A new biography of Reinhard Heydrich argues that decisions to exterminate the Jews were not made in the 1930s but developed in stages, often in response to changing political and military circumstances.

At the state funeral following the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in Prague in May 1942, Heinrich Himmler remembered his colleague as a noble man, “with a character of the rarest purity and a mind of penetrating logic and clarity,” rightly “feared by the sub-humans and slandered by Jews and other criminals.” Visibly moved, Adolf Hitler added that Heydrich had died as a martyr “for the preservation and protection of the Reich.” The Führer decorated him with “the highest award in my gift, the highest stage of the German Order,” and patted the cheeks of his two sons as he left the ceremony.

Chief of the Criminal Police, the SS Security Service, and the Gestapo, and ruler of Nazi-occupied Bohemia and Moravia, Heydrich was a key planner of the genocidal “Final Solution.” And yet, Robert Gewarth, a professor of history at University College Dublin, points out that no serious scholarly biography of him exists. Hitler’s Hangman fills this gap with a careful, compelling and chilling account of the Third Reich’s “administrator of death.”

Employing “a cold empathy,” Gewarth does not downplay Heydrich’s responsibility for his actions or the twisted “morality” he used to justify them. But he reaches beyond characterizations of Heydrich as a depraved monster or a “perversely rational desk-killer.” Dismissing as untenable assertions that Heydrich planned the Holocaust from the 1930s onward, Gewarth argues that decisions to exterminate the Jews developed in stages, often in response to changing political and military circumstances.

Operating within a “polycratic jungle of competing party and state agencies over which Hitler presided erratically,” he writes, Heydrich developed policies of mass murder “for a range of reasons, from ideological commitment and hyper-nationalism to careerism, sadism, and weakness.”

As a young man, Gewarth demonstrates, Heydrich was apolitical. He was indifferent to the rise of the Nazi Party in the 1920s, making jokes about Hitler as a “Bohemian corporal.”

Dismissal from the German navy (for violating the officer corps’ code of conduct) in 1931, however, left Heydrich without a job or a career at the height of the Great Depression. With the help of his wife’s family, he got an appointment with the SA (Sturmbteilung), taking this path, Gewarth suggests, because it offered an “opportunity for a structured life in uniform,” and a life with a sense of purpose. Membership in the Nazi Party was a precondition for
employment.

A few weeks later, Himmler (who was under the mistaken impression that Heydrich had been an intelligence officer in the navy) hired him to develop an intelligence service within the SS (Schutzstaffel), then a small paramilitary unit subordinate to SA chief Ernst Röhm.

By the mid-30s, according to Gewarth, Heydrich became convinced that Jews were at the center of a network of enemies intent on subverting the Third Reich. Concerned that open brutality might antagonize the German people and trigger a response from abroad, he designed policies to terrify Jews into emigrating. In 1938, Jews were excluded from economic life and forced to pay a redemption fee for the property damage that occurred during Kristallnacht. When World War II began, Heydrich ratcheted up the pressure and the violence. His perverse logic condoned and even demanded killing Jews while objecting to the theft and plunder of their property. But his “final aim” remained deportation to an as yet undetermined territory, not systematic, indiscriminate mass murder.

Following Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, and the conquest of vast territories in Eastern Europe, Gewarth reminds us, “the scope of the Jewish problem” expanded substantially. Deciding that resettlement was no longer feasible, Himmler and Heydrich got a leg up on civilian administrators, their “natural rivals,” by unleashing a policy of ethnic cleansing, starting with the extermination of Russian Jews. By the spring of 1942, Hitler had given them the authority to decimate Europe’s Jews through a combination of forced labor and “special treatment,” to be administered in gassing facilities in Belzec and Auschwitz.

Heydrich didn’t get to enjoy the fruits of his labor. Shot by Jan Kubis and Jozef Gabcík, agents of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the Czech resistance, he lingered for a while, then died from an infection in his stomach. Had penicillin been available Heydrich would have recovered from his wounds – and certainly would have supported an acceleration of the genocide in the occupied East. If he did not commit suicide as Allied troops closed in on the Third Reich, he surely would have been convicted as a mass murderer and perpetrator of crimes against humanity by the tribunal that convened at Nuremberg.

His career, Gewarth implies, does not serve as evidence for “the banality of evil.” But it does underscore the equally scary proposition that a young man from a stable bourgeois background can, under certain circumstances, become a relentless and remorseless killer.

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