

## The Purge of the SA Reconsidered: “An Old Putschist Trick”?

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EARLY in the morning of June 30, 1934, SA Chief of Staff Ernst Röhm and other leaders of the National Socialist storm troopers, the *Sturmabteilung* or SA, were arrested by Adolf Hitler in the Bavarian resort town, Bad Wiessee. Further arrests followed across Germany during the day. Many SA leaders, various German politicians, two generals, some dissident Nazis, and some of Röhm’s friends were shot. Finally, Röhm himself was killed late the next day. This was the only violent internal party purge to occur in the entire history of Nazism. Some ninety people were killed, with the greatest proportion being in Berlin, Munich, and Silesia.<sup>1</sup> At the time the purge was justified by the allegation that the SA leaders were plotting to overthrow Hitler, carry out a “second revolution,” and seize power in collusion with former Chancellor General von Schleicher (also shot) and with the aid of an unnamed foreign power (France). The need to rid the SA of corruption and decadence was emphasized; in this context Hitler’s alleged discovery of Röhm’s homosexuality was publicized.<sup>2</sup>

Historians now agree that Hitler moved against the SA to retain army support, especially for the presidential succession. The military leadership in turn acquiesced to Hitler combining the offices of president and chancellor on

Earlier versions of the arguments in this article have been set out in papers given at various conferences of the German Studies Association over the past decade. I am grateful to my fellow panelists and audiences for their helpful suggestions and comments. The late Dr. Otto Gritschneider allowed me full access to the files he gathered on the purge. He, Dr. Reinhard Weber of the Staatsarchiv München, and Mr. Hermann Weiss of the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* all shared their expertise on the period with me, for which I am very grateful. I also appreciate the comments of an anonymous reader for *Central European History* and my colleagues, Professor Peter Dennis, Dr. John Connor, and Dr. Craig Stockings, on an earlier version of the article.

<sup>1</sup>Historians began by assuming that large numbers were killed in this purge. Figures of up to 150–200 were mentioned: Heinz Höhne, *Mordsache Röhm. Hitlers Durchbruch zur Alleinherrschaft 1933–1934* (Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag, 1984), 319; Höhne gives a figure of eighty-five dead, 319–321. Gritschneider lists ninety dead: Otto Gritschneider, “*Der Führer hat Sie zum Tode verurteilt...*” *Hitlers “Röhm-Putsch”-Morde vor Gericht* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1993), 60–2.

<sup>2</sup>See the extracts in Max Domarus, *Hitler Reden und Proklamationen 1932–1945. Kommentiert von einem deutschen Zeitgenossen, Band I Triumph, Erster Halbband 1932–1934* (Munich: Süddeutscher Verlag, 1965), 397–402.

President von Hindenburg's death in August 1934. The SA never exercised power in the National Socialist state again.<sup>3</sup>

This event has become known in English as the "Night of the Long Knives." Insofar as witnesses survived, the story of what happened on June 30 and July 1 has been reconstructed, mainly from testimony in postwar trials, and is little disputed. Historians do not disagree on what happened or how but on *why* it happened.

This article will begin by summarizing the changing historical interpretations of the purge. It will then examine the particular evidentiary difficulties that bedevil historical study of this event and illustrate how these continue to skew the historical interpretations of the purge. It will suggest paths for further research. It argues that historical interpretations of the purge are still subtly influenced by the Nazis' own justification for the killings. A new paradigm is needed and fresh insights required.

Tensions over the role of the SA after the Nazi takeover of power came to a head in 1934. Röhm attempted to give the SA a military role, though it is not clear whether he wanted the SA to replace the army or form a large militia alongside the army as in Fascist Italy. In February 1934 Hitler clearly sided with the army and rejected the concept of an SA militia. Hitler and Röhm met in early June and, as a result, Röhm went on sick leave. Röhm announced that the entire SA would take leave in July 1934 in an effort to ease the tensions. On June 29, 1934, Hitler, who was traveling in the Rhineland, was brought evidence of an SA plot against him and decided to purge the organization.<sup>4</sup>

Historians' interpretations focus on this prehistory of June 30—why Hitler moved against the SA and the origins of that decision. From the earliest postwar accounts onward, the interaction of five components of the German political system has been seen as bringing about the purge. The first component was Röhm and the SA as conscious rivals to the army and as alleged supporters of a second revolution. The second was the army leadership and President von Hindenburg, who brought pressure on Hitler to curb or destroy the SA. The third was the Nazis' conservative political allies, particularly in the circle around Vice-Chancellor von Papen, and their intrigues. A fourth component was other Nazi leaders (notably Hermann Goering, Heinrich Himmler, and Reinhard Heydrich) and their role in increasing hostility to the SA. The fifth and final component was the equivocal role of Hitler. Historians differ whether Hitler instigated the moves against Röhm and knowingly misled Röhm, or whether Hitler himself was misled by Goering and the SS leadership. Some

<sup>3</sup>Norbert Frei, *National Socialist Rule in Germany: The Führer State 1933–1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 17, 27; Richard Bessel, *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism: The Stormtroopers in Eastern Germany 1925–1934* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 146, 147.

