

REVISITING THE EXECUTION OF MARINUS VAN DER LUBBE IN THE CONTEXT OF *INVITATION TO A BEHEADING*: WHAT DID NABOKOV KNOW?¹

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Lazar Fleishman, colleague and friend, is known worldwide for his scholarly scrupulosity and the astonishing empirical basis at the heart of his many books. To take an obvious example, we need only open *Boris Pasternak v dvadtsatye gody* (1981) or *Boris Pasternak v tridtsatye gody* (1984) to any page to see how our honoree places his hero's words and deeds in the complex, and often dangerous, multi-voiced context of his times. Very few of us Slavic scholars, if any, can match the *Sitzfleisch* of a Fleishman publication. And without any false modesty, and with the humility that comes with age and hindsight, I freely admit that the *gamburgskii schet* epitomized by Lazar's impeccable scholarship is not a competition I would feel worthy entering. Be that as it may, the following note is my modest attempt to celebrate Lazar by following in footsteps that at least faintly resemble his own.

Readers familiar with Nabokov's drollery in the English-language forewords to his novels have learned to take his self-referential comments *cum grano salis*. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the 1959 foreword to *Invitation to a Beheading* (orig. *Priglasenie na kazn'* [1938]), a work triumphantly described there as a "violin in a void" (Nabokov 1959: 7). For a creative personality who had already suffered significant personal loss at the hands of very real ideologues and ideologies (exile, impoverishment, the assassination of his father) and who was now a family

¹ This note is a revisiting and slight expansion of my "A Note on Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*: The Reichstag Fire and the Execution of Marinus van der Lubbe" (see: Bethea 2013: 592–98).

man living with a Jewish-Russian wife and young child in Nazi Berlin, the idea that this novel did not emerge out of, and at some level engage with, a specific historical context strains credulity. Nabokov wrote to his friend Khodasevich in July 1934, as he was immersed in composing *Priglasenie*: “I am writing my novel. I do not read the papers.”² Even if this statement is largely true and sincere, it does not follow that all of “*dura-istoriia* [history the fool]” has been successfully banished from the artificial world of *Priglasenie*. The purpose of the present note (*zametka*) is to identify a possible subtext, taken from contemporary history, that served as a spur to the artist’s thinking as he set about writing *Priglasenie* in the midst of his work on the longer novel *Dar* (*The Gift* [partially ser. 1938, pub. 1952]).

Let us begin by looking again at Nabokov’s foreword to *Invitation*. The second paragraph and opening sentences of the third paragraph read:

I composed the Russian original exactly a quarter of a century ago in Berlin, some fifteen years after escaping from the Bolshevik regime, and just before the Nazi regime reached its full volume of welcome. The question whether or not my seeing both in terms of one dull beastly farce had any effect on this book, should concern the good reader as little as it does me.

Priglasenie na kazn’ came out serially in a Russian émigré magazine, the *Sovremenniya Zapiski* appearing in Paris, and later, in 1938, was published in that city by the *Dom Knigi*. Emigré reviewers, who were puzzled but liked it, thought they distinguished in it a “Kafkaesque” strain, not knowing that I had no German, was completely ignorant of modern German literature, and had not yet read any French or English translations of Kafka’s works (Nabokov 1959: 5–6).³

First, without arguing that every detail in this passage should be turned on its head à la the psychoanalytic tactics of the “Viennese witch-doctor”

² Vladimir Nabokov to Vladislav Khodasevich, July 24, 1934; Beinecke Library, Yale; cited: Boyd 1990: 409; the original cited in: Boyd 2001: 477.

³ On émigré reviewers, who in the 1930s mentioned “Kafka’s works” in relation to *Priglasenie* only once, see: Dolinin 2019: 150–51. On Nabokov and Kafka see also: Foster 1995: 444–51.

(Nabokov 1959: 8), it would be fair to say that the “dull beastly farce” must mean something to the man writing these words, otherwise why mention the Communist and National Socialist movements at all? Second, how is the reader to understand the author’s *total lack* of any German language and culture/literature (“I had no German [and] was completely ignorant of modern German literature”) after he had been living in Berlin for years, was in possession of an elite Cambridge education, and was highly (actually breathtakingly) fluent in three languages and cultures? If we think of Fedor in *Dar*, Nabokov-Sirin’s most autobiographical character, does he exist in a world that is completely walled off from history (cf. the trauma of his father’s disappearance), does this young émigré walk around Berlin, even when he is composing verse in a dream-like state, with no awareness of the foreign “shore” (its sights, sounds, letters, words) he is stepping from? Not likely.

