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"THE NIGHT OF THE LONG KNIVES: RECONSIDERED"

Master's Thesis

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April 26, 2022

The "Night of the Long Knives"—June 30, 1934, and the murderous days that followed is one of the more fascinating episodes in the history of the Third Reich. A year after taking power, multiple circles of influence challenged Nazi control. The National Socialists perceived enemies everywhere. At times the internal challenges were as significant as the external.

Much of the conflict centered on a myriad of perspectives on the nature and direction of the Nazi revolution. For Hitler, the revolution was complete, at least for now. His real revolution was a racial one, whose full dimensions only became manifest later. Hitler's relationship with conservative circles was complex and, in ways, almost codependent. For many conservatives, the revolution had gone too far. For some National Socialists, it never went far enough. Frustrations with the perceived gap between the expectations and the execution of the National Socialist revolution set the stage for a climax of forces and realignment in the Third Reich. The brutal way the Nazis faced this crisis in the summer of 1934 solidified Hitler's position as *Führer* without viable challenge.

The historiography of National Socialism, the Third Reich, the Second World War, and the Holocaust spans tens of thousands of volumes.¹ However, very few in this vast collection specifically focus on these critical events, and most are in German. Larry Eugene Jones argues that "American scholars have all but abandoned the writing of the political history of the Weimar Republic to their German colleagues."² The most notable book in English, *The Night of*

¹ Daniel Siemens, *Stormtroopers: A New History of Hitler's Brownshirts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 18.

² Larry Eugene Jones, ed., *The German Right in the Weimar Republic: Studies in the History of German Conservatism, Nationalism, and Antisemitism* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2014), 4.

the Long Knives, is almost fifty years old and criticized for its "minimal recourse to research in-depth and no scholarly apparatus."³

It is time to take a fresh look at these events and reconsider the context and nature of one of the most significant milestones of the Third Reich. The Nazis were very interested in the aftermath and interpretation of what appeared as a violent purge to many. They went to great lengths to ensure that their version of these events resonated. Researchers piece together circumstantial evidence as few documents remain. What evidence we do have is almost "entirely based on the testimony of those who initiated, were involved in, or acquiesced in the moves against the SA [*Sturmabteilungen*], predominantly police, military, and Nazi sources."⁴ As a result, the historian faces a limited source pool dominated by a National Socialist bias.

This study works to draw out the marginalized perspective lost in victor's history. The research begins in a dense historiographical environment to establish a context describing the significant forces at play. The framework of the project merges the ideal of modernization and revolution with the challenges of violence and demagoguery. With their origins in nineteenth-century modern German history, these concepts and ideas permeate the waning days of Weimar and the onset of the Third Reich. Understanding Hitler's manipulation of the powerful forces in that tenuous period requires a solid grounding in this complex field.

Accumulated research has stimulated several questions that stretch across multiple themes within the broader scope of the study. These topics are relevant and contribute to a

³ C.F. Latour, review of *The Night of the Long Knives*, by Max Gallo. *The American Political Science Review* Vol. 68 No.1 (March 1974), 300.

⁴ Eleanor Hancock, "The Purge of the SA Reconsidered: "An Old Putschist Trick"? *Central European History* 44 no.4 (December 2011): 675. The *Sturmabteilungen* (SA), literally the "storm detachments" or "storm sections" but better known as "storm troopers" or "Brownshirts" as defined by Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 22.

better understanding of this critical time in the Third Reich. The project will illuminate these ideas and draw them out in the narrative.

What type of revolution did the Nazis achieve, and what was the character of the socialist influence in the National Socialist movement? What was the military's role in these events, both in the final consolidation of power in the summer of 1934 and the *Machtergreifung* of January 1933? What was the nature of the resistance movement running out of Vice-Chancellor von Papen's office, and how effective or influential a role did it play? Were the conservatives the primary target of the "Röhm Purge," or was the SA a real threat to Hitler's leadership in the Third Reich?

Coming to terms with these questions and developing informed interpretations is the goal of this analysis. The methodological challenges that complicate any study are heightened for the modern German historian. Sensitivity and bias have obscured perspectives on these violent days in the summer of 1934 and the early months of the Third Reich. A balanced assessment must recognize the limitations the decision-makers faced and evaluate all aspects of the context.

Newspaper coverage will help draw out this context for Germans and the international community, providing press reactions to these events and what the public *could* have known. Peter Fritzsche broadens such an analysis in the framework of his specialty, *Alltagsgeschichte*, the history of the everyday. Combining these elements will expand and deepen our portrait from the grassroots perspective and that of the decision-maker. A better understanding of these events, pushing beyond the obscuration intended by the Nazis, is a service to the victims and brings us closer to deriving critical structures and methods for further study.

The Third Reich has fascinated and confounded historians for decades. Benjamin Hett argues that "Hitler's Germany is unique among all regimes in human history in at least one respect: serious historians are unanimous in judging it a catastrophe with no redeeming features."⁵ What was it about the Germans that could draw them into an idea and vision with such disastrous results? How *unique* was Germany, and what were the sources and character of this peculiarity? Before we can come to terms with the underpinnings of the events in late June and early July 1934, the study must draw out an interpretation of these critical questions and the birth of the Third Reich in January 1933.

To truly understand the Third Reich and Modern Germany, as Hans-Ulrich Wehler would argue, we must reach farther back to the nineteenth century.⁶ I will provide background and establish context for the events of the summer of 1934 through the prism of David Blackbourn's confrontation with the *Sonderweg*, specifically focusing on the analysis of Weimar Germany by Detlev Peukert.⁷ In *The Weimar Republic*, Peukert draws out the distinctive character of the Weimar era and its relationship to the longer-term continuities of German history.⁸ Peukert refines and builds on Wehler's and Blackbourn's interpretations, describing what was "special" about Germany during Weimar as "the sudden and uncompromising way modernization arrived and the simultaneous presence of several different elements of crisis."⁹

⁵Benjamin Carter Hett, *The Death of Democracy: Hitler's Rise to Power and the Downfall of the Weimar Republic* (New York, NY: St. Martins Griffin, 2018), 8.

⁶ Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *The German Empire 1871-1918*, (New York, NY: Berg, 1985).

⁷ David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth Century Germany* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1984).

⁸Detlev J.K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, trans. Richard Deveson (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1993), *xii*.

⁹*Ibid.*, 281.

In this respect, Peukert is an appropriate guide to our contextual research effort, explicitly addressing the origins of the Third Reich. In his view, Germany's first experiment in democracy was crucially influenced and ultimately defeated because the political system forfeited its legitimacy and ceased to function when faced with deep-seated economic, social, and cultural modernization crises.¹⁰ The initial promise of social reform enshrined in the Weimar constitution ran afoul of a cycle of financial problems. These crises exacerbate anti-capitalist and anti-globalist arguments by enemies of the Republic described by Benjamin Hett.¹¹ The regime's inability to navigate the economic challenges and deliver benefits undermined its support.

The effect of this deterioration follows the breakdown and segmentation of liberal political consensus and the developing crisis in socialist working-class society. Conflicts within the organized working class between the Communists and Socialists limited their ability to mount a common front against fascism. The disunity of the German Right also provided an opportunity for exploitation by the National Socialists "every bit as important as a prerequisite for the establishment of the Third Reich as the schism on the socialist Left or the fragmentation of the political middle."¹² The splintering of these groups rendered them ineffective as a political force. Peukert argues that "the electoral decline of the liberals was the decisive event of Weimar politics, because it undermined the pro-republican center from within."¹³

¹⁰Ibid., 81.

¹¹ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 10.

¹² Jones, *The German Right in the Weimar Republic*, 2.

¹³ Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 210.

As the Republic's enemies assumed control, a dialectic developed between authoritarian politics and the "disintegration of power."¹⁴ The breakdown provided the opportunity to remove all the countervailing sources of authority. The Reich President was the sole focus of legitimacy, and his entourage was not a reliable custodian. "As the authoritarian tide advanced, so the crumbling of the power of professional politicians accelerated."¹⁵

German society in the early 1930s was more mobile and politicized, and a move toward authoritarianism was not possible without a broad basis of electoral support.¹⁶ The old élites had destroyed the Republic, but their ultimate success depended on the Nazis' electoral support. Hitler had no interest in being tamed by the old élites, and they had no interest in turning over leadership to the Nazis after just destroying Weimar.

Peukert is also very clear in delineating the uniqueness of Weimar Germany. This uniqueness was one of degree rather than kind—Germany experienced more intensely the crisis of modernization experienced everywhere.¹⁷ There was a sense of deep-seated unease and disorientation. "The hallmark of the period was uncertainty."¹⁸ Peukert outlines a convergence of factors that produced an all-embracing crisis for Germans with no escape. The modernization process in Germany took "a more brutal, uncompromising" form.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid., 263. Although he does not make it explicit, I think Peukert is crediting K.D. Bracher with this analysis. K.D. Bracher, *Die Auflösung der Weimarer Republik* (1955), 6th edn, Königstein, 1978.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 264.

¹⁷ Andreas Killen, email message to author, March 28, 2022.

¹⁸ Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 275.

¹⁹ Peukert used statistics of suicide to provide dramatic evidence of Germans helpless state of mind: In 1932, there were 85 suicides per million inhabitants in Great Britain, 133 in the United States, and 155 in France. In Germany, there were **260**; Ibid., 280.

