POLITICAL AGITATORS TO IDEOLOGICAL ENFORCERS: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BROWNSHIRTS IN GERMANY 1921-1938

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Glossary of Abbreviations and Terms

Anschluss – Hitler's annexation of Austria in 1938

Braunhemden – Brownshirt

Feldherrnhalle – monument on the Odeonsplatz in Munich appropriated by the Nazis to commemorate the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch

Führer – Hitler's title following the death of President Paul von Hindenburg in 1934

Gauleiter – NSDAP regional leader

KPD – Communist Party of Germany

NSDAP – National Socialist German Workers' Party

Propagandamarsch – parade consisting mainly of uniformed ranks of SA men

Reichstag – German parliament

SA – Sturmabteilung (Storm Division; Stormtroopers or Brownshirts)

SPD – Social Democratic Party of Germany

Reichswehr – German armed forces during the Weimar Republic and the first two years of Hitler's chancellorship, renamed Wehrmacht in 1935

Reichswettkampf der SA – Reich Competition of the SA

Roter Frontkämpferbund – Red Front Fighters' League, the KPD's main fighting league which frequently engaged in street fights with the SA

Volk – People

Völkische Beobachter – People's Observer, the official newspaper of the NSDAP

Volksgemeinschaft – people's community conceived of in the Nazi political imaginary as unifying Germans through common 'Aryan' racial status

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Introduction and Literature Review

The complex role of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), also known as Brownshirts and Stormtroopers, in the 'Third Reich' has long been the subject of debate among historians.[1] Founded on 11 August 1921, this paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) quickly became notorious for activities such as the intimidation of political opponents – especially German communists and socialists – and the perpetration of gratuitous street violence designed to upset democratic order in Weimar Germany.[2] Historians of the SA agree that the organization was integral in raising the NSDAP's profile in Weimar Germany and for helping facilitate Hitler's ascension to power in 1933. Following Hitler's appointment as chancellor on 30 January 1933, the Brownshirts became indispensable to the Nazis' terror apparatus, carrying out thousands of summary arrests, brutal beatings, public humiliations of Germans found guilty of racial defilement, and the executions of political opponents and Jews.[3] The Brownshirts played a crucial role in events such as the infamous 1923 Beer Hall Putsch, took the lead in the 1 April 1933 anti-Jewish boycott, and were key perpetrators during the horrific 1938 November Pogrom, also referred to as "Kristallnacht." On an ideological level, the Brownshirts came to embody core National Socialist values such as national belonging in the *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community), cooperation, heroism, and physical health.[4]

Despite its key role in the 'Third Reich,' the Brownshirts' historical relationship with the NSDAP was turbulent at best. Unclear role specificity, poor pay, and abysmal housing conditions often undercut the morale of the average trooper.[5] Furthermore, continued outbursts

[1] Throughout this essay, 'Third Reich' appears in quotation marks to acknowledge that this was the Nazis' own terminology.
[2] Daniel Siemens, *Stormtroopers: A New History of Hitler's Brownshirts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 89.
[3] Peter Fritzsche, *Hitler's First Hundred Days* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2021), 163.
[4] Siemens, *Stormtroopers, xli.*
[5] Ibid., 123.

of street violence provoked by the Brownshirts compromised Hitler's narrative of law and order in the first months of his chancellorship and drew scathing criticism from conservative Catholics such as Vice-Chancellor Franz von Papen.[6] Struggling not only with the rank-and-file members of the organization, by 1934 Hitler also found himself embroiled in frequent disputes with the chief of staff of the SA, Ernst Röhm. Amidst a context in which the NSDAP sought to legitimize its claim to political power, Röhm made inflammatory calls for a second revolution to depose Hitler and advocated for the absorption of the regular German military into the ranks of the SA.[7] Röhm had made several powerful enemies, including Heinrich Himmler, leader of the NSDAP's other paramilitary wing, the *Schutzstaffel* (SS), and Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the SS's intelligence agency, who were more than willing to curb the influence of their rival organization to secure the SS's place of prominence in the 'Third Reich'.[8] The SS and Gestapo collected much of the evidence used to convince Hitler that Röhm and the SA were planning to move against him.[9] Fearing an impending putsch – though there is no historical evidence to suggest that this was a reality – and concerned that conservatives would move to replace him as chancellor, Hitler was forced to act. Drawn from a list of names compiled from SS intelligence, from 30 June to 2 July 1934, 85 SA leaders, including Röhm, were slaughtered, and 1,100 more were arrested in a purge that came to be called the Night of the Long Knives.[10]

