Staging Antifascism: The Brown Book of the Reichstag Fire and Hitler Terror

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The Brown Book of the Reichstag Fire and Hitler Terror, published in Paris in August 1933, was more than a book. It was a staged event and the center of an international campaign that convinced much of the world that the Nazis had conspired to burn the Reichstag as the pretext to establishing a dictatorship. The campaign around the Brown Book and the trial of Georgi Dimitrov and the other defendants in Leipzig from September to December 1933 was so skillfully managed that it persuaded many observers outside Germany as well as reputable historians until the 1960s that the fire was the work of a Nazi conspiracy.1 Not until 1959–60, when the German newsmagazine Der Spiegel published a five-part series based on the research of the nonacademic historian Fritz Tobias, were the Brown Book’s falsifications and misrepresentations exposed. A few years later most professional historians were persuaded that Tobias’s research was sound—the Brown Book had been discredited (at least in the Federal Republic of Germany), and the thesis of a “lone” arsonist widely accepted. During the past three decades a number of challenges to the details presented in Tobias’s research have been mounted, though

1. In his biography of Hitler, Konrad Heiden wrote, “It may be assumed that the incendiaries were close to the National Socialists, but their identity and methods have remained unknown” (Der Fuehrer: Hitler’s Rise to Power, trans. Ralph Manheim [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1944], 559).
most have not withstood the scrutiny of experts. Today a dwindling number of dedicated researchers still maintain that Tobias was engaged in a cover-up, though no credible evidence of conspiracy or of links between the arsonist Marinus van der Lubbe, a disaffected Dutch council communist, and the Nazis has ever emerged. Much of the controversy has been forensic: it concerns questions about van der Lubbe’s movements on the night of the fire, the time line of events, the chemical evidence, the speed of the fire pattern, inconsistencies in Tobias’s book, and contradictions in the voluminous trial testimony. Over the years the reputations of numerous witnesses and the historians engaged in the controversy have been besmirched, sometimes leading to legal battles. Though the amount of detail covering each of these aspects is overwhelming to non-experts, the actual evidence of conspiracy is scant; the newest proponents of what might be called the Nazi “complicity theory” have, despite their fierce invective and charges of manipulation and distortion, brought little to light that would alter dramatically the consensus that van der Lubbe acted alone. In the German Democratic Republic (GDR), to be sure, the Brown Book remained the standard account of “Nazi fascism” throughout its forty-year history. What is ultimately at stake in the seemingly never-ending controversy is the ques-


3. The most recent phase of the controversy concerns trial documents found in Moscow and preserved as Fond 551 in the Bundesarchiv in Berlin. Though these files do contain materials previously unknown to historians and offer a more complex picture of the investigation conducted by the police, the Gestapo, and the court, they do not present evidence of conspiracy or offer an alternative to previous explanations.


tion of whether the end of democracy was the result of a planned and well-organized conspiracy or whether a historical “accident” or unplanned event gave the Nazis the pretext to establish nonparliamentary rule in Germany. As Hans Mommsen noted in 1964, behind the controversy stood the larger issue of the nature of the National Socialist seizure of power: was the dictatorship the result of a political crime or simply an opportune event?6

During the night of February 27, 1933, the main assembly hall of the Reichstag in Berlin was set ablaze and largely destroyed. Police and firemen arriving at the scene found van der Lubbe, who confessed to being the arsonist. Nazi leaders, including Hermann Göring and subsequently Joseph Goebbels, Adolf Hitler, and Franz von Papen, arrived while the building was still burning. Göring immediately called the fire a communist plot, a signal for the insurrection. Hitler told Papen, “This is a God-given signal, Herr Vice-Chancellor! If this fire, as I believe, is the work of the Communists, then we must crush out this murderous pest with an iron fist.”7 Within hours President Paul von Hindenberg signed an emergency decree “for the protection of people and state” that put an end to civil liberties, including freedom of speech, association, the press, and privacy; the autonomy of the federal states; and the right to counsel and appeal. The regime unleashed a massive campaign of repression directed first and foremost against communists, as well as leading Social Democrats and opponents of the regime like the publicist Carl von Ossietzky. Thousands were arrested in the weeks that followed. In addition to van der Lubbe, four persons were charged with conspiracy to commit arson: the chief of the communist delegation in the Reichstag, Ernst Torgler (who surrendered to police), and three Bulgarian communists, Georgi Dimitrov, Vassili Tanev, and Blagoi Popov, who were arrested several days later, on March 9. Apparently, German police were initially unaware that Dimitrov was the head of the West European Bureau of the Comintern.

At the end of August, a group of communist exiles and writers who had fled to Paris in the wake of the fire published a book discussing its origins and laying bare the elements of a counterconspiracy. The Brown Book, it can be argued, created the prism through which most of the world saw Nazism for more than a generation. It was a compelling tale of ruthless and diabolical Nazis bent on eliminating all their political rivals and using the fire as a

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pretext to eliminate the communists and terrorize the population on the eve of the March 5 elections. The central character is the hapless “tool” van der Lubbe, described as “ein kleiner, halbblinder lustknabe” (a small, half-blind love slave) whose name appears on a list of lovers of the notorious SA leader Ernst Röhm (Braunbuch [1980], 62). The Brown Book charged that although van der Lubbe claimed to have acted alone, the “true arsonists” were Goebbels, who planned the conspiracy, and Göring, who directed his SA accomplices to use a secret underground passage to enter the Reichstag from his adjacent presidential residence (Göring had been president of the Reichstag since the Nazi takeover of the Prussian government in 1932). Göring and Goebbels wanted the fire to appear as the work of international communism, hence the arrest of Torgler and the “three Bulgarians.” Further evidence of conspiracy was suppressed by murder and terror. Among those silenced were Georg Bell, a mysterious SA man and former secretary of Röhm’s who had allegedly arranged liaisons with young men for him; a popular Berlin clairvoyant named Erik Jan Hanussen, who allegedly had foreknowledge of the plan; and Ernst Oberfohren, president of the German Nationalists in the Reichstag, who allegedly left a “memorandum,” found after his mysterious suicide, revealing details of the plot. The Reichstag fire, which occurred just days before the first election faced by the new government, was, it concluded, the well-planned culmination of the terror that the murderous, degenerate Nazis used to secure control over Germany.