Peukert provides a persuasive argument for the unique German experience that was an intensified version of the norm. A portrait not obscured by its peculiarity but rather illuminated by its familiarity. An answer to the dominant question of Modern Germany and how the Germans arrived at the events of 1933. Peukert argues that what was "special" about Germany between 1918 and 1932 was a unique conjuncture that demonstrates how easily the process of modernization, so often considered a typical experience, can tip over into catastrophe.²⁰

Rounding out the context and background for these events requires us to understand dominant interwar societal conflicts that underpinned and influenced the end of the Republic and the early months of the Third Reich. There was never a consensus in Germany on why the First World War was lost and how to respond to the postwar settlement. Germany's democratic politicians accommodated to the world order while rebellion was the path of the nationalist right.²¹ Weimar Germany was consumed with this political conflict, and the National Socialists were the most skilled at manipulating this protest. Benjamin Hett argues that "Nazism was a particularly savage nation-specific reaction to globalization."²²

Analysis of the German press provides another window into the unfolding events and perceptions that enrich our narrative. Newspapers were the predominant means of mass communication in the 1920s and 1930s in much of Europe and the United States.²³ In Germany, a fragmented and competing press exacerbated the divisions, uncertainty, and

²⁰ Ibid., 281.

²¹ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 33.

²² Ibid., 128.

²³ Bernhard Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3; Kylie Galbraith, *The British Press and Nazi Germany: Reporting from the Reich, 1933-9* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 1.

ideological politics that Peukert and Hett discussed and contributed directly to the further delegitimization of the Weimar Republic. The press underwrote a parliamentary culture of antagonism that amplified the perceived threat of civil war. With a media image of an indecisive government, the press presentation turned the Nazis into an attractive choice for voters desperate for decisive action.²⁴

Our narrative unfolds towards a fuller understanding of the multiple perspectives on the "Nazi revolution" within this context of uncertainty and conflict. Attributing a revolutionary nature to National Socialism is not uncontroversial. For some, crediting the Nazis with achieving a revolution misrepresented the essence of what is commonly viewed as a coercive totalitarian, genocidal state. However, "a refusal to acknowledge the immense revolutionary energies released by National Socialism bars one from understanding the rise of Nazism as a mass movement."²⁵

As discussed, Hitler's revolutionary focus was racial, and its full realization was still years away. The events of the "Night of the Long Knives" finally resolved divisions within the party and between the party and the SA on various interpretations of the goals of a National Socialist revolution. The character and evolution of these critical ideas, both natural and idealized, resonate through all aspects of this crucial milestone. The expectations of social leveling based on class resentment highlight some of the frustrations driving internal divisions while clarifying the perceived threat by traditional elites of the SA's rise.²⁶ Central to this study is

²⁴ Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic*, 12.

²⁵ Walter Hofer, "Fifty Years On: Historians of the Third Reich," *Journal of Contemporary History* 21, no. 2 (April 1986), 238.

²⁶ Andreas Killen, email message to author, January 10, 2022.

understanding the resolution of the inherent conflicts stemming from egalitarian aspirations and revolutionary change, particularly after the Nazis attained power.

The mass National Socialist political mobilization executed and stimulated by these ideas is at the core of this dynamic political transformation. It is difficult for some to credit the Nazis with the persuasive nature of their national renovation. Yet that nature drove the Nazi's mobilization of Germany's most socially diverse party on January 30, 1933.²⁷ The success of this diversity rested on the emphasis of the socialist and workers aspect of the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP)*.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt analyzes the rise of "class-thinking" and "race-thinking" in the modern world. In her view, these ideologies had a tremendous power of persuasion—persuasion not possible without an appeal to experiences or desires in meeting immediate political needs.²⁸ The Nazi's attempt to resolve industrial society's social and ideological conflicts centered on their efforts to bridge the transition between these thought systems. They had to win over industrial workers who generally supported the parties of the Left by stressing the primacy of national over class identity. Coercion was insufficient to achieve an ideal *Volksgemeinschaft*, or people's community; the German worker needed to abandon his focus on class and be persuaded the National Socialists would better meet their immediate political needs.

From the very beginning, the inclusion of 'workers' in the National Socialist German Workers' Party set them apart. It gave them "cachet among young Germans for whom the icons

²⁷ Peter Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 205.

²⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, (New York, NY: Meridian Books, 1958), 159.

of worker and soldier symbolized the wartime contributions of ordinary Germans."²⁹ Many workers found the Nazi vision of national solidarity, economic prosperity, and the consolidation of a greater Germany compelling. As a result, nearly one-third of Nazis were workers, one of every ten former Social Democrats.³⁰ The extent of National Socialist support amongst the working classes, as documented by Fritzsche, was long underestimated or misunderstood by earlier generations of scholars, particularly those from the Left.³¹ Before taking power in January 1933, the Nationalist Socialist program to insert social reform into a national frame had already attracted millions of workers. National reassembly—the critical motion and appeal of National Socialism rested on a vision of a nation that recognized and enfranchised the people based on what they did for the *Volk* rather than who they were according to status scales.³²

Even with the start of the Third Reich, the persuasive attractiveness of National Socialist ideas continued to resonate. In *Hitler's First Hundred Days*, Peter Fritzsche draws on newspaper accounts, memoirs, and diaries to illuminate the street-level view of the first hundred days after Hitler was appointed chancellor. Through the prism of average Germans, Fritzsche emphasizes the contingent nature of the Third Reich's nurturing of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. To highlight the complex interplay of coercion and consent, he demonstrates that the Nazi rise to power was not preordained but a series of negotiated accommodations where Germans came to embrace the birth of the Third Reich. Fritzsche argued:

²⁹ Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis*, 201.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Andreas Killen, email message to author, March 28, 2022.

³² Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis*, 231.

To explore consent instead of coercion means to engage with the social descriptions of collective life the National Socialists themselves applied to modern politics: the importance of will and belief and the credibility of concepts such as national community, the people, and race.³³

To best understand the character of the Nazi revolution and its persuasive nature, one must return to the origins of the NSDAP in the 1920s. The Nationalist Socialist movement sprang from two distinct roots: the party and the national defense leagues, two organizations with very different social backgrounds.³⁴ The German Workers Party was a small group of politically-minded civilians that Hitler had met in Munich in 1920 at the beginning of his political career. The national defense leagues were radically nationalist formations consisting of mostly war veterans organized on military lines for political purposes. The man who had the strongest influence and clearest political ideas within the Bavarian national defense leagues was Ernst Röhm, a native of Munich and a Captain in the Reichswehr.³⁵

Ernst Röhm was impressed with Hitler's oratorical talent, as was almost everyone, and provided Hitler with his most valuable military and political contacts.³⁶ Röhm was the dominant player in their early relationship, in control of thousands of disciplined followers and therefore in a position of absolute power and influence. Many considered him the party's patron, promoter, and protector; Siemens thought this characterization exaggerated and difficult to

³³ Peter Fritzsche, *Hitler's First Hundred Days: When Germans Embraced the Third Reich* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2020), 185.

³⁴ Hermann Mau, "The 'Second Revolution'—June 30, 1934," *Republic to Reich: The Making of the Nazi Revolution*, edited by Hajo Holborn, (New York, NY: Random House, 1972), 225.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Joachim Fest, *Hitler*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston (New York, NY: Random House, 1973), 128.

assess.³⁷ Nonetheless, Röhm's place in the movement was significant and unparalleled in Hitler's view. Hitler even went as far as to suggest when the history of the rise of the National Socialist movement was written that Röhm would have to be remembered as the second man after himself.³⁸

It was Röhm's idea to combine the two organizations, reorganized as the National Socialist German Workers' Party, amalgamated with what became the National Socialist "Sport Sections" or "Storm Battalions" (Sport- or *Sturmabteilung*, SA).³⁹ From the start, Hitler and Röhm had different conceptions of the appropriate function and command status of the SA. These conflicting perspectives were a continual wedge representing competition for resources and influence between the party and the SA. Periodically these internal differences challenged the efficacy of the movement at its core.

Hitler considered himself exclusively a political figure. The SA was to be a party force organized on paramilitary lines and subordinate to the political leadership, in essence to himself. He took the word 'soldier' in a wholly figurative sense: the SA men "were to be soldiers of the Nationalist Socialist idea."⁴⁰ Hitler recognized the attractive nature of this type of organization and its ability to have it work alongside the party to achieve his political aims.

Röhm, on the other hand, was a soldier. He envisioned the SA developing into an independent underground auxiliary army that would enable the Reichswehr to evade the provisions of Versailles.⁴¹ Röhm never fully accepted the idea of the SA as subordinate to the

³⁷ Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 70. He specifically challenges earlier interpretations by Eleanor Hancock, *Ernst Röhm: Hitler's SA Chief of Staff* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 1.

³⁸ Mau, "Second Revolution," 232.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Fest, *Hitler*, 230.

party. In his memoirs, Röhm states: "I demand the primacy of the soldier over the politician."⁴² This attitude characterized his relationship with Hitler and distinguished Röhm from the loyal sycophants in the party.

In 1925, Hitler's differences with Röhm led to a breakdown. After the failure of his November Putsch, Hitler was committed to a legal seizure of power. This inevitably slower process of generating votes conflicted with Röhm's interest in direct governmental attack and shattered public order. Hitler's masterful management of these two sides of the coin would be critical to the Nazi seizure of power.