<sup>4</sup>This overview of the lead-up to the purge is based on Frei, *National Socialist Rule in Germany*, Part I; and Eleanor Hancock, *Ernst Röhm: Hitler's SA Chief of Staff* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), chap. 14 and 15.

historians stress the friendship between Röhm and Hitler to explain the bloody outcome of their clash.<sup>5</sup>

Recently, the balance between the same five components has shifted. Historians remain uncertain about Hitler's role, but there is an increasing tendency to see Hitler as keeping his options open for as long as possible and only deciding against the SA in late June 1934, after which time he consciously deceived and manipulated Röhm.<sup>6</sup> Even then, historians are undecided as to whether he was deceived into believing there was an imminent putsch on June 29, 1934.<sup>7</sup>

Lothar Machtan has argued that Hitler as well as Röhm was homosexual and that in 1933–34 Röhm was striving for a position of power by blackmailing Hitler about his sexuality. In the purge of the SA, Machtan contends, Hitler had all who knew of his sexuality killed.<sup>8</sup> This interpretation has not found wider acceptance, and there are a number of problems with Machtan's use of evidence and the logic of his argument. How could Röhm threaten to publicize Hitler's sexuality in a country where the media was controlled by others? It is also not the case that all those who allegedly knew of Hitler's sexuality were killed in the purge.

Röhm's enemies inside the Nazi Party are still pictured as consciously plotting against the SA, and as distorting and inventing material to increase suspicions of Röhm.<sup>9</sup> George Browder, though, offers an alternative explanation. He argues 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 the light of this. In a process similar to the misunderstandings and misjudgments of the Cold War, defensive measures by the SA were then genuinely misinterpreted as offensive and suspicious.<sup>10</sup>

After the war German military leaders needed to justify their own involvement in the process that led to the removal of the final institutional barriers to National

<sup>5</sup>Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974), 468.

<sup>6</sup>Peter Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone. Geschichte der SA* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1989), 212–14; George C. Browder, *Foundations of the Nazi Police State: The Formation of Sipo and SD* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 140.

<sup>7</sup>Höhne, *Mordsache Röhm*, 245–46, 260.

<sup>8</sup>For the argument on Hitler's sexuality, see Lothar Machtan, *Hitlers Geheimnis. Das Doppelleben eines Diktators* (Berlin: Alexander Fest Verlag, 2001), *passim*; on the lead-up to the purge and the purge, see 238–49. On Machtan's use of evidence, see Walter Reich, "All the Führer's Men" (review of Machtan, *The Hidden Hitler*), *The New York Times*, December 16, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/16/books/all-the-führer-s-men.html> (accessed January 17, 2010); Ron Rosenbaum, "Queer as Volk? A new book claims Hitler was a closet case," (review of Machtan, *The Hidden Hitler*), *Slate*, posted December 3, 2001, <http://www.slate.com/id/2059222/> (accessed January 17, 2010); Geoffrey G. Giles, "Fuehrer Fantasy," *The Washington Post*, November 25, 2001, 4–5. For an argument that blackmail would have been implausible behavior by Röhm, see Hancock, *Röhm*, 163.

<sup>9</sup>Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 209.

<sup>10</sup>Browder, *Foundations of the Nazi Police State*, 142–43. See also Bessel, *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism*, 132.

Socialist rule. The viewpoint of the army initially found sympathy among historians such as Sir John Wheeler-Bennett and Robert J. O'Neill.<sup>11</sup> More recently, there has been a shift to attributing an originating role in anti-SA moves to the army leadership, particularly Walter von Reichenau, then head of the ministerial office in the Reichswehr Ministry. Von Fallois has demonstrated the extent to which the army leadership was an early and active participant in the moves against the SA.<sup>12</sup> The "threat" that the SA posed to the army served Hitler's purposes in ensuring that the military leadership conceded to the nazification of the armed forces. Importantly, the moves against the SA leadership were the most violent in those regions where the SA had not willingly cooperated with the army in border protection training before 1933.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, recent accounts emphasize the key role of the third component, the conservatives in von Papen's office. They were planning to check National Socialist power by securing the intervention of President von Hindenburg and the army leadership to reestablish the monarchy. Norbert Frei and Peter Longerich have argued that these plots intensified the problems facing Hitler, because the conservatives also tried to use the threat of the SA to force the army to intervene and curb Hitler's powers. As a result, the army leadership was presented with alarmist information about the SA from two sides. Von Papen's Marburg speech of June 17 that criticized National Socialist excesses, and his subsequent attempt to visit Hindenburg, brought the crisis to a head. Hitler had to remove this threat but was unable to do so directly because of this group's links to Hindenburg and the military.<sup>14</sup> (Hitler alluded to conservative opposition to Nazism in his Reichstag speech justifying the purge.<sup>15</sup>)

A move against the SA provided the perfect cover to move against the conservative opposition. Frei argues that this was "essentially Hitler's only remaining choice in the spring of 1934."<sup>16</sup> The conservative plotters were killed together with some politicians they intended to include in a reformed cabinet (e.g., Catholic Action leader Erich Klausener). The new emphasis on the actions of this group is an explicit attempt to explain why this crisis, alone of all National Socialist "competition over domination," had a violent outcome.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics 1918–1945*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1964), 320–21; Robert J. O'Neill, *The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933–1939*, 2nd ed. (London: Cassell, 1968), 44–46, 53.

<sup>12</sup>Immo von Fallois, *Kalkül und Illusion. Der Machtkampf zwischen Reichswehr und SA während der Röhm-Krise 1934* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1994), passim; Browder, *Foundations of the Nazi Police State*, 141 and 289–90, note 5.

<sup>13</sup>Bessel, *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism*, 74.

