

The Hitler diaries

The discovery of Hitler's private diaries had historians gasping with anticipation. What was he thinking when he approved plans to gas six million Jews? How did he feel when he faced defeat in World War II? If genuine, the diaries could provide unique insights into the thoughts of the world's most evil dictator.

In April 1945, World War II was drawing rapidly to a close. Sick and demoralized, German chancellor Adolf Hitler was holed up in a Berlin bunker. Not far away, at Schoenwalde airstrip, Major Friedrich Gundlfinger supervised the loading of weighty metal trunks aboard his Junkers 352. Then, just as dawn was breaking, Gundlfinger taxied his plane along the grass runway and opened the throttle.

His mission was part of Operation Seraglio: a desperate attempt to evacuate Germany's command center before Russian troops stormed Berlin. But Gundlfinger's flight did not go according to plan. It's not clear what happened in the icy clouds above Dresden, but by 6 AM the aircraft had crashed in the Heidenholz Forest and burst into flames. The color drained from Hitler's face when he heard the news. "In that plane were all my private archives ..." he gasped. "It is a catastrophe!"

Diary discovered

After the war, few doubted that Hitler's archive had indeed been incinerated with the plane's crew. So, when a reporter from the Germany magazine *Stern* learned in 1979 that one of the Führer's diary volumes had turned up, he realized he was onto the most sensational story of his career.

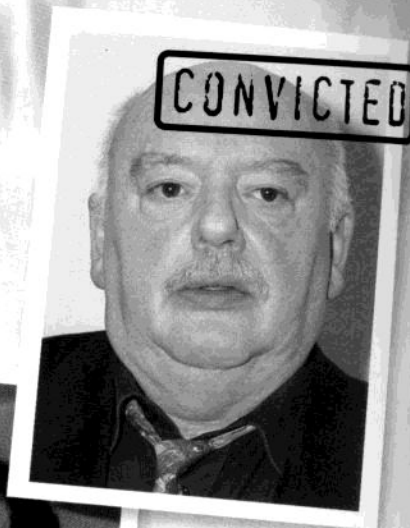
Gerd Heidemann had an unhealthy obsession with the Nazis, and it was a fellow memorabilia collector who showed him the first volume of diaries. Written in Gothic script, apparently in Hitler's handwriting, it seemed authentic. A little sleuthing led Heidemann to the source: dealer Konrad Kujau. He claimed he had bought it from an East German general, who was smuggling the volumes across the border that then divided Germany into East and West.

Buy, buy, buy!

Heidemann's boss was as excited as the reporter himself, and authorized him to buy the diaries—all 62 of them—for nine million German marks

◀ IN HITLER'S OWN HAND

Hitler's appointments diary for 1925, showing his genuine handwriting. Hitler's former secretary had claimed he did not keep a personal diary.



IMPRISONED

Forger Konrad Kujau (above) and Stern magazine reporter Gerd Heidemann (left) were sentenced to four-and-a-half years each for their part in the swindle. They repaid some of the money to Stern, but five million marks were never recovered.



HITLER'S RISE ▶

Adolf Hitler, photographed at a Nazi rally in 1934, on his rise to power.



(equivalent, in 1982, to \$3.7 million). In conditions of extreme secrecy, *Stern* editors superficially checked the diaries' authenticity—no experts were consulted—and prepared them for publication. In April 1983 they published extracts in a 356-page special edition, and syndicated them abroad.

Publication and exposure

The publication was at once disappointing and sensational. The diary entries were surprisingly banal, and added little to knowledge of the period. However, they gave an amazing new insight into Hitler's character, portraying him as kindly and compassionate.

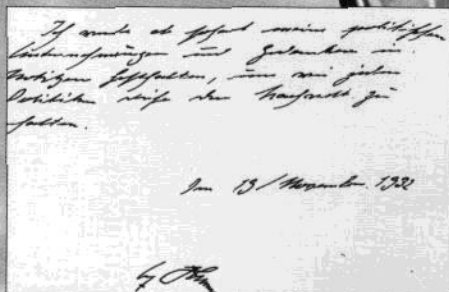
Historians and experts were divided. Some denounced the diaries as obvious fakes, but others leaped to defend them. To end speculation, *Stern* loaned several volumes to the Federal Institute of Forensic Investigation in Berlin.

Their report was damning (see box), and *Stern's* editor, Peter Koch, struggled to defend his magazine's reputation. Still convinced of the diaries' authenticity, he showed them to US handwriting expert Kenneth Rendell. After a day studying them, Rendell announced, "It doesn't look good." The most striking discrepancy was that the capital letters E, H, and K were quite different from genuine examples of Hitler's handwriting. Evidence of fraud piled up on all sides, and just two weeks after publication, Koch was forced to concede that *Stern* had been swindled.

The forger was Konrad Kujau himself. For years he had been making a good living by manufacturing Nazi memorabilia, but with the diaries he had overreached himself. Forging just one at first, he found himself trapped into creating more when *Stern* became involved. Gerd Heidemann, the reporter who "discovered" the diaries, had realized early on that they were fake, but he had

THE FAKE DIARY ►

The first page of Hitler's diary to be made public by *Stern* magazine reads: "Henceforth, I will take note of my political thoughts to leave a record for posterity as does every politician."



DEAD GIVEAWAYS

- ☞ The diaries had close parallels with a 1962 book, *Hitler's Speeches and Proclamations*.
- ☞ There were diary entries only for dates that appeared in the book. More damning still, the diaries repeated the book's errors.
- ☞ Labels supposedly typed in 1943 were as crisp as those dated nine years earlier. If the labels were genuine the typewriter's letters would have worn down.
- ☞ The bindings contained threads of polyester, which was not manufactured until 1953.
- ☞ The paper contained a fluorescent brightener, blankophor, introduced in 1954.

his own motives for making sure the deception continued. As middleman, he was creaming off a percentage of the payments. Also, the diaries' rehabilitation of Hitler provided a veneer of respectability for his own Nazi obsession.

Nor were the editors at *Stern* entirely innocent. Once they had agreed to buy the diaries, they were reluctant to believe that they were forged, and made only half-hearted efforts to check their authenticity.

The Hitler diaries were hardly clever counterfeits, but their place in the history of questioned document analysis is assured, through the enormous sums of money that changed hands, and because the greed and gullibility of all involved made them such enthusiastic dupes.

SENSATION! ►

Konrad Kujau holding a 1983 edition of *Stern*, in which the faked diaries were published as a "historic sensation."

