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Finding the Truth in Two Germanys

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In Berlin, on February 27, 1933, the Reichstag building was set on fire, leading to Germany's dictatorship and arguably a start to WWII. Concurrently, civil liberties were suspended. Investigative disarray led to the German Chancellor, Adolf Hitler, to plead to President Paul von Hindenburg for the enactment of Article 48. Article 48 gave Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers' Party power to eradicate the Communist Party and enact the suspensions of civil liberties that could eliminate threats to the Nazi Party. Historians and scholars alike began to study the accuracy and significance of the trials that arose after the fire. This led to the execution of suspected arsonist Marinus van der Lubbe, a Dutch communist. Van der Lubbe



"Firemen Work on the Burning Reichstag Building in February, 1933, after Fire Broke out Simultaneously at 20 Places. National Archives and Records Administration. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/535790/1/public?contributionType=tag>.

claimed to be the sole perpetrator of the fire. While the declaration of guilt was difficult to attest, multiple communist parties were firm that communists were not involved in the Reichstag Fire. The Reichstag Fire was a conspiracy used by the Nazi Party to undermine the Communist Party of Germany. The purpose of the conspiracy was for Nazi control of parliament.

Many historians have alternate interpretations of the Reichstag Fire. American historian of German history, Benjamin Carter Hett, views the Reichstag Fire incident through a more modern lens. The Nazis' exploitation of the incident is similar to the US-American public

¹"Firemen Work on the Burning Reichstag Building in February, 1933, after Fire Broke out Simultaneously at 20 Places. This Enabled Hitler to Seize Power under the Pretext of "protecting" the Country from the Menace to Its Security. Berlin. Acme." National Archives and Records Administration. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/535790/1/public?contributionType=tag>.

reactions to the events of 9/11 or the JFK assassination. Historians have also investigated the cause of the fire. The fire was first claimed to be a communist attack on the German government. The Nazi Party was determined to condemn the Communist Party of Germany for the fire.

As the need for historical accuracy increased, more accurate interpretations have come out since and refute earlier reports of the fire. One of the main reasons for more accurate findings are Communist Parties denying the reports, like Fritz Tobias' work from 1963, *The Reichstag Fire: Legend and Truth*, which puts blame for the injustice of the burning of the Reichstag building on communists which led to investigations from communists support to find and fund accurate findings on the night that the fire was ignited. One book that supports that Marinus van der Lubbe was not the arsonist of the Reichstag is Benjamin Carter Hett's *Burning the Reichstag* (2014). His analysis has come from the mystery of why a lot of the evidence was hidden from the public.

Hett's book describes the process of the years it took to clear Marinus van der Lubbe name. The accounts of many first-hand witnesses are in hand with what people already think that the fire was an unrightful attempt to blame communists for the fire. Western society suspected foul play but was disregarded as van der Lubbe's name had not been cleared in the court system. While communists had tried to fund research and even the trial to not only clear van der Lubbe's name for the fire but also communists that historians viewed had motive to set the fire. Arthur Brandt was the lawyer that was trying to exonerate van der Lubbe's name in court to give the proper recognition of innocence.

Hett also had help from Fritz Tobias. Even though Tobias was firm that Marinus van der Lubbe was enough to set the fire, he had a larger collection of knowledge of the Reichstag fire than any other person. Fritz Tobias was born in Berlin in 1912 and would be drafted into the army at the start of World War II. After the war, Tobias was a deputy chair in the Head Denazification Committee in Germany. A program that involved denazification of important people that would judge Germans after the war who had ties to Nazis. During this process he worked to find Nazis and investigate their actions during the war. Hett describes Tobias as a Social Democrat and is confused about why Tobias would be defensive for some Nazi police officers and his determination to prove that Marinus van der Lubbe was solely responsible for the burning of the Reichstag. Historians originally agreed with Fritz Tobias at first. Tobias' report led historians to agree that a communist burned the Reichstag Building. After the fall of

the Nazi Party much research and findings concluded that Marinus van der Lubbe was innocent and that the Nazi Party framed him to eliminate the Communist Party in Germany. The Communist Party after WWII looked back on the Reichstag fire and believed that the event that took place that night was in fact a **cover up** designed to eliminate the Communist Party and have the Nazi Party take control of Parliament.

During the East and West Germany split, an East German communists book perspective showcases that there was evidence of a Nazi plot to start the fire and blame and later blame it on the Communists Party. The evidence was believed that members of inspected the fire and suspects hid evidence that supported an innocent Marinus van der Lubbe. One of the main sources exonerating van der Lubbe was Rudolph Diels, the current head of the German Gestapo during the Reichstag Fire, and in those documents, Diels accuses Heini Gewehr as the arsonist, stating that it was “the first crime of the National Socialists.” After seventy-five years Marinus van der Lubbe was finally pardoned in 2008 clearing him and communists of the burning of the Reichstag.

Annotated Bibliography (Chronological Order)

Birchall, Fredrick T. "Incendiary fire wrecks Reichstag; 100 Red Members Ordered Seized."

New York Times. (1933, Feb 28).

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/100767190?accountid=14522>

- The day after the Reichstag building burned down, the New York Times wrote an article about the event. The newspaper article explained a process of how the building was set ablaze and explained van der Lubbe was already in custody a day later by turning himself in. Also, the NY Times writes of the arrests of 100 communist members who were suspected of being suspected of having participated in the burning. The article ends by saying the suspension of certain civil liberties in Germany by the government in a response to the fire.

Katz, Otto. *The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror and the Burning of the Reichstag*. London: V. Gollancz, 1933.

