

'Ich übergebe der Flamme die Schriften...'

THE SYMBOLISM IN THE BURNING OF BOOKS BY STUDENTS IN BERLIN 1933

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In the spring of 1933, students at German universities raided libraries and staged public and dramatically effective burnings of books that they deemed 'un-German'. In the light of torches, accompanied by marching band music and officers of the SA in uniform (*Sturmabteilung*, the paramilitary organisation of the National Socialist party), the students burnt the works of authors like Karl Marx, Thomas Mann, Sigmund Freud, Erich Maria Remarque and Erich Kästner. The bases for their selection of books were blacklists published by the Ministry for Propaganda of the Third Reich earlier that year. In accordance with these lists, the texts of 71 authors were banned because their works were considered to be 'impure', Jewish, defeatist or decadent.¹ Many of these authors were associated with the labour movement, the enlightenment, humanism or pacifism.²

The German Student Union (*Deutsche Studentenschaft*), which was responsible for the events, had been dominated by National Socialists since 1931.³ In April 1933 they launched a campaign that went under the rallying cry 'Against the un-German spirit',⁴ and included boycotting professors (especially Jewish ones) and publishing articles supporting their goal of spreading National Socialist ideals. The campaign culminated in the burning of around 20,000 books in Berlin on 10 May 1933.⁵ Even though similar events took place at other universities, this was the most important one because not only did the Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, give a speech (Fig. 1), but it was also widely covered by the media.⁶ In a radio programme broadcast live by most of the German stations between 11 and 12pm that night,⁷ the proclamation of nine beforehand-determined fire incantations is clearly audible. Elected students declared the values of National Socialist ideology and what they opposed, before throwing the books into the flames with the words 'Ich übergebe der Flamme die Schriften von [...]'.⁸



Figure 1. Joseph Goebbels delivers a speech during the book burning on the Opernplatz in Berlin. Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

However, not all titles that were on the index of forbidden books were burnt, and some valuable editions were kept behind closed doors.⁹ This book burning was not only the destruction of ink, glue and paper to obliterate the material books themselves, but it was carried out to have a symbolic meaning. The National Socialists widely used symbolic communication and in particular public defamation as propaganda methods.¹⁰ Mass events were often orchestrated to give the impression of a ritual and tried to evoke strong emotional responses in the spectators. In this case, the aforementioned *Feuersprüche* and the general atmosphere were supposed to provoke a state of wild enthusiasm, but also disgust for the disdained books (and authors).¹¹

Book burnings in general can have various symbolic meanings. They can be seen as an attack on literary freedom and on a society that values it, on the authors or on intellectual heritage. They can also be a display of authority over what is allowed to be thought and read. This short article focuses on the dimensions of the symbolism specific to the book burning in Berlin in May 1933.

The first aspect in this regard is that the event was supposed to symbolise the beginning of a new era. In his speech, Joseph Goebbels made this point very clear by stating that '[t]he era of exaggerated Jewish intellectualism is now over', making way for a 'German revolution', where people were not people of the book

Ich übergebe der Flamme die Schriften... I hand over to the flame the works of...

