

TRUTH, PATRIOTISM AND THE HEROIC NARRATIVE: THE CASE OF OPERATION ANTHROPOID

Abstract: This paper explores the concept of heroism and that quality of courage generally perceived as central to heroic behaviour. We base our analysis on the assassination in Prague in 1942 of senior Nazi leader Reinhard Heydrich by two Czechoslovak patriots and the reprisal killings which followed it. We highlight how faithfulness to the historical record must be central to any authentic national narrative. Where courageous deeds are engineered by others and controlled from afar, we assess the implications of such control for the heroic narrative and the value judgements associated with it.

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Introduction

Public anniversaries are occasions on which we commemorate or celebrate totemic events. The historical narrative underpinning a particular set of events, however, is often a locus of contention: ‘who carried the banner of liberty here and who was the oppressor?’ Indeed – to the extent that violence or bloodshed was involved – should such events be celebrated at all? Does celebration imply that a given society fears a return to strife or terror? Or that this society is itself founded on violence? Is an objective and neutral commemoration ever possible? Moreover, is it justifiable that the ‘heroes’ of such events be identified and labelled as such without close analysis of the rights and wrongs of their actions? To take one specific instance, 21 November 2020 will mark the centenary of that series of violent events which unfolded in the city of Dublin during the War of Independence – a day now remembered as Bloody Sunday – namely the killing in the morning by IRA operatives of fifteen British intelligence agents, followed in the afternoon by a reprisal attack by Crown forces which led to the deaths of fourteen spectators at a GAA match in Croke Park. Were the perpetrators of that morning’s attacks heroes or murderers? The label we choose will depend, of course, on the perspective we bring to these events. Given the centrality of those dawn assassinations to our self-concept as an independent nation, perhaps many Irish people will see the assassins as heroes. Ambiguity around motive, then, seems to be a feature common to national commemorations of this type.

In this article we explore the nature of heroism as a narrative for commemoration from the perspective of what is perhaps an archetypal case from recent European history: the assassination in Prague on 27 May 1942 of Reinhard Heydrich, the acting ‘Reich Protector’ of Bohemia and Moravia, by two agents – one Czech, the other Slovak – who had been parachuted in from England specifically for that mission, dubbed ‘Operation Anthropoid’. The killing of Heydrich and the savage reprisals which followed it are viewed by Czech historians as defining events in the affirmation of Czech national consciousness during the period of Nazi occupation – they evinced manifestations of exceptional bravery, self-sacrifice and human dignity which form a core part of the self-concept of Czech and Slovak peoples to the present day. In the words of Czech writer, dissident and later president Václav Havel: ‘We know what that attack cost us. But freedom is something worth paying for. For various reasons we had not offered

organised armed resistance to the initial invasion. So we had to pay in another way'.¹ In this article we consider the meaning of the heroic act for a society and for the individual. We ask what ingredients – beyond bravery – are characteristic of the heroic act and the heroic personality as these find themselves reflected in subsequent historical narrative to this defining event.²

As we explore the concept of heroism, its core meaning, a central preoccupation becomes the issue of veracity in historical account. We cannot attempt to judge whether or not an act is heroic unless we can be sure that we have the correct facts – including context – at our disposal. In the words of American historian and literary critic Hayden White, historical writing is 'a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them'.³ Any worthwhile analysis of an event must call to account the principal actors, their motivation and the backdrop against which the historical narrative unfolds. For any attempt at explaining the past to have merit, it must be hold true to a precise factual account of what happened. Distortions of fact in a work which claims to be historical indicate an underlying problem. Falsification of history, the creation of ideological myths, is a symptom of sickness: of the author, or even of society itself. When we discover such falsification, it is akin to the discovery by a physician of fatal symptoms in a human patient who had otherwise displayed no overt signs of illness. When the truth of what happened in the past is destroyed in the present, this stands as a serious warning to the present.⁴ We all stand on our national as well as on our personal narratives. A person lying about his or her qualifications in order to work in a hospital treating patients is rightly regarded as a charlatan and menace. Similarly, when a government engages in systematic distortion of the past in order to draw its population into supporting a destructive project, we are dealing with a situation which menaces social order. War and deceit, as ever, are linked. Were the truth known, at least in a liberal democracy (or 'open' society, in the terminology of Karl Popper), the 'doctor' would not be allowed near the sick person and the political agenda would suddenly change against the falsifiers. In a 'closed' society, on the other hand, there is no guarantee that the political agenda will change, even when such distortion is revealed.⁵

Once the true narrative is known, other questions emerge. Being interested in why we stand where we do implies that, once we accurately know our position, we ask if it is right or wrong. It is thus our moral sense that impels us to explore the past: any conclusion we reach as to why the past has brought us to the present juncture must derive from our moral perspective; our concept of what was done right and what was done wrong. When informed by truth and by right thinking, the myth of the past informs the present. When the myth is life affirming, it generates useful work. The closer the national myth is to truth, the safer one is both within that society and as a neighbour to

¹ Quoted in Ivana Chmel Denčevová, 'Za svobodu se platí aneb Měl atentát na Heydricha smysl?' [Does freedom have to be paid for, or Was there any point in killing Heydrich?] (Český rozhlas 2019). This essay accompanies a radio documentary on the same subject broadcast on Czech Radio's 'Plus' channel 23 December 2019. See 'Za svobodu se platí aneb Měl atentát na Heydricha smysl?' (Plus, 23 December 2019) <<https://plus.rozhlas.cz/za-svobodu-se-plati-aneb-mel-atentat-na-heydricha-smysl-8123254>> accessed 25 February 2020.

² Our motivation is partly personal; several visits to Prague, including to the Orthodox Cathedral of Saints Cyril and Methodius, and also to Lidice in 1988 where it was a privilege to meet a lady who had escaped death in Nazi reprisal killings because of external racial characteristics which classified her, according to false Nazi doctrine, as Aryan – she was transported to Germany as a child, where she lost her native Czech language, only later to relearn it.

³ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (JHU Press 1975) 84

⁴ Peter Charleton, *Lies in a Mirror: An Essay on Evil and Deceit* (Blackhall Publishing 2006) 72-79

⁵ This distinction between 'open' and 'closed' societies underpins the defence of liberal democracy first made by philosopher Karl Popper in his celebrated work *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Routledge 1945).

it. In the words of Hayden White, 'What else could narrative closure consist of than the passage from one moral order to another?'⁶

Central to that value is the unfolding of a correct narrative: knowing the facts enables us both to judge and to analyse. When we select any event from the past and attempt to uncover its meaning, we are making a statement about human nature and in doing so are thus informing the present as well as the future. Clashes over the meaning of past events generally derive from two factors: differences in perspective – whereby different people view the same event and the same set of facts in different ways of seeing events – and differences in symbolic association – whereby a past event takes on a transcendent significance as either sacred and inspirational or as an instance of national victimhood and shame.⁷ Perhaps the worst stage is reached when a society, in the grip of terror, comes to identify with the dead rather than with the living. Such is the definition of adherence identified by Swiss cultural theorist Denis de Rougemont with reference to the Spanish Civil War, as supporters of both sides asked: 'Who are your dead?'⁸

The events which form the focus of this article relate to the interplay of relations between European states and state actors during the last century – notably the Second World War, which led to that partition of Europe along geographical and ideological fault lines which lasted more than forty years and whose traces persist to the present day.⁹ Europe's history is one in which empires – land empires and maritime empires – have exerted domination over nascent nation states, crushing the aspirations of subdued peoples to nationhood. Our current European Union may be described as an empire of consent between former empires and their formerly subjugated nation states.¹⁰ All the structures of the current European project, as it continues to evolve, have at their heart the pain-filled lessons of our shared history.¹¹ The endurance of these structures implies continued commitment to rejecting colonialism, coercion and totalitarianism at the societal and institutional level. But if we follow the interpretation of historical narrative suggested by Hayden White, building upon the work of philosophers such as Denis de Rougemont, we see that there is scope for agency at the individual level also: exceptional human qualities are required from time to time in order to overcome those human weaknesses which inexorably come to the fore in totalitarian societies. Thus, in the heroes of the past we may discern some of the core values by which citizens of today's liberal democracies abide. To be a hero is to have exceptional virtue. This virtue is actualised when an individual, acting altruistically, and in adverse circumstances, acts to achieve a goal which she or he acknowledges as transcendent of ordinary values. This value must then be capable of articulation in such a way that others may perceive its transcendent nature.

⁶ Hayden White, 'The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality' (1980) 7(1) *Critical Inquiry* 5.

