

Historians find 'proof' that Nazis burnt Reichstag

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By Tony Paterson in

Berlin

THE first documentary evidence has emerged to support the view that the Nazis started the 1933 Reichstag fire that Hitler used as a pretext to establish a dictatorship.

While historians have agreed that there is no substance to Nazi claims that German Communists were to blame for the blaze, there has also been a lack of evidence to back the widely held belief that Hitler's supporters burnt down the parliament building in Berlin.

After poring over 50,000 pages of hitherto unexamined documents from former East German and Soviet archives, four leading German historians have now concluded that the fire was a Nazi plot. Marinus van der Lubbe, 24, a pro-Communist Dutch labourer, was beheaded by the Nazis after admitting that he started the blaze alone to encourage a workers' uprising.

The news magazine Der Spiegel backed this version of events in the 1960s after a wide-ranging investigation. Now, however, the four historians argue that Der Spiegel's coverage was part of a cover-up by Nazi sympathisers to protect the culprits from prosecution. Their findings put them at odds with other leading academics.

They base their case on remarks by Adolf Rall, a thief and Nazi stormtrooper, whose body was found in woods near Berlin in November 1933. Rall is said to have told prosecutors of a meeting of the SA stormtroopers during which the SA leader, Karl Ernst, ordered them to enter the Reichstag through a tunnel and sprinkle flammable liquid inside.

Ernst is said to have told his men that an excuse was needed to begin attacking Communists. Hitler used the fire to justify the arrest and torture of 25,000 Left-wing activists and to pass an emergency decree establishing absolute Nazi authority.

According to the historians, a former stormtrooper working in the jail where Rall was serving a sentence, heard of his statement and tipped off the SA. Its leaders are then said to have arranged for the statements to be destroyed by accomplices in the prosecutors' office and for him to be murdered.

His remarks however are said to have been referred to in other papers found in the archives. The four historians - Hersch Fischler, Jurgen Schmaedeke, Alexander Bahar and Wilfred Kugel - say Nazi complicity in the blaze was kept secret by ex-Nazi journalists after the war.

Der Spiegel's investigation in the 1960s was led by the historical researcher Fritz Tobias. His findings have been backed by the historian Hans Mommsen and are supported by one of his British counterparts, Ian Kershaw, in his recent work Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris.

The historians - writing in the journal Historische Zeitschrift - accuse Mr Tobias of "wanting to dispel the odium of arson from National Socialism" through his claims. Mr Tobias has defended himself, saying: "I was born into a Social Democratic household and am the last person to want to exculpate Hitler and his consorts."

Last week, Der Spiegel published a 10-page rebuttal of the four historians' conclusions. It said: "The thesis which holds that van der Lubbe was the only arsonist involved remains the most plausible explanation." Although Mr Tobias was not an ex-Nazi, the magazine conceded that other former members had been employed.