The Hindenburg

What really happened to Hitler’s zeppelin?

Most of us have seen the horrific photos or actual newsreel footage of the doomed dirigible Hindenburg crashing to earth in flames in 1937. The tragedy, which occurred at the U.S. Naval Air Station in Lakehurst, New Jersey, claimed the lives of 35 of the 97 passengers and crew and one person on the ground. The pride of national socialist Germany, the Hindenburg was the largest zeppelin ever created. Its loss was considered by Adolf Hitler’s critics to be a major embarrassment for Germany. Was the massive airship sabotaged for that very reason?

By Philip Rife

The official cause of the 1937 LZ129 Hindenburg disaster was determined to be St. Elmo’s fire, a rare form of static electricity which supposedly provided the spark that ignited the highly flammable hydrogen contained in the airship’s massive gas bags. (The United States, the world’s only commercial producer of helium, had refused to sell that non-flammable lifting gas to the Hindenburg’s German owners for political reasons).¹

The American board of inquiry settled on St. Elmo’s fire as the probable cause after eliminating a number of other possibilities, including engine sparks, structural failure and ball lightning. They reached this conclusion despite testimony from their own scientific experts that it was virtually impossible for St. Elmo’s fire or any of these things to have caused the explosion.² In private, an entirely different explanation for the explosion was strongly suspected by both American and German investigators: sabotage.³

On May 6, 1937, the German zeppelin LZ129 Hindenburg exploded in flames as it was preparing to dock at the Lakehurst Naval Air Station in Jew Jersey. The exact cause of the explosion has been considered a mystery ever since. TBR contributing editorial board member Philip Rife—and many others—are convinced, however, the Hindenburg was sabotaged by enemies of the Third Reich.
Testifying at the inquiry into the disaster, the officer in charge of the Lakehurst Naval Air Station, Cmdr. Charles Rosendahl, said:

The simplest way of having sabotaged the ship would have been to place in the gas cell trunk a device with some sort of time element which would cause flame to be propagated into (the) gas cells.

The first issue of flame from such a device in a gas cell trunk would be upward, since that is the path of least resistance and the natural path for flame to take. That would account for the first appearance of flame on top of the ship.⁴

Rosendahl reiterated this view to an FBI agent who mentioned it in an internal memo to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover:

Cmdr. Rosendahl stated that he was a personal friend of Hugo Eckener [the head of the German airship company]. According to Rosendahl, [Eckener] has stated to him confidentially that he is convinced that the Hindenburg met her fate due to the employment of sabotage, either on the part of communists or sympathizers with the anti-Nazi movement.

Cmdr. Rosendahl informed us that he has always entertained the sabotage theory as being a logical cause for the destruction of the Hindenburg.⁵

A later internal FBI document summarizing the Hindenburg investigation suggested the U.S. Navy airship expert had acquired more specific information to buttress his belief that foul play was involved:

Cmdr. Rosendahl stated that he was of the opinion—due to various happenings that had been called to his attention—that there was a strong possibility that the fire which was ignited in this gas shaft at 62 ring was caused by an individual who attempted to perform an act of sabotage.⁶

According to the FBI, the view of sabotage was also shared by an American technical advisor to the inquiry, although he suspected a different mechanism:

He was of the opinion that a carved-out bullet in which phosphorus had been placed struck the girder in the superstructure. Then the hydrogen would be touched off by the phosphorus, and the explosion would ensue.⁷

A tracer bullet might produce similar results without needing to strike part of the dirigible’s superstructure, as the British demonstrated by destroying German zeppelins with tracer rounds during World War I. But its luminous flight path to the target would probably be
visible to witnesses on the ground in the gathering darkness at Lakehurst. However, the sniper theory was lent some support in a letter received by the board of inquiry:

While on the way to Toms River, I past [sic] two men in a high-priced car talking to a tall, rather poorly dressed one. He had a rifle, and when he saw me coming, he tried to conceal the rifle.

A little later when I came back, they were still there, the tall man quickly hiding his rifle under his overcoat. I could hear one man in the car saying hide it quick. Evidently they were waiting for the airship Hindenburg. I wanted to ask if the airship had arrived, and stopped my car. They started in the opposite direction. The tall man then jumped in the car.

The man with the rifle was about 30 years old [and] blond, while the two in the car were about 28 and 35, dark, typical Jewish looking. 8

This incident takes on added significance in light of a report routed to the board of inquiry by the director of naval intelligence. It was summarized in an internal FBI memo at the time:

Information has been obtained from a confidential informant to the effect that two days prior to the loss of the Hindenburg, this informant was in Atlantic City [New Jersey] where, while sitting on a flight of steps leading from the boardwalk to the beach near the Steel Pier, he overheard snatches of conversation between two men who were unaware of his presence.

These two men were well dressed [and] spoke English, but when they became aware of the informant's proximity, they reverted to the use of a foreign language which sounded like either German or Yiddish.