The book and the campaign that accompanied it was the creation of Willi Münzenberg, the renowned international communist impresario and Reichstag deputy who earned the title “Red Hugenberg” for his organizational empire, which included the International Workers Aid (IAH), numerous dailies and weeklies, journals, and the highly successful illustrated weekly Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung (AIZ), with a circulation of nearly half a million. His

premise was that the fire could only be a political crime, and—since only the National Socialists could benefit—“it must be premeditated, supported, and perpetrated by leading National Socialist functionaries.”9 In March and April the communist Reichstag fraction had already declared that it was prepared to prove in court that “Minister Göring and Chancellor Hitler are guilty in the act of incendiarism in the Reichstag.”10 Münzenberg seized the opportunity with characteristic skill and dramaturgical flair. He knew that “there was no more effective propaganda than an event that propagandized itself.”11 In the same month he founded the World Committee for the Relief of the Victims of German Fascism and at least a dozen other organizations worldwide to orchestrate an international campaign closely coordinated with the Worker’s Anti-Fascist Congress, held at the Salle Pleyel in Paris on June 5, 1933.

The Brown Book became a best seller. It was translated into twenty-four languages and published in more than fifty-five editions. The Münzenberg organization claimed (and its files show) that a half million copies were in circulation by 1935, though it is likely that this figure is inflated.12 There were also five illegal editions, and various “camouflaged” and “miniature” copies hidden in Schiller’s Wallenstein and Goethe’s Hermann und Dorothea were smuggled into Germany by a well-coordinated system of underground couriers that even the Gestapo admitted “functioned very well.”13 Gimbels department store in New York featured it in its advertising. Long after he broke with the communists, Arthur Koestler, who had worked closely with Münzenberg at that time, could still claim that it “probably had the strongest political impact of any pamphlet since Tom Paine’s Common Sense.”14

More significant still was the impact of the Brown Book on the conduct of the trial that began in mid-September in the Leipzig Supreme Court. From the first day to the close of the trial, on December 31, when the court’s president,
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Karl Werner, delivered a summation explicitly to refute the Brown Book’s claim that only the Nazis could have benefited from the fire, the book remained an “active presence” in the courtroom. Scores of witnesses, including Göring, Goebbels, and SA chief Edmund Heines were called solely to challenge its allegations. The entire court—judges, attorneys, assistants, and defendants—traveled from Leipzig to Berlin to watch van der Lubbe describe his pathway during the fire, demonstrate how he had set the curtains ablaze, and explain how he had entered the building by climbing an exterior wall. Goebbels himself called the Brown Book “the sixth defendant.”

The Brown Book presented a picture of Nazism that was to become all too familiar: it artfully exploited the early mistakes of the new Nazi regime, offering a dramatic and highly sexualized interpretation of events. It simultaneously filled two urgent political and emotional needs, explaining how, without mentioning the utter impotence of the KPD (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, or German Communist Party) or the unpreparedness of its leaders, the Nazis drove the party out of existence and its leaders into exile or prison. The explanation ignored the Nazis’ popularity and electoral successes and emphasized conspiracy, blackmail, brutality, pathology, and sexual deviance. The image of “Nazi fascism” that emerged from the Brown Book and the Reichstag fire campaign no longer rested on the Marxist dogma of inevitable proletarian victory or on capitalist string pulling but on heroic and innocent victims of degenerate homosexuals and morphine-addicted fanatics.

The new face of communist antifascism was a conspiracy narrative or, one might more accurately say, a counterconspiracy narrative. If the Nazis had accused the communists of planning the fire as “das Fanal,” the signal for an insurrection, Münzenberg and Katz fleshed out a counterconspiracy of Nazi intrigues to perpetrate a well-planned gamble to destroy democracy and eliminate their enemies from the scene. Douglas Reed, one of the few skeptical voices, who covered the trial for the London Times, remarked at the time that there was only a “pigeonhole of credulity” for a (Nazi) conspiracy. What purpose, then, did these conflicting narratives of conspiracy serve? Conspiracy theories have been famously called a “paranoid style” of politics, representing a pathological version of reality by substituting purported transparency and connectivity for truth. Critics of the “paranoid theory” of conspiracy politics, like Timothy Melley, have suggested that the term paranoid substitutes a pathologizing explanation for what is in fact a form of “agency panic,” a cri-

sis of diminished human agency in specific historical situations.\textsuperscript{17} Conspiracy theories are constructed out of the conviction that there are no accidents in history; that everything is connected, intended, meaningful, and ultimately explainable; in other words, that human beings are being manipulated behind their backs. They are a kind of Hegelianism or Marxism of the little man and woman; in that respect there is little difference between conspiracy theory and theory itself. Without subscribing to the view that the bracketing of the “real” by conspiracy thinking is itself only a crude version of a more generalized radical ontological uncertainty, I would agree that the Reichstag fire case, with its antithetical conspiracy narratives, does in fact reveal a historical moment of profound diminished agency, certainly on the left, in the 1930s. William E. Dodd, U.S. ambassador to Germany, reported that “nobody believes the official version of setting fire to the Reichstag.”\textsuperscript{18}

Documents from the Central Party Archive in Moscow, available since 1991, cast new light on the role of Münzenberg and his lieutenant Otto Katz in producing the \textit{Brown Book} and staging the campaign and the sensational countertrial composed of internationally recognized jurists that Münzenberg organized in London just days before the Leipzig trial. In April, Münzenberg vetted his plans for the campaign with the political secretariat of the Comintern Executive in Moscow, under the auspices of the chief of the Propaganda Section, Béla Kun, and Politburo member Ossip Piatnitsky.\textsuperscript{19} An internal Comintern memorandum underscored the importance of “conducting a campaign that made use of modern propaganda techniques, avoided obsolete methods” and put its “main emphasis on the mobilization of ‘public opinion.’” During late July and early August 1933 Münzenberg traveled to Moscow to finalize plans.\textsuperscript{20} However, Moscow’s enthusiasm and the resources put at his disposal


\textsuperscript{19} This material is located in the papers of the Comintern (Communist International), housed in the Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial’no-Politicheskoi Istorii, Federal’noe Arkhivnoe Agentstvo Rossii (Ros. 1917–1940) (Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Modern History in Moscow; hereafter cited as RGASPI), Fond 495.60.242a, April 3, 1933. The \textit{Brown Book} was first mentioned in early April in a Münzenberg publication as a documentary collection on Nazi crimes to be published under the aegis of Münzenberg’s German Relief Committee of the Central Committee of the IAH in Amsterdam (see Sohl, “Enstehung und Verbreitung,” 292).

