

Czech-Mate

IN THE NINE months that Margaret Jackson had been working for Colin Gubbins, she had come to realize that there was something extraordinary about her job. Unlike everyone else in the country, who were 'dependent on newspapers or what had been censored' for their daily news, she was 'in direct touch with what was happening abroad'. ¹ She also knew of decisions being taken at the highest level, for it was she who typed up the notes about the work being undertaken at the secret stations and she who kept the records of Gubbins's meetings with the chiefs of staff. Indeed she was privy to all the undercover operations being planned across Europe. If ever she had been abducted by the Nazis, she could have revealed priceless information.

One of Gubbins's responsibilities was to liaise with the Czech government-in-exile, which Winston Churchill had recognized as a representative body in the summer of 1941. Baker Street had already agreed to start training the Czech soldiers who had fled to Britain more than a year earlier and had also accepted 'that an essential pre-condition of any future operations was the establishment of a secure radio link with the Protectorate'. ² A Czech volunteer was trained for this role, but it took many months and 'several false starts' before he was finally dropped into the country by air. He was accidentally landed in Austria, instead of Bohemia, but eventually managed to slip across the border. Henceforth, London and Prague were in radio contact.

As early as September 1941, the Czechs had revealed to Gubbins that they were planning a mission of such secrecy that neither MI6, nor any senior British politician, was to be informed. The secret came directly from Colonel Frantisek Moravec, the wily head of Czech intelligence, who was based in London and working alongside his government-in-exile. Moravec and his staff had fled their native Czechoslovakia eighteen months earlier, flying out in the teeth of a blizzard at the very moment Hitler's storm-troopers were marching across the frontier.

Moravec had been deeply depressed to flee his native land, for he was leaving everything behind. 'My wife and children were lost to me, abandoned in the stricken country below, somewhere under the swirling flakes, left to the mercies of the invaders.' ³ There was just one cause for optimism. He had spent several months directing the activities of a German double agent who was working against the Nazis: the experience had taught him that 'even a brutal police state like Hitler's could be penetrated'. ⁴

The penetration he was now planning was little short of spectacular, as he confessed to Gubbins at their September meeting. The Czech president-in-exile, Eduard Beneš (who was nominally running Czechoslovakia from a suburban villa in Gwendolen Avenue, Putney), 'had sanctioned a terrorist attack on some prominent personality' ⁵ in the Nazi government in Prague. When Gubbins pressed Moravec further, he learned that this prominent personality was none other than the Reichsprotektor, Reinhard Heydrich.

Heydrich was a spectacular target, as Gubbins well knew. Appointed Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia – the lands incorporated into the Third Reich in the spring of 1939 – he was proving utterly

ruthless. 'Intelligent, ambitious, cunning and cruel', is how Moravec described him. Heydrich was one of the principal architects of the extermination of the Jews and was in the process of undertaking the racial cleansing of his fiefdom 'with sadistic zeal'. [6](#)

Within days of taking office, he vowed to 'Germanize the Czech vermin', [7](#) but he was only intending to Germanize those who had been confirmed, by X-ray screening, to be Aryans. The rest were to be liquidated. Ever since arriving in Prague, his rule had been 'an unbroken chain of murders' and his ruthlessness fully justified the Führer's description of him as 'the man with the iron heart'. [8](#)

Gubbins was enthusiastic about the plan to assassinate Heydrich, aware that it would be a much needed coup for the beleaguered President Benes. He was facing constant criticism from the Russians for not doing enough to sabotage the factories in Bohemia that were mass-producing weaponry for the Third Reich. Assassinating Heydrich would show that he meant business.

Gubbins told Moravec that 'he had no hesitation in agreeing', but he expressed a word of caution. Assassination was frowned upon by many in Whitehall and ministers had previously objected to a Baker Street plan to murder Nazi-supporting leaders in the Middle East. Anthony Eden went so far as to call it 'war crimes business'. Gubbins suggested that Moravec should 'restrict the knowledge of the Czech approach, and above all of the identity of the probable target, to a very small circle'. [9](#) Moravec agreed. 'The fewer persons involved the better,' he said, especially if the assassination 'was to be regarded as a spontaneous act of national desperation'. The hope was that 'the spontaneity would become genuine when Heydrich was dead'. [10](#)

Gubbins also warned of the likely cost of the assassination, even if it were unsuccessful. It would provoke 'wholesale reprisals' [11](#) that could cost the lives of thousands of innocent Czechs. Moravec had a ready answer. Heydrich was already killing civilians on an unprecedented scale. Some 5,000 people had been arrested since his arrival in the country and all the principal resistance leaders had been 'swiftly and systematically eliminated'. Moravec also told Gubbins that he was receiving regular news from undercover agents, thanks to the wireless link, and their reports made for grim reading. 'Police cars drove daily out of the grim Pankrac prison in Prague on their way to the shooting range in Kobylisy and the airport fields at Kuzyn where German execution squads waited.' [12](#) In short, mass killings of civilians were already taking place.