1	Gegen Klassenkampf und Materialismus Für Volksgemeinschaft und idealistische Lebenshaltung Marx, Kautzky	Against class struggle and materialism For the people's community and an idealistic way of life Marx, Kautzky
2	Gegen Dekadenz und moralischen Verfall Für Zucht und Sitte in Familie und Staat Heinrich Mann, Ernst Glaeser, Erich Kästner	Against decadence and moral decay For discipline and decency in family and nation Heinrich Mann, Ernst Glaeser, Erich Kästner
3	Gegen Gesinnungslumperei und politischen Verrat Für Hingabe an Volk und Staat F.W. Förster	Against opportunism and political treason For devotion to the people and the nation F.W. Förster
4	Gegen seelenzerfasernde Ueberschätzung des Trieblebens Für den Adel der menschlichen Seele Sigmund Freud	Against soul-shattering emphasis on sexuality For the nobility of the human soul Sigmund Freud
5	Gegen Verfälschung unserer Geschichte und Herabwürdigung ihrer großen Gestalten Für Ehrfurcht vor unserer Vergangenheit Emil Ludwig, Werner Hegemann	Against the distortion of our history and the disparagement of our notables For respect for our past Emil Ludwig, Werner Hegemann
6	Gegen volksfremden Journalismus demokratisch-jüdischer Prägung Für verantwortungsbewusste Mitarbeit am Werk des nationalen Aufbaus Theodor Wolff, Georg Bernhard	Against democratic-Jewish journalism that is alien to the people For responsible participation in the building of the nation Theodor Wolff, Georg Bernhard
7	Gegen literarischen Verrat an den Soldaten des Weltkrieges Für Erziehung des Volkes im Geiste der Wehrhaftigkeit Erich Maria Remarque	Against literary treason against the soldiers of the world war For education of the people in the spirit of the readiness to fight Erich Maria Remarque
8	Gegen dünkelfhafte Verhuzung der deutschen Sprache Für Pflege des kostbarsten Gutes unseres Volkes Alfred Kerr	Against the conceited ruining of the German language For the cultivation of the most precious good of the nation Alfred Kerr
9	Gegen Frechheit und Anmaßung Für Achtung und Ehrfurcht vor dem unsterblichen deutschen Volksgeist Tucholsky, Ossietzky	Against impudence and arrogance For respect and reverence for the eternal German spirit Tucholsky, Ossietzky

Table 1. Feuersprüche. German version and own translation after: Bücherverbrennung 33, 'Feuersprüche', <<http://www.buecherverbrennung33.de/feuersprueche.html>> (29 April 2016).

(as Jews were traditionally seen),¹² but people of character.¹³ According to him, science and scholarship had been hiding behind files, folders and paragraphs, while a new Germany had been erected outside the universities. However, from this moment on, he hoped that everyone would unite behind the authorities of the Reich. Books generally stand for intellect, knowledge and wisdom, but what the National Socialists wanted was collective dedication to the nation, not individual critical thinking. This becomes clear in the first and third fire incantations (see Table 1), which make proclamations against what we now call capitalism and political treason, and for devotion to the nation and the people.¹⁴

Fire was an especially important element of National Socialist iconography.¹⁵ Bonfires were regularly lit at events for the entertainment of the crowd, similar to medieval witch burnings,¹⁶ but also at initiations of the Hitler youth.¹⁷ In the case of the book burnings, it functioned as a metaphor for renewal, as phrased by Goebbels:

You do well [...] to hand over the bad spirit of the past to the flames. This is a strong, great and symbolic act, an act that will document for the world: The spiritual basis of the November Republic [Weimar Republic] sinks to the ground, but the phoenix of a new spirit will rise victorious from these ruins.¹⁸

He asked the people to not only see the fire as symbol for the decline of the old era, but as the ascent of a new one, which, as he said, would arise from the flame of their hearts.

Another implication of the book burning was that of a 'cleansing' of what Goebbels called 'Jewish rubbish and filth'. Libraries were raided of blacklisted books and the students were to collect those titles from their friends and acquaintances. The burning was a means for the complete destruction of these books and for the 'sterilization' of the 'infectious' thoughts in them.¹⁹ This references the Nazi's idea of racial hygiene and their obsession with *Volksgesundheit* (national health).

In the case of the public libricide central to this essay, there is a strong relation to another historic event: The Wartburg Festival of 1817. Here, 500 students of twelve different universities gathered to demonstrate for a protestant, patriotic renewal of a German nation-state.²⁰ In remembrance of Martin Luther's burning of the bull of excommunication in 1520,²¹ students and professors, chanting and equipped with torches, burned bales of paper carrying the titles of disdained books.²² Although the ideologies behind the two events were to some extent different, the quasi-religious, nationalistic character and the call for a 'rebirth' of the nation make for a strong relation between them and show that the ideology behind the Nazi book burning was not an isolated

event.

