Political Violence and the Nazi Seizure of Power

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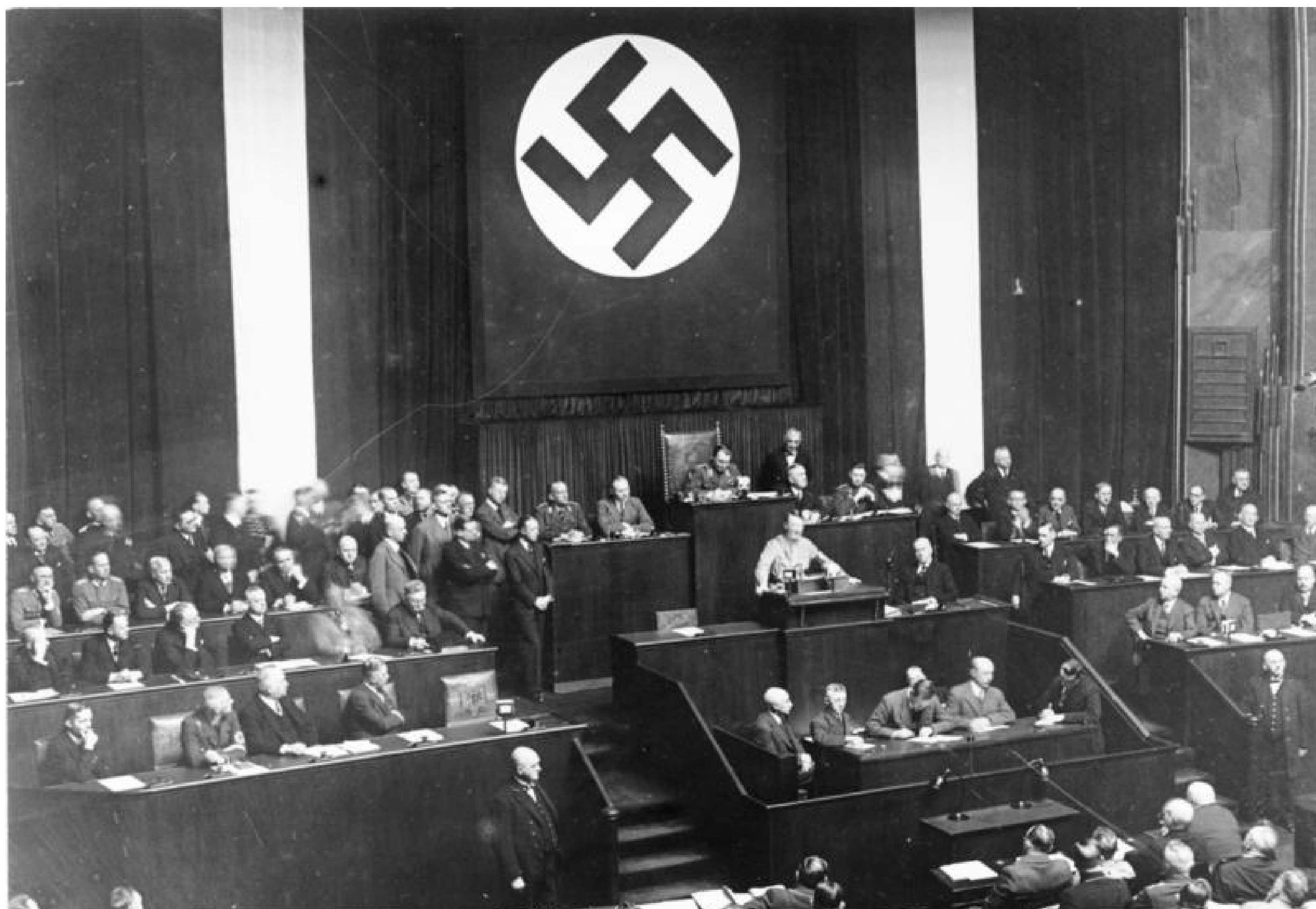

