

# Historical tales about the capital of the 20th century

## A half-blind communist with a sharp eye for the future. Marinus van der Lubbe (1909-1934) and his Reichstag Fire.

Posted on [7 June 2013](#) by [Joep de Visser](#)

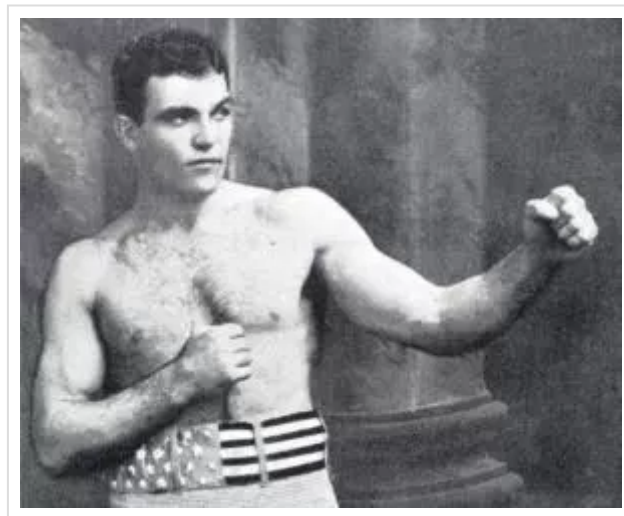


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The *Reichstagbrand* (*Reichstag fire*) in the evening of 27 February 1933 has been famous for being one of the biggest miscalculations in history. In stead of the uprising against the nazi regime, which Marinus van der Lubbe had in mind when he lit the German parliament, the regime introduced a

series of laws which made communist and social-democratic opposition close to impossible. In spite of his active years as a communist, Van der Lubbe was suspected of being in a nazi plot by his fellow *comrades*. For those reasons, he became mainly famous as *dumb* or as a *loser* of his own act. Previous to the deed which made him world-famous in 1933, the young Marinus had a life already. His life gives us an insight of his character and motivation to burn down the Reichstag. When and why did Marinus become a communist? Was he strictly seen even a *communist*, or what was his relation to the communist party? What was his opinion about the use of violence for the sake of a revolution? How did he develop the idea to burn the Reichstag?

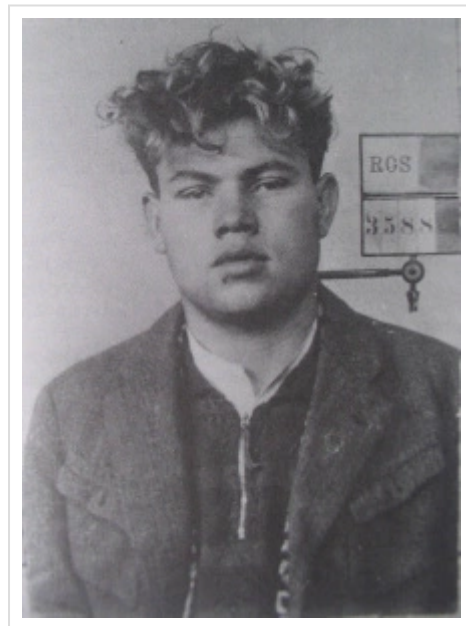
Marinus van der Lubbe was born in Leiden, under poor conditions in January 1909. His mother was a farmers' daughter who had four children in an unhappy marriage. Marinus' mother left her first husband and married to a pedlar, of which he was the third and youngest child. At the age of twelve, his mother passed away. Marinus moved to his half-sister and three younger cousins. When he finished elementary school a year later, he thought of becoming an adventurous globe-trotter, a priest or a flower salesman. After he worked two weeks as a courier for a grocery store, he stopped. Thereafter, he started as a construction worker – a job which fitted him better. Marinus was seriously muscular and in the evenings, Marinus went to a school to learn more about his profession. At work, he was nicknamed Dempsey – after the world champion heavy weight boxing at that time.



Marinus must have had a couple of productive and relative easy years, till two minor accidents changed his fate. During hoarsing around with his colleagues, some cement came in Marinus' eye. Due to a chronic infection of his mucous membrane – the damage on his cornea couldn't heal but only ulcer more. It resulted that Marinus only had 30 percent sight at his left eye. Only at the age of 15, he couldn't work for a couple of months and thought about the state of the world. When he started working again, he got to know Simon Hartevelt – a young communist. Shortly after, Marinus became an active member of the communist youth party. A couple years later, it had resulted in a domestic argue about this and left his half-sister's house. In 1927, he rented the room in Leiden. Half a year later, the second accident occurred at work and his right eye was heavily damaged too. Now, he could only recognise a person when he stood within a meter. It didn't last long before Marinus was a workless, half shuttered pauper at the age of 19. His only income was now a weekly 6.44 guilder by the office for social welfare.

