

Revealing the Forged Hitler Diaries

by JOSEF HENKE*

In April 1982, two journalists from the *Stern* magazine, Dr. Thomas Walde and Leo Pesch, came to the Archives of the Federal Republic of Germany (the *Bundesarchiv*) to ask for records and other archival material concerning the flight to England in 1941 of Rudolf Hess. During their stay, they told me that the *Stern* had obtained a large collection of material created by the Nazi party. Furthermore, they informed me that the material had been, until that time, kept by private persons. As the archivist responsible for Nazi party records at the Federal Archives, I was very interested in obtaining more details. In order to prove their story, Walde and Pesch showed me several sheets of paper, without any registry context, which had allegedly been found by a colleague at the *Stern* — reporter Gerd Heidemann. These documents seemed to contain the handwriting of Adolf Hitler. Walde and Pesch did not provide me with any details about the origin, the format, the amount, or the contents of the alleged Hitler “papers”; nor did they mention that diaries were among those holdings. They did, however, indicate that they felt a moral obligation to transfer the material to the Federal Archives after they had used it for journalistic purposes. As there is a black market in Germany and elsewhere for Nazi material, I did not feel that there was a sensation in the making.

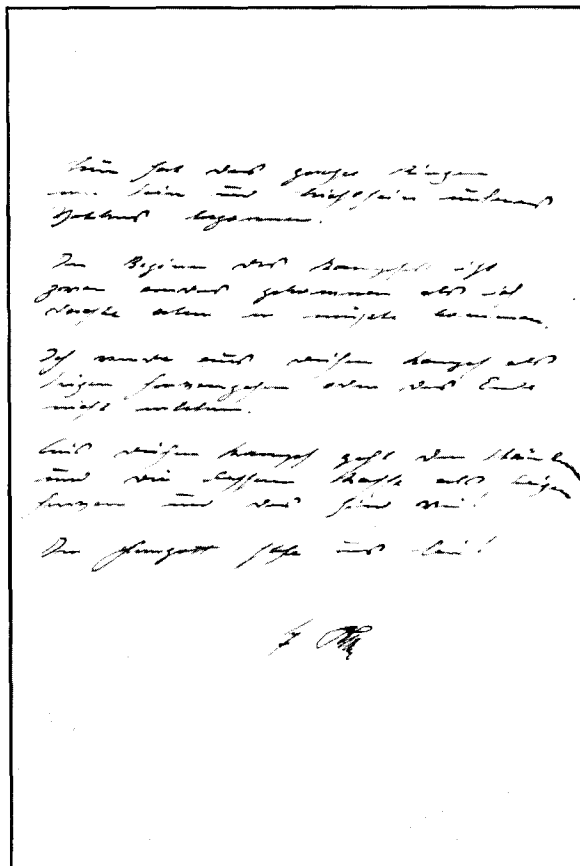
The *Stern* also had legal reasons for transferring the papers to the Federal Archives after publication, or better, journalistic exploitation. Since the Minister of Finance of the Free State of Bavaria feels entitled to act as Hitler’s legal heir and confiscate any part of Hitler’s property, the *Stern* knew quite well that only a contract to transfer the papers to the Federal Archives would prevent their confiscation by the Bavarian government. An agreement was reached on 7 April 1983, without any financial commitment by the Federal Archives, whereby the *Stern* agreed to submit to the Federal Archives advance copies of any material to be published. After the *Stern* had published the chosen extracts, the entire collection, whether published or not, was to be turned over to the Federal Archives. I again underline the fact that at that time no one at the Federal Archives knew anything about diaries. In fact, no one was sure whether the material found by Heidemann, and held by the *Stern*, was even authentic. We merely did our work as archivists to safeguard possible archival material against sale on the black market.

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Some weeks after Walde and Pesch visited the Federal Archives, the *Stern* asked the Archives to comment on the quality of some of those papers. The documents contained no clue to their origins other than the apparent handwriting of Adolf Hitler. As philological and historical analysis could not be applied to these scattered pages because they lacked any indication of provenance in a government department or Nazi party agency, I advised the *Stern* journalists that handwriting and scientific experts would have to be involved. Four documents, three originals and one copy, together with some actual Hitler autographs from the holdings of the Federal Archives, were sent to the criminal police office of the State of Rhineland-Palatinate, which had previously helped the Archives when handwriting analysis was necessary for historical purposes. The examination by the police in May 1982 concluded that the papers seemed to be in the handwriting of Hitler. I was not astonished, therefore, when the *Stern* told me later that an American and a Swiss expert had come to the same conclusion.

