From Benjamin Carter Hett, *Burning the Reichstag: An Investigation Into the Third Reich’s Enduring Mystery* (Oxford University Press, 2014)

PROLOGUE

BERLIN, FEBRUARY 27, 1933

THE EVENING OF FEBRUARY 27, 1933, was a cold one in Berlin: six degrees below zero centigrade, with a sharp wind out of the east. There had been snow. The streets and sidewalks were icy.

That night twenty-nine-year-old Chief Constable (Oberwachtmeister) Karl Buwert, who had been posted to watch the west and north sides of the Reichstag building from 8:00 to 10:00, was expecting a quiet shift. The weather would keep most people indoors. There was an election on and the Reichstag was not in session; many deputies were away campaigning, and the work of the building’s staff slowed down after 9:00. Between the rounds of the lighting man at 8:45 and the Reichstag mailman at 8:50 or 8:55, and the first inspection of the night watchman at 10:00, no one would be moving about inside the building. For this hour or so the Reichstag would be quiet, and, presumably—apart from the porter at the north entrance—empty . . .

. . . What we can know about what happened at the Reichstag on that icy night in February 1933 comes to us through what Chief Constable Buwert and a number of other witnesses remembered. These witnesses, mostly police officers and firefighters, were doing their jobs under sudden, intense pressure. As is often the case during fast-moving and frightening events, the details of timing in their accounts, and of who was where at particular moments, do not all quite fit or match.

At what he recalled as either five or ten minutes past nine, Chief Constable Buwert was standing by the grand steps to Portal I when a “civilian” rushed up to him. “Officer, someone has broken a window pane there!” this civilian exclaimed. “You can see a light there, too,” he added.

The “civilian” was probably a twenty-two-year-old theology student named Hans Flöter, who at “9:05 or 9:08”—his recollection—was on his way home from an evening in the State Library a few blocks east on Unter den Linden. As Flöter was crossing the Platz der Republik he heard the sound of breaking glass. He assumed it was merely a careless custodian. A moment later Flöter heard the sound again. He looked up and this time saw a man on a balcony, in the act of breaking a second-floor window. The man, said Flöter, was holding a firebrand . . .

. . . At almost the same time, twenty-one-year-old Werner Thaler, a typesetter at the Nazi Party paper the *Völkischer Beobachter* (Nationalist observer), was on his way home from work. He had walked along Friedrich-Ebert-Strasse from the Brandenburg Gate to the Reichstag, and crossed the square to the west. It was at that moment, 9:07 or 9:08 he thought, that he too heard the sound of breaking glass. “I saw two men, whom I can’t describe, climb in the window that is directly to the right of the main entrance.” Later he would become uncertain that there had been two men; perhaps he had seen only one. Like Flöter, Thaler rushed to find a police officer. Like Flöter, he found Buwert . . .