

Book Review

The Reichstag Fire, 68 years on

Alexander Bahar, Wilfried Kugel: *Der Reichstagbrand - Wie Geschichte gemacht wird* (The Reichstag Fire - How History is Created), edition q, Berlin 2001, ISBN 3-86124-523-2, 864 pages, price: 68.00 DM

5 July 2001

On February 27, 1933—more than 68 years ago—the Berlin Reichstag, the seat of Germany’s parliament, was set on fire. Shortly after the fire began, the Dutch left-wing radical Marinus van der Lubbe was arrested at the scene of the crime, apparently as the sole culprit.

Even before his identity was established, the Nazi leaders accused the German Communist Party (KPD) of having committed arson. According to Nazi propaganda, the Reichstag fire was intended as a signal for a communist uprising that had long been planned—a claim for which there was not a shred of evidence. In actual fact, the KPD leadership was neither willing nor able to organize such an uprising, so the Reichstag fire could not have been a signal for it.

For the Nazis, who had been in power less than a month, since January 30, 1933, the Reichstag fire was the excuse for a hitherto unparalleled persecution of Communist and Social Democratic workers, intellectuals and party leaders. On February 28, 1933 alone, just one day after the fire, thousands of persons active in, or allied with, the workers movement were arrested. The first to be arrested also included writers Egon Erwin Kisch, Ludwig Renn and Carl von Ossietzky, later murdered by the Nazis in a concentration camp.

All left-wing newspapers, including the Social Democratic daily *Vorwärts*, the Communist Party press and the German Trotskyists’ newspaper *Permanente Revolution*, were confiscated and banned.

Two decrees put into effect only one day later, the “Decree on the Protection of People and State”, subtitled “against communist acts of violence endangering the state,” and the “Decree Against Treason of the German People and High-Treason Activities,” were used to annul practically overnight the essential basic rights incorporated in the constitution of the Weimar Republic. These so-called “fire decrees” stayed in effect until the end of the Third Reich and formed the pseudo-legal basis for the entire Nazi dictatorship.

In the days immediately following the fire, the Nazis used the opportunity to generally weaken the entire German workers movement and prepare its destruction, a pressing task since early Reichstag elections had been scheduled for March 5, 1933, and a Nazi election victory was by no means certain.

There were still millions of workers organized in the SPD (Social Democrats), the KPD and the trade unions who were prepared to fight against the Nazis. The results of the March elections made this clear: the SPD and the KPD were still able to garner a combined vote of 13.2 million, the same number of votes they had received during the last

elections in 1932. The NSDAP (Nazis) received 17.2 million votes (compared to 11.7 million in the 1932 elections), but were not able to gain an absolute majority of votes on their own. This was only possible with the aid of their German Nationalist allies from the “Kampffront Schwarz-Rot-Weiss”.

It was the SPD leadership’s capitulation before the Nazis and the division of the workers due to the “social fascism theory” propagated by the leaders of the Stalinist KPD that prevented National Socialism from being stopped at the last minute and combated.

As early as 1931, Leon Trotsky already formulated the task at hand in his open letter to the members of the KPD, *How Can National Socialism be Defeated?*:

“The front must now be directed against fascism. And this common front of direct struggle against fascism, embracing the entire proletariat, must be utilised in the struggle against the Social Democracy, directed as a flank attack, but no less effective for all that.

“It is necessary to show by deeds a complete readiness to make a bloc with the Social Democrats against the fascists in all cases in which they will accept a bloc... We must understand how to tear the workers away from their leaders in reality. But reality today is—the struggle against fascism...”

“The overwhelming majority of the Social Democratic workers will fight against the fascists, but—for the present at least—only together with their organisations. This stage cannot be skipped. We must help the Social Democratic workers in action—in this new and extraordinary situation—to test the value of their organizations and leaders at this time, when it is a matter of life and death for the working class.”(1)

As we know, history took a different turn: the Nazis were victorious, and the German and European working class suffered its worst and most devastating defeat. The authors leave no doubt as to the fact that the leaders of both the SPD and the KPD bear decisive responsibility for this defeat. This is made particularly clear in the authors’ portrayal of the so-called “Prussian coup,” the ouster of the SPD-led Prussian government in July 1932 by the Reich Chancellor (head of government) of the time, Franz von Papen. Although the majority of their members were only waiting for the word to offer massive resistance, the SPD and trade union leaders didn’t put up even the semblance of a fight against Papen’s “cold coup d’etat,” and thus paved the way for the Nazis.

To this very day, there is hardly any event in German history that has been debated as heatedly as the issue of who really set the Reichstag on

fire.

In years of meticulous research, the two authors of the book, historian Alexander Bahar and physicist and psychologist Wilfried Kugel, carried out the first comprehensive evaluation of the 50,000 pages of original court, state attorney office and secret police (Gestapo) files that had been locked away in Moscow and East Berlin until 1990. The result is a remarkable and explosive, more than 800-page document that for the first time provides almost complete circumstantial evidence that the Nazis prepared and set the Reichstag fire themselves.