Colonel Moravec now had a question for Gubbins, one on which the entire operation was to depend. He asked whether he 'would help in this project by providing facilities for training and supplying special weaponry that was required'. Moravec knew that without access to the specialists, the assassination stood very little chance of success.

Gubbins 'had no hesitation about agreeing', [13](#) giving Moravec the green light he needed. Within weeks, Eric Sykes and Cecil Clarke would become involved in the assassination project, along with a small number of other individuals. These included Gubbins's secretary, Margaret Jackson, who found herself writing reports of a most surprising nature.

'The object of the operation,' she typed on to notepaper headed MOST SECRET in red ink, 'is the assassination of Herr Heydrich, the German Protector in Czechoslovakia.' Initial research suggested that there were several possible means by which he could be killed, including blowing up his private train or 'shooting him when he is appearing at some ceremony'. [14](#) But further study suggested a rather different option, one that was far more enticing. Heydrich had elected to live on the baroque country estate of Panenské Břežany, which lay some twelve miles to the north of Prague. The estate was guarded by an SS company stationed in the nearby village. Although Heydrich liked to work on his official papers at Panenské Břežany, he was obliged to travel into Prague on most days. He always refused an escort on the grounds that it would damage German prestige: he had no wish to give the impression that he feared for

his safety. Instead, he travelled to Prague accompanied only by his driver, Oberscharführer Johannes Klein, 'a strapping six-footer'. [15](#)

As Margaret typed up the various intelligence reports, she learned that an attack on Heydrich's car, while en route between Panenské Březany and Prague, had become the favoured option for the assassination. 'Practical experiments proved that such an anti-personnel attack on a car must be carried out at a corner where it is forced to slow down,' she wrote. [16](#)

Colonel Moravec managed to lay his hands on a large-scale map of the road from Panenské Březany to Prague and this was studied 'in minute detail'. [17](#) There was one obvious place to strike. As Heydrich's Mercedes entered the Prague suburb of Holešovice, there was a crossroads with a sharp bend on a hill that led down to Troja Bridge. The car would be obliged to slow down as it approached the crossroads, leaving Heydrich dangerously exposed.

Holešovice offered an additional advantage: it was at a considerable distance from the SS garrisons in both Panenské Březany and at Prague Castle in the centre of the city. In theory, the assassins would have time to get away.

Gubbins offered to have these assassins trained at the killing school in Arisaig, an offer that Moravec was only too happy to accept. But first, he had to find two men willing to undertake an operation of extreme danger.

There were some 2,000 Czech soldiers in England, most of whom were based in barracks at Leamington Spa. A small group of these had already formed themselves into an elite. Moravec interviewed them all and selected two dozen of the most promising men for special training. They were given no information about the proposed mission: all Moravec told them was that they would need 'all the qualities of a commando, such as physical fitness, mental alertness and various technical aptitudes', along with one additional quality. When the men asked what this was, he said: 'Are you ready to die for your country?' [18](#)

The men who signalled their agreement were taken by train to Arisaig in order to be taught the art of silent killing. William Fairbairn was absent at the time of their arrival, leaving the training in the hands of Eric Sykes. He was quick to recognize that Moravec's men were professionals, 'a disciplined lot' who were 'a very different ball-game to the French section'. [19](#) Yet he nevertheless said that they would require a minimum of six weeks' training in fitness, killing and shooting practice.