Marinus spent his time usually with debating and learning more about Karl Marx's communist theory. A certain Piet van Albada, son of a doctor, taught Marinus some German – because one should read Marx in German. Moreover, Germany should be the country where the socialist revolution should take place next time. Marinus learned a lot at Piet's room, where he found shelter for moments when he couldn't pay his rent again. They shared money, till Marinus found out that Piet actually paid for his stay. Although Piet was from a privileged social class, Marinus did not want this. The times that Marinus lent a little bit of money, he paid it back as soon as he could.

In 1929, the communists in Leiden were divided about the new situation in the Soviet Union, where now Stalin had the power. As a result, the chairman of the local communist party's clubhouse changed his political opinion. With no better alternative, Marinus became its new chairman. Surprisingly, he was successful as an organiser of events. A choir came up and theater plays were organised. Marinus also became an attraction himself. He gained public attention after he climbed into a lamppost, telling labourers that they should strike against the disappointing wages in the industry where Marinus worked himself too. When he spreaded his own paper without any allowance of the local communist party, he was expelled from the communist party and gave up his position as chairman. In March 1930, when a policeman wanted Marinus to stop with selling communist papers in public, Marinus threw him through a window. He was imprisoned for two weeks jail – but accepted in the communist circles again.



In the autumn of 1930, Marinus accepted a competition where he could earn 5000 guilders. It was a Dutch weekly who would give this price to the first Dutchman to swim the Strait of Dover. When he called the weekly that he was in Calais, starting his swim – Marinus was told that they don't accept the bet because it was too dangerous. Marinus should do it next year, he was told. Marinus biked back to Leiden again. Back in his home-town, Marinus was beaten up during a fight with the police. Marinus was imprisoned in The Hague, though a public protest demanded his release. One week later, Van der Lubbe was released and enjoyed a warm welcome by his fellow comrades.



In February 1931, Van der Lubbe tried to make a step towards national politics. Marinus asked the Dutch communist party in Amsterdam, if they could use him for the national propaganda team. The reply was negative. Marinus decided to propagate for the party without assignment. Together with his friend Henk Holwerda, he crossed the Netherlands to spread the communist religion. Marinus and Henk enjoyed it and planned to walk towards the Soviet Union. As an income, they would make picture postcards to sell them on their way. A few weeks before they left Leiden, the communist party expelled them from the party because it didn't agree to the boys' way of selling the postcards. Marinus and Henk left their home town on April 14th 1931. Already before the Dutch border with Germany, Henk and Marinus splitted up. Henk changed his mind after he realised that the Soviet Union was so far. Besides, Marinus rather walked alone and in his fast tempo. When he sold the photographs – he said that Henk became ill. Marinus also hitchhiked with automobiles and arrived in Berlin within five days. In the German capital, Marinus was impressed by the violent atmosphere between nazi's and communists. Secondly, people seemed to be too poor to buy his postcards. As a result, when Marinus figured out that a visa for the Soviet Union costed 160 Reichsmark – he changed his mind and headed back to the Netherlands to propagate the revolution there again. Later, it turned out that he wouldn't have gotten a visa since he was thrown out the Dutch communist party anyway.

In the summer of 1931, he attempted to cross the Strait of Dover for the second time. Due to bad weather and a lack of money, he needed to give up again. Back in Leiden, Marinus left as soon as he could and without being prepared. He walked towards China – presuming that he would cross Yugoslavia in four days. After three weeks of walking there, he gave up and headed back. Marinus stated that he couldn't make it because the roads were crooked there. Back in Leiden again, Van der Lubbe tried to organise a library for labourers with a meeting room. When he wasn't given any credit by the office for social help, he smashed its windows. In February 1932, Marinus left again for the Soviet Union. When he tried to cross the Soviet border illegally in April 1932, he was caught by the Polish police and imprisoned for three weeks. In the meanwhile, Marinus was sentenced by the Dutch court to three months prison for violating the windows. Somehow, he stayed out of the prison. Marinus didn't join the communist party anymore, but rather tried to educate the labour

class. When he wasn't given a credit, he started a hunger strike which took about twelve days. Marinus was brought to the hospital, where he gained strength in no-time.

