

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Robert Gerwarth. *Hitler's Hangman: The Life of Heydrich*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. 393 S. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11575-8.

Reviewed by Chris Mauriello (Salem State University)

Published on H-Genocide (September, 2012)

Commissioned by Elisa G. von Joeden-Forgey

Hannah Arendt famously characterized the behavior of Adolph Eichmann, one of the main architects of the Nazi Final Solution, with the phrase “the banality of evil.” In 1963, Arendt was attempting to recast our understanding of how rather ordinary men could implement the Holocaust through the incremental policies of a faceless, efficient bureaucracy. Since then, scholarship on Nazi perpetrators has given us a more complex picture of their behavior within the bureaucracy, though the idea that they were essentially ordinary and even banal is still generally assumed. After reading Robert Gerwarth’s excellent biography of Eichmann’s boss, Reinhard Heydrich, however, the concept of the banality of evil does not seem to capture at all the man’s intents and motivations. In Gerwarth’s synthetic interpretation, Heydrich evolved from a very ordinary young man to an ideologically motivated and efficient, professional bureaucrat capable of devising and implementing policies and actions resulting in the murder of millions. While the ordinary man remains intact, the extraordinary role that he played in planning and implementing genocide deepens our knowledge of the evolution of the machinery of death and the men who made it function smoothly.

From the outset, Gerwarth acknowledges the challenges and limitations of writing a biography of “one of the key players in the most murderous genocide of history” (p. x). Beyond the obvious impossibility of identifying or empathizing with his subject, Gerwarth cites the scarcity of documents related to Heydrich’s personal life. This leads the author to rely on the voluminous reports, memoranda, and published articles in Nazi and SS magazines from Heydrich’s time as the head of the powerful *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Reich Security Main Office or RSHA) and later as Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia. While Gerwarth never quite delivers a full picture of the private life and motivations of the man whom novelist Thomas Mann characterized as “Hitler’s Hangman,” he does reconstruct the evolution of Heydrich’s life, and, more important for historians, he

leaves a clearer picture of the individuals, relationships, policies, and practices of the Nazi regime while it developed a systematic policy of mass murder. Much to his credit, he does this with a clear and concise writing style that makes this book thoroughly readable for professional historians and upper-level undergraduate students alike.

The greatest strength of Gerwarth’s biography is his ability to richly contextualize Heydrich within the social, economic, and political turmoil of Germany during the first half of the twentieth century. Instead of turning to generational theory, Gerwarth focuses on the unique circumstances and events in the life of “Young Heydrich” that shaped the course of his intellectual and social development. The decline of his family’s music conservatory business and bourgeois status in the city of Halle; rumors of a Jewish bloodline; and, finally, the devastating loss of a naval commission in 1929 over a scandal involving a contested marriage engagement leads to the transformative moment in Heydrich’s life and one of two hinge points in Gerwarth’s biography. According to Gerwarth, this moment of personal and professional crisis led Heydrich to the three most influential people in his life: his pro-Nazi wife, Lina von Osten; his intellectual mentor, Dr. Werner Best; and his political ally, Heinrich Himmler. Making the most from limited private papers, speeches, articles in Nazi and SS magazines, and internal memoranda, Gerwarth attempts to reconstruct Heydrich’s political and intellectual embrace of the Nazi movement and ideology. Convincingly, the author makes the case that Heydrich, with the support of his ambitious and ideologically committed wife and his professional relationship with Himmler, found in the SS and the Nazi Party a new basis for professional and personal status that he so desperately needed at the time. What is not entirely clear is whether he intellectually embraced the ideas of Nazi ideology and race theory or instead came to see them as a necessary corollary to reinforce his rather weak Nazi credentials (he was a relative newcomer to the

SS and the party and was never part of the Old Guard); to enhance his important professional relationship with party leaders (especially Himmler); or to define a goal for his policy and action in his important position as head of the RSHA. While Gerwarth implies that Heydrich eventually did make the intellectual journey to Nazism, especially in the context of “fighting enemies of the Reich,” (p. 84) this important question lingers, and instead of receiving an explicit analysis of Heydrich’s ideological trajectory, the reader is left with only more examples of his antisemitic and racialist policies and memoranda supporting those policies. While it is obviously unfair to criticize a biographer for not definitively revealing the intentions behind his subject’s actions, some discussion of the relationship of intention to function would have filled out this transformative moment in Heydrich’s life and one of the key hinges of the biography.

