

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 270

### “The Reichstag Fire”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

On February 5, 1933, the new German chancellor, Adolf Hitler, received a visitor. It was Baldur von Shirach, head of the Nazi Party’s youth organizations. Chancellor Hitler, five days after moving into the Chancellery, told Shirach, “We have power and we’re going to keep it. I’m never leaving here.”

Indeed, though few at the time would have predicted it, he would remain chancellor until his death in 1945.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 270. The Reichstag Fire.

When Adolph Hitler was offered the chancellorship, at the head of a government of mostly ministers who were not National Socialists, he accepted the offer on the condition that another general election be held. The deal was made, and President Hindenburg called the election for March 5, barely a month in the future.

Germany had already seen two general elections in 1932, plus two rounds of presidential elections, plus various state elections. So a lot of elections have been going on, and a consistent thread in these elections has been that support of Adolph Hitler’s party, the NSDAP, tops out in the high thirties. Enough to make it the largest party in the Reichstag, but not enough to form a government it can fully control.

On the face of it, Hitler demanding yet another election was likely to become yet another exercise in futility. Why should this election produce a result markedly different from any of the other recent elections? But Hitler didn’t see it that way. Hitler saw an opportunity to use his new position as chancellor to spread his message farther than ever before, win a majority at last, and gain the government he always wanted.

He spoke over the radio to a national audience on February 1, two days after taking office. This was Hitler's first radio address. It had to be vetted by the Cabinet, so it was not a full-bore National Socialist speech; it was a declaration of the new government's priorities. Even so, it contained much that would have been familiar to anyone who had heard Hitler speak before. He denounced the German Revolution of 1918 as a betrayal and dismissed the Weimar Republic as "fourteen years of Marxism [that] have brought Germany to the brink of ruin." In deference to his conservative coalition partners, he spoke of traditional German values and called for unity. With regard to foreign policy, he called for German equality with other nations, but also pledged peace.

It was an uncharacteristically moderate tone for Hitler, and some listening might have concluded that accession to power had forced Hitler to dial back his extremism. But when he went into campaign mode, when he spoke only for the NSDAP and not for the whole government, Hitler very much returned to form. The unofficial National Socialist slogan for the campaign would be: "Attack on Marxism."

This election would indeed be different. First of all, the government persuaded President Hindenburg to sign what was titled "A Decree for the Protection of the German People," which empowered the government and the police to restrict the press and ban political gatherings. Hitler's government used the new powers to hamstring the German Communist Party, the KPD, and the Social Democratic Party, the SPD.

Second, the NSDAP would have access to German radio broadcasts for the first time. Hitler and Goebbels worked out a system in which Hitler would give speeches before a live audience, which would be carried over the radio along with commentary by Goebbels. They were an effective one-two combination.

Third, Hermann Göring was making full use of his position as acting interior minister of Prussia to purge the local police organizations throughout the state of Prussia of officers sympathetic to the left. And let me just remind you that Prussia constituted more than 60% of Germany at the time, so we're talking about most of the German police. A directive came down from Göring calling on all police to oppose "organizations hostile to the state," by which he meant leftists, and encouraged the police to use their firearms, pledging that any officer who did would be protected, regardless of the circumstances. To put it plainly, Göring had told the police it was open season on Communists and socialists.

Meanwhile, the other right-wing parties in the coalition, the German National People's Party, the DNVP, along with the Agricultural League, an organization of wealthy East Prussian landowners, and the Stahlhelm, the right-wing veterans' group, formed an electoral coalition with some other right-wing groups, and ran together in a joint list, which went by the unwieldy name of the "Black, White, and Red Battlefront," black, white, and red being the Imperial colors, the colors of the German flag before the 1918 revolution. Papen led this coalition, which pledged

to work together with the National Socialists. Their campaign posters showed Papen and Hindenburg with the legend, "If Hindenburg trusts him, so can Germany."

On February 22, Göring ordered the creation of auxiliary police forces, which he claimed were needed to combat Communist- and socialist-inspired unrest. Large numbers of SA, National Socialist stormtroopers, along with members of the SS, an elite force within the SA, and Stahlhelm volunteers were deputized, ostensibly to assist the police. In practice, it meant the stormtroopers had free rein to do as they pleased. Violence soared with attacks on KPD and SPD individuals and groups at a level never seen before. It soon became impossible for the leftist parties to assemble in meetings or conduct business.