\textsuperscript{20} Gross, \textit{Willi Münzenberg}, 262.
should not be exaggerated. The campaign was as much directed at Comintern leaders and the more skeptical Soviets to persuade them that European antifascism was a viable political option. Until then, antifascism was not a concept widely embraced by the Comintern or by national communist parties. In 1928 Stalin coined the term *social fascism* to describe the SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, or German Social Democratic Party) as the main enemy of communism, indeed as what he called the moderate wing of fascism. For communists, the term *fascism* was characterized by elasticity and imprecision, encompassing capitalism, social democracy, liberalism, imperialism, and ultimately all those who stood outside their own camp. Communist antifascism not only abused the term *fascism* but turned it into a term of abuse to mean all noncommunists. Before 1933 campaigns were orchestrated for specific purposes, like the famous Amsterdam Congress (which actually took place in Paris) against Imperialist War, provoked by the Japanese attack on Manchuria in the fall of 1931. Held between August 27 and August 29, 1932, it focused on anti-imperialism rather than antifascism and was organized by Münzenberg and the writers Romain Rolland and Henri Barbusse to generate a broad movement uniting progressive and left-wing groups, including communists and disaffected socialists.

In the months after the fire Stalin did not alter his implacable belief that Germany might still remain a reliable ally despite the advent of Hitler. Until the end of 1933 Soviet military leaders still hoped to maintain their long-standing (since the Rapallo Treaty of 1921) relations between the Red Army and the Reichswehr, including reciprocal military contacts and projects. In March, German foreign minister Konstantin von Neurath assured Soviet foreign minister Maxim Litvinov that there would be no change in relations with the Soviet Union, a point affirmed by Hitler when he called the fight against German communism an “internal affair.”

In July, Reichswehr Minister Werner von Blomberg spoke to a group of German and Soviet officers of a “common interest” of long standing. But Soviet diplomats also warned that “never before had our relations been maintained in such a difficult general political atmosphere as now” and called on the German government to “immediately, with an iron hand, put an end to

all these excesses” if good relations were to be maintained. Only in September 1933 did the German attaché in Moscow report that “there exists a very strong trend in Russia to leave us and become good friends of France. This strong trend is represented in the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs by Litvinov.”

Consequently, the Comintern’s financial support for the anti-Nazi enterprise was meager. Moscow’s tepid attitude toward exile antifascism was evident when, on the eve of the trial, Kun complained bitterly to Piatnitsky that the agitation campaign they had begun in April was beginning to unravel, that he lacked even a room for the project, and that there was no technical support whatsoever, making the work “not only difficult but in many cases impossible.”

Despite these obstacles, the campaign to save the four communists—though not the accused arsonist van der Lubbe—represented the first stirrings of the exile antifascist movement that the Comintern would only later regard as a model for all popular front enterprises. Münzenberg’s style, his confabulation of organizations, commissions, and prominent public figures, was already in place during the 1920s (Sacco and Vanzetti, Scottsboro). What was new, as the historian François Furet noted, was that Münzenberg, with his genius for propaganda, now faced Goebbels “in a head-to-head match, and in so doing, invented the new face of Stalinism: anti-Fascist Communism.” In his role as the Comintern’s public face in Europe, Münzenberg enjoyed a greater measure of independence and freedom of action in the international field than the German party did. He carefully negotiated the narrow line between sectarianism and fraternization with the “class enemy” with the skill of a tightrope walker. “Münzenberg’s prestige and self-esteem necessarily became involved in the success of the front as a front, rather than in the success of the front as an instrument in building the party.”

26. RGASPI, Fond 495.60.242a, Kun to Piatnitsky, September 2, 1933. See also Gross, Willi Münzenberg, 262.
The day-to-day organizer of the World Committee (nominally headed by Albert Einstein, though without his consent) and the master of the Brown Book campaign was Otto Katz, who operated under several noms de guerre. A German-speaking Czech Jew, the linguistically gifted and dandyish Katz was equally at home in Prague, Berlin, Moscow, Paris, Hollywood, Madrid, and Mexico City, to name just some of the stations on his itinerary. In 1946 he was called back to Prague to be foreign commentator of the party daily, Rude Pravo. In November 1952 he was accused of participating in a Trotskyite-Titoist-Zionist conspiracy and convicted of treason and espionage during the notorious Slansky trial in Prague. He was hanged along with eleven other victims on December 3, 1952. The author of more than a dozen books, though few published under his own name, Katz had worked for Münzenberg’s IAH in Moscow in the 1920s and was widely reputed (by both the FBI and his former coworkers) to be a Soviet agent (though no direct evidence of his having worked for the NKVD [Narodny Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del, or People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs] has yet emerged).

Conflicting versions of the authorship of the Brown Book circulated for years, in large part the result of the political paths subsequently taken by its multiple authors. Katz remained a communist, organizing antifascist campaigns in Hollywood, running the Agence Presse Espagne during the Spanish Civil War, and working for the Komitee Freies Deutschland in Mexico. Münzenberg died under mysterious circumstances after his release from a French internment camp in October 1940. Koestler, Gustav Regler, and Alfred Kantorowicz became notorious “renegades” and repudiated their old comrades, though not the Brown Book. Alexander Abusch, who later became a functionary of the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands, or Socialist Unity Party of Germany), disparaged the ex-communists as bohemian intellectuals and “late-communists.” So intense was the rivalry between Abusch and Katz over the Brown Book’s authorship that it became a source of friction when both were in Mexican exile in the 1940s and, as their GDR Stasi files reveal, was still a sore point during the anticosmopolitan purges of the 1950s, when Abusch was briefly relieved of his posts in the GDR and Katz was arrested in Prague.

Abusch noted that Katz or “[André] ‘Simone’ had very

31. This claim was made by Gustav Regler and is repeated by Koch, Double Lives, 342n23.
32. On June 10, 1950, Abusch, then a prominent SED politician in the GDR, was interrogated in connection to the Noel Field affair. He was also interrogated during the Slansky trial by the
many petty-bourgeois, typically intellectual characteristics.” Katz acknowledged that Abusch was his coeditor but proudly insisted to his interrogator in Prague—up to the moment that he was executed—that “it was due to my efforts that the Brown Book was completed.”

Many things contributed to the Brown Book’s commercial success, not least its extraordinary jacket design by the photomontagist John Heartfield. Years later Abusch recalled that

we were working in a frenzied rush, in a race to keep up with events, beginning the Brown Book at the beginning of August and preparing it simultaneously in several countries. The German edition came out first, and by the time the trial against Dimitrov and the others began, it had appeared in eighteen languages and was becoming a worldwide sensation in the movement at that time. . . . We said right away, already in May, that there was only one person who could create the dust jacket for the explosive Brown Book, and that was John Heartfield. And he created that famous dust jacket of the burning Reichstag.

