

The Attempted Assassination of Konrad Adenauer: A Plot to Derail Reparations

In the early years of post-World War II West Germany, Konrad Adenauer, the nation's first chancellor, emerged as a pivotal figure in rebuilding a devastated country and restoring its place on the global stage. A staunch anti-Nazi and devout Catholic, Adenauer led West Germany from 1949 to 1963, steering it toward democracy, economic recovery, and reconciliation with former enemies. However, his efforts to negotiate reparations with Israel for Holocaust atrocities made him a target of extremist opposition. On March 27, 1952, a parcel bomb addressed to Adenauer exploded at Munich Police Headquarters, killing a police officer and exposing a shocking assassination plot tied to Israeli militant Menachem Begin. This article explores the context, execution, and aftermath of this audacious attempt to kill the chancellor, shedding light on a lesser-known chapter of Cold War history.

Konrad Adenauer and the Reparations Agreement

Konrad Adenauer, born in 1876 in Cologne, was a seasoned politician with a record of opposing Nazism. As mayor of Cologne during the Weimar Republic, he resisted Hitler's regime, enduring imprisonment and living in seclusion during the war. After 1945, he co-founded the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and became West Germany's first chancellor in 1949, tasked with rebuilding a nation in ruins. His foreign policy prioritized integration with the West and reconciliation with former adversaries, including France and the United States. A cornerstone of his moral and diplomatic agenda was addressing Germany's responsibility for the Holocaust.

In 1951, Adenauer initiated negotiations for a Reparations Agreement with Israel, aiming to provide financial compensation to Holocaust survivors and the nascent Jewish state. The talks, formalized in the Luxembourg Agreement of September 1952, were deeply controversial. In Germany, some viewed reparations as an economic burden or an admission of collective guilt, while in Israel, many opposed accepting money from Germany, seeing it as legitimizing a nation responsible for the genocide of six million Jews. Radical groups, particularly those tied to the Zionist paramilitary organization Irgun, condemned the agreement as a betrayal of Holocaust victims, arguing that survivors should receive direct payments rather than funds channeled through the Israeli government for state-building projects.

Menachem Begin and the Irgun Connection

At the heart of the assassination plot was Menachem Begin, a towering figure in Israeli history who would later serve as prime minister from 1977 to 1983 and share the 1978 Nobel Peace Prize for the Camp David Accords. In 1952, Begin was the leader of Herut, a

right-wing political party rooted in the Revisionist Zionist movement, and a former commander of Irgun, the pre-state militia responsible for attacks against British forces in Palestine. Begin, whose family perished in the Holocaust, fiercely opposed the reparations deal, viewing it as a moral compromise that allowed Germany to “buy” absolution.

Begin’s opposition was not merely rhetorical. According to later revelations, he actively supported a plot to assassinate Adenauer to derail the reparations talks. The plan was orchestrated by a small group of former Irgun members, including Eliezer Sudit, who detailed his involvement in a memoir published decades later, *Be’shlihut Ha’matzpun (On a Mission of Conscience)*. Sudit’s account, corroborated by German journalist Henning Sietz in his 2003 book *Assassination Attempt on Adenauer: The Secret History of a Political Attack*, revealed Begin’s central role in approving, funding, and planning the operation.

The Plot Unfolds

The assassination attempt was both bold and amateurish. On March 27, 1952, a package addressed to Chancellor Adenauer arrived at Munich Police Headquarters, arousing suspicion due to its childlike handwriting and incorrect addressing. The parcel, which contained a bomb hidden inside an encyclopedia, had been mailed by two teenage boys hired by the conspirators. Sensing something amiss, the boys alerted the police rather than posting it. When officers attempted to inspect the package, it detonated, killing Bavarian police officer Karl Reichert and injuring two others.

At the same time, two additional letter bombs were sent to the venue where Israeli and German delegations were negotiating reparations, claimed by a group calling itself the Jewish Partisans Organization. These bombs failed to reach their targets, but the Munich explosion triggered an international investigation. French and German authorities traced the plot to five Israeli suspects in Paris, all linked to Irgun. Among them was Eliezer Sudit, who admitted to preparing the explosive device. The suspects were arrested but later allowed to return to Israel, with evidence kept under seal to avoid inflaming antisemitic sentiments in Germany.

Sudit’s memoir, published in the 1990s, provided critical insights into the plot’s motivations and execution. He claimed the intent was not to kill Adenauer but to generate international media attention and disrupt the reparations talks. “It was clear to all of us there was no chance the package would reach Adenauer,” Sudit wrote, suggesting the plot was designed as a symbolic act. However, this claim is disputed, as Begin’s involvement and the deadly outcome—a police officer’s death—suggest a more serious intent. Sudit recounted Begin’s personal commitment, including an offer to sell his gold watch to fund the operation when money ran short, and meetings with Knesset members Jochanan Bader and Chaim Landau, as well as former Irgun intelligence chief Abba Scherzer, to coordinate the plot.

Aftermath and Cover-Up

The West German government, under Adenauer's leadership, and Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion both sought to downplay the incident to preserve fragile bilateral relations. Adenauer, aware of the plot's origins, chose not to pursue it aggressively, fearing it could provoke antisemitic backlash in Germany or derail reparations. Ben-Gurion, who supported the reparations deal, appreciated Adenauer's restraint, as publicizing Begin's involvement could have strained the fledgling German-Israeli relationship. The details remained largely suppressed until 2006, when the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published excerpts from Sudit's memoir, sparking renewed interest and debate.

In Israel, Begin's role remained obscure for decades. His personal secretary, Yehiel Kadishai, and Herzl Makov, director of the Menachem Begin Heritage Center, claimed ignorance of the plot when questioned in 2006. However, Sudit's account, backed by Sietz's research, left little doubt of Begin's involvement. The revelation shocked analysts, given Begin's later stature as a peacemaker, and raised questions about the ethics of political violence in the post-Holocaust era.

The assassination attempt failed to derail the Reparations Agreement, which was signed in September 1952. West Germany initially paid approximately 3 billion Deutsche Marks to Israel and 450 million to the Claims Conference, with payments continuing as new claims emerged. The agreement bolstered Israel's economy and marked a significant step in Germany's moral reckoning, though it remained divisive. Adenauer's survival and resolve strengthened his domestic and international standing, contributing to his re-election in 1953.

Legacy and Historical Significance

The attempted assassination of Konrad Adenauer underscores the raw emotions and complex politics of the post-Holocaust era. For Begin and his allies, the reparations deal symbolized a betrayal of Jewish suffering, yet their violent response risked undermining Israel's moral authority and diplomatic goals.

Adenauer's decision to suppress the affair reflected his pragmatic commitment to reconciliation, even at the cost of transparency. The incident also highlights the challenges of navigating justice, memory, and national interest in the shadow of genocide.

Today, the plot is a footnote in the legacies of both Adenauer and Begin, overshadowed by their later achievements. Adenauer is celebrated as a founding father of modern Germany and European integration, while Begin is remembered for his role in securing peace with Egypt. Yet the 1952 attempt serves as a reminder of the volatility of the early Cold War years, when ideological divides and historical wounds fueled extreme measures. It also prompts reflection on the ethics of political violence and the delicate balance of diplomacy in addressing past atrocities.

As historian Moshe Zimmermann noted, the plot's secrecy was driven by a mutual desire to protect German-Israeli reconciliation. Its belated exposure, through Sudit's memoir and subsequent reporting, invites us to grapple with the moral ambiguities of a time when survivors, statesmen, and militants wrestled with the legacy of the Holocaust in profoundly different ways.