

Rudolf Diels, Head of the Prussian Political Police, on the Reichstag Fire of February 27, 1933 (Retrospective Account, 1949)

Abstract

In preparation for the Reichstag elections of March 3, 1933 (which were supposed to pave the way for the legal establishment of the Nazi dictatorship), Hitler ordered the near-complete elimination of the political opposition, especially his fiercest ideological opponents, the Communists. He was helped in this by the German population's general anti-Bolshevist sentiments, which he systematically stoked during the election campaign. With the appointment of Hermann Göring as acting Prussian Minister of the Interior, Hitler gained control over the police force of that state, and he used this power to persecute Communists, Social Democrats, and other political opponents. He justified his actions by alleging that these groups were engaged in treasonous activities. For example, the Nazis claimed that their search of the Karl Liebknecht House (the Communist Party headquarters) in Berlin on February 24, 1933, had yielded evidence of plans for an imminent Communist revolution. Given the skeptical stance of the public toward such pronouncements, it was a fortuitous coincidence that the police were able to arrest the mentally unstable Dutch Communist Marinus van der Lubbe (1909–1934) outside the burning Reichstag on February 27, 1933. His subsequent trial produced no evidence of a Communist conspiracy. But the following account by Rudolf Diels (1900–1957), head of the Prussian political police, makes clear that the Nazi leadership was determined to present the Reichstag fire as incontrovertible evidence of a Communist plot and to use it as a pretext for eliminating the political opposition once and for all.

The following excerpt was originally published in Diels's 1949 autobiography, a rich source of information on the early phase of the Nazi dictatorship. The autobiography should be approached critically, however, on account of its apologetic tone.

Source

[...] When I pushed my way into the burning building with [my old colleague] Schneider, we had to climb over the bulging hoses of the Berlin fire brigade, although, as yet, there were few onlookers. A few officers of my department were already engaged in interrogating Marinus van der Lubbe. Naked from the waist upwards, smeared with dirt and sweating, he sat in front of them, breathing heavily. He panted as if he had completed a tremendous task. There was a wild triumphant gleam in the burning eyes of his pale, haggard young face. I sat opposite him in the police headquarters several times that night and listened to his confused stories. I read the Communist pamphlets he carried in his trouser pockets. They were of the kind which in those days were publicly distributed everywhere. And from the primitive hieroglyphics of his diary, I tried to follow his trips down to the Balkans.

The voluntary confessions of Marinus van der Lubbe prevented me from thinking that an arsonist who was such an expert in his folly needed any helpers. Why should not a single match be enough to set fire to the cold yet inflammable splendour of the Chamber, the old upholstered furniture, the heavy curtains, and the bone-dry wooden panelling! But this specialist had used a whole knapsack full of inflammable material. He had been so active that he had laid several dozen fires. With a firelighter, the "Industrious Housewife," he had set the Chamber aflame. Then he had rushed through the big corridors with his burning shirt which he brandished in his right hand like a torch to lay more fires under the old leather sofas. During this hectic activity he was overpowered by Reichstag officials.

He also confessed to several smaller arson attacks in Berlin, the mysterious cause of which had aroused the attention of the Criminal Investigation Department. Several details suggested that Communist arsonists who had helped him in Neukölln and the Berlin Town Hall might have helped him with the Reichstag. The interrogating officers had pointed their investigations in this direction. But meanwhile things of a quite different nature had happened.

Shortly after my arrival in the burning Reichstag, the National Socialist elite had arrived. Hitler and Goebbels had driven up in their large cars; Göring, Frick and Helldorf arrived; Daluge, the police chief, was not there.

One of Hitler's chief adjutants came to look for me in the maze of corridors, now alive with the fire brigade and the police. He passed me Göring's order to appear in the select circle. On a balcony jutting out into the Chamber, Hitler and his trusty followers were assembled. Hitler stood leaning his arms on the stone parapet of the balcony and stared silently into the red sea of flames. The first hysterics were already over. As I entered, Göring came towards me. His voice was heavy with the emotion of the dramatic moment: "This is the beginning of the Communist revolt; they will start their attack now! Not a moment must be lost!"

Göring could not continue. Hitler turned to the assembled company. Now I saw that his face was purple with agitation and with the heat gathering in the dome. He shouted uncontrollably, as I had never seen him do before, as if he were going to burst: "There will be no mercy now. Anyone who stands in our way will be cut down. The German people will not tolerate leniency. Every Communist official will be shot where he is found. The Communist deputies must be hanged this very night. Everybody in league with the Communists must be arrested. There will no longer be any leniency for Social Democrats either."

I reported on the results of the first interrogations of Marinus van der Lubbe—that in my opinion he was a maniac. But with this opinion I had come to the wrong man; Hitler ridiculed my childish view: "That is something really cunning, prepared a long time ago. The criminals have thought all this out beautifully; but they've miscalculated, haven't they, Comrades! These gangsters have no idea to what extent the people are on our side. They don't hear the rejoicing of the crowds in their rat holes, from which they now want to emerge," and so it went on.

I pulled Göring aside; but he did not let me start. "Police on an emergency footing; shoot to kill; and any other emergency regulations which might be appropriate in such a case." I said again that a police radio message would be sent to all police stations in his name, putting the police in a state of alert and ordering the arrest of those Communist officials whose imprisonment had been intended for some time in the event of a ban on the Party. Göring was not listening: "No Communist and no Social Democrat traitor must be allowed to escape us" were his last words. When I met Schneider again, I tried to collect my thoughts:

"This is a mad-house, Schneider, but apart from that the time has come: all Communist and Social Democrat officials are to be arrested, big raids, a state of alert and all that goes with it!"

Schneider forgot the Social Democrats when he passed on Göring's order as a radio message. When I returned to the "Alex" after midnight it was buzzing like a beehive. The alerted operational battalions of the police stood lined up in long rows in the entrance drives with steel helmets and rifles. While squad vans arrived and whole troops of detectives, with logbooks that were filled out years ago, jumped onto the loading docks, joined by uniformed officers, the first cars were arriving back at the entrance of the building with dazed prisoners who had been woken up from their sleep. [...]

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