<sup>14</sup>For the argument summarized in this paragraph, see Frei, *National Socialist Rule in Germany*, 15–21; Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 208, 211–15; Heinz Höhne, *Die Zeit der Illusionen. Hitler und die Anfänge des 3. Reiches 1933 bis 1936* (Düsseldorf: Econ Verlag, 1991), 209–212.

<sup>15</sup>Domarus, *Hitler Reden und Proklamationen*, Band I, Erster Halbband, 411.

<sup>16</sup>Frei, *National Socialist Rule in Germany*, 17.

<sup>17</sup>Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 212–14.

Frei added a further factor in the analysis of the political situation in 1934, that of “a crisis of the regime.” The regime also faced popular resentment. Economic recovery was not yet apparent and discontent was increased by severe wage cuts. Supporters were dissatisfied by the regime’s failure to deliver on its promises. Nazis and non-Nazis alike were critical of Nazi violence and corruption; SA excesses contributed to this criticism. In many ways the SA acted as a lightning rod for all aspects of the regime that were unpopular. The consequent loss of support may have emboldened the conservative opposition. Frei suggests that Hitler handled the crisis by adopting a variation of the *Flucht nach vorn*.<sup>18</sup> The SA, therefore, served as a scapegoat for the party’s excesses in 1933–34.<sup>19</sup>

The purge helped to ensure a resurgence of Hitler’s popularity. Because he was seen by the public as acting decisively against excesses, the purge crucially consolidated the perception that as *Führer* Hitler stood above and separate from the party. The “crisis of the regime” is an important new element and draws on more wide-ranging work about German society under Nazism. Does this explanation, though, represent a “compulsion to continuity” on the part of historians of twentieth-century Germany? Historians have suggested that Germany faced crises of the regime in 1912–14, 1929, 1934, and 1939.

What of historians’ views of the other side, Röhm and the SA? Here there has been less change than one might expect despite considerable recent research on the SA.<sup>20</sup> The SA had a predominantly working-class membership, led by mostly middle-class senior officers.<sup>21</sup> Historians still debate what proportion of the new members who joined in 1933–34 were predominantly ex-Socialists or ex-Communists, as was often suggested by those seeking to excuse the purge.<sup>22</sup> Even more of these new members were men from other paramilitary groups or unemployed men who sought economic opportunities.<sup>23</sup> Historians

<sup>18</sup>For this argument, see Frei, *National Socialist Rule in Germany*, 3–9; Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 207–8.

<sup>19</sup>Domarus, *Hitler Reden und Proklamationen*, Band I, Erster Halbband, 400, note 138; 402; 414, note 155.

<sup>20</sup>See Thomas Balistier, *Gewalt und Ordnung. Kalkül und Faszination der SA* (Münster: Verlag Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1989); Bessel, *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism*; Bruce Campbell, *The SA Generals and the Rise of Nazism* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998); Conan Fischer, *Stormtroopers: A Social, Economic, and Ideological Analysis, 1929–35* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983); Thomas D. Grant, *Stormtroopers and Crisis in the Nazi Movement: Activism, Ideology, and Dissolution* (London: Routledge, 2004); Mathilde Jamin, *Zwischen den Klassen. Zur Sozialstruktur der SA-Führerschaft* (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer Verlag, 1984); Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*; Peter H. Merkl, *Making of a Stormtrooper* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); Sven Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde. Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im italienischen Squadristus und in der deutschen SA* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2002); Eric G. Reiche, *Development of the SA in Nurnberg, 1922–1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>21</sup>Fischer, *Stormtroopers*, chap. 3; Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 81–93, 144–46.

<sup>22</sup>Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 113; Timothy S. Brown, *Weimar Radicals: Nazis and Communists between Authenticity and Performance* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 136–39.

<sup>23</sup>Bessel, *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism*, 125–6; Campbell, *SA Generals*, 120–21, 124–26; Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 188–94, 199.

recognize that the SA leadership had to respond to pressures from below and that many of Röhm's statements and policies in 1934 were designed to integrate and meet the needs of this heterogeneous membership.<sup>24</sup> There is, however, no evidence that Röhm's political goals were influenced by the SA rank and file.

Nevertheless, the SA leadership, with the exception of Viktor Lutze, is itself still treated by historians as a united group. Here historians have departed from the picture Hitler painted of divisions within the SA leadership.<sup>25</sup> The role of Edmund Heines, the only SA leader who seemed to recognize the dangers facing its leaders by June 1934, requires more investigation.<sup>26</sup> Are these questions not being asked because the evidence does not exist to answer them, or does the evidence exist if it were sought?

There has been some attention given to what the purge indicates about the SA as an organization and its leadership. Attention has focused on its amateurishness and its political blindness.<sup>27</sup> What the crisis indicates about the SA as an organization might be explored more.

Disapproval of Röhm's homosexuality has declined, although there is still a tendency to treat the hostile reactions of others to his homosexuality as "understandable." Such reactions may not have been probed sufficiently for their contribution to the crisis. Homophobia may have prevented other leaders from avoiding misunderstandings with Röhm. A certain constraint on the part of some leaders in their relations with Röhm may have made it harder to dismiss misunderstandings at an early stage.

In their analysis of the SA, historians have agreed that Röhm was not plotting a putsch, that in part he was the victim of his own political mistakes.<sup>28</sup> They emphasized Röhm's tactical blunders, his overblown rhetoric and overconfidence, and his miscalculation that he had Hitler's support. Koehl judged that "Röhm remained an amateur to the last: the amateur leader of an amateur army."<sup>29</sup> This interpretation overlooks two points. First, Röhm did tone down his rhetoric and pressure at Hitler's request in June 1934 when he went on sick leave and prepared to send the SA on leave in July.<sup>30</sup> Second, it overlooked Röhm's characteristic pattern of behavior in confrontations with Hitler—to back down, to walk away, and not to fight. This can be seen as early as 1925 when he gave up the

<sup>24</sup>Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 191–203, 206; Fischer, *Stormtroopers*, 166–67.

