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HHhH: The Story of Resistance Represent Our Resistance By Dr. Lenore J. Daniels, PhD BC Editorial Board

Whiles its successive campaigns, with apparent conclusive logic, held out to the Germans the prospect of a vast world empire in which, thanks to the fact that they belonged to the chosen people, they would all be able to embark on the most glittering careers...while we, the oppressed, lived below sea level...and had to watch as the SS pervaded the economy of the entire country, and one business after another was handed over to the German trustees...

For halfway up the walls of the entrance hall...there were stones escutcheons bearing symbolic sheaves of corn, crossed hammers, winged wheels, and so on, with heraldic motif of the beehive standing not, as one might at first think, for nature made serviceable to mankind, or even industrious labor as a social good, but symbolizing the principle of capital accumulation.

-W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

On some positions, Cowardice asks the question, "Is it safe?" Expediency asks the question, "Is it politic?" And Vanity comes along and asks the question, "Is it popular?" But Conscience asks the question "Is it right?" And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because Conscience tells him it is right.

-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution"
(March 31, 1968)

In his review of Laurent Binet's novel, *HHhH*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, translator Sam Taylor, 2009, American Edition, 2012), *New Yorker* critic James Wood recounts his visit last year to the American Ambassador's residence in Prague (May 21, 2012).ⁱ Otto Petschek, whose family was "among the wealthiest families in Czechoslovakia," built the villa (which includes the ambassador's residence) in the late nineteen-twenties. The Petschek's, German-speaking Jews, writes Wood, foresaw "the horrors that awaited them, and fled Prague in 1938, a year before the German occupation of the city.

More than guest of the current ambassador, Wood is a friend, and as friend, the ambassador had something "telling" to share with Wood.

He got me to lie on my back and peer at the underside of some piece of ambassadorial furniture. There, on the naked wood, was a faded Nazi stamp, with swastika and eagle; and next to it, quietly triumphant in its very functionality, was a bar code strip, proclaiming the American government's present ownership.

It was something he would never forget, writes Wood.

That is it! The American ambassador points out the swastika and eagle of former owners and the bar code strip of the present owners. Maybe, I think, for the ambassador, the latter symbol is that of triumph over fascism. At any rate, I am not going to look up the name of the current American Ambassador sitting now in this building once used by the Nazi regime. I do not think it matters.

But Wood pursues a line of thought. If this shift in symbols had been "invented" by a novelist, would the information be considered "worthless" while the same narrative, authenticated by a historian would have more value? "An invented reality is not identical with an actual reality," Wood explains. "I take special pleasure in recording its actuality, but I can imagine relishing it in a novel."

The author of this debut-novel, writes Wood, thinks otherwise. Binet, Wood suggests, opposes the idea of "invented facts" and "invented characters." Such invention would have "no place in historical fiction," as it would "weaken" the work "both aesthetically and morally."

In *HHhH*, Wood continues, "Binet has written a historical novel of sorts, a book that, if not quite full of invented details, certainly uses invention...while apologizing for doing so." Binet, he adds, has his cake and eats it too while crying over "the split crumbs."

Laurent Binet, a professor of history and a writer of fiction, (Wood: "the French writer and academic," telling too!), and a relatively young man, (born: 1972), certainly knows history, unlike the young and older citizens in the U.S., many of whom would have difficulty locating Prague on a map, let alone knowing the history of the U.S. - the history not colored by invented narration. I think Binet knows all about the purposeful *art* of invented narration.

Specifically, Binet knows the history of fascism and of resistance. I think it is safe to say that the resistance movement against fascism is standard fare in academia in his country. Here in the U.S., a history of the peoples' resistance is not taught at all, unless relegated to a few pages in the history textbooks. Here, there is more of a movement to erase history.

The Nazis believed they were curing the world of its illness: Jews, homosexuals, communists, ethnically "impure" populations, and, in turn, they filled their historical documents, (manifestos, speeches, interviews, diaries, pamphlets), with invented images of saviors and monsters. It is the narrative of the neo-Nazi (and others not so blatantly labeled) to this day. In the U.S., a few years ago, Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and the U.S. had documents, (manifestos, speeches, interviews, diaries, pamphlets), to prove it! Apparently, it was convincing.