The next day, February 23, a week and a half out from the election, Göring ordered a police raid on the Karl Liebknecht House, the headquarters of the KPD in Berlin. Flyers and documents were seized, though nothing incriminating was found. Not that that stopped Göring and other National Socialist officials from breathlessly announcing that they had uncovered evidence of an imminent plot to launch Communist revolution and overthrow the German government. These claims were widely reported in the German press the following day.

As wild accusations flew of an imminent leftist uprising and as beatings and killings of socialists and especially Communists became commonplace, a rumor began to circulate among the opposition that the Nazis were planning to stage an assassination attempt on Adolph Hitler and use it as a pretext for a killing spree. Supposedly they had already drawn up lists of prominent left-wing figures to be murdered.

At this fraught moment, with political tensions strung as tight as Germany had ever seen, came shocking news from an unexpected quarter. On the evening of February 27, less than a week before the election, Adolph Hitler was relaxing at the home of Joseph and Magda Goebbels. Hitler was a frequent guest at the Goebbels home, as he had no family of his own. He got on well with both of them. When they married, two years ago, Hitler was the best man. At this moment, they had one small child, a daughter, Helga. Hitler doted on her.

At about ten o'clock that evening, the phone rang. When Joseph Goebbels answered, the caller told him the Reichstag building was on fire. Goebbels assumed the call was a prank at first, but the frantic caller vehemently insisted it was not. Hitler and Goebbels headed to the Reichstag immediately, where they found deputy interior minister Hermann Göring already on the scene. The building was engulfed in flames. Police had already apprehended a suspicious figure found at the scene, 23-year-old Marinus van der Lubbe, a Dutch Communist. The agitated Göring was telling everyone at the scene, Hitler and Goebbels included, that one of the perpetrators had already been caught, that he was a Communist, and that the fire was set as a signal to begin the Communist revolution that Göring and the Nazis had already warned was imminent.

Hitler worked himself into a fury, shouting that every Communist Party leader should be shot on sight, that every Communist deputy in the Reichstag should be hanged. "Now there will be no more mercy!" Hitler shouted, not even for the Social Democrats.

When an official at the scene suggested to Hitler that the perpetrator, van der Lubbe, was perhaps no more than one unstable young man who acted alone, Hitler immediately rejected this possibility. "This is a very clever, carefully planned matter. The criminals thought this through very carefully. But comrades, they have miscalculated, haven't they?"

In the morning, the Cabinet met. Göring reported to the assembled ministers that it was impossible for a single person to have set the fire alone, and that the material seized during the police raid on the Karl Liebknecht House showed that the Communists were poised to begin a series of terrorist attacks that included setting fire to public buildings, poisoning sources of food and water, and taking hostage the wives and children of government ministers and other high-ranking officials.

The Cabinet spent the day drafting an emergency decree to present to President Hindenburg for his signature. The decree suspended the constitutional rights of freedom of speech, of the press, the right to assemble, the right to privacy in one's home, habeus corpus, I could go on. The only controversial provision was one proposed by Wilhelm Frick, the National Socialist interior minister. It permitted, in cases where a German state government was not taking necessary security measures, the German federal government to take control over that state government.

Remember that the coalition agreement allowed the Nazis the position of federal interior minister, though that post had little power. It was the state interior ministries that controlled the police. Göring controlled the Prussian police, and Frick's suggested provision would allow him to take control over police in other states, suddenly making him much more powerful. That's unlikely to have been a coincidence.

Anyway, the decree was approved by the Cabinet and signed by the President that same day. It was officially titled "Decree for the Protection of the People and the State," although most historians refer to it simply as the "Reichstag Fire Decree."

Hitler told the Cabinet that the moment had arrived for "a ruthless reckoning with the KPD." He wasn't exaggerating. Even as the Cabinet debated the terms of the draft decree, most of the Communist Party leadership were already in custody, including most of the Party's deputies in the Reichstag. The rest were in hiding, or fleeing the country. KPD newspapers were shut down. On March 3, KPD leader Ernst Thälmann was found and taken into custody. The man who a year earlier was assuring his members "after Hitler, our turn," would never see the light of day again. A number of SPD leaders were also taken into custody.