<sup>25</sup>On Hitler in his July 13, 1934, Reichstag speech, see Domarus, *Hitler Reden und Proklamationen*, Band I, Erster Halbband, 416.

<sup>26</sup>O'Neill, *The German Army and the Nazi Party*, 47.

<sup>27</sup>See, for example, Bessel, *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism*, 145–46; R. L. Koehl, *The Black Corps: The Structure and Power Struggles of the Nazi SS* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 93, 95, 101.

<sup>28</sup>Frei, *National Socialist Rule in Germany*, 13; Höhne, *Die Zeit der Illusionen*, 200; Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 203.

<sup>29</sup>Koehl, *Black Corps*, 97.

<sup>30</sup>Hancock, *Röhm*, 150.

leadership of the Frontbann.<sup>31</sup> Hitler himself was the source that this was Röhm's preferred way out of the crisis. When Hitler justified the killings to the cabinet, he accused Röhm of seeking to blackmail him by offering his resignation as SA chief of staff.<sup>32</sup>

Historians' evidence has had to be almost entirely based on the testimony of those who initiated, were involved in, or acquiesced in the moves against the SA, predominantly police, military, and Nazi sources. Some witnesses, such as Gisevius, who subsequently became associated with the resistance to Hitler, may have been regarded as retrospectively more reliable because of this later role. To a lesser extent historians have also been influenced by the accounts of contemporary German political exiles.<sup>33</sup>

With the exception of David Irving, who treated Hitler's suspicion that Röhm was plotting against him as justified, historians generally have not accepted the official National Socialist explanation for the moves against the SA.<sup>34</sup> Historians have nonetheless been indirectly influenced by the official Nazi story, to the extent that they have accepted that the clash with the SA was unavoidable, that Röhm's plans would lead him to challenge Hitler's authority, and that Röhm planned a second revolution.

Historians have recognized the corporate self-interest driving the army leadership's reactions, but not the impact of the army's interpretation—that the SA was a threat—on their own analyses. Despite the alarmist talk, there was no evidence that the SA was planning a putsch. In any case, could the military really seriously have feared the SA? Any SA putsch would have been opposed by the 100,000-man army, the police, and the SS. The SA leadership could not have relied on those of its members who had been incorporated from the *Stahlhelm*. The army was also far better equipped and trained than the SA. The weapons holdings registered in *Landespolizei* seizures in Franconia after the purge suggest that the claims that the SA was well-armed were exaggerated.<sup>35</sup> While Röhm supported the arming of some SA units, he ordered the organization to put social needs before acquiring firearms.<sup>36</sup> The evidence that the SA was stockpiling weapons comes from military sources.<sup>37</sup> It is not necessarily trustworthy.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 80–1.

<sup>32</sup>Dr. Thomsen, "Niederschrift über die Ministerbesprechung am 3. Juli 1934 vorm. 10 Uhr," BAR R43I/1469, 5.

<sup>33</sup>See, for example, Wheeler-Bennett's use of Otto Strasser in Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power*, 318, 320, 322.

<sup>34</sup>David Irving, *The War Path: Hitler's Germany 1933–1939* (London: Michael Joseph, 1978), 33–40.

<sup>35</sup>BA MA RH57/9 and BHSA/KA Landespolizei Nürnberg-Fürth Kommando Bund 2.

<sup>36</sup>Fischer, *Stormtroopers*, 167–68.

<sup>37</sup>Irving, *The War Path*, 271, notes; O'Neill, *The German Army and the Nazi Party*, 50 and 267, note 267.

Although the SA was large, with more than 4.5 million members in 1934, it was disorganized and heterogeneous. Most of its members had joined in 1933 and had no strong loyalty to Röhm or the SA leadership itself.<sup>38</sup> Most of them would have put obedience to Hitler above loyalty to Röhm if they had to choose. This can be seen in the ease with which they accepted the purge. Such behavior in itself indicates that no takeover was planned.<sup>39</sup> In addition Röhm, who had experience of several unsuccessful putsches in the early 1920s and of a successful coup in Bolivia, knew what a successful revolt would entail. The evidence suggests rather that he was preparing to compromise or back down.<sup>40</sup>

The military leadership's claim to have feared that Röhm's plans for a militia would succeed also seems unlikely in view of Hitler's repeated assurances that he did not support the concept. This was one issue on which Hitler had clearly taken a stand.<sup>41</sup> Could army leaders really have believed the SA leadership capable of posing a threat, especially once they had seen their laziness and lack of military professionalism up close? The SA leadership even showed a lack of awareness of the political opportunities open to them, neglecting the possibility of taking over the police during the *Gleichschaltung*.<sup>42</sup> The military leaders appear to have been unwilling to tolerate even the existence of an alternative military concept and found the idea of a militia particularly threatening, but there was little real evidence or basis for their fears. At the greatest stretch—and even if the SA formed the basis of a militia clearly subordinated to the army—it is possible that the army was concerned that it would have been a rival for resources as rearmament progressed.

