Assassinating Adolf Hitler and Reinhard Heydrich: The History of the Attempts to Kill the Nazi Dictator and the Blond Beast

By Charles River Editors

Introduction

Assassinating Hitler

"When I reported to the Fuhrer bunker the next day with the daily situation map and saw Hitler going from one room to another in the bunker, my hand moved involuntarily toward my pistol. I had a terribly strong urge to kill him and stop all the suffering." - Siegfried Knappe, Wehrmacht Major, 1945 (Knappe, 1992, 52).

At the close of World War I, Adolf Hitler was an impoverished young artist who scrapped by through selling souvenir paintings, but within a few years, his powerful oratory brought him to the forefront of the Nazi party in Munich and helped make the party much more popular. A smattering of followers in the hundreds quickly became a party of thousands, with paramilitary forces like the SA backing them,

and at the head of it all was a man whose fiery orations denounced Jews, communists and other "traitors" for bringing upon the German nation the Treaty of Versailles, which had led to hyperinflation and a wrecked economy.

Like other totalitarian regimes, the leader of the Nazis kept an iron grip on power in part by making sure nobody else could attain too much of it, leading to purges of high-ranking officials in the Nazi party. Of these purges, the most notorious was the Night of the Long Knives, a purge in the summer of 1934 that came about when Hitler ordered the surprise executions of several dozen leaders of the SA. Nonetheless, for the most part Hitler enjoyed great popularity among both the members of the Wehrmacht and ordinary Germans during his rule over the Third Reich between 1934 and 1945. To many, he appeared to be the spirit of a revived, powerful Germany, shaking off the hardship and humiliation imprudently inflicted by the victorious western Allies at the end of World War I. His strangely magnetic, ranting speeches struck a chord with millions, creating iron loyalty in many of those who followed the commands of his dictatorship.

From the very beginning, however, others held a different view of the newly constituted Third Reich's Fuhrer. Though the concept of tyrannicide remained so foreign to German culture that the word only appeared in the national language after World War II, as the war progressed and Germany's fortunes faltered, more individuals and groups plotted the death of Hitler.

The climax of these efforts took place on July 20th, 1944, but Hitler himself recognized his eminence and notoriety as factors making him the target of assassination attempts years earlier. Though his own stated figure of seven attempts to kill him falls on the low end of the actual number of quietly thwarted plots, the Fuhrer knew he was a target and deliberately acted in an elusive fashion. As he stated in 1939, "There will never be anyone in the future with as much authority as I have. My continued existence is therefore a major factor of value. I can, however, be removed at any time by some criminal or idiot. […] no one is safe against some idealist of an assassin who ruthlessly stakes his life for his purpose." (Hoffmann, 1996, 253).

Most assassination schemes against the German dictator centered on the use of bombs to kill him. Such attacks, of course, theoretically increased the chances of killing Hitler, since a blast would create a far larger "fatal area" than a bullet or even a spray of bullets from a submachine gun. Additionally, the bomb's user need not directly risk their own lives or figure out a way to get through Hitler's security, which necessarily watched most closely for human threats rather than completely hidden objects. A few would-be assassins planned a more direct approach, prepared to sacrifice their lives shooting the Fuhrer point blank. Siegfried Knappe, a Wehrmacht major attached to Hitler's bunker staff in the final days in Berlin, expected (incorrectly) that the Russians would execute him and therefore nearly decided to shoot Hitler down with his service pistol. Only the thought that his action would birth a new "Stab in the Back" legend restrained him.

Through it all, Hitler eluded many of the attempts on his life without ever realizing his risk. Most plotters escaped undetected, baffled by the randomness and secretive nature of Hitler's movements. The Fuhrer frequently canceled prearranged engagements, arrived at other locations with only a few minutes' advance notice, used different trains than originally planned, and generally proved constantly unpredictable. When Hitler traveled by air, he not only brought a detachment of fanatical SS guards, but also highly trusted personal physicians and cooks, and his own personal car, the latter armored and already thoroughly checked for sabotage and booby traps.

Beyond all his precautions, the Fuhrer sometimes almost appeared protected by incredible – or uncanny – luck. Despite the enmity of the world and the increasingly violent opposition of his own

officers, the Third Reich's leader lived until he chose to die, as though destined by some dark fate to perish only by his own hand.

Assassinating Reinhard Heydrich

“Since it is opportunity which makes not only the thief but also the assassin, such heroic gestures as driving in an open, unarmoured vehicle or walking about the streets unguarded are just damned stupidity, which serves the Fatherland not one whit. That a man as irreplaceable as Heydrich should expose himself to unnecessary danger, I can only condemn as stupid and idiotic.” - Hitler

Cloak and dagger adventure, with daring commandos parachuted deep behind enemy lines to kill a sinister mastermind, belongs chiefly to the realm of thriller novels or films. However, World War II stretched over such vast territories and affected so many hundreds of millions of people that nearly every possible human interaction, from the vilest to the noblest, and from the most pedestrian to the exotically adventurous, achieved reality at some point during the conflict. The assassination of Reinhard Heydrich stands out as one of the war's most remarkable secret operations.

"The man with the iron heart," as Adolf Hitler dubbed him, made a fitting target for the dramatic events which unfolded in Prague on May 27th, 1942. According to testimony by the historian Michael Freund, “He is one of the greatest criminal figures of the Third Reich. Nowhere in the histories of the Third Reich has [Heydrich] been awarded his rightful place. He is a man of outstanding significance, a criminal mind of Luciferic grandeur.” (Dederichs, 2009, 17).

During the early stages of the war, the Reich Protector often walked the streets of Prague alone or with just one or two escorts, and he also favored an open-topped Mercedes 320-C convertible, which left him fully exposed to snipers, bomb throwers, and the like. Though he was ordered by the Fuhrer to install armored plates inside the seat backs to limit the effect of grenades hurled into the interior of his vehicle, these armor pieces remained idle in the castle garage on the date of Heydrich's assassination. By contrast, Heydrich found time to have expensive horsehair upholstery installed in the touring car, providing a springy, comfortable ride.

That would be all the good fortune a British-trained team of Czech assassins would need. Even though the assassination attempt was mostly botched (to the extent that the assassins initially assumed they had failed), shrapnel from an anti-tank grenade caused the top Nazi official severe injuries, killing him a little over a week later.

Even as Heydrich lay mortally wounded, Hitler and the Nazis planned severe reprisals, and the most notorious would come at Lidice, which the Germans tenuously (and incorrectly) linked to the plot. The Nazis ultimately razed the small village to the ground and killed every male over the age of 15 in town before sending the remainder off to concentration camps.

Assassinating Adolf Hitler and Reinhard Heydrich: The History of the Attempts to Kill the Nazi Dictator and the Blond Beast chronicles the various attempts on Hitler’s life and the successful assassination of Heydrich. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about the assassination attempts like never before.

Assassinating Hitler

Chapter 1: The Night of the Long Knives

An early event in the formative years of the Third Reich demonstrated the savagery of Adolf Hitler's Nazis, but it also demonstrated Hitler's concern for his safety from the very beginning.

In the wake of the Nazis' totalitarian takeover, the Sturmabteilung, or SA, led by Ernst Röhm, grew restive at the Fuhrer's intention to build an actual state rather than continue on a revolutionary socialist path. Though most historians today agree Röhm had no intention of killing or deposing Hitler, the paranoid German dictator would feel compelled to take action as he believed the threat from the SA was rising.

Hitler and Röhm inspecting the SA at Nuremberg in 1933

As time passed, the SA came to represent a hazard to the Third Reich with their ungovernable restlessness and personal allegiance to Röhm. In part, their importance and influence in the events of 1933 made Hitler worry about his own ability to control the group, and the Fuhrer attempted to keep the SA occupied with various kinds of busy-work, ranging from the horrific (such as torturing prisoners at early concentration camps, where the guards were under even less control than they were during the Holocaust) to the almost humorously mundane (such as parading around with collection boxes to gather a few extra marks for the Reich treasury or going to church on Sundays in their finest kit). At the same time, many members of the SA were not content to be mere police in Hitler's new order. Many desired a higher social status, and some used the threat of force to become minor officials or business partners in

lucrative enterprises. This problem was particularly rife away from the seat of authority; despite the existence of telecommunications, physical distance from the capital still had a much more notable effect in attenuating central command and control in the 1930s.

This petty self-aggrandizement might have been tolerated, but Röhm set about making himself inconvenient to Hitler almost from the day of the Fuhrer's ascension to supreme power in the new "Thousand-Year Reich." “With an unmistakably threatening undertone he declared, referring to the many mass proclamations of the victory of the national revolt, that he ‘preferred to make revolutions rather than celebrate them’ […] Deeply offended, he accused Hitler of being nothing but ‘a civilian, an “artist”, a dreamer’. From the summer of 1933 onwards he […] organized huge parades all over the Reich, voicing his discontent in numerous critical utterances.” (Fest, 1995, 167-168).

Puffed up with his own self-importance, Röhm apparently did not appreciate that he was dealing with incredibly dangerous men. Heinrich Himmler, a quiet, unassuming psychopath with a deceptively weak chin and thick glasses, was one of the individuals Röhm underestimated. Himmler, a strange mixture of serial killer and visionary, saw immense potential in the SS and set about honing it into an elite instrument of both political murder and battlefield excellence. Though theoretically still a branch of the SA, Himmler soon detached the SS from the brownshirts in all but name and made a truly formidable instrument out of them, unlike the loudmouthed but ultimately low quality ranks of the SA.

Himmler

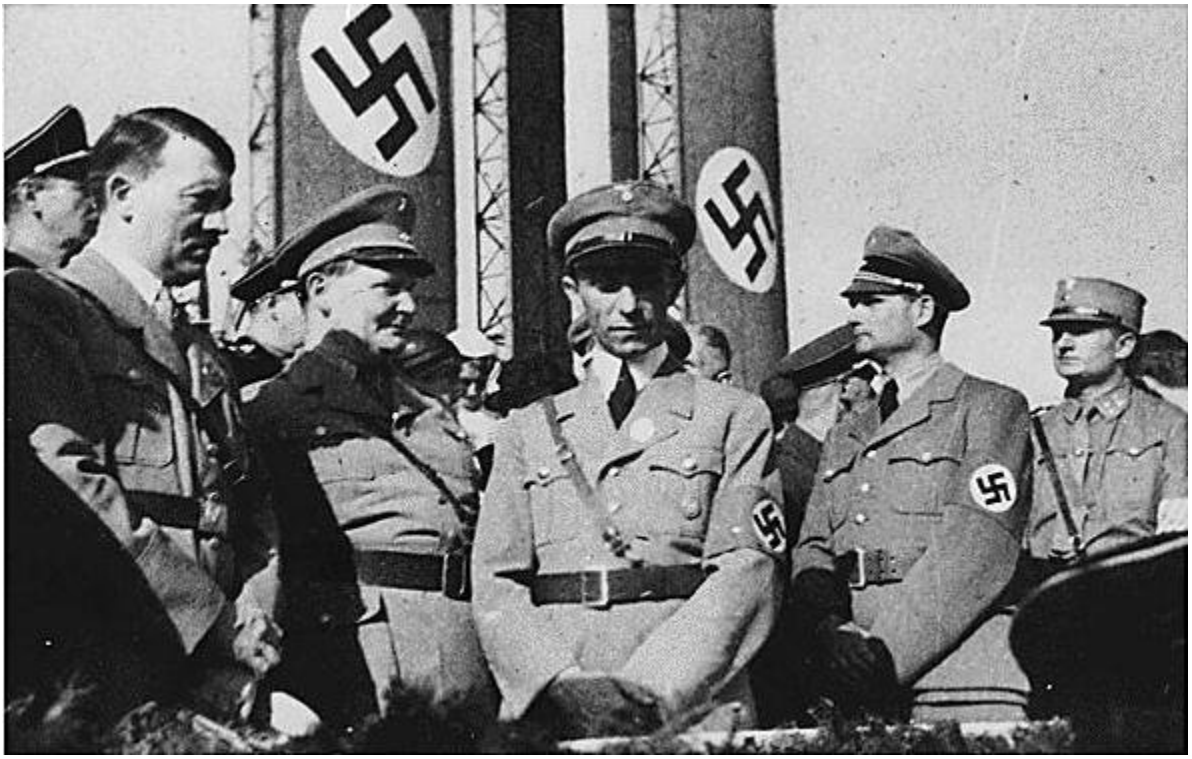
Hitler wanted to build a new order and thus had concrete objectives he hoped to achieve, but Röhm desired an ongoing state of revolution, and he was a loose cannon with a horde of utterly amoral followers. Röhm's avowed goal was the toppling of all governments, and this idea could hardly have been pleasing to Hitler, busy as he was building a new totalitarian government

That said, Röhm's complaints may have merely been examples of simple grumbling due to feeling useless. After all, for someone who had been in the thick of the action in 1933, it wouldn't be surprising if Röhm felt that Hitler was not giving him anything to do worthy of his mettle. It is even possible that his posturing was a strange cry for attention from the Fuhrer, and while he definitely got Hitler's attention, it was not in the manner he wished. Dictators have rarely survived and prospered by being hesitant to deal with potential threats, and Hitler was driven by his keenly-honed survival instinct to respond decisively to Röhm's vague but persistent bellowing about a second revolution.

Another highly important factor in Hitler's eventual opposition to the SA's continued existence was their effect on people the Fuhrer needed as props for his regime. Though he was master of life and death

over every German citizen and literally commanded every resource of the state, Hitler was still human, and he needed powerful backers in order to maintain his position and carry out his plans. One major faction the SA threatened to alienate from the Third Reich's cause were the owners of big businesses and other major capitalists. These men gave tremendous financial and material backing to the Nazis, and Hitler was exceedingly weary of offending them, whatever his private opinion of them might have been. The SA's constant talk of a "Second Revolution" and its sporadic but strident calls for all businesses to be nationalized in the name of a socialist worker's state did go unnoticed. In fact, it engendered great alarm among the wealthy, including industrialists, investors, and successful entrepreneurs.

As a result, between June 30th and July 2nd, 1934, Hitler, his entourage, and various SS units brutally cracked down on the SA leadership in what has come to be called the "Night of the Long Knives." Many arrests followed, leading to dozens of summary executions (some carried out with great barbarism) and hundreds of men sent off to early concentration camps. Ironically, some of the men arrested and shot for allegedly plotting Hitler's death believed themselves the victims of an anti-Hitler putsch and died defiantly shouting "Heil Hitler!" at the firing squad. Röhm himself declined to commit suicide in prison, instead calling for Hitler himself to kill him if the Fuhrer believed him to be a traitor. Instead, several SS officers shot Röhm to death with pistols in his cell.



Hitler, Hermann Goering, Joseph Goebbels, and Rudolph Hess all took part in planning the purge.

Historians are still divided as to whether Röhm and SA threat was merely a figment of Hitler's fevered imagination fed by Goering's and Himmler's forgeries and impelled by the Army's determination to see the Sturmabteilung commanders liquidated, or whether Röhm was actually a genuine threat to the Fuhrer. On one hand, Röhm showed no signs of intending Hitler any harm at the Wiessee meeting, since he had dispensed with even his ordinary security detail. On the other hand, the SA chief was full of hubris and might have thought himself too powerful for Hitler to attack. Furthermore, the acquisition of

heavy machine guns and other illegal weapons, accompanied by aggressive rhetoric about a Second Revolution, is somewhat damning.

One thing is certain, however; Hitler ended the Night of the Long Knives with his power strengthened, while Ernst Röhm died pistol bullets puncturing their way through his heart and lungs in a squalid jail cell. Thus, in terms of the Fuhrer's perspective, the Night of the Long Knives cannot be classified as a mistake. At the very least, it had a neutral political outcome for Hitler, and at best, it headed off either an Army coup or a Second Revolution led by Röhm and his lieutenants. It was also an act of utterly cold-blooded murder of a man who had been a personal friend of the Fuhrer for decades, and of hundreds of other men who may well have been innocent of the charges against them. Regardless, the purge was carried out with almost no sign of remorse whatsoever, showing the true measure of Hitler in several ways.

The bulk of the SA survived the Night of the Long Knives, which was principally aimed at killing its leaders and certain obnoxious or dangerous individuals rather than a wholesale extermination of the organization. Even if the higher casualty figure of around 1,000 dead is accepted, it was a tiny number compared to the group's overall strength, which was in the millions. Nevertheless, the action had the desired effect. The working class SA members – perhaps accustomed to bowing to authority and accepting whatever misery fate inflicted on them thanks to their background, regardless of their outward swagger and braggadocio – accepted the results meekly and more or less quietly gave in to Hitler's arrangements.

The SA was not disbanded, but it was reorganized. Most notably, it gained a new Obergruppenfuhrer in Viktor Lutze, a former postal worker and policeman who was a far cry from Ernst Röhm. A middle-class individual, Lutze enjoyed spending time with his wife and two daughters, playing ping-pong, and driving his car, which would prove fatal for him when he crashed while negotiating a sharp bend near Potsdam at excessive speed.

Lutze was unlikely to cause trouble for Hitler and appears to have been dedicated to simply doing his job. Charged by Hitler with the reorganization of the SA, including a directive noting that "SA men should be leaders, not ludicrous apes," Lutze oversaw a number of actions. The SS, which was already independent in fact, was formally split off from the SA and became a fully autonomous organization. The SA's air, motor, and skirmisher branches were detached and reassigned to completely different organizations.

Chapter 2: Maurice Bavaud's Plot

Hitler exerted great effort to reorganize the SA, but in the wake of the Night of the Long Knives, the dictator began his habit of moving randomly and unannounced. In fact, the Night of the Long Knives soon grew vastly embellished in the Fuhrer's mind, though whether the additions represented genuine paranoia or a simple effort to justify his illegal murder spree remains unclear. In a speech on July 13th, 1934, Hitler indicated that the alleged Röhm plot represented no more than the tip of the iceberg: "Surrounded by steel-helmeted SS men, he presented his audience with an elaborate and fantastic web of claims and assertions about the supposed conspiracy to overthrow the Reich. There were four groups of malcontents who had been involved, he said: Communist street-fighters who had infiltrated the SA, political leaders who had never reconciled themselves to the finality of 30 January 1933, rootless elements who believed in permanent revolution, and upper-class 'drones' who sought to fill their empty lives with gossip, rumour and conspiracy." (Evans, 2005, 41-42).

Like the mythical dragon's teeth of the Cadmus and Jason legends, Hitler's dictatorial tendencies and violent paranoia proved a self-fulfilling prophecy, and it inevitably led to very real conspirators plotting

against him. Indeed, most of these assassins sprang from the same end of the political spectrum as Hitler himself; the effectiveness of the Gestapo in wiping out the communists and socialists and keeping them utterly suppressed is evident in the fact that none of the major schemes against Hitler's life originated with them.

As Hitler left the vicinity of the Burgerbraukeller in Munich on November 9th, 1938, the day after his traditional harangue at the beer hall in honor of his failed yet significant 1923 Beer Hall Putsch, a clean-shaven young man with widely spaced eyes and slicked back hair lurked in the dense crowds of cheering onlookers, Nazi party members, and veterans. With a 6.25 millimeter pistol in his coat pocket, the 22 year old man waited for the moment when Hitler would come within 25 feet and give him a clear shot.

This young man, a Swiss citizen named Maurice Bavaud, had entered Germany that year for the express purpose of killing Hitler, but his reasons for attempting the dictator's assassination appear quite muddled from surviving evidence. Bavaud seemingly resented Hitler to some degree due to the latter's less than cordial relations with the Catholic Church. A theology student at the Saint Ilan Langueux Seminary in France, Bavaud found his calling in religious matters and appeared to be a sincere believer.

Bavaud

That said, Bavaud seemed to be motivated by other political interests, and it seems a crank and persuasive eccentric named Marcel Gerbohay proved much more influential than Bavaud's vague Catholicism-inspired objections to Hitler. Gerbohay, another student at the Saint Ilan Langueux Seminary, claimed to be a direct heir of the Romanov czars and formed a small student group called the “Society of Mystery.” Gerbohay claimed this group of 10 students would topple communism in Russia and install him as the new czar, and Bavaud had total faith in this fantasy.