And third, the sarcastic phrase “reached its full volume of welcome” is pertinent because it refers to the moment at which the Nazis actually gained control of the levers of state and were free to impose their policies on the population. That moment, I would like to suggest, came with the famous Reichstag fire of February 27, 1933, which the Nazi coalition government (still only a plurality) succeeded in attributing to Communist arsonists and then manipulated as *cause célèbre* to arrest and remove from any active role the opposition party. That the aging President von Hindenburg appointed Adolph Hitler Chancellor in January 1933 and, in the wake of the fire was moved to issue the Reichstag Fire Decree, a crucial piece of legislation which restricted civil liberties and, through mass arrests and intimidation, allowed the Hitler administration to squash the Communist opposition (before then occupying a 17% block of Parliamentary seats) seems very close to the “full volume” of which Nabokov intimates. Indeed, in terms of historical causality, it was largely as a result of the Fire Decree that Hitler succeeded in only a month’s time in garnering the necessary two-thirds majority in the Reichstag to pass the Enabling Act, which gave the Nazi government full legislative powers and in effect made Hitler Germany’s dictator. At the inflection point of this turmoil is a mentally impaired young Dutchman with Communist sympathies by the

name of Marinus (Rinus) van der Lubbe (1909–1934). It is his story that bears interesting parallels with the plot-line of *Priglasenie*.⁴

As a resident of Berlin in 1933–1934 Nabokov had to be bombarded with news about the Reichstag fire and the series of arrests and elaborate trial following in its wake that autumn.⁵ The event was simply too present in Europe's (and the world's) consciousness not to have registered; indeed, the very fact that multiple aspects of the trial seemed staged (a grim prelude to Stalin's show trials) certainly could have played a role in the theme of execution as theatrical spectacle in *Priglasenie*. Van der Lubbe, who was born in Leiden, was cognitively impaired at birth and was destined for the life of manual laborer. His home life had been unfortunate – his parents were divorced, his mother died when he was young, and he was forced to live with his half-sister's family – but he was endowed with a strong constitution and had done work as a bricklayer. Along with his early interest in the worker's plight (he had become partially blind in 1926 when he got lime in his eyes on the job and was placed on a meager pension) he also apparently had cultivated a fascination with fire. By the time he showed up in Berlin, he had been a member of the Dutch Communist Party (CPN) and its youth section the Communist Youth Bund (CJB) and had taken part in a strike at the Tielmann factory for which he stood trial with others and for which he attempted to assume exclusive responsibility (an exaggeration destined to repeat itself). Taken together, his character traits and the details of his short biography create the picture of someone unbalanced, hyper-politicized, and eager to participate in revolutionary activity.

Enter the Reichstag fire and van der Lubbe's much disputed role in it. At 9:25 pm on February 27, 1933 one of Berlin's fire stations received a call that the Reichstag was on fire. By the time the fire brigades arrived on

⁴ For background on these events see: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Reichstag-fire>.

⁵ For the Russian émigré press's initial reaction to the Reichstag fire see, e.g., the Parisian daily *Poslednie novosti*, March 1 and 2, 1933, nos. 4361 and 4362: «Пожар Рейхстага [The Reichstag Fire]» and «События в Германии: Отменены конституционные гарантии. Репрессии против коммунистов и социалистов [Events in Germany: Constitutional Guarantees Have Been Abolished. Repression of Communists and Socialists]». This was front page news and covered three columns of the entire page.

the scene the Chamber of Deputies was consumed in flames and most of the building was severely damaged. It took some two hours to extinguish the blaze, and when policemen inspected the building they discovered numerous bundles of inflammable material placed throughout the premises. They also discovered Marinus van der Lubbe, who was immediately arrested. The young man claimed to have started the fire as a call to action for the German workers to rise up against the Nazis. Hitler and Goebbels rushed to the site to find Göring, who termed the conflagration a “Communist outrage” and announced that the culprit had been apprehended. Hitler himself saw the fire as a “sign from God” and the *Fanal* (signal) that a Communist putsch was underway. Before the next day had passed the Chancellor asked for and received from President von Hindenburg the Reichstag Fire Decree. The Nazi thrust to consolidate power was on.