Hitler's Reichstag speech promoting the Enabling Act of 1933, delivered at the Kroll Opera House, following the Reichstag fire.Many contemporary observers of the Nazi takeover in 1933, and many Nazis themselves, were at pains to stress the peaceful nature of the 'German revolution'. Agreeing with the Nazi Party leader in the Schleswig-Holstein town of Eutin, who boasted of 'how peacefully the revolution has occurred in Germany', they often contrasted the smooth transfer of power in 1933 with the bloodshed and chaos of the revolutionary events in Germany during 1918 and 1919. In 1933 the state did not crumble, the army did not intervene, civil war did not break out. German nationalists could take satisfaction from the apparent orderliness and the absence of large-scale violence which accompanied Hitler's takeover: here, it seemed, was a true 'German' revolution, one during which the trains continued to run on time.

Today this picture of the Nazi seizure of power seems at best rather disingenuous. After all, Nazi activists did not shrink from violence; indeed they gloried in it. Struggle, violence and war were at the centre of Nazi ideology, and for years the Nazi storm troopers, the SA, had been engaged in a campaign of politically motivated street fighting which left hundreds dead and thousands injured during the final years of the Weimar Republic. What is more, Hitler had identified himself publicly with the violent excesses of his followers in a manner hardly typical of leaders of major political parties, when in August 1932 he voiced his 'unbounded loyalty' to a band of Nazis accused of the brutal murder of a Communist sympathiser in the Upper Silesian border village of Potempa. And when, in early 1933, the Nazis finally were able to gain control of interior ministries and police headquarters throughout Germany, storm troopers unleashed a campaign of terror. Thousands of opponents of the Nazis were rounded up and taken away to makeshift concentration camps set up in disused factory premises or barracks, and many met their deaths at the

hands of tormentors who, it now appeared, had the power of the German state behind them. Long before Germany was declared officially a one-party state in the summer of 1933, open political activity directed against the Nazis had come to a halt.

The Nazi 'revolution' may not have been as bloody an affair as the Terror following the French Revolution or the Civil War following the Russian, but it was hardly the peaceful, orderly affair that many claimed at the time. Violence was one of the key factors in turning the 'backstairs intrigue' (Alan Bullock's phrase) which brought Hitler to the Reich Chancellory into the first step towards one of the most brutal dictatorships the world has ever seen. While it was the machinations of men of power and influence which put Hitler in the saddle in Berlin, it was the actions of the Nazi storm troopers in cities and towns throughout the country which helped smash opposition to the 'new Germany'.

Immediately upon hearing of the formation of the Hitler government, supporters of political parties took to the streets – the Nazis and their conservative allies to celebrate the 'national uprising' and the Communists to protest against the ‘further intensification of the fascist dictatorship'. Fairly typical of what happened were the events in the eastern German city of Breslau (today's Wroclaw) on January 31st. The Communists reacted to the news first, announcing a protest demonstration in the centre of the city at which a general strike was to be proclaimed. But no sooner had the Communists' supporters begun to assemble on the morning of the 31st, than about 500 Nazi storm troopers decided to march through the square where the demonstration was to take place. The police, no friends of the Communist Party at the best of times and eager to make a positive impression upon their new masters, kept the 500-600 unemployed supporters of the Communists out of the square while the storm troopers paraded around; and when the planned demonstration finally got under way the police quickly intervened to stop it. Police truncheons appeared and the Communists scattered, some running up nearby streets and smashing the windows of the shops selling Nazi uniforms; the police then began shooting, and an unemployed labourer was killed; and afterwards the Breslau Police President (no member of the Nazi Party – he was later to be replaced by the regional SA leader Edmund Heines) used the fiasco as an excuse to ban all Communist rallies as a threat to public order.

