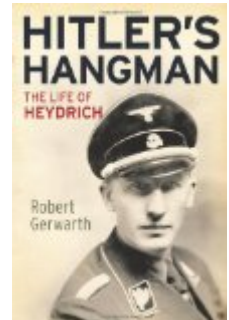


Robert Gerwarth. *Hitler's Hangman: The Life of Heydrich*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. 393 S. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-11575-8.



Reviewed by Ugur Ümit Üngör

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Robert Gerwarth has written a compelling biography of Reinhard Heydrich by weaving together the personal, professional, and institutional dimensions into an insightful and definitive historical examination of Heydrich's life and work. Gerwarth opens the book by identifying two challenges to writing a Nazi biography: mastering the literature on Nazism, and fathoming the mentality and ideology of a committed Nazi. He succeeds admirably in overcoming both, by holding on to his principle of 'cold empathy', detachment. He does not prosecute or demonize Heydrich, nor does he moralize, trivialize, or sacralize his violence. The book is teeming with dense narrative and empirical recreation (supported by 90 pages of sources), and interspersed with incisive analytical segments. Throughout the chapters, Gerwarth skillfully alternates between Heydrich's personal story and German political and social history. Gerwarth calmly debunks the myth that Heydrich had Jewish ancestors, revises assumptions about his anti-Semitic background, and nuances overstatements about his careerist motives. But in doing so, he also takes a clear position in the historiography of Nazi mass violence, for example by

identifying as the major turning point of Heydrich's life his dismissal from military service due to a broken engagement promise, and by tracing his radicalism to his lack of early Nazi credentials.

Heydrich was born into a middle-class Catholic milieu in Halle, where his father, a former opera singer, ran a musical conservatory. He was a typical example of the *Kriegsjugendgeneration*, those Germans who were not old enough to fight in the First World War, but who experienced it as teenagers. He signed up for the navy, where his career came to an abrupt end in 1931, when a disciplinary committee convicted him of breach of his engagement promise to a girlfriend. Heydrich apparently locked himself up and cried for days in self-pity. Amid a great economic crisis he was now desperate for employment and suffered the discontents of downward social mobility. Dismissal from the navy might have been the key event of his life: he saw his dreams shattered, and this particular mishap of unrequited ambition is probably what drove him to pledge to redeem himself with a blind ruthlessness. It also deeply implanted a fear of losing his job, which would

vex him in later years. Then, through his wife's contacts, Himmler interviewed him for the job of head of the counterintelligence division of the SS. Astoundingly he was given the position by reciting plots from cheap crime fiction and spy novels he used to read – he accepted for financial, not ideological reasons. From then on, the story is familiar: Heydrich was catapulted into ever-increasing power as he gradually began running an expanding network of security and intelligence services of Germany: the SD, the Gestapo, SiPo, and the Reichssicherheitshauptamt.

Two vital issues that reappear in the book are how his personal and professional identity surfaces as a result of contact and relations with colleagues, friends, and family, and the violence that epitomized his life.

Heydrich displayed a ruthless arrogance in the workplace and in the family environment. The more power he accumulated, the more untouchable he began to feel, and the more he resorted to “ruthlessness” (*Rücksichtslosigkeit* or *Härte*), which Gerwarth summarizes as “toughness, both towards oneself and towards others [...] the suppression of emotions and the cultivation of callousness, hardness and mercilessness towards all opponents” (p. 73). Heydrich's bureaucratic style consisted of upward sycophancy and downward contempt. Respect for Heydrich was based on fearful admiration for his Machiavellian ways rather than sympathy for his personality. His close associate Werner Best described him as follows: “He immediately articulated his opinions and intentions with a remarkable forcefulness and thus left others no choice but either to agree and submit to his will or to undertake a counter-attack for which few had the courage. In this way, Heydrich immediately forced everyone to position themselves as his friend or foe.” (p. 72)

The book's passages on family intrigues and conflicts make for hilarious, if instructive, reading: Heydrich was annoyed by his good-for-nothing brother-in-law, who kept losing the jobs Hey-

drich handed him. When his sister then appealed to him, not as SS Gruppenführer but as “my own flesh and blood, my brother” (p. 115), he sent a subordinate to deliver the terse message that he was breaking off contact with them. Heydrich's inability to maintain emotionally meaningful relationships with intimates seems to offer an important insight into understanding his mercilessness, and mirrors that of others, such as Stalin. This is best exemplified by the testament he wrote to his wife in 1939: “Educate our children to become firm believers in the Führer [...] that they strictly adhere to the eternal laws of the SS, that they are hard towards themselves, kind and generous towards our own people and Germany and merciless towards all internal and external enemies of the Reich...” (p. 139)

A major question in the book is violence. After all, the life of Heydrich is a story of unbridled mass violence. How did a sporty, boyish-looking musician from an upper middle class, cultured family turn to the Nazi party and become one of the most violent architects of genocide? Gerwarth richly illustrates the agency of Heydrich, but he also pays ample attention to the structural conditions of bureaucratic competition in which Heydrich operated. His relations with the police, the law, and the army fluctuated between conflict, competition, and cooperation. Once installed as boss of the terror apparatus, Heydrich could only aspire for the expansion of his powers and portfolio. Well before the war, he assaulted the Jews, battered the Churches, persecuted the Freemasons and arrested Asocials. When he was put in charge of Dachau in 1933 already he endorsed the maltreatment and cruelty against the inmates. By the time he was running the Einsatzgruppen eight years later, he was a seasoned perpetrator for whom the exercise of mass violence against defenseless civilians had become routine. Indeed, theories of perpetration apply well to Heydrich: he experienced the processes of initiation and routinization quite rapidly. The only question that

remains is coping: did he ever feel remorse, suffer from or repress his guilty conscience?

