

Seven Men at Daybreak by Alan Burgess. Book review by R.C. Jagers

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SEVEN MEN AT DAYBREAK. By *Alan Burgess*. (New York: E. P. Dutton. 1960. Pp233. \$3.95.)

This is an inaccurate and fictionalized account of the circumstances surrounding the assassination in 1942 of the Nazi RSHA chief Reinhard Heydrich by two agents of Czech intelligence in London, Jan Kubis and Josef Gabcik, parachuted in for that purpose. Because the author represents that his construction of the events is validated by research into records and interviews with surviving witnesses, claiming the "advantage ... of records amassed by both friend and enemy" and "a footnote of authority" conferred by his "coming so late to this story," and because he has indeed unearthed enough facts to provide a distorted skeleton for his yarn, his failure to distinguish between fact and invention may disconcert readers familiar with my own earlier presentation of the case history of the operation.¹

Mr. Burgess' inventions range from the usual embroidery of verbatim dialogue which no still living person could have heard and relatively harmless false embellishments like seven swastikas branded on Kubis' buttocks and his decoration for fictitious exploits in France to bad guesses on points of major importance. He has the agents "knowing that they were the first parachutists to come back to Czechoslovakia" when

there had been 16 others before; he has them dropped in December 1941 instead of April 1942; he has them "told they would be dropped near Pilsen" though the Pilsen area was a poor drop zone and never used; he has other agents dropped from the same plane as they, including Josef Valcik, who had gone in the preceding autumn; he has London getting radio messages from them and about them. Some of his misconstructions reflect on the soundness of the Czech operational procedure -- that the agents should be told "without preamble" what their mission was to be on their "first meeting with the senior officers," rather than after specialized training and a probing assessment; that they should be parachuted in when there was telltale snow on the ground; that they should have "decided to preserve their parachutes as souvenirs"; that they should be caught displaying English banknotes, wearing English suits, and having English laundry marks on their clothes. None of these things are true.

Most damaging in this respect is Burgess' intermingling of the strictly compartmented mission of the two lone agents with the activities of the unreliable and Nazi-penetrated Czech underground, saying that they were given three addresses where they could apply for help, that the Czech underground radioed London for reinforcements for them, and that two rescue teams were dispatched. The men he names as leaders of these teams, Arnost Miks and Adolph Opalka, had been parachuted in on other missions several months before Kubis and Gabcik were dropped. The latter were particularly instructed to eschew contacts with the underground, and the turning of their lonely ordeal into a clumsy mass enterprise sullies its high courageous dignity.²

Against this author's disservice to the cause of careful history, however, must be set one really good deed. The man who betrayed to the Germans the brave assassins' hideout in the cellar of St. Bartholomeus was given in my account, out of confusion with a similar cover name, as Alois Kral. Mr. Burgess correctly gives it as Karel Curda. There was a real Alois Kral, a member of a different operational team, whose memory is thus cleared of an unintentional calumny. Of a second, separate traitor whom the book names Gerik, I have no knowledge.

It is conceivable also that Mr. Burgess' account of the agents' heroic last stand and death in the church cellar, which varies considerably in detail from mine, rests upon better information than I used, the reports received in London shortly after the event. But how much of this is fact and how much fiction would have to be determined by an examination

of his sources, which he does not name.

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1 R. C. Jagers, "The Assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, " Studies IV 1, p. 1 ff.

2 Mr. Burgess' data on two of the underground conspirators he names can be amplified from an open source. "Uncle Hajska," whose true name he gives as Zelenka, was Jan Zelenka, a district Sokol leader. His cover name was derived from his birthplace, the village of Haj. After Heydrich's death he was arrested by the Gestapo and took poison. "Jindra," whose true name escaped Burgess, was Ladislav Vanek, a high school teacher and district underground leader in Brno. He too was arrested, much later than Zelenka; but he survived. Despite accusations of collaboration, he became a postwar official in the Czech Ministry of Education. Both of these names appeared in a book entitled Stiny za Heydrichem (Shadows behind Heydrich) published in Czechoslovakia in 1947 or 1948. The Communist authorities later took it out of circulation.

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