Gerbohay eventually decided that the death of Hitler would speed his ascent to the throne of the Romanovs, and incredibly, he expressed disappointment in Hitler's failure to pounce on the Soviet Union immediately after gaining power. Amazingly, Gerbohay essentially desired Hitler's removal on the grounds that the Fuhrer lacked sufficient anti-communist zeal.

Bavaud apparently felt some homosexual attraction to Gerbohay, as revealed in his letters, though whether these feelings were repressed or acted upon remains uncertain. This, combined with his antipathy to Fuhrer and his disgust with Nazi neo-paganism, resolved him to kill the Third Reich's leader.

Bavaud prepared by learning German and reading Hitler's turgid, long-winded *Mein Kampf*, and he set out on October 9th, 1938 after stealing 600 Swiss francs from his parents to cover the expenses of his mission. He also left a very brief note for them urging them not to worry and stating he would now make something of his life.

The adventurous Swiss stayed for 10 days with some relatives, the Gutterers, in Baden-Baden, but when he was unable to find work, he moved on to Berlin, though not before stopping at Basle to buy a small 6.35 millimeter Schmeisser pistol and ammunition. He arrived in Berlin on October 21st, 1938 and secured lodgings, only to then discover that Hitler was not in the city.

After determining Hitler was at the Berghof in Berchtesgaden at the time, Bavaud hopped a train to Bavaria in search of his quarry, but in a pattern destined to repeat itself in the following days, Bavaud arrived at Berchtesgaden only to discover Hitler had left for Munich. The Swiss theology student lingered in the vicinity for a few days, practicing with his pistol in the forest, and he decided a shot from his 6.35 mm Schmeisser at more than 25 feet would likely miss its target.

While there, Bavaud also encountered Karl Deckert, a police official, who believed the young Swiss wanted to see Hitler due to overwhelming enthusiasm for the Fuhrer. Accordingly, Deckert told Bavaud in some detail about the Beer Hall Putsch commemoration on November 8-9. Thus, Bavaud changed his plans and decided to kill Hitler at the November 9th parade. He traveled to Munich on October 31st, while his precious stock of Swiss francs continued dwindling, and by claiming the status of a Swiss newspaper reporter, he secured a seat in one of the reviewing stands.

On November 9th, Bavaud arrived early, muffled in a heavy overcoat containing his pistol, and there he sat for several hours as the stands gradually filled around him until the parade began at noon. Led by crimson swastika flags and accompanied by loud but somber marching music, the procession moved through the streets and came close to the point where Bavaud sat waiting. However, at the crucial moment, the Swiss found himself baffled by a totally unexpected problem: "He saw Hitler and reached for the weapon in his pocket, poised to fire. But as the crowd around him grew more animated, a forest of right arms was raised, briefly obscuring the target. He tried to pick his moment, but Hitler was closely flanked by Göring and Himmler, and he was denied a clear shot." (Moorhouse, 2006, 33).

Since his aim was blocked by masses of people hailing the Fuhrer with the so-called "Hitlergruss" salute (ironically modeled on a salute incorrectly ascribed to the Romans due to French Revolution era art), Bavaud weighed the possibility of forcing his way into the street and executing Hitler point blank. However, he decided, probably quite correctly, that he would be intercepted before he could fire the shot, so he postponed his attack again.

After that, a comedy of errors ensued as Bavaud shuttled back and forth between Berechtsgaden and Munich attempting to catch up to Hitler but each time learning the Fuhrer had recently departed for the

location Bavaud had just left. Finally, with his money running out, the brave but luckless Swiss assassin attempted to reach the border.

Lacking the money to buy a ticket for the whole distance, he purchased a ticket for part of the route and then simply sat among the passengers, hoping not to be noticed. A conductor soon found him, however, and when he did, Bavaud was unwisely carrying the now useless 6.35 mm Schmeisser pistol, without which he might not even have been arrested but merely expelled from the train. Things only got worse when the Gestapo searched his bag and found maps of Munich with suspicious notations, copious ammunition, and, according to some accounts, a written document detailing his longing to kill Hitler.

After he was tortured, Bavaud eventually confessed, and the German People's Court sentenced him to death. Swiss authorities did nothing to intervene; in fact, ambassador Hans Fröhlicher responded with extraordinary fear to the situation, refusing to visit his fellow countryman and loudly condemning him even before the trial began. Even more astonishingly, the Gestapo offered to trade Bavaud for a minor Third Reich agent then in Swiss custody, but the Swiss government refused the offer. The government of Switzerland did not even bother to inform Bavaud's parents of his plight; they only learned of it when the Germans permitted him to send two letters to his family, the second of which contained these words: “Dear Father, Dear Mother […] I beg the Lord to forgive my enemies. I beg forgiveness from those against whom I have trespassed. […] I embrace you all…for the last time. I want to cry, but I can’t. I feel my heart would explode…Thank you for everything that you have done for me…I entrust my soul into the hands of God. Your son.” (Moorhouse, 2006, 36).

Bavaud's life ended on May 14th, 1941 in Plotzensee Prison, where many other would-be assassins of the Fuhrer also met their fate. Just 25 years old, the courageous but impractical plotter met a swift, bloody death thanks to the Gestapo's all-metal guillotine, a device used to dispatch some 16,500 people during the Third Reich and retained for executions until 1990 by the Stasi in East Germany. Following the war, the German courts eventually commuted Bavaud's sentence posthumously to imprisonment (in 1955) and then dropped charges entirely. The Germans also paid Bavaud's father, Alfred Bavaud, the sum of 40,000 Swiss francs as restitution. The Swiss government took over half a century after that to fully admit its culpability in the theology student's death. On November 7th, 2008, Pascal Couchepin, the President of Switzerland, finally hailed Bavaud as a hero with a post on his website which read in part, “With hindsight, the then Swiss authorities did too little to intervene on behalf of the condemned person […] He seems to have anticipated the doom that Hitler would bring to the whole world [...] For this he deserves our remembrance and recognition.”

A modern picture of the prison

Urged on by this belated encomium, the Swiss government hired sculptor Charlotte Lauer to erect a commemorative obelisk to Maurice Bavaud at Hauterive. The slim, needle-like pillar stands some 16 feet tall and includes an inscription in French. Translated, the text reads, “Maurice Bavaud (1916-1941), driven by his ideal of the good, tried to kill Hitler in autumn, 1938. Decapitated in Berlin on 14 May 1941.” The pillar stands at the Latenium Museum overlooking the waters of Lake Neuchatel, a scene doubtless familiar to the young seminarian from the city on the lake's shore.

Chapter 3: Noel Mason-MacFarlane and British Honor

In the years just before the outbreak of World War II, Germans and Swiss theology students did not comprise the whole list of Hitler's would-be assassins, as a prominent Briton in Germany at the time also devised a bold scheme for killing the Fuhrer before he could unleash fresh war on Europe. Possessing the courage, the means, and the opportunity, Noel Mason-MacFarlane failed to act due to two factors: his obedience to his own government's policy, and that government's retrospectively blinkered insistence on “aboveboard dealings” with the Fuhrer.

Mason-MacFarlane

A tough, direct, and intelligent officer, Mason-MacFarlane served as the British military attache to Berlin in the years immediately prior to World War II. His World War I military experience, during which he won France's eminent Croix de Guerre, gave him a directness rarely found in diplomats. He classified Hitler as a violent, dangerous militarist, vainly advising his government to take a hard line against the Fuhrer.

Mason-MacFarlane grew convinced that Hitler should die for the good of Europe in 1938 as the Third Reich, flush with its success in the "Anschluss" with Austria, set its sights on devouring Czechoslovakia next. Indeed, the Germans suspected him of dark designs and sent an agent, Captain Victor von Koerber, to try and entrap him by posing as an anti-Hitler plotter who wanted the Englishman's help. Too canny to fall for such a transparent ruse, Mason-MacFarlane doffed the Gestapo agent off with disarming words.

In early 1939, with Czechoslovakia effectively destroyed by the Third Reich, Mason-MacFarlane sent a message to his government offering to "waft Hitler to Valhalla." A major rally in preparation gave him his inspiration, because Hitler's massive, flag-draped podium directly faced his apartment windows. The British officer expressed his opinion to another Englishman as both shared a drink and watched the preparations: "'Easy rifle shot,' he said, adding, 'I could pick the bastard off from here as easy as winking.' He went on: 'There'd be hell to pay, of course, and I'd be finished in every sense of the word. Still…with that lunatic out of the way we might be able to get some sense into things.'" (Moorhouse, 2006, 138).

Ultimately, Mason-MacFarlane rather naively sent his bold proposal to Whitehall, but the British government, despite having their espionage efforts hamstrung by a bizarre sense of "fair play" and the notion of the "gentleman spy" even when dealing with utterly devious and brutal adversaries such as the Third Reich (and later the Soviet Union), responded with shock. Lord Halifax rejected the plan rather indignantly, and according to an article in the *Times* in 1969, Whitehall officially described the idea of killing Hitler as "unsportsmanlike."

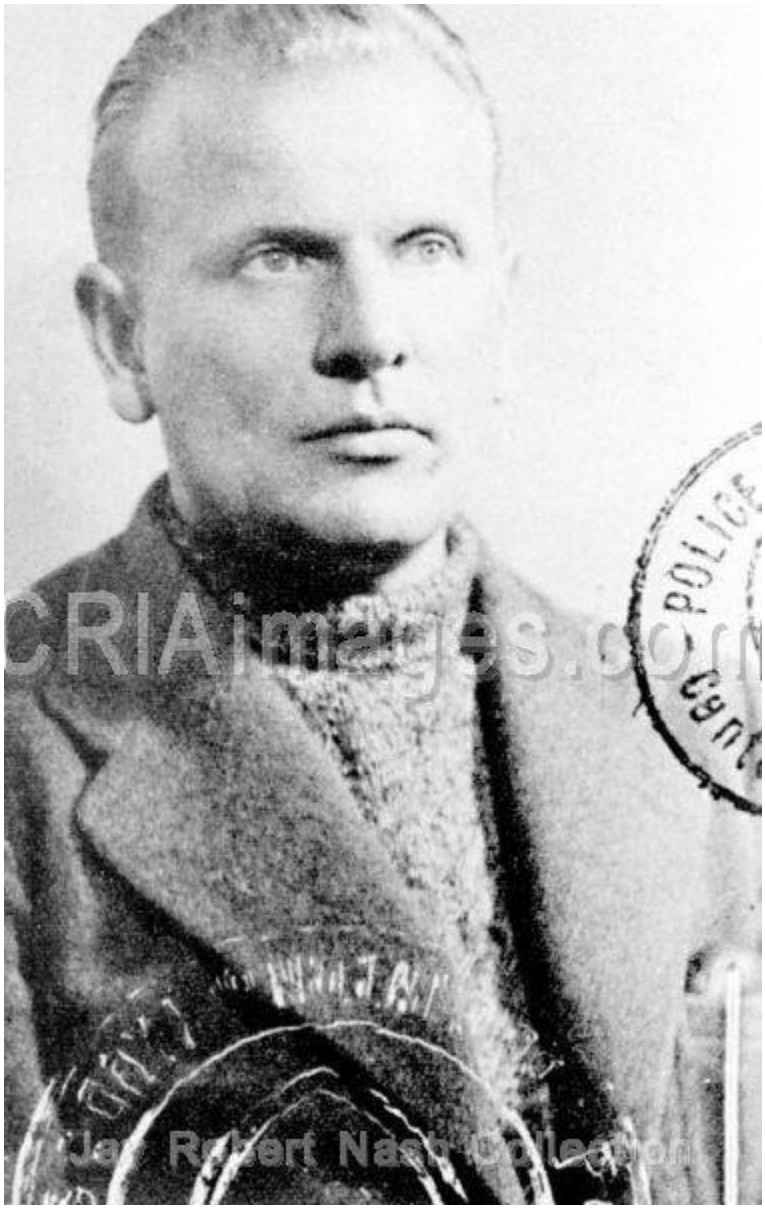
Lord Halifax

Two months later, the British government recalled Mason-MacFarlane to England and assigned him temporarily to a post at Aldershot. Though he continued to enjoy a distinguished career, the British government, including MI6, the British government clearly viewed Mason-MacFarlane as far too much of a “loose cannon” for them to permit him to remain anywhere near Hitler. Ironically, throughout his reign, the Fuhrer believed the English capable of the deepest perfidy, but he may have actually owed his life to their excessive sense of fair play.

Chapter 4: Assassination Plans and Countermeasures

While Bavaud and Mason-MacFarlane each represented an immediate threat to Hitler in their own way, many other conspirators never came so close to achieving their objective. A number of men planned bomb attacks on Hitler but fell into Gestapo hands long before they could make any attempt. Betrayed by their own incaution while acquiring materials, speaking too freely, trusting the wrong people, or simply running afoul of a chance Gestapo search, these individuals suffered arrest, trial, and frequently beheading long before the fruition of their plans.

At the same time, many other would-be assassins undoubtedly went undetected, failing to work out viable plans, missing opportunities, or losing their nerve before taking action. In the case of British-born Soviet NKVD agent Alexander Foote, a scheme to blow up Hitler at a cafe in 1939 came to nothing when Stalin decided to forge an alliance with the Nazi dictator instead.



Foote

Though Hitler relied mostly on luck, the support of the German people, and random movements to ensure his survival, he added some further measures to his defensive repertoire as time went on. Most notable among these, perhaps, was commissioning the construction of a unique automobile whose specifications remain extraordinary in certain regards even 70 years later: “Hitler had a special Mercedes-Benz manufactured for him in that company's Stuttgart factory. It was a 770-K open touring sedan, built completely by hand at a cost of $250,000. It weighed five and one-half tons and had rubber bulletproof tires. The windows were 1 ½ inches thick and also bulletproof […] Each door contained ¾-inch armor plate and weighed more than 900 pounds […] The car could reach 50 mph in 12.2 seconds and had a top speed of 120 mph.” (Thomsett, 1997, 104).

The Third Reich's engineers fitted similar armor protection to Hitler's custom aircraft and personal train. Each conveyance bristled with pistols, submachine guns, rifles, and thousands of rounds of ammunition so the Fuhrer and his entourage could fight off attackers if necessary. The cars of Hitler's train weighed 60 tons apiece due to the weight of armor, while his aircraft bore no less than 20 heavy machine-guns each.

Ironically, one serious flaw in Hitler's security systems lay in a decision by the Fuhrer himself. Rather than creating a single focused organization, he made multiple departments responsible for his safety, which inadvertently encouraged bitter feuds between them. Though this may have kept all of them from evolving into a “Praetorian Guard” capable of dictating to the dictator (or even assassinating him like Caligula), it also created numerous gaps and inefficiencies in the protective cordon around the Third Reich's head of state. Indeed, the various organizations often worked at cross purposes without even realizing it, creating startling lapses in basic security that enabled determined assassins to occasionally slip through.

This patchy security around Hitler opened up an opportunity to the man who very nearly succeeded – alone and unaided – in killing the Fuhrer five years before Claus von Stauffenberg's much more famous plot. Unlike von Stauffenberg and his elaborate Operation Valkyrie, Johann Georg Elser possessed no military rank, no network of powerful friends, and no plan to establish an alternate government should his attempt lay the German dictator low. He would act alone, using only methodical patience, skill with hand tools and clockwork mechanisms, and an iron determination to kill the Fuhrer.

Elser

Elser, a short, slim, dark-haired man with a penchant for playing the zither and the close-mouthed characteristics of a confirmed loner, originated in Hermaringen, a small south German town of white

walls and red-tiled roofs in the Wurttemburg region. He later moved to Konigsbronn in search of work and to avoid his father, who savagely beat him and his mother throughout his childhood years. Elser worked as a carpenter and woodworker with immense dedication and an impeccable work ethic, but those attributes failed to save him from economic ruin in the disastrous years following World War I. Though much of Germany regained lost financial ground following Hitler's takeover as the economy rode the wave of massive rearmament programs following the repudiation of the Treaty of Versailles, Elser remained impoverished despite strenuous efforts to better himself.

The German woodworker loathed Hitler, but he took no action until fresh threats of war loomed in the late 1930s. Elser detested the thought of a fresh conflict filling Europe in general, and Germany in particular, with slaughter, misery, and destruction, and he identified Hitler as the prime mover in the direction of yet another massive war. Those who knew him also noted his keen sense of justice and his courageous but dangerous refusal to even pretend to like the Nazi regime: “In May 1938, a Nazi parade threaded its way through his hometown of Königsbronn. Elser, like many others, turned out to watch, but as those around him gave the Hitler salute, he refused to do likewise. When a colleague reminded him that it might be sensible to conform, he replied curtly: ‘You can kiss my ass.’ He then ostentatiously turned about and started whistling to himself (Moorhouse, 2006, 48).

Elser's desire to kill Hitler emerged slowly between 1936 and 1938. Working in the armaments industry at some points, he saw firsthand how weapons production rose sharply long before the “provoking incidents” that allegedly “forced” Nazi Germany to threaten its neighbors. The final catalyst to act seemed to be the annexation of the Sudeten region of Czechoslovakia in September 1938, which convinced Elser of Hitler's boundless rapacity and his intention to start another war resulting in untold numbers of deaths.

Like the Swiss Bavaud, Elser stalked his tyrannical prey by attending the annual rally at the Burgerbraukeller in Munich on November 8th, 1938. This “beer cellar” – actually a large and well-appointed drinking hall with a podium for speeches underneath a huge interior balcony supported by three brick and stone columns – occupied a special place in Nazi mythology. Hitler launched his abortive “Beer Hall Putsch” from the Burgerbraukeller in 1923, failing to seize power but achieving the national fame later permitting him to become Fuhrer and establish the “Thousand Year Reich.” Hitler liked to gather all his “Old Soldiers” and other party faithful in the Burgerbraukeller annually to give a long-winded speech congratulating them on the magnificence of the Nazi state and railing against those opposed to it. The occasion usually involved much beer, solid Bavarian food, and conviviality in addition to the speech. Hitler usually lingered to drink a toast, mingling with the “Old Soldiers” after his oration.

A picture inside the Burgerbraukeller

Elser approached the matter rationally, arriving on November 8th, 1938 with no preconceived notion about how to kill Hitler. He noted the density of the crowds at the height of the celebrations and quickly discarded the idea of shooting the Fuhrer, deeming both a clear shot and a subsequent escape impossible. He entered the Burgerbraukeller at 10:30 after the throng cleared and calmly inspected the interior, and he returned the following day, November 9th, to witness another ceremony and continue his scouting. During this time, he picked the central column immediately behind the speaker's podium as the spot to place a bomb for next year's November 8th speech. He departed before November 10th, and thus did not witness Kristallnacht, the infamous outpouring of anti-Semitic hatred in Munich during which the Nazis smashed the windows of hundreds of Jewish shops and set fire to synagogues.

Elser continued to work at the Waldenmaier munitions factory and a quarry until April 1939, stealing explosive powder, fuses, and detonators here and there. He sold much of his personal property, amassing approximately 400 Marks, enough to live for several months, and he then visited the Burgerbraukeller in April after quitting his munitions factory job, measuring the pillar openly along with other features of the hall. He told the staff he planned to apply for a job maintaining the building in order to avoid being drafted into the military.

With that work done, Elser built a number of prototype bombs and tested them at the family farm, by then largely abandoned due to his father's illness and his mother's estrangement from her drunken, abusive husband. At one point, the local police investigated him, but the parts they found merely led them to believe Elser intended to build a clock. Even his closest friend believed Elser sought to invent a morning alarm clock that would switch on an electric light in the bedroom at the same time that it rang, and not surprisingly, Elser did not disabuse him of that notion.

Elser left his home for good in August 1939. He scouted the Swiss border near Konstanz, finding a site he believed ideal for escaping following his plot, and he then set up a home in Munich and began working on the painstaking task of preparing the pillar for the explosives. He entered the Burgerbraukeller at 9:00 p.m. each evening and ate his dinner, which helped allay the suspicions of the staff. At 10:00 p.m., he concealed himself each night in a little-used storage room and lurked there until 11:00, when the hall shut down for the night. Elser stashed his tools in the storage room as well, so once the Burgerbraukeller fell quiet and dark, he emerged with a flashlight covered in dark cloth to cut its beam to a few feet. He took three days to cut a hatch in the wooden cladding on the back of the central column, sweeping up every fleck of sawdust, then set to work removing bricks to form a hollow space for his bomb. Elser was so methodical that to muffle the loud noise produced by hammer and chisel, Elser patiently timed his blows to correspond to the rhythmic clank of passing trams or the loud flushing of nearby public toilets.