In the winter of 1932-3, Marinus had conversations with his friend Piet van Albada. Marinus said, he didn't understand why people committed suicide. He would rather kill Hitler before, said Marinus. Piet replied that it would be impossible – and blowing up the Reichstag would be more effective. When he read on 30th of January 1933 that Hitler became *Reichskanzler* (Chancellor), he followed the situation in Germany even more. He read that a civil war was about to start in the Ruhr district, he headed to Germany at February the 3rd. Two weeks later, he made it till Berlin. Here, Marinus spent his days looking around in the city. In Neukölln, a funeral took place near the office for social welfare. Marinus talked with some labourers who were around. He stirred them up, trying to start the uprising with them. At first, these labourers seem interested – but they had changed their mind the next day, when Marinus came back to meet them. Marinus concluded now that a communist revolutionary initiative was lacking.



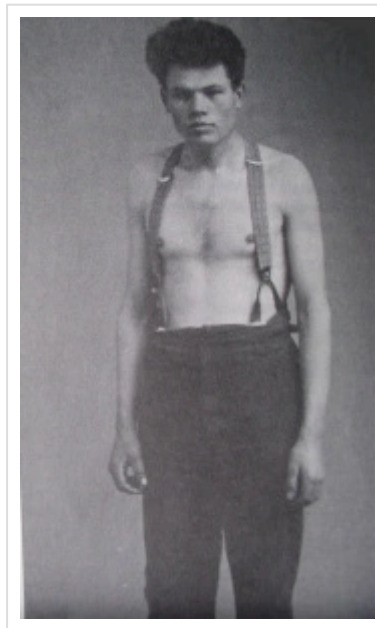
Saturday the 25th of February, Marinus bought kindlings and headed towards the office of social welfare in Neukölln again, though with other intentions. Through the slot of a window, Marinus threw a burning kindling during dusk and left. He took the U8 towards Alexanderplatz. Here, he headed towards the *Rotes Rathaus* (town hall) and the *Stadtschloss* – where he also found slots in which he threw burning kindlings. Marinus headed towards his pension in Kreuzberg, waiting for sirens which didn't come. The day after, he initially left to walk back towards the Netherlands. When he passed by the Reichstag, he must have remembered his conversation in the Netherlands – with his friend Piet, but he continued walking. After one night, he changed his mind and walked towards Berlin again. At 2pm, Marinus inspected the Reichstag. This time, he wanted to be inside the building while enlightening it. Marinus thought it was the best idea to enter the building at the right side of the main entrance.



Monday evening, the 27th of February 1933. Marinus walked towards the Reichstag at 8:40pm. After he saw a policeman, a woman and a gentleman, he strolled around for another twenty minutes. Nine pm, he broke into the Reichstag. At first, he had to kick about ten times before the double glazed window was broken. Marinus didn't know that his presence was already noticed by a young student, who warned the police. Also, the fire-brigade was informed – they received a call at 9:13pm. Marinus wasn't sure if there would be security inside the building – so he hurried anyway. At first, he had bad luck in his mission. The first two kindlings couldn't flame anything while Marinus was in his rush. He undressed and burned his shirt. While he was looking for fuel, he only found towels which would burn. In the meanwhile, the fire-brigade arrived at 9:20pm and two boats were on their way at the Spree river, right next to the Reichstag. The brigade entered the building at 9:21, noticing only smoke – no fire. Five minutes later, Marinus was caught by Reichstag's security man Poeschel and policeman Scranowitz. He only flamed a couple of curtains and a couch and many insignificant fires around. "Hands up!" – Marinus was told while Scranowitz's pistol was aimed at him. Marinus was asked why he did this, and hit in his face when he answered. Thereafter, Marinus was brought to the police post at Brandenburger Tor. He directly committed his act but wouldn't explain why. During his questioning, a loud bang startled the conversation. It was 9.30pm – the glass roof had collapsed. Because oxygen came in – jet flames rose far out of the Reichstag. At 10pm, the fire reached its peak while it was extinguished at midnight. In the meanwhile, Hermann Göring heard about the fire and headed towards the Reichstag. It is said that Göring mostly cared about the expansive rugs inside the buildings. Ernst 'Putzi' Hanfstaengl, who stayed at Göring's residence, called Goebbels – knowing that Hitler would be there. When Hanfstaengl told Goebbels that he wanted to speak to Hitler because the Reichstag is burning, Goebbels thought he made a joke. Only when Goebbels fact checked that it was true, he and Hitler headed towards the Reichstag. Hitler stared at the Reichstag in embittered anger.