Remember that all this took place five days before a general election. The KPD was effectively banned; the SPD was not free to campaign. The Hitler government got plenty of press though;

most newspapers repeated uncritically the government's claims that a Communist revolution was imminent and that extreme measures in response were necessary to save Germany. Tens of thousands of members of the Stahlhelm and the Nazi SA stormtroopers, acting as so-called deputies or auxiliary police, patrolled the streets and the polling places on election day.

So how did the election turn out? You shouldn't be surprised if I tell you the National Socialists were the only party to increase their vote share, relative to the previous election, held less than four months ago. The biggest loser was the Communist Party, which dropped from 17% to 12% of the vote. The SPD lost 2% from its vote share, dropping from 20% to 18%. Even so, the SPD and the KPD retained their positions as the number two and number three parties in the Reichstag, respectively. The other political parties all saw tiny drops in their support, less than 1% apiece.

The NSDAP gained 11%, to take 44% of the vote share. Nazi gains appear to have come from middle-class Germans, who applauded the crackdown on the Communists. Additionally, turnout was much higher in this election than the previous one, increasing from 80% to 88%. It appears that the voters who sat out the previous election but participated in this one broke heavily for the Nazis.

But the remarkable thing about this election is not that the Nazis did well; it's that the other parties mostly hung onto their usual vote shares. Even the Communists suffered only a modest loss. Hitler must have been disappointed that the majority he long sought eluded him once again, although he had the consolation of knowing that the NSDAP plus its coalition partner, the Black-White-Red Front, added up to a comfortable majority.

Hitler's style of leadership changed immediately after the election. Before, he presided over cabinet meetings but did not attempt to control them. In the very first cabinet meeting after the election, Hitler spoke of the election result as a revolution. He predicted the end of Marxism in Germany and called once again for an enabling law. The KPD would not stand in the way, Hitler told his ministers, "because they [will] find themselves in detention." No one in the Cabinet argued with him; instead, they congratulated him on the election result. A few days later, Hitler persuaded the Cabinet to create a new position, Minister for Popular Entertainment and Propaganda, and appoint to it Joseph Goebbels, who at the age of 35 was unusually young for a Cabinet post.

The newly confident Hitler government also pressured the other German states to follow Prussia's lead and crack down not only on the Communists, but the SPD as well, shuttering SPD offices and banning SPD newspapers for such treasonous acts as questioning whether the Reichstag fire really was the beginning of a Communist uprising. Nazi stormtroopers attacked SPD facilities and dragged SPD leaders off to join the Communists in detention, where they were frequently beaten and tortured.

The government and the SA quickly ran out of places to keep all their prisoners. And so they turned to an abandoned munitions factory just outside of the town of Dachau, in Bavaria, not far from Munich. The factory grounds were converted into a concentration camp to hold Communists and other political prisoners. Administration of the camp was assigned to the SS, the special elite unit within the SA that since 1929 had been under the command of the now-32-year-old Heinrich Himmler, a faithful member of the Nazi Party since the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923.

Under the administration of Himmler and the SS, Dachau would become the template for a system of hundreds of Nazi concentration camps spread across Europe in years to come. As in many of the other camps, prisoners entered under an iron gate that spelled out the slogan, *Arbeit Macht Frei*, a German saying that you can translate as “Work shall set you free.” Dachau was not a secret; its creation was announced to the public on March 22, less than three weeks after the election, and the living conditions therein were widely publicized in German media. Germans were told that the inmates at the camp were dangerous radicals, held in indefinite detention for the sake of public safety. Most Germans applauded these precautions. Those who didn’t took Dachau as a warning. A commonly repeated saying in Germany went: *Lieber Gott, mach mich stumm, daß ich nicht nach Dachau komm*; which you might render in English as, “Dearest God, strike me dumb, that I may not to Dachau come.”

[music: Saint-Saëns, *Sonata for Clarinet and Piano*]

The first meeting of the new Reichstag was on March 21. The event was organized by Germany’s newly minted Propaganda Minister. The date had symbolic significance, because it was the first day of spring and also because it was the 62<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the first meeting of the Imperial German Reichstag under Otto von Bismarck in 1871. The choice of location also underscored the symbolic message that Germany was getting back to its Imperial roots: Potsdam, just outside Berlin, former residence of the Kings of Prussia and the German Emperors.