One of these men spoke of having recently come from abroad on a cargo vessel that "landed in New York at 43." Talking about the Hindenburg, one of the men said: "This will be her last trip. Everything, including the long-range tracers, is in readiness. Soon now, Hitler will not drive any more Jews out of Germany." 9

The Hindenburg and her sister airships in the German dirigible fleet had achieved an unparalleled safety record prior to the disaster at Lakehurst. The Hindenburg had made 36 crossings of the Atlantic without incident, and was considered such a safe risk that Lloyd's of London insured her for a very modest premium. 10

A writer for Collier's magazine who traveled on the Hindenburg the previous year observed:

German dirigibles have flown nearly 1 million passengers without a fatality. It is the firm conviction of
this reporter, after close firsthand watching of their methods, that only a stroke of war or an unfathomable act of God will ever mar this safety record.\textsuperscript{11}

Because a number of anonymous threats had recently been made against the \textit{Hindenburg}, extraordinary precautions were taken on her final flight. Like all German dirigibles, the \textit{Hindenburg}'s ladders and walkways were covered with rubber to prevent sparks, and crewmen wore special anti-static uniforms and crepe-soled shoes (with cloth instead of metal grommets for the laces). All matches, lighters and batteries were confiscated from passengers before boarding. Their luggage and personal items were minutely examined and X-rayed. Before departure, the airship was thoroughly searched, first by members of the crew and again by government security agents. The latter had specific instructions to look for bombs.\textsuperscript{12}

One reason for such extraordinary precautions was that bombs had been found on other German craft in the recent past. Two years earlier, a bomb was discovered underneath a table in the passenger dining room of another dirigible, and a second explosive device had recently turned up aboard a German ocean liner.\textsuperscript{13}

A memo to FBI director Hoover from the bureau's Philadelphia office the day after the \textit{Hindenburg} disaster included the following:

\textit{The Daily Worker}, official organ of the Communist Party of America, in its issue of April 27, 1937 [nine days before the incident in Lakehurst] printed an article headlined "German Seamen's Union Organizer Speaks Friday." The article states that the organizer will tell how anti-Nazi seamen do perilous underground work aboard Reich liners plowing between New York and Germany.\textsuperscript{14}

In addition, German intelligence agents narrowly missed apprehending a “suspicious” \textit{Hindenburg} passenger the year before. The man in question was later discovered to be using a forged Swedish passport. A search of his hotel room revealed plans and technical drawings of the \textit{Hindenburg} with X marks over several areas of the airship's gas cells.\textsuperscript{15}

The surviving crewman nearest to the point of the initial explosion described a “bright blue-white flash” that he likened to a flashbulb, followed by a sound similar to a gas stove being lit.\textsuperscript{16} And a member of a police bomb squad probing the wreckage of the \textit{Hindenburg} found remnants of what could have been a bomb-triggering device. Chemical analysis showed it to be the remains of a small dry cell battery unlike any that were known to be aboard the ill-fated airship.\textsuperscript{17}

Speculation as to who could have planted an explosive device on the \textit{Hindenburg} has centered on two principal suspects—one of them a passenger, the other a member of the airship's crew.

The suspect passenger, a man named Joseph Spaeh, was a U.S. resident born in France. While touring Germany as an acrobat and comedian, he had reportedly aroused the suspicion of German intelligence by his association with anti-Hitler elements.\textsuperscript{18}

Though all the other passengers had traveled to the airfield in Germany from their hotel by bus, Spaeh arrived by private car just before the \textit{Hindenburg}'s departure. He was carrying a wrapped package which he opened at the request of security personnel to reveal a child's doll—a present, he said, for his daughter in America.

\textbf{SPAEH AROUSES SUSPICION}

During the flight to New Jersey, Spaeh aroused the suspicion of the \textit{Hindenburg}'s crew because on several occasions he managed to gain access to a part of the airship that was off limits to unescorted passengers. Once, a crewman found him wandering unaccompanied in the interior of the ship. On another occasion, he slipped away from a tour being conducted by the ship's doctor on the pretext of visiting his dogs. The animals were being transported in the \textit{Hindenburg}'s kennel—located just below the gas cell where the explosion is believed to have originated.\textsuperscript{19}

One of the FBI memos cited earlier had this to say about Spaeh:

According to the information that Eckener has received from various members of the crew, the rule that a passenger was not to be allowed out of the passenger quarters unless in company with a member of the crew was not strictly enforced in the case of a passenger by the name of Joseph Spaeh.

According to Rosendahl, members of the crew informed Eckener that Spaeh had two dogs that were maintained in the freight room, which is located directly below gas cell No. 6. Further, that this passenger was allowed to go back and tend to these dogs at frequent intervals, either to feed them, water them or merely to pet them, and on these trips he was not ac-
panied by a member of the crew.
I was also informed by Commander Rosendahl that Joseph Spaeh is an acrobat by profession, and in connection therewith Rosendahl stated that it would take a fairly active man to climb the rigging separating gas cells in order to gain access to the gas shaft.