Gradually, a suitable hollow emerged, and when it was the correct size, Elser lined it with cork to muffle the ticking of his timing devices, lessening the chance of discovery. He laid a plaster floor as evenly as possible to create a flat base to ensure the timing devices ran at the correct rate, and he closed the opening with a tin plate to prevent discovery should someone knock on the outside of the pillar. Elser set the hollow space low, just above the floor, kneeling for hours to work on the project and bruising his knees.

Finally, Elser judged the chamber ready and set his bomb. The device demonstrated the same meticulous craftsmanship as the rest of Elser's preparations, and as it turned out, it worked perfectly. “By modifying a clock movement with extra cogs and levers, he created a timer that could run for a maximum of 144 hours before activating a lever. That lever then triggered a system of springs and weights to launch a steel-tipped shuttle, which struck the percussion cap of a live rifle round (with the bullet removed) embedded in the explosive. For good measure, Elser then added a second clock mechanism to act as a fail-safe.” (Moorhouse, 2006, 48).

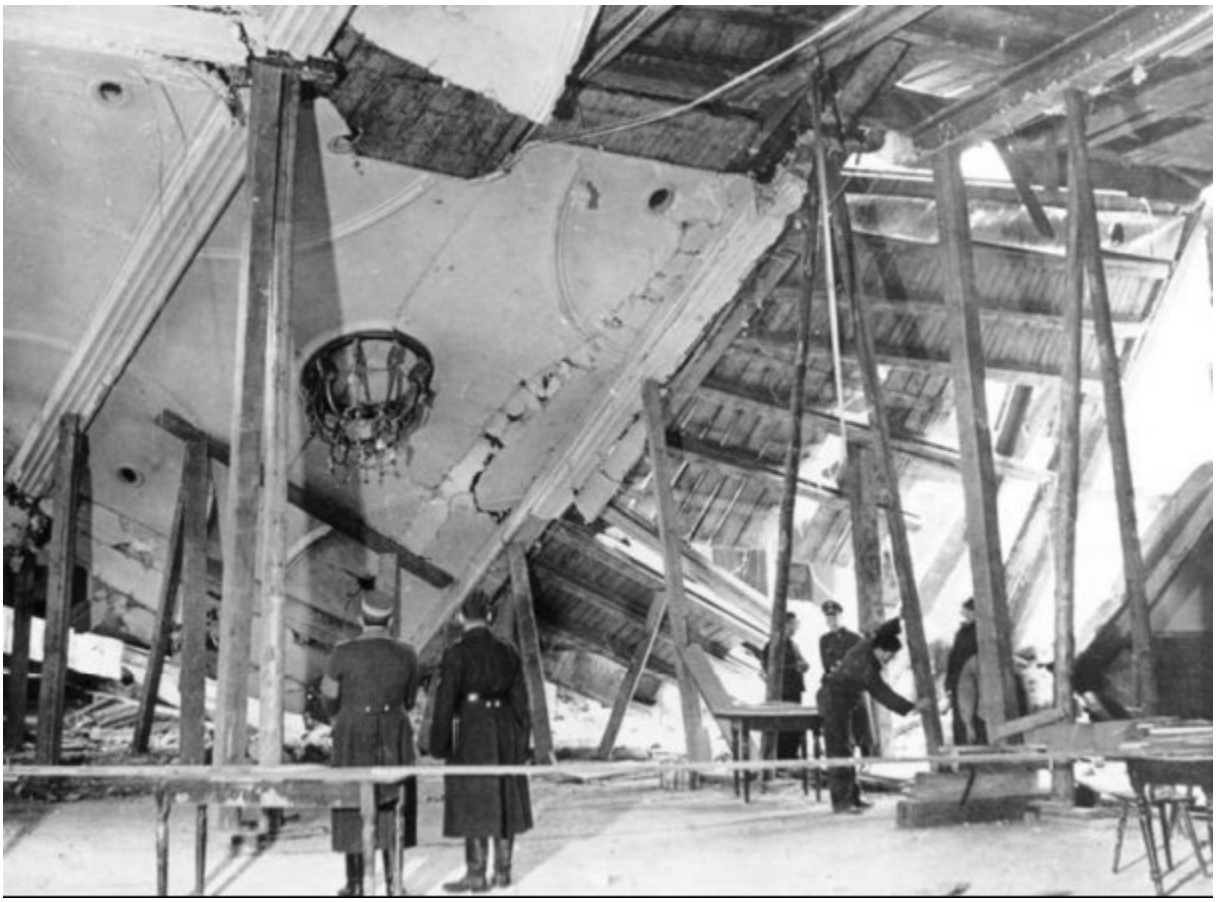
Elser set the bomb to go off at 9:20 p.m. sharp on November 8th, 1939, aware that Hitler's annual speech generally began at 9:00 and continued for somewhat more than an hour. However, in 1939, Hitler and the OKW were busily preparing plans for invading France in October and November. Ultimately, the Fuhrer and his generals postponed the invasion until 1940, but on the 8th, Hitler intended to make a decision about the invasion on the following day, which meant the dictator and his inner circle had to return to Berlin on the evening of the 8th. With fog rolling in and making flight impossible, Hitler decided to use the train instead. This necessitated shifting the time for the speech's commencement to 8:00 p.m., a change in plans that Elser could not have been aware of.

On the night of the attempted assassination, Hitler began his speech at 8:00 while his immediate circle – Goering, Goebbels, Himmler, Hess, and others – sat at nearby tables consuming vast quantities of free beer. The Fuhrer began his speech in a rather meandering way, but he soon found his stride as he endlessly berated the British and their treachery, villainy, hatred of freedom, and other vile characteristics. He spoke of the need for boundless sacrifices by the German people to preserve themselves against despicable foreign perfidy, and at one point, he used the word “hate” 18 times in a few minutes. Finally, he wound up his speech to the strains of “Deutschland Uber Alles.” All the while, behind the vast red, white, and black swastika flag hanging from the pillar behind him, Elser's bomb ticked closer and closer to detonation.

His speech done, Hitler, in a very good mood, left almost immediately, since he had a train to catch and thus could not wait to drink or chat with the “Old Soldiers.” The Fuhrer and his inner circle left the building at 9:07 p.m., which was a few minutes late since Hitler meant to depart at 9:00, but he still got

out with just minutes to spare. At exactly 9:20, shortly after Hitler and his entourage had left, the pillar blew apart thunderously in a brilliant sheet of flame, sweeping the podium with a lethal shrapnel of bricks and other debris. A moment later, the huge balcony above the podium collapsed in a roaring torrent of stones, bricks, broken beams, and plaster, toppling onto the very place where Hitler had stood just a few minutes before. Had the Fuhrer spoken at his usual time, the balcony would have fallen on his torn and shredded body and crushed it to paste under hundreds of tons of debris.

A waitress named Maria Strobl was waiting on the table occupied by Hitler's cronies that night and was collecting the empty beer mugs at the moment of the explosion. In 1959, she supplied an account of the moment for a newspaper interview: “I wanted to clear the table, so I picked up ten large mugs. It was right by the column where Hitler was – I was waiting on those tables. I picked up the ten mugs and all of a sudden there was a blast that knocked me through the door into the entranceway. Rocks and all kinds of junk were falling on my head. Then I went out to the doctor's room. We thought a bomb had fallen somewhere. […] Then I got a cop to take me home.” (Haasis, 2013, 354).



A picture of the damage done by the blast

Strobl suffered partial hearing loss due to the blast, but she continued to work at the beer cellar. The Nazis proved extremely reluctant to pay for the large quantities of beer Hitler's entourage consumed and left without paying for it, and the waitress returned to the Nazi Party Headquarters in Munich with a bill on no less than nine occasions in the following days before one of the officials finally paid.

Of course, Strobl could be considered one of the lucky ones. Approximately 10 feet of bricks, stone, and iron beams lay piled on the podium where Hitler usually stood, and a full 50 feet of wall behind it had collapsed inward, broken by the force of the collapsing balcony pulling against it through supporting

beams. 8 people died in the blast, and between 30 and 60 were injured according to the various official counts. Of the 8 killed, only 1, a temporary waitress named Maria Henle, represented a “civilian” casualty, as the rest consisted of SA thugs and Nazi Party officials at least partly implicated in carrying out Hitler's murderous policies. Since only around 120 guests and personnel remained in the Burgerbraukeller at that time, between 25 percent and 50 percent suffered wounds, indicating the detonation's power.

Hitler and his entourage remained ignorant of the event for approximately 45 minutes following the detonation. Hurrying off to Berlin, the men caught their train at 9:31 p.m. in a jubilant, highly excited mood. When the train stopped at Nurnberg, however, Goebbels disembarked to send several messages and returned to the car pasty and shaken. He had learned of the explosion from the teletype.

Still in a jocular mood, Hitler initially refused to believe Goebbels, whom he suspected of playing a prank, but the propaganda minister's continued seriousness soon convinced him. The Fuhrer telephoned Munich for details, and the party continued their rail journey to Berlin. Hitler ascribed his survival to luck or to an even higher power, but others in his entourage wondered who might be responsible. “While pondering this latest brush with death, he drew the conclusion that providence was once more sparing him for great things. Himmler, meanwhile, was drawing conclusions of his own. That night he wired his minions with news of the attack. He concluded, ‘There’s no doubt that the British Secret Service is behind it.’” (Moorhouse, 2006, 51).

If Hitler could boast of a miraculous escape, quite the opposite proved true of his would-be assassin. Understandably drained by his year-long solitary effort to kill the dictator and avert war, Elser botched his getaway badly. Rather than immediately heading for the Swiss border upon completion of the work, he returned to the Burgerbraukeller on November 6th just days before Hitler’s speech to ensure that the clocks remained operational. He concealed himself as usual, and once everyone had left for the evening, he emerged to examine the clocks. His fears proved groundless because the bomb remained in perfect working order (as the coming blast would indicate).

Elser slipped out the emergency exit at 6:30 a.m. and bought two morning cups of coffee as a celebratory toast to the success of his design and what he imagined would be the approaching death of Hitler. He then wasted precious time visiting his sister and various acquaintances before boarding the train to Ulm. At Ulm, he transferred to the Friedrichshafen train, arriving on the shores of Lake Constance at 6:00 p.m. on the 8th, a few hours before the blast.

After getting a shave, he crossed the lake by boat to Konstanz, and from there he made his way to the Swiss border. However, when he attempted to jump the fence in Wessenbergheim Park, he was apprehended by two German border guards, Waldemar Zipperer and Xaver Rieger. Rieger's later report indicated that the pair intercepted Elser at 8:45 p.m. after seeing him furtively approaching the fence. The men took Elser into custody rather quietly, though they were prepared to shoot him if he made a break for the fence. The carpenter, indeed, looked towards the border fence, only 25 feet distant, as he reached the door of the customs post, but he decided not to flee. Instead, he allowed the guards to search him.

According to Rieger, the border guards found an incriminating selection of items in Elser's pockets. “Elser carried wire cutters and a sealed envelope, which contained numerous notes with sketches pertaining to the production of grenades and fuses, heat and hardness coefficients, and the labeling of ammunition crates […] In addition, Elser had parts of an ignition device with him (firing pins, spring, etc.) and a postcard with the interior of the Burgerbraukeller in color.” (Haasis, 2013, 276).

Elser complained that the guards had arrested him without cause, but they disregarded that and handed him over to the local Gestapo chief, Otto Grethe. The Gestapo interrogated Elser from 10:00 p.m. until 4:00 a.m. the following day, and at 11:00 that night, news of the attempted assassination by bomb arrived by teletype, along with a command to seal the border. The message neglected to mention whether the bomb killed the Fuhrer.

When that news reached Grethe, Elser's detonator parts – brought along as a sort of passport to prove to the western Allies that he was the man who killed Hitler and therefore worthy of asylum – led to his doom. Rather than being processed as an ordinary draft-dodger who would likely sent to prison for a few months, Elser now had the full notice of the Gestapo. In the morning, Grethe sent him to the Munich Gestapo headquarters by car, but at the time, full suspicion failed to fall on the carpenter immediately. Filled with rage and paranoia, the Gestapo and Kripo arrested over 1,000 people, including rubberneckers drawn to the Burgerbraukeller by the explosion. 50 people working at the Burgerbraukeller fell into the dragnet, and waitress Maria Strobl experienced a number of rather hostile interrogations at her apartment. The SS man and Berlin Police Commissioner Arthur Nebe flew in to head the Kripo investigation.

Nebe

Ironically, Hitler and Himmler had assigned an official already secretly opposed to the Fuhrer to carry out the investigation. Nebe, a man with a face dominated by an extremely prominent nose, had already made occasional contact with Hitler's enemies inside the Wehrmacht, such as Hans Oster. Four years later, Nebe would participate in the July 20th 1944 bomb plot and be hanged in Plotzensee Prison as a traitor to the Third Reich.

In the wake of the bombing, the SS, Gestapo, and Kripo quarreled constantly during the investigation, hampering one another's efforts, but Elser eventually came under suspicion. The parts in his pocket matched those recovered from the rubble by specially organized clockmaking students, and many Burgerbraukeller workers recognized him as a frequent visitor to the beer cellar during the past year. Moreover, the Gestapo found bruises on his knees consistent with someone kneeling for long periods to create the hollow for the bomb.

Accordingly, on November 12th, 1939, the Gestapo men in Munich – with Himmler present – beat Elser violently, with Himmler occasionally joining in to kick the prisoner. As it happened, the Nazi thugs, carried away by zeal and sadistic rage, pummeled the carpenter so brutally he could not even provide them with the confession they wanted. The Gestapo therefore questioned Elser's family, neighbors, and everyone else remotely connected to him. These individuals found themselves under extreme suspicion and, in some cases, temporarily imprisoned and threatened by the secret police. Somewhat understandably, the Gestapo could not believe that one man had come so close to ending the Fuhrer's life without being part of a huge, sinister international conspiracy, even though everything they learned pointed towards the unsettling truth that Johann Georg Elser acted completely alone, had no "predisposition to crime," and was in fact an ordinary (if brave) man with no foreign connections.

Much of the Gestapo's zeal, of course, stemmed from the fact they failed to detect or prevent the assassination attempt. Deflecting blame onto Elser's neighbors or former employers helped prevent Hitler's rage from focusing on their incompetence and impotence to prevent every possible plot against the Fuhrer's life.

Between November 13th and November 23rd, the Gestapo beat a plain confession out of Elser. At one point, they brought his girlfriend, Elsa Harlen, to see him, and Harlen later described what she saw: "He was sitting on a chair in the middle of the room, and I definitely would not have recognized him […] His face was swollen and beaten black and blue. His eyes were bulging out of their sockets, and I was horrified by his appearance. And his feet were swollen, and I believe the only reason he was sitting on the chair was that he was no longer able to stand. In each corner of the room there was a Kripo officer standing with his pistol drawn." (Haasis, 2013, 1031).

Naturally, Elsa Harlen found herself interrogated over the next few days by Heinrich Himmler, Adolf Hitler, and Martin Bormann in succession. The three men used the familiar "good cop, bad cop" routine of alternating between friendly and menacing conversations, but since Harlen knew nothing of Elser's scheme and the swarms of sinister British agents in Konigsbrunn existed only in Hitler's feverish imagination, the questioning came to nothing. The Gestapo released her, and Elser's other relatives and acquaintances, on November 28th, though they continued to ask the same pointless questions for 6 months.

Meanwhile, Elser described his bomb in detail to the Gestapo, whose leaders admired it so much they included it as a booby trap in their training manuals. After continued beatings, combined with other methods of physical and psychological torture, produced no evidence of a British plot, the Nazis finally sent Elser to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Hitler wanted the assassin kept alive, sane, and in good condition so that after Germany won the war (as he imagined), the conspirator and several captured British spies could face a show trial demonstrating how English perfidy forced the Fuhrer to begin hostilities. Elser accordingly received good food (including meat, vegetables, and potatoes with sauces), an enlarged cell, and woodworking tools, and the guards even permitted him to construct and play a zither. Elser played skillfully but predictably chose sad, melancholy tunes. The guards also allowed him to keep a framed photograph of his girlfriend Elsa Harlen in the cell, whom he rather poignantly referred to as his "bride," indicating a hope now never to be realized with Elser captive in the iron claws of the SS.

Finally, with the end of the war approaching, Hitler ordered Elser transferred to the Dachau concentration camp in February 1945, and with the blasts of American artillery audible in the distance in March, the Dachau guards began killing their prisoners to prevent their rescue. Hitler sent orders to kill Elser in early April, weeks before his own suicide, and on April 9th, 1945, at around 11:00 p.m.,

Theodor Bongartz shot Elser twice in the head with a pistol while both men stood in the darkness in a neglected camp flowerbed. Unlike most prisoners, whom the guards forced to strip naked before their execution, Elser died fully dressed, and the guards cremated his corpse the following day, on April 10th, 1945. Bongartz himself died just over a month later on May 15th, 1945, officially of tuberculosis but possibly of advanced cirrhosis.

Bongartz

If an epitaph exists for Georg Elser, it is perhaps found in the statement of a Gestapo officer threatening the arrested businessman Erhard Waldenmaier in 1940: “In spite of repeated torture, Elser had stuck to his story that he had carried out the attack, in order to save the working people and the entire world from war.” (Haasis, 2013, 1634).

Chapter 5: Plotters in the Wehrmacht

If Hitler failed to win the hearts and minds of all ordinary Germans such as Georg Elser, he also lacked full loyalty from the Wehrmacht (the term referring to all of the German military branches) itself. While deeply imbued with principles of fidelity and unquestioning service, the organization still contained men capable of anticipating future disasters brought upon Germany by Hitler's endlessly aggressive policies, and some of these men decided, reluctantly, to act.

As Hitler felt secure enough to begin seizing parts of Europe in 1938, it became a catalyst for a plot to overthrow the Fuhrer on the part of Hans Oster, an Abwehr officer. Austria succumbed first, entering the Nazi fold more or less voluntarily as Hitler's agents mobilized the powerful right-wing factions then holding sway in the country to support an Anschluss, or union, between the two nations into a larger state, “Greater Germany.” The nearly bloodless victory, popularly acclaimed by considerable portions of the Austrian populace, encouraged Hitler's predatory ambitions. He set his sights next on Czechoslovakia, a patchwork country with a superb industrial sector Hitler hoped to claim for the Third Reich war effort. As a pretext, the Nazis fabricated accounts of Czech persecution against the German majority living in the western border region of “Sudetenland,” which, not coincidentally, also contained Czechoslovakia's formidable boundary defenses and the chief mountain range blocking a Wehrmacht advance into the Czech interior.

Added to the threat of impending war, Hitler and Hermann Goering began to dismantle the top ranks of the Wehrmacht, replacing the somewhat independent-minded officers there with their own cronies, or with Hitler himself. Two men, Werner von Fritsch and Werner von Blomberg, the Army Commander in Chief and the War Minister respectively, fell victim to a Machiavellian conspiracy by the Fuhrer, Goering, Himmler, the Gestapo, and the SS. Hitler wanted the two men removed because they objected to a new war, while Goering aspired to become War Minister himself.

Von Fritsch

Von Blomberg

Von Blomberg fell to scandal first. Encouraged by the duplicitously friendly Goering, von Blomberg married a young woman from a poor family, only to discover that Goering and the Gestapo immediately presented forged documents indicating his wife worked as a prostitute. Hitler, tut-tutting over the decline in morals, sacked von Blomberg for the sake of the “German Army's reputation,” as if an officer marrying a sex worker, even had it occurred, would somehow tarnish the Wehrmacht's image more than the mind-numbing massacres soon to be committed in Russia and the Balkans. To Goering's dismay, Hitler assumed the title War Minister himself, though he threw Goering the juicy bone of a new title, “Reich Marshal,” giving the overweight Luftwaffe head immense power and effective succession rights to Hitler.

With von Blomberg removed, Hitler set his sights on Werner von Fritsch's destruction. The Fuhrer accomplished this by framing the straight-laced von Fritsch for a homosexual affair with a male prostitute, Joseph Weingarten, known on the street as “Bavarian Joe.” The Gestapo questioned Weingarten on January 15th, 1938, and soon discovered in their own investigation that one Achim Fritsch, a retired army captain, was actually the “von Fritsch” identified as Bavarian Joe's client. However, they concealed this information, and the charges against von Fritsch went ahead.

