# The fake Hitler diaries scandal: how history’s most infamous forgery fooled the world



In April 1983, a major scandal unfolded in the world of journalism and historical research when a respected German magazine, Stern, together with the British newspaper The Sunday Times, announced the sensational discovery of Adolf Hitler's private diaries. Published on 25 April, this supposed historical scoop claimed to reveal previously unknown insights into the Nazi dictator, captivating global headlines. However, the diaries were ultimately exposed as an elaborate hoax, resulting in widespread embarrassment, financial losses, and damaged reputations.

The claimed diaries comprised 60 volumes, reportedly penned by Hitler between 1932 and 1945, covering the entire era of the Third Reich. Stern's London editor, Peter Wickman, told BBC News just days before the announcement that the magazine was "absolutely convinced" of their authenticity. Wickman described the diaries as resembling school exercise books with hard covers, sealed with swastikas and eagles, and written in Hitler's distinctive spidery gothic handwriting.

The diaries purportedly revealed unexpected details of Hitler's personal life, including his struggles with flatulence and halitosis, his girlfriend Eva Braun's insistence on obtaining Olympic tickets, and even a birthday telegram sent to Joseph Stalin. Perhaps most startlingly, the diaries suggested that Hitler was unaware of the Holocaust perpetrated in his name.

The sensational find was attributed to Stern journalist Gerd Heidemann, known for his obsession with Nazi memorabilia. Heidemann had previously bought and restored Hermann Göring's yacht and was involved romantically with Göring's daughter. He claimed the diaries were salvaged from a plane crash in East Germany and later came into the possession of an East German collector, from whom he negotiated the purchase on behalf of Stern. The magazine invested approximately 9.3 million Deutschmarks (£2.3 million) to acquire the volumes, which were then stored in a Swiss vault for safekeeping.

Leading historian Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper, also known as Lord Dacre of Glanton, was among the first to examine the diaries. Renowned for his 1947 book The Last Days of Hitler, he initially approached the documents with scepticism but was gradually persuaded of their authenticity, urged in part by chemical tests suggesting the diaries were pre-war. The sheer volume and variety of the material, including sketches, paintings by Hitler, and personal documents, further influenced his opinion. Charles Douglas-Home, editor of The Times, remarked on the difficulty of forging such a comprehensive archive, saying "a forger would have to be very good to forge across that whole range."

Lord Dacre went so far as to write an article endorsing the diaries, suggesting they might prompt a re-evaluation of Nazi history. A bidding war for publishing rights ensued, and Rupert Murdoch, proprietor of The Sunday Times, personally negotiated to acquire the serialisation rights.

Despite scepticism from within The Sunday Times itself—stemming from a prior experience with forged Benito Mussolini diaries—the publication, propelled by Murdoch's determination, went ahead with the release of the story. Editor Frank Giles sought reassurance from Lord Dacre, only to learn that the historian was having second doubts, likening it to a "180-degree turn" in opinion. Murdoch rejected the hesitation, reportedly saying, "Just because Dacre has been vacillating for all this time, screw him, we'll publish."

Following a press conference hosted by Stern, where editor-in-chief Peter Koch affirmed complete confidence in the diaries, Lord Dacre publicly admitted that his earlier authentication had been premature. "I must say as a historian, I regret that the normal methods of historical verification have, perhaps necessarily, been to some extent sacrificed to the requirements of the journalistic scoop," he conceded.

Shortly thereafter, Charles Hamilton, a US autographs dealer, voiced strong doubts on BBC Breakfast, asserting he could "smell the ebullient odour of forgeries" upon first seeing the diaries. Indeed, within weeks, detailed forensic analysis confirmed the diaries were counterfeit. Testing revealed that the paper, ink, and glue were manufactured after World War Two, and the diaries contained anachronisms, modern expressions, and factual errors inconsistent with Hitler's time.

The ultimate forger was identified as Konrad Kujau, an artist and prolific Nazi memorabilia counterfeiter. Kujau had pieced together the diaries by plagiarising sections of Max Domarus's book Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945, including its errors. He added fictitious, mundane entries reflecting Hitler's daily life, such as frustrations over visits to Eva Braun and complaints about bad breath. Kujau's efforts to artificially age the diaries were crude, involving pouring tea over pages and physically damaging them. Notably, he mistakenly labelled the diaries with the initials "FH" instead of "AH".

Compounding the deception, Stern had supplied experts with other supposedly genuine Hitler documents authored by Kujau himself, inadvertently aiding the forged diaries' initial acceptance. Kujau was arrested, confessed, and was sentenced to four-and-a-half years in prison in 1985.

Gerd Heidemann was also found guilty of fraud for inflating the acquisition costs of the diaries and pocketing the surplus, which funded his extravagant lifestyle, including maintaining the restored Göring yacht and accumulating further Nazi artifacts. Heidemann contended that he had been deceived, but Kujau maintained that he was complicit. Heidemann received a prison sentence of four years and eight months.

The scandal severely impacted reputations: Lord Dacre's standing as a historian was irreparably damaged, Stern's editors, including Peter Koch, lost their positions, and Frank Giles was removed as editor of The Sunday Times. Rupert Murdoch later acknowledged to the Leveson Inquiry in 2012 that publishing the story was "a major mistake I made, I take full responsibility for it."

However, The Sunday Times' circulation increased as a result of the exclusive, and Murdoch benefited financially through an agreed clause requiring Stern to refund payments if the diaries proved fraudulent.

This episode stands as a striking example of the challenges faced by both historians and journalists in verifying extraordinary claims, illustrating the complexities involved in authentication and the consequences when scepticism is sidelined in pursuit of a scoop.

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

## References

* <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hitler-Diaries> - This article corroborates the claim that the Hitler Diaries consisted of 60 volumes produced by forger Konrad Kujau and that the German magazine Stern bought them believing they were authentic, which led to a major scandal in 1983. It also confirms Rupert Murdoch’s Sunday Times involvement and their previous experience with forged Mussolini diaries.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hitler_Diaries> - The Wikipedia page supports the details about the forensic analysis revealing the diaries' forgery, Historian Hugh Trevor-Roper's initial involvement and eventual doubts, and the broader context of the scandal including the interaction with Ernst Hancke and publication timeline.
* <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/science/hitler-diaries-hoax> - This source confirms that the Hitler Diaries hoax began with Stern's announcement and that forensic tests revealed post-WWII materials were used, exposing the diaries as forgeries, similarly describing the forged backstory crafted by Kujau and the resulting damage to journalism's credibility.
* <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/upk_european_history/11/> - The academic article outlines the sensational nature of the discovery, the scope of the sixty-two volumes, the hoax's exposure, and the trial, aligning with the narrative of the scandal’s progression and its impact on public and historical discourse.
* <https://www.historyextra.com/period/second-world-war/hitler-diaries-hoax-fake-forger-konrad-kujau-stern-history-facts/> - This history-focused article details the role of Stern journalist Gerd Heidemann, the storage of diaries, the involvement of Hugh Trevor-Roper, and the forensic evidence that led to the exposure of Kujau as the forger, matching key points of the article about the scandal and its aftermath.