



German History in Documents and Images

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The Book Burning: Report by Louis P. Lochner, Head of the Berlin Bureau of the Associated Press (May 10, 1933)

In May and June 1933, the National Socialist German Students' League [*Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund* or NSDStB] and the German Student Body [*Deutsche Studentenschaft* or DSt] joined members of the SS and SA in organizing various country-wide actions to "cleanse" libraries of "un-German" literature. This campaign led to a wave of public book burnings, the most spectacular of which took place on Berlin's former Opera Square [*Opernplatz*] on May 10, 1933. Approximately 20,000 books were incinerated that night, and Goebbels delivered an appropriately inflammatory speech. Each burned book fell under at least one of nine categories – for example, Bolshevik, Jewish-democratic, or morally depraved. Works by Heinrich Mann, Erich Kästner, Kurt Tucholsky, Sigmund Freud, Bertolt Brecht, Carl von Ossietzky and Karl Marx were among those slated for defamation and actual destruction. Beginning in September 1933, the elimination of "un-German" literature from the cultural realm was centrally organized by Goebbels' Reich Chamber of Culture, which censored texts and barred certain individuals from the literary profession. In total, about 2,500 writers left Germany during the Nazi period. On the flip side, authors of conservative, militaristic, or *völkisch* works – i.e., writings that were suitable for propaganda purposes – benefited from Nazi policies. In the following report, American journalist and correspondent Louis P. Lochner recounts what he saw and experienced that night in Berlin.

The whole civilized world was shocked when on the evening of 10 May 1933 the books of authors displeasing to the Nazis, including even those of our own Helen Keller, were solemnly burned on the immense Franz Josef Platz between the University of Berlin and the State Opera on Unter den Linden. I was a witness to the scene.

All afternoon Nazi raiding parties had gone into public and private libraries, throwing on to the streets such books, as Dr. Goebbels in his supreme wisdom had decided were unfit for Nazi Germany. From the streets Nazi columns of beer-hall fighters had picked up these discarded volumes and taken them to the square above referred to.

Here the heap grew higher and higher, and every few minutes another howling mob arrived, adding more books to the impressive pyre. Then, as night fell, students from the university, mobilized by the little doctor, performed veritable Indian dances and incantations as the flames began to soar skyward. When the orgy was at its height, a cavalcade of cars drove into sight. It was the Propaganda Minister himself, accompanied by his bodyguard and a number of fellow

torchbearers of the new Nazi *Kultur*. 'Fellow students, German men and women!' he cried as he stepped before a microphone for all Germany to hear him. 'The age of extreme Jewish intellectualism has now ended, and the success of the German revolution has again given the right of way to the German spirit. [. . .] You are doing the right thing in committing the evil spirit of the past to the flames at this late hour of the night. It is a strong, great and symbolic act, an act that is to bear witness before all the world to the fact that the spiritual foundation of the November Republic has disappeared. From these ashes there will arise the phoenix of a new spirit. [. . .] The past is lying in flames. The future will rise from the flames within our own hearts. [. . .] Brightened by these flames our vow shall be: The Reich and the Nation and our Führer Adolf Hitler: Heil! Heil! Heil!'

Source: Louis P. Lochner, ed., *The Goebbels Diaries 1942-43*. Washington, DC, 1948, pp. 177-80; reprinted in Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism, 1919-1945*, Vol. 2: *State, Economy and Society 1933-1939*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000, pp. 207-08.