The Kripo head in Berlin, Arthur Nebe, already secretly opposed to Hitler, contacted men in the German Military Intelligence (Abwehr) who shared his dread of what the Fuhrer might inflict on Germany. These men included Wilhelm Canaris, the long-faced, keen-eyed leader of the Abwehr, and Hans Oster, his second-in-command. Nebe forwarded the files on Achim Fritsch and Bavarian Joe to Canaris and Oster, providing them with clear proof that Hitler fabricated the homosexuality charges against Werner von Fritsch out of whole cloth. Oster contacted Werner von Fritsch in late January and implored him to assemble the German generals, explain the falsity of the charges against him, and mobilize the Army to overthrow Hitler in a coup d'etat. Fritsch, however, succumbed to depression and confusion, and he resigned from the post of Commander in Chief on February 3rd, 1938. General Walther von Brauschitsch replaced him, and he lacked the strength of character to resist Hitler and thus cooperated in many of the Fuhrer's subsequent crimes against humanity.

Oster

Canaris

Von Fritsch insisted on a court-martial, which succeeded in presenting all the actual evidence and clearing his name. It also demonstrated clearly that Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich worked together to libel von Fritsch, though Goering managed to conceal his leading role in the scheme through a combination of greasy elusiveness and bold-faced lying. A bizarre sequel followed the court-martial: "Urged on by Oster, Fritsch challenged Himmler to a duel with pistols. According to Otto John, a legal adviser to Lufthansa with ties to the resistance, 'Oster … thought that this would bring about the decisive confrontation between Army and the SS and lead to the fall of the regime.'" (Parssinen, 2003, 33). Gerd von Rundstedt never delivered the challenge, however, and von Fritsch eventually lost interest in the matter.

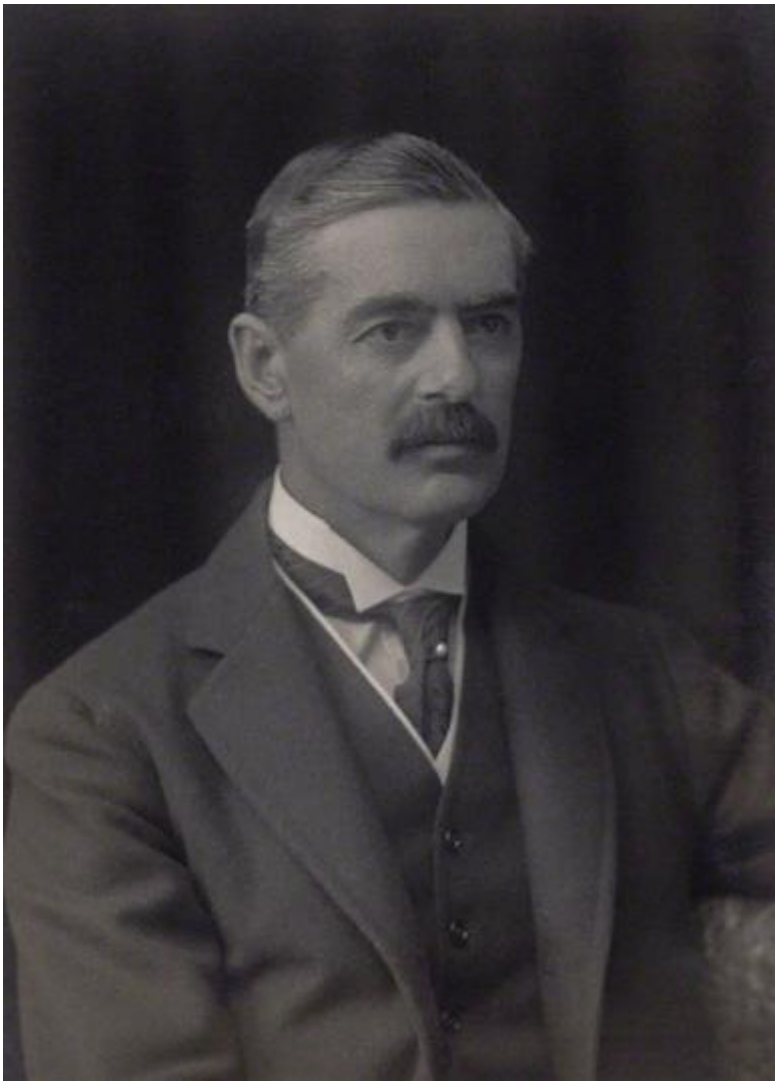
The fall of Fritsch won Oster and Canaris numerous supporters, some zealous and some lukewarm, among the German general officer corps. Ludwig Beck, Henning von Tresckow, Erwin von Witzleben, and many others began planning the overthrow of Hitler. Indeed, some of these men survived the eventual failure of Oster's various plots only to die after participating in the more famous July 20th, 1944 bomb plot headed by von Stauffenberg.

Von Witzleben

Tresckow

In late May 1938, Hitler's agents orchestrated staged riots in the Sudeten territories, and the Fuhrer loudly announced his intention to defend the Sudeten Germans from imaginary Czech oppression. As the British began negotiations with Germany regarding the fate of Czechoslovakia, Oster sent Ewald von Kleist-Schmenzin to the British Foreign Office's Sir Robert Gilbert Vansittart, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, and others, “with an assignment from Ludwig Beck: ‘Bring me back certain proof that England will fight if Czechoslovakia is attacked, and I will put an end to this regime.’ Kleist began his meeting with Vansittart by informing the chief diplomatic adviser that he came ‘with a rope around his neck.’ [...] Fully misunderstanding Kleist's mission, Prime Minister Chamberlain described Kleist

and his reactionary friends as nothing more than modern Jacobites hoping to spark a revolution and restore the past with British help." (Fest, 1994, 49).



Chamberlain

Maintaining his trust in Hitler, Neville Chamberlain threw away a direct offer from the German high command to depose and probably kill Hitler, which may have averted World War II. In doing so, the British – Hitler's longtime bogeyman and the people he enjoyed blaming for each and every scheme to kill him – may have saved the dictator from overthrow by Oster and his allies by refusing to give even verbal support to their scheme. Chamberlain believed that if he sacrificed enough small states to Hitler's ambition, the Fuhrer would soon grow satisfied and cease his aggression. The British prime minister failed to realize that the German dictator took each new surrender as a sign of trembling pusillanimity and weakness on the part of the British, and that the appeasement policy simply honed and encouraged his boundless schemes of conquest.

Oster sent a succession of emissaries to Chamberlain and his cabinet throughout the summer, but as before, the British ignored their pleas with a certain amount of stuffy indignation that the German officers would seek to involve them in something so "underhanded." The English upper class held a deep, essentially racist, loathing for the Germans as well, describing them as "a race of carnivorous sheep." (Fest, 1994, 53). As such, they thought Hitler no worse than any other Teuton in existence.

Finally, on September 5th, 1938, Oster and Witzleben led the others in planning a direct coup. They would mobilize Wehrmacht units to neutralize Hitler's SS Liebstandarte bodyguards, seize Hitler, and either kill him immediately or put him on trial for crimes against humanity, almost certainly resulting in a death sentence.

On September 28th, however, Neville Chamberlain destroyed the incipient overthrow of Hitler without even realizing it when the negotiations at Munich led to a peace agreement which effectively granted the Sudetenland to Germany and dismantled his alleged ally Czechoslovakia with the stroke of a pen. This immediately ended any chance of ousting and executing Hitler because the Army commanders prepared to bring their troops to assist the coup only participated due to their fear of war. Now it appeared the Third Reich and Britain would not fight after all, so the Army leaders withdrew their support.

With no soldiers at their command, Oster, Canaris, Witzleben, and the other conspirators could not overcome Hitler's Liebstandarte and seize the Fuhrer. Chamberlain had undone the plot at the eleventh hour by supinely accepting Hitler's demands, and Witzleben, speaking with his fellow conspirators, gave vent to unbridled, savage sarcasm at the disastrous turn of events: “You see, gentlemen, for this poor foolish nation, he is once again our big dearly beloved fuhrer, unique, sent from God, and we, we are a little pile of reactionary and disgruntled officers or politicians who dared to put pebbles in the way of the greatest statesman of all times at the moment of his greatest triumph.” (Parssinen, 2003, 166).

Undeterred, Oster continued attempts to overthrow Hitler during the following years. Other officers joined in, but Hitler's elusiveness thwarted several attempts to kill him outright. At one point, Tresckow and a group of other generals prepared to assassinate the Fuhrer during one of his visits to the Russian front by simply pulling out their pistols and riddling him with bullets when he walked into the scheduled briefing. The Fuhrer foiled them by changing his plans and visiting a different part of the front instead.

Another attempt involved a lone suicide bomber – a brave officer who agreed to wear a uniform with a bomb installed in the front of the tunic. When Hitler arrived, the man planned to fling his arms around the Fuhrer and detonate the bomb, killing both Hitler and himself. Several generals invited Hitler to view the “new uniform” they had devised, and the Third Reich's dictator agreed, only to cancel the viewing at the last moment.

The occasion when Tresckow, Oster, and the other military conspirators came closest to killing Hitler took place on March 13th, 1943. Dubbed Operation Flash, the plan involved smuggling a plastic explosive package disguised as a bottle of Cointreau triple sec cognac liqueur aboard Hitler's personal Focke-Wulf Condor aircraft at Smolensk. The sophisticated explosive, timed to detonate with the Condor near Minsk, would tear even the heavily armored aircraft apart. One of the conspirators, Fabian von Schlabrendorff (destined to survive the war, raise six children, work as a constitutional judge in West Germany, and die in 1980 at the age of 73), gave the bottle to Colonel Heinz Brandt at Smolensk, asking him to take the liquor back to headquarters and give it to Colonel Stieff, a personal friend. Schlabrendorff claimed the Cointreau settled a bet with Stieff which he had lost, and Brandt readily agreed to take the cognac with him on the flight.

The conspirators awaited news of the destruction of Hitler's aircraft, but instead learned the Condor landed intact, against all odds, at Rastenburg. Schlabrendorff boldly telephoned Brandt and told him he had given him the wrong bottle. He asked the Colonel to hold it for him overnight, when he would arrive personally at headquarters, retrieve the bottle, and give Stieff the correct bottle personally. Schlabrendorff arrived at headquarters as scheduled and found Colonel Brandt, in an excellent mood, emerging from his office while unwittingly juggling the bomb playfully. Though understandably terrified, Schlabrendorff thanked Brandt, took the bottle, and retreated to a private location to determine

why the bomb failed. Once alone, he “opened the bomb with a razor blade and removed the detonator. He found that the capsule had broken, the acid had eaten its way through the wire holding the firing pin, the firing pin had struck as intended, and even the percussion cap seemed to have ignited. But the explosive had not gone off. Among the theories [...] the most likely is that the heater in the plane's cargo hold had malfunctioned [...] and the explosive, which was sensitive to cold, failed to ignite as a result.” (Fest, 1994, 122).

Eventually, an act of kindness on Oster's part led to his undoing. He assisted 14 Jews in obtaining false Abwehr identification papers, enabling their escape to Switzerland, but unfortunately the Gestapo arrested his assistant, Hans von Dohnanyi, who funded the escape, on charges of financial corruption. Linked to Dohnanyi, Oster found himself under house arrest, and when his links to several of the July 20th, 1944 plotters emerged, the Gestapo transferred him to a concentration camp, along with Canaris.

Even at this stage, Oster's role in the earlier attempts to overthrow Hitler remained secret until the last days of the war. The Gestapo finally discovered incriminating diaries in early 1945 that detailed the Abwehr's determination to remove Hitler from power by force and either kill him or declare him criminally insane. The Fuhrer responded with wrath, ordering Oster and all other conspirators executed forthwith. After a brief trial with a foregone conclusion on April 9th, 1945, Oster and several other men suffered execution by hanging at Flossenburg concentration camp. Wilhelm Canaris died beside him. Two weeks later, on April 23rd, 1945, elements of the U.S. 90th Infantry Division liberated the camp, too late to save two of its most notable prisoners.

Chapter 6: Claus von Stauffenberg

Stauffenberg

Count Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg played the central role in Operation Valkyrie, also known as the July 20th bomb plot, the 1944 attempt on Hitler's life that (unlike most of the Army's previous efforts) nearly succeeded. The subject of numerous books and at least one high-profile popular film, Operation Valkyrie came even closer than Georg Elser's bombing attempt to killing Hitler.

Since at least 1943, Stauffenberg had involved himself in covert resistance to Hitler and scheming against the Fuhrer's life. The officers engaged in these ambitious plans worked out a strategy, "Valkyrie," that would enable the seizure of key spots and the arrest or elimination of crucial Nazi personnel in the event Hitler died, allowing the schemers to assume the reins of power or at least attempt to do so.

Stauffenberg received a promotion to the rank of colonel on July 1st, 1944 and found himself participating in meetings at the Berghof as an aide to General Friedrich Fromm. The newly minted colonel answered summons to appear at the Berghof on July 8th, when Fromm consulted with Hitler and

other top officers on the conduct of the war. Stauffenberg smuggled a bomb into the conference room but did not detonate it, perhaps due to the absence of Himmler and Goering, whom the resistance consistently earmarked for elimination at the same time as Hitler to increase the chances of Nazi collapse.

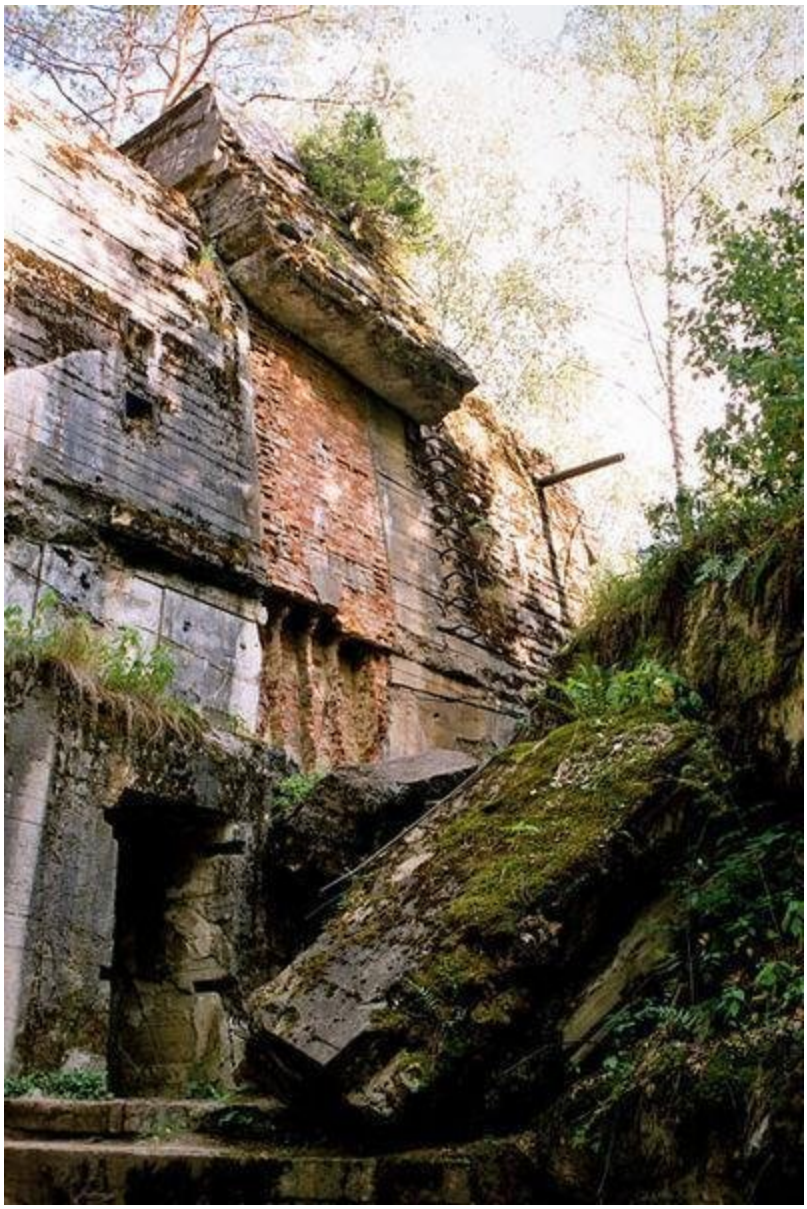
Fromm

The plotters now felt extreme urgency in bringing about Hitler's death, and two factors impelled them: fear of Gestapo discovery, and the Allies' advance. The men hoped to gain a negotiated peace with the Allies rather than an unconditional surrender following their slaying of the Fuhrer, but such an outcome remained possible only as long as the Allies remained outside Germany's borders. Hitler must die before the Allies reached German soil or the plan would be in vain.

The inner circle of men at the heart of the plot – Oster, Stauffenberg and his brother, Canaris, Beck, Tresckow, Schlabrendorff, Witzleben, and other longtime resisters, along with new faces such as Hans-Ulrich von Oertzen, remained conflicted about the plan but determined to proceed despite their personal shame at "betraying" German military obedience. Stauffenberg explained his thoughts several days before the July 20th bombing attempt. While his brother, Berthold von Stauffenberg, judged the attempt foredoomed but declared the necessity of trying in any case. Claus von Stauffenberg remarked, "It is now time that something was done. But he who has the courage to do something must do so in the knowledge that he will go down in German history as a traitor. If he does not do it, however, he will be a traitor to his conscience." (Hoffmann, 1996, 374).

Stauffenberg sought another opportunity to blow up Hitler on July 11th, again at the Berghof. Though he successfully smuggled a bomb into the conference room, Stieff – now in on the plan – dissuaded him from throwing it due to Himmler's absence. It's also possible his courage failed him or he could not bear the stain on his military honor.

On July 14th, Hitler moved his headquarters from the Berghof to the Wolfsschanze ("Wolf's Lair") in Prussia, a massive forest complex near Rastenburg. Stauffenberg accompanied the staff, still carrying his briefcase bomb, and on July 15th, he placed the briefcase in the Wolfsschanze's conference room and left. Before the bomb exploded, however, Stieff entered the room, removed the briefcase, and disarmed the timing mechanism, once again possibly saving Hitler's life.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 101III-Reprich-012-08
Foto: Reprich | 1942

Pictures taken at the Wolf's Lair

Stauffenberg (standing on the far left) next to Hitler on July 15, 1944

On July 19th, dozens of officers prepared for the seizure of key points in Berlin and elsewhere on the following day, along with the broadcast of messages announcing Hitler's death and the end of the Third Reich. Few expected success, least of all Stauffenberg, but all stood ready to carry out their part in the unfolding drama.

Stauffenberg arrived at Rastenburg airport at 10:00 a.m. on July 20th carrying an innocuous briefcase. Meeting fellow conspirator Werner von Haeften shortly before the 12:30 p.m. military conference with Hitler, he gave Haeften the empty briefcase and received the explosive briefcase, containing two bombs, in its place. Stauffenberg armed the first bomb but then found himself interrupted by an urgent telephone call. Apparently slightly panicked, he left the second bomb behind, halving the explosive power of the briefcase and, most likely, accidentally saving Hitler's life.

When the meeting in the Wolfsschanze's map room with its gigantic oak table finally got underway, Stauffenberg entered and put the explosive briefcase down just three feet from where Hitler stood, behind one of the oak table's massive legs. He then left again, blending in with the aides who hurried in and out, fetching papers, making telephone calls, sending telegraph messages, and the like. At 12:42

p.m., the bomb exploded, as one of the 40 men present later recalled: “In a flash the map room became a scene of stampede and destruction… there was nothing but wounded men groaning, the acrid smell of burning and charred fragments of maps and papers fluttering in the wind.” (Moorhouse, 2006, 190).

Many of those present died, and most of the rest suffered wounds, but thanks to the protection offered by the table leg and the table itself, Hitler survived with minor injuries except for perforations in his eardrums. The blast had blown his pants right off of him.

A picture of the damage done by the bomb

The explosion attracted little attention for several minutes, muffled by the walls and unremarkable in a location where frequent weapons drills occurred. One soldier even remarked to Stauffenberg as the would-be assassin hurried out to his car that the explosion likely marked the death of a forest animal incautiously straying into the Wolfsschanze's minefields. Stauffenberg stayed only long enough to see a corpse wrapped in Hitler's cloak carried out of the map room. Failing to check the cadaver's identity, he assumed the Fuhrer lay dead under the blood-soaked cloth and thus left for Rastenburg airport, where, despite the alarm raised by the time he arrived, he managed to bully an air crew into releasing an aircraft for an immediate flight to Berlin.

