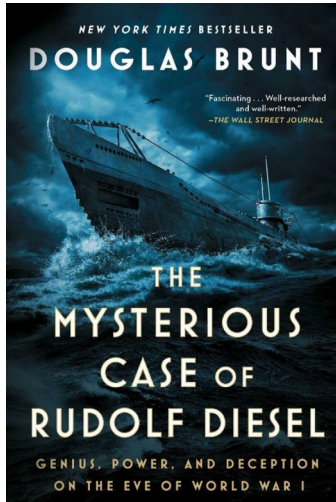


Book Review: Douglas Brunt's *The Mysterious Case of Rudolf Diesel: Genius, Power, and Deception on the Eve of World War 1*

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The Mysterious Case of Rudolf Diesel: Genius, Power, and Deception on the Eve of World War 1. Douglas Brunt. New York City, Atria Books, 2023. 384 pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781982169909.

Situated in the late 19th century and the years just before the First World War, *The Mysterious Case of Rudolf Diesel* presents a thrilling and memorable story of one of history's greatest inventors and his strange disappearance. German by blood, though raised in Paris for most of his youth, Rudolf Diesel, during the 1870s, set out at an early age, hoping to invent an engine that would revolutionize the world. However, his earth-shattering invention would rattle some of the world's most influential individuals, making his sudden disappearance in September 1913 even more intriguing and leading authors in the modern day to revisit this bewildering vanishing act.

Despite Rudolf Diesel's significant influence on our world, his name is often never associated with his engine, which transformed transportation. Douglas Brunt's ultimate goal with *The Mysterious Case of Rudolf Diesel* is to bring attention to the name Diesel, giving the reader a comprehensive biography of this underappreciated engineer. The biography sets to establish the background of this man's life leading up to his sudden disappearance on board the SS *Dresden* in 1913 and how his life could be interpreted in the handful of speculations behind why and how one of the world's most famous individuals could disappear with little trace. Brunt's years of devotion to this project, requir-

ing an untold number of hours in archives and museums has created a captivating book that presents enough new evidence regarding Diesel's disappearance to shake the original arguments that have withstood for over a century.

Rudolf Diesel's life began with modest beginnings, being the son of Bavarian immigrants in a less-than-desirable neighborhood in Paris. From a young age, Diesel demonstrated an intense curiosity toward his toys' inner workings, which inspired him to create blueprints of his own contraptions. Once the family was forced to flee Paris for the city of London during the height of the Franco-Prussian War, the teenager began his fascination with engines and how their effects could improve workers' quality of life worldwide. The early chapters of Brunt's book establish the young engineer's deep and obsessive desires that would dictate the rest of his life. Brunt paints an excellent picture of a fiercely intelligent man who aims to help others, where money and prestige only come after the good that a cleaner and more efficient engine could do for society. Despite his disadvantaged upbringing, Diesel cemented himself as one of Europe's best engineers as a young adult, quickly finding himself in positions of power over ice-making manufacturing plants in France and Germany.

Rudolf Diesel's work in the late 19th century led to the development of the Diesel engine, a more efficient and cleaner power source than other engines of its time. A creation of this magnitude set off a chain reaction from

both those who either sought to master the diesel engine for themselves or had hoped to destroy the engine before it had disastrous effects on their business. Brunt's writing skills shine bright when intertwining the stories of John D. Rockefeller and Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm, two immensely powerful individuals of the early 20th century who were directly affected by Diesel's new engine. The Kaiser set out to establish a navy that would challenge Britain on a world stage and found that the practicality offered by diesel engines could create a U-boat fleet that could bring the Royal Navy to its knees. However, when German military industrialists attempted to take the engine for themselves, Diesel refused to cooperate, leading to a lawsuit and forever souring the Kaiser's view of the inventor. Rockefeller additionally had antagonistic views of Rudolf Diesel, as Diesel's engine could run on various fuel sources, threatening to topple Rockefeller's monopoly on oil-derived engines. Brunt thoroughly interjects the rising tensions between Diesel and his antagonist throughout the book before 1913, lending readers to question the evidence given on whether these two men had any involvement in the disappearance.

The book's most interesting aspect arises in its third act, following Diesel's disappearance under strange circumstances. Brunt switches gears, writing from a biography to a murder mystery while utilizing all the background information he had presented in the previous chapters to fuel skepticism toward the many theories regarding Diesel's sudden departure. The

first of three popular theories about the mysterious disappearance revolves around Diesel accidentally falling from the SS *Dresden* during the night. However, Brunt disregards this theory as implausible given the circumstances. The second and most widely accepted theory from contemporary journalism from 1913 suggested the vanishing act to be suicide. However, Brunt additionally refutes this theory, as many others have done. The last of the three theories had been hinted at throughout the book, involving murder by either the agents of Rockefeller or the Kaiser. The book had given plenty of evidence throughout Rudolf Diesel's biography, hinting that the likely theory of the three would involve murder. However, Brunt surprises his readers by presenting a fourth option with fewer contradictions than the others.

Douglas Brunt's theory may be the most controversial and potentially unfavorable aspect of *The Mysterious Case of Rudolf Diesel*. Brunt suggests that Diesel may have faked his death and moved to Canada to work under

the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, to improve his engine designs for the Royal Navy out of sight of the Kaiser and his agents. This intriguing argument presents evidence from the disappearance that makes more sense than the theories above. However, some readers may need supplementary information to boost this claim, as there may need to be more evidence to persuade readers that the pacifist Rudolf Diesel had suddenly devoted his life to bolstering the world's most powerful navy. However, the limited evidence Brunt delivers makes sense, and additional research by scholars and historians could further support this argument.

The Mysterious Case of Rudolf Diesel provides an excellent life summary of one of the world's most important inventors. Rudolf Diesel may have been pleased to know that Douglas Brunt prioritized giving a thought-out summary of his life. The book belongs with other superb pieces of literature covering the lead-up to one of the world's deadliest conflicts.

About the Author

Clayton Willis recently graduated from Columbia University's MA program in European History, Politics, and Society. His historical interest in 19th and 20th-century European History has led to studies on the First and Second World Wars and the peacekeeping missions of organizations such as the European Union. After graduating, Clayton continues to serve as Senior Advisor for Columbia University's European Union Student Association, an association he was elected Vice President of in 2024. He is currently preparing to begin a PhD in the fall of 2025.