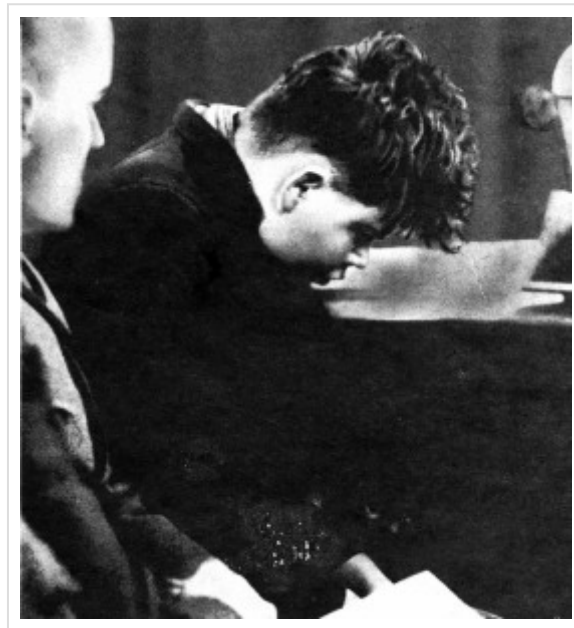


In the contradictory information which Goebbels, Göring and Hitler were given, they concluded that the Reichstag was fired by a group of communists. They already expected a communist protest to take place over a longer time, and were surprised that the communists didn't organise one so far. Goebbels, Göring and Hitler were afraid of a repetition of a general strike which took place in March 1920, during the [Kapp Putsch](#). Hitler, who had a tantrum, declared in a hysterical state that it was a communist plot. Furthermore, he demanded that communist members of the parliament would be executed the same night. Göring, who as the Prussian Minister of Interior Affairs had control over the police, insisted that communist functionaries to be executed at the place where they would be found. The police was authorised to use their pistols without any restrictions. That following night, thousands of communists, socialists and social-democrats were arrested and imprisoned. Their newspapers were temporarily forbidden, although their power wasn't restored before the next restrictions would overwhelm them again.



The next day, Marinus declared how he came and what he had done in Berlin so far. He remembered many details, admitted his attempts in Neukölln, the *Rotes Rathaus* and the *Stadtschloss* too. The day after, March the 1st, Marinus told in detail how he lit the Reichstag. The 2nd of May, he formulated his motive: "I sympathise with the proletariat in their class struggle. (...) In Germany, there is a nationalistic coalition of Hitler, Papen and Hugenberg and I think this has two dangers. 1: the labours will be suppressed. 2: the national coalition will not be humiliated by other

countries – with the result that there will be war again.” In this first week, Marinus was still proud of his deed. An important change came when a forensic team concluded that Van der Lubbe must have had assistance. One of their mistakes is that they didn’t realise that the curtains were old, and therefore easy to be lighted. According to this analyses, there must have been a group of communists or a group of nazi’s who lit the Reichstag. Clearly, the nazi’s tried to make the *Reichstagbrand* look like a communist plot. That would be in their benefit, because they could defend more laws against communist organisations. On the contrary were communist journalists, such as the communist Willi Münzenberg, who left Germany as soon as they could when he heard that the Reichstag was on fire. In Münzenberg’s analysis, Van der Lubbe was a spy for the nazi’s. After all, the nazi’s already had a list of communists who were arrested the same night. When three Bulgarian men were also suspected to be in the plot, they successfully adopted Münzenberg’s analysis in the court. Especially Georgi Dimitrov, an experienced and high ranked spy for the *Komintern*, succeeded in making the nazi’s look suspected. According to Dimitrov, Van der Lubbe was given command to burn the Reichstag because otherwise – he would be sentenced for his homosexuality.



During this political game, in which valse arguments were invalidated by lies, Marinus van der Lubbe decided to start a hunger strike at March 16th 1933. Because his version of the story wasn’t believed, he also silenced from April 25th on. The only things which Marinus said was that he worked all alone and demanded a rapid conviction. Sometimes, Van der Lubbe made exceptions and spoke very vaguely to annoy the judge or Dimitrov. Throughout the months, Marinus weakened and bow his head more and more to the ground, adopting the body language of a loser. In the meanwhile, Willi Münzenberg initiated another commission in London, the so called international court of justice. September 20th 1933, one day before the German court started in Leipzig, the commission in London concluded that the nazi’s lighted the Reichstag. The German court concluded differently. They couldn’t prove that there was a nazi or a communist plot. In December 1933, Marinus van der Lubbe was the only one to be convicted. While he was given the death penalty by the judge’s final conviction, Marinus slept. At 10 January 1934, only three days before his 25th birthday, he was beheaded by a guillotine at a courtyard of his prison in Leipzig.