However, Hitler felt betrayed by Röhm's attempts to draw the SA apart and force him into a subordinate role. Röhm was an excellent, influential friend, and Hitler owed much of his political career to his support. Nonetheless, Röhm was having difficulty fitting into Hitler's new program, and the two parted ways. A telling note to their friendship is included in a departing letter to Hitler: "I take this opportunity, in memory of the great and trying times we have been through together, to thank you warmly for your comradeship and to ask you not to deprive me of your personal friendship."⁴³

Before this split, Hitler had offered the skillful party organizer Gregor Strasser the position of party leader in the north. This appointment was a significant addition to the movement and, in one respect, helped offset the loss of the SA leader. Strasser was another strong force like Röhm, a figure of substance during this period of reorganization "prepared to

⁴² Ernst Röhm, *Geschichte eines Hochverrätters*, 5th ed., Munich, 1934, 349, quoted in Mau, "Second Revolution," 227.

⁴³ Fest, *Hitler*, 231.

take an independent line against Hitler and the Munich leadership."⁴⁴ He would eventually suffer the same fate at the hands of Hitler, but for now his movement represented an unsolicited ideological alternative.

Strasser was more of a socialist than a nationalist, and he took the anti-capitalist planks in the party program quite seriously.⁴⁵ The driving force of the socialist nature of the party has its roots with the Strasser brothers in conjunction with Joseph Goebbels. Strasser was in the newspaper and publishing business with his journalist brother Otto. Goebbels was a young intellectual and Gregor's "most important associate."⁴⁶ The Strasser working group ideas supported the nationalization of key industries and an alliance with Russia in solidarity and opposition to a capitalist West.

A particular program with these North German Nazis was put forward in a magazine, *Nationalsozialistische Briefe* ("National Socialist Letters"). Countering the ideological dominance of the party in the South, almost everything "held sacred in Munich" was challenged.⁴⁷ Goebbels was the editor; and in response to a letter from a Berlin reader cautioning against a Nationalist Socialist Party "of radicalized bourgeois" afraid of the words "worker and Socialist," he responded: "We are socialists; we are enemies, mortal enemies, of the present-day capitalist economic system with its exploitation of the economically weak, with its injustice in wages . . . we are resolved to annihilate this system despite everything."⁴⁸ Their program also challenged

⁴⁴ Robin Lenman, review of *Gregor Strasser and the Rise of Nazism*, by Peter D. Stachura. *History* 69, no. 226 (1984): 359.

⁴⁵ Volker Ullrich, *Hitler: Ascent 1889-1939*, translated by Jefferson Chase (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2017), 192.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴⁷ Fest, *Hitler*, 233.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 234.

the party's foreign policy position, advocating a closer tactical alliance with the Soviet Union opposing the Western Allies, and championing the national independence movements in India and Egypt.⁴⁹

Hitler in no way rejected capitalism, and in the framework of Hannah Arendt, he was focused on racial struggle not class conflict. When he finally addressed this internal party conflict, he dismissed their ideas completely. Hitler categorically rejected any agreement with Russia; Germany would smash Bolshevism and "reorient to towards the east and colonize the area as it had in the Middle Ages."⁵⁰ There would be no questioning of private property. He was still gaining his confidence as party leader, but he successfully stifled this threat to the party's program from the north and solidified his role as its sole interpreter. It was the last time there was any significant debate about the party's primary political orientation.⁵¹

Hitler was able to smooth over the conflict with Gregor and Goebbels with the skillful use of conciliatory personal gestures.⁵² He recognized the political talents of Gregor Strasser and Goebbels and worked his magic to divide the two and optimize their value to the party. He was especially successful in converting Goebbels, who pledged absolute loyalty: "Yes, this is a man I can serve. This is what the creator of the Third Reich looks like . . . I am knocked sideways."⁵³ Hitler coopted Gregor Strasser with the position of propaganda director in Munich. Still, Gregor was not as easily swayed by the Hitler cult and retained complete

⁴⁹ Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 88.

⁵⁰ Ullrich, *Hitler*, 196.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁵² Fest, *Hitler*, 242.

⁵³ Ullrich, *Hitler*, 198.

independence from the Führer. The party transitioned from provincial to national politics with Gregor's organizational skills and Goebbels as propaganda minister.

Nonetheless, Hitler could not eliminate the socialist leanings of many in the party; Otto Strasser would continue to dissent for years. In an analysis of the May 1928 elections, Otto complained that the party had failed to catch the ear of the masses and failed to make any inroads into proletarian circles:

In fact, the party's following consisted chiefly of lower-grade white-collar workers, artisans, some farm groups, and young people inclined to romantic protest—the advance guard of the classes of the German population who were especially susceptible to the rousing music of "an ordinary military band."⁵⁴

These differences with Otto finally came to a head in the summer of 1930 when Hitler recognized that the party's internal ideological disagreements would be harder to conceal on the national stage.

There are parallels between the way that Hitler negotiated the break with Röhm and the way that he addressed the remaining dissent from the Left. As he gained more confidence in his position as party leader, he was less tolerant of challenges to his hierarchical structure with himself at the apex. Otto Strasser considered himself the "repository of true National Socialism," and like Röhm advocated aggressive "catastrophe tactics" against the Weimar Government.⁵⁵ He wanted to put the idea before the leader; in his view the leader should serve the idea. At a time when "almost every leading National Socialist had his own National

⁵⁴ Fest, *Hitler*, 256.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 278.

Socialism," the Führer was not interested in a democratic solution.⁵⁶ Hitler could no longer tolerate Otto's challenge to his political leadership. He made one final effort to retain this talented journalist and persuade him to accept the position of Reich press secretary.

For two days at the end of May 1930, the two debated their varying interpretations of the term "socialism" in the party program. Otto accused Hitler of "choking off revolutionary socialism in the interest of keeping the party legal and . . . cooperating with the mainstream right-wing parties."⁵⁷ Hitler, quite agitated, responded:

I am a socialist . . . But what you mean by socialism is nothing but crass Marxism. The masses of workers only want *panem et circenses*. They have no comprehension of any sort of ideals. . . There can only be one revolution, the revolution of race: there is no economic, political, or social revolution. The fundamental struggle is always the same: the struggle of a racially inferior lower class against a dominant high race. The day the higher race forgets this iron law, it has lost the battle.⁵⁸

After more excited discussion Strasser posed what to him was the critical question: If the Nazis took power, would the means of production remain unchanged? Hitler replied: "But of course. Do you think I am so mad as to destroy the economy?"⁵⁹ Strasser shot back: "If you wish to preserve the capitalist regime . . . you have no right to talk about socialism."⁶⁰ The conflict continued for a few weeks, and Hitler called for Otto Strasser and his followers to be removed, but before they could be expelled they resigned, with a July 4th headline: "The socialists are leaving the NSDAP."

⁵⁶ Baldur von Schirach, *Ich glaubte an Hitler* (Hamburg, 1967), 87 quoted in Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris* (New York, NY: Norton, 1998), 697, n. 55; and Kershaw, *Hitler*, 329.

⁵⁷ Ullrich, *Hitler*, 227.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵⁹ Fest, *Hitler*, 280.

⁶⁰ Otto Strasser, *Hitler and I*, trans. Gwenda David and Eric Mosbacher (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1940), 112.

Gregor had already broken with his brother. Otto's tendency to act on his own had "fully destroyed their relationship."⁶¹ It was not just Gregor; not more than a few thousand followed Otto into his new organization, the Fighting Society of Revolutionary Socialists. Gregor Strasser's ideological attitudes changed "as he became less a "socialist" and more of what might be termed a populist or neoconservative."⁶² For most National Socialists, it was the Führer not the program they found so attractive. The departure of Otto Strasser ended once and for all the sole conflict over principles within the Nazi party.⁶³ "Now it was clear: the Leader and the Idea were one and the same."⁶⁴ Hitler had successfully removed the final ideological challenges within the party. His internal challenges would continue, centered more on the stormtroopers.

In the end, the SA, not the party, "shaped the style of the National Socialist struggle for power."⁶⁵ Where in 1925, Röhm's departure was softened by Gregor Strasser's recruitment; now Otto Strasser's departure was softened by Röhm's return. Hitler would paper over his differences in his pursuit of power and reconcile with Röhm. By the end of 1930, he was more confident in the security of his leadership role, and his gratitude to the man who made his rise possible was more significant than his fear of him as a rival.⁶⁶

Hitler returned him to his leadership position in the SA, and Röhm did not disappoint. He tripled the organization's size to an army of 300,000 by January 1933; in the next year, it

⁶¹ Ullrich, *Hitler*, 228-229.

⁶² Peter D. Stachura, *Gregor Strasser and the Rise of Nazism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 109.

⁶³ Fest, *Hitler*, 282.

⁶⁴ Kershaw, *Hitler*, 329.

