

# THE MURDER OF REINHARD HEYDRICH

Was SS Lieutenant General Reinhard Heydrich actually murdered in Prague's Bulovka Hospital by the SS?

BY BLAINE TAYLOR

AS IS WELL-KNOWN by most students of World War II, SS Lt. Gen. Reinhard Heydrich—the Acting Nazi German Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia—was attacked in an assassination attempt by a small group of Czech partisans in Prague on the morning of May 27, 1942. Most assume that he died of his wounds a few days later in the hospital. But is that what really happened?

In October 1960, there was published the by-now accepted account of the assassination by author Alan Burgess, *Seven Men at Daybreak*. Two men had attacked Heydrich, but Josef Gabcik's British-made Sten gun failed to fire, while a Mills grenade lobbed by back-up assassin Jan Kubis exploded, blowing a hole in the rear body panel of the Mercedes-Benz Type 320 touring car, license plate SS-4 (recently correctly identified in the book *Reinhard Heydrich: The Biography* by Max Williams, Ulric Publishing, 2003.)

It was the explosion from the Mills grenade that severely wounded Heydrich, who nevertheless—pistol drawn—bounded from the car in pursuit of Gabcik and fought a running gun battle.

According to Burgess, “Even in that moment of dire personal peril, Josef had time to reflect sorrowfully that Jan’s grenade seemed to have done him [Heydrich] no harm. He was quite wrong. From the very moment Jan’s grenade had exploded, Heydrich was a

Library of Congress



Reinhard Heydrich convened the “Wannsee Conference” in January 1942 in a Berlin suburb that set in motion the “Final Solution”—the plan to exterminate Europe’s Jews.

dying man. Ten days it would take him to die, with the best doctors in the Reich fussing and fuming around his bedside, but die he would, as painfully and slowly as many of his own victims had died. The bursting grenade had exploded fine splinters of steel, horsehair, and material from the seat covers upwards. They had penetrated deeply into the spleen and lumbar region of Heydrich’s back. Blood poisoning would set in. No penance could save him now, and penicillin was beyond the range of even his most invidious intrigues.” In other words, the Allies had the new wonder drug, but the Nazis didn’t.

The wounded Heydrich, screaming in pain, climbed into the rear of a Czech bakery van and was taken to nearby Bulovka Hospital. “At the hospital, startled attendants brought out a stretcher and carried him inside.”

A Czech policeman phoned the Acting Reich Protector’s headquarters at Hradcany Castle, and soon the hospital was surrounded by armed SS security police and Heydrich’s room was cordoned off.

Here is what happened next, according to Williams in *Reinhard Heydrich: The Biography*: “In the Bulovka Hospital, Heydrich was appearing to recover well from his

This illustration of the attempted assassination of Reinhard Heydrich is based on the book, *Seven Men at Daybreak*, by Alan Burgess. Heydrich was attacked in his open Mercedes by Josef Gabcik, whose Sten gun failed to fire. In the background is the back-up assassin, Jan Kubis, who managed to toss a grenade into the car.

U.S. Army Art Collection





accompanied by the famous surgeon Professor Ferdinand Sauerbruch, a consultant to the problem and an old Heydrich family friend.

“Dr. Ludwig Stumpfegger also joined Gebhardt and Sauerbruch. The eminent surgeons arrived by air on the night of the attack. Gebhardt was pleased with the [earlier] operation results and although there was drainage from the chest wound and the patient was running a temperature, both Gebhardt and Sauerbruch thought that Heydrich would recover.

“By June 2nd, Heydrich’s temperature was 102 degrees Fahrenheit and a further operation was discussed, but this was discounted by Gebhardt as he felt it would be unnecessary. [Dr.] Theodore Morell, Hitler’s physician, took the opportunity

wound and the subsequent operation. [Reichsführer-SS/National Leader-SS Heinrich] Himmler had ordered his friend, Professor Dr. Karl Gebhardt, to fly to Prague and take over the care of his comrade.

“SS Brigadeführer [Brigadier General] Gebhardt was Chief Surgeon of the [SS] Hohenlychen Medical Institute, Professor of Orthopedic Surgery at the University of Berlin, and Chief Surgeon to the Reich Physician SS. Gebhardt was

to suggest his modern sulphonamides, but Gebhardt refused.”