“Göring, der Henker des Dritten Reichs” (“Göring, the Executioner of the Third Reich”) was produced in August and contained six elements: (1) the burning Reichstag (the image was used in his first photomontage for the AIZ in Prague, “Durch Licht zur Nacht” [“Through the Light to Night”], which appeared in May 1933 depicting Goebbels and the book burning); (2) the contorted screaming face of Göring; (3) a soldier’s torso, arms cut off at the elbow, to which Heartfield pasted two oversized arms to suggest an apelike demeanor; (4) a drawing of an ax; (5) the apron, its edges blended with the rest of the photomontage, the pattern and the folds painted and the blood splatters added; (6) the Reichstag facade, where there is a loss of focus and a cropping of the relief “Dem deutschen Volk” (“To the German People”) (fig. 1). Göring’s uniform is printed in reverse with the tell-tale armband on the right arm. The blood splatters are painted on his apron. In a subsequent version that appeared in the exile AIZ in September, Heartfield added Göring’s Maltese cross, which reads “Pour le Profite” (for profit), a parody of the “Blue Max,” Germany’s highest


military order, Pour le Mérite, created by Frederick the Great in 1740 (fig. 2). Göring had in fact received the distinction for having flown with Baron von Richthofen during World War I, making the insult all the more barbed. Heartfield had already caused a scandal by using the same parody in his 1931 photomontage of a jackal wearing the Pour le Profite, “Krieg und Leichen—die letzte Hoffnung der Reichen” (“War and Corpses: The Last Hope of the Wealthy”). He also added the title “Göring, the Executioner of the Third Reich” as well as the ironic comment that “Göring’s face is taken from an original photograph and has not been retouched.” But while the face is indeed untouched, his bulbous neck was obviously enhanced and even more greatly exaggerated with the addition of a protruding boil in the second version. “Göring, the Executioner of the Third Reich,” is also a vivid example of the bestialization that Heartfield had also used to great effect in “The Last Hope of the Wealthy.” The back cover is a bloody corpse splayed against a swastika, an image that directly responds to a Nazi photomontage that appeared on the cover of the *Illustrierte Beobachter* on November 19, 1932—a technique borrowed by the Nazis from
Figure 2. John Heartfield, “Göing, the Executioner of the Third Reich,” AIZ, September 14, 1933
Heartfield himself—of an SA man, “Und fragt ihr die Stimmen, die ihr zählt, die meine hat den Kampf gewählt” (“And If You Ask the Votes That Count, Mine Has Chosen Battle”).

Heartfield was the pioneer of political photomontage in the Weimar Republic, the most highly regarded artist belonging to the KPD and the one most often imitated by his opponents. A dadaist who turned to communism during the November revolution, Heartfield and his brother, the publisher Wieland Herzfelde, were personally given their party membership books by Rosa Luxemburg on the last day of December 1918, just weeks before she was murdered on January 15, 1919. Heartfield remained a loyal party member until his death in the GDR in 1968. In the 1920s his “dialectical montages” were regarded, as he put it, as a “truly revolutionary weapon in the class struggle.” They included many book jackets done for Münzenberg and the party publishing house, including the famous dust jacket for Kurt Tucholsky’s Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles (1929), which won him admirers among left-wing artists in Germany and an invitation to the Soviet Union, where he spent part of 1931–32, contributing to the volume Soviet Union in Construction on Soviet photomontagists. Compared with his politically withering and satirical photomontages, however, his Soviet efforts were affirmative and lacking in critical bite. From its inception, Heartfield was the leading photomontagist for Münzenberg’s famous AIZ, founded in 1925 to produce a left-wing alternative to the popular illustrated photo-weeklies of the bourgeois press, like the Berliner Illustrirte-Zeitung and the Münchner Illustrierte-Presse. After he fled Germany for Prague in April 1933, Heartfield began his most intensive period of activity for the AIZ. His photomontages appeared almost weekly. Some were produced as miniaturized versions smuggled into Germany camouflaged as tea packets. Yet whereas the Weimar AIZ had reached nearly a half million readers, the Prague edition never exceeded printings of twelve thousand. Censored by the Czech government, it was distributed mostly in Switzerland, Alsace-Lorraine, and Austria, countries whose reading public did not closely follow events in Germany.

Heartfield’s photomontages combined journalistic reportage, photographic caricature, and persuasive graphics with the shock effect of dada montage. He recontextualized texts and images through metamorphosis, hybridization, anthropomorphism, and inversion of scale to achieve what Mikhail Bakhtin called “grotesque realism,” a genre that opposes to “high art” and literature mockery, parody, and any other form of discourse that “brings down to earth” the high and the mighty. His photomontages magnified hypocrisy, inverted hierarchies of authority, diminished and degraded...
the enemy. As Sabine Kriebel has shown, Heartfield’s dada montages registered the shock and disjointedness of modern life through fragmentation and disjunction, whereas during the 1930s he inverted the original montage principle by substituting what Kriebel calls “sutured” photomontages, which “suppress the seams and ruptures of their manufacture” to “propagate fictions of causal wholeness.” The medical term *suture* refers to the production of an “illusionism” that aims at visual seamlessness. Heartfield’s “dialectical montages” exploited the political discourse of deception to create a “seemingly transparent” picture of the world through irony, puns, degradation, and distortion. Yet Heartfield’s reality was more often than not itself an illusion promoted by the Comintern, which in turn propagated a fiction of fascism either as degeneration—Göring’s primate physiognomy—or as a conspiracy of capitalism.

Heartfield’s cover design was the visual analogue to the content of the *Brown Book*, which brought together disparate elements of terror, capitalist conspiracy, sexual anomaly and degeneracy, morphine addiction, and so forth to create a composite image of National Socialism’s “inner reality.” Like its jacket, the composition of the *Brown Book* was a montage, an artful suture of investigative journalism, communist tract, and a modern polit-thriller that belongs in all of its major components to the genre of the detective novel. Factually correct elements, like accusations from the Nazi press and vivid examples of Nazi terror, are woven together with falsifications, conjecture, and inventions unique to the *Brown Book*. As Koestler recalled, “All this was based on isolated scraps of information, deduction, guesswork, and brazen bluff.”

