

Night of The Long Knives (Nazi Blood Purge) June 30th to July 2nd, 1934Background

In the early summer of 1934 Adolf Hitler showing astute political manoeuvring, cunning and unscrupulous use of violence had practically Nazified Germany. There remained just one main obstacle to his goal of becoming absolute ruler; the Sturmabteilungen (SA) who were the Nazi party's own para-military division which by June 1934 had more than two million men. Led by Ernst Roehm they were clamouring for the radical Nazi revolution that Hitler had promised.¹ Their insistence that the SA should control all para-military organisations and regular armed forces placed them and by association Adolf Hitler in direct conflict with the army generals and the German President Paul von Hindenburg. Hitler knew that the generals were completely against any such move and would resist any such attempts and that the President could easily hand over all control to the Reichswehr (unified armed forces of the Weimar Republic) blocking Hitler's pursuit of absolute power.

Planning and Execution

As the spring of 1934 headed into summer, the SA were increasing their violent activities against businesses and individuals. This alongside their demands for Hitler to disband the army and the growing concern from the regular army, and the President, regards this forced Hitler into action. He had recognised some time ago that to fulfil his future foreign policy he would need the professionalism and discipline of the Army and its Generals; the SA were a barrier to this and as Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of Adolf Hitler* understatedly describes:

The SA had served its purpose. It had conquered the streets of Germany and helped the party to power. Now it would have to be eased from the picture.²

Hitler and the senior Nazi leadership of Herman Goering Reich Minister of Aviation, Heinrich Himmler head of the Gestapo and Reinhard Heydrich head of the *Schutzstaffeln* (SS) intelligence agency had already begun to position the SS, their inner protection squad, to key areas of the country in particular Berlin, Munich, and Bavaria. Even regular Army units had all leave passes cancelled indicating a degree of support from the military leadership for the events that were about to unfold.³

On the 30th of June 1934 Hitler launched the Nazi Blood Purge. Despite all the military activity and build-up of SS units happening around them the SA leaders seemed, to a man, to be completely unaware as to the danger that surrounded them. Within hours many key SA figures including their leader Ernst Roehm were arrested and summarily executed. There were however many millions of SA members around the country but, 'nowhere did the SA try to fight back once the news of the arrests and Roehm's removal were confirmed'.⁴ The

¹ William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of Adolf Hitler*, Electronic Edition, (New York: no press noted, 2012) p. 43.

² Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of Adolf Hitler*, p. 43.

³ Gerald Reitlinger, *The SS: Alibi of a Nation 1922-1945*, (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1981) p. 60.

⁴ Siemens, Daniel, *Stormtroopers: A New History of Hitler's Brownshirts*, (Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 2017) p. 168.

number of SA victims is still unclear although Hitler did admit to fifty-eight executions and nineteen others that lost their lives.⁵ There were, however, many other victims as Hitler took the opportunity to eliminate other political opponents, perceived critics of the regime, clergy and other individuals who he felt had not supported him in the past.

Following the purge Hitler took full responsibility, justifying his actions to the public with a speech in the Reichstag where he claimed that Roehm and the SA were planning a violent putsch. In his speech he declared:

If anyone reproaches me and asks why I did not resort to the regular courts of justice, then all I can say is this: in this hour I was responsible for the fate of the German people. I became the Supreme Judge of the German people.⁶

Consequences

With the SA removed as a credible force within Nazi Germany, (although they did continue as an arm of the Nazi party, though very much weakened through to the end of World War two) the Army Generals were appeased. They did not, despite the murder of two of their own generals offer any protest to the bloodiest purge in German history. 'In fact, General Werner von Blomberg, the minister of defence, publicly congratulated Hitler for his bloody deed'.⁷ Hitlers own position and that of the Nazi Party was solidified and within a few weeks following the death of President Paul von Hindenburg he was ready to assume absolute power. Through characteristic deceit he abolished the title of President, contrary to the deceased last will and testament, and contrived to combine the offices of President and Chancellor declaring himself Fuhrer and Reichs Chancellor and furthermore Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces.

That the military did not appreciate the significance of this act was demonstrated the next day when the leaders and men of the armed forces swore allegiance to Hitler as Supreme Commander of the Wehrmacht.⁸

Hitler's journey from disillusioned corporal of Kaiser Wilhelm II Army of World War One to Fuhrer and Supreme Commander of a Nazi Germany created by him was complete.

⁵ Reitlinger, *The SS: Alibi of a Nation 1922-1945*, p. 68.

⁶ Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of Adolf Hitler*, p. 46.

⁷ Ibid. p. 46.

⁸ Jablonsky, David, *Churchill and Hitler: Essays on the Political-Military Direction of Total War*, p. 323.

Bibliography

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