The day’s ceremonies were carried live over German radio, beginning with church services for the deputies, either in Potsdam’s Lutheran or Catholic churches. Hitler himself skipped both worship services; he used the morning instead to lay a wreath at the grave of Horst Wessel. Afterward, the Reichstag met in Potsdam’s Garrison Church, except for the SPD deputies, who were boycotting the ceremony. President Hindenburg gave brief opening remarks, then the chancellor spoke. Hitler began on a negative note, decrying Germany’s “decay” under the Weimar government. He went on to call for a national revival, then spent a good chunk of his speech praising Hindenburg and declaring that the President’s marvelous life story was an inspiration to every German. After the speech, Hindenburg, dressed in his field marshal’s uniform, shook hands with Hitler, who had forsaken his usual brown shirt for a formal black coat. Hitler bowed to Hindenburg as they shook hands, and the photograph of this moment appeared in newspapers across Germany: the venerable field marshal congratulating his dutiful minister.

After the ceremonies were concluded, military and SA units paraded through the streets of Berlin. That night, after a torchlight procession, Hitler went to the opera to attend a performance of Richard Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

Anyone who heard the speech or saw that photograph—and most Germans did one or the other or both—might have concluded that this was a new and more conciliatory Hitler. Hindenburg was by this time warming to his chancellor, no longer dismissing him as a “Bohemian corporal.”

But anyone who thought that should have known better by the next day, the day Himmler announced the creation of the Dachau concentration camp, or the day after that, when the Reichstag met in its first regular session, now at the Kroll Opera House, just across the square from the gutted Reichstag building. By the way, the Reichstag building will not be repaired or renovated until the 1960s. The Kroll Opera House will be the seat of the Reichstag until 1945.

At that first session, Hitler's government introduced the Enabling Act he wanted. As you know, this is not the first time Hitler brought up this idea, but now, in this environment of national crisis, he had a good chance of getting it passed. As a reminder: the enabling act Hitler is calling for is a law that effectively delegates the Reichstag's power to make laws to the Cabinet, including the power to enact laws contrary to the constitution. As such, the Enabling Act is itself a constitutional amendment and therefore requires two-thirds approval in the Reichstag.

That's quite a hurdle, considering that in recent years German governments have struggled to get to a majority. But the quest for two-thirds approval got a big boost when none of the Communist Party's 81 delegates showed up for the session. That's because they were all in detention, in hiding, or in exile. The same was true of 26 out of the 120 SPD deputies. Then Reichstag President Hermann Göring gave the Act a big boost by ruling that deputies who were absent without excuse would be counted as present for purposes of establishing a quorum. These 107 socialist and Communist deputies who were not present because they were in custody were therefore treated as present for purposes of establishing a quorum, and as abstentions when the Act was voted on.

With the NSDAP and its coalition partners certain to support the Enabling Act, and with those SPD deputies who had so far avoided arrest and who had run the gantlet through the streets of Berlin, where they were harassed by swarms of brownshirts calling out “Marxist swine!” as they arrived for the session, they were certain to vote against.

In the hall where the Reichstag met hung a giant swastika flag—never mind that this was supposed to be a parliament, not a party meeting. Adolph Hitler had shed his formal black coat and was back to his customary brown shirt. As he entered, the NSDAP bloc stood and offered him a triple “Heil!” salute. Hitler gave a two-and-a-half-hour speech in which he spoke again about the national decay Germany was experiencing, and how it was the fault of the Marxists. Then he discussed the sad state of the German economy. He promised better returns for farmers, an end to unemployment, higher wages, higher exports, you name it, he promised it. He

concluded with a call for the Enabling Act, saying the government could not do its work if it had to negotiate with the Reichstag every step of the way.

After Hitler finished, the Reichstag adjourned for two hours, so the various political parties could caucus in private to discuss the coming vote.