⁶⁵ Mau, "Second Revolution," 228.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

would grow to more than three million by incorporating competing paramilitary organizations. The SA was Hitler's "irrefutable argument in his final struggle for power."⁶⁷

Röhm and his SA leaders were undoubtedly in support of the socialistic and constructive elements of the Nazi revolution. However, Röhm was more of a rebel than a social revolutionary.⁶⁸ He was a genuine monarchist who created an SA leadership socially distanced from the rank and file. He believed in improving the hard-working conditions but rejected the efficacy of strikes and class hatred. In line with National Socialist anti-capitalist and anti-globalist sentiment, Röhm argued the workers' poor conditions were due to the peace settlement and the Dawes Plan.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, the rank-and-file SA had a working-class element, with a cruder soldier's communism desperate to solve the social problem of so many unemployed storm troopers. In 1931 and 1932, when jobless numbers in Germany rose to over six million, more than half of the stormtroopers were out of work, in some regions as high as 80 percent.⁷⁰ In that light, ideological affiliation was not the driving force in the growing numbers of the SA, but the organization still faced ideological differences that challenged cohesion. Mainly in the industrial centers of the north, stormtroopers became associated with the 'socialist' left-wing of the NSDAP led by the Strasser brothers, Goebbels, and the Berlin SA-Führer Walter Stennes.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Ibid., 229.

⁶⁸ Hancock, *Ernst Röhm*, 87.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 91.

⁷⁰ Theodor Geiger, *Die soziale Schichtung des deutschen Volkes: Soziographischer Versuch auf statistischer Grundlage* (Stuttgart: Enke, 1932), 110-111, quoted in Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 87.

⁷¹ Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 88.

Stennes represented a similar rejection of middle-class values and ideals that dominated the Strasser brothers' party platform conflicts with Hitler. As with most of the more radical groups in Germany during this period, he was particularly critical of Western liberalism:

The bourgeois, consumed by the Western spirit of liberalism and infecting all sections of the population with whom he comes into contact (embourgeoisement of the working-class movement!), is almost a greater enemy to us than the political West, under whose imperialism we find ourselves. This is because he joins us as a fellow countryman and begins to weaken the front from within.⁷²

This wing focused on recruiting the young proletariat and parts of the impoverished middle classes tying together national renewal and social revolution. Although Hitler had successfully stifled much of the more "socialist" rhetoric and impetus from the Strasser brothers and the party, their influence continued to resonate in a rapidly growing SA.

SA northern leaders felt a need for greater financial contributions to help support their work, claiming it was the SA, not the party bureaucracy, that most furthered NSDAP aims.⁷³

Stennes was especially critical of Hitler's legalistic focus that prioritized winning elections over the material well-being of his Stormtroopers. In a bitter letter to Röhm, he argued that rather than indulging in electioneering:

It is much more important to undertake measures to relieve the economic position of the SA. In Berlin there are Regiments containing 67 percent unemployed. In Breslau, a Company could not turn out for inspection—in frost and snow—because it completely lacked footwear.⁷⁴

⁷² Bundesarchiv Koblenz (BA), NS26/597 (NSDAP Hauptarchiv), *Arbeiter Bauern Soldaten. Kampfblatt der Nationalsozialisten*, A.B.S. No. 3, Berlin, 18 April 1931, pp. 1-2; BA, NS26/83. 'Wie es zur Stennes-Aktion kam!', herausgegeben von Walter Stennes, p. 8, quoted in Conan Fischer, *Stormtroopers* (London: George Allen & Unwin Publishers, 1983), 166.

⁷³ Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 88.

⁷⁴ BA, NS26/325. *Abschrift* 1161/31 St/v.B. gez. Stennes, quoted in Fischer, *Stormtroopers*, 46-47.

Stennes also pushed for SA leaders to be given promising seats on the party's electoral lists in the forthcoming elections. As a result of his failure to persuade the party leadership to accede to this demand, the SA's supreme commander, Salomon von Pfeffer, resigned on August 12, 1930.⁷⁵ These differences lay at the heart of a series of violent clashes within the movement, two of the most notable were led by Stennes in August 1930 and March 1931.

The first clash was instigated by a reaction to a story by Goebbels in the Nazi *Angriff* in which he criticized the "giant income" of Communist "*Bonzen*" (big wigs).⁷⁶ The Communist *Welt am Abend* responded with attacks on Goebbels' considerable personal income, intensifying already existing tensions within the Berlin SA.⁷⁷ Frustrated stormtroopers led by Stennes attacked the local NSDAP headquarters in August 1930, demanding the immediate resignation of Goebbels and other so-called "big-wigs." Hitler assumed leadership of the SA and intervened personally, promising better pay and more influence. Just two weeks before the Reichstag elections, this was sensational news for many anti-Nazi papers and an embarrassing window into internal conflict in the movement.⁷⁸

The SS (*Schutzstaffel*) was directly involved in this internal conflict between the party and the SA, as SS guard units protected the Berlin party headquarters. Further clashes between the party and the SA in Augsburg in September 1930, Dachau in October 1930, and Hanau in February 1931 required local party leadership to be protected by the SS.⁷⁹ In the course of this

⁷⁵ Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler: A Life* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 117.

⁷⁶ Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic*, 159.

⁷⁷ *Welt am Abend* (WaA), 185, 11 August 1930: "Goebbels Rieseneinkünfte;" WaA, 189, 15 August 1930: "Goebbels Rieseneinkünfte. Goebbels berichtet—wir berichtigen Dr. Goebbels;" WaA, 193, 20 August 1930: "Goebbels Rieseneinkünfte," quoted in Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic*, 159.

⁷⁸ Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic*, 159.

⁷⁹ Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 117.

crisis, the SS projected itself as the loyal counterweight to the SA, most especially the SA leadership. According to the official story from SS leadership, Hitler coined the motto "Your honor means loyalty" ("*Deine Ehre heißt Treue*") after the Stennes putsch. Significantly, the moral precept chosen by the SS as its motto refers to an internal party conflict.⁸⁰

Hitler was determined to curb the influence of Stennes and his followers and repair divisions between the party and SA. He used a presidential emergency decree aimed at political riots that threatened to outlaw the NSDAP to depose Stennes and his deputy in March 1931. This resulted in the second Stennes revolt that was again resolved by a promise of allocated fixed budgets by the new SA leader Röhm. Stennes left the party with about 500 stormtroopers—roughly one-third of Berlin's SA—merging later with another small group led by Otto Strasser that left the party a year before, as discussed previously.⁸¹ Neither organization generated much support, and the movement weakened. For the most part, Hitler could contain the unrest in the SA and channel their dissatisfaction into "aggressive and increasingly violent attacks on his political adversaries."⁸²

The SA was filled with soldiers who returned home from the First World War with activism "directed at destroying the existing order so that the eternal verity of *Volk* or nation could triumph."⁸³ Hitler was aligned with these views, and the SA was quite successful as his shock troops in the streets helping to generate the chaos and fear critical to the Nazi seizure of power. However, Hitler was committed to a strategy of the legal takeover of power. After he

⁸⁰ Ibid., 118.

⁸¹ Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 89.

⁸² Ibid., 90.

⁸³ George L. Moose, "Introduction: The Genesis of Fascism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 1, no. 1 (January 1966), quoted in Hofer, "Fifty Years On," 239.

became chancellor, the divisions between Röhm's SA leadership and Hitler moved to the forefront.

Hitler owed his victory to Röhm and the SA, but what was to become of them after the Nazis seized power? Massive celebratory demonstrations and torchlit processions demonstrated the growing influence—and for some, the potential threat of the SA. They had always assumed that coming to power would remove all constraints and accountability from their activities. They made a claim of vengeance and a requirement to destroy "Marxism." As Röhm and Göring conveyed: "You can impose the greatest hardships upon us, you can let us starve, but no one—not even our *Führer*—will be able to deprive us of the right of taking revenge!"⁸⁴

Their brutalities were meant to "give the revolution its true tone."⁸⁵ For several months they harassed and terrorized, killing more than 500 and sweeping an estimated 100,000 into concentration camps. Hitler sent out the message to rein in these forces. The SA was becoming the scourge of the revolution, and it was beyond his control.

Hitler's tactics of legal revolution made possible a relatively bloodless seizure of power. It was based on a policy of deception, pseudo-legality, latent terror, and measured localized actions.⁸⁶ It also left in place much of the old guard who could infiltrate the regime and challenge the revolution by adaption. This is what grated at Röhm and the SA leadership as they watched Hitler manipulate the remaining power centers in his quest for complete control.

⁸⁴ Colonel von Bredow's notes of 26 July 1932: *Nachlaß Ferdinand von Bredow, no 1. fos. 47-48, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv*, quoted in F.L. Carsten, *The Reichswehr and Politics 1918-1933* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), 370.

⁸⁵ Fest, *Hitler*, 401.

⁸⁶ Mau, "Second Revolution," 233.

Röhm could not conceive of a revolution without an insurrectionary phase, a storming of the citadels of the former powers, culminating in the classical "night of the long knives."⁸⁷ Röhm's and the SA's "second revolution" directly challenged the dominant conservative power bases—big business and the military—that Hitler planned to cooperate with to consolidate power and complete his vision of a greater Germany. Röhm's ability to accurately interpret the prevailing political conditions regularly fell short, especially after taking power. Röhm had not adjusted to the realities of politics and did not fully recognize his changed and diminished status with Hitler.⁸⁸

Their differences were more than just a function of method. Hitler understood that his detractors called for him to abandon his devious ways of cold revolution and "put through the unfulfilled demands of the National Socialist program—regardless of the cost in blood."⁸⁹ This was the demand of the "second revolution," and Hitler was not concerned as much about the horrors of its execution. Hitler did not trust the aims. Röhm understood this too late. He would not have openly preached the "second revolution" if he had not been convinced his dreams were identical to Hitler's.⁹⁰

It was their old disagreement popping up again. Röhm wanted a prominent role for the SA, to replace the Reichswehr and become the revolutionary army of the Reich. Hitler wanted nothing but a subordinate political role for this growing force of more than three million men.

