

# **Faking Hitler**

## **The STERN scandal and its impact on the reputation of the entire European press industry**

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### **MANAGEMENT DECISION**

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The authors prepared this case solely as a basis for class discussion and not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management. Although based on real events and despite occasional references to actual companies, this case is fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons or entities is coincidental.

## STERN'S Handling of the Crisis

The following paragraphs outline STERN'S internal and external handling of the reputational crisis. All illustrations, supporting materials and a timeline of the happenings in 1983 (**Exhibit 1**) are provided in the appendix.

### 1983: Management Decision by STERN

*May 6, 1983*

**At 11:00** an editorial conference was held at STERN, attended by Felix Schmidt, the second editor-in-chief besides Peter Koch, who had also believed in the authenticity of the diaries. Some editors had expressed doubts about the authenticity of the Hitler diaries. Schmidt assured that he was more convinced than ever of the diaries' authenticity and dismissed the arising discussion by saying that this was a denunciation of colleagues: "Anyone who doesn't understand that works at the wrong magazine".

**At 13:28** The German Press Agency reported that the diaries were fake. The news hit like a bomb. STERN editors stood in the hallways debating the disaster. Editor-in-chief Felix Schmidt scheduled an internal conference for 14:30. The legal advisors of the publishing house Gruner + Jahr personally went to the Federal Archives to receive the devastating expert opinions on the forgery.

**At 14:30** the conference room was crowded with department heads and editors. Since the legal advisors were not present at the conference yet to personally confirm the fraud, Schmidt urged the department heads to stay still, since the magazine's next edition, which was already finished, would have to be revamped, and the Hitler diaries would have to be removed from the upcoming issue. The editors decided to sit down together in the cafeteria and demanded to be fully informed by the editor-in-chief Peter Schmidt.

**At 17:00** the editorial team was almost completely assembled in the cafeteria. editor-in-chief Felix Schmidt and STERN founder Henri Nannen attended as well and were bombarded with questions: 'How could this happen? Who bears the responsibility? STERN editor Wolf Thieme, who had written the story of the discovery of the "diaries", pleaded complicit and made his "position available".

*May 7, 1983*

**At 19:00** STERN informed the press agencies that the editors-in-chief Peter Koch and Felix Schmidt resigned and that Rolf Gillhausen, the third editor-in-chief, and Henri Nannen were now in charge as editors-in-chief.

*May 8, 1983*

**At 18:00** an editorial meeting was held in the cafeteria with Henri Nannen and Rolf Gillhausen as the new editors-in-chief. Several editors had prepared resolutions calling for further resignations and the establishment of an independent editorial committee to prevent such incidents from happening again. STERN subsequently set up an independent editorial commission to investigate the incidents thoroughly and without bias. It was intended to codify STERN's progressive, liberal stance and guarantee the independence of the editorial team towards the publishing house. Through his central role in the affair, Heidemann, whom Henri Nannen had often praised in editorials in the past, became a lightning rod for the anger of his colleagues. The STERN commission also concluded that the "headline mentality" in the editorial department had contributed to the fact that supposed sensations were often accepted as "great for the newspaper" without the validity of the content being critically examined. Verification had sometimes degenerated into a method of equipping a story with the "facts" that were still missing for the "real" sensation.

*May 9, 1983*

**At 13:27** a message was sent to the press agencies that Henri Nannen had fired Heidemann and that he had also filed a criminal complaint against him.

*May 11, 1983*

STERN made a public apology. Henri Nannen himself wrote the editorial "In eigener Sache" (On his own account) of the issue published on May 11, in which he admitted that the diaries were forgeries (**Exhibit 2**). In this public statement, he described the case from his point of view and assured the readers that he would keep them up to date about the progress of their investigation. As Henri Nannen described the situation, "Stern has been struck by a wound that will still hurt for a long time".

*May 19, 1983*

The title of the STERN issue published on May 19 (**Exhibit 3**) was "Die Fälschung. Konrad Kujau. Der Mann, der "Hitlers" Tagebücher lieferte" (The forgery. Konrad Kujau. The man who produced Hitler's diaries). In this issue, the magazine reconstructed the whole scandal and took a closer look at the forger Konrad Kujau and how the supposedly biggest scoop in the magazine's history became a gigantic disaster.

*May 26, 1983*

On May 26, the STERN issue titled "Betrifft: Stern. Das Protokoll einer dramatischen Woche" (Concerns: Stern. The record of a dramatic week) was released (**Exhibit 4**). In this issue, the article "Tage, die den Stern erschütterten" (Days that shook the star) reported in detail how events unfolded within the magazine from May 6 onward and how it was handled from the moment the forgery was publicly reported.

