

# THE REICHSTAG FIRE

By L. BERNSTEIN

- THE SECOND OF THREE ARTICLES ON A CRITICAL EPISODE IN MODERN TIMES

*“This is a God-given signal! If this fire, as I believe, turns out to be the handiwork of Communists, then there is nothing that shall stop us now crushing out this murder pest with an iron fist. You are witnessing the beginning of a great new epoch in German history. This fire is the beginning.”*

Adolf Hitler. Statement to Sefton Delmer of the London Daily Express on the night of the Reichstag fire: February 27, 1933.

Every great moment of change in history has its date, however long may be the story of strife and turmoil that leads up to change. For Germany, imperialist Germany, that date was February 27, 1933, the night the Reichstag burned to the ground. The Germany which went to bed that night a sick and stricken democratic republic awoke next day to an iron-fisted dictatorship. If one is to put a date to the Nazi dictatorship, then the Reichstag fire is its beginning.

Such events are never accidental. The Reichstag fire was planned, as the Boston Tea Party and the November 7th uprising were planned. Nor was it planned to appear as accident. It was planned to proclaim itself deliberate arson. Flames broke out at seven or more places in the building simultaneously. Torches and tar were scattered about for all to see. And one of the firebugs remained on the premises to be arrested, leaving his jacket at the scene of the starting of the fire and carrying a membership card of the Dutch Communist Party in his pocket. This man was Marinus van der Lubbe. And this too was planned.

And there was much more to the Reichstag fire that was planned beforehand. Clumsily planned, because, perhaps, it was never intended to bring the firebugs to trial before an open court. Because, perhaps, it was intended only that the mailed fist of Nazism should come down — as it did on the very night of the fire — on all the enemies of Hitler's New Order, on communists and Social Democrats and trade unionists and pacifists; and that the quiet of the concentration camp should close over the whole affair.

But the plan miscarried. The eyes of the world were on Germany in those days of change. Press correspondents poked fingers through the flimsy concoctions of the Hitler State Information Office. Terror had not yet bitten deep enough to prevent honest Germans speaking out the bits of truth they knew. Perhaps it was intended that Van der Lubbe should be shuffled off, quietly, having played out his part to the full. But the intention could not be fulfilled; for the word began to go around the world that the Nazis themselves had fired the Reichstag.

There was solid ground for the rumour. On March 2nd, for instance, the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* published a message from the official *Preussische Pressedienst*:

*"In certain foreign newspapers the slanderous assertion, emanating from German Marxist circles, is being circulated that the fire in the Reichstag building was organised not by Communists but from the National Socialist side. . . . Among other things it is asserted that the Dutch Communist who was arrested is in reality an agent provocateur, and was induced to carry out the act of incendiarism by leading National Socialists . . . . These slanderous arguments are of course devoid of any basis."*

The rumours were based on many things.

Mass arrests had begun by midnight on the night of the fire, which only started by 9 o'clock; and by February 28 in Berlin alone, 1,500 people had been arrested by warrants made out, signed and with photographs of the arrested person attached. Clearly these warrants had been prepared before the fire. On February 27 the whole of the storm troop forces in Berlin were confined to their barracks, and kept there all day awaiting further orders. At the height of an election campaign, Goering, Goebbels and Hitler were all in Berlin, none of them speaking at meetings on that night, although all were speaking at meetings almost daily before and after. The Reichstag officials and staff were released from duty earlier than usual on that day by Goering's orders. Herr Gemp, chief fire brigade director of Berlin, had complained that Goering had expressly forbidden him to circulate a general call to all fire-stations for aid in fighting the fire, and the storm troops had been summoned and reached the fire before the fire brigade. On March 1 an official Government statement said that ". . . other criminals may have been able to escape through the underground passage . . . which connects the Reichstag building itself with the building of the President of the Reichstag". And the President of the Reichstag, Hermann Goering, was also Minister of Police, and head of the storm-troop organisations.

The rumours were solidly founded. The accusing finger of world opinion swung round to point clearly at the Nazis as the criminals and firebugs of February 27th. Whether or not there was any original intention to bring a "Fire Trial" before the courts, the fierce spotlight of world attention made such a public trial inevitable if the Nazis were to justify themselves. But despite all the confident assertions that the fire was caused by Communists, there was only one man in custody definitely accused of the crime. That was Marinus van der Lubbe. There were others held in prison without charge.

