# The Hitler diaries scandal: a notorious journalistic hoax unmasked



In April 1983, a major media sensation unfolded when German magazine Stern and the British newspaper The Sunday Times announced the discovery of Adolf Hitler’s private diaries, purportedly revealing new and startling insights into the Nazi leader’s life. However, what initially appeared as an extraordinary historical revelation eventually emerged as one of the most infamous journalistic hoaxes of the 20th century, with far-reaching professional and financial consequences.

On 25 April 1983, Stern published excerpts from what it claimed were the genuine Hitler diaries—handwritten journals covering the years 1932 to 1945. The volumes, resembling school exercise books adorned with swastika seals and written in Hitler’s distinctive Gothic script, attracted enormous media attention worldwide. Stern’s editor in London, Peter Wickman, told BBC News of their conviction in the diaries’ authenticity: “We were very dubious at the beginning, but we had a graphologist looking at them, we had an expert who compared the paper. We had historians like Professor Trevor-Roper, and they are all convinced they are genuine.”

The diaries were said to have been unearthed by Stern journalist Gerd Heidemann, a known collector of Nazi memorabilia. His alleged source was an East German who salvaged the volumes from a plane crash and subsequently stored them before offering them for sale. Heidemann's connections within former Nazi circles, including an affair with Edda Göring, daughter of Hermann Göring, lent apparent credibility to the story.

Stern invested around 9.3 million Deutschmarks (£2.3 million) to acquire the diaries, which it kept securely in a Swiss vault pending publication. The magazine planned a high-profile press conference in Hamburg to reveal the find to the world press. Their intention was to rewrite aspects of Nazi history, with diary content that depicted unexpected, personal facets of Hitler’s life, from his health issues to personal anecdotes involving Eva Braun. Intriguingly, some entries purportedly suggested Hitler’s ignorance of the Holocaust, a highly contentious claim.

Central to the diaries’ initial validation was Professor Hugh Trevor-Roper (Lord Dacre of Glanton), a respected historian noted for his 1947 book The Last Days of Hitler. He initially remained sceptical but was persuaded by the scale of the documents and alleged chemical evidence suggesting pre-war origins. The Times editor Charles Douglas-Home remarked on the extensive archive, noting hundreds of notebooks and personal documents, including early paintings by Hitler. This vast collection was thought to be beyond the capability of any forger.

With the endorsement of Trevor-Roper and others, Rupert Murdoch, proprietor of The Sunday Times, swiftly secured serialisation rights and pushed for publication, despite reservations from certain staff members. On the eve of Stern’s announcement, The Sunday Times ran the story as a “world exclusive.”

However, scepticism persisted, including within The Sunday Times, whose investigative team recalled prior experiences with fraudulent fascist diaries. As doubts mounted, Trevor-Roper reconsidered and expressed serious reservations about the diaries’ authenticity, signalling a “180-degree turn.” Despite this reversal, Murdoch decided to proceed with publication.

During Stern’s press conference, Trevor-Roper publicly admitted to his doubts, lamenting the sacrifice of conventional historical verification for journalistic immediacy. The following day, US autograph dealer Charles Hamilton, speaking to BBC Breakfast, identified clear signs of forgery: “As soon as I saw the diaries’ pages I could smell the odour of forgeries... it will be a great hoax in the history of mankind.”

Subsequent forensic examinations confirmed the diaries were modern forgeries. Chemical tests showed paper, glue, and ink dated from after World War Two. The content contained anachronistic phrases and inaccuracies impossible for Hitler to have known. The Sunday Times immediately withdrew the serialisation and issued an apology, followed by Stern’s public admission of error.

The forger was revealed as Konrad Kujau, a German painter and prolific counterfeit artist specialising in Nazi memorabilia. Kujau’s method involved plagiarising text and errors from a 1970s edition of Max Domarus’s Hitler speeches, fabricating a mundane and intimate portrait of Hitler’s day-to-day life through invented entries. His attempts to age the diaries—such as pouring tea on pages and rough treatment—were amateurish. Kujau also included mistakes like the initials “FH” instead of “AH” (Adolf Hitler) on diary covers. Ironically, many “authentic” documents Stern used to validate handwriting were Kujau forgeries as well.

Heidemann, complicit in the scandal, was found to have exaggerated purchase costs and embezzled funds to finance his extravagant lifestyle, which included restoring a Nazi yacht and collecting rare memorabilia, with claims as bizarre as owning former Ugandan dictator Idi Amin’s underwear. Kujau and Heidemann were both convicted in 1985 of fraud and forgery, receiving prison sentences of four and a half years and four years and eight months, respectively.

The scandal inflicted lasting damage on those involved. Trevor-Roper’s scholarly reputation was permanently tarnished. Stern’s editor-in-chief Peter Koch and other senior editors lost their positions. The Sunday Times editor Frank Giles was also removed. Murdoch reflected on the episode years later at the 2012 Leveson Inquiry, acknowledging the publication as “a major mistake I made, I take full responsibility for it. I will have to live with it for the rest of my life.” Yet, paradoxically, the scoop increased newspaper sales, and Murdoch profited financially due to contractual clauses requiring Stern to refund payments if the diaries proved fake.

The Hitler diaries hoax remains a cautionary episode in journalistic history, highlighting the complex interplay of ambition, authentication challenges, and the consequences of premature publication.

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

## References

* <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hitler-Diaries> - This URL supports the claim that the Hitler Diaries were a major hoax, created by forger Konrad Kujau and purchased by Der Stern in 1983. It also mentions that the diaries were later proven to be forgeries through forensic analysis.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hitler_Diaries> - This Wikipedia page provides details about the Hitler Diaries hoax, including the involvement of Stern and The Sunday Times, as well as the eventual exposure of the forgeries and their consequences.
* <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/science/hitler-diaries-hoax> - This webpage explains the Hitler Diaries hoax, highlighting the role of Konrad Kujau and how the scandal impacted German journalism. It also mentions the repercussions faced by those involved, including Kujau and journalists from Stern.
* <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/upk_european_history/11/> - This link references Charles Hamilton's work on the Hitler Diaries hoax, providing insights into the forgery and its impact on historical perceptions. Hamilton was one of the first experts to identify the diaries as forgeries.
* <https://www.fincen.gov/sites/default/files/sar_report/sar_tti_22.pdf> - Although this document does not directly pertain to the Hitler Diaries, it highlights the importance of forensic financial analysis in uncovering deceitful activities, similar to the methods used to expose the forgery of the Hitler Diaries.