Thus, within twenty-four hours of Hitler's appointment political activity by the German Communist Party was effectively driven underground in the Breslau region. The city's Social Democrats, who had adopted a wait-and-see attitude – after all, the Hitler government was a legal government and the SPD leadership was desperately concerned not to give the authorities an excuse for suppressing their organisations – saw the results of the Communist demonstration as a confirmation of the wisdom of their decision to do nothing. That evening, it was the Nazis' turn. They celebrated their victory with a huge demonstration at which an estimated 50,000 people took part; the centre of Breslau, the largest city in eastern Germany, became a sea of swastika flags and marching columns of brownshirted storm troopers. Politics in Germany would, they thought, never be the same again.

The events immediately following the formation of the Hitler government are revealing in a number of respects. First, they demonstrate the inability of a political movement (the Communists) whose supporters were largely unemployed to force a showdown with the new government by calling for mass strikes. Second, they show the reluctance of the Social Democrats to commit their forces (which, with the largest German trade-union federation, workers' sport organisations and a large political defence formation of their own, the Reichsbanner, were not inconsiderable) to the struggle. And third, they show that initially it was the police, not the storm troopers, who appear to have taken the initiative in suppressing the Left.

The turn of the storm troopers was to come later. A major step was the formation, in later February, of 'auxiliary police' composed of members of the SA, the SS and the Stahlhelm (a conservative veterans' organisation). This meant that to resist a band of SA men, one of whom wore an armband with the inscription 'Hilfspolizei' was to confront the power of the state; it lent legality to the terror tactics of the storm troopers. The creation of the 'auxiliary police' and the issuing of orders forbidding police from interfering with Nazi formations were followed by an upsurge of Nazi violence directed against the Left, particularly against Social Democrats and the Social Democratic trade unions. Leading members of the left-wing parties were arrested, as the police and Nazi formations increasingly co-ordinated their activities; attempts by the Social Democrats or Communists to hold election rallies were broken up

with growing frequency; the left-wing press – first that of the Communists and then that of the Social Democrats – was suppressed; and by the time of the Reichstag elections on March 5th Nazi violence and police repression had combined effectively to drive the Left from public view.

Nevertheless, although the Nazis had succeeded in paralysing the SPD and driving the Communist Party underground, the main organisational supports of German Social Democracy and the most important source of potential resistance to Nazi dictatorship, the trade unions, remained intact. But once the need to help the Nazi Party with the election campaigns was past, the storm troopers turned their attentions to the root-and-branch destruction of the German trade-union movement. This was not done by a co-ordinated assault throughout the country or by a frontal attack upon the trade-union headquarters in Berlin. Rather, it was carried out, during March and April, in a piecemeal manner. One day it was the turn of the Breslau trade union headquarters, taken by the storm troopers after shots were fired when SA men marched in the front of the building; two days later storm troopers hoisted the swastika flag on the trade-union headquarters in Leipzig; a few days later groups of storm troopers laid waste to trade-union offices in Dresden; then it was the turn of trade-unionists of Schneidemuhl, then Reutlingen, then Wiesbaden, then Frankfurt, then Hannover. No one could say when or where the next blow might be struck; no one knew at what point they should make their stand.

So the once-impressive institutional supports of German Social Democracy, which had withstood Bismarck's onslaughts fifty years before, were destroyed piecemeal, by instalments. By the time the Nazi government officially dissolved the trade unions in May and allowed their assets to be swallowed up by the newly created 'German Labour Front', the leaders of the once powerful Social Democratic movement were generals without an army.

This campaign against the Left was all the more effective because of its ambiguous nature. Because there was no single, decisive confrontation, and because it was essentially two-pronged – carried out both within and without the existing legal structure – it was much more difficult to resist. In early 1933 the Nazis' opponents faced apparently spontaneous attacks by marauding bands of storm troopers as well as the authority of the police, and the effectiveness of each was enhanced by the other: the storm troopers presented all the more a threat because behind them – somewhere – stood the state, and police repression was all the more effective because it was enhanced by the extralegal threat of the SA.

