

READING

Where They Burn Books...

On May 6, 1933, the German Student Association announced a nationwide “Action against the Un-German Spirit.” 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 the new!”¹ Lilian T. Mowrer, an American journalist in Germany, described what happened next:

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 condemnations 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.²

The mobs also burned the books of Helen Keller, an American author who was a socialist, a pacifist, and the first deaf-blind person to graduate from college. Keller responded: “History has taught you nothing if you think you can kill ideas 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.”³

¹ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 241.

² Quoted in *Witness to the Holocaust*, ed. Azriel Eisenberg (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1981), 79.

³ Quoted in Rebecca Onion, “‘God Sleepeth Not’: Helen Keller’s Blistering Letter to Book-Burning German Students,” *The Vault* (blog), Slate.com, May 16, 2013, accessed March 16, 2016.



Book Burning in Berlin

Students contribute anti-German books to be destroyed at a Berlin book-burning on May 10, 1933. About 40,000 people attended the event.

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Connection Questions

1. What was “un-German” about the various books burned by the Nazis?
2. What message did the Nazis convey by publicly burning books? Who did they hope would receive that message?
3. Have you heard of books being restricted or destroyed where you live? In what ways is that similar to or different from publicly burning books?
4. Was Helen Keller right, or can education, law, or policy destroy an idea?