

Episode 66: The Hitler Diaries Scam

Emily Einolander

Welcome to the Hybrid Pub Scout podcast with me, Emily Einolander.

Corinne

And me, Corinne Kalasky.

Emily

and guest host Chris Curran.

Chris

Hi folks.

Emily

We are mapping the frontier between traditional and indie publishing. And today that also means some extremely audaciously embarrassing flimflammy. So we're talking about the Hitler diaries scam today, and it's a pretty cuckoo-bananas story. And I just want to get your kind of initial impressions of it. Do you want to tell us, Corinne, what you think?

Corinne

Ah, yeah, I think cuckoo bananas goes a ways toward describing the story. A good way towards it. I, I don't know. I mean, like, it's kind of impressive how this guy was, like, able to pull one over on so many people for like a while, you know, people who definitely should have done better. And we're experts in all these subject areas. And I feel like it was just pure love of Nazism. That really carried him, you know, the whole way through this. And I don't know what to say about that. Except for. Exactly. Yeah. So no, but it's crazy. I mean, it's a it's a scam. I feel like it's, you know, it's a pretty good one. I mean, it's he's, I would say in lockstep with like Elizabeth Holmes, certainly. And Anna Delvy, who we were just talking about before we started recording some of the best loved scammers in the world today. So yeah, put that yeah, he was something, this guy. So yeah, that's my reaction.

Emily

I don't know if his voice was that low. But yeah, that's,

Corinne

I don't think her's is either? We'll never know.

Emily

What about you, Chris? What do you think?

Chris

Completely cuckoo bananas. I love cuckoo bananas. That is a great expression for it. Anytime that there are these crazy fraud stories? I love them. There was something about like a Thomas Jefferson wine bottle that was forged. That supposedly came from his vineyard. The billionaires vinegars the name of that book. If you can find it, it has a lot to do with the Koch brothers who, who, obviously, but anyway, anytime that there's anything to do with any of these kinds of crazy frauds, and ridiculous schemes, I'm all for it.

Emily

All for the ridicule. Yeah. All right. So let's set the scene. So it's Germany, April 21 1945. In the last days of the Third Reich, two planes leave Berlin at dawn, one of them carrying Hitler's valet William Arndt, who is escorting Hitler's private documents. By evening, Hitler's chief pilot Hans Bauer reported that one of the planes had crashed in a small village outside Dresden, the one that held aren't in the documents. Hitler shouted—

Corinne

In that plane were all my private archives, what I had intended as a testimony for posterity, it is a catastrophe.

Emily

The collection consisted of a previously unpublished sequel to mind calm, and opera that the viewer had written with one of his childhood friends and a large collection of his private diaries. years later, the documents not destroyed after all were discovered yada yada yada in 1983, the stern news magazine in Western Germany after selling cereal rights to publications across the western world, and now it's the discovery. Within a few days, Stern was totally discredited. The diaries were exposed as forgeries, and to Hitler loving dumbasses were arrested. We're going to talk about what kind of dumbasses and dumb Asri led up to the diaries being taken for Genuine Articles and shown to the world as such, exploring what mistakes publishers and reporters made to let something like this happen. And of course, we will unveil how the scam was brought to an end.

Corinne

Okay, so some content warnings up top Nazis, like a lot of Nazis, including casual shameless Neo Nazism long after the Third Reich is over. There's a lot of that in this story. Also, characters in this story are Holocaust deniers or revisionist historians who wanted to revive Hitler's image and have history smile more fondly upon him.

05:07

Emily

It just one thing about this story that just blew my mind was how many people miss the Third Reich in the immediate aftermath of World War Two in Germany? Well, not just in Germany and England and America as well. Yeah,

Chris

yeah. So it's the American side that shocks me the most.

Emily

I mean, I don't know any more in the past it would have been. Yeah. So, Chris, tell us what our sources are.

Chris

Well, our sources today are an episode of the podcast fraudsters called Hitler fanfiction that everyone believed. Another one the British ITV show selling Hitler from 1991. Which, by the way, you can find on YouTube,

Emily

I'll link it.

Chris

Yeah, yay. And then of course, the Hitler diaries fakes that fool the world by Charles Hamilton 1991, University Press of Kentucky.