⁸⁷ Fest, *Hitler*, 450.

⁸⁸ Hancock, *Ernst Röhm*, 81.

⁸⁹ Mau, "Second Revolution," 233.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

In his view, the SA would be just a militia primarily used for defense. Only the Reichswehr could fill the offensive role Hitler envisioned for the greater Reich.

Hitler had no intention of subordinating himself to the Reichswehr any more than he did the SA. The Nazis learned their lesson when they ran afoul of the Reichswehr in the failure of the November Putsch. Hitler was not directly confronting the military again. However, he recognized without complete control of the army, he could not control the state. At first, Hitler would have to overcome the dominant political forces of the military to seize power. After gaining power, he would have to maneuver to subordinate the Reichswehr.

The way Hitler manipulates these forces and events to achieve this position further enhances the relevance and interest of this period. What is most remarkable is how the Reichswehr leadership's policies undermined the foundations of its power. They chose not to support the organizations willing to protect the Republic. The dominant position of the Reichswehr stemmed from the weakness of the government. Their autonomy ended when they contributed to that government's destruction and stood idle as a strong government supplanted it.⁹¹

The Prussian Army, with its strong roots tracing back for centuries before unification, had always played a dominant role in the state. It was a solid conservative force supporting the monarchy and battling all liberal attempts to control its autonomy. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, German history is characterized by one long constitutional struggle for

⁹¹ Carsten, *The Reichswehr and Politics*, 405.

reform, liberalism, and democracy.⁹² The army played a critical role in ensuring that the opponents of these efforts were more successful.

The army's outsized influence drove the country and the world to war. Military defeat destroyed the monarchial system it sought to maintain. The experience of the First World War brought to the forefront the failure of German civil society to fully embrace the requirements of total war and to provide the proper place for the military within the community at large. Military war preparations clashed with the maintenance of civil order under the conditions of the Republic and exacerbated existing social conflicts.⁹³ "It was the logic of a professionally-inspired rearmament, within the specific social and economic context of Weimar Germany, which played a cardinal role in determining the military's posture in the politics of the Republic."⁹⁴

The revolutionary disturbances that plagued the Republic made them dependent on a Reichswehr dissatisfied with the constraints of Versailles. The government was in the impossible position of relying for protection against dissident groups upon an army that was "potentially the most dangerous dissident group in Germany."⁹⁵ Hitler took full advantage of these circumstances to obtain at least tacit approval from the military for his ascent to power in January 1933.

⁹² Gordon Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640-1945*, first paperback edition with corrections (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1964), xiv.

⁹³ Carsten, *The Reichswehr and Politics*, 91.

⁹⁴ Michael Geyer, "Professionals and Junkers: German Rearmament and Politics in the Weimar Republic," in *Social Change and Political Development in Weimar Germany*, ed. Richard Bessel and E.J. Feuchtwanger (London: Croom Helm, 1981), 17.

⁹⁵ Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army*, xviii.

There is no period in German history in which army representatives intervened more frequently and more directly in the country's internal politics.⁹⁶ General Kurt von Schleicher, in 1930 the chief of the newly created Ministerial Bureau of the Reichswehr, would be the chief protagonist in this power struggle with the Nazis. As Hitler was to demonstrate, there was no period in which the results of this intervention were more unfortunate.

Schleicher had an intimate relationship with Hindenburg, making him a key figure, mainly in the background, of the political scene. No Chancellor or cabinet minister could be appointed or dismissed without his consent.⁹⁷ Schleicher claimed to speak for the army, with some justification, as the top echelon of the army command were his friends and disciples.⁹⁸ He was no friend to the Weimar Republic and was intent on "freeing Germany from the anarchy of party politics and the dangers of parliamentary instability."⁹⁹

Schleicher did not take Hitler seriously, but he respected the broad popularity of his movement. He considered the "National Socialists much more dangerous than the Communists because they hide their revolutionary tendencies under a national cloak."¹⁰⁰ The perception of the Communists as the real threat was one with deep roots based on their relationship with the Soviets and their doctrinal opposition to capitalism. These sentiments were successfully stoked by anti-Communist press organizations who helped convince Germans that the National Socialists were the only viable counter to a growing Communist terror.¹⁰¹ The Nazis often

⁹⁶ Ibid., 428.

⁹⁷ Fest, *Hitler*, 298.

⁹⁸ Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army*, 455.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 453.

¹⁰⁰ Kurt von Schleicher, "Notizen für die Kommandeurbesprechung, n.d.: Nachlaß Schleicher, no.35 Bundesarchiv Koblenz (autumn of 1929) quoted in Carsten, *The Reichswehr and Politics*, 305.

¹⁰¹ Fulda, *Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic*, 181-183.

received a free pass, notwithstanding the clear challenge they presented. Due to cultivated relationships with conservative government elements, the stormtroopers regularly "earned public recognition for activities that increasingly did not help stabilize the democratic order."¹⁰²

The SA threatened the monopoly of violence by the military and the political power structure of which the Reichswehr was part.¹⁰³ Shocked by the revolution of 1918, when the army found itself "pitted against the gray hordes of the masses," Reichswehr leadership was convinced that the military must never again be turned against the people.¹⁰⁴ In November 1932, these fears were raised again when Communist and National Socialists forces worked together during the Berlin transport strike, wreaking havoc and further delegitimizing the government. Schleicher directed the Reichswehr to war game the efficacy of the military overcoming the combined forces of National Socialist and Communist terror in response to a declared national emergency.¹⁰⁵ The results indicated that the treaty-constrained army would have faced quite an uphill battle against the growing street forces of the National Socialists, especially when they combined with the Communists. At this point, any move by the government to rein in political violence "by crushing their demonstrations using police and military forces was increasingly in danger of having the opposite effect."¹⁰⁶

The last unhappy phase of the Weimar Republic was one in which the army was more continuously and intimately involved in domestic politics.¹⁰⁷ Military leaders thought that

¹⁰² Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 59.

¹⁰³ Geyer, "Professionals and Junkers," 109.

¹⁰⁴ Fest, *Hitler*, 298.

¹⁰⁵ Carsten, *The Reichswehr and Politics*, 378.

¹⁰⁶ Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 96.

¹⁰⁷ Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army*, 455.

involving the Nazis "would exert a moderating, domesticating influence on the movement."¹⁰⁸

Schleicher reached out to Hitler through contacts with Röhm and Gregor Strasser.

Unfortunately, Schleicher did not have the requisite skills to outmaneuver the political professionals.

This became even more evident when he reluctantly transitioned from behind the scenes to become Chancellor in December 1932. He was unable to garner cooperation with the unions or the Socialists, in large part because neither fully trusted him. It did not help that the labor forces never understood their real predicament or the reality of the Nazi threat.¹⁰⁹

Schleicher's attempt to reduce that threat by dividing the party and drawing Strasser and Röhm away from Hitler failed.

When the Nazis seized power in January of 1933, Hitler still faced obstacles in the state and within the party that obstructed his freedom of movement. The President, Schleicher, and the Reichswehr leadership tacitly accepted the Nazi's new role; but still expected to control Hitler from the inside. Hitler was coy enough not to confront these powerful forces directly. He would deal with them in due time. They were all surprisingly helpful to coopt.

Other than Röhm, Strasser was the only true challenge to Hitler's dominance within the party. When Schleicher offered him the Vice-Chancellorship in 1932, Hitler accused Strasser of betrayal. He departed without a fight, quietly retreating into obscurity. Nevertheless, Strasser

¹⁰⁸ Johannes Hürter, *Wilhelm Groener: Reichswehrminister am Ende Der Weimarer Republik 1928-1932* (Munich, 1993) 270, 284-292; Gerhard Schulz, *Von Brüning zu Hitler: Der Wandel der politischen Systems in Deutschland 1930-1933*, (Berlin, 1992), 157-160, quoted in Ullrich, *Hitler*, 242.

¹⁰⁹ Henry Ashby Turner, Jr. "The Myth of Chancellor von Schleicher's Querfront Strategy," *Central European History* 41 no.4 Imagining Germany from Abroad: The View from Britain and the United States (December 2008): 673-681 and Richard Breitman "On German Social Democracy and General Schleicher 1932-33," *Central European History* 9 no. 4 (December 1976): 352-378.

was still a strong player capable of returning. Röhm and the SA, on the other hand, posed an active threat to the Reichswehr and Hitler alike. When it was clear to the Nazis that Röhm and his leadership were obstructing their program, they worked together with the Reichswehr to eliminate the threat.