In the succeeding days and weeks van der Lubbe was interrogated (i.e. tortured) and, despite his insistence on acting alone, others were arrested in connection with the arson, including Ernst Torgler, chairman of the German Communist Party (KPD) and member of the Reichstag, on February 28, and three high-ranking members of the Comintern, Bulgarians Georgi Dimitrov, Vassil Tanev, and Blagoi Popov, in early March. Most historians now agree that van der Lubbe set the fire on his own, but spirited attempts have been mounted on both sides of the issue, some suggesting it was a Nazi plot orchestrated to remove all Communist opposition, while others argue that Hitler and his lieutenants were genuinely caught unawares and presented with a massive instance of good luck. In any event, the five alleged conspirators were officially indicted in July 1933 and then tried publicly in Leipzig, before the German Imperial High Court, from September 21 to December 23, 1933. The trial itself was broadly followed in the press and broadcast over the radio. Considering the circumstances it’s also not surprising that it offered moments of high drama, such as a heated exchange between Dimitrov, at the time of his arrest head of Comintern operations in Western Europe and a staunch apologist for the Soviet political system, and Reichsminister Göring.

The verdict delivered at the trial’s conclusion did not please Hitler or his administration but seems, upon hindsight, justified, if not in terms of the punishment at least in terms of the assigning of blame for the terrorist

act: van der Lubbe was found guilty of the arson and sentenced to death, while the others were set free for lack of credible evidence. On January 10, 1934 van der Lubbe was executed and the news of his death spread rapidly throughout the world. Here is how the Associated Press covered the event:

LEIPZIG, Jan. 10. – The guillotine that decapitated Marinus van der Lubbe this morning was hastily erected during the night by the official executioner and his attendants in the prison yard of the Leipzig district court.

At dawn van der Lubbe was shaved and led into the yard, where Dr. Wilhelm Buenger, the presiding judge at the Reichstag fire trial, Chief Prosecutor Werner, several physicians and twelve citizens “of good repute” – in accordance with the law – were assembled.

Without showing the least emotion, van der Lubbe listened with bowed head as the death sentence again was read by Dr. Buenger and silently shook his head when asked whether he wanted to make a statement.

Dr. Werner then said “I surrender you to the executioner.”

The latter, Herr Goebler of Magdeburg, dressed in evening clothes and wearing white gloves, laid his hand on van der Lubbe’s shoulder. Meekly the young man ascended the scaffold, where he was tied down, and in thirty seconds it was all over.

Van der Lubbe was examined yesterday and pronounced sane.⁶

And here is more detailed coverage by *Time* magazine:

On the massive desk of old President Paul von Beneckendorff und von Hindenburg last week lay a letter heavy with Dutch seals. It contained a dignified appeal from Wilhelmina Helena Pauline Maria, Queen of The Netherlands, Princess of Orange-Nassau and Duchess of Mecklenburg. Her Majesty asked only what seemed simple Anglo-Saxon Justice. The death penalty, she urged, should not be inflicted retroactively on her famed subject, the dim-witted Dutch brick mason Marinus van der Lubbe. At the time he set fire to the German Reichstag there was no

⁶ Associated Press, “Guillotine Erected Hastily,” *New York Times*, January 11, 1934: <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1934/01/11/95025379.html?pageNumber=9>

death penalty for such an act. It was hastily decreed, on the day after the fire, by President von Hindenburg at the frantic insistence of Herren Hitler, Goring and Goebbels. Would not Old Paul commute the sentence of Dutchman van der Lubbe to imprisonment? All Holland was hopeful when the Nazi-controlled Press threw out strong, repeated hints that President von Hindenburg would accede to Queen Wilhelmina's request. Overnight came a Nazi smack in the face to Holland. Van der Lubbe's head had been cut off, the German Government announced, without prior notice of any sort to either Queen Wilhelmina or the German public. Obeying strict orders from Minister of Propaganda & Public Enlightenment Dr. Paul Joseph Goebbels, German newspapers barely mentioned the Dutchman's execution, stating that "It was the purpose of the German Government to confront the public with an accomplished fact without long preliminary palavers as a token of justice, assurance, determination and as a warning to other international revolutionaries of the Communist persuasion." Since no correspondent witnessed the execution. Dr. Goebbels could and did put out an exclusive Government story of what occurred: At 5 p.m. Public Prosecutor Werner, whose speeches during the Reichstag Trial fill several volumes, entered van der Lubbe's isolated cell, reread the death sentence of the Supreme Court (TIME, Jan. 1), stated that President von Hindenburg had refused to commute it and told van der Lubbe to make ready for death at dawn. During the night a guillotine was hastily knocked together in the prison courtyard. Meanwhile van der Lubbe, who had written numerous letters from his cell to his family in Leyden, refused to write another after Prosecutor Werner told him he was really going to die.* Just after dawn, Prisoner van der Lubbe was led "without showing the least emotion" out onto the grass of the prison courtyard where he stood with hanging head while his death sentence was read a third time by Supreme Court Justice Wilhelm Büniger. Asked if he had any last words, van der Lubbe muttered "No."