Emily

I would like to note that I respect how much open spite the author has for all the Neo Nazis in the story and also for Rupert Murdoch. And there will also be several articles we'll link in the show notes on hybridpubscout.com.

Chris

And a notable point we want to make from the very top both the scammers many of the people who were scammed and at least one person who revealed the scam or huge Nazi fans, by which I mean either Neo Nazis or at least major right wingers. And that makes it more insidious, and easier to ride in every possible way.

Emily

And it's definitely there were some people who are just like openly I love Hitler so much, but then there were also people were like, Oh, just think it's really interesting. Just you know, fascinating character, a great man of history. group out of history. Like fucking Dan Carlin, one of Dan Carlin's great men of history. Oh, God, I don't think he's a Nazi. But yeah, you know what I mean?

Corinne

Good save.

Emily

I am not a Nazi. The world is always ending. Dan Carlin voice. All right, that said the main characters in the story are a couple of guys named Konrad Kujao, who went by Conrad Fischer to chumps. I mean, Nazi memorabilia correct collectors, and Gared Heidemann. So first, we have Konrad Kujau, the man who forged the diaries themselves, his entire life was a series of failed businesses and successful Griffes is lawyer would later go on to make this amazing statement.

Corinne

I do not think you can call Kujau a liar. Exactly. He is really more of a romantic who was not too careful to distinguish fact from fiction.

Emily

That's what my ex-boyfriend's mom used to say about him. Kujau's true calling was to sell fake Nazi memorabilia and art and manuscript forgery. It was very, very illegal to possess Nazi memorabilia in East Germany. So Kujau paid low, low prices to get enough memorabilia to start selling them at a profit to other offices who missed the Third Reich so much. So he could jack up the prices even higher. He also got very good at creating fake authentication documents. And as an art lover who claimed without any proof to have dropped out of art school, just like his hero, he decided to start out by forging Hitler's paintings. And by the middle of 1978, he was selling signed copies, you know, signed Adolf Hitler of mine including a couple of volumes that he wrote in his approximation of Hitler's handwriting, even though the original documents were well known to have been typewritten. So Hitler never wrote Mein Kampf his own handwriting, but for some reason, people bought these things. So some up big Nazi fan and a guy who actively loved his own ability to lie and fool people.

Corinne

Gerd Heidemann was a journalist who worked for a stern news magazine in Berlin. He had a huge fixation on Nazi war criminals to the point that his editors at stern were sick of him bringing Nazi related ideas to them. By the time he discovered the diaries, due to his personal obsession, he went so far as to buy Herman Goering's yacht—the—sorry, the Karen 2 yes, that Herman Goering, and ended up having an affair with Gary's daughter Edda. Since it was a very expensive yacht. He ended up entering the world of memorabilia collectors and other third reich fans. Boy is trying to sell the thing or at least recoup some of that money by reselling Nazi knickknacks. All right. Yeah I do I do. These two embarrassments. These two embarrassments came into contact with one another when high demand tried to sell Gary's yacht to yells favor favorite customer read favorite mark. Fritz Stiefel, showed him his forged Hitler diary that Kujau had sold to him. Nothing could ever made him harder than holding that diary in his hands. All right. I love it. No, no, no apologies. And from that moment, he was dead set on purchasing and publishing those diaries.

10:39

Chris

Here's how the scam went down. Heidemann was convinced he made the biggest discovery ever, but he spent so much time writing about the third reich and chasing down former Nazi war criminals. His editors at stern were completely uninterested in any more Nazi content from this guy. They called him the reporter with The Nazi bug, and he said he was deeply stuck in the Nazi mud. Heidemann knew his editors were tired of this obsession, and he believed they were too anti Hitler to appreciate the diaries. So he went over their head and got the whole thing approved and financed by the head of the parent company and Gruner and Dr. Manfred Fisher. When Manfred Fischer saw the diaries, according to Hamilton,

Corinne

by his own admission, the mayor touched of this cheap dimestore notebook gave him a sensual thrill that was close to ecstasy. Waves of almost orgasmic Joy swept over him I see fond build the tea stained pages and caress the sleazy leatherette cover.

Chris

Okay, quick pause.

Emily Einolander

love this guy.