I am not sure how fair it is to compare Binet's effort to re-tell a historical event in a novel to W.G. Sebald's novel, *Austerlitz*. This is playing at academic nitpicking. Unfortunately, the late German writer, Sebald, one of my favorite writers, died in a car accident in 2003. He was an older, more experienced writer, "internationally" recognized (usually everywhere but in the U.S.) *Austerlitz's* fictional namesake of Jewish heritage is born in Prague, and after the death of his parents in the Holocaust, Wood explains, he is bound for England on the Kindertransport, where "he escapes his fate."

Sebald's novel is quite as self-aware as Binet's: it uses enigmatic, layered storytelling, along with photographs, to produce something akin to Binet's mediation on fiction and the difficulty

of writing history. But it has a searching, unbroken intensity, a formal difficulty, even a forbidden quality that Binet's very appealing novel lacks.

For example, Wood continues, Binet's description of "the Theresienstadt ghetto... sounds as if he'd worked it up from the Wikipedia."

Binet is not Sebald. *HHhH* is not *Austerlitz*, and Sebald, for the most part, examines the *lack of resistance* on the part of most German and Europeans during the Nazi regime and the consequences "quietly" noted by his "fictional" narrator as he walks along the countryside or visits a historical museum either in England or in Germany.

Binet's focus is resistance, the resistance of ordinary people, specifically in Czechoslovakia, despite the narrative proclaiming the power and the might of Nazism.

I could argue that Wood's example of Binet's description of "the Theresienstadt ghetto" is taken out of context, as they say.

The first convey left for Riga on January 9, 1942: a thousand people, of whom 105 would survive. The second convoy, a week later, also sent to Riga: a thousand people, 16 survivors...There is nothing unusual in this dreadful numerical progression toward 100 percent. It is just another sign of the Germans' famous efficiency.

For me, it reflects the *efficiency* of our daily news reports on drone attacks in Pakistan or in Afghanistan, Wikipedia aside - and, most often, minus number of civilian casualties.

Binet's description of *the H* among *Hs* is as vivid as is his description of the courageous parachutists, the resisters.

HHhH is not, for me, as Wood claims, a novel "about the rise and fall of Reinhard Heydrich, the monster whom even Hitler called 'the man with the iron heart.'" Even Wood acknowledges that Binet has stated that Heydrich is not the protagonist of his book. "Heydrich is there - at the center of everything," Binet has written (*New Yorker*), but he is not the subject of the novel. And while Hitler called him "the man with the iron heart," the people of Czechoslovakia called him the "Butcher of Prague" - and it is from this perspective that Binet writes his historical novel, *HHhH*.

Wood's "monster" would imply that Heydrich or someone like him is merely a "fictional" character like, maybe, Dracula or Darth Vader or those characters at in *Monster Inc.*, forgive me, according to Wikipedia, "a 2001 American computer-animated comedy adventure" in which "monsters generate their city's power by scaring children."

Laurent Binet is a historian, but *HHhH* is not an excursion into history for history sake. Unlike the literature currently written in the U.S., this author is not indulging a fantastical tale for the sake of the market. Writer, Toni Morrison, once stated:

If anything I do, in the world of writing novels or whatever I write, isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it isn't about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private exercise of my imagination...which is to say yes, the work must be political...

Perhaps prominent writers in the West today fear identifying with another writer who, in turns, identifies with resisters. Perhaps, too, I am reading too much in *HHhH*, but it seems to me Binet asks the following questions: How does one person or a collective battle to destroy so destructive an idea as fascism once unleashed into the world, an idea that is very human, and is able to re-grow its tentacles, and is able to rebound to life in ever more creative ways? By the same token, in the face of the seemingly insurmountable, what is it that resisters pursue at great risk, at the point of death?

The title of Binet's novel, *HHhH*, refers to Reinhard Heydrich - "Himmlers Hirn heist Heydrich," that is, "Himmler's brain is called Heydrich." As the brain for the SS head, Himmler, it is Heydrich who thinks the plan and coordinates the Final Solution. The brainchild for the Final Solution, called the "Blond Beast," represents the human mind at its worst, producing mayhem, suffering, and death on the belief that he and the Nazi pogrom are doing the world, (and Germany, of course), good. Heydrich's idea must be killed. It is, as Binet characterizes, a bold and ambitious plan. Kill the thinker who makes concrete the extermination of other human beings a solution to an *imagined* problem.