"I surrender you, van der Lubbe," cried Prosecutor Werner, "to the executioner!"

Up stepped top-hatted, white-gloved Executioner Goebler. If he had been working anywhere else in Germany he would have used a battle ax

but in the State of Saxony, seat of the German Supreme Court, a French-type guillotine is the customary instrument of death. Putting his hand on the prisoner's arm, Executioner Goebler steered van der Lubbe to the guillotine, strapped him down, pressed a button releasing the great knife and stood back as it fell. Into a basket full of absorbent sawdust rolled the head of van der Lubbe.

Commented a high Nazi official in Berlin, "It was a concession that he was not hanged. The [retroactive] law specifies hanging for political arson but hanging is a shameful death. Van der Lubbe was spared that."

An autopsy by neutral Dutch physicians would have proved or disproved the charge that Nazis drugged van der Lubbe into the amazing apathy he showed throughout his trial for life. Though his old father asked for the head and trunk of his son, Public Prosecutor Werner insisted on burying the remains of Marinus van der Lubbe at Leipzig.

Other defendants at the Reichstag trial, all of them acquitted, were still held in prison by the Hitler State last week while their relatives waited in dread lest they be confronted at any moment with another Nazi surprise fait accompli.

* The Dutchman's confession that he alone set the fire (despite the testimony of German experts that he must have had accomplices) is widely accounted for on the theory that Nazis employed penniless van der Lubbe to help them set the fire, promising to save his neck by a Presidential reprieve and to reward him handsomely for hiding their identity and taking the whole blame in court. If this be true, Nazis would obviously have had every reason to stop him from writing letters as soon as he knew he had been double crossed.⁷

Without implying that the seemingly somewhat deranged van der Lubbe is the poetically gifted and therefore not "normal", not "transparent" Cincinnatus C. in *Priglashenie*, I would still like to offer several intriguing parallels between the two situations. First, van der Lubbe is beheaded, not by axe but by guillotine to be sure, but beheaded nonetheless. What is more, in the version(s) of the execution that ran in *Poslednie novosti*, which also cited coverage in Berlin, Leipzig, the Hague, and Amsterdam, it was written that «Голландцу отрубили голову топором [The Dutch-

⁷ "Germany: Head Into Basket," *Time* (January 22, 1934): <https://time.com/archive/6752433/germany-head-into-basket/>

man was beheaded by an *axe*. – My emphasis]». ⁸ Thus, the image of a henchman not pushing a button but actually wielding an axe would have been circulating through émigré circles from the moment the news of the execution was made public. Second, the beheading itself is presented as a somehow dignified ritual – what Nabokov would quickly identify as the essence of *poshlost'* – with all the smarmy pretense that goes with attempting to aestheticize brutality, including the idea that removing one's head from one's body is more “honorable” than hanging. ⁹ Surely a writer as sensitive to the threat of politically motivated violence and the behavior of zealous henchmen would notice how van der Lubbe was dealt with at his trial and execution. Recall, for example, what Nabokov wrote about this “German” penchant for *poshlost'* a decade later, in his Gogol book, as the war was still going on:

To exaggerate the worthlessness of a country at the awkward moment when one is at war with it – and would like to see it destroyed to the last beer-mug and last forget-me-not – means walking dangerously close to that abyss of *poshlost'* [sic – VN's coinage] which yawns universally at times of revolution or war (Nabokov 1944: 65).

In this respect, as he continues, “it is impossible to imagine anything more unpleasant than a German Lothario, a German who tries to be winsome” (Nabokov 1944: 65). Now, the German judges and executioner in this flatly reported newspaper article are clearly not Lotharios, but perhaps there is a sense in which they are trying to be “winsome,” trying to be consciously appropriate to their assigned roles.