Chris

Kujau, fed the diaries one by one to Heidemann and insisted that he wouldn't be required to deal with anyone else whatsoever. Heidemann promised to get 27 notebooks by the middle of 1981 though stern would end up with about 35 of them. You think the delays in between and the fact that Heidemann and even seen all of them at that point would be a little bit of a red flag, but I guess you could justify that by the way payments are doled out. However, it did mean Kujau was writing by hand 123 Diaries per month, which as forgeries go that's that's pretty impressive. Meanwhile, Heidemann also managed to contact the executor to Hitler's estates that Heidemann would get the rights to any unpublished original works by Adolf Hitler. Over time, he managed to get nearly 10 million marks out of Manfredi Fisher to pay out to Kujau. That'd be the equivalent of about \$6 million.

12:51

Corinne

Yowza. Oh, my. The diaries themselves were extremely boring. When he finally started writing who Yeah, presented Hitler as a peace loving guy who was tricked by the associates. He trusted into doing all those bad things. He loved platitudes and complained about things like his stomach pain and the loud screech owl outside his bedroom, evil dictators, they're just like us. The fictional Hitler was against book burning thought the laws against Jewish people went too far sometimes, and reacted to Kristallnacht by saying, what will they say abroad? Hamilton said, it was by and large a presentation that would have excited the approval and envy of Joseph Campbell's, for unknown to stern there were scarcely a true word in it, yet it carried the ring of truth. It had the simple, prosaic narrative style of the Bible. One could hardly contradict it without appearing to be an iconoclast. Kujau talked to his former Nazi friends to get ideas about tone. He also used a very specific to volume work of Hitler's speeches to fill out the Timeline and add little historical details to make it seem more authentic. To create the forgeries Kujau would drive to East Germany and buy notebooks. He also bought black and blue ink, mix them together and watered them down so he could use a cheap modern pen to write with, he would randomly spilled tea on the pages, even though supposedly they weren't even 40 years old. He got a seal made in Hong Kong and tried to put a H in gold on the front of the diaries. He accidentally used FH in the Gothic script, who use black ribbon from an actual SS document and attach it to the cover with a Wehrmacht black seal.

Emily

And for the for the record he didn't like... he didn't like have a seal made in Hong Kong. Just bought a seal from Hong Kong. Oh.

Corinne

I wouldn't put it past and this guy's fuckin nuts.

14:50

Emily

Yes, but he's very secretive, is very secretive about his arts. So not only was Heidemann very secretive about the whole thing with the rest of his colleagues Stern was very secretive about the whole thing as well. They didn't want to get scooped on the biggest story in 30 years. So after a vetting process that we'll go into a little bit, they'll they finally issued an over 30 Page memorandum that was issued to publications that Stern was interested in selling the story to recounting the exciting tale of the plane crash the peasants pulling trunks of documents from the wreckage, and squirreling it away to keep Nazis from finding it, etcetera, etcetera. There was that big mysterious in between kind of like, step one crash plane into East German forest with all Hitler's personal documents, step two. Step three profit. So, when Stephen was chopping the manuscript around, they talked about the plane crash, but not when and how the documents were discovered, or why it took so long, because they didn't know. People knew the plane crash happened because the actual pilot had given interviews and written about it in his memoirs, but he'd never actually mentioned what the documents were, or what were in any of them. And as Hamilton says in his book,

Corinne

The provenance of a fake is always ambiguous. If the forger does reveal his source, it turns out to be someone who is dead, or who has just left for parts unknown, or whose life or reputation would be jeopardized if his name is revealed.

Emily

And in this case, Kujau made up a brother who, like he pretended he had a brother who was some kind of Officer or like secret agent and would get in huge trouble and perhaps killed if it were revealed he were doing all these dealings in East Germany. Okay. So in the end, the Sunday Times of London, owned by Rupert Murdoch bought the british series serialization rights and Newsweek bought the American rights, and I will not even go into the bidding war and how stern fucked that up. But they did. There was there's a part where they asked for \$4.25 million and the Sunday Times just got up and walked out of the room. They had to like beg them to buy the rights. Oh my god. One of the most interesting sidebars here, I think, is the fact that in 1968, the Sunday Times had already gotten into a similar situation where they made a deal to buy Mussolini's diaries, which turned out to be forgeries. You would think they would learn but some assholes just love their fake news. It's Rupert Murdoch, Rupert Murdoch is assholes. More than one.