For this reason, Binet's novel begins by introducing the reader first to Jozef Gabcik and then to Jan Kubis (the first line of the novel begins, ("Gabcik - that's his name - really did exist"). "His story is truly extraordinary. He and his comrades are, in my eyes, the authors of

one of the greatest acts of resistance in human history, and without doubt the greatest of the Second World War." Gabcik and his team of parachutists, young people readers may not know as well as the Hs because history, particularly of resistance is often told by the *ultimate* victors, have been part of the writer/narrator's imagination since childhood, since his father told him the story "pronouncing the words 'partisans,' 'Czechoslovaks,' perhaps 'operation,' certainly 'assassinate,' and then the date: '1942'." The writer/narrator, for years, imagined Gabcik lying in some room with shutters closed, listening to the tram.

The writer/narrator wants to pay "tribute" to these men, but of course, would it be a "tribute" to add what he, the author, *imagines*?

The writer/narrator tells us that he has spent years researching the *whole* story as possible, that is, the surrounding discourse, including, books, biographies, manuscripts, photographs, cartoons, newsprint, films, (commercial, documentaries, propaganda), diaries, speeches, signed and unsigned Nazi documents, and testimonies of the perpetrators as well as surviving witnesses and comrades and compared all this information to what he had remembered from his father's stories and what he had learned in school.

The writer/narrator imagined and asked questions of the material becoming, since it had already been, a part of him. It was already his history. It is the usual process of learning that can be exciting and sometimes unsettling - as many citizens in the U.S. can testify to, so reading corporate logos and bar-codes at the malls is less challenging.

In his youth, the writer/narrator of HHhH also learned from his father that Slovaks collaborated with the Nazis and the Czech resisted. "In my child's mind, this meant that all Czechs had been resistance fighters and all Slovaks collaborators, as if by nature." He soon understood he had simplified the issue: "hadn't we, the French, both resisted *and* collaborated?"

But here is Gabcik (Slovak) and Kubis (Czech), for Binet, the protagonists, rising above expectations. It is Binet's intention to engross the reader with the story of these two resisters, young, with the future ahead of them, with the aspirations of youth. Yet, we meet Gabcik and Kubis training in England for *the* mission in Prague. There is no certainty of their safe return to England.

These two men have become part of the historical landscape: Aurelia, the young woman in question, had learned their names in school, like all the little Czechs and Slovaks of her generation. She knew the broad outline of the story, but not much more than my warrant officer. I had to wait two or three years before I knew for sure what I had always suspected - that this story was more fantastic and intense than the most improbable fiction. (HHhH)

What of Reinhard Heydrich's story or that of the Nazis? At the Wannsee Conference, January 20, 1942, "Heydrich and his assistant Eichmann set down the methods of enforcing the Final Solution," as if it was just another day at the office. And for Heydrich, it was another day at work.

By this time, mass executions had already begun in Poland and the USSR but they had been entrusted to the SS extermination commandos, the Einsatzgruppen, who simply rounded up their victims by the hundreds, sometimes by the thousands, often in a field or a forest, before killing them with sub-machine guns.

While the job of extermination had to be carried out, did it have to be so messy, so time consuming? The "method" "tested the executioners' nerves and harmed troops' morale." (So compassion was considered - just not for the "monstrous" victims of execution). Even Himmler "fainted" while attending one of these executions, the writer/narrator informs us. So it was up to Himmler's right hand man, Heydrich, to think. And he did. "After Wannsee, the extermination of the Jews - which Heydrich entrusted to the tender care of his faithful Eichmann - was administered as a logistical, social, and economic project on a very large scale."

Heydrich, "head of the secret services of the Nazi Party and the SS," becomes Heydrich, "the interim Protector of the Reich of Bohemia and Moravia in September, 1941. Heydrich wants to make a good impression and become *the* Protector - no interim Protector. Hence the Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution! "It was at the Wannsee that the genocide was rubber-stamped." (In the West, where the American Eagle flies high, these conferences are called "summits" today, and no - the people are not called upon to sit at the great tables and sup and debate their fate).

No longer need the task of be given, more or less on the quiet (if you can really talk of killing millions of people 'on the quiet'), to a

few death squads; now the entire political and economic infrastructure of the regime is at their disposal.