The second transformative moment in the life of Heydrich and a second hinge point in the book is the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Here, Gerwarth is at his best, synthesizing the motivations of ideology with the functional opportunities that a war against “subhumans” in the East presented to the promising and career-oriented Heydrich. According to Gerwarth, it confirmed Heydrich’s “unshakeable ideological convictions” that war in the East was a death struggle of irreconcilable ideologies (p. 196). War in the East had special ideological meaning and professional potential for Heydrich as head of the RSHA: “In Heydrich’s eyes the SS had to prove its dedication to Hitler’s racial fantasies and to display hardness against the broadly defined enemies of the German people” (p. 196).

In two chilling chapters entitled “At War with the World” and “Reich Protector,” Gerwarth fully connects Heydrich’s ideological convictions with his professional ambitions. He creates a complex picture of Heydrich at once committed to the cause of a “Jew-free Europe” but willing to let practical experience, proven field operations, and political favor within the regime determine the methods and scope of the Final Solution. Instead of the banal bureaucrat ordering deportations and killing from afar, Heydrich is the increasingly respected and trained professional manager meeting with his *Einsatzgruppen* (SS paramilitary death squads) commanders during and after shooting operations in the Baltic region, working long hours and neglecting his wife and family, solving

logistical problems of genocide, and all the while navigating the jungle of SS and Nazi politics. Based on his reading of Heydrich’s career, Gerwarth rightly contextualizes the Wannsee Conference as an ex-post-facto event confirming racial policy actions and killings that had been ongoing since Barbarossa in the summer of 1941 if not in Poland after the fall of 1939.

According to Gerwarth, the crowning achievement of Heydrich’s professional career was his appointment as Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia in the late fall of 1941. Replacing the ineffective Konstantin von Neurath, who had been unable to pacify Czech resistance, Heydrich instituted a repressive SS police state, arresting and murdering thousands while marginalizing the token civilian government and increasing productivity of the armaments industry in the protectorate. But Gerwarth is not content to leave us with a picture of Heydrich as an effective functionary efficiently administering a police state. Instead, he returns to the role of ideology as a basis for Heydrich’s actions at this phase in his career. Heydrich launched into an extensive attempt to “Germanize” the Protectorate through racial tests, deportations, and murder. As was the case while he was head of the RSHA in Poland and the Soviet Union, Jews were the first targets and “Heydrich’s arrival in Prague led to a decisive radicalization of anti-Jewish policies in the Protectorate” (p. 257). Heydrich’s own activism led thousands of Gypsies and Jews to their death in camps in the East.

Heydrich was assassinated by members of the Czech resistance in June 1942 at the height of his career as Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia. As Gerwarth relates, Heydrich’s death was a great personal and professional loss for Himmler, Joseph Goebbels, Martin Bormann, and Hitler. His funeral was “carefully stage-managed by Goebbels Propaganda Ministry in an attempt to portray Heydrich as the ‘ideal Nazi’” (p. 278). For Gerwarth, the private confessions of affection and the large state funeral in Berlin for a martyred Nazi hero are essential to understanding Heydrich and interpreting his legacy. Ultimately, Heydrich was a true believer in Nazi ideology as well as an effective bureaucrat capable of implementing policies and actions that led directly to deaths of millions in the Holocaust. To Gerwarth’s credit, we are not forced to choose between the poles of intentionalist ideologues and functionalist bureaucrats; in Heydrich we have a murderous combination of the two.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Chris Mauriello. Review of Gerwarth, Robert, *Hitler’s Hangman: The Life of Heydrich*. H-Genocide, H-Net

Reviews. September, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35631>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.