Advised that the army's pre-purge preparations were based on the fear of an alleged SA putsch, Silesian SA leader Edmund Heines commented that "it was an old putschist trick" to accuse others of what one was planning oneself.<sup>43</sup> The idea that Röhm intended a second revolution and that the SA as an organization supported this persists among historians, although their own research has undercut some of the basis for it.<sup>44</sup> This idea appears to have originated with

<sup>38</sup>Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 188, 193–94; Campbell, *SA Generals*, 120–21, 123–26.

<sup>39</sup>The reactions of the Munich SA leaders on the evening of June 29–30 are evidence of this: Frau Martina Schmid to Staatsanwalt Weiss, August 12, 1949, Gritschneider Papiere Band 2, 1–2; "Vorgänge am 30.6.1934," attachment to April 4, 1950, K. 7 B, "Vernehmungsniederschrift," Gritschneider Papiere Band 2, 3.

<sup>40</sup>Luetgebrune as reported by von Salomon in Ernst von Salomon, *The Answers of Ernst von Salomon to the 131 Questions in the Allied Military Government "Fragebogen"* (London: Putnam, 1954), 273–74; Robert Bergmann, Altdorf to the Generalstaatsanwaltschaft München zu Händen des Herrn Staatsanwaltes Weiss, May 14, 1949, SAM STAW 28793, 3; Joseph Nyomarkay, *Charisma and Factionalism in the Nazi Party* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1967), 132–33, 134.

<sup>41</sup>O'Neill, *The German Army and the Nazi Party*, 33, 39–41.

<sup>42</sup>Browder, *Foundations of the Nazi Police State*, 66.

<sup>43</sup>Quoted in May 17, 1949, K. 7B, Munich, signatures, "Vernehmungsniederschrift," SAM STAW 28793, 5.

<sup>44</sup>Most recently Brown, *Weimar Radicals*, 129–30.

exiled left-wing German opposition groups, and was echoed by Hitler's claim in his July 13 speech to the Reichstag that some SA leaders wanted to turn revolution into a permanent condition.<sup>45</sup> Surprisingly in so critical a historian, Browder even referred to the Second Revolution Movement as if this were a united group, representing an agreed tendency.<sup>46</sup> Even Longerich claimed Röhm planned a second revolution, though he also saw Röhm's concept of revolution as rhetorical with little political content.<sup>47</sup> Röhm's speeches in 1934 confirmed that his view of revolution was no different from that of Hitler or other Nazi leaders. Röhm spoke of the Nazi revolution as continuing, as Hitler himself did in January and March 1934, not of a new or second revolution.<sup>48</sup> In Röhm's 1934 speeches, the continuing revolution was the ideological transformation of German hearts and minds.<sup>49</sup> Röhm foresaw the SA combining the later ideological role of the SS as well as provider of premilitary and ideological training for all German males.

In his speeches in 1934 Röhm was careful to stress that the SA and the Reichswehr had distinct and separate roles and that the SA did not encroach upon the Reichswehr's territory.<sup>50</sup> Röhm's ideas on military and foreign policy may have differed from those of Hitler or the military, but it is noteworthy that he maintained a preference for the educated and for officers and war veterans as higher SA officers, and that many of his ideas on the armed forces as set out in his autobiography were not terribly radical. Röhm's ideas of a militia were vague and ill-defined, probably a more politicized army. At the moment, our knowledge of Röhm's proposals for the army depends on the testimony of Defense Minister Blomberg; we have only his version of what was contained in Röhm's memorandum of February 1934.

Röhm's political ideas have been obscured by the conflicting evidence about them provided by interested parties, arising out of attempts to justify his enemies and denigrate him. Different witnesses have argued that Röhm was in favor *and* opposed to rapprochement with the U.S.S.R., was too ideological *and* insufficiently ideological, supported more radical anti-Semitism *and* opposed the regime's anti-Semitism. The testimony of surviving witnesses varies on all these questions. Many postwar witnesses claimed either a radicalism or a moderation

<sup>45</sup> Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 147–48. Domarus, *Hitler Reden und Proklamationen*, Band I, Erster Halbband, 411–12.

<sup>46</sup> Browder, *Foundations of the Nazi Police State*, 81. He always capitalizes Second Revolution; see *ibid.*, 127, 138, 143.

<sup>47</sup> Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 180, and on Röhm's political ideas, see also 144–45.

<sup>48</sup> Domarus, *Hitler Reden und Proklamationen*, Band I, Erster Halbband, 356, 371.

<sup>49</sup> This is clear in Röhm's speeches from December 1933 to June 1934 as reported in the newspaper *Der SA-Mann*. See, for example, "Die S.A. ist die Ideenträgerin der deutschen Revolution. Die große fundamentale Rede des Stabschefs Röhm vor dem Diplomatischen Korps," *Der SA-Mann*, April 28, 1934, 1, in which Röhm defines the National Socialist Revolution as "a process of ideological education."