Meanwhile, an alert and coherent Heydrich was visited in the Bulovka Hospital by his wife, Lina Heydrich and, on May 31, by the Reichsführer-SS himself. Prior to his visit, however, Himmler had taken the time to be briefed on the patient’s condition by both Heydrich’s State Secretary and thus number-two man, the Sudeten German Karl Hermann Frank, and the Chief of the German Regular Police, General Kurt Daluege, both of whom were in Prague.

Frank’s duties required him to be in the former Czech capital, but Daluege’s did not. Frank hoped to succeed the wounded Heydrich, and he was, indeed, Hitler’s own candidate to do so. In the actual event, though, it was Himmler’s candidate—Daluege—who was appointed instead, with Frank as his deputy. Himmler had persuaded Hitler that his man was the better for the post.

## Aftermath of Assassination

After Heydrich’s death, Hitler staged the first of two monumental state funerals (the second was for Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, who was secretly forced to commit suicide after he was implicated in the Stauffenberg July 20, 1944, plot to kill Hitler). But the Führer wasn’t content simply to pay homage to Heydrich, widely known as “the blond beast” and “the man with an iron heart;” he was also out for revenge.

First there was the round-up of the assassins themselves. Betrayed by Karel Curda, one of their countrymen, the partisans went into hiding.

While the Germans searched for them, Hitler decided to teach the Czechs a lesson. The Gestapo and SS hunted down and murdered Czech agents, resistance members, and anyone suspected of being involved in Heydrich’s killing; the death toll reached more than a thousand. Additionally, 3,000 Jews were deported from the Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia for transport

to Auschwitz and extermination. In Berlin, 500 Jews were arrested at random and 152 were executed on the day of Heydrich’s demise.

But the Third Reich’s orgy of death was just getting started. Hitler ordered the complete destruction of the hamlet of Lidice, a small mining village 22 kilometers northwest of Prague, on the false charge that the villagers had given refuge to Heydrich’s killers. On June 10, 1944, all 172 men and boys over age 16 in the village were shot; the girls and women were deported to the Ravensbrück concentration camp where most of them died. In addition, 90 young children were sent to the concentration camp at Gneisenau, with some taken later to Nazi orphanages if they looked Aryan enough.

The village itself was destroyed with explosives, then bulldozed until no trace remained. The name was then removed from all German maps.

Meanwhile, on June 18, Josef Gabcik, Jan Kubis, and the rest of their five-man group hid themselves in the Church of St. Cyril and St. Methodus on Resslova Street in Prague, but the German

During their last meeting in the Bulovka, Heydrich quoted the words of one of his late musician father's operas, "Yes, the world is just a barrel-organ; played by God himself. We must all dance to the tune that just happens to be on the roll."

That night, Himmler flew off to the Führer's Eastern Front military headquarters at Rastenburg, East Prussia, where the records for the evening's dinner show no comments at all by Hitler on the Heydrich affair, but rather on the late German Kaiser Wilhelm II as "an ignoble monarch."

It was not until June 4 that Hitler was quoted as asserting, "I shall forthwith give an absolute order that in future our men who are particularly exposed to danger must implicitly obey the regulations laid down to ensure their safety. Since it is the opportunity which makes not only the thief but also the assassin, such heroic gestures as driving in an open, unarmored vehicle or walking about the streets of Prague unguarded are just damned stupidity, which serves the country not one whit.

"That a man as irreplaceable as Heydrich should expose himself to unnecessary danger, I can only condemn as stupid and idiotic. Men of importance like Heydrich should know that they are being eternally stalked like game, and that there are any number of people just waiting for the chance to kill them. The police alone, with the means of information at their disposal, cannot guarantee security.

"When a car collides with a tree, for example, it takes them goodness knows how long to decide whether there has, in fact, been any foul play. If a driver is shot, and the car crashes, the passengers cannot really know what has happened, for when one is traveling at 60 mph a bullet reaches its mark long before the sound of its discharge is heard.

"So long as conditions in our territories remain unstable, and until the German people have been completely purged of the foreign rabble, our public men must exercise the greatest care for their safety. That is in the interest of the nation."

Heydrich had, in fact, died that very day in the Bulovka Hospital, and yet—when we last saw him there—he seemed to be recovering. What had happened in the interim?

According to author Williams, "Lina was able to bring her husband some home cooking and everything looked well. On June 3rd, Gebhardt reported to Himmler that Heydrich's temperature was down and the wound was draining freely. All things pointed to a satisfactory recovery.