This is not to suggest that had the Left united and made a stand the outcome would have been much better. Although Communists and Social Democrats each blame the other (with some degree of justification) for the split within the German Left, the idea that a united Left would have withstood the onslaught of the Nazis and their conservative allies once they controlled the organs of state power – the police and, if need be, the army – is at best a pipe dream. At a time of horrific unemployment the chief weapon of the Left, the General Strike (which had sunk a right-wing Putsch attempt in 1920), was, to say the least, blunted. And to assert that the gulf which separated Socialists and Communists was the making of a few self-seeking politicians is to display a deep misunderstanding of both working-class politics and working-class life in interwar Germany.

For the disagreements on the left were not merely differences over ideology or attitudes towards the USSR, they also reflected deep social divisions: between the unemployed and those who still hung on to work; between the young and their elders; between those (Social Democrats) who had run the police in Prussia and those (often Communists) against whom the police were deployed, often with bloody results. If the history of the Nazi seizure reveals anything about left-wing politics, it is that there is little the Left can do on its own to stop a powerful right-wing movement which has mass support, allies in powerful places, and control of the repressive apparatus of the state. Seen in this light, it would appear that neither the Communist nor the Social Democratic responses to the wave of Nazi violence in early 1933 held out many prospects for success. The German Left was up a dead end which had been paved for it long before.

If this is true, it puts into question just how important was political violence for putting the Nazis in the saddle. Perhaps the real service of the storm troopers was less to win a decisive battle with the Left than to demonstrate that no real battle still needed to be fought. What the storm troopers revealed in 1933 was that the impressive

organisational network of the Social Democrats was little more than a paper tiger, a house of cards that came tumbling down in March and April 1933. This was, to be sure, an important service to the new regime, for Hitler and his allies did not know in advance how easy it would be to dispose of the trade-union movement. The street violence against the Left in 1933 carried very little risk for Germany's new rulers. Because it was a largely spontaneous, apparently uncoordinated assault, had it run up against stiff opposition the new government could have disowned it quickly – as Hitler, Hess and the new Nazi Interior Minister Wilhelm Frick were to do with other unwelcome violent outbursts. But once it was successful then the new regime could take full advantage of it.

The confusion which accompanied the creation of the German Labour Front – its leader, Robert Ley, later confessed to having had little idea in May 1933 what his new organisation was supposed to do – seems to confirm the largely unplanned nature of the assault on the Left. But unplanned though it may have been, it nevertheless had far-reaching repercussions for the social and political history of the 'Third Reich'. Most importantly, it committed the new regime to an uncompromising policy towards trade unions. By April 1933 it was clear that there would be no legal independent labour organisations in the 'new Germany'. Working-class interests and working-class protest would have to be expressed in other ways.

Another important consequence of the terror campaign was that it served to cut the links between the Left and the working class. Within a matter of weeks it became virtually impossible for Social Democrats or Communists to hold rallies, distribute literature, to canvass opinion. With Socialist and Communist party functionaries increasingly likely to be imprisoned, many understandably feared making political contacts. The publicising in the newspapers of the arrests and raids by police and SA served to heighten the fear. As a result, the party leaderships were cut off from the party organisations and the party organisations were cut off from the German people. And the fact that this destruction of the German Left was accomplished in an atmosphere of fear and terror was to colour social and political relations between the German working class and the regime for the life of the Third Reich.

Of course, the Left did not provide the only targets for the violent street politics of the Nazis. Another, obvious target was the Jews. Yet the Nazi violence against German Jews in 1933 was different, both in its timing and its political significance, from the campaign against the Left. For one thing, there was no chance that the Jews would offer physical resistance; largely isolated and defenceless, by 1933 German Jews were objects, not subjects, of German politics. For another, the Jews were largely irrelevant to the campaign for political power of which the struggle against the Left formed a major part. And whereas there is some evidence that the campaigns against the Communists brought the Nazis popular support in 1933, the opposite appears to have been the case with regard to the excesses against the Jews.

