

FIRE IN THE REICHSTAG



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By the early 1930s, the situation in Germany was becoming highly explosive. A third of the workers were unemployed, and democracy was on the verge of collapse. The Communists saw in this their best opportunity to seize power since their abortive revolution in 1918. A revolution was clearly in the offing, but despite the support of a few million voters and the Soviet Union, power seemed to be slipping from the Marxist grip.

The German people were turning to a new kind of socialism - National Socialism - and even some of the Communists were looking to Adolf Hitler for their salvation.

The Red response to this situation was one of extreme violence. One notable victim was the 21-year old poet and voluntary social worker Horst Wessel, who was murdered in 1930 after writing a stirring marching song for his Brown Shirt comrades. Two years later, as the General Election of July 1932 loomed nearer, the Reds abandoned all pretence of debate and discussion. Bloody terror became the order of the day.

In the six-week period before the election, there were more than 450 political riots in Prussia alone. In July 38 Nazis and 30 Communists were killed. However, the Red Terror failed. In the election, the Nazis more than doubled their number of seats in the Reichstag, and became the largest party; and in January 1933, President Hindenburg bowed to the inevitable and asked Adolf Hitler to lead a coalition government. The general election in the March of that year resulted in a clear victory for the Nazis and their nationalist allies.

Red fury now knew no bounds. In the campaign of violence and illegality that followed, the Union of Red Fighters openly called on their followers to disarm the SA and SS, while a few days later an official Communist publication *Red Sailor*, urged: "*Workers to the Barricades: forward to victory: fresh bullets in your guns: draw the pin of the hand*

grenades." A bloody revolution seemed imminent. A signal for its commencement was anxiously awaited, and it appeared to come on 27th February when the Reichstag building in Berlin was set on fire.

A Dutch communist, Van der Lubbe, was arrested near the scene, and subsequently he and four other suspects, including Torgler, the leader of the communist group in the Reichstag, were put on trial. The official report of the provisional inquiry showed that the *Red* group had had "*a remarkable number of party meetings in the Reichstag of late, without any reason which could be traced.*" At Liebknechthaus (the Communist HQ named after a leader of the abortive 1918 revolution), the authorities found lists of a large number of people who were to have been killed or arrested.

Van der Lubbe admitted that he had fired the building and that it was meant to be a signal for revolution. But, he claimed, contrary to expert testimony at the trial, that he had destroyed the building single-handed. He stuck to his story, but elsewhere the Reds were spreading the lie that the fire had been started by the Nazis themselves, and that Van der Lubbe was a degenerate half-wit and homosexual prostitute planted on the scene as a "fall guy."

Just two days after the fire the *Daily Worker* (forerunner of the *Morning Star*) official organ of the British Communist Party, carried the banner headline "*Nazis burn down the German parliament,*" and then went on to state that the "Fascists" had accused the Communist Party of having done it "*without a shred of evidence.*"

Thus was born one of the great myths of modern history - that the Nazis set fire to their own Parliament to provide an excuse for curbing the activities of the Communists. It might be said that some plausibility was given to the myth by the action of President Hindenburg (who was not a Nazi) on the day after the fire.

Fearing that another Communist revolution had started, he declared martial law and suppressed Marxist propaganda in Prussia. More substance was provided for the myth when the old Weimar Constitution was

changed by the passing of the Enabling Act, which has been falsely represented as giving dictatorial powers to Hitler.

The act had nothing to do with the Reichstag fire, but was a necessary part of the Government's program for overcoming the grave social and economic crisis in Germany. Nonetheless, such actions provided hooks on which the anti-Nazi media and politicians could hang their multi-coloured coat of lies and misrepresentation which came to be seriously accepted as authentic history.

The trial of Van der Lubbe and the other suspects should have dispelled any suspicion of Nazi guilt. It was a scrupulously fair trial, which resulted in the acquittal of all the defendants except Van der Lubbe himself.

Anti-Nazi propagandists, however, were far from being dismayed. They turned their attention on a *Brown Book* of alleged evidence compiled by communist exiles, and a farcical "counter-trial" which they staged in London, which, not surprisingly, found the Nazis guilty.

According to the *Brown Book*, a group of Nazis entered the Reichstag via a tunnel which was connected to the residence of Herman Goring, President of the Reichstag. They were supposed to have gained entry at 8.40pm, set the building on fire and then left, after pushing the half-wit Van der Lubbe into the building just after 9pm. The police arrived on the scene at 9.22pm. Evidence was given at the "counter-trial" by witnesses, purporting to be Nazis seeking repentance, that they were led by a Brown Shirt named Heines. It was ascertained later that Heines was making a speech elsewhere at the time of the fire.

Another confession was supposedly made by Karl Ernst, then chief of the Brown Shirts in Berlin. Apart from the fact that this confession did not turn up until after Ernst's death, it slipped up on one vital point. As with the other "confessions," it alleged that the Nazi arsonists were in the Reichstag from 8.40pm until 9.30pm. But at 8.45pm, a post-man entered the building to collect the mail, and left again at 8.55pm without seeing anything out of the ordinary or noticing the smell of gasoline or other fire raising substances.

The full truth is not yet known, but sound basic facts, certainly more than enough to discredit allegations of Nazi responsibility, were brought to light in Britain by the liberal historian Professor A. J. P. Taylor, who admits that he had accepted the myth unquestioningly "without looking at the evidence."

Later, however, writing on "*Who burnt the Reichstag*" in the August 1960 issue of the specialist magazine *History Today*, Taylor, working largely on evidence provided by Fritz Tobias, an anti-Nazi German civil servant, and which had been published earlier in *Der Spiegel*, pointed out that the Nazis made no attempt to manufacture evidence against the Communists, which seems a strange omission if, as alleged, the whole affair was staged to justify the suppression of the Communists.

As for the counter-trial, one of the witnesses there was "muffled to the eyes" according to Taylor, who wryly adds: "*This was a wise precaution: he was in fact a well-known communist and unmistakably Jewish.*"

When considering the facts, it seems incredible that the myth of Nazi responsibility for firing the Reichstag could ever have been accepted at all. Yet it was, and by reputable historians such as Alan Bullock, author of *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, and Anthony Sutton, author of *Wall Street and the Rise of Hitler*. One wonders what other mythical versions of historical incidents have been accepted by historians and others "*without looking at the evidence.*"

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