These tests, however, were not sufficient. A technical check by the Federal German Bureau of Investigation was also necessary to obtain exact information about the character and age of the paper and ink. Nine of the alleged original documents from the Heidemann holdings and some other authentic documents from the Federal Archives' holdings were sent to the Federal Bureau of Investigation on 6 July 1982. These investigations took longer than expected, so Heidemann, my colleague Klaus Oldenhage, and I paid a visit to the Federal Bureau of Investigation on 28 March 1983. At that time, the expert at the Bureau, Louis Ferdinand Werner, pointed out that at least one of these sheets of paper might contain whiteners not known during Hitler's lifetime. Before making a decision, Dr. Werner wanted to obtain the opinion of a well-known paper chemist from the Bayer enterprise in Leverkusen who is a recognized authority on production dates of special kinds of paper containing whiteners.

For then unknown reasons, the *Stern* went ahead with publication of parts the Heidemann collection. On the afternoon of 22 April 1983, the *Stern* issued a press release indicating that Heidemann had found Hitler's diaries, consisting of sixty entirely handwritten volumes. The Federal Archives thus learned of the existence of Hitler diaries at the same time as the general public. The President of the Federal Archives, Hans Booms, immediately decided to send me to a press conference scheduled for 25 April 1983 in Hamburg (where the *Stern* is published) to ensure that no one received the impression that the Federal Archives had declared the diaries to be genuine. The discussions at this press conference did not go well for the *Stern* as many journalists and historians did not believe that Heidemann had shown them anything but forgeries. The representatives of the *Stern*, however, were convinced of the authenticity of the diaries, and inexcusably claimed that the history of Germany in the last fifty years would have to be entirely rewritten. At least one lawyer for the *Stern* realized, however, that an official examination of the diaries by public agencies, in particular, the Federal Archives, was necessary in order to determine whether the historians who did not believe that the diaries were really written by Hitler were right. I strongly urged representatives of the *Stern* not to continue to give my colleagues and I isolated sheets of paper; they, therefore, allowed me to choose three volumes from the series of diaries. I went back to Koblenz that night.



This undated entry in the forged Hitler diaries, which appears to refer to the outbreak of the Second World War, contains the sort of vague, aimless comment on the struggles of the German people which raised doubt about the diaries' authenticity. A translation of the entry reads:

Now the great wrestling over the existence or nonexistence of our people has begun.

The beginning of the struggle has come differently, however, from the way I expected it to come.

I shall come out of this struggle the victor or I shall not live to see its end.

From this struggle the stronger one and the better race will emerge as victor, and that is us!

The good Lord may give us support!

Translation by Dr. H.M. Kallmann National Library of Canada. Photo courtesy: Brian Thurgood, Picture Conservation Division, Public Archives of Canada.

To authenticate the diaries, the Federal Minister of the Interior, Dr. Friedrich Zimmermann, decided that the Federal Archives should enlist the support of technical experts from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. On 26 April 1983, the Federal Minister for the Economy agreed that the *Bundesanstalt für Materialprüfung* (federal agency for testing materials), located in Berlin, should also be involved. Several individual documents were immediately flown to Berlin, while I took the three diaries to the Federal Bureau of Investigation located in Wiesbaden. For the rest of the week we could not undertake any philological or historical examinations because the public continued to ask all accessible officials of the Federal Archives whether or not the diaries were genuine. It was not until the weekend of 30 April that Klaus Oldenhege and I began our examinations. We decided to conduct separate examinations so that we could undertake our tests without any influence or support from the other. I concentrated on testing the historical background of the diaries. Klaus Oldenhege checked the details of the subject information in the diaries.

