

Thomas Ort
Queens College/CUNY
thomas.ort@qc.cuny.edu

Paper Presented at the 2021 ASN World Convention, 5-8 May 2021
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Remembering Reinhard Heydrich: The Politics of Memory in Nazi-Occupied Prague, 1942-1945

(slide 1) Most studies of memory in the context of dictatorial regimes emphasize its use as a means of popular resistance. Conversely, dictatorial regimes are usually said to be engaged in processes of silencing or forgetting, whereby oppositional memories are neutralized or suppressed. Milan Kundera probably put it best in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* when he wrote: “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”¹

There is a lot of merit to these kinds of approaches, but my presentation today will show that things are not always so straightforward. Dictatorial regimes are not only in the business of silencing subaltern memory, they are also in the business of producing memory. Indeed, the silencing of certain memories inevitably goes hand-in-hand with the amplification of others; there’s no silencing without amplification and vice-versa. There’s not much in dispute here.

What’s unique about the case of the Nazi occupation of the Czech lands during World War II is the way in which this brutal regime self-consciously deployed the rhetoric of memory and the scaffolding of what might be called liberal or bourgeois commemorative practices as a strategy of domination. In other words, in the Czech lands, the Nazi regime weaponized memory as an instrument of occupation.

The specific situation that concerns me is the aftermath of the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich in Prague in the spring of 1942. (slide 2) For those of you who may not know,

¹ Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, trans. Michael Henry Heim, (New York: Knopf, 1980), 3.

Heydrich was the second highest-ranking member of the SS and the head of the Nazi security police. He was one of the most ruthless and feared members of Hitler's inner circle and widely considered a possible successor to Hitler. He's probably best-known as the organizer of the Wannsee Conference, the infamous meeting at which the Final Solution was planned. He was, in other words, one of the chief architects of the Holocaust.

In addition to this horrific portfolio, Heydrich was the governor of the Nazi-occupied Czech lands, known as the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. (slide 3) He was a much-reviled figure; nicknamed "the Butcher of Prague" for his persecution of opponents of the occupation, he quickly became a target of the resistance movement. (slide 4) (slide 5) On the morning of May 27, 1942, as he was being driven to his office in Prague, he was ambushed by men with guns and bombs. He was wounded in the attack and died about a week later.

The attack was organized by the Czechoslovak government-in-exile in London and carried out by British-trained Czech and Slovak commandos who had been parachuted into the Protectorate. The operation was extraordinary in its boldness and remarkable for its success, but it ended badly in that it precipitated a bloodbath. About 5,000 people were killed in retaliation, including the inhabitants of the village of Lidice, a small town on the outskirts of Prague. All of the village's 173 men and boys over the age of 15 were rounded up and shot on the spot. (slide 6) 184 women and 88 children were deported to concentration camps, where most subsequently perished. The village was then burned to the ground, its ruins dynamited, and its rubble plowed into the earth. (slides 7-8) The goal was to erase forever the memory of Lidice. This was all punishment for the supposed crime of harboring Heydrich's assassins, but no one in the village had done any such thing. In reality the massacre was a way of terrorizing the population of Prague.

This appalling crime galvanized support for the war in Britain and the United States and became a major propaganda victory for the Czechoslovak government-in-exile. In refutation of Nazi claims of have erased forever the memory of the village, towns around the world were re-named “Lidice.” (slide 9) This is in itself a fascinating piece of memory politics, but it’s not the one that concerns me here. Rather, I’m interested in how the Germans memorialized Heydrich in the aftermath of his death and, specifically, what they did on the anniversaries of the attack in 1943 and 1944.

According to newspaper accounts, the first anniversary of the attack occasioned a massive outpouring of grief and widespread demonstrations of loyalty to the Reich. In a supposed expression of popular veneration for Heydrich and repudiation of his assassins, nineteen cities and towns across Bohemia and Moravia renamed streets and other public spaces in tribute to the fallen Protektor.² (slide 10) The most significant event took place on May 30 in the city of Plzen, the third largest municipality in the Czech lands, where one of its most important avenues was rechristened Reinhard Heydrich Strasse. Thousands of people lined the street to watch an honor guard process to a central square where the mayor of Plzen and various Nazi dignitaries extolled Heydrich’s virtues and insisted that he would never be forgotten. (slide 11) The next day all the newspapers in the Protectorate carried articles about this event and ran the following statement: “The ample participation of all segments of the population in these reverential celebrations demonstrated that the legacy and work of General Reinhard Heydrich remains alive in the minds of all and that his memory is undying.”³

² *Národní politika*, May 31, 1943, 1.

³ *Národní politika*, May 31, 1943, 1; *Pražský večer*, May 31, 1943, 1; *Lidové listy*, May 31, 1943, 1; *Polední list*, May 31, 1943.

On June 4, 1943, the first anniversary of Heydrich's passing, commemorative events shifted to Prague. (slides 12-13) The day began with a solemn wreath-laying ceremony at the site of the attack, where a shrine to the general, including a death mask and an SS honor guard, had been erected. (slide 14) The participants then adjourned to the Prague Castle for an elaborate commemorative event featuring musical performances by the Prague (German) philharmonic orchestra, poetry readings, and naturally speeches by high-ranking Protectorate officials, all of whom invoked the importance of remembering the deceased's labors and abiding by his legacy.⁴ (slide 15-16) This event was attended not only by the Nazi elite in Prague, but also by Heydrich's widow, his two young children, as well as the whole of the Czech collaborationist government.