For the reasons mentioned above, the assault on Germany's Jews took second place in early 1933 behind the assault on the Left. Indeed, before the elections in March there appears to have been very little violence directed against Jews or Jewish targets. It was not really until mid-March, after Goring (who controlled the Prussian police) announced during a speech in Essen that he rejected the idea that 'the police are a protection squad for Jewish shops', that things changed. This, it appears, was taken as a signal by the Nazis' activist followers, who enforced a growing number of boycotts of Jewish-owned shops, intimidated Jewish individuals and took a number of Jews into custody.

However, although the Nazi leadership had been quite clear in its attitude towards the Jews, its response to this upsurge in anti-Semitic violence was ambivalent. It obviously could not be condemned outright; after all the Nazis' activist supporters were only carrying the anti-Semitic exhortations of the leadership to logical conclusions. Yet there was concern that the SA rank and file should not get out of the control of their leaders and that retail trade, so important to economic recovery, should not be disturbed. Therefore, while Goring appears to have given a blank cheque to the storm troopers, other Nazi leaders, including Hitler, called for discipline and an end to interference in Germany's retail trade. Yet the boycotts did not stop. Faced with a growing boycott movement, evidence that storm troopers were not necessarily heeding the calls for moderation and vociferous protests about the violence from abroad, the Nazi leadership decided to take action: unable to stop the boycotts, the Nazi leadership decided to put

itself at their head, and Hitler and Goebbels called for a one-day nationwide boycott of Jewish businesses on Saturday, April 1st. Julius Streicher, the notorious anti-Semite and Nazi Party Gauleiter in Nurnberg, was put in charge of the 'Central Committee' which was to co-ordinate the event. This, it was claimed, would be the German people's righteous response to the 'lies' and 'atrocity propaganda' circulating in the foreign press.

Although storm troopers in many towns did not wait for the official signal to begin – there was, if anything, an increase in the number of unofficial boycotts of Jewish businesses in the run-up to April 1st – the day itself passed off fairly peacefully. Throughout the Reich brownshirted young men took up posts outside Jewish businesses, admonishing people not to go inside, and the 'co-ordinated' German press praised the orderly way in which the boycott had been carried out. Yet the Nazi leadership could hardly claim unqualified success. Support for the boycott was less than total: in many areas Germans demonstratively bought from the black-listed businesses. Indeed, one local Nazi party leader advised subsequently that, 'in the future actions against the Jews must be kept secret': announcing the boycott in advance had only allowed Germans to express their support for its victims by patronising Jewish shops on the preceding Thursday and Friday. If the object of the boycott was to put an end to the unplanned and spontaneous attacks of the previous weeks, however, it appears to have been moderately successful. The boycotts did not stop completely after April 1st, but their number decreased sharply.

The contrast between the campaigns against the Jews and against the Left is revealing of the nature and uses of Nazi violence in early 1933. Like the campaign against the Left, the violence against the Jews appears to have been largely unplanned and uncoordinated (at least until the Nazi leadership intervened in late March); unlike the campaign against the Left, however, the attacks on the Jews involved mostly actions against economic targets, aroused widespread misgivings amongst the German public and abroad, and did not offer compensating political dividends since this campaign was essentially irrelevant to the struggle for political power. It is revealing that never again in the history of the 'Third Reich' was there such an attempt to mobilise popular involvement in a nationwide anti-Semitic campaign; never again did the Nazi leaders allow either Julius Streicher or their activist supporters to determine the pace of the assault on the Jews.

Even more problematic for the Nazis were the actions taken during early 1933 against department and chain stores, the 'interferences in the economy' which were condemned by Nazi leaders with increasing frequency in the first halt of 1933. For years the Nazis made political capital out of the fear and antagonism of small shopkeepers towards their larger competitors, and before 1933 the opening of a new department store branch was invariably the occasion for Nazi protests. Once Hitler was in the Reich Chancellory and the storm troopers felt they could do as they liked, it was not surprising that department and foreign-owned chain stores as well as Jewish shops became targets for boycott actions. Woolworth, Bata (the Czech shoe manufacturer and retailer) and the large department-store chains were favourite targets. But such activities brought strong protests from the firms on the receiving end, as well as concern by the new government about the damage this might be doing to economic recovery; after all, the department stores may have been 'annihilating the Mittelstand' but they also were major employers.