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Ernst Röhm, "Die S.A. im neuen Staat," *Der SA-Mann*, December 16, 1933, 1, 5; "Die S.A. ist die Ideenträgerin der deutschen Revolution," *Der SA-Mann*, April 28, 1934, 4.

unsupported by contemporary evidence. Hoffmann-Koepping, Heines's adjutant, for example, argued that Röhm's private holidays in Italy served the purpose of allowing Röhm to make connections with the Vatican, and that he was not a monarchist.<sup>51</sup> Other friends claimed he was anti-Italian, which was also not supported by contemporary sources.<sup>52</sup> On closer examination Röhm's views tend to be less radical than often assumed.<sup>53</sup> The private criticisms Röhm made of Hitler in February 1934, which so concerned Lutze, may have been the private letting off steam of an old Nazi who felt he could speak critically of Hitler in a way that shocked a less intimate or well-established subordinate. (Goebbels, too, could be privately critical of Hitler.<sup>54</sup>)

Equally the evidence suggests that—whatever the revolutionary rhetoric of some local SA leaders and men—there were no plans for an uprising.<sup>55</sup> Rather the SA's top leader was on sick leave, and the entire organization was due to be on leave in August. Even those in the SA leadership who suspected that moves against the organization were imminent reacted by seeking to bring the matter to Röhm's attention rather than with direct action. Some of the evidence to the contrary came from witnesses such as Rudolf Diels, the first head of the Gestapo. In Diels's testimony in the 1958 trial of those who killed the SA leaders, he claimed, falsely, to have been closer to the SA leadership than Himmler and Heydrich.<sup>56</sup> Recent studies of Diels's role in the Third Reich cast greater doubt on his reliability as a witness.<sup>57</sup> Gisevius's reliability as a witness is also due for revision.<sup>58</sup>

The nature of the sources available to historians makes these assumptions unsurprising. The destruction of evidence and the desire of those implicated to cover their tracks meant that the Bavarian court that investigated Röhm's death after 1945 concluded that the SA leaders did have plans to change the state by force but not on June 30.<sup>59</sup> Historians have not shown a great self-conscious awareness of the problems of these sources. Browder's work in *Foundations of*

<sup>51</sup>Günther Hayo Hoffmann-Koepping, *Ich überlebte die Röhm-Revolution. Ein Tatsachenbericht über die Vorgänge des 30. Juni 1934* (Hamburg, 1949), Institut für Zeitgeschichte MS 594, 132, 134.

<sup>52</sup>Hans Betz's testimony at the Lippert-Dietrich trial quoted in Waldemar Schweitzer, "Die deutsche Bartholomäusnacht. Die Zeugenaussagen in Münchner Prozess gegen Dietrich und Lippert," *Deutsche Tagespost*, no. 56, May 14, 1957, press clipping in Stadt Archiv München ZA Pers. Röhm.

<sup>53</sup>Hancock, *Röhm*, 171–72; 227, note 5.

<sup>54</sup>Eleanor Hancock, *The National Socialist Leadership and Total War, 1941–45* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 137.

<sup>55</sup>Here ex-communists may have played a role. See Brown, *Weimar Radicals*, 125–30, 136–39.

<sup>56</sup>"Dietrich will peinliche Zeugen nicht erkennen," *8 Uhr-Blatt*, May 8, 1957, press clipping in Stadt Archiv München ZA Pers. Röhm.

<sup>57</sup>On Diels as a witness, see Browder, *Foundations of the Nazi Police State*, 85, 119, 126.

<sup>58</sup>Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten. Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2003), 306, note 74.

<sup>59</sup>Gritschneider, "Der Führer hat Sie zum Tode verurteilt," 88–90.

the *Nazi Police State*, which is based on sophisticated source criticism, is a notable exception. While historians are clearly aware of the interests driving the non-Nazi actors in the crisis, they have not carried this over into their approach to the sources and analysis of the evidence.

The story of the other side has not been told and can never fully be told. Few sources or witnesses survived. For example, there were no witnesses to the final meeting between Hitler and Röhm in June 1934. Röhm's own official and private papers, which might have cast light on his actions and motives, were seized and have disappeared. They seem to have been destroyed, unless they turn up in the Russian archives.<sup>60</sup> In addition to the presumed destruction of all but routine SA papers, all offices involved in the moves against the SA were ordered to destroy their records of this action.<sup>61</sup> A few files of telegram messages to the police in southern Germany provide our sole glimpse inside this process.<sup>62</sup>

Almost all Röhm's close political friends were executed. Those who survived by chance spent the period until 1945 seeking to prove their loyalty to Nazism and regain the positions they had lost. Röhm's friend and Nazi dissident, Kurt Ludecke, attempted a posthumous vindication of Röhm in *I Knew Hitler*, but was not in a position to shed much light on events.<sup>63</sup> Röhm's successor, Viktor Lutze, died in 1943 and was not available for postwar questioning. The testimony of Röhm's few personal friends who were still alive after 1945, men such as Robert Bergmann and Graf Leon du Moulin-Eckart, were never sought out by historians. Röhm's lawyer, Walter Luetgebrune, might also have been a "witness for the defense" for Röhm, but he was not questioned either.<sup>64</sup> The reason for this omission is obscure. Röhm's homosexuality had been the subject of much publicity both during his life and after his death. Was the failure to interview Röhm's friends a product of homophobia?<sup>65</sup>

Röhm's family always rejected the claims that he was planning to overthrow Hitler, but historians have followed Mandy Rice-Davies in assuming that "they would, wouldn't they?"<sup>66</sup> Where this aspect of National Socialism is concerned, the voices of the victims have not been heard. Singularly in the history of Nazism,

<sup>60</sup>Hancock, *Röhm*, 173.

<sup>61</sup>Hans Bernd Gisevius, *To the Bitter End* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1948), 178.

<sup>62</sup>Telegrams in BA MA RH57/9, BHSA/KA Landespolizei München Kommando Bund I, BHSA/KA Landespolizei Inspektion Bund 7 Akt 7258a, Bund 54 Akt 7975a, BHSA/KA Landespolizei Nürnberg-Fürth Kommando Bund 2 and SAM LRA 734035. On the destruction of evidence relating to the purge, see also Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten*, 220, note 35.

