

During the night of August 30/31, 1933, Theodor Lessing, having fled Germany for the relative safety of the Czech resort town of Marienbad (today's Mariánské Lázně), was assassinated by two right-wing contract killers. For the reward of 80,000 Reichsmark posted by the newly empowered National Socialist government of Germany, Rudolf Zischka and Max Eckert climbed a ladder to Lessing's third-floor apartment and shot him twice in the head through an open window while he worked at his desk. He died in a local hospital shortly after, the first known victim of the Nazis outside of Germany.

Two days after his death, Joseph Goebbels, who had personally approved the bounty for Lessing's murder, referenced Lessing at the Nuremberg party conference in declaring that it was "*not surprising that the German revolution . . . was now shaking off this yoke.*" The *Niederdeutsche Zeitung*, a pro-Nazi paper published in Lessing's hometown of Hannover, maliciously reported: "*Now this unfortunate ghost has also been wiped away.*" Lessing's old literary nemesis, Thomas Mann, wrote in his diary: "*I dread such an end, not because it is the end, but because it is so miserable and might befit a Lessing, but not me.*"

But not all celebrated. Following his death, Albert Einstein, Bertrand Russell, Romain Rolland, and Max Brod formed a Theodor Lessing Fund to finance the publication of Lessing's unpublished works. Tellingly, Lessing's death also helped convince Albert and Elsa Einstein to flee their holiday rental in Belgium for England that September (Einstein would never set foot in continental Europe again). And at Lessing's funeral at the Jewish Cemetery in Marienbad, his widow, Ada Lessing, presented the Czechoslovakian President (and former academic philosopher), Thomas Masaryk, with Arthur Schopenhauer's walking stick ([ADD LINK TO ARTICLE](#)), which Lessing had been leaning on for over thirty years.

While Lessing had been a somewhat controversial and confrontational figure during his public life in Germany, from a 21st Century perspective, there is little to indicate that he would be such an early target of the Nazis or that his murder would mark such flashpoint. Indeed, much of Lessing's work was directed, in concurrence with his philosophical principles (philosophy as action), toward effecting the public good. Early in his career, he formed a popular Anti-Noise Society to combat some of the ill-effects of rapid industrialization in urban Germany. As a determined pacifist, he served as doctor (albeit unlicensed) in military hospitals in the First World War. And he committed himself to improving the lives of the German working class through education, especially adult education, eventually and enduringly founding, with his dynamic wife Ada Lessing, an adult education school which today bears their name, The Ada-und-Theodor-Lessing-Volkshochschule Hannover (<https://www.vhs-hannover.de>).

He engaged in these efforts in addition to his primary work of teaching and writing philosophy and paying his bills through journalism, commentary, and theatre review. Unfortunately, the principal controversies in his life arose from this paid work. In 1910, Lessing wrote a nasty satire of the popular literary critic, Samuel Lublinksi, which generated public blow-back from German authors, especially Thomas Mann, who owed Lublinksi for positive reviews of their own work. In a 1925 journalistic series (collected in book form as *Haarmann, Story of a Werewolf*) on the trial of the grisly Hannover serial killer, Fritz Haarmann, Lessing outraged local officialdom when he

revealed that the Hannover police had long used Haarmann as an informant and declared that they, together with all of Hannover society, were essentially complicit in his crimes. Most dangerously for Lessing, in a subsequent 1925 article on the election of the General Paul von Hindenburg, to the German presidency, Lessing called this WWI hero (at least to the German public mind) an empty vessel, a question mark, a zero, but presciently warned that *"behind every Zero, there is always a future Nero."*

This last article, originally published in the Prager Tageblatt, incited student protests against Lessing when republished in a local Hannover paper, forcing the administration of the Hannover Technische Institute to force the resignation of Lessing's professorship. Later in 1930, Goebbels, used the article to propagandize Hindenburg's libel suit against Goebbels, stating, "

As noted in the quotes above, his death reveals as much about the character of his detractors as well as his friends. But was he really so controversial, so outspokenly Jewish, so dangerous to the Nazis that he needed killing?

And because he became better known for these controversies, these more public highlights in his career, the public discourse about Lessing has also always tended toward the polarizing, permitting his critics to paint him according to the contemporary colors they have on their palette boards. Even today, semi-prominent academics like Yascha Mounk look at Lessing and find him to be wanting, not for what for he was in his time, and according to the knowledge at the time, but what they might look for in a hero today.