- “Lubbe’s grave. Damn it! The deeper we bury him, the more truth comes to light!”(1934, ©John Heartfield)

Although his family wanted to bring Marinus’ corpse to the Netherlands, they were not allowed to. Marinus was given an anonymous grave at the *Südfriedhof* in Leipzig, where he was buried twice as deep as usual. On top of him, a huge brown stone was placed – without any inscription. The [dadaist](#) John Heartfield, who fled to Chechoslovakia in 1933 and to London in 1934, made a humorous collage about this peculiar way of burying. In the Nuremberg Trials, Göring declared that there definitely were no nazi’s involved in the burning of the Reichstag. The communist functionaries, Göring said, would have been arrested sooner or later anyway. The *Reichstagbrand* only quickened this – with the paradox result that many communist functionaries were not listed yet. The definite enervation came in 1959, when the journalist Fritz Tobias wrote a series of articles in *Der Spiegel* – pleading that Van der Lubbe acted alone. Three years later, he worked out this thesis till a monography consisting 700 pages. When the well respected historian Hans Mommsen confirmed Tobias’ analyses, it became the dominant view among historians in the western democracies. In addition, Marinus’ brother Jan asked several times for revision of the judgement. In 1955, this request was declined. In 1967 though, the judge sentenced Van der Lubbe posthumously to eight years of prison. Burning the Reichstag was a criminal act after all. In 1980, the West Berlin court even acquitted him. One year later, he was definitely convicted to eight years prison again.

In 1984, Marinus was given a street-name in his home town Leiden. In the early 1990s, a memorial was build in honor of Marinus van der Lubbe. It lead to the discussion what actually should be remembered. Can one remember an act which is judged as a crime? Do we have also to remember the unwanted consequences for the left-wing opposition? Can we remember the sad fate of Marinus, while he was also responsible for it? Or should we especially be warned about the political games in court, which both communists as nazi’s played? This grey zone of guilt is what the advocates of the memorial tried to portray, according to themselves. The artists Ron Sluik and Reinier Kurperhoek tried to show in their tripartite memorial. They chose to show Van der Lubbe’s

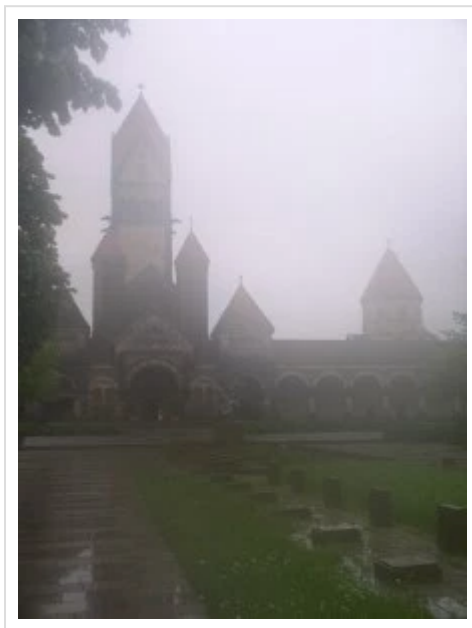
last poem, which he wrote in the jail, on three stone symbolic coffins. To be fair, I think it is more a tribute to the 'courageous' Van der Lubbe, who was the first Dutchman to become a victim of the nazi's. In Sluik and Kurperhoek's concept, the three memorials should be located in his home town Leiden, his grave in Leipzig and the place of act: Berlin.



In Leiden, Marinus was given his memorial in 1993 already. In Germany, the memorials were more debated. In Berlin, there was a discussion where Marinus' memorial should be placed. Underneath the window where he broke into the Reichstag? According to the governing social-democratic party, that would turn the Reichstag into an overkill of memorial stones. Basically, other memorials were given priority over the *Reichstagbrand* and the fate of Marinus van der Lubbe. In February 2000, the local mayor of Prenzlauer Berg advocated to place the Berlin part of the memorial at the Fröbelstraße. Here, Van der Lubbe slept a few nights – where now is a hospital. A month later, the memorial was placed at the *Deutsches Theater* at the Schumannstraße, although it remains unclear to me what this place has to do with Marinus. Another remembrance to Marinus van der Lubbe has been painted by a graffiti-artist at the Bethaniendamm. A couple tags of thanks seem to wish Marinus a peaceful rest. Unfortunately, these anarchists think that Marinus rests in peace since 1933 – giving this tribute a sloppy impression.