Stauffenberg's co-conspirator at the Wolfsschanze, Fellgiebel, soon learned that Hitler had survived and telephoned the officers in Berlin. His spoke so vaguely, however, that the men had little idea what had happened or failed to happen at the Wolf's Lair. Finally, at around 3:15 p.m., they decided to launch the coup attempt despite the near certainty Hitler remained alive.

For a few hours, things appeared to go the conspirators' way. The Valkyrie troops mobilized and seized a number of key objectives by 6:00 p.m. However, at around this time, Hitler began calling officers he knew, enabling them to recognize his voice and realize he was still alive, and many of the officers soon began standing their troops down. Even Witzleben called off his soldiers and went home by 9:00 p.m.

Hitler seemed euphoric at his survival, laughing and joking with the other people at the Wolfsschanze and declaring loudly, over and over again, “I am invulnerable, I am immortal!”

In the meantime, General Fromm, Stauffenberg's immediate superior, took Stauffenberg and other conspirators prisoner, just as they had taken him prisoner a few hours before. Beck attempted to kill himself but failed, leaving him writhing on the floor in agony until Fromm ordered a sergeant to mercifully shoot him.

Stauffenberg and a number of other conspirators met a swift fate at the hands of Fromm's men, who dragged them from the building. “In the courtyard outside, several military vehicles pulled up, their headlights glaring. [...] In the middle stood an execution squad consisting of Lieutenant Werner Schady and ten noncommissioned officers. [...] Olbricht was the first to be shot. Next it was Stauffenberg's turn, but just as the squad fired, Haeften, in a defiant gesture, threw himself into the hail of bullets. When the squad again took aim at Stauffenberg, he shouted, ‘Long live sacred Germany.’ Before the sound of his voice died away, shots resounded.” (Fest, 1994, 172). Himmler ordered Fromm's arrest shortly thereafter, suspecting him due to the great haste with which he killed Stauffenberg.

A wave of arrests followed in Germany and France as Gestapo interrogations, captured documents, and the actions of conspirators revealed those who participated in the scheme. Some of the men involved successfully committed suicide before their capture. Tresckow, a longtime plotter against the Fuhrer's life, managed to kill himself on the Eastern Front before the Gestapo or SS arrested him, and indeed before they even suspected him. He arranged to drive out alone with a submachine gun, which he fired, then detonated a grenade against his body to simulate his killing by partisans. Another plotter, Hans-Ulrich von Oertzen, asked to urinate while being arrested. The Gestapo allowed him to use the bathroom in his office, where he thrust a live grenade into his mouth and blew his own head off.

Many, however, fell alive into Gestapo hands and suffered extensive torture as the secret police worked to extract more names and more details from their captives. Beatings, electric shocks, the medieval rack, and a special finger-piercing device were all used during the interrogations. Some displayed their injuries in court, causing consternation in a society not entirely accustomed to the excesses of a dictatorial regime even after 11 years of rule by Adolf Hitler.

Eventually, the People's Court, headed by the notorious, intelligent, and corrupt Roland Freisler, tried dozens of prisoners and condemned them to death. 7,000 arrests led to no less than 4,980 executions, including some which amounted to no more than personal revenge by SS personnel against people they hated. Fromm died before a firing squad, and the court convicted Arthur Nebe, the Kripo head, sentencing him to hang.

Freisler

The Court's sessions continued for months, but on February 3rd, 1945, a massive Allied air raid struck Berlin while the court was in session. Freisler, a courageous man despite his other failings, returned from the air raid cellars to fetch certain important documents from the courtroom. A bomb struck the People's Court, collapsing part of the building and causing a falling beam to fatally strike Freisler on the head.

The bomb which killed Roland Freisler also serendipitously saved the life of Fabian von Schlabrendorff, the brave and self-possessed plotter who retrieved the fake bottle of Cointreau after the failed Smolensk bombing of the Fuhrer's Focke-Wulf Condor in 1943. Schlabrendorff's entire arrest and legal dossier, carried by Freisler at the moment of the bomb blast, burned to ash in the ruins. No surviving court personnel knew the charges against him and therefore asked the prisoner the reason for his incarceration and trial. Cool and quick-witted as ever, Schlabrendorff claimed his crime consisted of "illegally slaughtering cattle" (Boeselager, 2010, 91). Though he remained jailed for the rest of the war, he survived and was freed by American soldiers, after which he returned to civilian life.

Most of the plotters met their deaths piecemeal on the gallows or in front of firing squads as the court proceedings continued. Witzleben, Berthold von Stauffenberg, Alfred Kranzfelder, Fritz von der

Schulenburg, and a number of other men were executed in Plotzensee Prison on August 8th, 1944, the first of the plotters to die following Stauffenberg's shooting in the courtyard alongside three other men by Fromm's soldiers on the night of July 20th. Many others remained imprisoned in Plotzensee for months before the Gestapo or SS finally carried out their execution orders.

Imprisonment in Plotzensee constituted a form of torture in itself. Each prisoner occupied a tiny cell, continually illuminated by a bare electric bulb. The guards shackled each man to the wall with chains permitting him to reach the bed and toilet, but no more. Most prisoners lived in total isolation except when brought out for interrogation, torture, trial, or execution. The prison diet consisted of bread, plus soup made from potato peelings and gristle. The warders provided no exercise time and many men never saw the outdoors or the sky again, immured in fear-drenched boredom for months until the guards came to drag them to the execution chamber. Many of the condemned Valkyrie plotters suffered the penalty of hanging underneath a sturdy beam placed in a large, bare room with two tall, arched windows in Plotzensee Prison. The room still exists, and the beam still stands in the chamber as a memorial. The Gestapo equipped the beam with five large steel hooks to which they attached hemp nooses.

At least one legend, and perhaps two, were born in the execution chamber that day. The legend states that the Gestapo used piano wire to hang the men to prolong their torment, and that SS photographers filmed the executions so that Hitler could relive them whenever he wished. However, some historians dispute this. “In spite of extensive searches, no copy of the film has ever been found, though two eye-witness accounts, from camera men who in spite of an extensive search could not be traced, state in a German government publication that the sentence was carried out by hanging: hemp nooses were placed around the condemneds' necks […] and the stools upon which the convicted men stood were kicked away.” (Koch, 1997, 214). The fact that no copies of the purported film or images from it survive casts doubt on whether the SS ever actually shot the reel. With various Fuhrer headquarters captured virtually intact, some evidence of its existence – if, in fact, the film existed – seems probable. Thus, the men likely suffered ordinary hangings in the style of German executions of the time, a grim enough fate after their failed attempt and the Gestapo’s torture. The piano wire tale seems a later embellishment, as though the reality lacked sufficient brutality.

The SS hanged Arthur Nebe on March 21st, 1945 in Plotzensee Prison, and the Nazis carried out the death sentence against Canaris and another group of senior plotters on April 8th. For these plotters, the Nazis added an extra element of humiliation to their deaths, perhaps due to Canaris' seniority and the exceptional position of trust he occupied before his arrest. “As the skies began to lighten at dawn the next day, the executions began. The victims were taken to a bathing cubicle, where they were forced to strip; then, one by one, they were led naked across the courtyard to the gallows. Hooks had been attached to the rafters of an open wooden structure. The condemned men were ordered to climb a few steps, a noose was placed around their necks, and the steps were kicked aside.” (Fest, 1994, 192).

The Gestapo hanged the final group of 28 July 20th “traitors” on April 20th, 1945 as a birthday present to the Fuhrer. Many of the victims made no effort to either kill themselves or escape prior to their arrest, preferring to await the Gestapo with “dignity” and thus express their belief they were neither criminals nor traitors but brave German officers doing their duty and accepting the consequences of failure. Peter Yorck von Wartenburg wrote to his wife during the trials, “I, too, am dying for my country, and even if it seems to all appearances a very inglorious and disgraceful death, I shall hold up my head and I only hope that you will not believe this to be from pride or delusion. We wished to light the torch of life and now we stand in a sea of flames.” (Thomsett, 1997, 236).

Chapter 7: Operation Foxley

Hitler's paranoid mind saw foreign schemers behind every effort to assassinate him. Part of this stemmed from his overwhelming vanity, which made it hard for him to believe a true German could wish to kill such an invaluable asset as himself unless corrupted by foreign agents backed by shadowy Jewish financiers. Additionally, the dictator's contradictory philosophical beliefs played a part. Paradoxically, Hitler declared no force equal to the human "will," but at the same time he refused to believe an individual was capable of acting without a structure of authority to provide them with guidance and inspiration.

While many of the assassination plots were domestic in nature, on at least one notable occasion, the Fuhrer's favorite bugbear, the British, actually contemplated an assassination mission against him before deciding against it. Operation Foxley, as the English dubbed the plan, originated with an unnamed French colonel sometime around the date of the D-Day landings in Normandy. Though the original scheme presented wildly improbable features, such as the colonel's utterly incorrect belief that Hitler occupied quarters near Perpignan and that he could therefore be killed by a large-scale air assault, it prompted the British SOE (Special Operations Executive) to consider an assassination attempt. The SOE officially resolved to study the possibility during a meeting on June 27th, 1944, as directed by General Colin Gubbins. The SOE developed parallel feasibility studies for assassination of other high value Nazi targets such as Goering, Himmler, and Goebbels, though Hitler remained the chief focus.

Gubbins

Uncertainty about whether or not the assassination would be advisable arose almost immediately, as revealed by a June 21, 1944 brief from H.L. Ismay to Winston Churchill: "The Chiefs of Staff were unanimous that, from the strictly military point of view, it was almost an advantage that Hitler should

remain in control of German strategy, having regard to the blunders that he made, but that on the wider point of view, the sooner he was got out of the way the better." (Seaman, 1998, 14).

The SOE leadership pondered two alternate plans for killing Hitler. The first involved attacking his personal armored train, the "Hitler Special," by derailing it or by introducing poison into its water supply. The second, which drew the most attention due to its far higher practicality, involved shooting Hitler as he walked in the Bavarian alpine countryside near his picturesque retreat, the Berghof, near Berechtsgaden.

The Berghof

For this, the most feasible scheme developed involved the use of two snipers. These men would try to pick off Hitler as he walked out of the defended Berghof perimeter to a teahouse for breakfast, as he did every morning in pleasant weather, by shooting him with explosive bullets. If they could not acquire a clear sighting on their quarry, they would instead try to move closer and fire either a U.S. bazooka or a British PIAT portable anti-tank rocket into the teahouse to kill Hitler during his repast. Finally, if that proved impracticable, the men would use the bazooka or PIAT on the Fuhrer's car as he drove back to the Berghof after finishing his morning meal. The men would wear German Gebirgsjager (mountain troop) uniforms both to allay suspicions if spotted and to pin the assassination on the Wehrmacht if the Germans saw them while escaping.

The British eventually dropped the plan due to several factors, including a strong aversion to underhanded killing, the possibility that Hitler crippled German war planning with his impracticality, and the swift approach of the war's end. Indeed, though the British remained ignorant of the fact for months, Hitler never returned to the Berghof after July 14th, 1944. The July 20th bomb plot ended the Fuhrer's Berechtsgaden outings, so just two weeks after Operation Foxley's initiation, the main circumstance giving it any chance of success ceased to exist.

At approximately the same time, the American OSS, or Office of Strategic Services, provided a moment of unintentional comedy with their own plan to destroy Hitler. A band of OSS researchers known as the “Choirboys” created a risible scheme and proposed it in all seriousness. “[T]his group decided the Fuehrer could be undone by exposing him to vast quantities of pornography [and] collected the finest library of German smut ever assembled in the United States. The material was to be dropped by plane in the area surrounding Hitler's headquarters on the assumption that the Fuehrer would step outside, pick up some bit of it, and immediately be thrown into paroxysms of madness.” (Smith, 2005, 204).

The OSS chiefs actually countenanced this plan to the point of arranging a meeting between the Choirboys and a colonel from the Army Air Corps. The Choirboys explained their scheme and asked the colonel for aircraft to drop the immense collection of pornography near the Berghof. The officer responded by leaving the meeting in a rage, calling the Choirboys “maniacs” and bellowing that not one Allied pilot's life would be risked for an “insane boondoggle” of that nature. (Smith, 2005, 204)

In the end, the Western Allies' aversion to sending their men on actual suicide missions ensured that no Western scheme to kill Hitler enjoyed much chance of success. The Fuhrer's random, unpredictable movements, combined with the swarms of Gestapo, Kripo, and SS monitoring every Germany city, rendered any attempt to introduce foreign agents to kill Hitler almost certain to fail. As a result, neither the British nor the Americans attempted the action.

Of course, the Allies guaranteed Hitler’s demise in a more traditional way. The overwhelming might of Allied air power and a strong ground offensive from the West, along with the steady (and costly) advance of the Soviets from the East, doomed the Fuhrer without the need for an assassin's bullet. On April 30, 1945, the man who pulled the trigger and ended the dictator’s life was Adolf Hitler himself, ensuring that the Nazi leader would not fall into the hands of advancing Soviet troops fighting just a few blocks away.

A picture of Hitler during his final public appearance on April 25, 1945, five days before he committed suicide

The Assassination of Heydrich

Chapter 1: Heydrich's Background

Heydrich in 1922

A tall, rather slender individual with a long face, prominent, narrowly aquiline nose, and small, slightly squinting eyes, Reinhard Heydrich wore his blond hair slicked back and possessed some of the accomplishments of a "gentleman." An intelligent administrator and skilled pilot, the man nicknamed "the Blond Beast" also played the violin with notable virtuosity due to the fact that his parents were an opera singer and a pianist. Despite those innocuous sounding positions, young Heydrich received frequent, brutal beatings from his mother, echoing the extraordinary levels of parental violence inflicted on many psychopathic killers during their formative years.

Standing alongside such bloodstained figures as Heinrich Himmler, Adolf Eichmann, and Hitler himself as the architect of a series of mass murders equaled in history only by those of the communists, Reinhard Heydrich emerges as a paradoxical individual from the surviving records. The Blond Beast showed great devotion to his wife, Lina von Osten, and his four children, daughters Silke and Marte and sons Heider and Klaus. Nevertheless, though he appears to have been unusually troubled by the horrors inflicted on Jews and foreigners during the Third Reich, Heydrich applied his iron will to force himself to continue whenever a pang of doubt occurred. In fact, Hitler groomed Heydrich as his potential successor, deeming him to be a suitable Fuhrer in the event of his own death or incapacity. Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, viewed his nominal subordinate with a mix of proprietary paternalism, awe, and alarm, recognizing him as a useful protégé, admiring his grim handiwork, and fearing that the ambitious and intelligent man would supplant him by turns.

Heydrich standing alongside Hitler and Himmler in Vienna in 1938

As head of the Gestapo, Heydrich constructed the infamous "Nacht und Nebel, or "Night and Fog," program. This secret police operation was designed to abduct (and usually murder) enemies of the state with such care and secrecy that they simply vanished, with nobody witnessing their arrest or their transport to places of imprisonment, torture, or execution. "Nacht und Nebel" was designed to sow deep fear in the German populace, a program of "disappearing" enemies carried out in as eerie and ghostly a fashion as possible in order to give the Gestapo the aura of a haunting, invisible, omnipresent danger which could strike anywhere without warning.

Heydrich also involved himself heavily with the seizure and deportation of Jews, though he did not oversee their actual extermination, a matter handled by Adolf Eichmann. The Blond Beast did, however, help to gel Nazi policy during the early war years at the Wannsee Conference on January 20th, 1942, the infamous meeting where the Nazis decided the fate of Europe's Jews. The Nazis sensed distantly they might be defeated in the war, so they wished to complete at least some "work" prior to that moment. “Heydrich had stated at the Wannsee Conference: ‘In the course of the implementation of the Final

Solution, Europe is to be combed through from west to east. The evacuated Jews will be brought, group by group, to the so-called transit ghettos […] to be transported from there further to the East.' The choice of the Lublin district as the center for the extermination actions could, therefore, serve as a cover for the claim that the Jews were being sent to the East. Their disappearance after their extermination in the death camps could be explained by saying that they had been sent further east." (Arad, 1987, 15).

A. Savin's picture of the building where the Wannsee Conference was held

Hitler was not present at the conference, which took place near one of the Wannsee lakes that form an important swimming attraction near Berlin, but the men present took their cue from the Fuhrer's statements, which included this diatribe: "I already stated [...] – and I refrain from overhasty prophecies – that this war will not come to an end as the Jews imagine, with the extermination of the European-aryan peoples, but [with] the annihilation of Jewry. For the first time the old Jewish law will now be applied: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth … And the hour will come when the most evil world-enemy of all time will have played out its role, at least for a thousand years." (Kershaw, 2008, 589).

A few months earlier, Hitler had appointed Heydrich "Reich Protector" of Czechoslovakia in late 1941, and once installed in his new post, the Gestapo chief set about conquering what was, in effect, his kingdom with a system he described as "whips and sugar," his own slant on the more familiar phrase "carrot and stick." Initially carrying out a number of political killings to show the Czechs he was not to be trifled with, Heydrich then treated his new subjects with a form of favor in order to win them over to the Nazi cause. In Poland, the Germans made themselves hated with their policy of random murder and grinding economic oppression, but Heydrich, by contrast, attempted to soothe the Czechs with high wages, good jobs, and various perquisites such as regular vacations in scenic areas for factory workers. At the same time, he left no doubt of the gruesome consequences of disobedience or rebellion. Heydrich was not exactly a kind master, but he attempted to create an unequal symbiosis which benefitted the Czechs as well – just not as much as it benefitted the Germans, of course.

As part of his program, Heydrich eschewed the trappings of security favored by most of his peers. Just as he had fearlessly confronted Russian fighters on the eastern front during the opening action of Operation Barbarossa, to the point of being shot down behind enemy lines and barely escaping with his life, now Heydrich defied potential death in a different fashion.

One of Heydrich's open air vehicles

Despite his steely rationality, Heydrich remained tormented by his own inner demons, as one bizarre incident in particular highlights: "One of his colleagues has described the haunting and profoundly revealing occasion when Heydrich came home at night to his brilliantly lit apartment and suddenly saw his reflection in a large wall mirror. In an attack of cold rage he 'whipped his pistol from his holster and fired two shots at this double', the ever and tormentingly present negation of himself." (Fest, 124).

Heydrich in Prague in 1941

Such was the man who was targeted for assassination by the British and the Czech government in exile as 1941 drew to a close. The British likely targeted him because of his association with Czechoslovakia, a nation whose fate made the English uncomfortable due to their partial culpability in its fall to Hitler's aggression. Neville Chamberlain had effectively signed away Czechoslovakia's independence in 1938 with the Munich Agreement, and for this reason the eastern European nation remained prominent in the thoughts of British statesmen who now viewed the appeasement policy as a mistake, if not outright treason.