The day's commemorations wrapped up in the afternoon with what I think is the most interesting event of all. (slide 17) At a ceremony organized by the Prague municipal government, Josef Pfitzner, the Nazi-appointed deputy mayor of the city and the figure who actually controlled its government, announced the creation of a new foundation—the Foundation for the Memory of Reinhard Heydrich. Its purpose was to award a prize equivalent to Heydrich's yearly salary to an individual or institution that had performed distinguished service toward the “strengthening of the Reich mentality and of the union of Bohemia and Moravia with the Reich.”⁵

The first person to receive this award was Josef Kliment, a legal scholar and, sadly from my perspective, a historian, who wrote on the intimacy of Czech-German relations in the early modern period. Kliment, I should explain, was also an official in the Czech collaborationist

⁴ *Národní politika*, June 4 & 5, 1943, 1.

⁵ *Národní politika*, June 5, 1943, 2.

government, thereby demonstrating his commitment to the Reich mentality not just in theory but in daily practice.⁶ He was a good choice for the award.

(slide 18) In June 1944, on the second anniversary of Heydrich's passing, Pfitzner awarded the prize to a Czech doctor, František Teuner, who ran an organization known as the Kuratorium for Youth Education.⁷ The purpose of the Kuratorium was to provide athletic and cultural activities for Czech youths but also simultaneously to promote Nazi ideology and loyalty to the Reich.⁸ (slide 19) In 1944, it launched a summer camp program known as the Heydrich Summer Relaxation Action for Czech Children. Teuner was another good choice for the foundation's award. (slide 20)

So, why stage elaborate and no doubt expensive ceremonies to change the name of a street? Why organize poetry readings and music recitals? Why start a Foundation for the Memory of Reinhard Heydrich? The answer, of course, is that the purpose of all these commemorations was the ritual itself, the pomp and circumstance. The photographs are so great precisely because these events were made for the camera. They were all fastidiously staged propaganda events designed to persuade the population of the legitimacy of the occupying force and of the inevitability of German rule. The point of the pomp was to convey the aura of legitimacy and to cloak the violence of the occupation in a veneer of respectability.

All this should be clear enough, but what about the form? Why dress it up in the rituals and rhetoric of memory? To begin with, the rhetoric of memory and what I've called liberal or bourgeois commemorative practices lend themselves particularly well to the projection of

⁶ *Národní politika*, June 5, 1943, 2.

⁷ *Národní politika*, June 6, 1944, 1.

⁸ For a fascinating discussion of this institution, see Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1948* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 236-251.

legitimacy. Few customs suggest respectability better than foundations established in someone's memory. Murderers don't have foundations named for them, upstanding citizens do.

Second, it's long been understood that memory is a critical site for the cultivation of affective bonds and the creation of community.⁹ All of these commemorations were in part attempts to recast Heydrich as a friend of the Czech people and as a martyr to the cause of Czech-German reconciliation. The Heydrich summer camps and the foundation were likewise intended to assure Czechs that as long as they showed loyalty to the Reich, there would be a decent place for them in the new Nazi-dominated Europe.

Third and most importantly, the language of memory and the rituals of commemoration have a depoliticizing effect. The British political theorist Duncan Bell has, in my view, offered one of the most trenchant critical analyses of memory as a concept, and one of his central arguments is that it often serves to disguise the operation of power. Appeals made in the name of "memory," he explains, elide the manner of its construction "through acts of manipulation, through the atavistic play of power."¹⁰ Indeed, who can be against memory? Against honoring the dead? Against setting up a memorial foundation? Dressing up state ceremonies in the language and rituals of memory is undoubtedly a way of masking the raw exercise of power.

Bell encourages scholars to think of memory politics in terms of contests between dominant and subaltern groups over the shaping of national narratives, and I believe this is a good way to understand the Nazi attempt to manage Heydrich's memory in the aftermath of the assassination. The attack on Heydrich was an incredibly powerful statement of subaltern resistance to Nazi rule

⁹ See, for example, Kerwin Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations* 69 (2000): 130, and Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24.

¹⁰ Duncan S. A. Bell, "Mythscapes: memory, mythology, and national identity," *British Journal of Sociology* 54:1 (2003): 71.

in the Czech lands. To counter the narrative of resistance, the Nazis responded not only with violence but also with the sustained memory campaign I described. And the purpose of the campaign, ultimately, was to offer another narrative of Heydrich and of the meaning of his assassination: he wasn't a butcher hell bent on the enslavement of the Czech people, rather he was a fatherly figure devoted to Czech-German reconciliation; the assassination wasn't an expression of Czech popular resistance to Nazi rule, it was the work of an isolated band of emigres in London who gambled with the lives of people at home. And so on.

In short, the Nazi campaign to memorialize Heydrich in the Czech lands was not really about remembrance at all, except to the extent that it also served as a reminder of the bloody consequences of violent resistance. Instead it was an attempt to colonize the population's imagination by offering an alternative narrative of the assassination's meaning. That the Nazis recognized in the language and rituals of memory a potent instrument of occupation should make us far more cautious than we often are about its claims and uses.