<sup>63</sup>Kurt G. W. Ludecke, *I Knew Hitler: The Story of a Nazi Who Escaped the Blood Purge* (London: Jarrolds, 1938), 672–89.

<sup>64</sup>See Luetgebrune's comments on the background to the putsch reported by Ernst von Salomon in von Salomon, "Fragebogen," 272–74.

<sup>65</sup>See, for example, Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power*, 310, 322.

<sup>66</sup>"He would, wouldn't he?," Mandy Rice Davies, June 29, 1963, quoted in Elizabeth Knowles, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 273.

its victims were themselves Nazis. Perhaps for this reason historians have not felt much of an obligation to them.

Up to now, therefore, the victors have shaped the writing of the history of June 30, 1934. This is perhaps the inevitable outcome of the destruction of Röhm's papers and the deaths of the SA leadership. It is uncertain, however, whether the surviving evidence is so skewed that no other view can be derived from it. Historians need far more to adopt the approaches of source criticism, read the evidence against the grain, go behind the evidence, or possibly even construct an urtext of the original evidence. An artificial exercise in temporarily reconstructing the story from the point of view of the SA leadership, for example, might highlight the distortions of the existing version. This is not to suggest that Röhm and his colleagues should be seen as martyrs. Historians' awareness of the SA's own violence and murders is another reason they have felt no need to recover the voice of these victims.

While power struggles were common in the National Socialist state, this was the only such struggle to end violently. This singularity is largely taken for granted by historians and might bear further investigation itself. The focus of the explanation for this outcome of the power struggle needs to shift from Röhm's miscalculations to Hitler's response. Did the crisis arise out of Hitler's procrastination? Was it a result of Hitler's tendency to delay decision making and then hit out violently? Or was it, as Nyomarkay suggests, a result of the very nature of Hitler's charismatic authority?<sup>67</sup>

If historians were to free themselves as much as possible from the Nazi justifications of the purge, how might this alter their view of the causes of the purge itself? Given the paucity of documentation, how can study of the purge progress? A number of possibilities exist. The first is to make greater use of the archive assembled in the postwar Bavarian investigation of the executions on June 30 and July 1, 1934, in Munich. Otto Gritschneider and I have drawn on these, but only for a study of the postwar trials of those involved and a biography of Röhm, respectively. The files contain extensive interviews with surviving witnesses and may yield fresh insights if cross-checked with other evidence. More use can also be made of the judicious assessments of evidence by the public prosecutor Karl Weiss.<sup>68</sup>

Gritschneider's study in 1958 of the trial of those responsible focused on the legal implications of the case. The testimonies and witness statements of those involved in planning and carrying out the purge, the conduct of the trial and its verdict, and the press coverage of the trial all constitute evidence for a

<sup>67</sup>Nyomarkay, *Charisma and Factionalism in the Nazi Party*, 35–7, 40, 42–3, 46–7, 145–46.

<sup>68</sup>July 4, 1956, Weiß, Erster Staatsanwalt, Im Auftrag, Der Generalstaatsanwalt, an die Strafkammer des Landgerichts München I, "VIII 3324/55(4) Betreff: Strafverfahren gegen Josef Dietrich und Michael Lippert wegen Beihilfe zum Mord (Mordaktion vom 30. Juni 1934). Schwurgerichtsanklage," GP Bd. 10 (*Institut für Zeitgeschichte* [hereafter IfZ] Fa 442/5 X), passim.

further case study of some of the continuities between the Third Reich and the postwar Federal Republic.

A second possibility is to follow the example set by Richard Bessel and to make greater use of regional records. Ulrich Herbert's biography of Best contains an overview of the purge in Munich, but more remains to be investigated about support for Röhm inside the Bavarian government.<sup>69</sup> Bavarian government files suggest that the Bavarian state government had a very realistic understanding of the pressures on the SA leadership from their membership and that it made various abortive efforts to help Röhm handle them.<sup>70</sup> Further examination is also needed of General Hans Doerr's postwar claim that the Bavarian *Reichsstatthalter* Ritter von Epp evaded Munich army commander General Adam's attempts to contact him on June 29 out of a desire not to be caught on the wrong side.<sup>71</sup>

Bessel's work indicates that use of German records now in Polish archives would assist examination of the purge of the SA in Silesia in particular.<sup>72</sup> This is probably the most understudied aspect of the purge, even though Breslau saw the greatest number of executions after Munich and Berlin. Why? This requires more analysis. A biography of Edmund Heines, if practicable, would help here. Do the various regional file holdings of the Landespolizei cast any further light on the purge? What were the regional differences in both the purge and the subsequent disciplinary proceedings within the SA? Do they support Bessel's argument that the violence of the purge depended on the state of SA-army relations in each region? Jüttner claimed that the army encouraged the SA to arm in border areas and the demilitarized Rhineland.<sup>73</sup> Do the Landespolizei records of weapons seizures substantiate this claim?

The purge was followed by a lengthy culling of SA officers and men that reduced the SA's size to 1.6 million men by October 1935. Men were dismissed for disciplinary offenses, political unreliability, and criminal behavior.<sup>74</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that some left the SA because they knew the

<sup>69</sup>Herbert's account of the causes of the purge is very conventional. See Ulrich Herbert, *Best. Biographische Studien über Radikalismus, Weltanschauung und Vernunft, 1903–1989* (Bonn: Verlag J. H. W. Dietz Nachfolger, 1996), 138–40, 143–47.