⁷ Denis de Rougemont, *La Part du Diable* (Gallimard 1942) 38-42

⁸ C G Wallis, 'Satan and Denis de Rougemont' (1944) 6(1) *The Kenyon Review* 150.

⁹ This schism was labelled 'the iron curtain' by Winston Churchill in a speech delivered in Fulton, Missouri on 5 March 1946: 'From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent'. See 'The Sinews of Peace ('Iron Curtain Speech')' (International Churchill Society) <<https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1946-1963-elder-statesman/the-sinews-of-peace/>> accessed 03 March 2020.

¹⁰ Such is the analysis presented by historian Timothy Snyder in his 2018 lecture to the World Economic Forum. See 'Mapping Eastern Europe: The Long View' (YouTube, 25 January 2018) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UliS7PuTXX8&t=56s>> accessed 25 February 2020.

¹¹ French economist and diplomat Jean Monnet, often called 'the Father of Europe' for his achievements in establishing the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, wrote in his memoirs that: 'Europe will be forged in crises, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises'. Jean Monnet, *Mémoires* (Librairie Arthème Fayard 1976).

It should be stated at this juncture that the historical facts concerning the killing of Heydrich are for the most part (and for the moment at least) no longer contentious. This was not always the case. During the early years of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, from 1948 when the Communist Party seized power, until the early 1963 when Alexander Dubček's generation of Communist reformers unseated the hardliners around Antonín Novotný, there was only limited public mention of Operation Anthropoid. This was because the plan to kill Heydrich had been devised by the government in exile, assisted by British intelligence – thus it was a potential contagion to the prevailing socialist orthodoxy in that it presented an indigenous anti-Fascist narrative incompatible with the official narrative which claimed that liberation from the Nazis had come to Czechoslovakia 'from the East', and was due solely to Soviet intervention. A brief thaw in this attitude yielded the 1964 film *A atentát* (the Assassination), which to this day is hailed as one of the most accurate cinematic depictions of Operation Anthropoid. Otherwise Czech and Slovak citizens have had to wait for the Velvet Revolution of 1989 for the full story to be told.¹²

The Nazi Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia

Before we consider the claim that Operation Anthropoid and its aftermath should be viewed as manifestations of authentic heroism, it is important to establish the historical context in which these events occurred. By 1942 Czechoslovakia had long ceased to exist. It was part of the German Reich. Slovakia had seceded. In September 1938, Italy, France, England and Germany had instructed the Czechoslovak Republic to cede a quarter of its territory; Hungary occupied another part shortly after. The President, Edvard Beneš, as an opponent of the dismemberment, had been required to resign his position and had moved to America. In March 1939, his successor President Emil Hácha, former chief justice, agreed – under the threat of total annihilation personally delivered by Hitler – that what remained of his country would become part of Germany, the 'Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia', while Slovakia declared independence.¹³

On the face of it, all of these moves were perfectly legal; but law is not the only instrument for validating human actions. It was only with the Hitler-Stalin pact to dismember Poland in August 1939, the German-Russian invasion of Poland the following month, and the dismemberment of France nine months later that any serious consideration was given by the international community as to whether Czechoslovakia might continue to exist or might be revived in the future.¹⁴ The winning of that argument was down to a small group of outstanding individuals. Two stand out. President Beneš declared that all that had happened under the cloak of legalism was in fact void due to coercion and, consequently, that his resignation was of no effect.¹⁵ At his right hand was the most important spy-controller of World War II, General František Moravec, who on

¹² Further East, however, the memory wars over World War II continue to be fought, and fought fiercely. A public debate held by Russian historians in December 2019 over which facts should be selected and which countries targeted in order to portray the Soviet Union in the best light, given the complexities arising from the secret protocols to Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, caught the attention of the EU's disinformation unit 'EUvsDisinfo' during January 2020. See 'Kremlin Historians, Fighting The War On Remembrance' (EUvsDiSiNFO, 27 January 2020) <<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/kremlin-historians-fighting-the-war-on-remembrance/>> accessed 25 February 2020.

¹³ A readable account of this is P E Caquet, *The Bell of Treason: The 1938 Munich Agreement in Czechoslovakia* (Profile Books 2018).

¹⁴ Our account follows William Shirer, *20th Century Journey, The Nightmare Years 1930-1940* (Little, Brown & Company 1985).

¹⁵ Here we draw on the autobiographical account of Beneš himself, of which only one volume was completed: Eduard Beneš, *Memories: From Munich to New War and New Victory* (Godfrey Lias Tr, War College Series 2015; originally published Houghton Mifflin 1954).

being transferred to the Czechoslovak Army intelligence section had taught himself espionage from basic manuals, built up a staff from nothing and engaged the services of 'A-54', a German intelligence officer called Paul Thümmel.¹⁶ Through him the Czechoslovak government in exile could determine when exactly subsequent attacks would take place in their own and other countries. General Moravec, in directing subsequent events from afar can be questioned as an actor outside the action and one who because of that detachment could bear consequences, in this case the murder of thousands of his fellow citizens, that those close to the events might never countenance.

The selection of Heydrich as target for assassination

During the month of September 1941 alone the occupying German forces had counted 114 incidents of sabotage in Bohemia and Moravia. These included the deliberate explosion of 100,000 litres of petrol in one incident as well as a dynamite attack on a German children's home.¹⁷ The incumbent governor of the territory, Konstantin von Neurath, was increasingly regarded as weak and ineffective. On 27 September 1941, Hitler suddenly dismissed Neurath as acting *Reichsprotektor* and replaced him with Reinhard Heydrich. Heydrich was a protégé of Heinrich Himmler who had made a name for himself as leader of the Gestapo (Secret State Police) from 1934 and had been one of the organisers of the Kristallnacht pogrom against German citizens of the Jewish faith in November 1938. Born in 1904, Heydrich began his career in the Navy. He had joined the Nazi Party late but quickly manoeuvred himself into the top echelon of party leaders.¹⁸

He has been characterised by contemporaries and biographers alike as the most ruthless member of Hitler's inner circle. Hitler himself referred to Heydrich as 'the man with the iron heart'.¹⁹ It is significant that Heydrich came to prominence due to his secret police work. A person's prominence in society is in large measure determined by the nature of that society. When a society clamps down on ordinary freedom, the significance of its secret police force is much amplified. When a society demands complete adherence in thought and action to an ideology, the secret police move out of their rightful place as an unpleasant necessity, to be kept at a severe distance, right into the very centre of power. Thus, Hitler entrusted Heydrich with the mission of cowing the Czech population into complete submission. Total cooperation was to be secured – by terror if necessary: the advanced industrial facilities of Bohemia and Moravia were to become major suppliers of armaments to the Third Reich, which made a submissive and efficient Czech labour force a key prerequisite.

On first being interviewed by Heinrich Himmler in 1931, at a hastily organised meeting which became Heydrich's first step into the Nazi hierarchy, Heydrich impressed Himmler by identifying several methods by which the enemies of the Party might be detected and then crushed.²⁰ That perverted skill Heydrich applied in the Protectorate. In the weeks after his arrival in Prague in September 1941 some 4,000 people were arrested of whom 10% were executed immediately.²¹ The prime minister was arrested

¹⁶ František Moravec, *Master of Spies: The Memoirs of General Frantisek Moravec* (Bodley Head 1975).

¹⁷ Callum McDonald, *The Killing of SS Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich* (Papermac 1989) 108-109; for an impression of life in Prague in 1941 see Heda Margolius Kovály, *Under a Cruel Star: A Life in Prague 1941-1968* (Granta Books 2012) chapter 1 and interspersed by flashback throughout; see also the autobiography of the great keyboard virtuoso and Bach specialist Zuzana Růžicková (with Wendy Holden), *One Hundred Miracles* (Bloomsbury Publishing 2019).

¹⁸ Joachim C Fest, *The Face of the Third Reich: portraits of the Nazi leadership* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson 1970) 154-172.

¹⁹ Mario R Dederichs, *Heydrich: The Face of Evil* (Casemate 2009)

²⁰ For details see McDonald (n 17) chapter 2.