The key voting bloc here was the Catholic Centre Party. It and its partner, the Bavarian People's Party, controlled 91 seats, enough to make or break the Act. One of the Centre Party's policy priorities had been a concordat between Germany and the Vatican; that is, an agreement spelling out the legal position of the Catholic Church in Germany. Hitler was himself raised Catholic—although by this time I think we can safely call him a 'lapsed Catholic'—and promised such an agreement to Ludwig Kaas, leader of the Centre Party and himself a Catholic priest. Kaas also asked for Hitler's assurance that the government would not use the special powers granted by the Enabling Act against Catholics; that Catholic churches and schools would be respected, along with the Centre Party itself, as would the right of Catholics to practice their faith, and that Catholics would not be excluded from government employment.

Hitler agreed to these terms orally and promised to send Kaas a letter spelling them out in writing. This letter was never sent, although Hitler's government did negotiate a concordat with the Vatican.

Within the Centre Party meeting, Kaas argued for his party to support the Act. Taking the other side was former chancellor Heinrich Brüning, who argued vociferously against supporting Hitler, telling his colleagues that it was better for their Party to go down honorably than to support someone like Hitler, who in the end would destroy them anyway. He lost the debate and the Centre Party deputies voted to support Hitler. The dissident minority, including Brüning, would also publicly vote with the Nazis, despite their private reservations.

When the Reichstag reconvened, more speeches followed. The only deputy to speak against the Enabling Act was Otto Wels, leader of the SPD. He told the Reichstag that after the attacks on his party, the arrests of its innocent members, and the destruction of Party offices and equipment, no one should expect the SPD to support the government. "You can take from us our freedom and our lives," he said, "but not our honor... We pledge ourselves in this historic moment to the principles of humanity and justice, of freedom and of socialism. No enabling act can give you the power to destroy ideas that are eternal and indestructible." He ended his speech with a tribute to SPD members who had been assaulted and imprisoned by the Hitler government; here he was interrupted by Nazi laughter.

When the vote was taken, the Enabling Act passed, 444-94. Only the deputies from the Social Democratic Party voted against it.

The Enabling Act included a four-year deadline, meaning it would expire in 1937. But it would be renewed then, and again in 1941. In principle, Germany was still governed by the Weimar



constitution and the Reichstag. In practice, the Reichstag would become nothing more than a venue for Nazi Party rallies, and Germany's actual constitution would be the Enabling Act. Even Cabinet meetings would become increasingly infrequent, and eventually cease altogether. Adolph Hitler personally would wield the power of the government, the parliament, and the judicial system. From this point forward, you can safely refer to Adolf Hitler as a dictator. It's worth noting that he followed Mussolini's footsteps to reach this point, but while it had taken Mussolini five years to go from newly appointed prime minister of a coalition government to *il Duce*, it had taken Adolf Hitler fifty-two days.

I would like to take this opportunity to point out that the very first people the Nazis persecuted, the first ones they beat and tortured, the first they locked away in concentration camps—before people of other ethnicities, before Poles or Slavs, before political or religious dissidents, before LGBT people, even before Jews or Roma—the very first victims were Communists and socialists. And when the moment came to resist the impending nightmare, the only voices raised against the Nazis were those same Communists and socialists. After Otto Wels, no one else will denounce Adolf Hitler publicly and to his face again, ever.

This is something I hope you will keep in mind the next time you hear it said that the Nazis were actually socialists, because hey, it's right there in the name.

Leading German Communists who escaped arrest fled to the Soviet Union. Many would later be purged by Stalin. As for the SPD, within two months, Interior Minister Frick would order the SPD dissolved and its assets seized.

Germany's trade unions met a similar fate. All labor organizations were banned except those affiliated with the Nazi Party. In Nazi Germany, labor disputes will be resolved by government decree.

The surviving SPD leadership, including Otto Wels, fled to Saarland, which in 1933 was still under the administration of the League of Nations, there to decide what to do next. Some chose to return to Germany and resist the government by lawful means. They were all in custody or dead by the end of the year. Others, including Wels, chose to move to Prague and oppose Hitler from exile. There they established a new SPD newspaper, *Neuer Vorwärts*. In 1938, the Czechoslovak government, under German pressure, would expel them from its territory. Otto Wels died in Paris in September 1939.

The other political parties, centrists such as the Centre Party and the German People's Party, collapsed as their members jumped ship to join the NSDAP. It took the right-wing parties a little longer, but they too dissolved or merged with the National Socialists. The *Stahlhelm*, the right-wing veterans' organization, folded itself into the SA. In July, all political parties apart from the NSDAP were banned. In November, another Reichstag election was held, this time on the Italian model, in which only the National Socialists submitted a list, and the public only voted yes or no.