The FBI agent’s memo indicated Cmdr. Rosendahl wasn’t alone in suspecting Spaeh:

It is the opinion of Cmdr. Rosendahl, as well as certain members of the Board of Inquiry, that it was entirely possible that Joseph Spaeh might have placed either a flammable substance in the gas shaft or placed a timing device which would have ignited the mixture in the gas shaft. 30

We know that the FBI investigated Joseph Spaeh, but we don’t know most of what they learned. An internal bureau memo dated May 25, 1937, was recently released in response to a Freedom of Information Act request.

The memo begins:

It has been determined that Joseph Spaeh had access to the aft portion of the airship to tend to two dogs which he owned and which were confined in the freight room. Some suspicion has attached itself to Spaeh, as at various times he was in the stern of the ship unaccompanied.

The rest of the page, along with the entire remainder of the FBI’s report on Spaeh, was blacked out and withheld from FOIA release. The law requires that any government agency withholding information from FOIA release cite the reason for the exemption. The FBI stated the information on Spaeh was withheld “in the interest of national defense or foreign policy.” 31

When thunderstorms unexpectedly delayed the Hindenburg’s scheduled arrival time at Lakehurst—a development which would presumably cause considerable concern to anyone who knew a time bomb had been planted aboard the airship—survivors recalled that Joseph Spaeh had appeared “particularly restless.” 32

One factor weighing against the idea of Spaeh or any other passenger being able to smuggle a bomb aboard the Hindenburg was

![The Hindenburg's passenger quarters featured observation windows on both the port and starboard sides that opened for fresh air and photograph taking. Above is a photo of Hindenburg's promenade deck.](image)

**The Ultimate Airborne Luxury**

Readers for whom the word “airship” conjures up a mental image of the Goodyear blimp will be surprised to learn how luxurious travel was aboard one of the giant German dirigibles of the 1930s. The Hindenburg was almost three football fields long. She could accommodate up to 70 passengers in a style comparable to the finest ocean liners of the day, but carried them across the Atlantic in less time and without the rolling motion of ocean waves. In fact, the pilot had to keep the airship stable within 3 degrees or items might begin to slide off the dinner tables and counters. The Hindenburg’s deluxe appointments included staterooms (each equipped with its own toilet and hot and cold running water), showers, a bar, lounges (complete with an aluminum piano), a library, a dance floor with bandstand and a dining room serviced by a fully equipped galley. Sumptuous meals, prepared on board by a skilled chef, were served on fine china atop linen tablecloths. To guard against the danger of fire, passengers wishing to smoke entered a sealed smoking room where they had their smoking material lit for them by a steward using an electric heated-filament lighter kept chained inside the room. The same steward saw to it that no lit materials left the smoking room.
the thorough inspection their belongings were subjected to before departure. No such impediment existed for members of the airship's crew, however.

After the tragedy, German investigators were able to build a strong circumstantial case that one crewman in particular possessed the method, motive and opportunity to have carried out an act of sabotage against the Hindenburg.

Erich Spehl was known to have associated with opponents of the Hitler government. In fact, fellow crew members had been concerned for some time that the young man had fallen under the spell of his lover, an older woman with communist connections.

Spehl was a serious amateur photographer, and as such would have had a working knowledge of flashbulbs, including their potential to be triggered by a small battery to cause an explosion of the highly flammable hydrogen in the airship's gas cells.

In addition, Spehl was one of the few crewmen whose job routinely took him to the area of the ship where the explosion is believed to have originated. When the detonation occurred, however, he managed to be at the opposite end of the craft, as far away from the explosion site as it was possible to be.

An American researcher claimed to have discovered information documenting the fact that Spehl had secretly made plans to hide out in New York City after the Hindenburg landed.

According to a 1972 wire service story:

The device was planted by a rigger, Eric Spehl, an ardent Catholic who hated Hitler and wanted to destroy the Hindenburg as a symbol of Nazi might and German technology.

Spehl, aided by a left-wing girlfriend, planned the explosion and timed it to occur after he and most of the others aboard had left the Hindenburg. But the scheduled docking was delayed by a thunderstorm. The device went off as the Hindenburg was tying up at the mooring mast.

If one of these two suspected individuals planted a bomb that killed 36 people, he apparently took his secret with him to the grave. Joseph Spaeh was among the survivors of the tragedy, escaping with only a broken heel bone suffered when he leapt from the burning airship. Erich Spehl was less lucky.

Although he escaped the flaming craft alive, he was severely burned and died a few hours later in the temporary emergency hospital set up at the airfield.

Finally, the incendiary bullet and timebomb scenarios are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The former could conceivably have been a backup plan in the event the latter was discovered or failed to go off, or there might have been separate, unrelated plots to destroy the Hindenburg (perhaps even including parallel plots by Joseph Spaeh and Erich Spehl).

We may never know with certainty who or what brought down the Hindenburg, but an examination of all the available evidence clearly points to sabotage as the most likely explanation.

ENDNOTES:
5 FBI memo.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 U.S. Department of Commerce.
9 FBI memo.
10 The Encyclopedia of Unsolved Crimes by Daniel Cohen.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 FBI memo
19 Ibid.
20 FBI memo
21 Freedom of Information Act

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