Passages on little Heydrich and violin lessons and school days when his classmates called him "Suss" because of his "hooked" nose and rumors of Jewish blood in his family. The writer/narrator offers a picture of a young Heydrich and his father and a probable or an improbable dialogue about the war. Why, asks the young man. "Because France and England are jealous of Germany, my son?" Invented dialogue? Yes, says the writer/narrator but "reconstructed from more or less firsthand accounts with the idea of breathing life into dead pages of history."

Only yesterday, it seems, I recall a similar scene, only it is Bush II to the citizens of the U.S. after September 2001. *Because they want to take away our freedom! They are jealous!*). The young, sign up to fight. The rest of you, go shopping! The "logistical, social, and economic project on a very large scale" - again!

The young Heydrich joins the Freikrops. The young Heydrich thinks of defending the idea behind the dialogue, the idea of racial, social, and economic superiority.

Did Heydrich really come to the Reich regime from nowhere? Did he really *rise* to the top of the Nazi government from somewhere *below* to become the Butcher of Prague?

On the other hand, we are told that Gabcik and Kubis had never been to Prague. We see them in camaraderie with each other and other members of the resistance, including simple people, sympathetic families, housewives, and children. There are young women and girlfriends who love them and wish them success. We see nothing in their description to suggest they are prone to *violent* thoughts, but clearly, *HHhH* tracks the resisters as they train and fight. We are told how the comrades respond when one of their members is killed in battle. We know how those men and the women, families, and children respond when news of deportations and massacres of their fellow countrymen and women reaches them.

What distinguishes the violence on behalf of the Czech resisters from those of Heydrich's gang? It has been asked and seems, in hindsight, self-evident. But *HHhH* asks that we, the reader, consider the question of violence again in light of current invasions, wars, repressive and austerity measures at home expanded globally. Or

have the resistance movements of the past been labeled with a bar code and marketed as past action once understandable because politically advantageous to the ultimate victors in our own era?

France, under the newly-elected Socialist, Holland, announced it will join the EU and the U.S. in drone surveillance operations in Mali against al-Qaeda (*Guardian*, October 22, 2012). Germany's Merkel announced that her country is prepared to train Malian security forces, providing "material and logistical support." The level of international cooperation, claims one source in the Malian government, is "unprecedented."

In the meantime, "in dire poverty," the people of Mali, according to Chance Briggs, national director of World Vision, face food and nutrition challenges. "It would be intolerable to see further pain and suffering heaped on children and their families in Mali. They have enough to deal with in the past few months."

Like the people of Czechoslovakia, foreign flags, symbols, and eventually bar codes arrive in your country whether you are in need of "freedom" or not.

Back in Czechoslovakia, the Butcher of Prague never sleeps.

The day - May 27, 1942 - has been selected. Gabcik and Kubis's boss, Colonel Moravec, based on the latter's memoirs, summoned the men "separately" before the mission - to warn them of the "most probable outcome."

For Gabcik, the mission is a war operation, and the risk of being killed goes with the job...

Kubis thanks the colonel for having chosen him for such an important mission...

Both men say they would rather die than fall into the hands of the Gestapo.

You are Czech or Slovak. You do not like it when they tell you what to do, not when they hurt people - that's why you decide to leave your country and join up elsewhere with your compatriots who are resisting the invader.. The French make you join the Foreign legion...But you do finally end up with a Czechoslovak division formed in a town full of Spanish refugees, and you fight

alongside the French when they in turn are attacked by the Nazis...You join the special forces and are trained in various grandly named castles all over Scotland and England. You jump, you shoot, you fight, you throw grenades...You believe in justice and you believe in vengeance. You are brave, willing, and gifted. You are ready to die for your country. You are becoming something that grows inside you, and that begins, little by little, to be bigger than you, but at the same time you remain very much yourself. You are a simple man. You are a man.

You are Josef Gabcik or Jan Kubis, and you are going to make history.

Even the writer/narrator of *HHhH* is present on May 27, 1942.

Here I am, exactly where I wanted to be. A volcano of adrenaline sets ablaze the curve in Holesovice Street. It is the precise instant when the sum of individual microdecisions, transformed solely by the forces of instinct and fear, will allow history to perform one of its most resounding convulsions, or hiccups.

Goebbels's diary dated May 28, 1942: "An alarming rumor comes from Prague."