Our study of the information in the documents led to the following observations:

1. The writer of the diaries had, surprisingly, never corrected his text. This meant that Hitler had had a lot of time to prepare carefully the daily entries in his diary. As far as we know, Hitler did not like writing, nor any kind of bureaucracy, and we could not imagine that for a period of more than twelve years Hitler was always in the same mood and therefore able to write in the same handwriting every day without ever making a mistake. Yet, because Hitler disliked writing, we were not in a position to compare authentic examples of his handwriting with the alleged diaries. We, therefore, had to check the contents of the diaries most carefully. We soon found that the subject information was incredibly poor. A dictator knowing everything, ordering everything, denying everything, and allowing everything would have written more than just silly or publicly known information in his diary. The author, however, never shows any sign of reflection on the contents of the information; even when there was a political crisis of the highest importance, he often only made very formal annotations about routine matters like a letter of congratulation he had received.
2. The information was also written in a very primitive way. The information in the entries neither exceeded the knowledge of an average newspaper reader nor dealt with non-political details of private life including, of course, sexual affairs. In discussing the political contents of legislation, for example, the writer of the diaries usually wrote something on that subject on the day on which the law was issued. A real politician — and nobody can deny that Hitler was a real politician, although, of course, in a very bad sense — would have said something in his diary about the course which led to this or that piece of legislation. The writer of these diaries did nothing more than put in the date of the issue of the law and its content; Oldenhege and I did not find any information about these laws which was not also published in contemporary newspapers. If the diaries were indeed authentic, one would have to believe that Hitler, the omnipotent dictator, was in no position to enhance

his diary with secret facts crucial for any political development. Even the notes on his girl friend, Eva Braun, do not express anything more than the remarks of any lover about any loved girl.

To sum up: the intellectual quality of all the entries in the alleged diaries proved to be extremely poor. Hitler was a villain and mass murderer, and he was certainly not an intellectual, but he was not so stupid as to produce a meaningless sixty-volume diary. From what we know of Hitler's way of thinking and talking — mostly in long reflecting monologues — it seems unlikely that when writing in his diaries and (as the author proclaims in the first volume) confiding his ideas to future generations, Hitler would have contented himself with a primitive recitation of well-known facts available in contemporary newspapers and politically irrelevant details of private life. Furthermore, a great many decisive political events are not even mentioned in the diaries. Secret state and party affairs, which were not communicated to the public but are now known as a result of research in archives, do not appear in the forged diaries. In one of the diaries I obtained from the *Stern*, for example, the entries describing the beginning of the Second World War only contain well-known facts, speeches, proclamations, and directives — nothing more than what was reported in contemporary newspapers. There is absolutely no mention of the crisis on the eastern front, the winning of "living space" for the German people, the enslaving of the peoples of Eastern Europe, and the annihilation of the Jews. Instead, there appears an almost daily quotation: "I'll go to my soldiers at the front."

All these facts led to the suspicion that the diaries were forgeries, but the falsification itself had not yet been proven. We, therefore, began to note factual errors in the entries which we thought were sure to establish that the diaries were indeed forgeries. The following are some examples of mistakes we found with regard to historical events: under the date of 19 January 1934 the author mentions a law which was never issued; under the date of 9 January 1934, he informs his readers of an alleged talk with Reichspräsident Paul von Hindenburg about the Dutch national, van der Lubbe, who, according to the Nazis, was responsible for the burning of the German Parliament (the *Reichstag*) almost a year earlier. The information supposedly given by Hitler in his diary on this matter is nonsense. Hindenburg had decided on 6 January 1934 to reject an official Dutch demand for mercy for van der Lubbe. (We could prove that fact in the records of the Reich Chancellery.) The alleged diary says that Hitler talked to Hindenburg in an attempt to *prevent* him from saving van der Lubbe. The author made another serious error when, under 22 June 1934, he says Dr. Gürtner, was "Reich and Prussian Minister of Justice." This term is not correct for that date since in June 1934 Dr. Gürtner was Reichs-Minister only; he subsequently only became Acting Minister of the Prussian Ministry for Justice. The term "Reichs and Prussian Minister of Justice" was not officially used before 16 October 1934.