As early as 1931, when Röhm again took control of the SA, the Reichswehr recognized the threat an invigorated, more professional group posed as a military competitor. Disbanding the SA would prove to be beyond the capabilities of the Weimar Republic, in part ironically, due to opposition from the Reichswehr. In 1934, an even larger SA, disgruntled and without a proper role, could no longer be tolerated by the military. Hitler was not going to choose the SA over the Reichswehr, and uncharacteristically for him, he was clear with his intentions. Röhm never grasped this and "continued to believe that Hitler was, as always, playing some deep game and secretly agreed with him now as he supposedly had in the past."¹¹⁰ Feeling as if he was being blocked by Hitler's advisors and characteristically favoring a frontal assault, he sent a memorandum to the Ministry of Defense declaring that the SA should replace the army as the country's main fighting force.¹¹¹

At this point, the worm had turned for Röhm. In January 1934, Hitler ordered the first head of what would become the Gestapo, Rudolf Diels, to collect incriminating material against the leaders of the SA. An identical order went out to the Reichswehr.¹¹² In February, Hitler brought together the leaders of the Army, SA, and SS and sketched the basic outlines of a

¹¹⁰ Fest, *Hitler*, 453.

¹¹¹ Immo von Fallois, *Kalkül und Illusion: Der Machtkampf zwischen Reichswehr und SA während der Röhm-Krise 1934* (Berlin, 1994), 105-8, quoted in Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, 24.

¹¹² Rudolf Diels, *Lucifer ante portas . . . Es spricht der erste Chef der Gestapo* (Stuttgart, 1950), 379-382; Peter Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone: Gesichte der SA* (Munich, 1989), 208; Fallois, *Kalkül*, 125, quoted in Ullrich, *Hitler*, 462.

dictated agreement between the army and the SA that subordinated the brownshirts to the political education of the nation.

Hitler begged the SA leadership "not to obstruct him in such grave times—and added menacingly that he would crush anyone who tried to."¹¹³ Röhm failed to heed these warnings or thought they were further verbal maneuvers. He remained defiant, recognizing the power vested in him in control of such a large force. More importantly, Hitler was confronting him with an unacceptable alternative; it was the equivalent of "giving him the sack."¹¹⁴

He made attempts to find another acceptable solution with Hitler in March. When these efforts failed, he stepped up the tone of revolt, reinvigorated the slogans of the second revolution, and organized a new wave of parades and marches to demonstrate the unbroken vigor of the SA. He contacted Schleicher and other oppositional circles, obtaining sizable quantities of arms and stepping up the training programs of his units.¹¹⁵ Although these may have just been efforts to placate and occupy his troopers, such activities were construed by Hitler and the Army as a challenge.

Röhm's posed a challenge within the party; negative sentiments traced back to the perpetual power struggle between the party and the SA, and partly from disapproval of Röhm's alternative lifestyle and that of his entourage. He had faced increasing homophobic attacks from the Socialist press in Munich and Berlin, which undermined his support in multiple spheres. Although he retained a strong personal relationship with Hitler, his relationship with Gregor Strasser was strained; both the army leadership and the conservatives around Papen

¹¹³ Fest, *Hitler*, 455.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 456.

were strong opponents.¹¹⁶ After the Nazi seizure of power, "leading party functionaries regarded Röhm as a threat to their share of the newly acquired power."¹¹⁷ This group included, above all, Hermann Göring, Joseph Goebbels, and Rudolf Hess, who envied Röhm's enormous power base and number two position in the regime. Heinrich Himmler would play a prominent role as commander of the SS, then still a subdivision of the SA, but sure to gain by Röhm's fall.

It was neither the SS nor the SA, but rather Franz von Papen, who drove the situation to its conclusion in June 1934. Unbeknownst to Hitler's Vice-Chancellor, an opposition movement was brewing in his office that would trigger the resolution of the crisis. Papen was an unabashed Catholic conservative and leader of a coalition within the cabinet representing prominent conservative interests that remained influential and powerful. These conservatives fundamentally opposed the principle of popular sovereignty. Beginning with Heinrich Brüning, a profoundly conservative Catholic politician as Chancellor in March 1930, they had "effectively decoupled the exercise of executive power from the vicissitudes of Weimar party politics."¹¹⁸ With General Schleicher working in the background, these forces successfully destroyed Germany's first democratic effort but could not fully capitalize on its demise.

In conjunction with the Army and Hindenburg, this group planned to moderate and control the Nazis after deferring to Hitler's Chancellorship in January 1933. They assumed they could contain the radicalism of the Nazi movement and thus use it to legitimate their claims to

¹¹⁶ Hancock, *Ernst Röhm*, 155.

¹¹⁷ Mau, "Second Revolution," 236.

¹¹⁸ Larry Eugene Jones, "Franz von Papen, Catholic Conservatives, and the Establishment of the Third Reich, 1933-1934," *The Journal of Modern History* 83, no. 2 (June 2011), 275-276.

social and political hegemony.¹¹⁹ However, by May 1934, most of the cabinet were Nazis: they were doing the manipulating, intimidating, and outright bullying.¹²⁰

Conservative circles wanted to stem the Nazi tide. These forces were concerned about Hindenburg's poor health and imminent passing and the crisis it might pose for the regime. They saw Nazi tensions as an opportunity "to curb Hitler's demands for absolute power and steer the regime in the more moderate direction of a restored monarchy."¹²¹ A focal point for this subversion originated in the office of the vice-chancellor.

Papen gathered a conservative counterweight to Nazism with a group of *Jungkonservativen*, or "neoconservatives," advocating for the authoritarian state but repelled by the regime's contempt for human rights and civil liberties. They perceived the National Socialist "social" revolution as the "ultimate victory of the rule of the inferior," and thereby terror, brutality, and lawlessness.¹²² For them, a "conservative revolution" would initiate a renaissance bringing the German revolution to its "natural and necessary culmination."¹²³ Papen's speechwriter, Edgar Julius Jung, was the moving spirit of the group. They felt responsible for Hitler coming to power: "We must get rid of him."¹²⁴ They were prepared to overthrow the Nazi regime with a new government supported by Hindenburg and the Reichswehr.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 280

¹²⁰ Karl-Heinz Minuth (ed.), *Akten der Reichskanzlei: Die Regierung Hitler, 1933-1934* (2 vols., Boppard, 1983) II. 1393, quoted in Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, 27.

¹²¹ Norbert Frei, *Der Führerstaat: Nationalsozialistische Herrschaft 1933 bis 1945*, revised edition (Munich, 2001), 25-27; Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 212; Hans-Ulrich Thamer, *Verführung und Gewalt: Deutschland 1933-1945* (Berlin, 1986), 326, quoted in Ullrich, *Hitler*, 463

¹²² Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 146.

¹²³ Jones, "Franz von Papen," 306.

¹²⁴ Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 675.

The conservative effort was doomed because it depended on Papen outmaneuvering Hitler. Leveraging the evident deterioration of enthusiasm for the regime and the brutal SA, the vice-chancellery group planned to use a speech by Papen to draw broader support for a check on Hitler's power. The Vice-Chancellor would then convince Hindenburg to declare martial law and use the Reichswehr to disband the SA. It is not clear that Papen fully understood or was aware of what was planned or required of him, but he did not execute his role.

Nonetheless, Papen would not have convinced Hindenburg to turn on his chancellor anyway. Hindenburg enjoyed a particular claim to authority that bound him to all sectors of German society representing "the project of national unity that had become synonymous with his person."¹²⁵ For Hindenburg, the various forces of the German Right had come together under his guidance with the mass support of Hitler. Hindenburg was never anything but highly satisfied with his last chancellor.¹²⁶ In addition, the Reichswehr was committed to never deploy in domestic affairs, and they would indeed not have engaged without direction from Hindenburg. On June 26, Werner von Fritsch, the commander in chief of the army, briefed the President about problems with the SA, and they agreed that the police and the SS should handle the SA. No matter what happened, the army would stay out of it.¹²⁷

The President, the Reichswehr, and the conservatives were considerable forces with whom Hitler and the party leadership recognized they must compromise to consolidate power. Röhm and his SA leaders resented catering to these traditional elitist groups and "insisted on

¹²⁵ Wolfram Pyta, "Hindenburg and the German Right," in *The German Right in the Weimar Republic: Studies in the History of German Conservatism, Nationalism, and Antisemitism*, ed. Larry Eugene Jones (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2014), 33.

¹²⁶ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 225.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 226.

completing the 'revolution' by pushing for a fundamental transformation of German society."¹²⁸

These were not just ideological differences but fundamental discrepancies in life experience and social status. They continued to challenge the internal cohesion of the National Socialists and their vision of a unified national community, their *Volksgemeinschaft*. The lingering crisis was coming to a head.

Hitler was notorious for putting off difficult decisions, but his hand was forced when Papen gave a public address at Marburg University on June 17, 1934. This was Jung's trigger event for the "conservative revolution." Papen "warned against a 'second revolution' and attacked the personality cult surrounding Hitler."¹²⁹ He stated:

No people can afford constant revolt from below if it wants to survive the court of history. At some point the movement will have to end, and a fixed social structure, held together by an independent justice system and a universally accepted power of state, must come into existence. Nothing can be built with constant dynamism. Germany cannot be allowed to become a train speeding blindly ahead without anyone knowing where it is headed.¹³⁰

The Nazis were aware and sensitive to the frustrations of Germans not realizing the initial promises of the "national revolution," and Papen's speech resonated with them while highlighting a deep division within the government. Hitler recognized the magnitude of the threat posed by Papen, supported by the President, the military, and influential conservatives. Addressing this threat provided an opportunity to finally reign in the SA.