A good detective story, the *Brown Book* stages an epic struggle between the ingenious and preternaturally developed investigator (the book itself) and the cleverly irrational criminal, in this case, the unscrupulous, and fundamentally depraved (morphine-addicted) Göring. Operating from the principle “Cui bono?” the *Brown Book* establishes motive and then builds the three key elements of the conspiracy: (1) the plan conceived by Goebbels, above all the means of access—the underground passage, so iconic that a piece of it now adorns the lobby of the new Reichstag in Berlin—by which the conspirators,

37. Interview with Abusch. See also Karl Bömer, *Das Dritte Reich im Spiegel der Weltpresse* (Leipzig: Armanen, 1934), 46.
led by Heines, were able to set the fire undetected; (2) the murdered witnesses, especially Bell and the author of the “Oberfohren Memorandum”—presumably a communist forgery—who were eliminated to evade detection; and (3) the crucial link between the arsonist and the conspirators: van der Lubbe’s homosexuality.

Building on the notorious sexual scandal around Röhm, the Brown Book makes the sensational claim that there was a direct line from the homosexual madman van der Lubbe to the SA, and to Bell, an adventurer and confidence man who was mysteriously murdered in Austria in April 1933. Bell, allegedly “Röhm’s pimp,” supposedly maintained a list of the young men he procured for Röhm to compromise the Nazi Party. The “list,” which was among the documents confiscated when Bell was murdered near Kufstein in Austria, was identified by a certain “W.S.” as containing a certain Christian name “Rinus” and in parentheses a Dutch name, beginning with “van der . . .” (BB, 57). The Brown Book’s characterization of van der Lubbe as a homosexual prostitute serving the Nazis is its most dubious and most pivotal assertion, one that has no basis in the evidence presented about the defendant to the police, to the court, or in the facts of his well-researched biography.39

The Left’s portrayal of the Nazis as a band of degenerate homosexuals bent on misusing young SA “proles for unethical homosexual purposes” antedates the Reichstag fire and the Nazi seizure of power. In 1931 and 1932 Röhm’s homosexuality stood at the center of a well-organized campaign, which reached a high point with the publication of his private correspondence with a leading German homosexual-rights activist, Karl Günther Heimsoth, as a brochure, in the left-wing Munich Welt am Montag and in the Social Democratic Münchner Post, thereby revealing that Röhm was homosexual and strongly favored the repeal of the notorious antihomosexual Paragraph 175. The scandal known as the Röhm affair was precipitated, on the one hand, by the Left’s presumption of an “inner identification” between homosexuality and fascism and, on the other, by the relative openness that the idea of a virile, homophile, male-hero cult enjoyed in some circles on the extreme right—including the National Socialists—until 1934.40 At the same time, the

criminalization of homosexuality in the Soviet Union in 1933 made the anti-homosexual denunciations of the Röhm affair an acceptable political tactic for the communists.⁴¹

In a leap of psychoanalytic fancy, the Brown Book claimed that van der Lubbe’s behavior was “so typically homosexual that Freud has called it the homosexual ‘Parsifal-complex’” (BB, 57). The Brown Book’s evidence for his homosexuality was his shyness and awkwardness around women. Consequently, he “sought his love in the ranks of the schoolboys and older comrades” (BB, 46). Though the Brown Book observed that van der Lubbe possessed so powerful a physical upper body—and had twice planned to swim the English Channel for prize money—that his colleagues nicknamed him “Dempsey” (after the American boxer), it consistently represented him as a feminized man: “Van der Lubbe is in his whole essence homosexual. His character is feminine, his reserve and shyness in front of women is established by the testimony of many, his need for closeness and tenderness from men is notorious” (BB, 52).⁴²

After the publication of the Brown Book, van der Lubbe’s Dutch comrades vehemently protested its defamations in a “Red Book” (Roodboek) and collected numerous testimonials.⁴³ Nevertheless, the communist characterization of van der Lubbe as homosexual not only linked him to the conspiracy but created a highly eroticized linkage between homosexuality and fascism, what Andrew Hewitt has called “homo-fascism.”⁴⁴ Coding fascism as homosexual created the image of a regime driven by a lethal combination of calculation and degeneracy, rationality and depravity, the obverse of the new proletarian virilism deemed necessary for the antifascist struggle. It was also aligned with the charge that van der Lubbe’s “vain and self-aggrandizing” personality accounted for his failure to develop the necessary class consciousness to be a “real” communist, with his susceptibility to the petit bourgeois and degenerate world of the Nazis. Van der Lubbe was the “tool,” whose character is constituted by his position between the sexes and the classes, making him “obedient and pliable to the will of the arsonists.” He was what the second Brown Book (1934) called an “embryonic fascist.”

⁴³ Roodboek (Amsterdam: Intern. Utgeversbedrijf, 1933).
Once the Brown Book appeared, the campaign turned its sights to London, where it planned to stage an international tribunal—a countertrial—just days before the actual trial was scheduled to begin in Leipzig. A distinguished panel of jurists—the International Commission of Legal Inquiry into the Reichstag Fire—consisted of eight prominent lawyers from seven countries who would hear testimony and act as judges in the case.\textsuperscript{45} Katz, who maintained his incognito as an Austrian journalist named Rudolf Breda, did not exactly hide the fact that the tribunal was a Münzenberg enterprise, though most of the commission lawyers considered it their obligation to render a sound judgment regardless of any external pressures. Just days before the tribunal was to open, its independence was compromised by the French member, Moro Giafferi, who addressed a tumultuous meeting at the Salle Wagram in Paris on September 11, where he publicly denounced Göring “the assassin, the incendiary!” creating a “near riot” of fifteen thousand people.\textsuperscript{46}

The Nazi press denounced the Commission of Inquiry and the London tribunal “comic opera,” while the Leipzig court treated its proceedings with extreme seriousness and even permitted Torgler’s court-appointed lawyer, Alfons Sack, to attend. Sack in turn invited all the commission members to attend the Leipzig trial, an invitation accepted only by the American Arthur Garfield Hays, counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), who was of Jewish origin. Hays (named for three presidents) made his reputation in 1925 as Clarence Darrow’s assistant and the defense team strategist for the famous “Monkey Trial” of the Tennessee teacher John Scopes. Hays was a tireless defender of unpopular causes like the Sacco and Vanzetti and Scottsboro cases and a cagey trial lawyer who authored two novels, \textit{Let Freedom Ring} and \textit{Trial by Prejudice}, as well as an autobiography.\textsuperscript{47} On April 15, 1933, the ACLU in New York received a letter in which the Paris Aid Committee explained that it was about to launch a countertrial: “At this trial we will produce our documents and proofs concerning the origins of the Reichstag fire, and the unheard of methods used by [sic] gang of unscrupulous...
provocateurs.”

