Ich übergebe der Flamme die Schriften...' The symbolism in the burning of books by students in Berlin 1933

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Abstract: In the spring of 1933, students at many German universities raided libraries and staged public and dramatically effective burnings of books that they deemed "un-German". In the light of torches, accompanied by marching band music and officers of the SA in uniform, the students burnt the works of authors like Karl Marx, Thomas Mann, Sigmund Freud, Erich Maria Remarque and Erich Kästner. These book burnings were not only the destruction of ink, glue and paper to destroy the material books themselves, it was carried out to have a symbolic purpose. To start with, the political and historical backgrounds for these events are shortly given. This is followed by an analysis of the symbolic dimensions of burning books that were pursued by the national socialists, by example of the libricide in front of the Humboldt-Universität Berlin. This was the most important of the book burnings in 1933 as it was broadcasted throughout the whole country and the minister for propaganda, Goebbels, even held a speech. It did not suffice for the national socialists to destroy the books, but the public should see what happens to thoughts that were not compliant with their ideology, demonstrating that the Nazis had proclaimed themselves as authority over the minds and morals of people.

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The book burning in Berlin, May 10, 1933. —US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD. Introduction. On May 10, 1933, student groups across Germany carried out a series of book burnings of works that the students and leading Nazi party members associated with an "un-German spirit." Enthusiastic crowds witnessed the burning of books by Brecht, Einstein, Freud, Mann and Remarque, among many other well-known intellectuals, scientists and cultural figures, many of whom were Jewish.