Chris

Reporters, publishers and their consultants made a lot of mistakes. For one thing, nobody checked into vitamin source because Heidemann convinced them that it was too dangerous for the person who had acquired the diaries, big red flag Kujau was basically allowed to keep his anonymity even though he was known in the Nazi memorabilia circles. And even though he had been caught forging other pieces of art throughout his life, how is this acceptable?

Emily

You know, like they have to protect their sources Chris, even though it's not an actual international scandal or like an ongoing story, it's something that was found years and years ago who they still have to protect the source.

Chris

Nonsense. They also tried to get authenticators for these docs, but they did it in a very half assed way. One of the most important authenticators was Hugh Trevor Roper, who was a British historian who wrote a book called *The Last Days of Hitler* published in 1947, and edited Hitler's war directives 1939 to 45. He was also a Regis professor of modern history at Oxford, and had been made a Lord Lord Dacre by Margaret Thatcher, who apparently could make Lords he was asked by the Sunday Times to give the diaries his seal of approval, stern sent him to a shrine like storage vault where they had the diaries and a number of other documents to use to authenticate it. After examination, he called the diaries, the most important historical discovery of the decade and a scoop of Watergate proportions. Here's the problem though. There was other documents they brought Lord Dacre to use as comparisons also came from Kujaus collection. They were all forgeries. Newsweek sent a German Jewish American professor named Gerhard Feinberg, who was convinced by a line where Hitler called Neville Chamberlain a quote unquote Clever Fox. He also noticed that for some reason, Kujau had signed the bottom of every page of the diary with Hitler's name. He said,

Corinne

nobody in their right mind would forged Hitler's signature hundreds of times and think they'd get away with it.

19:58

Chris

Little did he know none of these people are in their right mind. The greatest method they used of testing authenticity was giving samples of the pages, photocopies not originals to handwriting experts. Hamilton also wrote that two of the handwriting experts they used didn't even know German. He also went into a long, almost 10 page description of all the people who could have looked at the diaries and given their opinions, but weren't consulted.

Corinne

There were available in Germany, England and America, many experts competent to pass judgment on the diaries. They included persons who had known Hitler intimately, and historians who had known Hitler intimately, and historians who had studied his life and career. There were also experts in Hitler's script, who could recognize it instantly. And who could read with ease the old Gothic hand in which the diary was penned, still alive in Germany, were some of Hitler's aides and secretaries who had not only been with the fewer every day over a period of years, but we're familiar with his handwriting, his ideas and his mode of expression.

Emily

This goes on for almost 10 pages, as we mentioned, and he just names person after person, relationship to Hitler, a couple of secretaries, his bodyguard, his personal assistants, people who were

at his wedding, you know, hours before he killed himself. Despite the spite in this author's heart is is I love it.

Chris

It drips from the pages, it really does. And another thing they didn't do was get any forensic evidence. They didn't send any documents to West Germany's federal archives, the bonus archive, until they had already sold the rights and announced the discovery to the world.

Emily

The hoax was uncovered pretty quickly, in fact, right before the stories went to press, so there were problems with content when Trevor Roper found out that he was comparing the diaries to documents that came from the same source that some of the other forgeries that had been uncovered. He knew he made a huge mistake. He made a quote unquote, full one ad regarding their authenticity, but by then his name was all over everything endorsing the hell out of the diaries. He told stern about his doubts right before they were about to make the announcement and he wasn't the only one cautioning them against this, but more on that later. And the Sunday Times mostly because he was the guy that the Sunday Times sent to test things quote unquote test stare at in a magical vault in Switzerland just more like everyone moved forward with it anyway, with Rupert Murdoch with the Sunday Times of London leading the charge, Murdoch is quoted as saying,

Corinne

Fuck Lord Dacre. publish.

Emily Einolander

Then later on, when he was confronted about the misinformation he'd been complicit in spreading, he said,

Corinne

We're in the entertainment business circulation went up. We didn't lose money or anything like that.

Emily Einolander

You're Murdoch. I mean, he's Australian. So it was like, Yeah, we are in the entertainment business.