²¹ *idid* 113.

and sentenced to death; but held as hostage in order to secure compliant behaviour from the citizenry. All radio sets of the Czech Home Army were detected through the use of novel technology and contact between the resistance and the Beneš government in London was disrupted.²²

This crushing of all opposition by Heydrich was an overt and openly publicised policy, carried out with the explicit aim of terrorising and pacifying the population. Heydrich's long-term plans for the Czech people, however, were revealed only to insiders.²³ This is a classic case of deceit being used to mask a truth, which – if it were to be revealed – might provoke mass uprising and disorder. As part of his justification for invading Czechoslovakia in March 1939 Hitler had attempted to persuade President Emil Hácha that Germany would protect the Czechs, arguing that in a situation of general warfare they would be better off under the Reich.²⁴ However, the truth was different. Early in October 1941 Heydrich revealed to his officials that his mission was to depopulate Bohemia and Moravia of Slavs and replace these ancient Slav regions with Germans. While food rations were to be increased in the interim, as the 'Czech workers must be given their grub', a certain level of terror must also be maintained but not 'to the point of explosion and self-destruction'. As preparation for depopulating the territory of Czechs and minorities, an X-ray disease-screening facility was to be used as a cover in order to survey the population for racial characteristics. Those who were determined to be of German blood, according to the prevailing racist orthodoxy, were to be re-educated, while such undesirable elements as nationalist schoolteachers were to be eradicated, universities shut permanently, and those who resisted would 'be put up against the wall'. The Czechs would not be told that their country would be emptied, as 'otherwise we would have a revolution on our hands which would cause us difficulties'.²⁵

The population, though defiant, was thoroughly cowed. President Emil Hácha's actions in presenting Hitler with a fully equipped hospital train for the Eastern front during the Christmas of 1941 indicate Hácha's puppet status – reminiscent in some ways of the regime of Vidkun Quisling in Norway. The previous month Hácha had met Heydrich in Saint Wenceslas Cathedral. There in the chapel beside the main altar he had presented him with four of the seven keys to the chamber in which the Crown of Karel IV, king of Bohemia, dedicated to the martyr Saint Wenceslas, reposed beside his grave. It was and remains to this day the most sacred object in the country. President Hácha described the 14th century crown jewels as symbols of Bohemia's and Moravia's allegiance to the Reich. And he went on:

On March 15, 1939, the Reich, from which the dignity of the kings of Bohemia once derived, took over the protection of these insignia and thereby the key to power. Mr Reich Protector I am personally handing over to you as the Führer's Commissioner in the Protectorate, the four keys to the crown jewels that were in my possession.²⁶

One may accept that at least a small section of the Czech population wanted to believe that German rule would be benign. It is indeed possible that some Czechs, certainly even

²² Moravec (n 16) chapter 14.

²³ For an account of Heydrich's speech to Nazi officials of 1 October 1941 see McDonald (n 17) 111-112.

²⁴ Joseph W Bendersky, *A Concise History of Nazi Germany* (3rd edn, Rowman & Littlefield 2006) chapter 12.

²⁵ Quoted in McDonald (n 17) 112.

²⁶ Quoted in Michal Burian, Aleš Knížek, Jiří Rajlich and Eduard Stehlík, *Assassination: Operation Anthropoid 1941-1942* (Defence Ministry of the Czech Republic 2002) 37.

some members of the puppet government who were forced to speak German at all meetings regarding the implementation of Reich policy in the Czech lands, might have agreed with the views of Heydrich's wife Lena: 'To this day, I remain convinced that my husband's task was a pure and positive one. He came to Prague firmly believing that Czechoslovakia may one day become a part of the Third Reich. This was best for the Czechs'.²⁷

The episode concerning Heydrich, Hácha and the crown jewels is significant for this present study because it takes us into the realm of legend. Myth is a more powerful force than any static moral judgment over facts because legend is dynamic.²⁸ A person may approach sensible judgment about a given event once the factual narrative of that event has been accurately set out. Once legend enters the soul, however, the mythical aspects of the narrative can take hold of a person and drive him or her in directions outside of and detached from the realm of reason. On the subject of this encounter with the crown jewels, a rumour went around Prague that Heydrich had not only touched the crown but had actually put it on his head.²⁹ According to legend anyone other than the rightful ruler who wore that crown was fated to die within a year. Did President Hácha spread this rumour, one wonders, to justify his apparently spineless conduct? Certainly, Heydrich was exercising the prerogative of the crown and was abusing it. Within months, he was fatally wounded.

In London, at the close of 1941, the government in exile was in turmoil. The territory of Czechoslovakia had been dismembered, apparently permanently, as a consequence of the Munich agreement of 1938. Moreover, the leaders of no country apart from the Czechs and Slovaks themselves were suggesting that, should the Nazis be defeated, the country should be restored to pre-war borders.³⁰ From the perspective of Czechoslovakia it seemed that at an irrecoverable low point had already been reached. The Beneš government in exile had little to offer. General Moravec, however, had managed to obtain the assistance of a high-ranking German army officer Paul Thümmel, code name 'A-54', who had correctly predicted the invasions of Poland and the Soviet Union.³¹ But much more was required: a sign that the Czech people, cut off from the Slovak republic by nominal independence, were not quislings but were prepared to fight the occupier. Again, we return to value judgments, to the application of moral analysis onto historical events. The narrative of Heydrich's death is simple enough. The content of the motives displayed in bringing it about is more complex – since the planners, Moravec and Beneš in London were making a calculation about the relative value of human lives: would the death of Heydrich be worth the reprisals which would inevitably follow? Similarly, it is important to recognise and avoid any temptation to view these events in terms of a simplistic heroic narrative; a narrative in which one ascribes the virtue of courage only to those pursuing aims of which we approve.

²⁷ Lina Heydrich, *Leben mit einem Kriegsverbrecher* (Ludwig 1976).

²⁸ Charleton (n 4) chapter 2.

²⁹ There is no evidence that Heydrich actually placed the crown on his own head, although a contemporary photograph does show him staring at the Crown of King Wenceslas. See 'Legends of the Bohemian Crown Jewels' (Bohemian Magic) <<http://magicbohemia.com/2018/01/21/legends-of-the-bohemian-crown-jewels/>> accessed 25 February 2020. The 1975 film *Operation Daybreak* depicts what some ordinary Prague citizens believed. For a full synopsis of this film, including details of all cast members, see, Patrick Louis Cooney, 'Operation Daybreak (1975)' (Vernon Johns Society) <<http://www.vernonjohns.org/snuffly1186/operation%20daybreak.html>> accessed 25 February 2020.

³⁰ The diplomatic note recognising the government of President Beneš of July 9 1940 specifically stated that the British government did 'not intend to engage ... in advance to the recognition or future support in the fixing of whatever future boundaries in Central Europe'. Quoted in Beneš (n 15) 109.

³¹ Moravec (n 16) 57.

In his seminal early study of the Nazi leaders, German public commentator Joachim Fest asserts that the idea of evil 'is linked with the concepts of possession by spirits, uncontrollable outbursts of emotion, and an attachment to the dark instincts', an analysis which breaks down, he believes, on any consideration of the cold, calculating and secular nature of Reinhard Heydrich.³² Yet in Christian thought evil is also a component of those deliberate planned manoeuvres that set out to achieve an object.³³ At the core of such manoeuvring is deceit.³⁴ And evil in itself takes many forms that are quiet and understated; not necessarily ranting. Often it is a question of not revealing that which, if people knew it, would change their behaviour. Keeping the personality hidden and unknowable is part and parcel of this, since disguise and dissembling in position, in statement, in uniform, in party policy, disable people from reaching the conclusion, as did the Swiss diplomat Carl Jacob Burckhardt on meeting Heydrich, that here was '[a] young, evil god of death'.³⁵

Operation Anthropoid – the key participants

For analysis in this paper is the assassination in Prague in May 1942 of acting *Reichsprotektor* Reinhard Heydrich – an operation named *Anthropoid* by the military planners who devised it. The basic facts of Operation Anthropoid are not disputed.³⁶ Central to its success were two Czechoslovak soldiers, Jozef Gabčík³⁷ (born near Žilina in north-western Slovakia) and Jan Kubiš³⁸ (born in the Moravian village of Dolní Vilémovice), who were selected by General Moravec to be its main protagonists.

On the face of it Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš were ordinary young men who displayed none of the overt skills or exceptional attributes which might be commonly associated in the public mind with the concept of 'hero'. As soldiers in the Czechoslovak army they had escaped Czechoslovakia with the invasion of the Nazis, had travelled to France with much of the undefeated but exiled army where they were enrolled in the Foreign Legion, fighting the German invasion and being decorated for bravery. They answered the call of President Beneš and upon the occupation of France travelled to England where they became part of the exiled Czechoslovak legion.

A British military intelligence report on Jozef Gabčík dating from the time when he was being trained in England for work behind enemy lines describes him as follows:

A smart and well-disciplined soldier. He has not the brains of some of the others and is slow at acquiring knowledge. He is thoroughly reliable and

³² Fest (n 18) 152-153.