Until this Friday in May 1933 the culture politics of the National Socialists had been carried out mostly without the public.²³ The spectacle in Berlin was a statement to show the outside world the changes that had occurred in Germany since Hitler's seizure of power earlier that year. As such, it did not only bear a symbolic meaning for the German population, but also for the international community, displaying the power of the National Socialists.

To summarize, there were two important dimensions to the symbolism of the book burning in May 1933. On the one hand it showed the external and internal ringing in of a new era, built on the ashes of history, and on the other hand it functioned as the 'cleansing' from books and thoughts that were deemed dangerous and 'un-German'. Fire served as a central metaphor for both these notions. It did not suffice for the National Socialists to destroy the books; the public had to see what happened to thoughts that were not compliant with their ideology. This demonstrated that the National Socialists had proclaimed themselves as the authority over the minds and morals of the people. The event shows how complete the claim to power by the National Socialists was and in the following years the insight expressed by Heinrich Heine in one of his verses as early as 1821 sadly became a horrible truth:

***D**as war ein Vorspiel nur, dort wo
man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man
am Ende auch Menschen.²⁴*

Notes.

- 1 Fishburn, M. *Burning Books*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print. 31.
- 2 Bock, S. '„Geglüht und gehärtet?“ Zu Funktionen und Folgen der Bücherverbrennung 1933'. *Brennende Bücher. Erinnerungen an den 10. Mai 1933*. Eds. M. Bircken and H. Peitsch. Potsdam: Brandenburgisch Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2003. 58-83. Print. 67.
- 3 Ibid. 63.
- 4 All translations are made by the author. German original: 'Wider den undeutschen Geist'.
- 5 Bock. '„Geglüht und gehärtet?“'. 79.
- 6 Fishburn. *Burning Books*. 35.
- 7 Puth, Klaus Peter. '10.05.1933: Bücherverbrennung – Radioübertragung'. *Rundfunk, Historie und Radio-Fernempfang*. 23 June 2015. Web. 6 December 2015.
- 8 'I hand over to the flame the works of [...].'
- 9 Fishburn. *Burning Books*. 37.
- 10 Benz, W. 'Der Kulturskandal: Mythos, Tradition und Wirkung der Bücherverbrennung. Ansprüche auf kulturelle Hegemonie und ihre Durchsetzung'. *Brennende Bücher. Erinnerungen an den 10. Mai 1933*. Eds. M. Bircken and H. Peitsch. Potsdam: Brandenburgisch Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2003. 24-38. Print. 30.
- 11 Lowenthal, Leo and Carol Hamilton. 'Caliban's Legacy'. *Cultural Critique* 8 (1987): 5-17, 13. Web. 5 April 2016.; Bock. '„Geglüht und gehärtet?“'. 67.
- 12 Lowenthal and Hamilton. 'Caliban's Legacy'. 14.
- 13 Heiber, Helmut. *Goebbels-Reden: Band 1: 1932-1939*. Düsseldorf: Droste, 1971. Print. 108-112.
- 14 Bücherverbrennung 33. 'Feuersprüche'. Web. 29 April 2016.
- 15 Fishburn. *Burning Books*. 35.
- 16 Bock. '„Geglüht und gehärtet?“'. 79.
- 17 Fishburn. *Burning Books*. 36.
- 18 Heiber. *Goebbels-Reden*. 108-112.
- 19 Lowenthal and Hamilton. 'Caliban's Legacy'. 10, 12.
- 20 Benz. 'Der Kulturskandal'. 25.
- 21 In 1520 Martin Luther burned the papal bull that excommunicated him from the Catholic church, along with the book of church law, to protest against Roman Catholicism.
- 22 Lowenthal and Hamilton. 'Caliban's Legacy'. 16.
- 23 Bock. '„Geglüht und gehärtet?“'. 65.
- 24 Heine, H. *Almansor. Eine Tragödie*. Berlin: Hofenberg, 2015. Print. 11. 'That was a prelude only, where one burns books, in the end one will also burn humans.'