National Archives



ABOVE: SS Dr. Karl Gebhardt, head of the German Red Cross by the end of the war, treated both Reinhard Heydrich (who died) and Albert Speer (who survived). He was tried, convicted, and hanged by the Allies as a war criminal. OPPOSITE: Heinrich Himmler, center, reviews troops in Prague in 1941 with Heydrich (second from left).

"During June 3rd, Heydrich was sitting up eating his midday meal when he suddenly collapsed. He rapidly deteriorated and lost consciousness. Lina was summoned urgently... and immediately attended her husband. In the early hours of the fourth, he recovered consciousness



SS guards stand over the corpses of 172 men and boys of the village of Lidice, massacred in retaliation for the assassination of Heydrich.

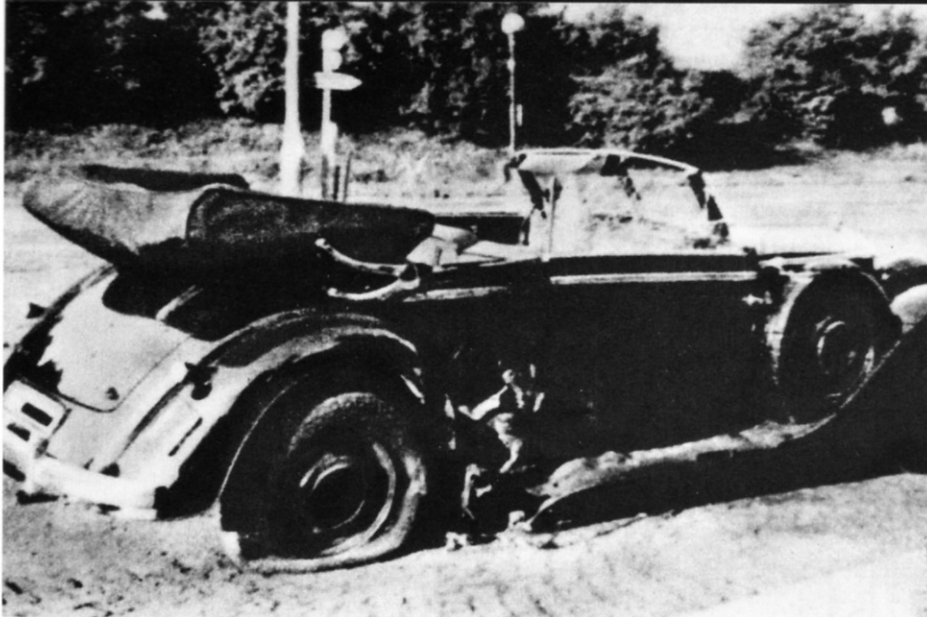
occupying force soon located them and a fierce, four-hour gun battle erupted.

Forced to barricade themselves in the church's underground crypt, the partisans held off their attackers until the Germans ordered the Prague fire department to flood the crypt using fire hoses. To prevent being captured and tortured, the partisans took their own lives; only the wounded Kubis survived, and he soon died in the hospital.

Today, a memorial plaque and the bullet-scarred crypt window remind passers-by of the sacrifice made to rid Czechoslovakia of the evil Heydrich.

The village of Lidice was not the only victim. Another village, Ležáky, about 100 kilometers southeast of Prague, met a similar fate on June 24 when 500 armed German troops and police marched in. Thirty-two villagers were shot and their bodies burned in the local crematorium. Two of the village children were selected for the "Aryanization" program while the remaining 11 were gassed at the Chelmno concentration camp.

National Archives



Heydrich's Mercedes after the attack. The driver's window was shattered, and a hole was blown in the side behind the door. The passenger door was also blown off in the attack and has been replaced for the photo.

enough to say, 'Ah, you are here. How nice. Come again this afternoon, won't you?'

"Lina was unable to take the strain and was given a sedative. Before she awoke, her husband died at 4:30 AM on June 4, 1942. His death was recorded, somewhat incorrectly, by a clerk in the death register, Volume 1/1942, under Number 348...."

The Reich Protector's Office requested that an autopsy be conducted, and it was performed by Professor of Pathology Herwig Hamperl of the Charles University in Prague, as well as forensic pathologist Gunther Weyrich. Also present were Professors Diek and Hohlbaum and the SS physicians.