- This book gives the first speculation that the Nazi Party was behind the burning of the Reichstag. Otto Katz states that the Nazi Government was creating criminal acts and the purpose of the book is in fighting Hitler’s Fascism.

Frendrick, Paul. "WHO SET THE REICHSTAG FIRE? THE WORLD AWAITS THE

ANSWER: The Nazis Prepare to Try Accused Communists at Leipzig This Week, While Outside Investigators Accuse the Nazis *The New York Times*, September 17, 1933.

- In September after the burning of the Reichstag, the NY Times covers the case with reports of other defendants awaiting trial. The accused with Marinus van der Lubbe are all communist, but it was found that they played no part in the crime. The trial has become an international spectacle with how the media was treating how important the trial was.

"Letter Asserts Roehm Bossed Reichstag Fire." *The Washington Post* (1923-1954), Jan 1946, p.3. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/151886260?accountid=14522>.

- A Washington Post newspaper article showed letters obtained from a previous stormtrooper saying Ernest Roehm ordered van der Lubbe to climb into the Reichstag to set the main hall a blaze. This had significant undertones that van der Lubbe was not a lone figure in the burning of the Reichstag.

"Reichstag Fire Blamed on Ernest Roehm." *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995), Jan 14, 1946. p.7. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/165653199?accountid=1452>

- A LA Times newspaper article released in the same day as the Washington Post article also states that Ernest Roehm supervised Marinus van der Lubbe into burning the Reichstag.

Diels, Rudolf, *Lucifer ante portas: ... es spricht der erste Chef der Gestapo*. Zurich, 1949, pp. 142-44.

- In an autobiography of the Gestapo head, Rudolph Diels, explained the process of how Marinus van der Lubbe voluntary confession made him not further his case against other suspects. The confession caused Diels to not look for other accomplices. Diels later in life becomes a classified as a category V for a person who was exonerated that had no ties to the Nazi party after WWII.

Tobias, Fritz, and Arnold J. Pomerans. *The Reichstag Fire*. New York: Putnam, 1963.

- German historian Fritz Tobias was said to have a treasured library that held evidence and knowledge of the Reichstag fire. One of the more prominent research of the event, he published a book describing how Marinus van der Lubbe could have started the fire alone without any assistance.

Taylor, A. J. P. (1960, Aug 01). "WHO BURNT THE REICHSTAG?" *History Today*, 10, 515.

Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1299015825?accountid=14522>

- Taylor's piece focuses on plans that a communist revolution was planned before the events of the Reichstag fire. Marinus van der Lubbe was in opposition to the government and the Reichstag burned exactly like he said it burned. This piece by Taylor is adamant that there was a plot by the communist party to revolt against the government. It also goes on saying evidence points to van der Lubbe and questions how the investigation turned to him as a communist. Being a communist was the reason Nazi Germany was able to suspend civil liberties and round up members of the Communist Party.

"The Arsonist; *The Reichstag Fire*". By Fritz Tobias. Translated by Arnold J. Pomerans from the German, *Der Reichstagsbrand*. Introduction by A. J. P. Taylor. Illustrated. 348 Pp. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. \$5.95." *The New York Times*. March 01, 1964.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1964/03/01/archives/the-arsonist-the-reichstag-fire-by-fritz-tobias-translated-by.html>.

- The newspaper article in question had historian backtracking on some instances that Nazis were behind the burning of the Reichstag. With reviews of Tobias and Taylor's book there is speculation whether Marinus van der Lubbe was the lone arsonist in the Reichstag fire.

Telford, Taylor. "The Arsonist." *New York Times* (1923-Current File), Mar 01, 1964. p.2.

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/115701427?accountid=14522>.

- The New York Times released an article about a second trial that was trying to exonerate Marinus van der Lubbe posthumously. The article also states that the Nazi version of the fire, where a communist plot was the factor in burning the Reichstag was falling apart, but the conviction of van der Lubbe still put communists responsible for their in the fire as seen through the government ruling.

Der Reichstagsbrandprozeß und Georgi Dimitroff Dokumente 27. Februar bis 20 September 1933. Berlin: Dietz, 1982.

- This German book, translated by google translate, states the Georgi Dimitroff was not implicated in the burning of the Reichstag. This book was written from a Marxist-Leninist perspective, describing that previous authorities held back document that could remove communist as part of the burning. The communist perspective of the book

defends the communist view that the fire was a Nazi plot was correct. The Communist Party sees the fire was not a communist agenda but a Nazi plot to extend their power over the government.

Weber, Hermann. *Deutsche Kommunisten*. Berlin: Dietz, 2008.

- The book covers the topic of German Communists. There is a short detail that explains that Communist Party did not believe in the fact that they were implicated in the burning of the Reichstag. Even though there was belief that the Nazi party had a hand in the burning there was no actual persuasion by the government that the Communist Party played no part in starting the fire. This text was also in German was translated by Google Translate.

Connolly, Kate. "75 Years On, Executed Reichstag Arsonist Finally Wins Pardon." *The Guardian*. January 12, 2008. Accessed February 21, 2019.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/jan/12/secondworldwar.germany>.

- The article states that there are dividing theories that speculate van der Lubbe involvement with the fire that suspended civil liberties in Germany and gave rise to a dictatorship.

Hett, Benjamin Carter. *Burning the Reichstag : an Investigation into the Third Reich's Enduring Mystery*. New York, NY : Oxford University Press, 2014.

- A former trial lawyer, Benjamin Carter Hett is a professor of history at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Hett has worked together with various of other historians, most notably Fritz Tobias, in researching the event surrounding the Reichstag fire. *The Burning of the Reichstag* is available on Amazon, Audible, google play books, and at Barnes and Noble all for purchase. It is also available at the UCSB library.