The authors have thus succeeded in disproving a hypothesis that even today is still fairly widespread: that the Dutchman Marinus van der Lubbe was the sole perpetrator. They “base their evidence largely on original documents that are stored in public archives, but have not been evaluated up to now... The book contradicts in many ways all of the research reports that have been published so far on the Reichstag fire, based on what the authors say is the first thorough evaluation of all presently available relevant sources... In summary, the authors have succeeded after years of work in presenting a comprehensive chain of circumstantial evidence—albeit one that will only have a conclusive character for those readers who are prepared to take on the intellectual challenge presented by the often highly complex and convoluted aspects of this case of political crime.” (2)

Bahar and Kugel describe the two contradictory hypotheses as to who was actually responsible for setting the fire as follows:

“As incontestable as it is that the Nazis benefited from the Reichstag fire and made skillful use of it in establishing their dictatorship, opinion remains divided as to who actually committed the deed. The communists accused by the Nazi authorities at the Reichstag Fire Trial in Leipzig were already ruled out in 1933 for obvious reasons: quite apart from the lack of evidence, the suicidal and thus nonsensical nature of such a deed was self-evident, despite Nazi propaganda to the contrary. So did Marinus van der Lubbe, the 75% vision-impaired Dutch left-wing radical communist arrested in the burning Reichstag set the fire on his own? Or were the culprits to be found among the Nazis?” (3)

As early as the summer of 1933, the *Brown Book on the Reichstag Fire and Hitler's Terror* was published in Switzerland under the editorship of Willi Münzenberg. In this book, German emigrés attempted to provide proof that the Nazis had committed the crime in a secret operation run by Nazi leader Hermann Göring. And even before the Reichstag Fire Trial in Leipzig, the “Legal Commission of the International Investigation Committee” came to the conclusion that the Nazis had set the fire themselves. Up to 1949, this was the prevailing opinion of all serious contemporaries outside of Germany. “Everyone abroad was and remains convinced that the Nazis set fire to the Reichstag.” (4)

In Germany, however, the legend of Marinus van der Lubbe as the sole perpetrator was created after 1945 by the first head of the Gestapo, Rudolf Diels, and his former staff. Diels, who was in charge of the sweeping arrests carried out on the night of the fire, had every reason to exonerate the Nazi rulers after World War II, since he was deeply involved in the Reichstag fire himself. As the authors explain:

“six hours before the Reichstag fire, Rudolf Diels, head of the ... Political Police since February 23, 1933 and subsequently head of the Secret State Police Office (Gestapo), wrote the following police radio telegram which was sent to all police stations in Prussia at about 6:00 p.m.: ‘Communists reportedly plan to carry out systematic raids on police squads and members of nationalist associations with the aim of disarming them.’ ... ‘Suitable countermeasures are to be taken immediately, and where necessary communist functionaries placed under protective custody.’” (5)

“The arrests carried out the next night had thus already been initiated by Rudolf Diels, the Chief of the Political Police, on the afternoon of February 27.” (6)

The authors prove that it would have been impossible for Marinus van der Lubbe to set on fire a building as large as the Reichstag on his own, by reconstructing in minute detail the course of the fire on the basis of countless testimony documents and investigation and court files (particularly in Chapters 2 and 4).

Their conclusion is that “the ‘culprit’ van der Lubbe had even less time to carry out his alleged act of arson than has hitherto been assumed, namely only 12 to 13 minutes... The view often expressed in historical literature that the Reichstag arson had taken Göring, Goebbels and Hitler ‘by surprise’ must now presumably be regarded once and for all as a myth.” (7)

In Chapters 5 to 7, the authors document the proceedings at the so-called Reichstag Fire Trial, which began on September 21, 1933 in Leipzig, and then present the circumstantial evidence for the guilt of the Nazis. The exact evaluation of all of the fire expert reports leads to one conclusion: “All of the fire experts agreed that the fire in the Reichstag assembly hall had to have been set by *several* culprits. Van der Lubbe’s self-incrimination was thus proved to be a lie.” (8) (My emphasis - W.K.)

In the trial before the Leipzig *Reichsgericht* court, which the Nazis had originally planned as a show trial, the accused were “van der Lubbe and comrades.” The Dutchman’s alleged “comrades” were Ernst Torgler, the former chairman of the KPD parliamentary group in the Reichstag, and three Bulgarian communists who were living illegally in Germany: Georgi Dimitrov, who had been the head of the Berlin-based Western European Office of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (Third International) until early 1933, Blagoj Popov and Vasil Tanev. Despite coerced witnesses (including concentration camp prisoners), planted and forged “evidence,” and torture and terror against the accused, the Nazis never succeeded in proving the alleged guilt of the communists. Dimitrov’s undaunted conduct in court, in particular, added to the embarrassment for the Nazi leaders. The *Reichsgericht* passed its verdict on December 23, 1933: “The accused Torgler, Dimitrov, Popov and Tanev are acquitted.” Marinus van der Lubbe, the only “presentable” culprit, was sentenced to death and executed on January 10, 1934, despite the existing expert opinions and testimony which conclusively ruled out the Dutchman as the sole perpetrator.

