

Killing Ideas

By May, the Nazis were burning books. The first book burning took place on May 6, 1933. Students from the Berlin School of Physical Education demolished the Institute of Sexual Science, one of the first scholarly groups to study homosexuality, ceremonially hung a bust of the institute's founder, and then burned twelve thousand books as they sang the nation's anthem. Four days later, the Nazi German Students' Association set up more bonfires, this time to burn books written by Jews and other "undesirables." At one gathering, Joseph Goebbels told a cheering crowd, "The soul of the German people can again express itself. Those flames not only illuminate the final end of an old era; they light up a new!" Lilian T. Mowrer, an American who lived in Germany, described what happened next:

The books we were reading – whether by Thomas Mann, Bernard Shaw, Stefan Zweig, Werner Bergengruen, or Paul Claudel – like modern art – turned into bills of indictment against society. They made us confront National Socialism. They mobilized our defiance.

I held my breath while he hurled the first volume into the flames: it was like burning something alive. Then students followed with whole armfuls of books, while schoolboys screamed into the microphone their condemnation of this and that author, and as each name was mentioned the crowd booed and hissed. You felt Goebbels's venom behind their denunciations. Children of fourteen mouthing abuse of Heine! Erich Remarque's *All Quiet On The Western Front* received the greatest condemnation... it would never do for such an unheroic description of war to dishearten soldiers of the Third Reich.²⁸

Of all the events that took place in Germany in the spring of 1933, the book burnings made the greatest impression abroad. Helen Keller, an American writer, sent the organizers of the event a letter. "History has taught you nothing if you think you can kill ideas. Tyrants have tried to do that often before, and the ideas have risen up in their might and destroyed them. You can burn my books and the books of the best minds in Europe, but the ideas in them have seeped through a million channels and will continue to quicken other minds."²⁹

Others quoted the words of the great German poet, Heinrich Heine, whose family was Jewish. Referring to book burnings in the nineteenth century, the poet had said: "Where they burn books, they will soon burn people." Yet even those who quoted Heine could not truly believe that anyone would go that far.

CONNECTIONS



Why do you think the Nazis began the book burnings by casting books about gays into the flames? What other books were cast into the fire? Why were they singled out? Who made the decision?

Lilian T. Mowrer recalled that "the burning of books affected me more deeply than anything else. I could not have been more shocked by the sight of martyrs at the stake, for although torturing people was revolting enough, regimentation of the individual was ultimately more sinister and the Nazis were beginning to apply their racial theory with ruthless efficiency." For her full account of the event, see the packet on *Kristallnacht* available from the Facing History Resource Center. Why do you think she responded to the book burnings with such emotion? How do you account for Helen Keller's response? How do you think you would have responded?



In what respects is a book burning like a rally or a parade? What differences seem most striking? How do individuals make decisions at such events? How do you think the atmosphere that surrounds a book burning affects what is written? What is published?