# The Hitler diaries hoax: how forged journals fooled the world in 1983



In April 1983, one of the most remarkable journalistic episodes unfolded when the German magazine Stern and the British newspaper The Sunday Times announced the discovery of what they claimed were the private diaries of Adolf Hitler. The revelation, initially hailed as an extraordinary historical find, soon unraveled into a notorious hoax that cost millions and damaged the reputations of several individuals and institutions.

On 25 April 1983, Stern published its exclusive report on the supposed diaries, which contained handwritten journals spanning from 1932 to 1945, covering the entirety of Hitler’s Third Reich. The diaries were described as resembling school exercise books, sealed with a swastika and eagle emblem, and filled with Hitler’s distinctive gothic handwriting. The content presented previously unknown aspects of Hitler’s life, including personal afflictions like flatulence and halitosis, interactions with Eva Braun, and even notes about sending birthday greetings to Stalin. Remarkably, some entries suggested that Hitler was unaware of the Holocaust occurring during his regime.

The diaries were said to have been discovered through Stern journalist Gerd Heidemann, a known collector of Nazi memorabilia. Heidemann claimed that the notebooks originated from a plane crash in East Germany and had eventually come into the possession of an East German collector. Acting as an intermediary, Heidemann negotiated their purchase for Stern, with the magazine paying approximately 9.3 million Deutschmarks (£2.3 million). To safeguard the prized documents, Stern stored them in a Swiss vault.

The initial authentication process included handwriting experts, historians, and chemical tests, although Stern limited the experts’ access to only select pages. Among the historians was Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper, also known as Lord Dacre of Glanton, a respected specialist on Nazi Germany and an independent director of The Times. Initially sceptical, Lord Dacre’s reservations diminished after viewing the vast archive, which included not only diaries but drawings, paintings, and personal documents like Hitler’s party card. This led him to declare the diaries authentic and write a supporting article in The Times.

The announcement sparked a bidding war over serialisation rights. Rupert Murdoch, proprietor of The Sunday Times, personally negotiated the deal in Zurich. The Sunday Times rushed the publication of its exclusive story, despite internal doubts and previous experience of a diary forgery scandal involving Benito Mussolini’s supposed diaries.

However, within days, serious doubts emerged. Lord Dacre began expressing uncertainties, admitting to being rushed into his initial endorsement. At the Stern press conference, whilst their editor Peter Koch reaffirmed the diaries’ authenticity, Lord Dacre publicly confessed to having second thoughts. Additional scrutiny by experts, including US autograph dealer Charles Hamilton, revealed glaring inconsistencies. Chemical analysis showed that the paper, glue, and ink dated from after World War Two. The diaries contained anachronisms, modern language, and factual errors, such as referencing information Hitler could not have known.

The scandal broke wide open when it was discovered that the diaries were forgeries created by Konrad Kujau, a skilled but unrefined artist and prolific Nazi memorabilia forger. Kujau had copied content from a published book on Hitler’s speeches, including its errors, and embellished the diaries with imagined mundane entries. His attempts at ageing the documents were amateurish, involving pouring tea on the pages and physically distressing the notebooks. Ironically, many “authentic” Hitler documents used for comparison in the authentication process were also forgeries by Kujau.

Heidemann admitted to collaboration with Kujau and was found to have inflated prices and skimmed money to support his extravagant lifestyle, which included restoring a yacht once owned by Hermann Göring and collecting various dictators’ memorabilia. Both men were convicted of fraud and forgery in 1985, receiving prison sentences.

The fallout was significant: Lord Dacre’s reputation as a historian was permanently damaged; Stern’s editor-in-chief and other staff lost their positions; The Sunday Times editor Frank Giles was removed; and Murdoch later acknowledged the publication as a major mistake during the 2012 Leveson Inquiry into media ethics. Despite the embarrassment, Murdoch’s newspaper experienced a boost in circulation, and contractual clauses ensured he recouped the money paid to Stern when the diaries were proven fake.

Reflecting on the episode, Charles Hamilton had predicted the scandal would become “a great hoax in the history of mankind,” a characterisation that the events ultimately substantiated. The Hitler diaries affair remains a cautionary tale on the challenges of verifying historical documents and the impact of sensational journalism.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hitler-Diaries> - This source corroborates the overall story of the Hitler Diaries being a major journalistic hoax in 1983 involving forged diaries attributed to Adolf Hitler, their purchase by the German magazine Stern, and the involvement of British newspaper The Sunday Times, including the false belief in their authenticity and the costly fallout.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hitler_Diaries> - This article supports details about the initial skepticism, the forensic analysis that exposed the diaries as fake, and the involvement of historians like Hugh Trevor-Roper (Lord Dacre), as well as the background to the hoax including the false claim that the diaries originated from a plane crash in East Germany.
* <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/science/hitler-diaries-hoax> - This source provides information on the nature of the forgery, the use of forensic testing revealing that the materials dated from after World War II, and confirms the involvement of Konrad Kujau as the forger and Gerd Heidemann as the Stern journalist who facilitated the sale.
* <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/upk_european_history/11/> - This publication discusses the sensational nature of the Hitler Diaries discovery and subsequent exposure as a hoax, including the trial and public reaction, supporting the article’s points about the scale and impact of the scandal.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugh_Trevor-Roper> - This page details Hugh Trevor-Roper’s involvement as a historian who initially authenticated the diaries before expressing doubts, corroborating the article’s description of his role and damaged reputation following the scandal.