It often has been asserted that in the actions of the SA, particularly against institutions such as the large department stores, we can see evidence of the 'socialism' of National Socialism being taken seriously. However, the violent outbursts of the SA involved certain types of capitalist concerns. The targets were almost exclusively retail outlets; industrial plants, corporate offices and commercial banks were largely spared. The Nazi activists had taken their aim not at the capitalist system as a whole but at the most visible capitalist enterprises, ones seen to he inflicting damage directly upon a significant section of the Nazi Party membership and support.

It was these sorts of actions, which were out of step with the needs of the Nazi leadership in Berlin and which provided apparent evidence that the SA was getting out of control, that helped pave the way for the bloody purge of 1934. The SA, which had grown by leaps and bounds during 1933 and had taken into its ranks large numbers of people whose political reliability was (from the Nazis' point of view) highly questionable, was causing increasing difficulties for the regime. Brown-shirted activists persisted in violent activities which were being condemned with growing stridency by the Nazi leadership – in particular by Reich Interior Minister Frick – and the SA was becoming

intensely unpopular among the population at large. It is hardly surprising that an organisation of young men who often drank, were rowdy, threatened respectable citizens (and on occasion even the police) with concentration camps, frequently appeared out of the control of its own leaders and numbered millions of members by early 1934, would arouse unease among large sections of the German population. This is, of course, not to assert that the reasons for the purge are to be found in the violent activities mentioned above; the main reasons for the purge lie in the relations of the new government with the armed forces and the unwillingness of SA Chief of Staff Ernst Rohm to give up his idea of the SA becoming a new Nazi people's army. However, the extent of the purge at local level and the tremendous enthusiasm with which it was greeted by most Germans was due in large measure to the continuing, politically counterproductive violence of the brownshirts in late 1933 and early 1934. The SA fell victim to a campaign whereby the Nazi state was constructed so that, as the West German researcher Mathilde Jamin has put it, 'the unpolitical German could regard National Socialist institutions as a constituent part of his bourgeois normality'.

Who, then, was responsible for the wave of violence on which the Nazis rode to power in early 1933, and why did it occur? The answers to these questions are far from clear. To begin with, the SA was an organisation which grew tremendously after Hitler came to power. Even before 1933, when storm troopers were supposed to be members of the Nazi Party – before joining the SA could be regarded as a means to secure employment – membership in the organisation had fluctuated wildly: available statistics point to a membership turnover of perhaps 20-25 per cent in a single month; the SA was an organisation in which someone who had been a member for six months was an experienced veteran. The turnover was all the greater when, after January 1933, the SA was opened officially to people who were not party members, and membership rose from roughly half a million at the time of Hitler's appointment as Reich Chancellor to about three million a year later.

Nevertheless, despite the difficulties a few general comments can be made: Nazi activists were young – the vast majority of SA men, over 80 per cent, were under thirty; a large proportion were workers (not surprising considering the age structure of the SA), even if, relative to the population as a whole, workers were not really over-represented; many were unemployed, particularly those who made their homes in 'SA barracks' and formed the activist backbone of the organisation; and all, obviously, were male.

This last point, while perhaps obvious, is important. Nazi activism was a predominantly male preserve; Nazi violence was a product of a political culture which praised 'male' virtues of toughness and standing one's ground. It was a great achievement of the Nazi movement that it so successfully channelled the violent behaviour of young men into domestic politics. Indeed, it is possible to see the violence of the Nazis (and of their opponents) as the arrival in the political arena of the sorts of gang violence and fighting which are quite common in modern industrial societies – something which Eve Rosenhaft has shown so brilliantly in her recent work on Communist street fighters during the final Weimar years. The violent behaviour of the young man out to prove his virility, clothed in and justified by the language of radical nationalism and anti-Marxism proved an extremely powerful political weapon. Thus, far from being (as Peter Merkl has suggested in a recent article) the product of a 'deviant' culture or the expression of personal frustrations of disturbed 'individuals of violent propensity', the Nazis' achievement in attracting and mobilising hundreds of thousands of young men to their cause was due to their success in building upon mainstream social values.