In this issue, also the reactions of the world press towards the scandal were gathered. In the article "Das Gelächter über den Reinfall" (Laughter at the flop), STERN humorously faced the ridicule of the entire world press (**Exhibit 5**). It said "From the North Cape to the Firelands, the world laughs at STERN. Not a satirist, not a cartoonist of rank, who passed by the gigantic flop with the Hitler diaries. You, the STERN readers, should also be able to laugh at us".

In the same issue of the magazine, STERN also published letters from readers on the forgery scandal which strongly criticized STERN, thus intendedly exposed STERN to the public opinion (**Exhibit 6**).

*June, 1985*

The trial against Gerd Heidemann and Konrad Kujau took place. The forger was sentenced to four years and six months in prison on the charges of fraud and forgery, reporter Heidemann received two more months, as the court assumed that he had withheld a large part of the money.

## **2018: Management Decision by STERN**

For 35 years STERN's forged Hitler diaries had been coyly locked away in the basement of the magazine publisher Gruner + Jahr. In September 2018, on the occasion of STERN's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the magazine surprisingly took the forged Hitler diaries out of its safe and reopened the case to deal with the darkest chapter of its history. The new editor-in-chief Christian Krug decided to make the fake notebooks available to the public. On Hamburg's Day of Journalism seven volumes of the faked diaries were then exhibited publicly for the first time, attracting a large audience and media interest.

At the same time, STERN launched a ten-episode podcast series with the title "Faking Hitler – the true story of the fake Hitler diaries". In doing so, the magazine joined the trend of making stories out of its own mistakes from the past by dealing self-critically with its own history. The on demand audio series reconstructs more than two years in the lives of Kujau and Heidemann and also presents previously unpublished material. For this purpose, the editorial team analysed tape material with telephone conversations between the two men and used excerpts from this original material. Additionally, STERN also interviewed contemporary witnesses and historians. Reportage elements and quotes from the diaries round off the audio series. By addressing the scandal with the help of a podcast, which is available on the podcast platforms iTunes, Spotify and Deezer, STERN was able to make the story accessible to everyone and thus generate public interest in the forged Hitler diaries even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Today, the Hitler diaries are what they were not originally: a document of contemporary history. STERN gave some of the forged diaries to the Federal Archives in Koblenz and donated volumes to various museums and exhibition houses. The "Haus der Geschichte" in Bonn owns one volume and also the Museum of Contemporary Art in Paris and the Police Museum in Hamburg are in the possession of some volumes.

## European media organizations' handling of the Crisis

The following sub-chapters describe how Paris Match and The Sunday Times dealt with the scandal of the forged Hitler diaries. All illustrations and supporting materials can be found in the appendix.

### Paris Match

On May 6, 1983, France Inter, a French national generalist radio station, publicly announced the news: STERN's diaries were faked. On the same day, the management of Paris Match announced that it was its duty to stop any publication until the light was shed on this story. If there had been manipulation and disinformation surrounding the discovery of the Hitler diaries, the magazine would investigate the truth. Thus, Paris Match publicly recognized the obvious - the scoop of the century became the deception of the century. On May 13, after a week of criticism, the new edition of Paris Match was published. In it the French newspaper calmly defended itself with the help of Jean Cau, a journalist from Paris Match and a famous polemist. For all the questions raised, the journalist publicly described the criticism as harsh and unfair and shared the new aim of the French magazine: to be the echo of the events constituted in Germany by the purchase and publication of the diaries by STERN. However, the tone of this publication on May 13, combined with Jean Cau's public claim, were perceived by the public as follows: "Who are you to lecture us, as you would know more than we do". At that moment, the priority of Paris Match was to save its credibility. Therefore, on May 20, Paris Match prepared its investigation to find out who carried out this manipulation and why and how it happened. These were the real questions the magazine needed to answer in order to be transparent to its readers. However, Paris Match remained to its defensive behaviour as they did not want to be lectured. The French magazine especially wanted to fight against morals and rumours that indicated that it might have been involved in participating in an operation to rehabilitate Hitler's image.