Finally, the authors expose the Nazis as the only feasible culprits. Among the documentary evidence the authors base this verdict on is the testimony of SA member Adolf Rall (who was later murdered by the SA and the Gestapo). The emigré newspaper *Pariser Tageblatt* reported on December 24, 1933: “he (Rall) stated he was a member of the SA’s ‘Sturm 17’ unit. Before the Reichstag fire broke out, he had been in the subterranean passageway that connects the Reichstag assembly building to the building in which the government apartment of the Reich President [Hermann Göring] is located. Rall said that he had personally witnessed various members of his SA unit bringing the explosive liquids into the building.” (10)

Hans Bernd Gisevius, who had worked as a junior lawyer for the political police from August to December 1933, made the following testimony at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trial in 1946: “It was Goebbels who first came up with the idea of setting fire to the Reichstag. Goebbels discussed this with the leader of the Berlin SA brigade, Karl Ernst, and made detailed suggestions on how to go about carrying out the arson. A certain tincture known to every pyrotechnician was selected. You spray it onto an object and then it ignites after a certain time, after hours or minutes. In order to get into the Reichstag building, they needed the passageway that leads from the palace of the Reichstag President to the Reichstag. A unit of ten reliable SA men was put together, and now Göring was informed of all the details of the plan, so that he coincidentally was not out holding an election speech on the night of the fire, but was still at his desk in the Ministry of the Interior at such a late hour... The intention right from the start was to put the blame for this

crime on the Communists, and those ten SA men who were to carry out the crime were instructed accordingly.” (11)

Based on this testimony and a wealth of other circumstantial evidence, the course of this act of arson can be reconstructed as follows:

“On February 27, 1933, at about 8:00 p.m. a commando group of at least 3, and at most 10 SA men led by Hans Georg Gewehr entered the basement of the palace of the Reichstag President. The group took the incendiary substances deposited there, and used the subterranean passageway to go from the Reichstag President’s palace to the Reichstag building, where they prepared the assembly hall in particular with a self-igniting liquid they probably mixed in the hall. After a certain latency period, the liquid set off the fire in the assembly hall. The group made their getaway through the subterranean passageway and the basement of the Reichstag President’s palace (and possibly also through the adjacent basement leading to the machinery and government employees’ building) to the public street ‘Reichstagsufer.’ Göring entered the burning Reichstag building at 9:21 p.m. at the latest, presumably in order to provide a cover for the commando group’s retreat.

“Van der Lubbe was brought to the Reichstag by the SA at exactly 9:00 p.m. and let into the building by them. The sound of breaking glass which was noticed by witnesses and which was allegedly due to van der Lubbe breaking window panes to get into the building was probably only intended to attract the attention of the public. The Dutchman was sacrificed as the only available witness.” (12)

Almost all of the SA men involved in the deed (with the exception of Hans Georg Gewehr) and many accessories to the crime were later murdered by the Nazis, above during the so-called “Röhm putsch” on June 30, 1934.

Responsibility for the Reichstag Fire was a constant source of debate between German historians after the Second World War. In the early 1960’s, the attempt was made to establish the hypothesis of van der Lubbe as the sole culprit—in particular by Rudolf Augstein’s magazine *Der Spiegel* and the “amateur historian” and intelligence officer Fritz Tobias. To this very day, some prominent German historians base themselves on this hypothesis and still attempt to deny the guilt of the Nazis. With their new book *Der Reichstagbrand*, Alexander Bahar and Wilfried Kugel have provided authoritative evidence to finally dispel the longstanding controversy.

References

- (1) Leon Trotsky: Portrait des National Sozialismus, Arbeiterpresse Verlag, Essen 1999, p. 61
- (2) A. Bahar and W. Kugel: Der Reichstagsbrand, edition q, Berlin 2001, p. 19
- (3) *ibid.*, p. 15
- (4) Braunbuch über Reichstagsbrand und Hitlerterror, Universum-Bücherei, Basle 1933, p. 74
- (5) Bahar and Kugel, p. 71
- (6) *ibid.*, p. 72
- (7) *ibid.*, p. 73
- (8) *ibid.*, p. 321
- (9) Walther Hofer et. al.: Der Reichstagsbrand, Arani-Verlag, Berlin 1972/1978, revised new edition: Ahriman-Verlag, Freiburg 1992, p. 2
- (10) Bahar and Kugel, p. 533
- (11) *ibid.*, p. 543
- (12) *ibid.*, preliminary remarks “Reconstruction of the Reichstag arson”



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