Gerwarth explains that “Heydrich’s actions cannot simply be understood as those of a blood-thirsty sadist playing a preconceived role in building a totalitarian police state. Since joining the SS in 1931, he had immersed himself in a political milieu, which thrived on the notion of being locked in a life-and-death struggle. Winning that struggle required decisive action against enemies in respect of whom even the most unimaginable cruelty was justified. As his future deputy, Werner Best, observed, Heydrich tended to project his own proclivity towards intrigues and violence on to his real or alleged enemies. Finally free to move against an ideological enemy who had supposedly enjoyed the upper hand until 1933, he considered terror a justifiable weapon – in fact, the only adequate weapon against such evil” (p. 68). Here, Gerwarth applies the psychological concept of projection, the operation of expelling feelings or wishes the individual finds shameful, obscene, or dangerous by attributing them to another. Heydrich denied his own intrigues and cruelty by first ascribing them to his adversaries and victims, and then acting to erase them by murdering the victims.

Entering the impervious mind of an upper-echelon perpetrator like Heydrich is just as complex as unraveling a dictatorship. Perhaps the most telling part of the book is chapter 7, particularly the section in which Gerwarth explores Heydrich’s state of mind, in the month following the invasion of the Soviet Union, about the monumental genocide he was about to commit. The record suggests that “he was conscious that his actions constituted a radical breach of the norms of Western civilization and the values cultivated in his paternal home” (p. 198). But Heydrich’s mental faculties were strong enough for the equally monumental neutralization needed to justify the genocide, “by convincing himself that in order to be kind to future generations of Germans [...] he and

his men had to be hard in the present conflict” (p. 199). Apparently, the sources do not allow us to probe deeper than this into Heydrich’s mind. But two aspects of Heydrich’s life and career appear to be crucial to any explanation of the violence. First of all, his ascetic self-denial and obsession with ideological, racial, and physical purity – a central concept among genocide perpetrators that also appears among Khmer Rouge cadres. Genocide arises as an effort of regeneration of the group at the expense of another group by purification of society. A second concept is thoroughness: Heydrich dismissed the crude methods of random pogroms committed by disorderly mobs, in favor of secret, sweeping solutions. Both during the Anschluss and Kristallnacht, he even issued orders counteracting violence against Jews. In this regard he was a caricature of Gründlichkeit.

Much like Himmler, Goebbels, and (as Thomas Weber has argued) Hitler himself, Heydrich had no real, extensive or intensive experience with violence, whether in war or street fighting. This corroborates recent research that the worst genocidal campaigns are often thought out, planned, and ordered by men for whom violence exists mostly at the level of fantasy. Heydrich personally ordered the murder of the leader of the Catholic Action organization, Erich Klausener. He explicitly ordered Einsatzkommando 9 to massacre all Jews (including women and children), visited execution sites on the Eastern front, and looked at countless photos of executions. Evidently, he was closer to the bloodshed than the squeamish Himmler ever was. Indeed, Gerwarth writes: “Ever since the First World War, he had lived in a world surrounded by, and suffused with, violence: he had experienced war and revolution as a teenager, only to enter the military and subsequently join the SS.” (p. 293) But what was Heydrich’s personal relation with violence? Did he ever personally execute anyone? Did he beat his wife, spank his children, or abuse his secretaries? If so, how did he feel about these acts?

Gerwarth also invokes broader discussions by injecting the odd comparative caveat, rightly noting: “The genuinely modern idea of creating ethnically homogeneous nation-states through the suppression, expulsion and often murder of ‘suspect’ minorities was by no means a Nazi invention.” (p. 151) But he could be challenged on his argument that the Nazi persecutory category of race was more “slippery” than the “somewhat firmer” categories of religion or class. It took the Young Turk regime almost a year to define what exactly an Armenian was, as they fumbled through the sectarian maze of Eastern Christianity. The Soviets persecuted and murdered categories as arbitrary and abstract as kulaks, “enemies of the people” (*vrag naroda*), “former people” (*byvshie lyudi*), or “wreckers” (*vreditel’i*). The question is not so much whether race is a looser identity marker than class or religion, but how genocidal regimes come to essentialize their victim groups regardless.

Finally, “Hitler’s Hangman” is about much more than Reinhard Heydrich. In a way, this biography is a metaphor, a template for the hangmen in other genocidal regimes. As the *Doppelbiographien* of Hitler and Stalin suggest, it seems equally important to assess Heydrich alongside equivalents from other regimes, such as Stalin’s chief enforcer Lavrenti Beria, Franco’s executioner Emilio Mola, or Iraq’s former head of intelligence, the murderous Ali Hassan al-Majid (“Chemical Ali”). The book also evokes questions on civilization and barbarism. Heydrich had a baby face, and probably had soft hands too, judging from his virtuosity on the violin. Acquaintances remembered him as “an extremely sensitive violinist who displayed a tenderness and sentimentality that deeply impressed his audiences” (p. 37). How can this civilized disposition be reconciled with the barbarism of his career? Even though to some extent this question remains a mystery, we now have a good understanding of the barbarism of Heydrich.

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