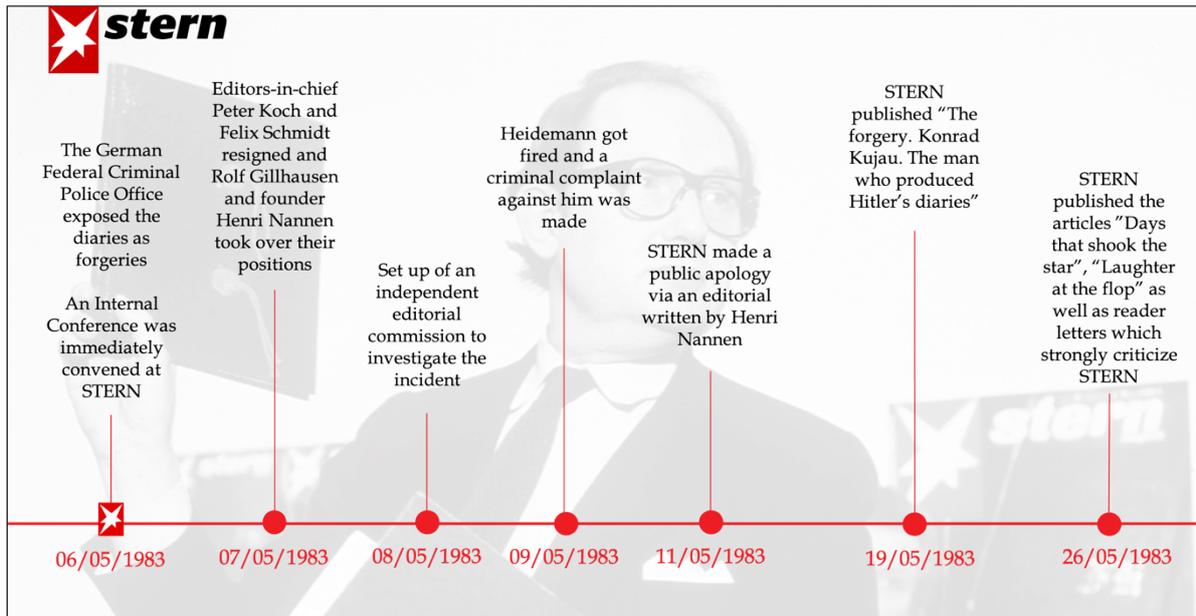
### The Sunday Times

On May 6, 1983, the top editors of The Sunday Times British discovered the truth about the diaries last minute. CEO of The Sunday Times, Rupert Murdoch, dismissed their concerns and required to keep the press rolling, leaving The Sunday Times, "one of the world's great news organizations, with serious egg on its face". However, the British newspaper quickly ran into a series of embarrassments. Some critics accused them of being Nazi sympathizers and put forward conspiracy theories about the origin of the diaries, which were supposedly used to provide financial benefits to the HIAG, the "mutual aid society for former Nazi SS officers". A day after the incident, The Sunday Times furiously backtracked from its strategy to keep publishing. On May 8, the paper hired a new Hitler expert to mock the diaries, and the British newspaper published the new headline "The Hitler Diaries: hunt for the forger." This was the first time the paper acknowledged the forgery of the diaries and provided background information about how such an incident could happen. Besides, The Sunday Times proclaimed that it took actions to investigate and unravel the situation. As written in its publication, "The Sunday Times had asked Stern for access to Heidemann, but this

had been refused.” Therefore, the British magazine arranged its own test of the diaries with the help of a reputable British forensic firm. In addition, The Sunday Times announced that it would not proceed with the publication of materials from the diaries as planned for May 22 and issued a sincere apology to its readers. Thus, the magazine acknowledged its fault and justified it by saying: “Serious journalism is a high-risk enterprise”. Although Rupert Murdoch denied his direct responsibility in the matter, the CEO of The Sunday Times proclaimed in 2012 (almost 30 years after the incident) that he took “full responsibility for it” and added “It was a major mistake and one I shall have to live with for the rest of my life.”

## Appendix

Exhibit 1 Timeline of the happenings in 1983



**Exhibit 2** Editorial by founder Henri Nannen in STERN'S issue from May 11, 1983, apologizing to the readers

**HENRI NANNEN**

# In eigener Sache

*Lieber Sternleser!*

Das Bundesarchiv in Koblenz hat eine Anzahl der Bände, die der STERN als „Tagebücher Adolf Hitlers“ abzdrukken begann, nach einer vom STERN veranlaßten Prüfung zu Fälschungen erklärt. Auch wenn die Untersuchung weiterer Bände in der Schweiz und in den USA noch nicht abgeschlossen ist, muß aus dem Koblenzer Urteil gefolgert werden, daß es sich bei dem gesamten Fund um eine mit teils eindeutig echten, teils ebenfalls zweifelhaften Dokumenten angereicherte Fälscherarbeit handelt.