Colonel Moravec watched as the bespectacled Sykes put them through their paces. He was impressed by what he saw. 'The men were kept in isolation from the outside world, taught the use of small arms of every kind, manufacture of hand-made bombs, ju-jitsu, survival in open country on synthetic foods, topography and map-reading and concealment devices.' Even by commando standards, Sykes's programme was 'very exacting' and pushed the men to the very limits of their endurance. [20](#)

They undertook punishing training in rock climbing and were then thrown headlong into unarmed combat. 'Stretched to the utmost, harried, prodded, tested, the trainees were probed for any hidden physical or psychological weaknesses which might cost them their lives.' Sykes pushed them 'to their psychological limits', not because he was a sadist but because he wanted to know the point at which each man would crack. It was the only way to weed out those 'who could not function under the crushing pressures they would face in the field', when they would be at constant risk of exposure by informers.

At the end of six weeks, it became clear that two of the men were outstanding. Josef Gabčík was short, tough and 'absolutely reliable', with a fine sense of leadership. Just twenty-eight years of age and an orphan since he was a small boy, he could be provoked into a fury by the most trivial things, such as spilling a drink. 'Up he soared like a rocket, spurting rage, to burst effectively, briefly and brightly at a high altitude; then, with a wry appraisal of his own ridiculousness, he would laugh himself down to

ground level again.’ His temper might have proved a handicap, but it was offset by his bravery and determination. If anyone could be trusted to kill Heydrich, it was Gabčík.

The second candidate was Jan Kubis, ‘a shy and softly spoken man who never lost his temper’. He was the perfect counterfoil to Gabčík: ‘well disciplined, discreet and dependable’. He was also an ardent patriot who told his superiors that he wanted ‘to help the Czechoslovak cause as much as I could’. [21](#) If that meant being dropped into his native land on a near-suicidal mission, then he was keen to take part.

Colonel Moravec wanted to be absolutely sure that he had got the right men for the job and had a private chat with Eric Sykes. Sykes had trained hundreds of men over the previous twelve months, yet he had rarely come across such a talented pair. ‘He said that in ju-jitsu they were almost perfect. They had passed their discretion test with flying colours.’ Moravec himself had watched them on the shooting range. ‘I could see that they were artists with pistols, rifles and sub-machine guns.’ More importantly, ‘they threw hand grenades with precision at a hundred yards.’

Moravec was satisfied that he had found the right men: now, he had to be certain that they were undertaking the mission of their own free will. He took them to one side and spoke to them individually, explaining that they were the favoured candidates for an assassination attempt that would place them in grave danger. ‘If they were lucky enough to escape death during the attempt,’ he told them, ‘they would have two alternatives: to try to survive inside the country or try to escape abroad and return to their London base.’ He said it was most likely they would be killed. ‘I thought they deserved complete honesty.’

Both men answered without displaying any emotion. Gabčík told Moravec that ‘he viewed the mission as an act of war and the risk of death as natural.’ Kubis simply thanked Colonel Moravec ‘for choosing him for a task of such importance’. [22](#)

Colin Gubbins had been helping to organize the technicalities of the Czech mission while the assassins had been training in Arisaig. He had recently appointed the brilliant young Cambridge graduate Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard to head his Czech Section. It was a wise choice. Hesketh-Prichard had previously lived in Prague and knew the city well. Now, his task was to help with the detailed planning of the assassination.

It soon became clear that the principal problems were technical ones. ‘Chief among these was the difficulty of providing a bomb which could be concealed in a briefcase, used at short range without killing the operator, but which was nevertheless sufficiently powerful to penetrate the armour-plating of the Reichsprotektor’s official motor car.’ [23](#)

Heydrich’s car was likely to be within range for just four or five seconds as it slowed down at the Holešovice crossroads. The fuse on a standard grenade was too long for an attack where speed would be essential. Nor could a grenade be guaranteed to pierce the armour-plated Mercedes. Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard realized that an explosive device would have to be specially designed and built. Millis Jefferis’s team at the Firs would have been well placed to construct such a weapon, but they were deluged with work in the final months of 1941. Hesketh-Prichard turned instead to Cecil Clarke, who had shown considerable mastery at blowing up cars with his specially adapted spigot mortar.

Clarke agreed that a standard grenade would not puncture the armour-plating of Heydrich’s car. He also knew that an anti-tank grenade, which would blow a hole in almost anything, was far too cumbersome to be thrown across a road. It was almost a foot long and weighed some four and a half pounds. It was not a weapon for assassination. What was needed was some sort of hybrid grenade, powerful enough to pierce armour-plating but also light enough to be thrown. Clarke now began sketching a uniquely destructive explosive device, modelling it on the cylindrical No. 73 Anti-Tank percussion grenade. With its screw-on

cap, it looked like a thermos flask. Cecil decided to streamline it still further, packing its top end with a pound of nitro-glycerine explosive. This reduced the weight by a third, making it a great deal easier to throw. He then fitted the grenade with a No. 247 fuse made of black bakelite that was 'designed to function on impact, irrespective of how the grenade landed'. [24](#) It would detonate, come what may.