Praised by Hitler himself, Heydrich is the man who brought the city of Prague under the orderly control of the Nazi regime. Heydrich, the "Blond Beast," who, the writer/narrator imagines, imagines his image as death itself soaring: "Everyone is afraid of you, even your boss..." But maybe not everyone!

A poster reads:

IN PRAGUE ON MAY 27, 1942, THERE WAS AN ATTACK ON THE
INTERIM REICHSPROTEKTOR, SS OBERGRUPPENFUHRER
HEYDRICH.

The events of this day are already history - as are the deaths of Gabcik and Kubis, both of whom fought bravely to the very end. "It had taken eight hundred SS storm troopers nearly eight hours to get the better of seven men."

Heydrich dies from wounds sustained in the car bombing but not the ability of government to mobilize those committed to institutionalize repressive methods of control. As the writer/narrator points out,

Heydrich was dismissed from the Germany Navy on April 30, 1931, and, there after, the doors of the Freikorps are open to him. Of course, the Freikorps! - the writer/narrator's father exclaims. Why not, since it was the "paramilitary organization dedicated to the struggle against Bolshevism." Who "rubber-stamped" their existence? The Social Democratic government! "My father would say there was nothing surprising about that...the Socialists have always been traitors...it was indeed a Socialist who crushed the Spartacist uprising and had Rosa Luxemburg executed. By the Freikorps."

Heydrich is recognized by his peers and supervisors as a grateful "public servant" whose "duty was to prevent factory occupations and to ensure the smooth running of public services in the event of a general strike." Here, Binet suggest, is where Heydrich acquires his "acute sense of duty toward the state," and uses his imagination thinking of more and more repressive methods on behalf of the state. In time, the Butcher of Prague's competition is the equally well-respected Albert Speer, the refined and cultured man, who prefers a state of ignorance when it comes to the details surrounding Heydrich's duties but who needs a *select* crew of workers to build not only the *Lebensraum*, "the living space" for the expansion of fascism as practiced by the Nazis but also the building of structures for what must be controlled and contained and exterminated

(This scenario is foreign to us. We live in a capitalist state, and capitalism only needs more markets to live).

Speaking of traitors, those who pursue glory are not alone. The acquisition of bar code labels on material goods motivates others, a good many others, to remain loyal and dutiful to the state. When asked by a Czech judge how he could betray his comrades, Karel Curda responded: "I think you'd have done the same thing for a million marks, Your Honor!"

Curda, according to the writer/narrator of *HHhH*, was sentenced to death and hanged in 1947. "As he climbs onto the scaffold, he tells the hangman an obscene joke." Gabcik and Kubis he is not. Heydrich adorns himself in invincibility, and Curda, a modern man, envisions bar codes! "He *sold* Gabcik and Kubis to the Nazis, but he *gave* them all the others."

"My story is finished and my book should be, too, but I'm discovering that it's impossible to be finished with a story like this."

HHhH returns to an image of Jozef Gabcik once again onboard the boat where his journey has never ended. Traveling across the Baltic, across the "dark coastline of Poland, along the "alleyways of Krakow [,]... he and the other ghosts of the Czechoslovak army have finally managed to set sail for France." As Gabcik focuses on the "boat's waterline," The writer/narrator *imagines* Gabcik is "joyful at the prospect of finally fighting the invader" because, he, the writer/narrator is "also there"...among the shadows of the soldiers in civilian clothes who pace around the boat are other shadows: disoriented old men, misty-eyes lone women, well-behaved children holding a younger brother's hand...And a fellow comrade walks up to Gabcik and asks for a light. The writer/narrator sees that "Gabcik recognizes the Moravian accent."

The monument and plaques honoring the work of Gabcik and Kubis as well as the crypt in which these resisters fought bravely cannot contain their spirit. It lives on. If *HHhH* seems a bit ambitious, well, so be it! *HHhH* is not a work one would expect the current imperialist machine to honor.

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i ..."I learned of the true extend of the perversion of the law under the Germans, the acts of violence they committed daily in the basement of the Petschek Palace, in the Pankrac Prison, and at the killing grounds out in Kobylisy. After ninety seconds in which to defend yourself to a judge you could be condemned to death for a trifle, some offense barely worth mentioning, the merest contravention of the regulations in force, and then you would be hanged immediately in the execution room next to the law court..." W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, translator, Anthea Bell, *The Modern Library*, New York, 2001.