Third, taking into account that this has been a show trial from the start, with the conclusion, at least for poor van der Lubbe, never in doubt,

⁸ This was the Berlin storyline, the first appearing in the article: «Эпилог лейпцигского процесса [The Leipzig trial's epilogue]», *Poslednie novosti*, no. 4677, January 11, 1934. For the Russian description of the executioner (*palach*) in evening dress, see: «После казни ван дер Люббе [After van der Lubbe's execution]», *Poslednie novosti*, no. 4678, January 12, 1934: «Палач, во фраке и белых перчатках, уже стоял рядом с председателем суда [The henchman, wearing a tailcoat and white gloves, stood next to the presiding justice]».

⁹ In this connection see esp.: Dolinin 2013: 29–44, esp. 32–33; Dolinin 2019: 303–20, esp. 307.

the elaborate performative quality of the event, including the executioner's evening dress, white gloves, and "tender" hand gesture seems sickeningly sweet, once again drenched in *poshlost'*. «С любезного разрешения публики, вам наденут красный цилиндр [With the gracious consent of the audience, you will be made to don the red top hat]» (Nabokov 2000: 54 and 1959: 21), declares the judge as he reads the sentence in the novel. The evening dress, by the way, provides a nice situational rhyme (Nabokov would never repeat events *verbatim*, so to speak) to Pierre's hunter's green – «охотнич[ий] горохов[ый] костюмчик» (Nabokov 2000: 175) – in *Priglasenie*, the latter possibly gesturing toward Hitler's Bavaria. That van der Lubbe has been declared sane, when he evidently was not, makes the "I surrender you to the executioner" climax all the more false, all the more evidence that what has been done is not righteous punishment, but cynical, shabby charade. Van der Lubbe's physical strength (his nickname was "Dempsey") coupled with his total apathy and docility at the trial and execution provide suggestive counterpoints to Cincinnatus's physical puniness coupled with his inner turmoil and (unseen to his tormentors) imaginative flights as he is waiting to be executed.

As a final aside, following the execution the distinguished Flemish poet Willem Elsschot (born Alfons Josef de Ridder, 1882–1960) wrote a poem entitled "Aan Van der Lubbe" (dated January 16, 1934, Antwerp). Since the poem was not translated until considerably later in the century, there is little likelihood that Nabokov knew of its existence. Still, the obvious intersection of tone and imagery between Elsschot's brief work and Nabokov's novel suggests that the space into which the violin played may not have been a complete void. Elsschot calls the court proceedings an "operetta" (*de operette*), a term that evokes the cheap stage decorations and replaceable, cardboard character types in *Priglasenie* (cf. again the "dull beastly farce" of the foreword), just as he cuts through the doublespeak of the manner of execution, decapitation imposing maximum carnage and dishonor and having nothing to do with saving face (hanging being supposedly reserved for traitors):

Lang heeft men geprakkezeerd
 wat een mensch het meest onteert:
 hangen, branden, vierendeelen,
 of gewoon als varken kelen.

Toen heeft men het mes gekozen
 om je toch eens te doen blozen.
 Zulk een gala met wat bloed
 doet een hakenkruizer goed.¹⁰

(Elsschot 1946–1947: 265)

Elsschot ends his poetic send-up of the “live performance” (*zulk een gala*, lit. “such a gala”) with the prediction that the ghost of the simple youth/boy (*jongenlief*) will haunt its executioners until they meet their fate “at Russian hands” (*door den Rus vernietigd zijn*, lit. “are destroyed by the Rus/Russian”). By Russian he doubtless means the Soviets.

It would be an irony of history, however, and an irony rendered yet more ironic, as it were, by the fact that Elsschot and Nabokov-Sirin are writing presumably completely independently of each other, if some measure of the justice meted back to this dark regime of bad taste and romantic mythology run amok came from a stroke of the insistently non-political Sirin’s pen and not only from the more obvious thrusts of Stalin’s sword.

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¹⁰ “Man has for years employed his mind / the most degrading death to find, / hanging, burning, drawing, quartering, / cutting the throat like a pig for slaughtering. // Maximum dishonour to achieve, / the knife was chosen for the deed; / a live performance, shedding blood / always does a Nazi good” (trans. Peter J. Large).

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