³³ Gospel of John, 11:47-53.

³⁴ Charleton (n 4).

³⁵ Fest (n 18) chapter 8 includes various impressions of Heydrich as told by contemporaries.

³⁶ We follow throughout the narrative as told by Burian et al (n 26), except where otherwise indicated.

³⁷ A number of accounts of the lives of Gabčík and Kubiš are available in the Czech and Slovak languages. For a biography of Gabčík see Jaroslav Čvančara, 'Nevzdáme se! Nikdy! Josef Gabčík. Život a smrt velitele paraskupiny ANTHROPOID' [We will never surrender. Josef Gabčík. The life and death of the Anthropoid parachute team leader] (2015) *Paměť a dějiny* 2015/02. Čvančara is also author of a biography of Heydrich, titled simply *Heydrich* (Gallery 2004).

³⁸ For a biography of Kubiš see Jaroslav Čvančara, 'Tentando superabimus - Odvahou zvítězíme. Životní příběh Jana Kubiše, parašutisty, který bojoval a zemřel za správnou věc' [Our courage will bring us victory. The life of Jan Kubiš, the parachutist who fought and died for a just cause] (2012) *Paměť a dějiny. Revue pro studium totalitních režimů*, 6, part 2, 110-127.

very keen, and has plenty of common sense... He is a good leader, when sure of his ground, and he obeys orders to the last detail.

There was also faint praise from British military intelligence for Jan Kubiš: ‘A good reliable soldier, quiet... comes in for a certain amount of good natured teasing. Classification ‘D’, might work up to a ‘B’.³⁹

If soldiers were to be chosen for an important mission, it might be expected that those chosen would be those classified by their trainers as outstanding. However, just as there is emotional intelligence, which achieves results that IQ on its own will not, there are other qualities which are beyond assessment. What might these other qualities be? First and foremost, friendship and loyalty. Gabčík and Kubiš appear from all accounts to have been the best of friends. Indeed, as events later transpired, it is clear that neither let the other down. But a further factor not susceptible to quantitative assessment is how a person feels about his or her place in the world. Where such traits are uncovered and made visible they can provide a key to the personality. Sometimes a little incident can reveal what is hidden. While training in England, Jan Kubiš met an English girl Edna Ellison in a local town in Shropshire. Edna was seventeen and had a sister Lorna who was two years younger. Their family befriended the two exiled soldiers. Over seventy years later, the younger sister recalled what happened when Jan Kubiš first visited their house:

The next time we agreed to meet, mum came with us and this time mum invited him to our home, Sunnyside Cottage in Ightfield. As we all got off the bus in our home village of Ightfield a strange thing happened. There were two white gates to our garden and Jan Kubiš suddenly stopped. ‘It is just like home,’ he said, and had to fight back the tears.⁴⁰

When they left England at the end of December 1941 to parachute into their occupied homeland, both men left their uniforms and personal effects in the wardrobe of the Ellison sisters – an indication, perhaps, of their intention to return.⁴¹

Thus any assessment of the motivation of Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš as heroic or of them as heroes takes us inevitably into the realm of moral judgment. Definite judgment perhaps slides into ambiguity when we consider that they were after all soldiers carrying out a military assignment devised for them by General Moravec and the Czech government in exile in consultation with British military intelligence. This was a military mission with clear geopolitical goals. We note moreover the undertaking that Gabčík and Kubiš signed prior setting off on their secret mission, guaranteeing ‘to commit an act of sabotage or terrorism at a place and in a situation depending on our findings at the given

³⁹ Background on the two soldiers in English is provided in McDonald (n 17) 101-103. The actual military intelligence reports on both men are reproduced in Laurent Binet, *HHH* (Vintage 2012) 129-130, a debut novel loosely based on the story of Operation Anthropoid.

⁴⁰ Quoted in the *Shropshire Star*, ‘Incredible story of the Shropshire sisters who fell in love with secret assassins’ (Shropshire Star, 07 September 2016)

<<https://www.shropshirestar.com/entertainment/2016/09/07/incredible-story-of-the-shropshire-sisters-who-fell-in-love-with-secret-assassins/>> accessed 25 February 2020. A local amateur historian John Martin, who had spent 40 years researching Operation Anthropoid, had interviewed the sisters as old ladies. Martin had also interviewed the son of Heydrich and much of his research was used in the 2016 film *Anthropoid*, starring Cillian Murphy, in which Martin himself featured as an extra. See Neil Prior, ‘John Martin helps take Anthropoid to the cinema screen’ (BBC, 09 September 2016) <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-37320149>> accessed 25 February 2020.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

site and under the given circumstances'.⁴² The terrorist aspect of the act being planned was thus foregrounded and not denied. The purpose of the mission, moreover, as Moravec describes it, was to encourage and provoke the population into resistance. However, given the brutal efficiency of the Nazis – their determination to use terror as an instrument to maintain a stranglehold over the population – such an outcome was never realistic or attainable. Indeed, the strategy demonstrates the detachment of the leadership in exile from the lived reality of its people. It was always acknowledged by the planners that popular insurrection was an outcome that the Nazis would do everything to prevent. It was accepted, then, that an inevitable consequence of Operation Anthropoid ending in success would be remorseless Nazi reprisals against the Czech population. The whole plan could be thus described as a highly deliberate act of cold calculation, rather than the hot-blooded, impulsive actions characteristic of people in mortal danger engaging in defiant self-defence. Those calculating and directing events were at a remove from experiencing any direct effect or immediate emotional impact themselves. Nevertheless, the current consensus among most Czech historians is that such calculation was justified – a point of view which appears consistent with Czech public opinion today.⁴³

Operation Anthropoid is underway

In late December 1941 Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš were dropped by parachute near Nehvizdy about 30 km east of Prague. They would have passed close to Blaník Mountain, celebrated in Czech legend as the place from which knights led by Saint Wenceslas will emerge to save the country in its darkest hour.⁴⁴ Their view of themselves was, in contrast to any legendary thinking alien to the success of a secret assassination, prosaic. They had been told to contact nobody: just carry out the mission.⁴⁵ On the way, their RAF light bomber had twice been intercepted by night fighters but had hidden in cloud and had been strafed by anti-aircraft guns near Plzeň, the site of the huge armament works supplying the Nazi war machine. On the snowy ground, by sheer luck, the gamekeeper who found them was not a coward but a latent resister and he put them in touch with the underground. Jozef Gabčík was injured in the drop and was laid up.⁴⁶

His friend was put in touch with Jan Zelenka who had a network of safe houses. Reaching Prague, the family of Marie Moravec hid them. London waited. Meanwhile, the two main actors were drawn into other plans outside the scope of their original orders. They travelled to Plzeň and set radio beacons to guide in bombers for a planned raid on the arms factory. That failed.⁴⁷ The bombers were considerably off target. Back in Prague, with help from the underground network, they found a Czech informer in the Heydrich residence to give details of the coming and going of the SS-Obergruppenführer. They picked a sharp corner on his expected route from his palatial

⁴² Moravec (n 16) chapter 19.

⁴³ In the words of historian Jiří Padevět, quoted in Chmel Denčevová (n 1): 'Just try asking the people of Great Britain if the Battle of Britain was a good idea after all. If you are lucky, they will just tell you where to go. If you are unlucky, they will hit you. Both Nazi and Communist propaganda did their utmost to brush this event under the carpet - they declared it a criminal act. Communist propaganda even tried to obliterate the fact that it had ever occurred'.

⁴⁴ This legend is summarised in, 'The Knights of Blanik Mountain Are Ready to Face the Darkest Hour' (Ancient Origins, 02 November 2018) <<https://www.ancient-origins.net/myths-legends-europe/knights-blanik-0010940>> accessed 03 March 2020. Blaník is also the name of the final symphonic poem in Smetana's great cycle *Má vlast* [My homeland].

⁴⁵ Moravec (n 16) 196-197.

⁴⁶ McDonald (n 17) 142-143.