¹²⁸ Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 144.

¹²⁹ Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, 29.

¹³⁰ Ullrich, *Hitler*, 464.

Goebbels censored Papen's speech, and news of the disagreement within the regime "spread like wildfire."¹³¹ Papen was compelled to offer his resignation, but Hitler would not have it. He convinced Papen to discuss the issue together with Hindenburg and then, behind his back, met with Hindenburg himself on June 21. Hitler wanted to undermine Papen's alliance with the President and ascertain Hindenburg's "mood and capacity for making decisions."¹³² During this meeting, Hitler was confronted by Defense Minister Blomberg, who made it clear that if the "brownshirts were not brought to heel, Hindenburg would be prepared to declare martial law and put the government together in the hands of the army."¹³³ Hitler was reassured by his meeting with Hindenburg but recognized the time had come to act.

While at his retreat in Obersalzberg from June 23-26, Hitler made his final decision to strike.¹³⁴ Hitler returned to Berlin on June 26, and Papen's speechwriter Jung was arrested. Papen was kept at arm's length. Hitler had decided that the time had come for "a double blow—against the SA leadership clique and the 'reactionaries' around Papen—to cut through the domestic political stalemate."¹³⁵ Leading officers of the SS were provided with "evidence" of the supposed SA putsch and prepared to put it down. The army's resources were "at the disposal of the SS for the eventuality of a serious conflict."¹³⁶ Hitler intentionally deceived the SA and kept them feeling secure by calling Röhm on June 28 and telling him to summon his leadership for a frank discussion on Saturday, June 30 at 1000 in Bad Wiessee.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Fest, *Hitler*, 460.

¹³³ John W. Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918-1945* (New York, 1953), 319-320; Heinz Höhne, *Mordsache Röhm: Hitlers Durchbruch zur Alleinherrschaft, 1933-1934* (Reinbeck, 1984), 239-246, quoted in Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, 30.

¹³⁴ Ullrich, *Hitler*, 465; Fest, *Hitler*, 460.

¹³⁵ Ullrich, *Hitler*, 465.

¹³⁶ Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 215-216, quoted in Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, 30.

To preserve the illusion of normality, Hitler was in Essen with Göring and Viktor Lutze to attend the wedding of Gauleiter Josef Terboven. Göring and Hitler were groomsmen, and within a few days, Lutze would be the new leader of the SA. On June 29, Göring returned to Berlin to coordinate activities in the capital. Hitler and Lutze proceeded to Bad Godesberg for a planned inspection of a Reich Labor Service camp, where Goebbels joined them. Throughout this period, Hitler received provoking reports from Berlin that accelerated his timeline and led to an early morning departure for Bavaria. Röhm's enemies in the Nazi Party may have consciously distorted and invented material to increase suspicions. Still, it is possible that the "SS leadership was predisposed to see enemies and intrigues as a result of Himmler's conspiratorial worldview and that they therefore understood the actions of the SA leadership in light of this."¹³⁷ The atmosphere was ripe for confusion and misinterpretation such that SA defensive activities in Munich and elsewhere reinforced the perceived or pre-conceived threat and propelled the course of events.

Hitler's plane landed at Oberwiesenfeld Airfield at sunrise, and he was met immediately and updated by SS men whose latest news about an imminent "SA plot" further enraged him. He summoned the local SA leaders, calling them traitors, snatching their epaulets, and declaring: "You are arrested and will be shot!"¹³⁸ Hitler, Goebbels, Lutze, and a SS entourage traveled south to Bad Wiessee, where Röhm and several other SA leaders were arrested and brought to Munich's Stadelheim Prison. Other SA leaders still traveling for their meeting later in

¹³⁷ Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 209; George C. Browder, *Foundations of the Nazi Police State: The Formation of Sipo and SD* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 142-143; Richard Bessel, *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism: The Stormtroopers in Eastern Germany 1925-1934* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 132, quoted in Hancock, "The Purge of the SA Reconsidered," 671.

¹³⁸ Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 149

the morning with their Führer were also rounded up at train stations and on the roads and taken into SS custody. They were either shot in the early evening hours of the same day or, in the case of Röhm, the following day.¹³⁹

Goebbels had already sent the agreed codeword "*Kolibri*" to Göring in Berlin, activating further arrests and murders of SA leaders, conservatives, influential critics, and internal rivals.¹⁴⁰ Most of the victims in Berlin were conservatives, including most prominently the former Chancellor General Schleicher, his wife, and an associate General von Bredow. Papen's speechwriter Jung and another colleague Herbert von Bose were also killed. Papen's prominence and good relationship with Hindenburg likely spared him, but the murder of his two close advisors indeed sent a message while he remained under house arrest.

Gregor Strasser was arrested and shot in the cellar of Gestapo headquarters; his brother Otto escaped to exile. Sending a clear signal to a still defiant Catholic Church, a squad killed Erich Klausener, the head of Catholic Action, at his desk in the Ministry of Transportation. Some of the victims appear to settle old scores. Otto Ballerstedt, an engineer and early political rival who helped put Hitler behind bars for a few weeks after a fight in 1922, was killed in the vicinity of Dachau.¹⁴¹ Among the murdered was former Bavarian State Commissar Gustav Ritter von Kahr, who prevented Hitler's Beer Hall Putsch of November 1923.

¹³⁹ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bonn (FES), Viktor Lutze Papers, Political Diary of Viktor Lutz, 41-51; Eleanor Hancock, *Ernst Röhm: Hitler's SA Chief of Staff* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 160-161; Otto Gritschneider, *"Der Führer hat Sie zum verurteilt . . .": Hitler's 'Röhm-Putsch'-Morde vor Gericht* (Munich: Beck, 1993), 29-36, quoted in Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 149.

¹⁴⁰ Ullrich's English translation of *Hitler* uses "Hummingbird," translating "*Kolibri*" from German. Siemens uses *Kolibri*. *Kolibri* is the world's smallest pistol of Austrian manufacture since 1914 and therefore it is likely that *Kolibri* is more appropriate.

¹⁴¹ Ullrich, *Hitler*, 468.

Some elements of these murderous days bordered on the chaotic. In Silesia, the regional SS commander Udo von Woyrsch lost control of his units, and violence spilled over into other areas. "Significantly, the liquidations took place wherever the victim was found, in offices, in homes, on the street, with utterly brutal casualness."¹⁴² The total victims were likely no more than 100.¹⁴³ The rampage spread over several days, many corpses not found until weeks later, some in woods or rivers.

The public response to these events in Germany was initially somewhat muted but fearful. An element of schadenfreude buoyed those more in the know who had envied the influence of the SA and would now benefit from the removal of its leadership. Goebbels' propaganda machine flooded the public with a portrait that described the events "as a clean-up of dangerous and degenerate [homosexual] elements in the Nazi movement."¹⁴⁴ With the elimination of most of the regime's political threats, the uncontrolled elements of the SA were seen more as a harassment to the public. In that respect, there was much support for reining in the organization.

The British press had followed the events of the Third Reich with intense interest and coverage. Journalists faced an uphill battle reporting on the Nazi regime. The SA attacked some correspondents, and others were arrested. As a result, the British press "failed to perceive the deadly intent of the Nazi party to remain in power at all costs—giving them the benefit of the

¹⁴² Fest, *Hitler*, 465.

¹⁴³ Some historians have made estimates as high as 150 to 200 victims: Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, 173; Ullrich, *Hitler*, 468. Rainer Orth, a historian and "scrupulous detective" has identified ninety murdered by name, and Siemens estimates no more than ten additional, for a total of 100. A number surprisingly close to the official statistics from the summer of 1934, Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 151.

¹⁴⁴ Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, 37.

doubt, and therefore "normalizing" them."¹⁴⁵ This sentiment applied to the initial reporting for the Röhm Purge accepting the government's line of moderates steering a "middle course" and cleaning up "conspiratorial reactionaries."

However, as the dust settled, the purge became a disaster for the regime in the eyes of the British Press.¹⁴⁶ It was perceived as "state-sanctioned murder against fellow Nazis and colleagues," solidifying the true character of the National Socialists. Where before the press was at least receptive to the message of the Nazi regime, the "Night of the Long Knives" solidified the perception among British journalists that Hitler was the leader of a brutal dictatorship. In a rare occasion, British newspapers openly criticized the regime's absence of legality and due process.¹⁴⁷ They challenged the Nazi government and its leader for his direct involvement in the extra-judicial murder of fellow ministers and officials.

There is no credence to the fabrications of an actual plot in the SA. The leadership was at a spa retreat, and the rank and file were on leave or about to be. Tensions between the SA, SS, and Reichswehr were heightened as they had been for some time, but historians agree no evidence supports any "Röhm Putsch."