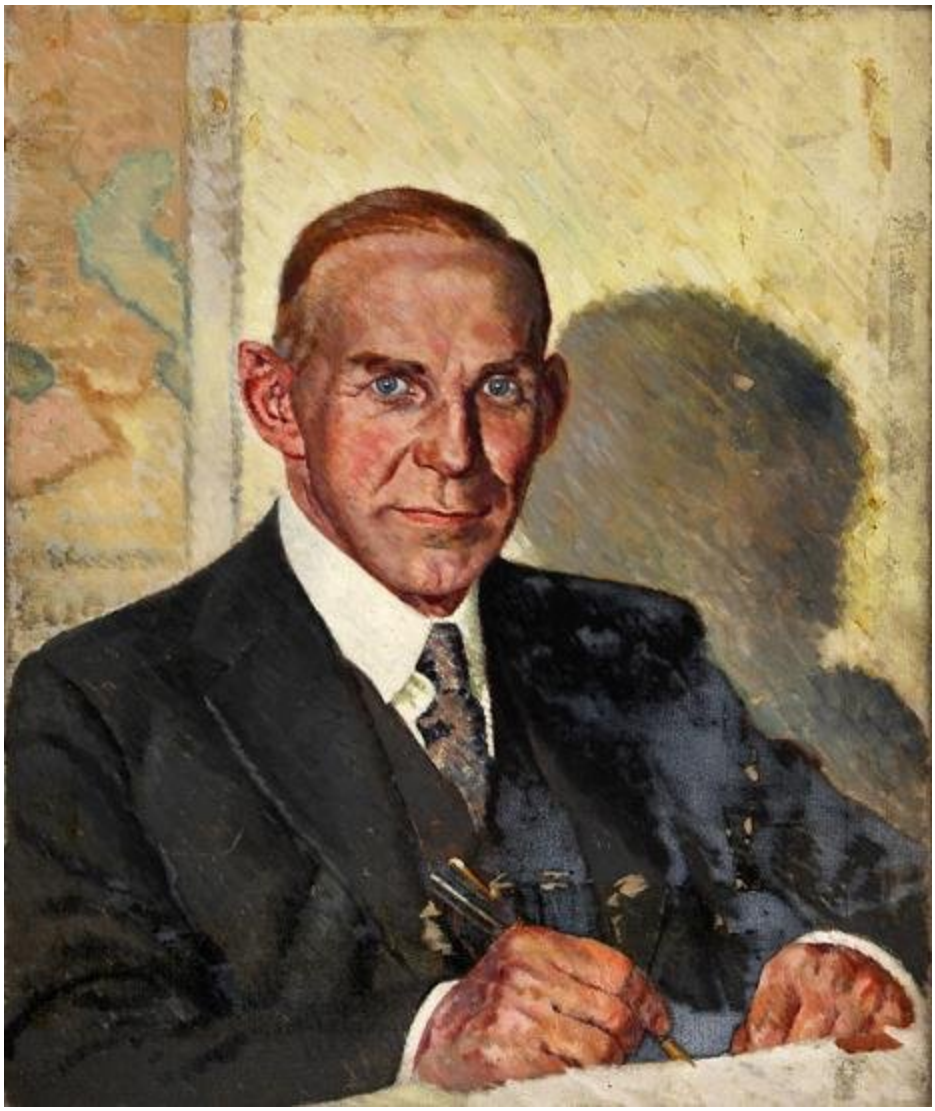
Chapter 2: Picking the Target

The British Special Operations Executive, or SOE, and the Czechoslovakian government in exile under President Edvard Benes cooperated in creating the plan to kill Reinhard Heydrich. The operation received the somewhat bizarre codename "Operation Anthropoid" and originated with the Czech exiles. The British government placed increasing pressure on these displaced officials to come up with a plan bolstering Czech resistance to Nazi occupation. Accordingly, in September 1941, the Czechs picked Heydrich as an assassination target, and the SOE assisted preparations.

Benes

Wryly dubbed the "Office of Ungentlemanly Warfare," the SOE existed as a highly secretive wartime organization charged with clandestine operations against the Axis. In particular, the British government wanted the group to foment and assist resistance movements in occupied countries across Europe. Led in 1942 by Roundell Cecil Palmer, 3rd Earl of Selbourne, the SOE enjoyed little success during the early war years.

As if that poor track record wasn't enough cause for concern, the Czechs had divided support for the plan amongst themselves; in fact, powerful political disagreements amongst themselves characterized the Czechs during Germany's occupation. One faction, standing for democracy, wanted to see Czechoslovakia as an independent nation in the manner of France or Britain, and while the United States fully supported this faction, the British offered tepid, unenthusiastic assistance due in large part to the fact that they had signed away just such a state in the 1938 Munich Agreement and had difficulty admitting their error. The other Czechoslovakian faction espoused radical communist beliefs, called for the overthrow of the Western democracies assisting them, and wished to see Czechoslovakia become an effective province of the Soviet Union.



Portrait of Palmer

Despite these deep divisions, the Czech government in exile “gradually came to be identified with a distinctive concept of the strategy and tactics of that liberation. The London concept, for which Eduard Benes, the former president, was the main spokesman, was primarily national in content. Its aim was simple: the restoration of Czechoslovakia as an independent state, within its pre-1938 boundaries. Munich and its consequences were to be erased from history.” (Skilling, 1960, 174).

However, the means necessary to attain this goal ran at loggerheads to long-established Czechoslovakian cultural norms. The Czech lands formed part of the Holy Roman Empire and then the Austrian empire for many centuries, making full independence from foreign domination a very recent phenomenon not only in fact but also in the Czech mindset. Originally a fierce and turbulent people, the Czechs successfully resisted the encroachments of the Empire for some time in the 1420s under the charismatic, violent, and unorthodox commander Jan Zizka, famous for his use of "war wagons" and artillery. The fanatical, reforming "Hussites" soon turned on themselves in bloody civil struggles, however, enabling crusaders from Western Europe to bloodily reestablish the hegemony of the Catholic church – and the secular power of the Holy Roman Empire – during the later 15^{th} and early 16^{th} centuries. Subjected to the torture, terror, and suppression characteristic of the Holy See's temporal

extension of its influence, and a process of Germanization by the Imperial forces, the Czechs slowly lost their turbulent, warlike, freedom-loving character. They retained a certain independence of mind, but, ruled by forces far too powerful for effective direct resistance, became masters of manipulating their overlords without entering into outright conflict.

As a result, the idea of eschewing violence in favor of winning concessions through political maneuvering became deeply ingrained in the Czech mental and cultural milieu. Necessity remolded the descendants of Jan Zizka and the indomitable Hussites into a nation of self-aware collaborators who came to accept a measure of submission to foreign domination as a way of life, almost an inevitable natural order. “Until then, tyrannicide was entirely outside the context of the modern Czech political tradition. In the nineteenth century, the Czechs chose to settle their disputes with their Habsburg rulers through various forms of non-violent opposition. It was the institutionalized mass killing of both world wars, which to some seemed state-organized terrorism, that radically altered the situation.” (Hauner, 2007, 86).

Accordingly, the Czechs themselves remained dubious as to the value of armed resistance against the Nazis. Only the Third Reich's brutality provided some catalyst to resistance beyond the Czech norms of manipulating and passively resisting their conquerors. Nevertheless, many Czechs remained opposed to killing Heydrich outright, with good reason, as the event proved. Deciding to kill Heydrich from the safety of well-appointed quarters in England was a far different matter than facing the consequences of the assassination on the ground in Czechoslovakia, and as it happened, the Czech resistance, after helping to set up the Heydrich assassination scheme, made an 11th hour attempt to persuade the government in exile to abandon it. On May 12th, 1942, just 15 days prior to the assassination, “several senior members of the Czech underground sent 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.” (Hauner, 2007, 88).

These fears proved to be eerily accurate, as every single one of them became a reality during the days following the attack on Reinhard Heydrich. By then, however, President Benes thought the plot was too far advanced to abandon, and the British remained sanguine that increased Czech resistance, or even a general uprising, would ensue once the Gestapo general died and demonstrated the human vulnerability of the Nazis.

Though the matter is disputed among historians, it is possible that Benes and his fellow Czech government exiles acted in response to a considerably more sinister motivation themselves. Though Heydrich contemptuously referred to his charges, in private, as "Czech garbage," and he privately claimed that only a minority of them presented suitable characteristics to make proper German citizens, his public actions paradoxically tended to make him more popular as time passed. Heydrich's initially bloody introductory period ended rather quickly, and while he continued to harry and deport Jews, the average Czech on the street began to profit from Heydrich's rule over Czechoslovakia. Whether Heydrich possessed the intelligence, lacking in so many other prominent Nazis, to realize that conquered peoples might be induced to support the Third Reich if the Germans offered benefits instead of oppression and murder, or whether Czechoslovakia simply had such high industrial value that the Nazis made an exception to their usual method of tormenting and impoverishing their foreign subjects, the "Blond Beast's" actions alarmed Benes in a different manner, according to some historians. One British historian provides a concise summary of President Eduard Benes' potential motivation for ordering Heydrich's assassination even in the teeth of heartfelt protests from his own nation's homegrown resistance movement: “The reason was not that Heydrich had inflicted a brutal regime of terror on the people of the Protectorate, but that he had been too soft on them and was winning their support.

He had started his rule with all the harshness expected of him […] After the stick came the carrot. Heydrich turned off the terror as quickly as he had started it, and proceeded to woo the Czech workers and peasants […] with increased wages and rations […] active opposition to German rule all but ceased […] The only way to revive it was to provoke the Germans into a new wave of terror and repression." (Read, 2004, 750).

These represent serious charges which, if true, place Benes in the light of a ruthless man willing to deliberately trigger the murder of thousands of men, women, and children in his nation simply to retain his political influence among the survivors. If this assessment is accurate, then Benes emerges on the page of history as an unusual type of war criminal, deliberately provoking genocidal acts against his own nation and people in order to profit from their misery.

That said, in the absence of any documentary proof pointing precisely to Benes' thoughts on the subject, proving the government in exile's culpability remains difficult. Nevertheless, the suspicion, unlike many conspiracy theories, is not implausible, given the thorough, detailed warnings of Nazi retribution Benes received and the fact that he chose to ignore them entirely. These strong hints of malevolent intent cast doubts on the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich as an act of heroic tyrannicide and recast it more strongly as a cruelly selfish decision by exiled politicians determined to retain their own influence and luxurious lifestyle regardless of the human cost.

Chapter 3: Operation Anthropoid

The initial preparations for Operation Anthropoid commenced on October 2nd, 1941, seven months before they came to fruition, and the two men selected to carry out the actually killing were initially Josef Gabcik and Karel Svoboda. Svoboda did not remain on the roster long, however, due to an accident caused by a greatly accelerated timetable.

The SOE and Czech exiles conducted a supporting operation in early October entitled Operation Percentage, which involved dropping radios and their operators into Czechoslovakia to facilitate communications between the Czech resistance and Britain. However, the Gestapo located one of the main transmitters on the first night, seizing and torturing the operators to learn more details of what was underway. The Germans made use of what was, for their era, a high-tech solution; radio detecting vehicles prowled the streets of Czech cities, and once an illegal transmitter was detected, Gestapo agents closed in using small, belt-mounted Kapsch radio locators. This early man-portable tracking technology proved extremely effective, enabling a wave of arrests that alarmed both the British and the Czech government in exile.

Driven by fear that the Nazis would wipe out the resistance before their agents arrived to kill Heydrich, the SOE accelerated the timetable vastly: "The departure of the ANTHROPOID drop into the Protectorate was scheduled as early as October 7-10, 1941, on the basis of the first meeting of the intelligence department in London with the SOE. At that time a period of air operations over the occupied parts of Europe ended (a dark, moonless night was necessary for the long-distance flight)." (Burian, 2002, 35). While carrying out hasty parachute training, Gabcik and Svoboda met with near disaster when Svoboda struck his head on the ground during a botched jump and suffered severe injuries. Though they eventually healed, the injuries kept him out of Operation Anthropoid.

With Svoboda out of commission, the British substituted Jan Kubis, and training recommenced in Scotland. The two Czechs received thorough training in throwing grenades and bombs, firing various weapons (including Sten and Bren guns and Colt pistols), and parachuting. They also learned how to build and rig what are today referred to as IEDs (improvised explosive devices) but at the time fell under the umbrella term "booby traps." The third phase of their training featured orienteering in unfamiliar

terrain, driving skills for a wide variety of military and civilian vehicles, and the use of Morse code. At the same time, British agents prepared extremely high quality false identification documents for the men, which even today remain scarcely distinguishable from actual "Czech Protectorate" documents issued by the Nazi government of Reinhard Heydrich.

Gabcik

Kubis

While this training continued, the war entered a new period which eventually spelled the doom of the Third Reich. On December 7th, 1941, the Japanese attacked the American Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, sinking ships and killing nearly 3,000 Americans. Hitler subsequently declared war on the United States, and though it was unclear at the time, it likely signaled the moment when victory for the Third Reich became impossible.

Even years before the D-Day landings and the brilliantly effective aggression of General George S. Patton, "the American Guderian" as the Nazis dubbed him, the entry of the United States into the conflict began to swing the weight of fortune against Germany. The Lend-Lease Program to the Soviet Union, later dismissed as contributing no more than 4% of the Soviet war effort by Stalin's postwar propagandists, actually provided between 30%-50% of Soviet materiel and food for the rest of the war, as revealed by Russian researchers examining the archives following the fall of the USSR. In some vital industries the figure climbed even higher; for example, 92% of the locomotive and train cars used by the Soviets to move troops and weaponry to the front originated in American factories (Weeks, 2004).

These events made it more imperative than ever that the Czech resistance begin operations to disrupt Nazi Germany's industrial heartland. At the same time, the SOE worried about funding cuts due to its lukewarm success at starting resistance movements and prompting full-scale uprisings elsewhere in Europe. They wanted a success it could brandish before the English government to justify its own existence.

Flight Lieutenant Ronald C. Hockey commanded the Halifax Mark II four-engine long-range aircraft which took off on the evening of December 28th, 1941 with Gabcik, Kubis, and a number of other Czech commandos on board. The aircraft left the ground at 10:00 p.m., flew over the English Channel to

France, and turned east before reaching Darmstadt by 12:42 a.m. on December 29. Though harassed twice by German fighters, Lt. Hockey proved his skill by eluding the attackers on both occasions.

On the other hand, the insertion did not go as smoothly as the British had hoped. “Orientation for the crew was made very difficult because most of the reference points, such as railroad tracks, rivers, and even small towns, had disappeared under heavy snow cover. This fact contributed to a navigation mistake as the crew mistook Prague for Pilsen (from which they were shot at by an anti-aircraft battery at 2:12 a.m.). As a result, the ANTHROPOID group was air-dropped at 2:24 a.m. close to Nehvizdy, a village near Čelákovice, east of Prague, instead of east of Pilsen.” (Burian, 2002, 44).

Lt. Hockey piloted his aircraft successfully back to Britain and, ultimately, survived the war. The men of the mission, in the meantime, found themselves in a snowy field with two containers of supplies, which included a Sten submachine gun, six anti-tank grenades, 32 pounds of plastic explosive, three pistols, and a variety of other armaments and tools. The men spent the first night hiding in the garden shed of a man named Antonín Sedláček, only to discover their proximity to Prague the following morning. They left for Pilsen immediately, since most of their contacts lived there, and soon found themselves ensconced in various safe houses. A doctor treated Gabcik, who injured himself during the nighttime, low-level parachute jump.

Making matters more difficult for themselves, the men left their equipment hidden outdoors in extremely rigorous conditions, a decision which nearly cost their mission its success. Weapons, like other sophisticated technological tools, must be kept dry and maintained to avoid the serious risk of failure. Gabcik and Kubis, however, concealed the grenades and Sten gun in sheds, exposed to bitterly cold temperatures and considerable moisture.

However, as fate would have it, the navigational error made by Lt. Hockey actually proved to be a boon for the assassins. The wary Germans detected the aircraft and combed the countryside for several days along its flight route, suspecting that agents entered the country via this means. However, the actual assassins had already moved to Pilsen, outside the area of search, meaning that the Gestapo and Wehrmacht men assigned to the search came up empty-handed. Other parachutists who landed around the same time did not fare so well; the Germans killed some, while others escaped only after desperate gun-battles in which they managed to kill their Nazi attackers in the snowy Czech countryside.

The men moved from safe house to safe house, spending as much time watching Heydrich's movements as possible. They noted his routes, his habits, and his typical schedule, and the Gestapo general's overall disdain for security also made itself evident during the months spent surreptitiously observing their quarry. Gabcik and Kubis grew convinced that two men could kill Heydrich, with a third acting as a spotter.

As the Czechs conducted reconnaissance, the local resistance leader, Bartos, an extremely sick man, anticipated the horrific consequences of the assassination and tried to dissuade the men from moving forward with Operation Anthropoid. The assassins initially kept their mission secret, but Bartos pieced the information together and confronted the men in April, just a month before the assassination took place. He begged them to reconsider in light of the massacres the Nazis would carry out to avenge Heydrich's death. Gabcik and Kubis met these demands with stony refusal and eventually stormed out in a rage.

Seeing that their pleas would not move the assassins, the resistance sent a message to London asking Benes to call off the mission, a request which the government in exile also spurned. Their suggestion that, in their own words, a "local Quisling" should be selected as a target also met with official refusal.

While this squabbling went on, the Gestapo managed to intercept and translate part of the Czech transmission, warning them that the Czechs planned some kind of commando operation in the near future. One unknown factor is whether the British SOE would have called off the operation had they known the resistance's objections and the probability of compromised communications. However, Benes and his lieutenants did not inform the English of the communication or the doubts it contained, and SOE itself did not learn of the dispute until after the end of the war.

Either way, the Gestapo formed a clear picture of rising Czech "terrorism," and Himmler himself grew alarmed enough to visit Prague on May 1st, slightly more than three weeks before Heydrich's assassination. The Gestapo noted large numbers of commandos and saboteurs, as well as the capture of explosives, booby-trapped telephones which exploded when a person lifted the receiver, and so on. Himmler asked Heydrich to improve the security situation in the light of these developments, but Heydrich still refused to use a personal escort. (MacDonald, 2007, 144).

The Anthropoid assassins received a final impetus to act from Heydrich's schedule; when Hitler called for the Gestapo general to return to Berlin on May 27th, 1942, the men knew this might be their last opportunity. Accordingly, they chose a killing ground suited to their purposes. Along the road from his castle to Prague, Heydrich drove down a hill to the Troja bridge in the Holešovice suburb, and at the bottom of the hill, the road went around an extreme hairpin turn, forcing all cars to slow to a crawl for several seconds to avoid skidding off the road. Moreover, a tram stop nearby provided the men with an excuse to loiter in the area without drawing unwanted attention, and no police stations or Gestapo barracks stood nearby. The plan was to kill Heydrich, either with a burst of fire from a Sten gun or with a hand grenade, then escape to nearby safe houses using bicycles.

The preparations and scouting had required so much time that the two men only prepared to carry out their orders on May 27th just a few hours before Heydrich left Prague by airplane for his meeting with Hitler in Germany, where he might possibly be given a reassignment to a different location. Operation Anthropoid would occur almost literally at the 11th hour.

Chapter 4: The Assassination

Reinhard Heydrich and the men planning to kill him both woke up to a beautiful morning on May 27, 1942. This was to be Heydrich's last day in Czechoslovakia for some time at least, and, apparently savoring a moment of pleasurable sentimentality, the Blond Beast abandoned his usual clockwork routine and driven punctuality. Instead, after rising at the Lower Castle in Panenské Břežany, he ate a leisurely breakfast, which only ended at around 9:00 in the morning.

A picture of the estate used by Heydrich in Panenské Břežany

Once he finished his meal, Heydrich enjoyed some time with his family in the pleasant castle gardens, and the warm spring weather and fresh air made lingering on the spot a tempting proposition. While Lina, heavily pregnant with their fourth child, looked on fondly, the Man with the Iron Heart ran about the grounds, romping, laughing, and playing with his three small children. That scene offered stark contrast to the scenes of agony and death taking place in the extermination camps at that very moment, where Nazi guards harried Jewish parents and children by the thousands, striking them with whips and clubs or allowing German shepherds to tear at their naked bodies in order to drive them into the gas chambers where many would die standing, unable to fall in the densely packed mass of gasping, screaming, dying humanity.

Heydrich, his mind no doubt far removed from the scenes of horror for which he bore considerable responsibility, enjoyed an hour relaxing with his family before he finally climbed into his black Mercedes touring car. The car's open top allowed ample fresh air and sunlight, but it also exposed the occupants to bullets, grenades, and even such simple weapons as thrown rocks or roofing tiles. Only two men sat in the car: Heydrich, in the back seat, and his driver, Oberscharfuhrer (Staff Sergeant) Johannes Klein, in the driver's seat. Both were large men, with Heydrich standing 6 feet 3 inches tall and weighing 206 pounds, and Klein around 6’ tall and likely outweighing his commander. While Heydrich remained lean and agile despite his size, Klein's burliness made him clumsy and slow, though extremely strong. No escort accompanied the car as it rolled out of the castle gates past saluting sentries in the crisp uniform of the SS. Klein threw the car into gear and stepped on the gas pedal, speeding off in the direction of Prague along a route he had driven dozens if not hundreds of times before.