⁴⁷ McDonald (n 17) 152.

residence into Prague and with the assistance of signals from Josef Valčík – a parachutist from a separate mission – at about 10.32 am on May 27th 1942, as Heydrich approached in his unaccompanied Mercedes, driven by his SS chauffeur, Jozef Gabčík stepped into the street and drew a machine gun from under his coat. The mechanism jammed, probably because it had been concealed in his briefcase in hay for fattening domestic rabbits. Heydrich made the driver stop and in dare-devil fashion characteristic of him started shooting back with his side-arm. Jan Kubiš then threw a modified anti-tank bomb. It missed the car but exploded, sending shrapnel through the door and wounding Heydrich. The ordinary germs from that road in Prague, in the era before antibiotics, were what caused the death of the *Reichsprotektor* from sepsis a week later.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the assassins fled, finding refuge with the Moravec family and ultimately in the Orthodox Church of Saints Cyril and Methodius. Its young priest, Dr Vladimír Petřek, was a patriot who took the duty of sanctuary seriously.⁴⁹

The deaths of Gabčík and Kubiš

It was here in this same Orthodox Church of Saints Cyril and Methodius that the men who had killed Reinhard Heydrich met their ends.⁵⁰ The best detectives in Germany had been sent to Bohemia to find Heydrich's assassins. A reward of 1 million Crowns had not brought forward any information. The Nazi authorities hinted that the liquidation of the civilian population of Lidice was only a prelude to a 'decimation' or genocide of Czech people, if the identity and location of the attackers was not revealed forthwith. Collaborationist Minister of Education Emanuel Moravec was deployed by the Nazis to give speeches around the country warning citizens of the dire consequences of their silence.⁵¹ Cleverly, to write cunningly betrays a value-judgment, the Nazi authorities proclaimed an amnesty with an expiry date in mid-June 1942 – only weeks away. One of the other parachutists, of which several groups had been sent in by the government-in-exile, Karel Čurda, who had been tasked with radio transmission, fell for this bait. It was Čurda who first posted the names of the parachutists and their protectors anonymously to the Gestapo and who then went in person to Gestapo headquarters to claim the reward.⁵² It was he who revealed the location of the Moravec family flat. Marie Moravec had concealed her resistance activities from her husband while her son Ata had acted as a courier for the group. When the Gestapo burst in, Marie Moravec asked the Czech interpreter for a bathroom break and took cyanide. She chose suicide rather than run the risk of betraying others while under interrogation.⁵³

⁴⁸ This account is taken from McDonald (n 17) chapter 9.

⁴⁹ For a full account of the life of Vladimír Petřek see Vojtěch Šustek, *Zlato se čistí v ohni. O životě, oběti a smrti pravoslavného kněze ThDr. Vladimíra Petřka, jeho rodičů a sourozenců* [Gold is cleansed in the fire. On the life, sacrifice and death of the Orthodox priest Dr. Vladimír Petřek, his parents and siblings] (Návrat domů 2008). The classical reference is to a saying of Seneca the Younger: *Ignis aurum probat; miseria fortes viros*, which may be loosely translated as follows: 'Gold is tested when placed in fire, and brave people in misfortune'.

⁵⁰ Once again we follow the account given in McDonald (n 17). Many new details have been uncovered, however, since McDonald's 1989 work, notably by modern Czech historians of the protectorate, Pavel Suk and Vojtěch Šustek. Their research forms the basis of more popular but no less thoughtful and rigorous works by historian Jiří Padevět, notably the guidebook *Anthropoid* (Academia 2016), co-authored by Pavel Šmejkal, and *Dotek Anthropoidu* (Academia 2017), which uses archival documents, press cuttings, transcripts of Gestapo interrogations and similar authentic materials to recreate the atmosphere of Prague under the Protectorate.

⁵¹ Šustek (n 49) 42-43.

⁵² McDonald (n 17) 189-190.

⁵³ Miroslav Ivanov, *Target: Heydrich* (Macmillan 1973) 259-264. Ivanov managed to track down the translator and to take a statement from him which is reproduced here.

Ata Moravec was taken to Gestapo headquarters for interrogation. He suffered a complete nervous breakdown when the Nazis beat him, plied him with alcohol and, in his stupor, showed him the severed head of his mother floating inside a fish tank.⁵⁴ He revealed that if ever in serious trouble, his mother had told him to go to the pastor of the Karel Boromejski church, the name the cathedral had been known by when under Catholic jurisdiction.⁵⁵ The Nazis immediately surrounded the building.⁵⁶

Inside, there were not two but seven parachutists – while waiting for instructions from London Gabčík and Kubiš had met up with five other resistance fighters sent from England, including Josef Valčík who had acted as signaller during the attack on Heydrich. All seven had received support from the same network of safe houses around Prague. Father Vladimír had hidden them all in the crypt filled with the bones of dead monks from centuries past, ministering to their daily needs for food and sanitation through buckets on ropes or by climbing a metal ladder through a tiny opening in the floor. This was not the first time Father Vladimír had offered help of this kind – he had also supplied false baptism certificates in an attempt to help persecuted Jews.⁵⁷ Three of those hiding in the cathedral could not stand the underground gloom of the crypt any longer and were sleeping on the choir balcony of the church. Among those was Jan Kubiš. After a gun and grenade battle he was found unconscious. Heinz Pannwitz, the German detective charged with capturing at least one of the perpetrators alive, later recalled his death:

He had tried to use poison on himself but apparently lost consciousness before he could do so. Although he was immediately transferred to the hospital none of the doctors' attempts to keep him alive succeeded. He died within twenty minutes.⁵⁸

Father Vladimír was tortured.⁵⁹ There were four overcoats, not three, in the balcony redoubt where only three dead or dying men lay. The Nazis knew there were other, what their value-judgment called, criminals somewhere in the church. None of those dead fitted the description for Jozef Gabčík. They opened the crypt. As McDonald describes, Father Vladimír under duress relayed the Nazi demand for surrender, using deliberately equivocal terms: 'I am instructed to say, so I am saying...' The Nazis had told Father Vladimír to relay to the parachutists the message that if they surrendered they would be 'treated as prisoners of war': this was rejected as a transparent lie by the parachutists, who discharged a volley of gunfire from the crypt. We can deduce that they believed surrender

⁵⁴ McDonald (n 17) 192.

⁵⁵ The Orthodox Church of Saints Cyril and Methodius was also referred to as the church of Charles Borromeo (Karel Boromejski) because it had been dedicated to Carolus Borromeus, archbishop of Milan from 1564 to 1584.

⁵⁶ Radio Praha has broadcast an account told recently to a colleague of Fr Václav Ježek of the Orthodox Church of Saints Cyril and Methodius by one of the German soldiers who had actually participated in the 18 June 1942 attack on the church, in which he had operated a machine gun, when he later visited the church as an old man and told of how his respect grew for the parachutists inside with their resistance; Radio Prague, 'The German visitor to Cyril and Methodius Church who said "I took part in siege"' (YouTube, 26 May 2017)

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mlq4qyIfrRs>> accessed 25 February 2020. We are grateful to Fr Václav for his encouragement in this endeavour

⁵⁷ Šustek (n 49).

⁵⁸ Pannwitz quoted in McDonald (n 17).

⁵⁹ For a 2010 television biography of Father Vladimír, including interviews with his daughter who survived the Nazi occupation see 'Neznámí hrdinové - Zlato se čistí v ohni' [Unknown heroes – Gold is cleaned in the fire] <<http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ivysilani/10204458965-neznami-hrdinove/210452801390027-neznami-hrdinove-pohnute-osudy>> accessed 25 February 2020. McDonald (n 17) 179 wrongly describes Vladimír Petřek as a lay reader, but Petřek had a doctorate in theology, had been ordained priest and served at the cathedral up to his arrest and murder; Fr Václav Ježek, personal communication, 2019

would inevitably result in torture and the chance that under torture they would reveal the names and locations of those who had helped them. They were aware of the destruction of the village of Lidice, which had already taken place. In a bid to stop further Nazi reprisal killings, the parachutists had already thought of repairing to a local park and killing themselves under a notice stating that they had been responsible for the assassination of Heydrich.⁶⁰ However, events had proceeded at a pace which made this option redundant. The four parachutists who remained in the basement fought on, simultaneously making an effort to tunnel into what was thought to be a nearby sewer. Through the morning a gun battle raged on, the shots of defiance echoing throughout the once proud Czech capital. Under Nazi orders, the Prague fire brigade flooded the basement.⁶¹ An SS detachment entered from the overhead door but was ambushed in waist-deep water. The unused entrance with stone stairs from near the altar was blown open and a simultaneous attack from both ends of the crypt was attempted: then, the sound of pistol fire in the crypt, four shots. The Germans crept in. Word came back: “*Fertig*” – “It’s over”. The official detective report of the incident states: “Four dead criminals were found in the crypt. Apart from serious injuries, they had wounds in the temple showing that they had killed themselves with their own revolvers”.⁶² Also found were bombs, guns and identity cards, torn to the tiniest shreds so that the Nazis could not trace anyone in consequence of those documents. But there was no ammunition. The last four bullets were used by the men to sacrifice themselves.

