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Heydrich and penicillin

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Heydrich and penicillin

In his review of Laurent Binet's novel HHHH, Adrian Tahourdin recycles the throwaway comment made by both Robert Gerwarth (in his autobiography of Reinhard Heydrich) and Binet that if penicillin were available in Germany in 1942 Heydrich's life would have been saved. German scientists had indeed learnt of penicillin by then from articles published in British journals and obtained *via* neutral countries, but their attempts to produce it were to remain distinctly amateurish compared to the colossal, and ultimately successful, Anglo-American effort. Lucrezia Borgia, altogether in a different league of evil from Heydrich's, probably died of puerperal septicaemia and penicillin would almost certainly have saved her life. It is immaterial whether Heydrich was only 2 years from being able to be treated with penicillin compared to some 425 in Borgia's case; its unavailability was to prove equally fatal.

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