<sup>70</sup>“Niederschrift (Urschrift) über die Besprechung der Justizverwaltung mit dem Oberlandesgerichtspräsidenten und Generalstaatsanwälten am 5. und 6. April 1934,” BHSA/II MJu 16998, 22, 29, 37, 56, 69–70; “Vormerkung über die Besprechungen des Herrn Staatsministers Adolf Wagner mit den Herrn Reichsfinanzminister Graf Schwerin von Krosigk in Berlin am 13.4.1934 vorm. 10 Uhr,” BHSA/II Bayer. Gesandtschaft Berlin 1789, 5, 7.

<sup>71</sup>Hans Doerr, Madrid, to Dr. Krausnick, June 15, 1954, IfZ ZS 28, 1.

<sup>72</sup>Bessel, *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism*, viii, 193.

<sup>73</sup>Dr. Freiherr von Siegler, “Niederschrift der Unterredung des früheren SA-Obergruppenführers Max Jüttner, geb. am 11. Januar 1888, wohnhaft in München-Solln, Josefinenstr. 15, durchgeführt am 2. April 1952 in München mit Dr. Freiherrn v. Siegler im Auftrag und in den Räumen des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte,” May 8, 1952, IfZ ZS 251 Bd. I, 3–4.

<sup>74</sup>Longerich, *Die braunen Bataillone*, 221–23.

allegations against their leaders were false.<sup>75</sup> A study of this process might also cast some retrospective light on the tensions and disciplinary problems of the SA before June 30, 1934.

How did the purge of the SA influence political developments inside Germany? The results for the relative power and influence of the armed forces, the SS, and the SA has been explored as—to a lesser extent—has its influence on the persecution of male homosexuals.<sup>76</sup> Research is beginning on how the resulting “moral panic” about Röhm’s homosexuality influenced social policy more generally.<sup>77</sup>

Finally, another fruitful subject for analysis would be the “myths” of the purge—when and why they started, what they signify both about the motives of their originators and their perpetrators, those myths deliberately started by the instigators of the purge, those developed by both sides after the war, and those that have developed in the popular mind. The reasons that so much credence was given to rumors and innuendo about the SA could be investigated. The incoherence of the Nazi “cover story” for the purge needs greater probing, and Hitler’s own shifting justifications of his actions and his criticisms of the SA warrant closer examination. In this connection, Domarus’s suggestion that, in his explanations for June 30, Hitler projected onto the SA the failings of the Nazi Party is an interesting beginning.<sup>78</sup> What social and cultural developments does the persistence of these myths cast light on?

If historians’ analyses of June 30, 1934, and its preconditions are still influenced by the way the power struggle ended, this influence can also be seen in the terms they use to describe it. German historians tend to use either the “Röhm-Putsch” in inverted commas or the “*sogennante Röhm-Putsch*” (the so-called Röhm-Putsch). While “Röhm-Putsch” is questioned by the use of “so-called” or inverted commas, the phrase “Röhm-Putsch” is constantly repeated as a description and is conveyed more strongly than the words or punctuation that qualifies it. Slippage can occur, too, where the phrase is used without any qualification.<sup>79</sup>

Otto Strasser’s appellation of the German St. Bartholomew’s Night and Ludecke’s of the Blood Purge have never caught on, and the English world knows the purge as the Night of the Long Knives.<sup>80</sup> The striking nature of this phrase, like *Kristallnacht*, keeps it in use. It is taken from Hitler’s own Reichstag

<sup>75</sup>Eberstein, Karl Frhr. v., IFZ 539, 22.

<sup>76</sup>Burkhard Jellonnek, *Homosexuelle unter dem Hakenkreuz. Der Verfolgung von Homosexuellen im Dritten Reich* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1990), sections 6.1.3–6.4.4.

<sup>77</sup>Professor Derek Hastings at Oakland University is researching this. Personal communication from Professor Hastings.

<sup>78</sup>Domarus, *Hitler Reden und Proklamationen*, Band I, Erster Halbband, 400, note 138; 402; 414, note 155.

<sup>79</sup>For example, Heinz Höhne, *The Order of the Death’s Head: The Story of Hitler’s SS* (London: Pan, 1969), 85.

<sup>80</sup>Ludecke, *I Knew Hitler*, 672.

speech that justified the purge. In this speech Hitler claimed that in planning the so-called second revolution within the SA, the plotters told those SA leaders not in the know “that a second revolution was near at hand, that this revolution had no goal other than to give me back a free hand, that therefore the new and this time bloody uprising—‘the night of the long knives,’ as it was horribly called—met my own wishes.”<sup>81</sup> This description implies the bitter bit, those who sought violence were trumped with their own methods, and vengeance turned against those who planned to wreak it. In other words, it implies acceptance of the argument that the SA did plan a second revolution. These terms lend more legitimacy to what happened than is warranted. The Röhm purge or the SA purge might be a more accurate description to start with.

The existing descriptions and classifications mean that Hitler is still indirectly being given the right to judge those he ordered killed and to classify them as rebels and traitors. Hitler has retained the power to classify what he did, or rather, historians have left him this power. Just as historians have moved away from the generic use of the term “final solution,” so, too, we should move away from phrases that unwittingly reinforce the legitimacy of the events of June 30–July 1, 1934, and we should consider to what extent this influences and/or reflects an insufficiently critical attitude to the purge of the SA.

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<sup>81</sup>Reichstag speech of July 13, 1934, in Domarus, *Hitler Reden und Proklamationen*, Band I, Erster Halbband, 418.