Corinne

That is much more now. Oh, my God, did I ever tell you I went to I had was at a book party in New York that he attended with his child bride at the time. That wasn't that he was very Tuesday wedding was Wendy something who was like, you know, half his age or something. But I just remember he looked like death walking. Like he was so old. And he was like, so beautiful. And it was just like, oh, it was yeah, it was horrifying. Anyway, I just That's my Rupert Murdoch story. It was just that I started the person and he was exactly as you would imagine, just like a bag of skin roving around. Terrible. Yeah, it was cheaper. Yeah, exactly. Yeah. Yeah. But yeah, it was pretty gross.

Emily

There was a day where Chris and I think Chris, you were driving us, or something like that. And you were like, me if you could burn anyone in effigy? Who would it be? Murdoch and you were like, deep cut. I don't remember who you said though.

Chris

Yeah, I hope...who would I burn? I don't know. Let me think on that.

24:28

Emily

Okay. Okay. If you can't think of anyone by the end of the episode, we'll put it in the show notes. So fact checkers were also able to find the historical volumes. Kujau had used to map out the timeline and discovered that there were no dates in the diary that didn't match up to dates used in the books if there wasn't something on a particular date in the book. that he was using. There wasn't an entry in the diary for that date either. So also this piece of shit David Irving, who was a Holocaust denier, English was unsurprisingly, one of the people who was instrumental in identifying the diaries as fakes. Because he loves, you know, so much. So he was one of the people who got a look at the collection of documents that were being used through his contacts in the memorabilia circles, because he wasn't supposed to see it because it was supposed to be hush hush, but obviously, someone's going to open their mouth at some point. So he got a look at the collection that were being used to compare to the diaries and pointed out inconsistencies and spelling and writing style in the documents that were being used to compare the diaries to for authenticity. So the ones that Trevor Roper looked at, notably at the press conference, where the Sunday Times announced the find he stood up during the question and answer session, and asked how Hitler could have written his diary in the days following the 20 July plot when his right arm had been injured. And there were pictures of him shaking hands with Mussolini with his left arm. Oh, gotcha.

Chris

Oh, no, the biggest Gotcha. The thing that blew the top off the whole scam. Forensic evidence,

Emily

obviously.

Chris

Dr. Arnold Rentz from the West Germany federal archive at a few pages of documents that revealed enough doubt before the announcement of the diaries to express doubts about the age of the paper. They also found there was a type of bleach used in the paper that didn't exist at the time. It showed up when they shown ultraviolet light. There was also polyester in the binding, which didn't exist before 1953. Within a couple of weeks, 15 volumes of the diaries were sent to forensic scientists in Germany and Switzerland. For further investigation. They found that there were modern components and ink not used in Germany at the time, the way the chloride and ink had evaporated, showed that it had only been written in the last couple of years, it was pretty easy to uncover almost immediately.

Corinne

So here's what happened to our anti heroes. One really fun part of this is the fact that for the 9.3 million marks Koolau ended up with 3 million Heidemann skimmed a lot of it and bought multiple properties and cars. When KU Gao found that out, he turned himself in and went all in on bringing high demand down, mostly because he'd been cheated, but also because he was convinced hide him and knew all along the diaries were forgeries. Kujau mentioned on one occasion when he couldn't get the same letterhead. He'd been using all along for a batch of his diaries and then deliver the diaries to hide him in saying, I did not open my mouth to discuss the thing. I took the money and I handed him diaries four and five, he lived through them that trust them in his beliefs. Not a word about the missing letterheads It was now clear to me that itemld knew the diaries were forgeries. After a year long investigation, both Kujau and Heidemann went to trial. They were charged with defrauding stern of 9.3 million Deutsche Marks high demand was found guilty of stealing 1.7 million and got for years and eight months and Koolau of receiving 1.5 million and got four years and six months where did the rest of the money go? Who knows?

Emily Einolander

Kujau got out of jail and started to sell quote unquote forgeries of Dali paintings with his own name signed at the bottom because they were forgeries get in trouble. and Heidemann him and went on to be accused of being a Stasi agent. And he lived a life of shame and bitterness. Good. So let's talk about the legacy of the Hitler diaries just a free flowing discussion of the bullshit. Yeah, that was and is. I would start by saying they they made tried to make Hitler into a soft little cuddly version of himself, saying over and over again that this discovery would make them rewrite the history books. And that's exactly what Holocaust deniers and Neo Nazis want is to rewrite the history books in their favor. It was so revisionist in the way it represented Hitler Stern was at real risk of getting nailed for spreading pro Nazi propaganda, which was big time illegal in post war Germany. And it took them about 10 years to recover their reputation as a reputable news source. Also, I hate Rupert Murdoch, I think Good.

