

Operation Anthropoid

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On 27th May 1942 two Czech Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) displayed extraordinary courage when they assassinated Reinhardt Hedrick of the German Army. Hedrick was appointed as Administrator/Protector of Bohemia and Moravia by the German Government during World War Two (WWII).

In the mid-1930's, the German inhabitants along the Czech border areas (called the Sudetenland) began asking for autonomy. As a result in early 1938 the German population directed by Sudeten German Party raised demands to make them unacceptable for the Czechoslovak government. In the summer of 1938, Hitler declared active support of the highly publicized demands of the German population for annexation of the Sudetenland into Germany. Britain and France issued an ultimatum to Czechoslovak government to swiftly hand over the Sudetenland to Germany. The Czechoslovakian government capitulated on 21st September 1938. The next day Hitler introduced new demands insisting that the claims of Poland and Hungary for their minorities also be met.

Wanting to avoid a new war in Europe, the leaders of Great Britain (Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain) and France (Prime Minister Eduard Daladier) accepted Hitler's proposal on organizing an international conference on Czechoslovak affairs. Together Chamberlain, Daladier, the leader of Italy Benito Mussolini and Germany Adolph Hitler met in a conference in Munich, Germany, on 29th September 1938. They made the decision "About us without us"; therefore, Czechoslovakia was forced to hand over the Sudetenland to Germany, Tesin to Poland, and parts of Slovakia to Hungary. With losing

the Sudetenland, Czechoslovakia lost most its natural barriers as well as modern fortifications which were being built.

Supported by Hitler, Slovak nationalists proclaimed an independent Slovak state on 14th March 1939. Only few hours later, early in the morning on 15th March 1939, Hitler's army invaded the rest of former Czechoslovakia (Bohemia and Moravia). Legally, Bohemia and Moravia were declared, personally by Adolph Hitler during his visit in Prague, a protectorate of the Third Reich and were placed under the supervision of the Reich protector Konstantin von Neurath.

In London, the Czechoslovak exile government organized a resistance network. Active cooperation between London and home resistance was maintained throughout the war years.

In September 1941 the Reich adopted a more radical policy in the protectorate. Reinhard Heydrich was appointed Reich protector for Bohemia and Moravia to suppress a growing domestic resistance. Who was Reinhard Heydrich? He was born in 1904 in Germany. He was probably the most abled Nazi of them all. He served as a SS-General, a Police General, a Luftwaffe pilot, a linguist, a musician, and a superb bureaucrat. He also served several years as a German Naval Officer. After being dismissed from the Navy early in the 1930's he joined the Nazi Party and built the SS Security Service. He became the leading architect of the Holocaust, the planned genocide of 11 million European Jews. He planned the "final solution" for the Jewish people and prepared

similar plans for all Czech, except for those with blue eyes and blond hair, traits of the so called "master race". (Cowdery, Vodenka)

Just one day after taking over the position of the protector Heydrich introduced martial law in the protectorate. Heydrich's regime almost completely wiped out domestic resistance, Czechoslovak exile government in London started planning a significant act of resistance revitalization. Soldiers from different Czechoslovak units were selected and trained by British Commandos Instructors in Great Britain. Several small teams were parachuted into the protectorate to re-organize domestic resistance, re-establish communication with the exile government in London, and organize the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich. (Burian, Knizek, Rajlich, and Stehlik)

The operation was given the name of "Operation Anthropoid". The team was consisting of Sergeant (Sgt) Jan Kubis and Sgt Josef Gabcik. With the support of people from the domestic resistance, Sgt Kubis and Sgt Gabcik followed Heydrich and soon learned about his daily routines and his habits. For the assassination attempt, they chose a curve where all vehicles had to slow down to make a very sharp turn. The attack was scheduled on 27 May 1942 since Heydrich was about to depart and take over military command in France.