The explosive was held *in situ* by adhesive tape, which lent a Heath Robinson touch to the grenade. But Clarke's weapon was anything but makeshift. When it exploded, it was designed to shatter with such force that shards of metal shrapnel would tear through the bodywork of the car with unbelievable force, inflicting devastating injuries on anyone inside. It was so lethal that the two assassins were warned to take great care 'to avoid the powerful blast'. [25](#) They needed to take cover within seconds of throwing the device.

There was perhaps another reason why Clarke warned them to take cover, one that needed to remain absolutely secret. It is possible that he had laced his grenade with botulinal toxin, a deadly poison that had been developed at the biological warfare wing of Porton Laboratories and given the codename X. The Porton scientist who developed substance X, Paul Fildes, was a genius in biological warfare. He later confided to two scientists that he 'had a hand' in the death of Heydrich. Indeed, he told the American biologist Alvin Pappenheimer that Heydrich's murder 'was the first notch on my pistol'. [26](#) There are no other records to substantiate his claim and Clarke himself never admitted to using any biological agent. Yet he was certainly interested in biological warfare and at one point had even managed to acquire his own supply of poison gas from a ship in Barry docks, exchanging it for a large box of plastic explosives. 'No one thought it much of a swap,' said Eveleigh 'Dumbo' Newman, who had been training at Brickendonbury Manor at the time. [27](#)

Newman and his comrades never ceased to be amazed by Clarke's capacity to invent dirty weapons, unaware that he was fighting an intensely personal battle against the Nazis. It was a battle born out of an experience on the Italian Front in the final hours of the First World War. As he crossed the corpse-strewn River Piave in November 1918, he had stumbled across a shot and dying Austrian soldier who stretched out his arm, imploring, quizzical, looking at him 'with composure, with an enquiring and kindly expression'. Clarke felt a surge of emotion unlike anything he had experienced before. 'As I shook his hand,' he wrote, 'a feeling of newness spread over me, and the scene appeared brighter and more intense. It was as though the illumination of the sun had been intensified, and I became unconscious of the presence of my body.' The mysterious glow in his soul 'lasted probably two seconds', before being replaced by an icy chill as he watched the man die at almost same moment as the armistice. [28](#) More than a year later, Clarke was still replaying the scene in his head.

That poignant encounter was to trigger a complete mental collapse in the aftermath of the war. Indeed, it caused him such anguish that he refused to talk about it with anyone, preferring to commit his most intimate feelings to a private notebook. Yet it was ultimately to change his life, for when he eventually emerged from his breakdown, he had developed his own theory about how to fight a war with a minimum of human casualties. Sabotage and targeted killing – eradicating individual monsters like Heydrich – was better by far than the slaughter of conscripted civilians.

The effectiveness of his Heydrich grenade, and therefore of the assassination itself, was to be entirely dependent on the accuracy of the person throwing it. This was deemed so important that the two assassins were taken to Aston House in Hertfordshire where they were given intense training under the auspices of Cecil Clarke, Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard and Peter Wilkinson, who, like Hesketh-Prichard, had previously lived in Prague. The men 'spent several Arcadian afternoons in the autumn sunshine carrying out field trials on an ancient Austin saloon'. To make the trials as accurate as possible, the vehicle 'had been rigged up with armour-plated panels and was towed behind a tractor'. A second car was also used, a

Canadian Buick, that had a colourful history. It was one of two Buicks owned by King Edward VIII and had taken him to Windsor Castle to make his abdication speech. Clarke had bought the car shortly before the war and loaned it to Brickendonbury, where it was used for military trials.

The Czech assassins and their trainers practised with the car travelling at various speeds. Hesketh-Prichard was the first to throw the grenade and was surprised how easy it was to hit the target, although he reasoned that this was probably because he came from a long line of keen cricketers. His father had played for the Gentlemen versus the Players at Lords before the First World War and Alfgar, too, was a skilled bowler. Indeed he had 'no difficulty in hitting the moving target at speeds of up to 25mph', the maximum that Heydrich's car could conceivably be travelling as it approached the Holešovice crossroads.