The letter requested that the ACLU find out, through its director, Roger Baldwin, “whether Clarence Darrow, Frank Walsch, or any other prominent American jurists would be willing to take part.” Apparently sensing that they were not just exaggerating when they predicted that a “case of international scope is being built up, comparable to that of the Dreyfus case in France,” Baldwin complied, sending an invitation to a dozen prominent jurists, including the deans of the Harvard, Yale, Cornell, Washington, and New York University and University of Chicago law schools. Nevertheless, none but his close associate Hays was enticed by the prospect, though on May 11 the committee cabled, “urgently expecting a notice concerning the participation of Hays and Darrow in the Tribunal.”

Baldwin was obviously concerned enough about the “integrity of the Executive Committee of the International Committee” to solicit assurances from the American Committee against Fascist Oppression in Germany that there was no political “discrimination” in the aid given to victims of the Nazi regime. In the end, only the indefatigable Hays agreed to attend, sailing from New York in mid-September.

What ensued was a complex interplay between the London tribunal and the Leipzig trial. Sack, a committed supporter of the Nazi revolution and at the same time a staunch believer in the inviolability of the German Rechtsstaat, passionately believed in Torgler’s innocence and integrity. As he explained, “I never wavered in my conviction that the Supreme Court would render a judgment that was anything but objective according to the most rigorous standards.” Even though he considered the commission a “new instrument for defamation against the hated Nazi Germany,” Sack took its declarations that it possessed extensive material proving the innocence of the accused seriously and flew to Paris in the hope of discovering new evidence. He was greeted by the results of the campaign at the height of its effervescence: “Numerous newspapers carried, in part on the front page, column-long articles, which in content essentially repeated the views of the Brown Book.”

On September 8 Sack arrived in Paris, where he met with the Swedish lawyer Georg Branting (son of the socialist leader Hjalmar Branting) in an extraordinary five-hour session in the Hotel de Bourgogne et Montana, also attended by Katz, posing as Breda (along with an American lawyer named Leo

Since we have Sack’s memoir and Katz’s notes, we can almost eavesdrop on the confrontation between the Nazi lawyer Sack and the Brown Book author. Sack was genuinely astonished that his interlocutors could distrust the objectivity of the high court. He was incredulous that they believed he was not free to fully defend Torgler and that they thought he had to fear for his life if he presented all the evidence on Torgler’s behalf. Katz, for his part, was equally surprised by Sack’s candor about the case and by his apparent intention to defend Torgler in a criminal case whatever the consequences. A game of cat and mouse ensued, with Sack requesting detailed evidence vindicating his client (his movements on the days leading up to the fire) and Branting and Katz trying to ferret out details of the still secret indictment or of the preliminary investigation in Leipzig.

In the presence of its author—whether Sack knew Katz’s true identity is not certain—Sack systematically attacked all the elements of the Brown Book, for example, requesting notarized evidence for specific instances of testimony, especially the witnesses tying van der Lubbe to Bell’s “list.” Though Sack admitted that he considered it “possible” that van der Lubbe was a homosexual, he challenged the commission to produce a single witness who could directly say that van der Lubbe had slept with Röhm. Sack warned that conducting a political defense would only reduce his ability to do his job: defending his client and nothing more. Even Katz, whose narrative of the events evaporated under Sack’s skilled queries, seemed relieved when Sack agreed with him that van der Lubbe was an individualistic terrorist who wanted to accomplish something “great.”

On September 14, 1933, Münzenberg sent Kun a jubilant telegram: “Today’s opening of the premiere of our film was a huge success. The entire Paris and English press is full of it. The press is overwhelmingly large and the whole affair an unprecedented success.” The film was of course the counter-trial held in distinguished rooms rented from the British Law Society on the Strand. As Sack, who arrived in London from Berlin on that very evening, observed, though it was arranged to look like a courtroom, it was actually
designed entirely for its effect on the press. Hays observed that the London tribunal was “a pretrial of a trial, involving German justice and the Nazi Party.” It is interesting to read Hays’s first account of his experience on his return:

Before the trial in Germany a committee of inquiry was constituted by inviting lawyers from various countries to come to London to hold hearings and bear witness in order to investigate the responsibility for the fire. The thought was that this would focus and dramatize public opinion, and it has had that effect. Nine lawyers from eight different countries acted as judges. We recognized our lack of power and authority that we would have no right to subpoena witnesses and that cross examination would not be conducted by anybody who desired to present a different point of view. None of us was Communist and none Nazi. We had no purpose except to hear the case objectively.

The countertrial brought the propaganda duel between Münzenberg and Goebbels to fever pitch. The Nazi press fulminated at the “traitor” Münzenberg, attributing the popularity of the Brown Book and the countertrial to the fact that Willi (who was not Jewish) was “endowed with a truly Jewish business spirit.” Münzenberg produced sensational reports of the London proceedings in special editions of his Gegen-Angriff, a host of brochures, and above all provocative cartoons and caricatures depicting the Nazi leaders as the puppet masters of the impending Leipzig trial or touting the power of the Brown Book (fig. 3).

Though the countertrial was a Münzenberg enterprise, it could not be staged entirely according to script. In his opening address to the tribunal, Sir Stafford Crips, a left-wing Labour MP, declared: “It has been suggested that the fire was a scheme put forward by the National Socialists themselves. In view of the worldwide importance of the trial to take place at Leipzig, and of its political surroundings, the committee feels that some means should be adopted for bringing together the evidence available outside Germany and for bringing it before the world for criticism and enlightenment.” Crips distanced himself from the conclusions of the Brown Book, emphasizing the independence of the London commission from both its version of events as well as from the accusations put forward by the Leipzig prosecutor’s office. Among the witnesses was Paul Herz, secretary to the Social Democratic Party in

56. Hays, City Lawyer, 343.
57. ACLU Archives, vol. 600, no. 184, November 11, 1934, 5–9.
Figure 3. “Weighed and found wanting.”
A key Dutch witness, the notorious “Herr W.S.,” the alleged source for the link between van der Lubbe and the Nazis, could produce no documents and admitted that the notorious Bell “list” contained only Christian names with the exception of “Marinus van der,” “initials, and . . . ubbe (underneath Holland).”61 The most important witnesses called to ascertain Lubbe’s alleged homosexuality had not seen Lubbe for years, and those associates of Lubbe who had, as Sack observed, “long ago refuted the legend of his homosexuality” were not called at all.62

The dramatic appearance of witnesses who testified either anonymously or in disguise seemed contrived. Despite these efforts to create sensation, the conclusions of the London commission were far more sober and carefully formulated than those of the Brown Book. First, van der Lubbe was declared an opponent and not a member of the Dutch Communist Party and showed “no trace” of a connection to the communists. Consequently, the four communist defendants should not be found guilty of conspiracy. Second, van der Lubbe could not have acted alone. Third, it was “highly probable” that the arsonists used the underground passage from Göring’s residence to gain access to the Reichstag. Only the Nazis could claim any advantage from the fire. Therefore, the commission concluded, “grave grounds exist for suspecting that the Reichstag was set on fire by, or on behalf of, leading personalities of the National Socialist Party.” In short, the bare bones of the Brown Book were upheld without giving credence to its more dubious propositions and questionable assertions.