In London, the Czechoslovak government in exile was puzzled: had not the two assassins been told to contact no one? We can speculate that the need to seek out support and companionship in danger is a human characteristic: that the hero is rarely alone and almost always attracts followers.⁶³

Nazi reprisal killings

Father Vladimír Petřek, Father Václav Číkl and the theologian Jan Sonnevend from the church were arrested. The presiding hierarch of the Orthodox Church of Czechoslovakia, Bishop Gorazd of Prague,⁶⁴ hearing this, independently and unprompted save by conscience, wrote to Himmler accepting full responsibility. The result was his arrest and ‘trial’ for treason. All four men were executed in Mauthausen concentration camp.⁶⁵ Among the 288 executed was the young widow and mother Anna Malinová who had hidden some of the seven parachutists prior to their final move.⁶⁶ Following their well-tryed policy of legalism, the Nazis did not touch anyone associated with Jozef Gabčík, since Slovakia was technically not part of the Reich and was independent from a legal point of view. The list of those to be murdered extended to the parents, wives and children of those identified as having been directly involved. Father Vladimír had asked a friend to destroy records of his marriage and of his daughter’s birth. Both wife and daughter survived.

⁶⁰ McDonald (n 17) 188.

⁶¹ See the account of Jan Vobecky, driver of the fire brigade brought in to flood out the basement, as quoted in Ivanov (n 53) 265-268.

⁶² McDonald (n 17) 195.

⁶³ Moravec (n 16) 200.

⁶⁴ The given name of Bishop Gorazd (1879 to 1942) had been Matěj Pavlík.

⁶⁵ For an account of the life and death of Bishop Gorazd from a religious (Western Orthodox) perspective see this 2011 article by Monk Gorazd of Orthodox Europe, ‘A Twentieth Century Western Orthodox Missionary’ (Pravoslavie, 03 September 2011) <<https://pravoslavie.ru/48437.html>> accessed 25 February 2020.

⁶⁶ See the account by Ružena Čížková as told in Ivanov (n 53) 231-238.

After the killing of Heydrich, instances of martyrdom occurred thick and fast, most of them completely involuntary.⁶⁷ Czech political prisoners in German hands were immediately executed; of course, they also sought to blame the Jews and initiated mass killings and deportations. Two entire villages were also destroyed; Lidice and Ležáky.⁶⁸ Lidice was chosen perhaps because radio transmissions had come from nearby and because a married man foolishly chose to break off his affair with a local girl in a letter by hinting that he was busy with resistance activities. The post was opened and reported to the Gestapo. What a disaster!

This was not just a physical destruction, but the complete eradication of the population. Even small children were murdered, though a few were sent to Germany for Germanisation – indeed it was a chance encounter in 1988 with a returning survivor of this Germanisation programme which has inspired much of our own personal interest in these events.

You may wonder how many people died in consequence of the death of that one man, Reinhard Heydrich? The answer given by General Moravec is: ‘Perhaps 5,000 Czechs paid with their lives for the death of a single Nazi maniac’.⁶⁹ How could such a high death toll be justified? In terms of the result, President Beneš writes in his memoirs, *From Munich to New War and New Victory*, which was that the British and French governments entirely revoked the Munich agreement in August 1942.⁷⁰ Czechoslovakia was restored. It was entirely in consequence of the sacrifice of the team around those in Operation Anthropoid. Yes, but in terms of the heroic narrative it may be wondered if this operation could have been generated and directed from inside the Czech lands? All of those assisting the parachutists operated in total secrecy and wary both of personal safety and of the savagery that any action striking at the Nazi order would unleash. It was the Czech leadership in London that could distance themselves from such consequences that was enabled to plunge into decisions with the gravest consequence and to detach themselves of responsibility and the emotional turmoil of being first-hand witnesses to horror. This facilitated those distant to make decisions to sacrifice some for the good of the nation. General Moravec was clear in his view that the resultant horror was justified:

In my opinion, the problem of cost can be reduced to a simple principle, so well understood by the parachutists Kubiš and Gabčík: freedom and, above all, liberation from slavery, have to be fought for, and this means losses in human lives. If in 1939, Czechoslovakia instead of yielding to the Munich decision, had fought Germany, as I am convinced it should have done, it would have suffered much greater losses than it did after Heydrich’s death, but it would also have earned a worthier place in history. Operation Heydrich might never have occurred. Given the circumstances in which we were placed at the time, it was a good try. It was the largest resistance operation in the country and it is a good page in the history of Czechoslovakia in the Second World War. The Czech people should be proud of it. I am.⁷¹

⁶⁷ The last chapters of *Ivanov* (n 53) give eyewitness accounts of lorries rumbling towards death camps loaded with hundreds of Czech citizens.

⁶⁸ McDonald (n 17) 184-196.

⁶⁹ Moravec (n 16) 206.

⁷⁰ Beneš (n 15) It is noteworthy how little credit Beneš gives to the parachutists themselves.

⁷¹ Moravec (n 16) 206-207.

The Idea of Heroism – Gabčík and Kubiš as heroes

Let us turn now to the idea of heroism. According to Joseph Campbell, the Irish-American philosopher, it is the nature of the hero-myth that he or she be marked out, be called, answer that call and proceed through every obstacle to accomplish the deed that is transformative of oppression into freedom.⁷² The hero takes many forms; but each iteration requires an especial quality. One of these is courage. After the attacks of September 11th 2001, the *New Yorker* magazine produced a special issue containing an article by Susan Sontag in which she compared the atrocities to the contemporary role of the United States of America in Iraq.⁷³ While this might not warm many towards her opinion, in a later address to a prizegiving in Rothko Chapel in Houston in April 2003, she made a statement that challenged any settled view of heroism and its exclusivity to moral actors:

Courage has no moral value in itself, for courage is not, in itself, a moral virtue. Vicious scoundrels, murderers, terrorists, may be brave. To describe courage as a virtue, we need an adjective: We speak of “moral courage” – because there is such a thing as amoral courage, too. And resistance has no value in itself. It is the content of the resistance that determines its merit, its moral necessity.⁷⁴

We cannot escape value judgments. But, despite what Sontag proclaims with such certainty, there is a difference between a hero and a dare-devil. It is not just courage that the hero, as transformer of the narrative, needs, but the kind of defiance of evil that he or she draws from a pure heart. This is so old-fashioned a concept that it may be startling for contemporary people. Would it be ridiculous to cut Heydrich off from the quality of courage? He did not have to stop his car and attack back. In September 1939, he had insisted in flying combat missions over Poland.⁷⁵ But, you might ask, against what opposition? The Polish army was unprepared and quickly routed, and any air power he faced was rudimentary and easily defeated. From what Heydrich did with his life, no one of sound mind could regard him as being pure of heart. In January 1942 he had been the convenor of the Wannsee conference, one of exactly twelve high functionaries of evil, who planned the mass murder of Europe’s entire Jewish population.⁷⁶ There we find no hero and no heroism and since others were to do the deeds without even emotional heartbreak such as that experienced by General Moravec, not even courage in the most neutral sense. Does true courage come marked out by a simplicity of soul that in ordinary life betokens the desire to help others? Before training for this mission, Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš had been told in England by their ultimate controller General Moravec that their chances of survival were ‘extremely doubtful’. He was never less than honest. In his memoirs Moravec describes the encounter with his two agents thus:

I added that the great probability was that they would be killed at the place of action. I thought they deserved complete honesty, so I tried to

⁷² Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Pantheon Books 1949) 23

⁷³ ‘Tuesday, and After’ (*The New Yorker*, 17 September 2001)

<<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/09/24/tuesday-and-after-talk-of-the-town>> accessed 25 February 2020

⁷⁴ Susan Sontag, ‘Of Courage and Resistance’ (*The Nation*, 05 May 2003). For full text see

<<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/courage-and-resistance/>> accessed 25 February 2020

⁷⁵ McDonald (n 17) 37.

