

The Market for Hitler

Stephen Berry

Review of **Robert Harris'** *Selling Hitler*
London, 1991.

At the beginning of April 1983 the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, recently ennobled as the first Baron Dacre of Glanton, met the London representative of the German magazine *Stern* at Heathrow. A former Regius Professor of History at Oxford, Trevor-Roper's many honours included the position of Independent National Director of Times Newspapers. It was in this role that he had been asked to fly to Zurich to verify the literary find of the 20th century. On the plane to Zurich Trevor-Roper regaled Wickman, the *Stern* representative, with his views on the ineffable superiority of Oxford over Cambridge. The German's views on the eccentricity of Englishmen must have been amply confirmed as Trevor-Roper told him that leaving an Oxford professorship for a Cambridge mastership was rather like becoming a colonial governor. In Zurich the historian was taken to a room on the ground floor of the Handelsbank. On a table there were fifty-eight volumes of diaries in a stack more than two feet high. In addition there was a bound volume of drawings and paintings, and a First World War helmet, all purportedly Hitler's. Only the Fuhrer's underpants were missing. Trevor-Roper later described it as a 'whole coherent archive covering 35 years'. The *Stern* men met his queries one by one so that Lord Dacre of Glanton became absolutely convinced of the diaries' authenticity. His glittering reputation - and that of many others - was about to be irredeemably tarnished.

How did the greatest fraud since the formation of the state come to pass? Gerd Heidemann, a *Stern* journalist had become obsessed with the Nazi era. Although chronically short of money, he had purchased Goering's old yacht, renovated it, and used it to hold parties for old Nazis. Through these contacts he had been directed to one Konrad Kujau (alias Fischer) in Stuttgart. 'Conny', as he was commonly

known, convinced Heidemann that he could obtain Hitler's diaries through his brother in East Germany. Heidemann convinced the people at *Stern*, who in turn provided millions of marks. Over a three year period Kujau passed on the diaries to Heidemann who in turn passed on the money to Kujau. Unknown to each other, Heidemann was not passing on the full amount of money to Kujau, and Kujau was not passing on Hitler's diaries to Heidemann. In actual fact, Kujau was producing a competent (but not brilliant) forgery which Heidemann and friends were all too willing to accept. Eventually, *Stern* decided to publish the diaries and submitted them for forensic tests and checks for historical accuracy. The scientists knew a fraud when they met one. The historians, frankly, could not make up their minds.

This is a good story and Robert Harris tells it well. Naturally there were many comic moments in this epic saga of self-deception. Before forging the diaries Kujau had extracted a pretty penny out of forging Hitler's paintings for a German businessman, Fritz Stiefel. A female nude signed, 'Adolf Hitler', but in reality by Kujau, was a poor copy of *Bathing in the Bergsee* by Julius Englehard. When Kujau sold this painting to Stiefel, he showed him a copy of the Englehard painting and cheekily accused Hitler of plagiarism! When Heidemann contacts Kujau for the first time by phone, Kujau confirms that he can indeed get the diaries. In addition, he can also get the handwritten third volume of *Mein Kampf* and an opera by Hitler called *Wieland the Blacksmith*. Heidemann laps it up. Then there was Billy F. Price from Texas. Price had one of the best collections of Hitler's paintings in the world and was generally fascinated by the man. After the forgery had been exposed, Price remarked, 'People say that Hitler couldn't have kept diaries. They say he couldn't have done this, he couldn't have done that - shit Hitler could paint paintings, he could write operas. Hell, he controlled more real estate than the Roman empire within three years. There's nothing that Hitler couldn't have done if he set his mind to it'. In 1984 *Adolf Hitler as Painter and Draughtsman* by Billy F. Price and August Priesack (ex-Nazi and Hitler expert)

came out. It contained over one hundred and fifty of Kujau's forgeries. It seemed that it was Kujau who could do anything.