In a speech on November 11 at New York’s Hotel Astor, broadcast on WNBC radio, Hays eloquently summed up the result of his trip.63 He was convinced that the four communists were innocent of the conspiracy charge. He was also convinced that van der Lubbe, “a Dutch worker with terroristic ideas” who was not a communist, set the fire. Moreover, he was certain that

60. Ibid.
62. Sack, Der Reichstagsbrand Prozess, 117.
the communists had no conceivable motive for the crime, since it was common knowledge that any provocation of that sort would have been a pretext to outlaw the Communist Party. There was no evidence and no basis for the Nazi claim that the fire was to have been a “signal” for a communist insurrection. Yet Hays underscored the fact that the conclusion of the countertrial that the fire was perpetrated by or on behalf of Nazi leaders was “tentative” and that “we were quite ready to revise in the event the trial at Leipzig showed that we were wrong.”

Hays wrote after his return to the United States that he was still unsure about the London verdict: “I would say that either Van der Lubbe set the fire alone, or that he had accomplices among the Nazis. He certainly had no accomplices among the Communists. But I have never been certain that he did not do it alone, or that the Nazis were his accomplices.”

Though the campaign considered the countertrial a triumph, the Comintern was not entirely persuaded of its usefulness. A confidential “political” report to the Executive Committee noted that “by and large it went well . . . but it gave a platform to prominent Social Democratic leaders like [Rudolf] Breitscheid and [Paul] Herz,” who were “completely superfluous,” allowing the SPD “to derive a great advantage from the trial at the last moment.” Such characteristically Münzenberg touches made the countertrial into a suspiciously “popular front” enterprise. H. G. Wells, who attended the trial’s first day, left complaining that he had never in his life “experienced such a boring theater,” to which Denis Nowell Pritt responded that he could not imagine a higher compliment, “given our decision to maintain a sober and unpolitical atmosphere for the proceedings.”

There could be no doubt that from a propaganda standpoint the countertrial and the campaign had turned the glare of publicity on Leipzig. From the outset of the trial, the Nazi leaders were trapped in the legal machinery of late Weimar justice, enduring rather than controlling a public trial lasting two months. Hitler would have preferred a brief trial and said that the agitation stirred up by the foreign press against the German government was dangerous. “The yelling would stop,” he said, “if the perpetrators were hanged right away.” The public outcry that the Leipzig court was conducting a “political” trial also weighed on the German attorneys and judges who tried

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64. ACLU Archives, vol. 600, no. 186, November 11, 1934, 7.
65. Hays Papers, Princeton University, Box 33, Folder 1, “Famous Trials of the Last Decade,” 8.
66. RGASPI, Fond 495.60.244a, October 4, 1933.
68. Tobias, *Der Reichstagsbrand*, 95, 624.
to preserve a semblance of legality and legitimacy. Though the regime tried to exert pressure on the court, it was neither fully independent nor an instrument of the National Socialists. Several judges were apparently sympathetic to the regime, and Goebbels received the not terribly reassuring message from the court examining magistrate Paul Vogt that he would ensure that “the Communists would be convicted as perpetrators.” Yet the countertrial, and even more dramatically the Brown Book campaign, introduced an element of risk into a trial that was still conducted according to the rules of evidence and the principles of German jurisprudence.

Portraying the court as a Nazi show trial diminished expectations for acquittal and was at cross-purposes with the criminal defense of the four communists, a fact already obvious to Hays, who arrived in Leipzig from London to witness the trial. (Hays was surely the only Jew in the Leipzig courtroom). If, as the defense (especially Sack) insisted, an acquittal was almost assured, propaganda attacking the court jeopardized the outcome. If, on the other hand, it was—as Katz apparently believed—a political trial that would lead to a conviction, the best outcome was a propaganda victory. The question of how to calibrate the political and criminal elements of the case was, as Comintern documents reveal, the major concern of the campaign on the eve of the trial.

Once the trial began, things changed dramatically. Dimitrov refused to cooperate with his court-appointed lawyer, Paul Teichert, and conducted a defense, as he put it, worthy of a communist leader. He defended both communism and his own innocence. He easily discredited the key witness against him, was defiant and relentless in his questioning of prosecutors, eyewitnesses, and hostile testimony from Nazi leaders brought to refute the claims of the Brown Book. Especially his verbal dual with Göring, who was reduced to shouting epithets and whom Dimitrov famously asked, “Are my questions making you afraid, Minister President?” made him into what the campaign called the “conquering Lion” (Brown Book II, 136). In his diary Goebbels registered his dismay: “Göring as witness in the Reichstag trial. But he only gave a popular lecture about Communism. And then he insulted Dimitrov. Inept staging [keine Regie].” About his own appearance he was more generous: “An entirely great day. I was in the best form. . . . Dimitrov and Torgler were miserably besmirched. There was nothing left of them.”

69. Ibid., 313.
Dimitrov’s triumph over Göring was instantly turned into a media event. Brochures and fly sheets appeared immediately, and a second Brown Book titled Dimitrov against Göring sported on its jacket another Heartfield photomontage—reproduced hundredfold—depicting the monumentally enlarged Dimitrov towering over a diminutive Göring sputtering epithets like “Red tramp, criminal, scum swindler, to the gallows!” In his photomontage Heartfield rearranged images of the courtroom, the defendant, and Göring, radically altering their position and the scale, and inverting the courtroom hierarchy (prisoner vs. witness) (fig. 4). Dimitrov’s vertical monumentality for this photomontage, which was reproduced ten thousandfold as postcards distributed throughout the Soviet Union and Europe well into the 1970s, corresponds to the antihorizontal imagery favored by the Stalinist aesthetics of the period.