The Party list won with 92% voter approval; Adolph Hitler at last had the Nazi majority he'd craved for so long.

The German flag, the black, red, and gold banner adopted by the Weimar Republic, disappeared. President Hindenburg ordered government buildings to fly the black, white, and red colors of the old Empire, alongside the black, white, and red swastika banner of the Nazi Party; these two flags would together represent the new Germany.

The reaction of the general public to all of this was mostly positive. People spoke of a new atmosphere in Germany, a sense of optimism had returned. You could feel it in the air and see it in people's faces on the street, it was said.

There was a mad rush to join the NSDAP. The Party had had less than a million dues-paying members on the day Hitler became chancellor. In the next three months, two million more Germans signed up, so many that on May 1, the Party announced a temporary moratorium on new memberships, because applications were flooding in faster than the staff could process them.

This sudden rush to the Nazi Party can partly be explained as a consequence of high unemployment, though only partly. It didn't take Germans long to realize that Party membership was the key to getting a job in government. A joke went around that the Party initials—NSDAP—stood for, "*Na, suchst du auch ein Pöstchen?*" which you could translate as, "So you want a job, too?"

Converts are always the worst, and these newly minted Nazi Party members didn't want anyone to think their change of heart was less than totally sincere, so they soon made spectacles of themselves by flying Party flags and wearing swastika lapel pins and greeting each other on the street with a raised arm and a hearty "Heil, Hitler!" instead of the more conventional "Guten Morgen!" In July 1933, Interior Minister Frick made the new greeting mandatory in German government offices.

The rapid embrace of Nazism among the German public was appalling, even to the Nazis themselves. "Now everyone is a Nazi," grumbled Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels. "It makes me sick." German writer Erich Ebermayer would later condemn this sudden shift in public attitude as "the most shameful aspect" of this era.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank William for his kind donation, and thank you to Sean for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like William and Sean help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

The podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. Sometimes it's my own work, sometimes it's licensed, but many times, the music you hear here is free and downloadable. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we step back from the narrative for a bit to contemplate the phenomenon of fascism. Much as it pains me to say this, fascism is the twentieth century's unique contribution to political thought, so it behooves us to take some time to consider it carefully, and now that we have two major powers, Italy and Germany, under fascist rule, it seems like the right moment to do that. I'll be stepping out of the timeline a little, because we also want to consider where fascism leads a nation, but I suspect most of you already know the answer to that one. We'll begin with *The Roots of Fascism*, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. As soon as the Reichstag building burned, opponents of the Nazi Party, both domestic and foreign, began accusing the Party leadership of arranging the fire themselves, then putting the blame on a mentally ill young Communist as an excuse to crack down on the left and suspend civil liberties just before the election.

When I was a young person, growing up in the aftermath of the war, it was taken as fact that the Reichstag fire had been staged by the Nazis for their own political benefit, and that was how it was taught in school. In more recent times, the consensus seems to have swung the other way: that the fire was started by a mentally unstable young Communist for reasons only he understood.

Not everyone believes that. The timing of the fire is still suspicious. It happened during an election campaign in which the Nazis were making up stories about imminent Communist uprisings. On the other hand, the behavior of the Party leadership that night—Hitler, Goebbels, Göring—strongly suggests they were as surprised as anyone.

But I'm struck by the fact that the Reichstag Fire conspiracy theory is what you might call the ur-conspiracy theory, the ancestor of several more to come. In our time, we use the term "conspiracy theory" very loosely. I'm using it here in a stricter sense of "a theory that posits a conspiracy to explain something that is otherwise hard to explain." In this category, I would offer as examples: the suggestion that in 1941 Franklin Roosevelt had advance warning of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, but allowed it to happen, or that the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy involved a secret cabal, or that the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States were an "inside job."

I believe these conspiracy theories thrive because in a peculiar way, they are easier to accept than the truth. It is difficult to conceive how unforeseen acts, especially acts of one ordinary person or small group of people, can dramatically change the course of history and affect the lives of billions of people. The alternative explanation, that these are the deeds of the powerful, doing what powerful people do, which is influence world affairs for their own benefit, is strangely more comforting than the truth.

[music: Closing Theme]