Gabčík and Kubis found it rather harder to throw the grenade, 'not having been reared in a cricketing tradition'.²⁹ The two of them were so concerned about missing their target that they decided to carry a veritable arsenal of additional weaponry. In addition to Clarke's six percussion grenades, they also took two Colt.38 Supers, four spare magazines, four Mills bombs, one of Clarke's tree spigot mortars, a Sten gun, ten pounds of gelignite and 'one lethal hypodermic syringe'.³⁰ No explanation was given for this last item. As with Clarke's grenade, any mention of biological weaponry was carefully expunged from the records.

The two men were kept apart from everyone else during their stay at Brickendonbury Manor. Secrecy had always been Cecil Clarke's priority and this mission was the most secret of all. When Sue Ryder arrived at Brickendonbury shortly before Gabčík and Kubis, she was told to keep her ears and mouth closed. 'Anybody who comes here is not expected to ask questions. You will find out what you need to know, but always keep your own mouth shut.'³¹

Back in London, secretary Margaret had one last memo to type, one that set out the precise details of the killing. Gabčík and Kubis were to be disguised as street cleaners and 'were to begin sweeping the road at a selected corner. Their explosives and arms were to be concealed in their dustman's barrow.' If Clarke's grenade failed to kill Heydrich, they were to shoot him 'at close quarters with their Colt .38 Super'.³²

Once the two men had undergone their parachute training and learned every last twist and turn in the road layout of Prague, they were taken for a night at the theatre with Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard and Peter Wilkinson. Their behaviour took both of them by surprise. When the actors on stage embraced, 'they thought it screamingly funny and roared with laughter.' But during all the jokey parts, 'they remained stolidly glum.' To inject a note of cheer, the four went off to the Criterion afterwards for 'a slap-up supper'. Wilkinson found them 'utterly reliable, utterly fearless, absolutely devoted to their cause'. He was most impressed. 'I could not have admired them more.'³³

They were taken out again on the eve of their departure, this time by Colonel Moravec. He escorted them to an Italian restaurant in Bayswater where they enjoyed the food, cracked jokes and made no comment about the final item of equipment that Moravec handed to them as they ate their meal: 'two capsules of quick-acting poison to be used on themselves in the event of unbearable torture'.

The men were driven directly to Tangmere aerodrome in Sussex, arriving there in the deep winter twilight. They were met by Flight Lieutenant Ron Hockey, whose task was to fly his Halifax to the Protectorate and drop them into the night sky.

As the men boarded the plane, Gabčík turned to Colonel Moravec. 'You can rely on us, Colonel,' he said. 'We shall fulfil our mission as ordered.'³⁴

Nothing was heard from the two assassins for more than a month. In London, it was assumed that something had gone seriously awry. This was indeed the case. The men had been dropped far from Plzen, their intended landing point, and Gabčík had injured himself on landing. But the men were fortunate that local villagers had heard the Halifax overhead and guessed that it was dropping agents. They went in search of the two men and found them hiding out in a quarry.

Gabčík and Kubis accepted assistance with great reluctance, for in doing so they were breaking the first rule of their mission: no contact with the local resistance. Yet they also realized that those locals had almost certainly saved the operation from being aborted. For the next six weeks, they were hidden in safe houses as they planned where and when to strike.

They finally settled on a date for action on receipt of crucial information from a member of the resistance, Josef Novotny. He was responsible for the castle clocks in Prague Castle and he overheard precise details of Heydrich's travel arrangements for 27 May, including the exact time at which his car would be travelling into Prague. Gabčík and Kubis decided to wait no longer: the assassination was set for that day.

Both men were confident in every aspect of the attack except one. They still did not trust Cecil Clarke's percussion grenade. When they headed to Holešovice crossroads on the morning of the attack, they took the precaution of packing their Sten gun and Colt pistols, in addition to Clarke's grenades. The weapons were placed in an old case and then covered in a thick layer of grass as a precaution against any police inspection. This was not as bizarre as it sounded. There was such a shortage of food in Prague that many people had started to breed rabbits. To feed them, they collected grass and weeds from the local parks.

Gabčík and Kubis took a train to the suburb of Žižkov, where they collected bicycles that had been left for them at a prearranged spot. They then cycled to the junction at Holešovice and made contact with an accomplice, Josef Valcik, who was to stand at the top of the hill and flash a mirror when Heydrich's car came into view.