According to Max Williams, "Diek was particularly concerned that the post-mortem should exonerate him from any blame at the initial operation. Professor Hamperl stated, 'Heydrich looked like a marble statue in death; was exceptionally tall, well built and somewhat muscular. He had rather sparse body hair.' All popular versions of Heydrich's death point to mediastinitis, but Professor Hamperl insisted in 1970 that, in his opinion, death resulted from anaemic shock. Three copies of the autopsy report were made, one going to Himmler, one to the Reich Protector's

Office, and the other was retained by Hamperl."

(*Reinhard Heydrich: The Biography*, distributed by Roger Bender in California, is the only book to date, incidentally, to publish the autopsy in both German and English.)

Continues Williams: "After the war and because of his medical treatment of Heydrich, Professor Hohlbaum was unable to obtain any worthwhile hospital appointment in the former Protectorate. He worked as a laborer and died in 1945 as a result of a leg injury. Professors Diek, Hamperl, and Weyrich returned to their native Germany and continued their professions until retirement."

The medical question stands: Why did

Reinhard Heydrich die—at least officially? Let us see what the autopsy report of June 7, 1942, concluded:

"Preliminary findings (June 4, 1942): Death followed damage to the inner organs (heart, liver, kidneys) following poisoning, obviously through a highly virulent infection. Accumulation of fluid pus was established in the chest, the abdominal cavity and the organs. No pneumothorax can withstand such a thing. However, encrusted effusions were found over the rear surface and on the forward mediastinal surface of the left lung. The largest discharge over the rear surface was drained at its lowest point with a Petzer catheter.

"Identification of the infection will be sought through bacteriological investigation. For the assumption of a specifically chemical poisoning from the explosive charge there is not the slightest basis....

"Pathological anatomical diagnosis: Bacterial general infection (intoxication) with opaque swelling of liver, kidneys and heart muscle. Surgically treated gunshot channel through explosion: gunshot entry opening in the back at the level of the 11th rib...."

What "gunshot entry"? As we saw earlier—and as all previous reports agree—Josef Gabcik's Sten gun had jammed, and thus there should not have been any "gunshot entry" unless it was a pistol bullet fired during his later running duel with the Reich Protector.

Now back to the autopsy report: "The shooting with the explosive charge [i.e., the British Mills grenade] suffered seven days before death, has opened the chest cavity and subsequently penetrated the diaphragm and also the abdominal cavity, so that a rupture of the spleen took place. The surgical treatment of all these injuries had to take into account that these wounds were contaminated with simultaneously introduced germs, and therefore it was decided to conduct the expected inflammatory build-up of exudation to the outside.

"Accordingly, after removal of the spleen, the chest cavity and the abdominal cavity were completely satisfactory and were drained in the appropriate manner. The foreseen inflammation, brought about by the introduced germs, actually took place and spread outwards in the course of the days following the injuries into the area of the diaphragm wound.

"Furthermore, in the left pleural area there developed an inflammatory discharge, which contained copious bacteria (streptococci, bacterium coli, etc.). In the final period before death there followed a spreading of this inflammation into the pericardium. That

the bacteria or else their poisons must have also disseminated into the blood, follows from the damage to parenchymal organs essential to life such as liver, kidney and heart muscles.

“The reaction of the organism, otherwise directed at the healing of this damage, was thereby substantially impaired, because the main organ of the body’s own defense, the spleen, which is capable of killing germs and neutralizing poisons, was removed due to serious damage.

**“Final assessment: Death took place as a result of damage to parenchymal organs essential to life through bacteria or their poisons, which were introduced with the gunshot injury with explosive charge and which settled and multiplied particularly in the pleural cavity, in the diaphragm and in the region of the spleen.”**

“Death took place....” Or did it? It is known that Heydrich survived the operation of May 27 and was recovering by June 3. What had happened in the intervening period to change his prognosis? On the evening of the 27th, Doctors Gebhardt, Sauerbruch, and Stumpffegger arrived from Berlin to “assist” in the case, and later Hitler’s own Dr. Morell—generally now acknowledged to be a “quack” (as he was also felt to be at the time)—also consulted on the case. In sum, patient Reinhard Heydrich was surrounded by too many medical personnel, one of whom I believe was a medical murderer.

My candidate for this is SS Dr. Karl Gebhardt, later hanged by the Allies as a medical war criminal. Any crime—particularly a murder—requires three necessary ingredients—means, motive, and opportunity—and he had them all. His means were his medical skills, his motive was to curry favor with his boss, Himmler, and his opportunity was that he was in charge of the case at Heydrich’s bedside.

