

THE HITLER DIARIES HOAX

The news stunned the world. On April 22, 1983, the German magazine *Stern* ran a huge headline. It read: HITLER'S DIARIES DISCOVERED. *Stern* claimed it had found 62 secret Hitler volumes. These covered the whole span of the German dictator's rule, from 1932 to 1945. *Stern* editors boasted that this was "the journalistic scoop of the post-World War II period."

² Everyone wanted to know how *Stern* got the diaries. In response, reporter Gerd Heidemann told this story. Just before Hitler shot himself in 1945, he had ordered his personal papers flown out of Berlin. They were to be taken to his mountain retreat, but the plane crashed en route. A farmer found the diaries in the wrecked plane and hid them in a haystack for 38 years.

³ As *Stern's* top reporter on Hitler, Heidemann investigated the crash. It took him years of hard work, he claimed, but in the end, his efforts paid off. Heidemann found proof that some of the cargo from the doomed plane had survived. Next, he had tracked down the farmer who had the hidden diaries. Beyond that, Heidemann's story was a bit murky. He refused to say where he found the farmer, who the farmer was, or how Heidemann had convinced him to give up the diaries. Heidemann couldn't release this information, he said, because he had to protect his sources.

⁴ News of the diaries captured everyone's attention. As evil as Hitler had been, many people were fascinated by him. Since his death, he had been the subject of hundreds of books. He had also been a popular film subject. By 1980, there were 55 movies about him. So the diaries—if they were genuine—really would be a top story of the post-World War II period.

⁵ At first, many people believed the diaries were real. Certainly the editors at *Stern* thought they were. After all, Gerd Heidemann was one of their best reporters. "We have every reason to trust Heidemann thoroughly," said *Stern's* editor-in-chief Peter Koch.

⁶ Some historians were convinced, too. Hugh Trevor-Roper, a famous scholar, took a look at a few samples. "When I turned the pages of those volumes, my doubts gradually dissolved," he said. "I am now satisfied they are authentic."

⁷ Others came to the same conclusions. London's *Sunday Times* paid \$400,000 for the right to print the diaries. In Italy, the magazine *Panorama* also paid a large sum for the diaries. In France, the weekly *Paris Match* did the same. And in the United States, *Newsweek* indicated interest. At the last minute, however, *Newsweek* editors had second thoughts and backed out.

⁸ That turned out to be a wise decision. Hitler's so-called diaries were a total hoax. Heidemann had gotten them from a man named Konrad Kujau. It is unclear whether Heidemann or Kujau masterminded the deception. Kujau was the one who actually wrote the diaries; Heidemann was the one who brought them to the public. In any case, both men were guilty of fraud.

⁹ At first, it appeared as though Heidemann and Kujau might get away with their crime. But soon doubts were raised. Skeptics quickly spotted errors in the diaries. Kujau had based the writings on a 1962 book by Max Domarus. So, of course, he repeated some of the same errors Domarus made. For instance, one entry has Hitler recalling a meeting with a top general. The general congratulated Hitler on his 50th year of military service. But Hitler was only 48 years old at the time. It was the general who had 50 years of service.

¹⁰ Kujau also repeated an error about the size of the crowd at one of Hitler's rallies. The real number was about 130,000 people. Both Domarus and Kujau pegged the number at half a million.

¹¹ Even when confronted with these errors, the editors at *Stern* held their ground. They had too much invested in the story to give up without a fight. The magazine's reputation was on the line. Also, it had shelled out \$4.1 million to buy the volumes. Editor-in-Chief Koch flew to New York to defend the diaries. He spoke on national TV. "I expected the uproar," Koch said. "[I] expected that many incompetent people would denounce the diaries as fakes. This is because every other publishing house will envy our story."

¹² But the evidence against the diaries kept mounting. Some people said they knew the diaries were phony even without reading them. First, they pointed out, there had never even been a rumor that Hitler had kept a diary. Rather, it was well known that Hitler hated to write. He almost always dictated his notes or letters to a secretary. Even his one book, *Mein Kampf*, had been dictated. So why would he have written so many entries over such a long time? And how could he have kept it a secret from everyone? James O'Donnell, an expert on Hitler, said, "It is beyond possibility that Hitler would have kept diaries without [anyone] knowing about it."

¹³ There were other problems. The handwriting in the diaries was all the same. But in 1944, Hitler barely survived a bombing attempt on his life. His writing arm was badly injured. The diaries had him penning an entry with no difficulty on the very day of his injury. Further, near the end of his life Hitler suffered from palsy, a nervous disease. Yet his handwriting showed no signs of a shaky hand.

¹⁴ The diaries themselves were the final giveaway. Kujau wrote the fake diaries in notebooks bound in imitation leather. Why would Hitler, who could afford the best, use such cheap notebooks? These books were supposedly kept over a 13-year span. Yet they did not differ from each other even a little bit. In addition, the pages were unstained, unworn. That was odd, since the early diaries had to be more than 50 years old. Finally, there came the chemical analysis. It removed all doubt. The paper and the binding had polyester fibers that did not come into use until after Hitler's death.

¹⁵ The fallout came fast and heavy. Heidemann was quickly fired. "We have kicked him out," announced Henri Nannen, the publisher of *Stern*. "I am now convinced he knew the diaries were forgeries." Peter Koch and three other *Stern* editors also were either fired or resigned. A red-faced Nannen confessed, "We have some reason to be ashamed." It took *Stern* several years to recover from the scandal and win back its readers.

¹⁶ In 1985, Gerd Heidemann and Konrad Kujau were tried for the swindle. They were both found guilty and sentenced to four years in prison. In his written confession, Kujau kept his sense of humor. At the end of his confession, in fine Hitler form, he added, "I admit having written the Hitler diaries. It took me two years to perfect my handwriting. [Signed] Adolf Hitler."