The two assassins now took up their position at the very point at which Heydrich's car was expected to slow to walking pace. Gabčík assembled the Sten gun while Kubis prepared Clarke's percussion grenade. Both men kept their eyes fixed on Valcik at the top of the hill, waiting nervously for the signal.

Heydrich was late. The clock sounded ten o'clock and then ten fifteen. Unbeknown to the assassins, the Reichsprotektor had decided to take a stroll around the castle gardens with his wife and three children. It was much later than usual when he finally climbed into his vehicle, sitting in the front seat beside his chauffeur, the six-foot Johannes Klein.

Kubis and Gabčík were by now growing jumpy. They had been loitering in the street for almost half an hour and were in danger of arousing the suspicions of passers-by. They were wondering how much longer to remain in wait when, at precisely 10.32 a.m., Valcik's mirror flashed a signal. Heydrich's Mercedes had swung into view.

The assassins had spent weeks training for this very moment. Gabčík released the catch on his Sten and rushed across to the sharpest point in the bend. Kubis pulled one of Clarke's grenades from his briefcase. Both men could see Heydrich's car as it approached. It was travelling quite fast, but dramatically decelerated as it approached the bend and prepared to make a wide sweep. It was now or never. As it slowed to walking pace, Gabčík raised his gun. For a split second he had Heydrich at point-blank range. He squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened. There was just a faint click. The Sten had failed to fire, possibly because there was grass caught in the mechanism. Gabčík was left standing at the side of the road, fatally exposed, with a gun that was jammed.

Johannes Klein, the chauffeur, had been trained for just such a scenario. His duty was to accelerate sharply away from trouble and whisk Heydrich to safety. But Heydrich was furious at the attempt on his life. Seeing that Gabčík's gun was jammed, he ordered Klein to stop the car and then pulled out his automatic pistol as he prepared to shoot his would-be assassin. As he did so, Kubis stepped from the shadows and hurled Cecil Clarke's bomb at the car. He had practised for this moment so many times during his training but now, in the heat of the moment, he missed his target. Clarke's percussion grenade exploded against the rear wheel of the Mercedes, detonating with unbelievable violence and flinging shards of glass and shrapnel through the body of the car. It was so powerful that Heydrich's and Klein's SS jackets, folded on the back seat of the soft-top vehicle, ended up draped on the high wire of the nearby tramway.

Kubis had been hit by the flying shrapnel and blood was streaming into his eyes. Through a veil of blood, he saw Klein jump from the car and run towards him, pistol drawn. Gabčík had managed to avoid the shrapnel, but he was horrified to see Heydrich drag himself from the vehicle and level his gun. He was lurching forward, shouting wildly as he prepared to fire. Gabčík ditched his jammed Sten and drew his Colt, taking pot-shots at Heydrich from behind a telegraph pole.

Kubis wiped the blood from his eyes, dodged Klein's bullets and jumped on to his bicycle. Klein took aim once again and tried to bring down the fleeing Kubis with a hail of bullets. But his gun also jammed, enabling Kubis to get away. Less than ten minutes after hurling his grenade, Kubis had made it to a safe house.

The situation was more desperate for Gabčík. He was caught in a shoot-out with Heydrich and risked being either shot or captured. But as he was ducking the bullets – suddenly – the unexpected happened. Heydrich staggered to the side of the road and collapsed in agony. Unbeknown to either of his assassins, Cecil Clarke's grenade had done precisely what it had been designed to do. As the shell fragmented, it had driven metal, glass and fragments of horsehair from the car's upholstery deep into Heydrich's spleen.

'Get that bastard,' shouted the Reichsprotektor to his chauffeur, pointing at the escaping Gabčík. [35](#) As Klein chased after the assassin, Heydrich clutched at the bonnet of the smoking, mangled Mercedes. He was in agony. Not a single eyewitness went to his help.

Colonel Moravec was the first person in England to learn news of the attack, picking it up on Prague radio. 'So that was it,' was his first reaction. 'Gabčík and Kubis had done it.' [36](#) He immediately informed Gubbins, who began dictating a memo for Margaret to type up. It was to be circulated to just one person, Lord Selborne. 'I would ask that this report be treated with the utmost secrecy,' he said, stressing that it was 'absolutely essential' that no one knew about Baker Street's involvement in the assassination.