Popular conjecture criticizing the Nazis and the SA exaggerates the level of homosexuality in the organization. Still, there is no evidence to support numbers any more significant than the population at large.¹⁴⁸ Many of Röhm's rivals did not approve of his

¹⁴⁵ Galbraith, *The British Press and Nazi Germany*, 33.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁴⁸ Laurie Marhoefer, *Sex and the Weimar Republic: German Homosexual Emancipation and the Rise of the Nazis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 155, quoted in Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 153.

alternative lifestyle, but Hitler had always tolerated his homosexuality. It was not the reason to move against the SA, even though it was used to justify this move and to discredit him.¹⁴⁹

Nevertheless, Hitler's public standing was strengthened by the move. His swift and decisive action "contrasted even more sharply than before in the minds of many with the disorder and radicalism of the Party."¹⁵⁰ He addressed the events publicly at the Reichstag session on July 13, placing much of the blame on Röhm. Hitler spoke of destructive, rootless elements who "became revolutionaries for its own sake and desired to see revolution established as a permanent condition."¹⁵¹ He rejected Röhm's insurrectionary revolution; Hitler's modern revolution was quieter and more controlled. "Shots hurt their ears, to generalize Malaparte's remark about Hitler."¹⁵²

In his remarks to the Reichstag, he used the analogy of a Captain dealing with a mutiny to explain his necessity for quick and independent action. Hitler's extralegal justification was based on his role as the sole arbiter of justice for the German people. The Nazi's constitutional lawyer, Carl Schmitt, provided the academic rationale: "The Führer protects the law from its worst abuse when in the moment of danger, he, by virtue of his domain as Führer and as supreme judicial authority, directly creates law."¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Eleanor Hancock, "Only the Real, the True, the Masculine Held Its Value": Ernst Röhm, Masculinity, and Male Homosexuality," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8 no. 4 (April 1998): 636.

¹⁵⁰ Ian Kershaw, *The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford, 1987), 83-95, quoted in Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, 39.

¹⁵¹ Fest, *Hitler*, 469.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 478.

¹⁵³ Carl Schmitt, "The Führer Protects the Law: On Adolf Hitler's Reichstag Address of 13 July 1934, in *The Third Reich Sourcebook*, Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013), 129.

June 30 became the decisive transition date in the Nazi seizure of power. Any remaining illusions about the regime's nature and whether their extreme methods might dampen and ease with time were extinguished. "Henceforth, there were no longer any legal or moral guarantees against arbitrary acts by Hitler or his cohorts."¹⁵⁴ Few observers at the time recognized the true criminal nature of the regime. Most German people tolerated "the state planning and carrying out acts of murder—a clear indication of how dulled people's sense of right and wrong was" so early in the regime.¹⁵⁵

Hindenburg's death on August 2 ended the final hopes of conservatives of some form of transition to a restored monarchy. Hitler codified his new role as "Führer and Reich Chancellor," uniting the two offices and transferring all power to himself. The army fell in line immediately with a new oath:

I swear by God this holy oath that I will show absolute obedience to the Führer of the German Reich and People, Adolf Hitler, the Commander-in-Chief of the Wehrmacht, and that as a brave soldier, I will be willing to sacrifice my life at any time for this oath.¹⁵⁶

The new oath had profound significance. It was a fundamental guide for the conduct of the military that would have broad implications, further amplified when a similar oath was required of all government officials. The previous oath "to nation and fatherland" was replaced with an unconditional affirmation of obedience to Hitler. This explicit totalitarian character of

¹⁵⁴ Fest, *Hitler*, 470.

¹⁵⁵ Ullrich, *Hitler*, 471.

¹⁵⁶ Fallois, *Kalkül*, 162, quoted in Ullrich, *Hitler*, 474. The Wehrmacht was not established until March 1935 but is retained as it was used in the source.

the regime had restored "something resembling a monarchy" after all.¹⁵⁷ On August 19, 1934, the popular referendum completed Hitler's consolidation of power.

The Reichswehr's leaders' comfort with the events was influential in assuring the initial fears of the public. They stood aside as they did in January of 1933 and allowed the regime to cement itself in place with violence, this time claiming two of their own. The elimination of the SA as a viable challenger and Hitler's Reichstag declaration naming them the only "weapons-bearer of the nation" was the result the Reichswehr leadership wanted.

However, the military was "guided by incompetence and arrogance."¹⁵⁸ The SS, not the army, gained the most at this juncture. Himmler was placed directly under Hitler, and the SS was to grow to become a significant power center in the regime and a genuine rival to the Reichswehr's role as the sole bearer of arms. The Reichswehr's leadership was warned by the former state secretary to the Reich Chancellery, Erwin Planck, to rein in the regime's proclivity for violence—"If you look on without acting, sooner or later you'll suffer the same fate."¹⁵⁹ The Reichswehr's position within the state was destroyed, and Hitler had achieved absolute control. The military was now an accomplice to his criminal policies, and there was no turning back.¹⁶⁰

Hitler and the Nazis were forced to address the prospects of a "second revolution" while securing their consolidation of power during the first eighteen months of the Third Reich. Hitler was the true victor, removing all viable opposition and establishing himself as the true

¹⁵⁷ Fest, *Hitler*, 475.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 470.

¹⁵⁹ Astrid Pufendorf, *Die Plancks: Eine Familie zwischen Patriotismus und Widerstand*, Berlin, 2006, p. 373, quoted in Ullrich, *Hitler*, 473.

¹⁶⁰ Ullrich, *Hitler*, 473.

dictator of Germany. He would not tolerate any further discussion of these murderous days, and the effects of turning on his closest associates lingered.

Hitler could not abide by the destructive nature so favored by Röhm and his SA leadership, who wanted to turn society on its head. Nonetheless, as it turned out, these events helped accelerate a Nazi revolution that reached deep and spared nothing:

It gripped and changed the political institutions, shattered the class structures in the army, bureaucracy, and to some extent the economy. It broke up, corrupted, and enfeebled the still influential nobility and the old upper crust. In a Germany that owed its charm as well as its provinciality to the same backwardness, it introduced a degree of social mobility and egalitarianism indispensable to a modern industrial society.¹⁶¹

Hitler realized he needed a rational and efficient industrial state to meet his expansionist aims.

The murder of Röhm and his followers and the key anti-Nazi "neoconservatives" "fundamentally altered the history of the Third Reich."¹⁶² Beyond ending any hopes of transforming Germany according to "socialist" principles, because of these events, Germany experienced a comprehensive popular demobilization. Kurt Gosswiler and the German Democratic Republic's materialistic historiography considered "big business" the most critical factor "in the liquidation of Röhm's SA, as the latter allegedly aimed at the abolition of the preeminent position of heavy industries and big farmers (Großagrariern)."¹⁶³ Big business was an enthusiastic partner in the destruction of the labor movement and the autonomous

¹⁶¹ Fest, *Hitler*, 478.

¹⁶² Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 245.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 147.

paramilitary potential of the right. "Power shifted decisively upward," and business leaders thrived in this new authoritarian environment.¹⁶⁴

Benjamin Hett argues that the SA was collateral damage in the purge, and the primary targets were the conservatives, particularly in the army high command.¹⁶⁵ Richard Evans includes upper- and middle-class conservatives who, as an audience, were now duly warned: "to keep their heads down if they did not want to get them blown off."¹⁶⁶ Michael Burleigh and conventional historiography lean more towards the SA as the primary target, which is persuasive simply because most of the victims were Stormtroopers.¹⁶⁷ Less controversial is the recognition that Hitler succeeded in solidifying his position of power fully independent of the conservative forces that challenged his autonomy just eighteen months before when he was made chancellor.

When we attempt to wrestle a German historical beast that cannot be tamed, we can become derailed, caught up in the peculiarities of the Nazis and Germans. Resolving the tensions and achieving a balance in the continuities and particularities of German historical analysis remains an elusive goal. This is especially true in a research effort focused on the early months of the Third Reich.

Without confining it to a category in itself, understanding Germany as a more "intensified version of the norm" helps us draw out the narrative obscured by the often morbid fascination with its peculiarities.¹⁶⁸ In this light, history is more familiar and illuminates a

¹⁶⁴ Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006), 101.

¹⁶⁵ Hett, *The Death of Democracy*, 228.

¹⁶⁶ Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, 116.

¹⁶⁷ Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 159.

¹⁶⁸ Blackbourn and Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History*, 292.

reflection of an experience closer to our own. "Walter Benjamin called Paris the "capital of the nineteenth century". . . , write Blackbourn and Eley, "we should be open to the whole meaning of Germany as the "tragic land" of the twentieth century."¹⁶⁹ Modern Germany as a metaphor for our times.

In his Postscript, Peukert's final interpretation outlines his description of Germany as a metaphor. In offering some final thoughts on the significance of the history of the Weimar Republic, he borrows three famous categories of historical writing proposed by Nietzsche in his essay "The Use and Disadvantage of History for Life." From the *monumentalist* point of view, Weimar could serve as a compendium of democracy's virtues and vices; from the *critical* point of view, the history of Weimar demonstrates the fragile nature of democracy and the contradictions of modernization; and from the *antiquarian* point of view, the features of classic modernity reveal the emergence of the world we inhabit today. A society that shared our hopes and anxieties, whose fantasies and phobias present a bewildering caricature of what is now our everyday life. "And yet, even in this respect, the shadowy figures that look out at us from the tarnished mirror of history are—in the final analysis—ourselves."¹⁷⁰

In reconsidering the events surrounding the "Night of the Long Knives," we provide a fresh look and perspective on one of the most significant episodes in the history of the Third Reich. If we can succeed in drawing out a marginalized or obscured narrative, its value depends on our context's substance. The challenges that populism, political violence, demagoguery, and

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 281-282

revolution posed to modern society in the twentieth century resonate. Better understanding how they transformed Germany brings us closer to their struggle and ours.