

Why did Hitler blame the communists for the Reichstag Fire? (10 Marks)

Grade A Answer

It is not known whether it was the communists who burnt down the Reichstag on the 27th Feb 1933 and many historians actually believe that the act was perpetrated by the Nazis themselves. A Dutch anarchist called Marinus Van der Lubbe was arrested at the scene but there were also many members of the SA in the vicinity. Whoever did start the fire it was how the Nazis used this event which is significant. The Nazis blamed the Communists because they were arch political rivals. Hitler wanted to discredit the Communists to put people off voting for them in the 5th March elections. It was possible that a strong turnout at the election in favour of the Communists would stop Hitler getting an overall majority of seats in the Reichstag. Communist support like Nazi support had been on the increase.

Hitler also had ideological reasons for taking the opportunity to strike against the communists. The Communists were an extreme left wing party believing in equality and internationalism, the Nazis were an extreme right wing party believing in hierarchy and nationalism.

On 28th February Hitler persuaded President Hindenburg to pass an emergency law under Article 48 of the Weimar constitution to "protect the people and the state". The emergency powers this decree gave to the government were used by Hitler to arrest hundreds of communists and to clamp down on other political opponents.

The Nazis (especially the SA) whipped up popular feeling against the Communists. Communists were intimidated on the streets and election meetings broken up. Without the Reichstag Fire it would have been difficult for the Nazis to taint the Communists with such a bad name and they could have been a threat to Hitler's ambitions at the election.