Sgt Kubis and Sgt Gabcik, supported by Sgt Josef Valcik were waiting for Heydrich's car to appear on the way to his office. Sgt Gabcik was armed with a British-issue Sten

gun and Sgt Kubis had specially modified Type 73 anti-tank grenades. Both also carried Colt automatic pistols. As the open limousine approached the spot, Sgt Valcik gave a signal to start the attack. Sgt Gabcik drew his Sten gun and aimed at Heydrich, who was seated in the backseat and reading documents. To the attackers' horror, the gun misfired. Heydrich's driver stopped the car and both Germans drew their pistols and opened fire at Sgt Gabcik. In that moment Sgt Kubis threw a grenade which exploded just outside the right rear side of the car. The explosion and grenade splinters severely wounded Heydrich; his driver was wounded in shootout with Sgt Gabcik. Sgt Kubis was injured in the head and face by splinters from his own grenade.

All the assassins successfully escaped, Sgt Valcik even unnoticed by witnesses. Heydrich was immediately transported to nearby Bulovka hospital. He was suffering from major damage to his diaphragm, spleen, lung and he also had a broken rib. Himmler dispatched the best doctors of the Third Reich to operate Heydrich. His recovery seemed to be progressing quite well. On 2nd June Himmler arrived personally to visit Heydrich in the hospital. After Himmler's visit, Heydrich slipped into a coma caused by blood poisoning from a grenade splinter. Heydrich never regained consciousness. He died early in the morning of 4th June 1942.

A terrible series of reprisals followed the assassination. The Gestapo offered 10,000,000 Crowns for information leading to the assassins. Hitler ordered accidentally arrest and executes 10,000 Czechs as a revenge for Heydrich's life. Germans arrested several families who had harbored parachutists from different teams. Some false

evidences about residents providing assistance to parachutists lead to a small village of Lidice east of Prague. Hitler ordered the annihilation of the entire village of Lidice and wiped its name from maps. On 10 June, German units, including a police unit from the town where Heydrich was born, surrounded the village. 173 out of total 199 men over 15 years of age were lined up against a wall in the center of the village and shot while their mothers, wives and children were force to watch. The remaining 26 men were herded into a barn which was set on fire. 195 women were taken to concentration camps. 53 of them did not survive the camps. Out of total of 98 children, 88 were taken to concentration camps, 7 were taken to orphanages and the remaining 3 were adopted by German families for re-education. Only 17 of these children survived WW II. The village of Lidice was burned to the ground and bulldozed. Two weeks later a village of Lezaky faced the same fate.

Seeing the run of events, Sgt Karel Curda, a member of the team Out Distance, gave himself up on 16 June to the Gestapo and betrayed his comrades. Seven of the parachutists from different teams were hiding in the Greek Orthodox church of St Cyril and Methodius in the center of Prague. Early in the morning 18 June 1942, the Gestapo and SS units surrounded the church. Gestapo members entered the church but were fired at by three of the parachutists hiding on balconies. SS units attacked the church with an intention to capture the parachutists alive. The parachutists exhausted almost all of their ammunition, but saved the very last bullets for themselves. The Germans then discovered that the remaining four parachutists were hiding in the crypt. The defenders

killed soldiers trying to access the crypt. Soon the Germans discovered a stone stairway entrance and blew it open, sending in more soldiers, but those soldiers were killed as well. The Germans discovered an external ventilation slot serving the crypt. Through the ventilation slot they tried to fill the crypt first with smoke, then with water. After 14 hours of fighting the defenders ran out of ammunition they committed suicide with their last bullets following the example of their comrades.

The assassination of Reinhard Heydrich was not without controversy. When representatives of domestic resistance learned what was going to happen, asked the exile government in London to abandon the assassination in fears of bloody reprisals from Germans against the Czech nation. The assassination went ahead despite of the fears. Those fears were well founded – estimated 5,000 Czechs were killed in the weeks following the assassination. The international outrage over the massacres – Lidice in particular – combined with the success of the mission, did a lot to strengthen the position of Czechoslovak government in exile. Britain finally officially recognized the government and abrogated the Munich treaty.

This drama has attracted Hollywood film makers since the beginning. They have made three movies: Hitler's madman, Hangmen also die, and Operation Daybreak.

In conclusion, historians would like to highlight that Operation Anthropoid was very unique because Heydrich was not only a Nazi top leader who died during the WW II; he was assassinated by Czech Noncommissioned Officers.