Die Chefredakteure des STERN Peter Koch und Felix Schmidt haben inzwischen ihren Rücktritt erklärt. Ich habe ihnen zu danken für eine langjährige gute und freundschaftliche Zusammenarbeit. Daß meinen Mitarbeitern Fahrlässigkeit in der Darstellung der Geschichte des Dritten Reichs vorzuwerfen wäre, kann nur jemand behaupten, der die kommentierende Einbettung der Zitate in die historischen Zusammenhänge nicht wahrgenommen hat.

Denn in einem Punkt zumindest haben auch die dem Bundesinnenminister Friedrich Zimmermann unterstellten Koblenzer Archivare vorschnell geurteilt: so plump und einfach als Fälschung zu durchschauen waren die 60 Bände nicht, sonst hätte es den wochenlangen Streit der Experten und Historiker über die Tagebücher wohl nicht gegeben. Daß Sachverständige vom STERN getäuscht oder falsch zitiert worden wären, istbarer Unsinn.

Eine kompliziertere Sache ist der Fall des Reporters Gerd Heidemann. Dieser Mann, der seine Fähigkeit zum Aufspüren und Recherchieren viele Male unter Beweis gestellt hat und dessen Aufklärung des Absturzes der „Führermaschine“ bei Börnersdorf unbestritten ist, wurde offenbar ein Opfer seiner journalistischen Besessenheit.

Inzwischen besteht der dringende Verdacht, daß Heidemann die STERN-Redaktion im weiteren Verlauf seiner Recherche bewußt irreführt hat. Die Geschichte dieser Recherche wird geschrieben werden, sobald sie restlos aufgeklärt ist. Um das zu beschleunigen, habe ich die Staatsanwaltschaft eingeschaltet. Ich weiß, welche Verantwortung ich gegenüber einem Kollegen damit auf mich nehme, aber die Verantwortung des STERN gegenüber seinen Lesern wiegt schwerer. Hier darf nichts vertuscht und nichts verschwiegen werden. Bei aller Schwere des Verdachts hat auch Heidemann Anspruch auf den Rechtsgrundsatz: solange ihm Schuld nicht nachgewiesen ist, hat er als unschuldig zu gelten.

In der STERN-Redaktion war mit den „Tagebüchern“ nur ein kleines Arbeitsteam befaßt. Aus Gründen strengster Geheimhaltung waren andere Ressorts nicht informiert. Daß es in einer Redaktion, die ihre Glaubwürdigkeit als höchstes Gut ansieht, deshalb Zorn und Empörung gegeben hat, werde ich auf mich nehmen müssen.

Die Schadenfreude und der Hohn allerdings, mit denen Bess-

wisser, Neider und Gegner den STERN überschütten, treffen mich nicht. Denn wer austeilt, muß auch einstecken können.

Gegen die dem STERN vorgehaltene Verdächtigung, die Tagebücher stammten aus rechtsextremistischen Quellen, spricht allein der Inhalt. Denn der Hitler der „Tagebücher“ ist kein weißgewaschener oder harmloser Geselle. Neonazis hätten an ihm keine Freude gehabt.

**D**ennoch: dem STERN ist eine Wunde geschlagen worden, die noch lange schmerzen wird. Wir trösten uns nicht mit der Feststellung, daß dies in 35 Jahren der erste Fall dieser Art ist. Wir trösten uns auch nicht damit, daß andere Zeitungen – darunter Weltblätter wie „Life“ und „Washington Post“ – raffinierten Fälschungen aufgesessen sind.

Aber es möge uns doch niemand für so dumm halten, daß der STERN eine vorübergehende Auflagensteigerung angestrebt und dabei fahrlässig das Risiko des Rückschlages in Kauf genommen hätte. Wer glaubt, es lohne sich, seine Leser für dumm zu verkaufen, der versteht nichts vom journalistischen Geschäft.

Über den Fortgang unserer Ermittlungen werden wir Sie unverzüglich informieren.

Herzlich Ihr

*Henri Nannen*

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Exhibit 3 STERN issue from May 19, 1983, reporting about Konrad Kujau



**Exhibit 4** STERN issue from May 26, 1983, cover: record of a dramatic week, and the article: days that shook the star



**Exhibit 5** STERN issue from May 26, 1983, world press reactions