The campaign underscored the contrast between the “hero” Dimitrov and the “puzzle” van der Lubbe. The latter appeared (at the opening of the trial) to have completely collapsed: “He walked as if he were asleep. His head was bowed. The expression on his face was set; his eyes unseeing his head bent over his chest” (Brown Book II, 159). Photographs of van der Lubbe in his striped pajamas, head bowed and staring blankly, were widely disseminated, a striking contrast with the rather well-built man arrested on the night of the fire. The Times’ Reed wrote: “‘A mental deficient,’ said some; a ‘consummate actor,’ said others. At one point Dimitrov pointed to van der Lubbe: This stupid tool, this miserable Faust is here, but Mephistopheles has vanished.” Reed added: “Did Faust know? Or was he not even the tool of others, but a poor and tattered vagrant on the high road of life?”

Van der Lubbe’s demeanor and apparent physical and mental collapse was pressed into the service of the Brown Book’s conjecture that he was an “embryo fascist,” a man whose “personal weaknesses rendered him easy to be exploited by unscrupulous persons for their own ends and marked him out as a tool for others.” It turned the working-class council communist into a déclassé vagabond, the abject communist archetype of the proto-Nazi whose very body betrayed his locus on the extreme edge of the social and moral geography of the political. The figure of the embryonic fascist superimposed the Freudian narrative of an archaic, inchoate, chthonic psyche onto the Marxist template of the murky divide between bourgeois and proletariat, personal and social

72. Reed, Burning of the Reichstag, 87.
Figure 4. John Heartfield, “The Judge and the Judged.” Postcard, ca. 1934. Russian National Library, Saint Petersburg
pathology. Van der Lubbe’s Dutch biographer, Martin Schouten, suggests that he became indifferent to the trial because his act that by his own admission lasted exactly “ten minutes” had dissolved in months of conjecture, false testimony, and irrelevant facts, which, as van der Lubbe himself said at a stunning moment during the trial, “had nothing to do with it.” He had indeed become a “hapless tool,” not of the Nazis but of both of his enemies simultaneously—the Nazis and the communists. If the campaign turned van der Lubbe into the “puzzle,” Dimitrov was the “miracle.” His closing speech ended with an unplanned theatrical flourish. As he recited Galileo’s famous line “The earth doth move all the same!” the presiding judge ordered the bailiffs to remove Dimitrov from the courtroom. He was carried out of the courtroom while intoning the words “The wheel of history is moving onward, towards a Soviet Europe, towards a World of Soviet Republics” (Brown Book II, 154). Münzenberg could not have dreamed up a better finale.

On December 23, 1933, the court pronounced van der Lubbe guilty of high treason (he was executed on January 10, 1934) but acquitted Torgler, Dimitrov, Popov, and Tanev. Though it exonerated these four defendants, charged with conspiracy, Supreme Court president Wilhelm Bünger still proclaimed “that Germany had been snatched back at the last moment from the abyss into which Communist leaders were trying to plunge the country.”

The official Nazi Press Bureau called the verdict an outrage “to the German nation’s sense of justice.” “This wrongful verdict,” it added, “makes abundantly clear before the eyes of the whole nation the necessity for a radical reform of our judicial system, which still in many ways follows the Liberal idea that has been set aside as foreign to our race.” The Völkischer Beobachter was even more blunt, predicting that “National Socialist Germany will know how to draw the consequences from the Leipzig verdict.” An outraged Goebbels reacted: “Lubbe death. All others, even Torgler, acquitted. That’s what happens to a revolution when you put it in the hands of jurists. This court must disappear. Bring on the court for the Protection of the German Volk.”

A jubilant Münzenberg called the acquittal the “first defeat of the Hitler regime” and “a great and irrevocable triumph of communism.” The acquittal gave not only Dimitrov but international communism an unexpected gift: the halo of innocence. As Koestler noted, “In the public mind, Dimitrov’s acquit-
tal became synonymous with the acquittal of Communism in general from the charge of conspiracy and violence. Communist terror was an invention of the Nazis to discredit their main opponents; in reality, the Communists were honest defenders of freedom and democracy. Dimitrov became the symbol of that brave and respectable type of modern liberal, the ‘anti-fascist.’”⁷⁹ Dimitrov became something that had eluded European communism since its inception: a genuinely popular “democratic” hero. He became the emblem of the new face of antifascist communism in the mid-1930s, no longer insular, illicit, clandestine, and proletarian but virile, virtuous, and democratic. This new face of antifascism was identified with Dimitrov. With Dimitrov’s ascendency to the symbolic leadership of the worldwide antifascist movement—soon followed by Stalin’s decision to make him head of the Comintern—the style of international antifascism changed dramatically from the dour proletarian comrade (kumpel) in his workers’ Mütze (as, for example, Ernst Thälmann) to the well-dressed, articulate, and cultivated European capable of quoting Goethe and Lenin in the same breath. The transformation of the image of communism at Leipzig was part of a massive alteration in the self-representation of European and Soviet communism at the same moment: from the avant-garde to Stalinist humanism, from the visual to the literary, from the rhetoric of the revolutionary vanguard to the rhetoric of the people and the nation.

The symbolic victory in Leipzig masked the much more massive defeat of German communism nine months earlier. The Brown Book provided some of the first details of the Nazi terror, of the concentration camps, and of the persecution of the Jews. Its list of the camps and its descriptions of the conditions, rations, torture, and murders provoked the regime to acknowledge the existence of concentration camps and to provide a public justification for them in an “Anti–Brown Book.”⁸⁰ As Manès Sperber points out, “The reason Münzenberg’s organizations—and all other associations and movements that were openly or secretly directed by the Communists—attracted so many adherents was that the speeches and actions of the Fascists, particularly the Nazis now in power, made a growing number of people fear for their freedom and their personal dignity.”⁸¹ The conspiracy theory woven by the Brown Book was in many respects the mirror image of the communist conspiracy that Nazi leaders believed in from the outset. At the same time, the Brown Book’s image of a

⁸⁰. See Werner Schäfer, Konzentrationslager Oranienburg: Das Anti-Braunbuch über das erste deutsche KZ (Berlin: Buch- und Tiefdruck-Gesellschaft, 1934).
regime without popular support resting on the machinations of social outcasts, morphine addicts, and homosexuals created the communist myth of fascism, which, as George L. Mosse observed, might have come from the repertory of the National Socialists themselves. This is not to equate Nazism and antifascism but to argue for a more complex reading of the borrowings and dynamic interplay of these two political enemies. More serious than any of Münzenberg’s deceptions was the self-deception that terror and not popular support was the main source of the regime’s success. By organizing an international campaign that depicted the Nazis as conspirators and terrorists, Münzenberg underestimated the capacity of the Nazis for even more cynical and criminal acts than those that followed the burning of the Reichstag.