Even more peculiar are the memories about Van der Lubbe in Leipzig. Although Marinus' grave in Leipzig became territory of the communist GDR, Marinus was not given a new grave. In despite of his communist efforts during Marinus' life and his act being clearly 'anti-fascist', the GDR rather believed that the Reichstag was set on fire by the nazi's. After Dimitrov's death in 1949, the Danziger Straße in Berlin-Prenzlauer Berg was even called after him, as well as *U-Bahnhof Eberswalder Straße*, till these changed to its original name in 1995 again. In Leipzig, the local *PDS (Partei Deutsche Sozialisten* – the party with the communist regime's heritage) decided that Van der Lubbe would get a memorial stone at his grave. With this, the party wanted to compensate for the absence of a memorial during the GDR's regime. According to my book from 1999, Marinus' grave would lay at a field which became occupied with urns during the 1960s. These urns will be removed in 2006, when Marinus will have a gravestone at the location where he is buried. When I visited the graveyard last week, I couldn't find of his grave or a memorial of him. In despite of discriptions and a little help from the municipal, his grave seems unable to be found even nowadays.



Taken everything into account, Marinus was most of all a misunderstood as soon as he left his home town. When it comes to his personal life, Marinus always have been susceptible for communism – given the poor conditions in which he was born. He must have been about sixteen years old when he even heard of communism. Without much ideological baggage and shortly after he lost much of his sight, Marinus was easily convinced. In communism, he also found friends and a goal. Being a local communist also turned out to be something where he was good at. Marinus enjoyed provocations and didn't respect police's authorities in the slightest. The young, muscular labourer had a heart of gold towards his friends – but was not afraid of violence. In the meanwhile, his strong will-power and his persistence brought him to travel throughout Europe. He had been to France, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Poland – and to Berlin once before. In 1931, Marinus thought that he saw a Berlin in which the revolution was about to start. Two years later, he found it back under control by the nazi's. Marinus' concluded that he had to stop the nazi's from suppressing the labour class and heading towards a war. Only later, the society found out that his analysis was right. Although he was barely educated, Marinus saw this danger approaching and acted against it. He may have been physically half blind for years already with a sight of a meter – in a political way

he had a sharp eye for the future. Till a certain level, Marinus was the same type as [Georg Elser](#). Unfortunately, their fate was the same too.

Marinus had a clear goal when he arrived in Berlin. Still, he had no idea which building he would like to burn down as a sign of the starting revolution. An office for social welfare, the Rotes Rathaus, the Stadtschloss and finally the Reichstag – Marinus apparently thought that burning down any building would be clear in its message. Ironically, the first one who understood Marinus' message was Hermann Göring. The Prussian minister of Interior Affairs preventative rounded up all active communists and socialists in Berlin. And as far as there were communists who got Marinus' message – such as Willi Münzenberg – they left Germany as soon as they could. Unfortunately for him, no one believed Marinus lit the Reichstag alone. During his trial, he became a toy figure between communists powers and the nazi party.

After he was executed, nazi's nor the communist GDR gave him a reasonable grave. Only after the Fall and the German unification, a peculiar memorial is developed. Although the lobby behind it try to make it look 'neutral', it is quite much a tribute to Van der Lubbe. At the Südfriedhof in Leipzig, he is given this memorial in 1999. Unfortunately it is unclear where it is located. In Berlin, plans to memorise Marinus' act and sad consequences didn't make it at the wanted site, while it is placed at an irrelevant location since 2000. Only in his home town Leiden, Marinus is remembered with a stone which can easily be found. Furthermore, a street in Leiden named after him. An other 'anarchist' initiative in Berlin may tribute to their comrade, Marinus' year of execution is mistaken. Perhaps it is striking for his failing attempts outside his home town Leiden. Marinus never swam across the Strait of Dover, he couldn't finish his journeys to the Soviet Union or China – he was arrested by foreign police forces for various times and the last time was fatal. In a way, Marinus has only been understood in Leiden – where the people knew him.

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