

Anthropoid: A film looks at 1942 assassination of Nazi chief Reinhard Heydrich

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Anthropoid deals with a historically important event—the assassination of the leading Nazi, Reinhard Heydrich, in the Czech capital over which he presided as the “Butcher of Prague” during the German occupation of the country in the Second World War.

Heydrich, a main architect of the Holocaust, chaired the Wannsee Conference near Berlin, where the plans for the extermination of European Jewry were adopted. He helped organize the Kristallnacht pogrom throughout Germany in November 1938, before moving on to his post in Prague.

The assassination of Heydrich was followed by the infamous Nazi reprisal attacks and mass executions in the Czech villages of Lidice and Lekazy, totally destroying them and resulting in the deaths of at least 15,000 people.

The new film, directed by Sean Ellis, is a straightforward account of the operation, organized by the Czech government-in-exile in London, that ended with the attack on Heydrich on May 27, 1942. He died a week later from his wounds. Unfortunately, the movie uses suspense and violence not as part of a serious examination of the events, but more as a substitute for such an effort.

After brief titles recounting the Munich Agreement of September 1938, which allowed German annexation of part of Czechoslovakia and was followed by partition of the country and its occupation by the Nazi regime, the movie opens with the December 1941 parachuting into the country of the Czech resistance fighters who were to carry out the attack some five months later.

One of the paratroopers has been slightly injured, and the film follows the pair as they successfully avoid being turned over to the Germans and make their way to Prague. There they present themselves to the remaining leaders of the gravely weakened Czech

resistance, and face the task of convincing these men that they are not spies and agents of the Nazis who have been sent to finish the job of wiping out organized opposition.

Finding shelter in a safe house run by a Mrs. Moravecs, the men sent from London then engage in discussion and debate within the resistance over the merits and tactical advisability of “Operation Anthropoid,” the assassination plot that has been hatched abroad.

Some of these early scenes are effective. The Czech capital provides an evocative backdrop, and an atmosphere of dread and suspense is conveyed by the spare dialogue, as the plans are discussed under the noses of the Nazi occupiers. The two paratroopers, Czech Jan Kubis (Jamie Dornan) and Slovak Josef Gabcik (Cillian Murphy), do a credible enough job with the material they have been given, and Toby Jones as the local resistance leader is strong in his impassive depiction of a man who has already seen too much barbarism but has no choice but to fight on.

This only goes so far, however. There is little characterization of the partisans beyond their patriotic dedication. A romantic angle is introduced, in the form of the two young women (Charlotte Le Bon and Anna Geislerova) who meet the partisans and wind up playing a supporting role in the plans, but this fairly conventional plot device does not lead any deeper.

Hand-held cameras serve the purpose of communicating terror and dislocation, but this is no substitute for broader context and an examination of both the occupation and the resistance.

The last 30 minutes of *Anthropoid* are designed to deliver a final jolt of excitement, but they end up instead providing the most graphic demonstration of the weakness of the film. The closing titles explain that the

resistance fighters, holed up in an Orthodox cathedral in the capital, successfully held out for 30 minutes against a ruthless German assault involving many times their number and far more powerful weaponry. The filmmakers have concluded that the best way to communicate this is to depict a 30-minute firefight on screen. Once again, and most crudely in this case, this literal representation only demonstrates the relative paucity of history and thought in this project.

Anthropoid is not the first film to depict the assassination of Heydrich. In fact, two films, by very well-known German refugee directors, were rushed into production within months of the operation. Douglas Sirk's *Hitler's Madman* and the better known *Hangmen Also Die!*, by Fritz Lang, were both released in 1943, in the middle of the war.

The Fritz Lang film, from a story by Bertolt Brecht and with music by the famous Hanns Eisler, is one of the famous German-born filmmaker's weaker efforts. It is an unabashed propaganda piece, in which everything is portrayed in terms of the "good" Czechs and "evil" Germans. The movie also meshed with the Stalinist efforts to portray the war in terms of a Popular Front alliance between the Soviet Union and the capitalist democracies against fascism. Brecht and Eisler, both then in Hollywood as refugees from the Nazis, were later forced to leave the US during the McCarthyite witch-hunt.

Hangmen Also Die! is indeed crude and, having been made even before all the details of the assassination were revealed, is not a faithful depiction of the events. It does contain ideas, however, and has little need for the violence that *Anthropoid* delivers in great quantity.

The paucity of ideas is related to conventional and complacent assumptions about the war itself: that is was that between "good" and "evil," between the Western democracies and fascism. The problem with this explanation is that it evades the issue of where fascism came from, that it was the foul product of the decay of capitalism itself. There is no mention in *Anthropoid*, for instance, of the role played by the Czech Communist Party during this period, when it withstood far more effectively than others the attempts of the Nazis to infiltrate and destroy the resistance movements.

No doubt in line with the attention drawn by the new film to the events of 74 years ago, a call has emerged in

the Czech Republic to accord the assassins of Heydrich the respect they deserve. According to a report in the *Guardian*, campaigners have called for the remains of Jan Kubis and Josef Gabcik to be exhumed from unmarked graves and reinterred with a proper burial.

By itself this would do little to explain the Holocaust and the struggle against Nazi barbarism. In fact, the crimes of Stalinism in Czechoslovakia are being used to obscure the significance of this history. A proposal to make a Prague cemetery a national memorial to "victims of Nazism and communism" avoids the necessary accounting with the source of Hitler and of the Second World War.

Anthropoid is also timely for reasons perhaps not intended by the filmmakers. Today Europe, and not only Europe, is once again the scene of the rise of ultra-nationalist and fascistic movements, testimony to the fact that the defeat of Hitler's Third Reich did not resolve the contradictions of capitalism out of which it emerged. There are also contemporary occupations, not identical to those of the Nazis, but evoking parallels. Today it is the United States that is the occupying power in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, facing the rage of the population and with the blood of millions on its hands.



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