'Even should Heydrich not die,' said Gubbins, 'and it is to be sincerely hoped that he will, he must obviously be incapacitated for a very long time.' He was delighted that Gabčík and Kubis had managed to strike at such a high-ranking Nazi. 'This is a most important matter on which we can congratulate ourselves, as even in Germany there is a limit to the number of men of his type who combine both the special aptitude and the special degree of brutality required.'

After praising his Czech Section and the wily Colonel Moravec, he also praised his own team: Eric Sykes, Cecil Clarke, Alfgar Hesketh-Prichard and Peter Wilkinson, 'for the meticulous care with which they prepared the operation and the necessary stores'. [37](#)

If Gubbins himself was impressed with the professionalism of the attack, then so were the Gestapo. Gubbins managed to acquire their official report into the assassination, which admitted that 'the attack was carried out in a most skilful manner.' The extraordinary grenade had been crucial to its success. 'It

was an extremely powerful bomb,' read the Gestapo report, 'for only the fuse and a few pieces remained of it.'

They soon found the assassins' abandoned briefcase containing two more of Clarke's grenades. These were immediately sent for analysis. The experts who defused the weapons had never seen anything quite like them. It was clear that they were 'of British make' and also clear that 'they have the same kind of fuses as the anti-tank shells used by British troops in North Africa.' Yet they had been skilfully modified by an expert, someone who was intent on wreaking maximum damage to an armour-plated car.

Clarke's grenade had indeed done its deadly worst. It had broken one of Heydrich's ribs, ruptured his diaphragm and flung shrapnel deep into his spleen. The Reichsprotektor was rushed to hospital and underwent emergency surgery, but Clarke's grenade was to prove a very dirty weapon indeed. Septicaemia soon took hold and Heydrich breathed his last on the eighth day after the attack.

His doctors blamed the dirty bomb for his death, saying that it had been caused 'by bacteria and possibly by poisons carried into [the vital organs] by the bomb splinters'.

Hitler was furious about the assassination. He initially blamed Heydrich himself, saying that driving around without outriders and SS bodyguards was 'just damned stupidity'.³⁸ But he quickly transferred his fury to the assassins, whose identity and whereabouts were still unknown.

Unless or until they were found, Czech civilians were to pay the price for Heydrich's death in a series of random, brutal and senseless killings. The village of Lidice was the first to be targeted, on the spurious grounds that it had links to the assassins. The village was cordoned off and 199 male inhabitants shot by the Gestapo. The 195 women and 95 children were arrested and sent to Ravensbruck concentration camp where most were gassed to death. The village of Ležáky was next to be targeted. All thirty-three villagers were shot and most of the children exterminated.

Gabčík and Kubis had made a lucky getaway, sheltering in a number of safe houses before being offered refuge in the dank catacombs of the St Cyril and St Methodius Orthodox Church. They took shelter with five other resistance fighters who feared being captured in the extensive house-to-house searches that were now taking place. All seven were hoping to make their escape.

What they did not know was that they were about to be betrayed by one of their fellow agents, Karel Curda. His revelations led the SS to their hiding place and the church was stormed at 4.10 a.m. on 18 June. The SS fought their way up to the choir loft in a ferocious two-hour gun battle: when they reached the top of the spiral staircase, they found two of the fighters dead and a third, Kubis, mortally wounded. He was rushed to hospital, for the SS were desperate to keep him alive, but he died of his wounds some twenty minutes later.

The other four fighters, including Gabčík, were still hiding out in the catacombs of the church, but their whereabouts were eventually revealed to the SS by the terrified preacher, Vladimir Petrek. First, the SS tried to flood them out, ordering the Czech fire brigade to fill the catacombs with water. When that failed to work, they threw hand grenades through the vents. Eventually, in a cloud of tear gas, masked SS soldiers stormed the catacombs, opening the main entrance with explosives.

As they waded through waist-deep water, they faced heavy gunfire from the four Czech survivors. The German troops fell back for a moment, in preparation for a renewed attack, but were halted by the sound of four shots. The defenders had used their last bullets on themselves.

Colonel Moravec and Colin Gubbins always knew that Czech civilians would pay a high price for the assassination. Several thousand were killed in the aftermath of Heydrich's death and there was a renewed reign of terror throughout the country. But Moravec remained convinced that the assassination was justified, arguing that the Nazi killings would have happened even if Heydrich had not been assassinated. 'The eradication of the Czech nation and its amalgamation into the Reich, including the systematic murder