30:03

Corinne

Is stern still around? Are they still publishing?

Emily

Yeah, they appear to still exist.

Corinne

All right. They survived it.

Emily

But by 2019, their circulation had fallen under half a million. Yeah. So there was a there was a thing that happened in 2017 where they did a cover in one of their editions that depicted Donald Trump draped in an American flag while giving stiff arm Nazi salutes. And the title of it was Zein Kampf. Oh my goodness. What a bunch of interesting, rich characters.

Corinne

Yeah, oh truly. Yes. Yeah.

Emily Einolander

Do we have any closing thoughts?

Corinne

I would like to see a Netflix documentary made about this. Honestly, or some kind of whatever. It doesn't have to be on Netflix.

Emily Einolander

Watch that mini series. Wait, which mini series? The one from like, 1991 that I watched? It's very corny. Okay. I love that. Obviously, because it was 1991. Yeah, making something like not corny. Yeah. I mean, no Twin Peaks was corny to me. Yeah, so I would recommend that.

Corinne

Yeah. Okay. Okay.

Chris

Death Among the Mormons.

Emily Einolander

Oh, yes. We keep talking about this. Yes.

Corinne

I haven't seen it. Wait, is that a book or is it a series?

Chris

No, it's a series on Netflix. It's about an antiquarian document dealer selling old got what was the term they used? I think they called it more Mormonallia.

Emily Einolander

I love it.

Chris

And this guy was responsible for the, for the for the quote unquote salamander letter.

Corinne

Oh, I've heard about this. Yes. Yeah.

Chris

And yeah, so so with the Salamander. So this guy had been like, passing off letters of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young and shit like that, you know, Mormon? Aliah. Yeah. And the whole thing with the salamander letter ultimately led to like three bombings in like 1985 or 1986. In Salt Lake City. Oh, yeah. Yeah, do yourselves a favor. It's like I don't know three or four episodes long. Yeah, yeah. But it's it's very much in this kooky

Corinne

Cuckoo bananas?

Emily

yeah, so when when you do dumb shit like this, it has real world repercussions I think is also just like when you when you are a publisher, you have a certain responsibility to the fucking public. And the fact that these people were so obsessed with a) it being absolutely true because it was so exciting and it would bring them so much money and 2) not getting scooped above all other things that prioritize right? That creates a situation where you can be fucking fleeced.

Chris

Fuck you Rupert. Yeah, yeah.

Emily

Cryptkeeper Australian.

Chris

Tucker Carlson.

Emily

Oh, the effigy you're saying? Yes.

Corinne

Ah, that's a good one.

Emily

Yeah, he would cry a single tear.

Corinne

Yeah. And wipe it with this bow tie. God what a fucking dork. I think well, not that I've been asked. But I'll tell you who I would choose from if yes, I would say Okay, I think both of these people are dead. But I would choose either iron Rand or David Foster Wallace. Hard to decide like

Emily

Okay, if it's, if it's effigy it doesn't matter whether live or dead. It's okay.

Corinne

Well, then. Yeah, well, I choose both.

Chris

Excellent. Excellent,

Emily Einolander

Oh man. All right. Well, I think we covered it. There is a lot more. There was so much more and I was sifting. And I was looking through all of the spiteful words of Hamilton. And the very silly miniseries from ITV, which, actually Peter Capaldi, is in it and his hair is enormous man, the Scottish man has the largest hair I've ever seen in a Scottish man.

Corinne

Oh, I will What is the name of the miniseries?

35:03

Emily Einolander

Selling Hitler, which was based on a book by the same name, which I would have gotten, but they didn't have an ebook version. I could. Ah, okay. And it was very expensive. I think I don't know if it's in print anymore, in fact, but apparently it was the big book. It came out in 1987. So it was more immediate aftermath. Yep, stuff. And it was, you know, less than 10 years when they made this mini series. So it was all still pretty fresh. In terms of, you know, scandal. Right. Well, we've been through a lot today.

Corinne

Indeed, yes.

Emily Einolander

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