⁷⁶ Mark Roseman, *The Lake, The Meeting: Wannsee and the Final Solution* (St Martin’s Press 2002) 32.

describe their probable fate realistically. Then I asked for their decision. There was nothing emotional about their answer. Gabčík said he viewed the mission as an act of war and the risk of death as natural. Kubiš thanked me for choosing him for a task of such importance. Both said they would prefer death to being captured by the Gestapo.⁷⁷

We cannot normally see inside a person's heart. When we do get this opportunity, it is perhaps the little things that show the nature of a person. Such an incident occurred just as General Moravec was seeing his assassins off on their mission. They had dinner at an Italian place in Bayswater, by coincidence near the Orthodox Cathedral of Holy Wisdom, making simple conversation and telling little jokes, and then went to the base where their plane was waiting for its night flight to destiny:

The goodbye was short and soldierly. I shook hands with Kubiš and watched him climb into the plane. Then I turned to Gabčík, who asked if he could talk to me for a few minutes in private. I wondered what he could want to ask me at this last moment after all the lengthy briefings. The idea that he might change his mind occurred to me but I dismissed it. Gabčík said, 'Colonel, I'm quite embarrassed to tell you – I have a £10 debt in our restaurant. Would it be possible for you to pay it for me?' I could only nod. Gabčík held out his hand. 'You can rely on us, Colonel. We shall fulfil our mission as ordered'.⁷⁸

What made them heroes? Some things about them are clear and that includes their sense of direction and their sense of belonging. One, Josef Gabčík, was a Slovak and the other, Jan Kubiš, was a Czech; both were ordinary working-class boys.⁷⁹ They would have inhabited their time and space and the music and stories that were part of growing up at that time. As they flew into their homeland, they would perhaps have remembered the intense pride in their shared nationhood which was part of their schooling. Even the names of places, should their pilot Captain Andrlé have called them out as he hunted in the blackness for the drop zone, would evoke more than memory. Places such as Tabor, where the nobles who supported Jan Hus held out for freedom of conscience, singing the hymn 'Ktož jsú boží bojovníci', meaning 'Ye Who Are Warriors of God'. Did they think these thoughts? Or Blaník, not just a place but a holy mountain where over centuries many had fleetingly encountered a man in armour seated on a white horse, the guardian of a cavern, where by tradition the warriors of Saint Wenceslas slept in total stillness with their steeds awaiting the ultimate peril of their nation.⁸⁰ Did they call to mind the tunes and the text of the national anthem of Czechoslovakia, which date from the period of Europe's 19th Century national revival movements – the first part in Czech,⁸¹ the second in Slovak?⁸² On the radio, popular melodies such as 'Songs My Mother Taught Me' by Dvořák would have been part of their childhood:

⁷⁷ Moravec (n 16) 196.

⁷⁸ *ibid* 199

⁷⁹ McDonald (n 17) 100-101.

⁸⁰ See earlier reference to significance of Blaník above (n 44).

⁸¹ The Czech language part of the anthem 'Kde domov můj' (original text by Josef Kajetán Tyl 1834) may be translated as follows: 'Where is my home? Where is my home? Water flow across the meadows, Pinewoods rustle among rocky crags, There the orchard is glorious with spring blossom, Paradise on earth it is to behold. And this is that beautiful land, The Czech land, my home, The Czech land, my home!' For a moving rendition see the original opera *Fidlovačka* by composer František Škroup, J. K. Tyl - *Fidlovačka - Kde domov můj?* (YouTube, 06 December 2012) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mo-NeHGecLI>> accessed 25 February 2020.

⁸² The Slovak language part of the anthem 'Nad Tatrou sa blýska' (text by Janko Matúška 1844) may be translated as follows: 'There is lightning over the Tatras, Thunders loudly sound, Let us stop them, brothers, After all they will

Songs my mother taught me, in the days long vanished;
 Seldom from her eyelids were the teardrops banished.
 Now I teach my children, each melodious measure.
 Oft the tears are flowing, oft they flow from my memory's treasure.⁸³

As in the United States of America at that time, Czechoslovak families would have gathered to hear music on the radio. Whereas in the USA they would have listened to NBC Symphony Orchestra under Toscanini, here the musical fare would have been the Czechoslovak Philharmonic and the music of Antonín Dvořák, Leoš Janáček and Bedřich Smetana, whose great tone poem to his homeland *Má Vlast* incorporated its dances, hymns and folk songs. Once the parachutists reached Prague, it would be impossible for them not to see the call of history at every corner: the Charles Bridge, among its sculptures that of the hero-priest who was murdered for refusing to disclose the confession of a queen, the *Vyšehrad*, or high castle, from which the earliest kings had ruled and from which the cathedral of Saint Wenceslas soars, the Old Town, with its astronomical clock, the church commemorating the appearance of the Mother of God to the people of Týn and the dramatic statue of Jan Hus towering defiantly – martyrs both, Jan Hus and King Wenceslas, the fathers of their people, thus tangibly present. The parachutists called their radio *Libuše*, after the princess who founded Prague after seeing the future city in a vision. In the main graveyard of Hradčany were buried the heroes of the nation. Did they ever see reproductions of the monumental *Slav Epic* by Czech artist Alfons Mucha, whose huge canvasses depicted the key events of pan-Slavism such as Jan Hus preaching in the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague and the arrival of the Slavonic Liturgy, that celebrated as it turns out in the Cathedral of Cyril and Methodius? Is culture part of what makes a hero, or is it the backdrop from which heroic thoughts and deeds are generated?

Certainly, Reinhard Heydrich would have not had either difficulty answering that question but may have hesitated out of deception as to whom he would share his views. A child goes to school, after all, not to learn that his or her country is a degraded product of a history of vile conquest. No, it must be the land of great, heroic and cultured forbears. Hence the *Reichsprotektor* wanted to destroy the Czechs. He became obsessed with the idea that that Czechs had been deceived into thinking of themselves as a nation and of Bohemia and Moravia as somehow their country and not as an integral part of Germany. In Heydrich's world-view Czech heroes, such as Count Albrecht von Wallenstein, were in fact German: a claim that could be made about almost anyone. Apart from his nonsensical racial plans to keep those of 'German blood' and of emptying the country of all others, the upbringing of every child was to be reoriented through a research project to be trusted to someone from whom objective statement might not be expected; an SS historian:

In order to convince the Czechs ... that they must be considered merely as a tribe and not as a nation ... his job is to investigate the origin of well-known personalities and to prove that ... these persons possess German

disappear, The Slovaks will revive. That Slovakia of ours, Had been sleeping up to now, But the thunder's lightning flashes, Are rousing the land, To wake it up!

⁸³ Když mne stará matka zpívát učivala [Songs my mother taught me], one of several masterworks composed in 1880 by Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904), the fourth song from *Cigánské melodie*, B 104, Op 55 set to poems by Adolf Heyduk (1835-1923), 'A. Dvořák: Songs My Mother Taught Me (Stunningly Beautiful)' (YouTube, 18 August 2019) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8AuPWZNXpY>> accessed 25 February 2020.

blood. In exploiting these investigations from the point of view of publicity ... the investigated persons are to be played up ... as “Great Masters of this Space” so as to dilute ... Czech national pride.⁸⁴

So much for scholarship! Heydrich recognised that as long as there existed the call to some value higher than self-interest, the Czech nation would live on. That must therefore be another factor in the making of a hero: the fact that he or she puts himself or herself at the service of a higher calling to which life, happiness and safety are dispensable; even family. General Moravec could be analysed here as outside the heroic narrative, running this operation from the much safer shores of England. But no, his actions while sacrificing of others and controlling an otherwise impossible to bear mission, were not as detached as an incomplete narrative might suggest. He had been offered eleven seats in a military aircraft as his country collapsed in March 1939, the British assuming that four of these would be taken by him with his wife and two children. He choose instead to flee in the night, leaving his family behind and filling the seats with those military intelligence officers who might best pursue the interests of Czechoslovakia abroad.⁸⁵ He never even told his family members that he was going. Moravec describes his thoughts on leaving:

While sitting in the ... plane flying towards England in the last desperate act of defiance against the aggressor, I found myself suddenly swept by black thoughts. The bitter struggle of the past years, the blood and sweat of so many, what had it all amounted to? The republic of Masaryk was dead. For the second time in my life I was an exile. My wife and children were lost to me, abandoned in the stricken country below, somewhere under the swirling [snow] flakes, left to the mercies of the invader. Bitterness welled within me. As our plane passed over the frontier mountains of Czechoslovakia, I put my head in my hands and cried.⁸⁶

The spy who was supplying General Moravec with most of his high-grade information, Paul Thümmel, also presented himself as devoted to a higher cause.⁸⁷ Was he? Initially, he said that he had a Serbian wife and so opposed Hitler because he was affronted by the racial policy of the Nazis. This turned out not to be the case. Later, it was thought that he was part of a group of about ten high-ranking officers who wished to save their country by helping the Allies. He took money for his services, and in considerable sums, yet when funds ran out he continued to risk his life to warn General Moravec about who the Nazis planned to arrest next in Bohemia and Moravia. Before he was executed in Terezin, he passed a message through a priest to General Moravec, stating that he died in the ‘knowledge that our work has not been in vain’.⁸⁸

Conclusion

⁸⁴ McDonald (n 17) 134-136, 112.