While Heydrich enjoyed a leisurely morning, the assassins found themselves in an agony of suspense while awaiting their target. Indeed, they almost abandoned their vigil for fear of being caught, and their

worry about being noticed loitering around the Gestapo chief's route was no idle fear. Another assassin, from a very different source, had met a hideous fate just a few weeks before thanks to a chance discovery: “In March 1942, the Gestapo arrested a musician during a routine patrol at Warsaw’s central railway station. Although his papers were in order and showed him to be a ‘German musician’ on his way to Prague, his over-sized, brand-new suitcase aroused suspicion. In a secret compartment, the Gestapo agents found a sniper’s gun […] After days of brutal interrogations, the man cracked and confessed to being a Russian agent sent by Moscow to assassinate Heydrich.” (Gerwarth, 2011, 276).

In contrast to their reprehensibly sloppy behavior during the five months leading up to this moment, Gabcik and Kubis acted methodically on the morning of the assassination attempt, and Josef Valcik accompanied them as a spotter. The men carried their weapons inside a pair of briefcases.

Valcik

The men took a tram to the suburb where they had left their bicycles, retrieved them, and pedaled onward to Liben, where they took up their positions at the hairpin curve chosen as the ambush site. Valcik moved up the hill to a prearranged observation point, where he waited with his shaving mirror in his pocket to flash a signal to his comrades when he spotted the sleek black Mercedes convertible approaching.

Gabcik assembled his Sten gun underneath a light-colored raincoat he had brought for this purpose, then lurked as unobtrusively as possible near the tram stop as if he was waiting for one. Kubis, with his two grenades, stood on the opposite side of the street in the shade of a clump of trees, again trying to avoid drawing attention.

The three men positioned themselves for action by 9:00, but Heydrich, at that moment, was finishing his breakfast and walking out into the castle grounds to play with his sons. For the next 80 minutes, the three Czechs fidgeted, with their apprehension understandably growing as Heydrich failed to appear; after all, the longer they remained in one place and showing no interest in boarding the regular succession of trams or engaging in other normal business, the higher the chance that German police or Gestapo agents would spot them and move in for an arrest.

Finally, at 10:20 a.m. (some accounts say 10:32 or 10:35), Valcik spotted the black Mercedes 320-C convertible gliding down the street. A tram approached the hairpin turn from the opposite direction, but the assassins had already agreed that civilian casualties would be acceptable if necessary to carry out Heydrich's killing. Valcik pulled the shaving mirror from his pocket and flashed it in the sun in the direction of his comrades near the hairpin turn, and the two men saw the brilliant flash of sunlight off Valcik's mirror and prepared themselves for the moment of action.

As the Mercedes 320-C slowed to a walking pace to round the hairpin curve, Gabcik ran out onto the sidewalk, throwing aside the raincoat to level his Sten gun at the car and its two Nazi occupants. The Sten gun, a cheap 9mm submachine gun with a folding stock, featured a stamped metal build and a 32 round magazine. The British, whose long-standing gun control had thoroughly disarmed their populace and necessitated the importation of 5,000 donated firearms from the United States at the start of the war to provide the home guard with some kind of weaponry, had produced the Sten gun in vast numbers in an effort to arm their own forces and those of anti-Nazi insurgents throughout Europe.

The simple weapon, which fired pistol ammunition, seldom hit anything beyond 100 yards, but Gabcik stood just a few feet from his targets as he raised the Sten gun and squeezed the trigger. At this juncture, he learned another characteristic of the Sten: its tendency to stop working unless given constant maintenance to avoid a host of other problems and circumstances. Rather than a rattling burst of bullets shredding the two Nazis in front of him, the Czech heard only silence as he yanked frantically on the trigger. His Sten gun, brought so painstakingly to this point, was as useless as a toy.

At this moment, Heydrich and Klein each made a mistake that resulted in the Gestapo chief's death. Heydrich ordered his driver to stop, and Klein obeyed. Rather than accelerating out of the ambush, the aggressive Heydrich decided to capture or kill Gabcik, whom he incorrectly assumed was acting alone. Meanwhile, Kubis grabbed one of the anti-tank grenades out of his worn briefcase and sprinted out of the trees. The two Nazis, their attention focused on Gabcik, who still struggled futilely with his Sten gun a few feet away, would fail to notice the second attacker until it was too late.

Kubis acted decisively but clumsily. “He misjudged his throw. Instead of landing inside the Mercedes, it exploded against the rear wheel, throwing shrapnel back into Kubiš’ face and shattering the windows of the tram which had stopped on the opposite side of the road. There were screams as the passengers were hit by shards of flying glass and metal. The car lurched violently and came to rest in the gutter, pouring smoke. Two SS jackets which had been folded on the back seat were whirled upwards by the blast and draped themselves over the trolley wire.” (MacDonald, 2007, 153).

Pictures of the damaged car and tram

Despite the poor toss, Heydrich had suffered severe injuries in the blast, the worst being a large piece of shrapnel which ripped through his back and deep into his spleen. However, the Gestapo chief was so full of adrenaline that he didn't feel his injuries, and thinking he was unharmed, he jumped out of the car

and staggered towards Gabcik, trying to get a clear shot with his 7.65mm pistol. Gabcik stood for several moments, staring stupefied at the tall, blond man in the black uniform stumbling towards him through the smoke and dust. Then, despite the shock of the explosion, the Czech made a stumbling run uphill. As he fled, the crack of pistol shots sounded behind him, and bullets whined past him. Desperately, he jumped behind a telephone pole and fired back at his black-garbed pursuer. Heydrich moved behind the damaged tram and returned fire, hoping to cripple or kill Gabcik.

Gabcik began to despair, knowing that SS men would arrive on the scene very soon. However, as the gunfight continued, Heydrich suddenly dropped to the ground; the pain from his wound suddenly struck him, and he writhed in agony for several moments. Gabcik, terrified, did not return to finish his target off but fled uphill, diving through the open door of a butcher shop up the road.

As that was going on, Klein pursued Kubis. The huge Nazi was slow-moving, but Kubis was scarcely faster. His forehead torn open by shrapnel from his own poorly-thrown grenade, the Czech assassin found it hard to flee with blood dripping into his eyes. He staggered to the place where the bicycles stood and leaped onto one, pedaling away frantically and leaving the raging Klein far behind him in a matter of moments.

Klein returned to find Heydrich lying on the ground next to the tram. His first instinct was to help his wounded chief, but Heydrich, pointing in the direction of Gabcik's flight, managed to snap at him, "Get that bastard!" Heydrich then reeled back to his feet and stumbled back to the car, where he fell across the hood and lay for some time. Klein thundered up the hill, but his pistol was jammed, so he would need to grapple with Gabcik should he spot him. As he reached the top, a man in a butcher's apron ran out of a shop and pointed back inside, shouting that a man with a pistol was hiding inside. Klein charged in the front door and slammed into Gabcik, who was running out at the same moment. The butcher, Bauer, was a Nazi sympathizer, and Gabcik had just discovered that the butcher shop had no back door or windows.

Finding himself in the iron grip of the enormous, enraged Klein, Gabcik fired a shot from his pistol that punched through both of the huge German's legs. Klein fell to the ground, roaring in pain and anger, while Gabcik leaped over him and ran wildly away. Klein managed to drag himself to his feet and pursue despite his wounds, but Gabcik managed to elude him in the alleys and take cover more successfully.

In the meantime, the final drama of Heydrich's life unfolded at the bottom of the hill. A young woman with blonde hair and a Czech policeman frantically flagged down passing vehicles to drive the Gestapo general to a hospital. The two Czechs stopped a bakery van first, but the driver, frightened, refused to help and eventually drove off. The man at the wheel of a second van, loaded with floor wax, showed more boldness. The bystanders placed Heydrich on his stomach in an effort to keep dirt out of his back wound, and the van drove off through the streets in the direction of the hospital.

Chapter 5: The Death of Heydrich

Despite the severity of his injuries, the mortally wounded Heydrich did not die shortly after the grenade seriously injured him. In fact, he lived for more than a week, dying eight days later on June 3rd at precisely the moment his relieved doctors believed he was about to make a full recovery. Two main theories as to his cause of death posit that he was killed by an infection, exacerbated by horsehair from the car's seat cushions carried into his wounds by the grenade fragments, or that botulism deliberately placed in the grenade by British SOE agents effected his demise. However, a third possibility – a lethal embolism caused by a postoperative blood clot – appears the most likely from evidence.

In the wake of the attack, the wounded Gestapo general was taken to the large, 1,400 bed Bulovka Hospital in the only vehicle immediately available, a delivery van carrying tins of wax. By the time he reached the hospital, Heydrich needed urgent medical care but initially refused it, perhaps distrusting Czech doctors and surgeons, but once several German doctors quickly put in an appearance, Heydrich consented to surgery.

A large hole in Heydrich's lower back, bleeding heavily and filled with metal fragments and debris, was only one of several bad injuries he had sustained. The doctors discovered, via x-ray, that the grenade had also collapsed the Nazi leader's left lung and punctured his spleen. Fortunately for him, his kidneys proved intact and the fragments missed his spine by a wide margin, raising his chances of survival considerably.

Despite Heydrich's openly expressed misgivings, the doctors took their medical calling seriously and provided the best care they could to their patient. Regardless of their personal feelings about the Blond Beast, both Czech and German doctors acted with professionalism and treated Heydrich with the same care and attention to correct medical procedure as they would have for any other patient. Fear of retribution doubtlessly provided some motivation, but the men involved clearly also adhered scrupulously to the neutrality demanded by their merciful profession, unlike notorious medicos such as Dr. Josef Mengele or Dr. Helmut Poppendick.

The operation began within an hour of Heydrich's arrival at Bulovka Hospital, and after the doctors inflated the Blond Beast's left lung and administered anesthesia, they gave Heydrich the first of two blood transfusions, along with antitoxins intended to prevent lethal gangrene. Dr. Walter Dick began the procedure by cleaning Heydrich's chest wound and removing the shattered tip of one of his ribs, then sutured that and several other wounds after thorough cleaning.

The next stage, involving the removal of Heydrich's badly damaged spleen, fell to Dr. Josef Hohlbaum, but the surgeon proved unable to continue due to an attack of nerves. “Dr. Hohlbaum, now wearing his glasses, made an incision from sternum to mid-abdomen. As he was reaching the umbilicus, Dr. Honek noticed that he was perspiring profusely. Dr. Dick reacted at once, and in his usual quiet and courteous manner whispered, ‘Professor Hohlbaum, you are not well, allow me to take over.’” (Defalque, 2009, 4).

Dr. Dick continued the procedure and discovered that the explosion had nearly destroyed Heydrich's spleen. A three-inch-square piece of grenade casing had lodged in the ruptured organ, carrying huge clumps of horsehair into the German's body along with it. The doctor removed the spleen and finished the suturing job, after which the doctors administered a second transfusion. Heydrich's vital signs remained strong and stable throughout, and the procedure took almost exactly an hour. The doctors moved the Gestapo general to a private hospital room at 2:00 p.m.

All the while, the SS established a strong guard in the hospital wing where Heydrich lay, ejecting the other patients and allowing only specific doctors and nurses whom they trusted to enter that portion of the building. Lina Heydrich soon arrived to see her husband, and Heydrich recovered quickly from the anesthesia and proved able to converse with her within an hour of the surgery's end.

Himmler sent three of his best SS surgeons - Dr. Karl Gebhardt, Dr. Stumpfegger, and Dr. Ferdinand Sauerbruch - to care for his wounded protégé. The trio arrived by airplane that same evening and took over within two days from Dr. Dick and his associates. The SS doctors declined to administer antibiotics, distrusting them because they espoused an early anti-vaccination stance due to their belief that vaccines represented a Jewish plot against Aryan health. In any case, the Germans did not yet have access to penicillin, relying instead on inferior sulfonamides.

Gebhardt

Sauerbruch

Heydrich developed an infection and fever, but on June 3rd, he appeared to rally. His fever abated, and he grew far stronger and more active. Around noon that day, he felt strong enough to sit upright in bed and eat a hearty meal, but in the middle of it, he suddenly fell over unconscious. Comatose, he died early in the morning of June 4th despite the doctors' attempts to save him. The medical staff meticulously noted his death in the hospital death register, and the doctors completed an autopsy which confirmed a lung infection and fluid in and around the lungs. However, it is now known that the amount of fluid found and measured by the doctors is considerably below the threshold usually needed to cause death, particularly in a large, healthy 38-year old man. Suggestively, the autopsy found large fat particles in Heydrich's heart, one of the symptoms of a major cardiac embolism. This, in turn, would have led to a cerebral embolism producing exactly the observed symptoms: a sudden collapse, coma, and, without modern treatment, death. The attack occurred when Heydrich sat up after remaining largely prone for a week, and a change of position that could easily dislodge a blood clot accumulated during a long period of inactivity.

British microbiologist Paul Fildes later claimed Heydrich's death as a personal trophy, asserting that he placed quantities of botulism toxin into the grenades and that this caused Heydrich's death. The facts indicate this sensational scenario lacks basis, save in Fildes' well-known self-aggrandizing imagination. Botulism toxin produces paralysis, and at no point during his illness did Heydrich show any signs of paralysis in any form. Most other botulism symptoms also failed to appear, and Kubis and Maria Sochmanova suffered wounds from the same grenade and never fell sick.

Furthermore, even if the British added botulism to the grenades, the attempt would have failed. The Czechs stored the grenades outdoors for five months, much of that time in wintry weather, which likely would have destroyed the toxin in any case. Botulism toxin breaks down rapidly in temperature extremes, and the bitter cold of early 1942 would've likely done it.

Lastly, since the Germans recovered an unexploded grenade from the set Kubis carried, proof exists that it was an ordinary anti-tank grenade with part of its shell removed and replaced by regular adhesive tape. This made the grenade easier to carry due to lessened weight but decisively compromised the sealed internal environment the explosive device would have needed to have even a slight chance of keeping the toxin stable enough to reach its target in a useful condition.

Reinhard Heydrich received a state funeral from the Third Reich in a gigantic Berlin ceremony. After lying in state for two days in the courtyard of Prague Castle, the Gestapo general's remains journeyed by aircraft to the Reich's capital, where he was laid to rest amid solemn speeches by prominent Nazis (including Adolf Hitler himself) to the sound of the funeral march from the "Twilight of the Gods" by Richard Wagner.

A picture of Heydrich's funeral

Brooding, menacing, filled with a bleak and sweeping grandeur, the strains of Wagner's magnificent composition served to mark the obsequies of more than just one Nazi official. They became, effectively, the dirge for thousands of other luckless human beings as well. The Third Reich exacted a hecatomb of revenge on the Czech people for the decision of their leader in faraway London: "Hitler exclaimed bitterly that Heydrich's death was like a 'lost battle', and the regime reacted with the savagery displayed by primitive peoples at the graves of their tribal chiefs and demigods." (Fest, ,133).

Thousands would bleed and die for the Reich Protector as the Nazis sent him on his final journey. Himmler, speaking at the Blond Beast's funeral, evoked the dreadful code of racial supremacy and genocide by which the intelligent, gloomy, psychopathic Gestapo general had lived, and which served as the glue holding together the remarkably varied band of misfits Hitler assembled to stand at the helm of the Thousand Year Reich. Himmler declared that in life, Heydrich was "feared by the sub-humans, hated

and slandered by Jews and other criminals [...] From the deepest reaches of his heart and his blood, he felt, understood and realized the worldview of Adolf Hitler. He seized all the tasks he was charged with from his fundamental comprehension of a genuine racial worldview and from the knowledge that the purity, security and defence of our blood is the supreme law." (Gerwarth, 2011, 279).

A 1943 postage stamp depicting Heydrich's death mask

Chapter 6: Vengeance

Predictably, the Germans responded furiously to the brazen attack on a high Nazi official, which included launching an immediate manhunt for the perpetrators. While Reinhard Heydrich's troubles were, in a sense, over, those of Czechoslovakia were only just beginning.

Helmuth von Pannwitz, the chief of the Prague Gestapo's anti-sabotage branch, raised the alarm after he investigated a vague Czech police report of assassins wounding a German officer and found Heydrich being prepped for surgery at the Bulovka hospital. The other Nazis initially believed Pannwitz's report to be a practical joke, but his desperation eventually convinced them and a large detachment of heavily armed SS moved to the hospital to defend the "Reich Protector."

Pannwitz

Pannwitz and the local Wehrmacht commander, Karl Hermann Frank, began an investigation which soon blossomed into a manhunt. Pannwitz, interrogated in the Lubyanka by the Soviet secret police (NKVD) after the war, would be sent to a Soviet gulag for 10 years before eventually being sent back to Germany in 1956 and working as a salesman until his death in 1975. In June 1942, however, he investigated the attack scene thoroughly, and he "was convinced straightaway that the assassins were parachutists. The unused bomb contained British plastic explosive, British fuses and British detonators: 'Because the sub-machine-gun was also British, there was no doubt as to where the assassination had been organized." (MacDonald, 2007, 156).

As news of the attack spread, ordinary Germans in the region grew enraged and began attacking Czechs, throwing bricks or firebombs into Czech stores and trying to kill Czechs they had lived alongside all their lives. The Gestapo and ordinary police protected the Czechs from this violence, which would lead to social disorder, but ultimately, the cruelty to be visited on the Czechoslovakian population would be officially organized, not a matter of vigilantism.

Hitler himself responded with a characteristic lack of restraint when he learned of Heydrich's wounding at 12:45 p.m. on May 27: "Infuriated, the Fuhrer ordered the arrest and execution of 10,000 Czech hostages. […] German police collected all available evidence and concluded the attack must have been organized and prepared in England. Frank telephoned Hitler to confirm the British involvement and

asked him to revoke the execution order, arguing that such unprecedented reprisals would be catastrophic for Czech morale." (Hauner, 2007, 85).

Though Hitler agreed to stop the immediate execution of 10,000 Czechs, he remained adamant that blood must be spilled in response to the attack. The Third Reich offered a reward of 10 million Czech koruna ("crowns") for information leading to the hiding place of the assassins, and at the same time, the highest members of the Nazi hierarchy discussed what response to the assassination attempt would be most appropriate. Propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels voiced fear that assassinations would multiply if they did not offer an overwhelming response: "It is imperative that we get hold of the assassins. Then a tribunal should be held to deal with them and their accomplices. The background of the attack is not yet clear. But it is revealing that London reported on the attack very early on. We must be clear that such an attack could set a precedent if we do not counter it with the most brutal of means." (Gerwarth, 2011, 11).

Goebbels

The manhunt launched by Pannwitz, Frank, and the Orpo police general Kurt Daluege soon reached unprecedented proportions. In an effort to get the assassins should they try to leave the city rather than remaining in hiding, the Germans suspended all railway and most tram services for the duration of the emergency. With martial law in place, Pannwitz and Frank enforced a 9:00 p.m. – 6:00 a.m. curfew, and the Nazis decreed that all Czechs, on pain of death, must obtain new identity papers before May 29th, with their families also subject to execution if they failed to comply.

Daluege

With these preliminary steps taken, the German commanders began their work in earnest. They mobilized 12,000 men, including men from the Gestapo, Wehrmacht, SS, Orpo, and the Czech police force, and began a massive sweep of Prague. The Germans searched over 36,000 buildings, yet, amazingly, discovered no clue as to the assassins' location, even though Gabcik, Kubis, and six other resistance personnel occupied a central position in the city of Prague the whole time. The men moved from one safe house to another for several days until they found their way to the Karel Boromejsky church at the city's heart. There, they hid themselves in the dim crypt beneath the white-walled stone building, already effectively buried and spending their days among the dead of centuries past. News reached them of Heydrich's death and the hideous vengeance extracted by the Germans, and while the first news cheered them, all of the men – and the two assassins, Gabcik and Kubis, in particular – felt a deep sense of guilt for the terror unleashed by the Nazis in response to their actions.

Gabcik and Kubis eventually concocted a scheme which they hoped would put a stop to the Germans' program of revenge killing. The two men initially thought to go to a public park and shoot themselves

there while wearing placards declaring their sole guilt in Heydrich's assassination. They then altered their plan to instead go to the office of Emanuel Moravec, a prominent Nazi collaborator, confess to the assassination of Heydrich, then kill Moravec also before taking cyanide pills. However, the other resistance men sharing their refuge talked them out of these steps, arguing – probably correctly – that the Nazis would continue their massacres regardless of the gesture.