Harris spends less time on the 'lessons' of the episode, but he does offer a few pointers. Whilst historians and journalists dithered, the 'natural' scientists at the Bundesarchiv demolished the fraud. The paper of the diary contained chemical whitener which had not existed prior to 1955. The labels stuck on the front of the diaries had all been typed on the same machine. The typewriter came from the correct period, but although the labels attached to the 1934 diary and the Hess volume of 1941 were supposedly typed seven years apart, there was no evidence of wear on the typeface. The four varieties of ink used in the diaries were common in West German shops and did not match inks available during the war. By measuring the evaporation of chloride from the ink, the scientists established that the Hess volume had been written within the last two years whilst the writing in the 1943 diary was less than one year old.

With this as background, it did not take long to discover the forger's main source, *Hitler's Speeches and Proclamations* by Max Domarus. If there was nothing in Domarus, there was nothing in the diary. If there was a mistake in Domarus, 'Hitler' repeated the error. Domarus recorded a telegram to Hitler from General Ritter von Epp congratulating him on fifty years in the army. In reality the telegram was from Hitler to Von Epp. Kujau copied this error, word for word.

The saga reveals how foolish it was to rely on expert authentication when that expert came from the social or psychological sciences, (particularly if the expert - Trevor-Roper - had a feeble grasp of German). When *The Times* sought to authenticate the Mussolini diaries, it engaged experts, including the author of the standard work on Mussolini, and a famous handwriting expert. Not one expert spotted the fraud. Particularly worthy of comment is the 'science' of handwriting, or holography as the practitioners call it. Kujau was like Clifford Irving, the forger of the Howard Hughes autobiography. They did not copy out works in a slow and tedious manner; they wrote in another person's hand at virtually the same

speed as their own. As Irving noted, once you could do one page, you could easily do twenty. The handwriting experts could not spot the impostor and were just as indecisive as the historians.

People could not and did not want to believe that the Hitler diaries were concocted by one otherwise unremarkable man. Radio Moscow alleged that the affair was a CIA plot. Jeanne Kirkpatrick detected the hand of an East European intelligence agency, and there were many who smelt the handiwork of an old SS network. The discovery of Hitler's diaries merely served to amply confirm theories which all these people already held.

I dogmatically hold to an opposite belief. Without prior evidence, I would not be surprised if a determined, lone individual of limited talents, through a process involving blunder and counter-blunder, could achieve the remarkable. Van der Lubbe burnt down the Reichstag all by himself, though people (depending on their political persuasion) still want to believe it was the Nazis or the Communists. Oswald shot Kennedy, James Earl Ray shot Luther King, Chapman shot Lennon and Hinckley shot Reagan because they wanted to make a splash, not because they were working for the KGB, the CIA or Ron Lafayette Hubbard. The First World War broke out after an Austrian Archduke's car in Sarajevo turned up the wrong road and stopped by a cafe where a Serbian nationalist was sitting, cursing his luck at having missed his hour of glory. I could almost certainly kill John Major if I had the inclination, and was willing to take a few pains. Like most people, I would not get sufficient of a 'kick' from killing the man. Nor would I enjoy the almost inevitable capture and the following years in a mental asylum (It seems you have to be mad to kill a politician these days). The simple truth is that Kujau gave the punters what they wanted. In Britain, Bison Books was built entirely on the public's fascination with the Nazis. *Hitler's Wartime Picture Magazine*, a reprint of extracts from *Signal*, the Nazi propaganda magazine, sold 250,000 copies in the UK and USA. It reprinted eight times between 1976 and 1978. As Bison's founder Sidney Mayer said, 'Hitler sells. Nazis sell. Swastikas sell - and they sell better and better... Nobody can out-swastika us. I've even thought of putting one on our

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vegetable cookbook because Hitler was a vegetarian.' On the wall of his office Mayer had a large picture of himself with a small Hitler moustache and the caption 'Spring-time for Mayer'. In this light the major question concerning Kujau must be the same as that for Hitler. Not, how did he manage to get so far? Rather, how in the end could he possibly have failed?

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