⁸⁵ Later, he managed to smuggle them out through his internal contacts.

⁸⁶ Moravec (n 16) 143.

⁸⁷ For an account of this important but often neglected figure see Jaroslav Kokoška and Stanislav Kokoška, *Spor o Agentu A-54: Kapitoly z dějin československé zpravodajské služby* [The controversy over Agent A-54: Chapters from the history of Czechoslovak intelligence service] (Naše vojsko 1994).

⁸⁸ Moravec (n 16) chapter 20. Here Moravec describes his thoughts on this extraordinary human enigma.

Is any summation possible? Heroes stand at the summit of human achievement. Kubiš and Gabčík, simple soldiers, take their place there. Their heroism was of an ordinary kind, the type which answers the challenges life sends and responds unwaveringly. They were normal young men and, from eye-witness accounts, kind, warm, considerate and to each other, and best friends.⁸⁹ Similarly the actions of the individuals who protected them, notably Father Vladimír Petřek, are evidence of a strength of character and bravery in the face of extreme intimidation and prolonged torture, which is surely heroic. This has become part of the narrative of the Czech and Slovak nations; just as the Cathedral, while remaining an Orthodox Christian temple, is also the official monument to those who fell in the resistance. An important part of the motivation of the current generation of Czech historians is to remind their fellow citizens of the heroism of their forebears. In the words of historian Jiří Padevět (b. 1966), one of the principal contemporary chroniclers of Operation Anthropoid, talking about his 2017 book *Dotek Anthropoidu* (The touch of Anthropoid):

One of the myths handed down to us is that Czechs had almost no heroes and that during the war we were the most enthusiastic informers. Neither of these things is true. My goal in writing this book was to honour all heroes and ‘ordinary’ folk, whether they were parachutists or just people who resisted the occupation.⁹⁰

Could the same status of hero be attributed to those who engage in armed actions which result in the death of non-combatants, whether intentionally or unintentionally, even if these actions are ideologically inspired? The definition of heroism will always be subjective – because there is rarely agreement over the context of actions or the motivations for them. For some it will always be the case that ‘the ends justify the means’ and that human empathy is a lower-order concern. Moreover the thought that a life of a ‘volunteer’ has been lost in vain (that an act was not heroic and that the person who carried that act was not a hero) may be too terrible to entertain. This human impulse towards justification and forgiveness is understandable. Yet from what all of us saw through years of the worst unrest in Ireland, a negative answer can also be suggested. Moreover, in any society, lack of feeling and absence of empathy are features of the personalities of a small percentage of individuals within the population. Such people may themselves be drawn to acts which are effectively homicidal, or may be identified by others as having this propensity. Such people are more easily motivated to be sent to kill, and the cause may not require elaboration. There is ample scope for exploitation of impressionable individuals in war situations or within terror organisations. The heroes of this account, on the other hand, showed self-awareness and awareness of their circumstances – they went willingly and without coercion. The enemies which they confronted in this case stand before us as archetypes of human evil – constituting a clear imperative to act against them, as well as providing moral justification for the inherently violent act of taking a human life.

If history must always tend toward judgment then our value-systems, and whether they contain actual moral values or merely reflect a perverted orthodoxy, must continue to matter. In the end, however, it matters even more who people are, by which we mean

⁸⁹ See the accounts of them in Ivanov (n 53) 78-105.

⁹⁰ Quoted in Aneta Černá, “‘Operace Anthropoid byla hvězdnou hodinou našich dějin’”, tvrdí historik Jiří Padevět [“Operation Anthropoid was the highpoint of our history”, says historian Jiří Padevět] (Info.cz 01 May 2017) <<https://www.info.cz/magazin/operace-anthropoid-byla-hvezdnou-hodinou-nasich-dejin-tvrdi-historik-jiri-padevet-8686.html>> accessed 25 February 2020.

what makes them up, their character, what they are in essence, because it is this that is ultimately the driver of the fate of nations. Hitler as a phenomenon would not have been possible without the sycophancy of those who were there to exploit his advance. *Reichsprotektor* Heydrich appears before us a man whose character required the constant cocoon of affirmation by men in long black leather coats who believed the in same fantastic vision as he did. And what was that? A vision of aeons of humanity stretching into the future where one country, one language, one vision of what made a person would dominate all others. To claim this was a 'race' is to give in to the kind of delusional thinking which did in fact save a small number of blonde and blue-eyed children from Lidice and Ležáky but which brought death to all others. Heydrich, anti-Semite and organiser of mass murder, was filled with an inhuman vision that fuelled a vast self-regard in himself and in his cohort. Hubristic self-regard means despising others. The Czechs, to him, were a 'pygmy race'. Heydrich's promises to his own group were to be fulfilled at the expense of others, by the destruction of their rights and their lives. The promises made by true heroes, on the other hand, are oriented towards 'the other', in the direct of sacrifice of the self, not for self-recognition, but for the revelation of truth. There is no doubt, at least in our minds, where those involved in the assassination of Heydrich stand.

Genuine heroes are everywhere to be found. In the late 1960s Miroslav Ivanov from Prague University sought out everyone alive who remembered these events and in his book *Target: Heydrich* published in 1970 he let them speak, in statement after statement, undistorted by narrative or by judgment. The main heroes were joined by hundreds of unknown others, people who loved their country, people who would not go to meet death, but in the words of one of them, if death came towards them, they would not turn away or flinch. Doctor Stanislav Hruby was presented with an injured Kubiš, his ankle having turned during the parachute landing, but he treated him despite the sword hanging over his head. Dr Hruby then agreed to travel to Prague in order to certify that the two young men were, per his signature, medically unfit for work. Otherwise, how could they explain to the Germans that they were wandering the city? He commented as follows:

Was I to refuse? ... I never had anything to do with politics ... a doctor was needed to ... take out tonsils and look after infectious diseases. But now it was not a question of tonsils, nor of influenza. I am not fond of high-sounding words so let us put it that that day I realized there were some realities more important than all that. I nodded.⁹¹

What are these realities? It is part of human nature to search for self-definition through what is seen as absolute. We are driven to order our lives through adherence to that which is greater than ourselves. In that quest, people may be mistaken and they may be deliberately misguided in who they join up with in a sharing of absolute ideas. But, it is this sense of service that has made the quiet heroism of mothers possible and this sense of how our lives are to be used for others that inspires quiet and repeated actions to the benefit of us all. It was for this that in America, a parachute instructor with his student attached turned his body to the ground when the chute and its back up failed to open, smashing himself to death but cushioning the blow and allowing the person for whose life he was responsible to live; it was for this that Ukrainian pilots flew deadly mission after mission in their helicopters, dumping concrete on the melted down nuclear reactor

⁹¹ Ivanov (n 53) 20-23 contains Dr Hruby's statement taken in 1970.

in Chernobyl; it was for this that Desmond Doss held on during the battle of Okinawa after the evacuation of his unit and rescued seventy-five wounded soldiers, treating Japanese and American alike. Karl Jung might say that these are manifestations of service not to God, but to the god-archetype, the highest point of the psychic structure and to which all experiences in our life, of love, of parenthood, of friendship, of overcoming adversity, are made subject. Clearly, Jung is right by calling all absolutes as being ultimately religious, since the defiance of our fundamental principles we see as an assault on our very being. Some respond to the god-archetype by angry ideology, by rules enforced by death and dismemberment; some on the other hand go deeper and see the acceptance of our faults and the dynamic of ongoing creation.

We can agree with those who point out that courage is morally neutral, for it takes only foolish gumption to kill innocent civilians while blowing yourself up. But in the end of the day, we must ask what people are about? It is not heroism to destroy, it is not noble to murder, it does not foster the colour and beauty of the world to eradicate either other peoples' culture or peoples' sense of what makes them part of their nation or of their religion. So, by their fruits shall you know them.⁹² Heydrich certainly had physical courage: but he was also devoted to murder. The heroes of this story had courage and right thinking and it was they that laid the foundation for the reassertion of Czechoslovak nationhood and for the ideal of service to the people.

It is thus that the heroism of Kubiš and Gabčík, the people who supported them, as well as those who suffered savage reprisals for their actions – in short all those affected by those momentous events in the occupied Czech and Slovak lands in 1942 – merit our profound consideration today as we in Ireland continue upon on our own centenary of commemoration and national reflection.

⁹² Gospel of Matthew 7:16.