Hitler’s Hangman: The Life of Heydrich

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maritime archaeological contributions to social history that constitute such a feature of terrestrial archaeology. As this handbook suggests, underwater archaeology is best known for its contributions to understanding ship construction in periods and places for which other sources are either scarce or nonexistent, but at the same time, additional areas are opening up for the field as it expands. The long section with fifteen chapters on the processes of maritime archaeology shows that the field is becoming increasingly complex and changing rapidly as new technological capabilities are brought to bear. This work repeatedly displays the immature aspects of the field, with several authors suggesting that they prefer a closed and private field of inquiry and others noting the relative lack of analytical publication, the numerous investigations that have produced little in the way of written results. Nevertheless, this work provides room for optimism that more and more maritime archaeologists are moving beyond the earlier narrow foci on process, procedure, and intrinsic objects toward wider interpretations. Francisco C. Domingues, in his contribution, touches on this point when he emphasizes the relationships of maritime archaeology to the broader study of maritime history, the study of mankind’s interaction with the seas, oceans, and waterways of the world. Indeed, maritime archaeology is one of the many complementary disciplinary approaches by which we can better understand that basic theme in global history. It is a distinct methodological discipline, but its meaning must extend beyond its process and procedures, just as the work of an archival researcher or library reader extends beyond methodologies and processes. Maritime archaeology is a means to find greater understanding and meaning in traces and remains that can be found in an underwater equivalent of libraries and archives, but to do so its results need to be merged with those from other complementary methodologies and processes. As is clear from this volume, practitioners of maritime archaeology have a way to go, but the reader is left with hope that there is movement toward that end.

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Reinhard Heydrich, Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia, favorite of Heinrich Himmler, and architect of the Nazis’ notorious “final solution,” stares out of a seventy-year-old photograph looking more movie star than monster. Yet monster he was, in a party of monsters. Any biography of this once-rising star of the Third Reich must ask and attempt to answer the question, How does a person become a monster? Robert Gerwarth does as well as any scholar in answering this question. He meticulously charts the course of Heydrich’s life. Heydrich’s childhood was relatively normal. His family held the values of the middle class, perhaps a bit more so than most, since his father ran a music conservatory. Heydrich accepted, along with most of his generation, the military myth of betrayal as an explanation for Germany’s defeat in
the First World War. The Depression brought his family the specter of want and uncertainty, as it did to hundreds of thousands of families. He developed a passion for sports, and throughout this period there was never any sign that Heydrich was destined for anything out of the ordinary, but when he joined the German navy as a cadet, as Gerwarth chronicles, Heydrich began to display a fierce ambition and an ability to identify opportunities for advancement and position himself to take advantage of them. Heydrich was clearly on a path for success when he was obliged to appear before a naval court of honor, as a result of a prior love affair that had surfaced after he announced an engagement—a minor scandal made worse by Heydrich’s arrogance before the court.

Heydrich was stripped of the uniform that in many ways had defined him, and his potential for historic impact seemed slight. However, leaving the navy he found himself at a unique and eventually rewarding nexus of personal, state, and global changes. Heydrich’s fiancée and her family were passionate Nazis, and for Heydrich the party offered a new path to power, position, and a positive self-image. For the rest of his life Heydrich would commit himself to becoming a paragon of National Socialism. He would succeed far better than most.

Getting in at what amounted to the ground floor of the creation of the Schutzstaffel (SS), Heydrich rapidly rose in the organization, becoming a confidant and trusted agent of Heinrich Himmler. Gerwarth argues convincingly that Heydrich was not an ideologue when he joined the movement, but he increasingly acted as an apparently true believer. Among Heydrich’s more interesting, and chilling, attributes was a belief that the times called on true Germans to be hard, even ruthless, in reestablishing their place as the rightful rulers of Europe.

Heydrich was also hardworking, athletic, personally brave, and fairly good-looking. Upon several occasions he disobeyed orders and flew combat missions with the Luftwaffe. He was quick to accept and master new challenges, particularly ones that would enable him to rise within the party structure or gain power. Increasingly, these involved the removal of Jews and other “undesirables” from the Reich. As the regime moved inexorably toward mass murder and genocide as policy, so too did Heydrich. He was responsible for the Einsatzgruppen, special task forces that followed the advancing front rounding up intellectuals, professionals, politically suspect individuals, and—always, always—Jews. Impressed with pseudoscience and apparently obsessed with sanguinary percentages, Heydrich divided and subcategorized the inhabitants of Europe on the basis of the Aryan “purity” of their blood. Early ideas, such as transporting European Jews to Madagascar, quickly faded, to be replaced with murder on an industrial scale. By 1941 Heydrich had crafted the so-called final solution. For him the elimination of populations was also the road to increased personal power, advancement, and fame. It was also a personally fulfilling task, for he had come to hate these unarmed and all but helpless enemies of the state.

To the German people Heydrich presented an image of the perfect National Socialist, secure in his roles as loyal servant of the people, good family man,
and warrior standing between loved ones and the war’s devastation. At dinner parties he was urbane, charming, and attentive to women. It was not surprising that he had affairs.

A workaholic, he became a master of political infighting, and Gerwarth chronicles how Heydrich continually and successfully employed this skill, which gained him many enemies and opponents, such as Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, the head of German military intelligence. He knew how to hold a grudge and how to take advantage of opportunities for advancement. Still, Gerwarth debunks the modern myth of competition and jealousy between Himmler and his protégé. Gerwarth quite early in the book also disproves allegations that Heydrich’s ethnic heritage included Jewish forebears.

Some readers may find Gerwarth a shade too empathetic with his subject, but it is important to note that it is all too easy to paint Heydrich as a monster born or to suggest that somehow the catalyst of National Socialism was required to create him. The author reminds us that the reality is far more terrifying—that the conditions that transformed Heydrich into an architect of evil can all too easily be re-created.

If there is a shortcoming to Hitler’s Hangman, it is the lack of an in-depth examination of Heydrich’s leadership, which leaves a curious gap in our understanding of the man. Still, taken in its entirety, this book has earned a rightful place on the shelves of serious biographies. The lessons it offers are ones that should not be forgotten.

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