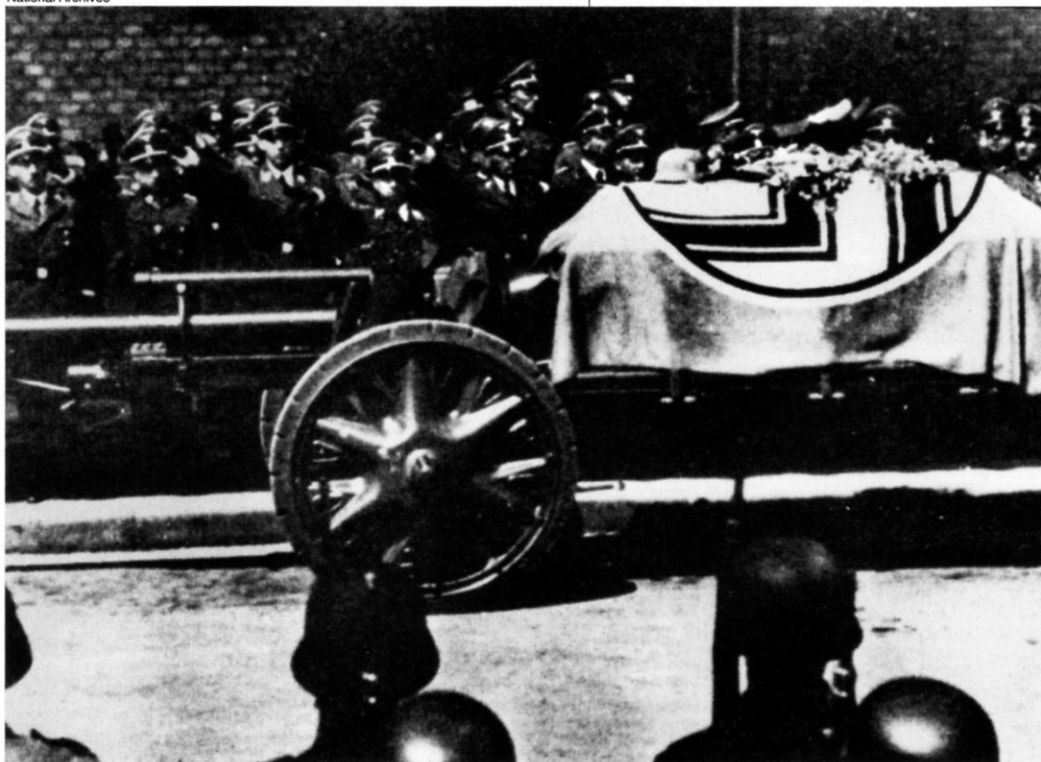
Two questions arise: Why would Himmler want Heydrich dead, and was there any evidence that Gebhardt might have been the killer? As to the first, Himmler feared that Heydrich, his more talented subordinate who, as a result of his appointment to the Czech Protectorate, now had direct access to Hitler and might someday eclipse him in the Führer’s eyes.

Indeed, after Heydrich’s death, Himmler took over Heydrich’s Reich Security Main Office for many months until he appointed the Austrian Dr. Ernst Kaltenbrunner as his successor.

As for Dr. Gebhardt, who became head of the German Red Cross in the closing days of the war, Nazi Minister of Armaments and War Production Albert Speer believed that Gebhardt was trying to kill him on Himmler’s orders during his own illness in the spring of 1944.

In conclusion, Captain Alexander Stahlberg—aide-de-camp and later adjutant to Field Marshal Erich von Manstein—writes in his 1990 work *Bounden Duty: The Memoirs of a German Officer, 1932-45*, “At that time Manstein was having increasing problems with his sight.... He had his eyes examined at the University Optical Clinic at Breslau. Professor Dieter—in SS uniform under his white doctor’s coat—diagnosed cataract and prescribed a treatment surprising to the layman: a tonsillectomy, to arrest the

National Archives



In June 1942, the dead Heydrich was given an elaborate state funeral in the Mosaic Hall of the New German Reich Chancellery in Berlin.

cataract. The operation took place....” So much for SS medical expertise!

I do not suggest that my theory is the only correct one, but that there is room for reasonable medical doubt. If this was, indeed, a murder case put before an American criminal courtroom jury, I believe that Kubis and Gabcik might actually be acquitted of the crime and that the doctors would be charged with either medical malpractice or outright murder. The questions, in my opinion, remain unanswered. □