There are many more examples of errors which could be cited. Despite the flaws in the documents, some officials in the Federal Ministry of the Interior still did not believe that our philological and historical findings were sufficient. We, therefore, had to ask the *Stern* to send more volumes of the diaries to the

Federal Archives. Four volumes were quickly sent by courier directly from a Swiss bank. Some hours later, our previous conclusions were irrefutably confirmed. We realized that the forger took much of his information from the official party newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* and a postwar publication by Max Domarus containing Hitler's speeches and proclamations, which in some way may be considered as a daily or weekly description of Hitler's political and personal schedule from 1932. Domarus, for his part, relied heavily on the facts given by the *Völkischer Beobachter* and other newspapers of the period. As a result, secret events and conversations which did not appear in the newspapers are not mentioned by Domarus either and, consequently, were not known to the author of the forged diaries. We also discovered a striking coincidence between the events mentioned by Domarus and those selected by the author of the diaries. Indeed, the forger very often quoted directly from Domarus and *Völkischer Beobachter*. We did not know whether to weep or laugh when we found out that many of the mistakes made in these publications were repeated by the author and that he committed errors by simply misunderstanding some of the facts recorded in *Völkischer Beobachter* and by Domarus. I think the most striking mistake in the diaries is located in the entry which deals with the cable of congratulation sent by Hitler to Ritter von Epp on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of von Epp's entrance into the army. Domarus correctly quotes this cable under the date of the 16 August 1937. The forger, who, as we now know, is Konrad Kujau, told the story the other way around — that Hitler had been congratulated by von Epp. Since Hitler was only forty-eight years old in 1937, it is impossible that even he could have joined the army fifty years earlier, or two years before his birth.

It was quite obvious to us early in May 1983 that the diaries were forgeries. The *Stern* lawyer soon became convinced that an investigation by anyone else would lead to the same result. I should add that the two other federal agencies which supported the investigation by the Federal Archives, as far as scientific or technical tests are concerned, discovered that the paper, the binding, and the ink were not coeval, and that they were not produced in the 1930s or early 1940s. While officials of the Federal Ministry of the Interior hesitated for some days before agreeing that the examination by the Federal Archives had produced the correct result, the Minister himself, Dr. Friedrich Zimmermann, immediately allowed the Archives to announce its findings to the media at a press conference on 6 May 1983.

In conclusion, some general remarks are needed on the role played by the Archives in revealing the diaries as forgeries. To be honest, I must admit that from a scholarly perspective this task was not very difficult. On the other hand, we needed archival knowledge about historical and bureaucratic details; but the public applauded the Archives more than was deserved. This applause also resulted from the fact that some historians who claim to be experts on Hitler made judgements without any knowledge of the documents they were judging. Some of these historians told the surprised public that they were convinced of the truth of the diaries, while others, who had not even seen a volume of the diaries, indicated that the books were forgeries. Through this event archivists had the chance to show the public the scholarly manner in which they do their work.

The real benefits for the Federal Archives and the other federal agencies which discovered the forgeries are, however, political. We had no interest other than finding the truth. While the Archives did sign an agreement with the *Stern* to acquire these Hitler "papers," we did so in order to ensure that the material would be obtained by the Archives *if* it proved to be genuine. If we had refused any involvement, the Federal Republic of Germany would not have had an official opportunity to know whether the diaries were forgeries. It is, therefore, the way in which the matter was handled that has enhanced the reputation of the Federal Archives, not the disclosure itself. Any historian with a knowledge of recent German history would have been in a position to demonstrate that the diaries were forgeries. For this reason it is hard to understand why the *Stern* handled the matter so badly. It is true that the falsification of Hitler's handwriting seemed to be a masterpiece, and even the experts took some time to establish that it was a forgery. But in contrast to the skill with which the writing was forged, the contents and physical make-up of the diaries were beyond any serious discussion. If the experts in German history on the *Stern* staff had been involved, Heidemann's story would never have been told. But the professional historians of the *Stern* were excluded by reporters and businessmen who were eager to earn a lot of money and did not care about historical truth and moral consequences. As a result, this story is a setback for journalism, and archivists should not enjoy their success too much. On the other hand, I happily admit that the position of the Federal Archives within the German government, and perhaps even of all archives, has been strengthened by this incident. The Federal Republic of Germany was not hurt politically by the forgery because the Archives and technical agencies were determined to establish historical truth; and that is the way archivists must approach their work everywhere.