Yet while Nazi activism may have been an expression of an unexceptionally violent culture, the behaviour of the storm troopers was exceptional. Not every advanced industrial society has had to cope with hundreds of thousands of young men organised in uniformed formations battling it out on the streets; not every advanced industrial society has settled political differences with the concentration camp. It was the specific social and economic context of Germany during the early 1930s which allowed the National Socialist movement to grow and to exploit the energies of hundreds of thousands of people. Among the most important factors which made this possible was mass unemployment. While the great mass of the unemployed no doubt reacted to their fate with resignation, frustration and apathy – which has been described and analysed so memorably in the justly famous study of The Unemployed of Marienthal – a large number of young men did not. It is clear that the sort of politics pursued by Nazi activists, a

politics which required a tremendous amount of time and energy, was hardly compatible with full-time employment. Only a minority of Nazi supporters may have conformed to the picture of the dedicated, 'fanatic' Nazi activist, the full-time 'political soldier' who often was housed in SA barracks and fed in SA soup kitchens, and who participated in rally after rally, march after march. But they were enough. The combination of mass unemployment, the breakdown of traditional political allegiances which characterised Weimar politics, and a culture which embraced violent aggressive values lifted the Nazi movement from relative obscurity to become the most successful practitioner of violent street politics that Germany had ever seen.

That said, it is important not to exaggerate the violent nature of Nazi politics and the importance of political violence in the Nazi capture of power. In the first place, as noted above, Hitler was not given the keys to the Reich Chancellory by violent storm troopers but by the 'old guard', keen to make a deal ensuring that Germany did not return to genuine democracy after the dismantling of the Weimar Constitution from 1930 onwards. Secondly, Nazi violence had its limits. Hitler had seen the folly in 1923 of openly courting confrontation with the forces of law and order, when his coup attempt died an ignominious death at the hands of the army in Munich; for sound tactical reasons the Nazi Party of the early 1930s, the mass movement, was committed to achieving power by legal means. And Nazi activists generally appreciated this. It is common for historians to stress how widespread Nazi violence was, but some thought also should be given to its limits. Nazi activists may have been 'fanatics', but they were not such fanatics as to stage frontal assaults on the state. Attacks by the SA on police stations or army barracks – that is upon targets where real resistance could be expected and whereby real issues of political power were at stake – were conspicuous by their absence. The storm troopers generally steered well clear of out-and-out terrorism, and the one time when this did erupt – in August 1932 – it was dealt with effectively by the police and soon repudiated by the Nazi leadership. A comparison with the events which accompanied the demise of parliamentary government in Turkey in a more recent decade – when thousands were killed in an orgy of political violence – or the campaigns of the IRA in Northern Ireland, suggests how limited was the violence in which the Nazis were engaged. The Nazi movement did not so much engage in the politics of terrorism as the politics of hooliganism.

Yet even this was paradoxical. Nazism may have mobilised violence and hooliganism, but it also did so in the defence of the social order. It simultaneously promised radical change and upholding of traditional values. It appealed to both roughness and respectability. The SA proved a draw both because it appealed to young men keen to prove their manliness and because it was a hierarchical organisation which put young men into uniforms and structured their lives. As the destroyer of Marxism it could pose as the defender of order; indeed, this pose of violence in the defence of order is one of the central paradoxes which explains the success of the Nazi movement both in attracting support and in being able to consolidate the dictatorship so quickly in 1933. As such, the politics of violence played a key role in the rise of the Nazi movement, and in the capture of power in 1933, but as the purge of 1934 indicates, its usefulness to Germany's new masters was limited. Once the grip of the Nazi dictatorship had been established, it was the turn of the SS.

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