Eventually, Pannwitz acted as what might be called the voice of reason among the Nazis. He believed that the far-flung terror tended to silence those who knew something of the assassins out of fear that they and their families would be executed for not speaking up sooner. This measure prompted the breakthrough the Germans hoped for when an anonymous letter arrived at Gestapo headquarters, among 200 other letters, naming Gabcik and Kubis as the two men who killed Heydrich and pleading with the Nazis to stop killing people who had nothing to do with the assassination. A day later, the letter's writer, a Sergeant Curda, walked into Gestapo headquarters and gave himself up. Stammering in acute terror, he gave the Germans the names of those involved in the plot. A parachutist himself and a brave soldier earlier in the war, Curda appears to have simply grown sick of the slaughter and believed that Benes' scheme to kill Heydrich was the act of a man detached from the real, actual horrors his decisions inflicted on the people of Czechoslovakia.

Curda did not know where the assassins were hiding, but he was able to betray the location of several safe houses. The Gestapo arrived at the apartment of the Moravec family early in the morning on June 17th. Battering at the door with their rifle butts, the Nazis shouted for the parachutists. The secret police bundled Mr. and Mrs. Moravec and their 17 year old son Vlastimil (nicknamed "Ata") into the hallway while they violently ransacked the apartment. Astonishingly, the Gestapo permitted Mrs. Moravec to visit the toilet, where she swallowed cyanide and quickly perished. Her husband and son did not gain such a merciful release.

The Gestapo quickly determined that Mr. Moravec possessed no knowledge of the resistance, and that it was his wife and son who had helped the assassins. Since Mrs. Moravec was already dead, the Germans took Vlastimil to the basement of the Petek Palace and subjected him to continuous torture for nearly 16 hours. Screaming under the whips, pliers, and electrodes of the Gestapo, Vlastimil showed almost superhuman determination, refusing to tell his tormentors anything.

Finally, the Germans, probably fearing he would die under torture rather than divulge the information they needed, tried a different tack; the Gestapo brought large quantities of brandy and forced Vlastimil to consume it. When he was thoroughly drunk but still conscious, the final, bizarre touch intended to break his resistance was brought in. Struggling to focus through the waves of agony washing through his body and the alcohol clouding his mind, Vlastimil squinted at the object the German in front of him held out. Suddenly, the hideous, surreal sight came into focus: the Gestapo interrogator was holding a fish tank half full of water, and bobbing obscenely on the surface was the severed head of Vlastimil's mother. As the stunned teenager stared at this gory object, deliberately presented in as weird and surreal a manner as possible, he heard the voice of a German warning him that his father would also be decapitated unless he told the Gestapo everything he knew about the parachutists.

With that, Vlastimil's spirit broke and he began to talk. He revealed that his mother had indeed aided the parachutists. Though he did not know if they were currently there, he had also heard her mention that the crypt of the Karel Boromejsky church was the place he should flee if the Gestapo ever discovered their secret.

Pannwitz figured immediately that this was the hiding place of the fugitives. As quietly as possible, 700 elite Waffen SS men moved into position around the church, and the Germans sealed the manhole

covers for many blocks around in case the Czechs could somehow reach the sewer system. Then, as day started breaking, Pannwitz led a number of SS men into the church itself.

The Germans soon discovered three of the parachutists had moved to the prayer loft, weary of the depressing surroundings of the crypt. The first German attempt to enter the loft ended when the Czechs rolled live grenades down the steps from above, sending the SS men scurrying for cover. Eventually, the SS men fought their way up into the loft.

There, in the gloom amid the ancient church pillars, a ferocious gun battle erupted, during which the three Czechs held off superior German numbers for over two hours. Finally, two of the men died outright. The Germans found the third still alive but unconscious; this was the grenade-thrower, Kubis. The Nazis made every effort to save the wounded man's life so that he could be interrogated later and perhaps used for anti-British propaganda purposes, but Kubis bled to death within 20 minutes without regaining consciousness.

Picture of damage done inside the church during the fighting

The Germans bottled up the other four men in the crypt but found themselves faced with the problem of how to remove them from that place alive. The Germans initially tried to persuade them to surrender by enlisting the services of the church's preacher, Petrek, who was attempting to save his own life, and their two prisoners, Moravec and Curda. The Nazis next used a fire engine to pump vast quantities of water into the crypt while throwing smoke bombs and tear gas grenades in, hoping to flush the men out alive. The resourceful Czechs used a ladder to reach the opening where the fire hoses entered and reached out to puncture them with their bayonets.

The Waffen SS next tried a direct assault but, in the waist-deep water in the crypt, found themselves under a galling fire from niches in the crypt walls. They fled back up the narrow stairs, carrying their wounded with them.

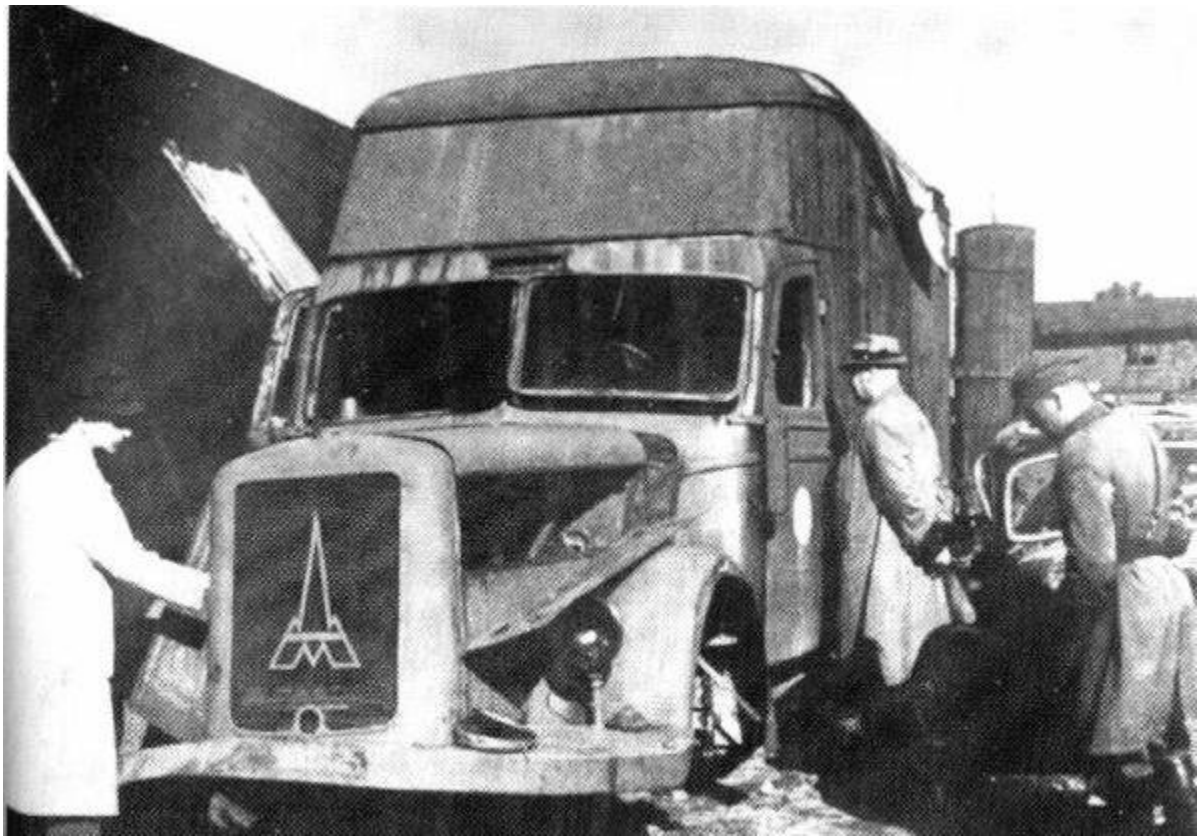
As Frank and his infuriated SS prepared to blow part of the church up, the sound of four gunshots echoed up from the dripping stairs. The last four Czechs, running low on ammunition, had killed themselves to avoid the long, torturous death the Germans would have inflicted on them had they been captured alive. 14 Germans had died in the battle, which lasted for most of the day.

The assassins were dead, but the reprisals were far from over. In fact, the fates of Gabcik and Kubis are largely overlooked in comparison to the mention of Lidice, the most notorious target of Nazi vengeance. The Gestapo and SS began a program of ruthless murder in Czechoslovakia which eventually left some 5,000 Czechs dead, and Lidice, considered a hotbed of resistance by the Nazis, would be completely destroyed. “On the day of Heydrich’s state funeral [...] the village of Lidice, near Prague, was set on fire and entirely leveled by the SS for allegedly sheltering the parachute agents. Two hundred male inhabitants were shot on the spot, its female population sent to concentration camps, and the children given to German families for adoption. [...] In an act of spontaneous solidarity, several localities in the United States adopted its name.” (Hauner, 2007, 88).

Pictures of massacred victims at Lidice

A picture of Lidice in the wake of the Nazis' destruction of it

Out of the children given up for adoption, only 21 of the 102 survived. The other 81 were sent to Poland, crammed into a "gas van," and asphyxiated with exhaust fumes, a method so cruel that the SS and SD themselves eventually abandoned it due to the psychological shock caused by the sounds coming from inside the vans during the gassing process. The Germans exterminated another village on the day when the parachutists died in the church crypt, in revenge for the men's escape through suicide.



One of the Nazis' gas vans

Photographs still survive showing the ground littered with the corpses with Czech men executed by the Nazis during the revenge killings that followed. Guards drove bands of Jews out of their barracks in the concentration camps and gunned them down in reprisal for what the Nazis termed "a plot by the international Jewish conspiracy." Only with the coming of autumn did the killing abate, leaving a shocked and cowed Czechoslovakia in its wake.

Chapter 7: The Significance of Heydrich's Assassination

Although the event is still well-known today, the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich failed to achieve the results desired by its architects. If anything, despite the careful planning and dramatic, spy-thriller appeal of the Czech patriots' doomed mission deep into the Third Reich, the scheme arguably caused far more harm than good.

Though Heydrich occupied a place far up in the Nazi hierarchy and exercised direct control over the extermination programs, Adolf Eichmann and others readily substituted for him in an operational sense following his demise. Though he organized the Einsatzgruppen, whose members reluctantly shot tens of thousands of people to death in the first years of the war; took a major role in the Wannsee Conference,

where the fate of Europe's Jews was decided; ran the Gestapo and its dreaded "Night and Fog" program efficiently; and helped organize mass deportations and exterminations, Reinhard Heydrich proved, in the actual event, to be easily replaceable.

Eichmann

The wheels of Hitler's ghoulish extermination scheme rolled on with well-oiled efficiency in the wake of Heydrich's death. Indeed, the Nazis accelerated the pace of human extirpation towards its logical limits following the assassination, in revenge for – and in honor of – their slain colleague. The Gestapo general's killing prompted the horrors of "Operation Reinhardt," named for the Blond Beast: “During the first five weeks of the killing operation in Treblinka, between July 23 and August 28, about 245,000 Jews were deported there from the Warsaw ghetto and Warsaw district; from Radom district, 51,000; from Lublin district, 16,500, bringing the total in this period to about 312,500. [...] SS *Unterscharfuhrer* August Hingst, who served at that time in Treblinka, testified that "Dr. Eberl's ambition was to reach the highest possible numbers and exceed all the other camps. So many transports arrived that the disembarkation and gassing of the people could no longer be handled." (Arad, 1987, 87).

Just as Heydrich's death failed to impact the practical implementation of the Final Solution and other Nazi butchery, so it proved militarily insignificant. Heydrich's role was that of a secret police chief and mass murderer, and though he was recklessly brave in combat, Heydrich never commanded German armies, so his death made no military difference to the course of the war. The Third Reich's fighting machine remained the finest in the world at the time, though burdened by a factor ultimately proving to be its undoing: the incompetent, megalomaniac interference of Adolf Hitler in strategic planning.

The hope that the bold assassination would trigger greater resistance among the Czechs also backfired resoundingly on Operation Anthropoid's planners. Czechoslovakia, despite its relatively favored status in the Reich, resented the Nazi invasion, and "a non-communist resistance had existed from the beginning of the German occupation, and after almost complete destruction […] was reorganized in

1943 and 1944." (Skilling, 1960, 181). Heydrich's death, however, prompted such a violent retaliation from the Germans that it set back the resistance's timetable rather than advancing it. The Nazi terror cowed the Czechs for several years, leaving it to the ethnic Slovaks to stage an armed rebellion against the Nazis in autumn 1944. “[T]he Slovak people [...] carried through their own liberation before the arrival of the Red Army and, for approximately two months, governed themselves through the Slovak national council. […] In 1944, plans were laid for an uprising, and with the approval of Benes, Lieutenant-Colonel Golian was appointed military commander. […] Open revolt spread throughout the area, partisan groups and Slovak army units taking part.” (Skilling, 1960, 188).

In short, Heydrich's death triggered such unbridled violence from the Germans that the ethnic Czechs remained largely supine for the rest of the occupation, and even the Slovaks only managed to arrange an uprising after years passed. This lack of active resistance during 1942, 1943, and much of 1944 cemented Czechoslovakia's position as an industrial powerhouse producing materiel for the Nazi war effort. Only when the Third Reich tottered towards collapse, and American and Soviet boots advanced onto Czech soil in 1945, did the Czechs of Prague dare to defy their Nazi conquerors again. At this juncture, "an uprising lasting four days, in which 2,000 lives were lost, demonstrated that the Czechs were not willing passively to await their liberation." (Skilling, 1960, 195). Though it is doubtful Czechoslovakia could have mustered the strength to throw off the grip of Hitler's colossal war machine earlier than mid-1945, it is equally clear that the assassination failed to inspire significant resistance and resulted in its temporary suppression.

Having failed to alter the course of the war itself, the Final Solution (other than perhaps to hasten it), or the Czech resistance (save to weaken it through liquidation and terror), it is still fair to ask what the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich achieved. Since the Allies would certainly have hanged the Gestapo general at Nuremberg following the war if he survived that long, the bold, daring, and courageously executed plan resulted in one deeply tragic consequence: pointlessly trading the lives of some 5,000 Czechs and perhaps thousands of Jews for a single German life doomed sooner or later regardless of the plot's outcome. It is, however, possible that the man at the heart of the scheme, the exiled Czech president Eduard Benes, reaped precisely what he sought, generating hatred for the Germans and support for himself regardless of the horrible cost borne by his nation and the men and women forced to live under the Third Reich's yoke.

Intriguingly, Heydrich acted as a much more caring father than his intensely abusive parents had before him. His son Klaus died in 1943, but the other three Heydrich children survived into adulthood and lived for many decades after the World War. At least two are still alive as of 2015, and due to their relatively kind treatment by Reinhard, none of them proved fully capable of believing the horrors their father committed in the name of racial purity and the Thousand Year Reich, despite the overwhelming evidence of his guilt. "’Was my father an evil man?’ Silke Heydrich asks rhetorically, recalling her relations with Reinhard Heydrich, the Nazi boss of Czechoslovakia. ‘If he really was, I should be able to feel this within myself. I have watched myself for a long time and didn't feel anything of the sort.’" (Moskau, 1971, 5).

Heydrich's sons evidently received the same level of care and attention from their father as did their sisters. Heider not only absolved Heydrich himself of any wrongdoing in his mind but also could not bring himself to believe that the Third Reich itself was a criminal government on a par with Stalin's brutal, mass-murdering communist regime or the savage executioners of Mao Zedong's "Great Leap Forward:" “Heider Heydrich is an engineer at a Munich aircraft factory. ‘I don't want to judge the Third Reich,’ he says matter-of-factly. ‘I only deal with tangible things. I want to get ahead and not be held up by the past.’ Silke says her brother for a long time simply refused to believe reports about the concentration camps.” (Moskau, 1971, 5).

Heydrich's wife Lina, who boasted of feeling like a "princess" while her husband ruled Czechoslovakia with an iron hand, likewise adopted a reflexive denialism after the war. Heinz Heydrich, Reinhard's younger brother, proved himself the only member of the Heydrich clan capable of facing the hard facts directly. Reinhard Tristan Heydrich, named for two tragic heroes from the pages of opera, truly acted the part of a villain throughout his life. It was Heinz, bearing a name which sounds unfortunately comical to English ears, who actually rose to achieve heroic stature and met a tragic end because of his probity. Heinz, personally revolted and horrified by the Holocaust, worked to save as many Jews and other targets of Nazi persecution as possible. He was "a journalist and the publisher of the soldiers' newspaper *Die Panzerfaust*" (Dederichs, 2009, 165), named for the Panzerfaust or "armored fist" antitank weapon, a short-range but highly-effective man-portable recoilless rocket capable of knocking out practically any Allied armored vehicle. Heinz used his newspaper's printing facilities to secretly forge false identity papers for hundreds of Jews and other political targets of Hitler's regime, enabling their escape from Nazi-occupied territory.

Unfortunately, a Nazi state attorney investigated *Die Panzerfaust* in late 1944, shortly before the fall of Nazi Germany. Heinz Heydrich believed that the Fuhrer or Himmler scented his activities and intended to close in for the kill. Fearing for his family's safety, and likely dreading prolonged torture at the hands of the Gestapo, "he shot himself in a special train fitted out with its own print-shop near the front in East Prussia." (Dederichs, 2009, 165).

Tragically, his suicide proved wholly unnecessary. The investigation centered on problems and possible corruption in the logistical branch handling distribution of paper supplies to various Nazi printing offices. Nobody in the Nazi hierarchy suspected Heinz Heydrich of his noble rescue of Jews and other potential Nazi victims. In fact, his role in this area only emerged after the end of the Second World War, when some of those he assisted came forward to testify.

Online Resources

Other World War II titles by Charles River Editors

Other titles about Nazi Germany by Charles River Editors

Other titles about Hitler on Amazon

Bibliography

Boeselager, Philip von. Valkyrie: The Story of the Plot to Kill Hitler, by Its Last Survivor. New York, 2010.

Evans, Richard J. The Third Reich in Power. London, 2005.

Fest. Joachim. Plotting Hitler's Death: the German Resistance to Hitler, 1933-1945. London, 1994.

Haasis, Helmut and William Odom (translator). Bombing Hitler: the Story of the Man Who Almost Assassinated the Fuhrer. New York, 2013.

Hoffmann, Peter and Richard Barry (translator). The History of the German Resistance 1933-1945, Third Edition. Montreal, 1996.

Knappe, Siegfried and Ted Brusaw. Soldat: Reflections of a German Soldier, 1936-1949. New York, 1992.

Koch, H.W.. In the Name of the Volk: Political Justice in Hitler's Germany. London, 1997.

Moorhouse, Roger. Killing Hitler: The Plots, the Assassins, and the Dictator Who Cheated Death. New York, 2006.

Parssinen, Terry. The Oster Conspiracy of 1938. New York, 2003.

Seaman, Mark. Operation Foxley: The British Plan to Kill Hitler. Surrey, 1998.

Smith, Richard Harris. OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency. Berkeley, 2005.

Thomsett, Michael C. The German Opposition to Hitler: The Resistance, the Underground, and Assassination Plots, 1938-1945. Jefferson, 1997.

Arad, Yitzhak. *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps.* Indianapolis, 1987.

Burian, Michal, et al. *Assassination: Operation Anthropoid, 1941-1942.* Prague, 2002.
Dederichs, Mario R. *Heydrich: The Face of Evil.* Drexel Hill, 2009. (U.S. reprint.)

Defalque, Ray J., M.D. "The Puzzling Death of Reinhard Heydrich." *Bulletin of Anesthesia History.* Volume 27, Number 1 (January 29), pp. 1-7.

Gerwarth, Robert. *Hitler's Hangman: the Life of Heydrich.* New Haven, 2011.

Hauner, Milan. "Terrorism and Heroism: The Assassination of Reinhard Heydrich." *World Policy Journal.* Volume 24, Number 2 (Summer 2007), pp. 85-89.

MacDonald, Callum. *The Assassination of Reinhard Heydrich.* Edinburgh, 2007.

Moskau, Joachim. "Nazi Children Reflect on Dad." *Boca Raton News.* December 28th, 1971 issue, page 5.

Read, Anthony. *The Devil's Disciples: Hitler's Inner Circle.* New York, 2004.

Skilling, H. Gordon. "The Czechoslovak Struggle for Liberation in World War II." *The Slavonic and East European Review.* Volume 39, Number 92; Dec. 1960, pp. 174-197.