## THE ACCUSED

There was Ernst Torgler, Chairman of the caucus of Communist members of the Reichstag, who had been arrested the day after the fire when, in the presence of his lawyer, he voluntarily entered police headquarters to rebut allegations that he had been involved in the fire. There were, also, three Bulgarian Communists, arrested in the general anti-Communist dragnet on March 3rd — Georgi Dimitrov, Tanev and Popov. During the weeks that followed the trial, hastily concocted tales were fabricated in Goering's ministries to "confirm" the guilt of the five men.

But the concocted tales served only to strengthen the suspicion that the Nazi Government had itself plotted and carried through the act of arson. Against Torgler it was alleged that he had been seen in the corridors of the Reichstag building with van der Lubbe at 8 p.m., an hour before the fire started; but it was also stated that he left the building only at 10 p.m., an hour after the fire started. No one in Goering's office asked the question immediately posed by the press: 'How did Torgler pass out through the police cordón, through the crowd of thousands which had assembled by 10 p.m. without any questions being asked?' Against Dimitrov it was alleged that he had been seen in Berlin with van der Lubbe a day before the fire; but the witness who swore to the allegation disappeared before he could be questioned further and confronted with proof that on that day Dimitrov was not in Berlin, but in Munich.

By March 27th, a full month after the fire, investigating Judge Vogt created a world sensation by announcing to the press that, at that date, the only charge sheet and summons so far prepared was against van der Lubbe. No one in Germany or abroad, could be brought to believe that this dull-witted and insignificant character could have carried through the crime alone. The pertinent question was raised: 'Are the criminals shielding behind the Nazi rulers?' On April 3rd, Judge Vogt, bowing to the storm of criticism, announced that ". . . warrants for protective arrest have been issued in respect of a few other suspected persons." And on June 2nd, came the startling announcement that van der Lubbe, Torgler, Dimitrov, Popov and Tanev were to be charged with "setting fire to the Reichstag and high treason." (My emphasis. L.B.) The high treason charge had come as an afterthought, a hasty, ill-conceived afterthought, by those whose frame-up was being unmasked as fast as it was planned.

By April 22nd, the intention became clearer. "The Supreme Court" said a statement issued by Judge Vogt, "proposes to combine the investigation in the many cases of high treason against members of the Communist Party into one single inquiry on a vast scale . . . The cases concerned are all those arising in connection with the change of Government in Germany . . . during the course of January and February. This will also include the proceedings connected with the act of incendiarism in the Reichstag." But a month later, this grand plan had been shot full of holes, and an announcement from the official parliamentary news bureau announced: "That the trial in connection with the act of incendiarism in the Reichstag will be associated with other cases against the Communist leaders in a great Communist trial, as is suggested, is not to be expected." Nothing more was ever heard of the "Treason Trial."

It is necessary to turn to the man van der Lubbe. At the age of sixteen he had joined the Young Communist League in Leyden (Holland), and resigned a few years later when his ambition to become leader of the Pioneer movement was thwarted. He rejoined the same year, and resigned again after a conflict with the leadership of the Y.C.L. Again he rejoined a year later, and in 1937 resigned again when the question of his expulsion was under discussion. In 1931 he visited Germany, and met a Dr. Bell, and through him the influential Nazi Captain Röhm. The anarchistic tendencies which had led to his breach with the Y.C.L. finally led him into prison, for breaking the windows at the office of an unemployment relief organisation, after his claim for increased allowances had been turned down. On his release from prison towards the end of 1932, he spoke at a number of meetings, vigorously attacking communism; some of these meetings were held by the Dutch fascist organisation. In January 1933 he left Holland for Germany.

### GEORGI DIMITROV

And it necessary to turn to the other figure, Georgi Dimitrov — the man who came to hold the centre of the stage at the Reichstag Fire Trial. At the time of the trial he was fifty years old. All his life he had been a revolutionary; at fifteen he had joined the workers revolutionary movement in Bulgaria, and at eighteen had become secretary of the country's oldest trade union, the Print Workers Union. At the age of twenty, in 1902, he joined the Marxist wing of the Social Democratic Party, and rose over the years to become a County Councillor, a member of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party and General Secretary of the Central Committee of Bulgarian trade unions. There is no struggle of the working class of Bulgaria in the twentieth century with which the name of Georgi Dimitrov is not associated. Finally in 1923, Dimitrov headed an armed uprising — was forced to leave the country, being sentenced, in absentia, to 15 years imprisonment. But he continued his life as a professional revolutionary, as a member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International and one of its foremost organisers against fascism.

(In his third and final article, Mr. Bernstein deals with Dimitrov's defence in the Reichstag fire trial. It will be published in the next issue of LIBERATION.)