As a result of the Night of the Long Knives' organizational impact on the SA and the internal crisis it caused, historians have understandably treated the purge as a turning point for the SA's role in the 'Third Reich'. Indeed, from the summer of 1934 to 1938, one out of every

[6] Thomas Childers, *The Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 265.
[7] Ibid., 276.
[8] Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 163.
[9] Ibid., 167.
[10] Ibid., 170.

two Brownshirts voluntarily departed the SA.[11] Furthermore, the SA leaders who had escaped the purge unscathed were disoriented and viewed the NSDAP as lacking respect for the SA and its achievements.[12] It seemed to many Brownshirts that the organization had lost its central place in Nazi Germany; to be sure, the SA never again functioned as an instrument of Nazi political policy as it had during the decade prior.[13] However, early historians of the SA have misidentified the Night of the Long Knives as marking a decline in the organization's significance in the 'Third Reich'. Books such as Peter Merkl's *The Making of a Stormtrooper* (1980), Richard Bessel's *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism: The Storm Troopers in Eastern Germany* (1984), and Eric Reiche's *The Development of the SA in Nürnberg, 1922-1934* (1986), terminate their accounts with the Night of the Long Knives in 1934. To suggest that the SA was obsolete following the purge is misleading, however. Antisemitic violence perpetrated by the SA crested during the summer of 1935, owing in part to the frustration and disorientation experienced by SA rank-and-file following the purge.[14] Furthermore, this narrative – that the SA was little more than a castrated propaganda tool following 1934 – cannot explain the widespread destruction the organization perpetrated in the 1938 November Pogrom. Two notable monographs provide an exception to this narrative. Conan Fischer's *Stormtroopers: A Social, Economic and Ideological Analysis* (1983), strives to create a social profile of the SA man that goes beyond 1934. Second, and indispensable to this thesis, Daniel Siemens' *Stormtroopers: A New History of Hitler's Brownshirts* (2017) proves to be the most comprehensive monograph on the SA in English. Like Fischer three decades earlier, Siemens rejects the assumption that the SA underwent what he

[11] Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 186.
[12] Ibid., 183.
[13] Childers, *The Third Reich,* 288.
[14] In his 1935 dispatch to Samuel Hoare, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, British Ambassador to Germany Sir Eric Phipps noted that SA vandalism, the posting of antisemitic placards, and assaults on Jewish Germans had become increasingly common.

terms a "cumulative banalization" following the Night of the Long Knives.[15] He highlights that the SA continued to be involved in public life in the 'Third Reich' and powerfully argues that the SA was far from irrelevant after 1934. However, while Siemens does much to dispel the previous historical narrative, he also places too much emphasis on the 1934 purge, suggesting that this event was the primary catalyst for the SA's transformation into an organization designed to educate the male German youth in the latter half of the 1930s.[16]

This thesis rejects the notion that the 1934 Night of the Long Knives caused the fundamental transformation of the SA after Hitler's ascension to power. While acknowledging that the purge had a profound impact, this thesis suggests that the SA's transformation had actually begun in the first months of 1933. Furthermore, this shift was not one of relevance to irrelevance, but was instead an organizational transformation in their role from political agitators to ideological enforcers. While the SA's political agitation attempted to undermine the stability and legitimacy of the Weimar Republic, the organization's subsequent ideological enforcement served a normative function in Nazi Germany by strengthening and disseminating NSDAP ideology. By examining visual records of the SA's presence and representation in Weimar and Nazi Germany, it becomes clear that an organization originally concerned with political agitation to facilitate a Nazi seizure of power was transformed into one designed to enforce the fundamental ideological narratives of the 'Third Reich'.[17] This thesis suggests that the most concrete way to observe this transformation is through the SA's various modes of representation. These modes of representation visually convey particular messages which reveal the organization's political or ideological aims. With regard to the SA, four main modes of

[15] Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, xxvii.
[16] Ibid., 179.
[17] Key ideological narratives might include antisemitism, submission to the Führer's authority, sacrifice of self for the nation, ethnic cooperation of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, etc.

representation emerge: first, the SA uniform; second, the physical public presence of SA men; third, the SA's ceremonial presence; and fourth, the memorialization of the SA. Evaluation of the first and second modes reveals an organization predominantly concerned with political agitation. Considering the third and fourth modes, however, reveals an organization that has moved away from political agitation in favour of ideological enforcement. It is worth noting that these modes are not totally distinct from one another. The SA uniform plays an integral part in the latter three modes. Ceremonies and memorials could also be considered part of the SA's public presence. Furthermore, visual art created by outsiders to the SA and disseminated in the 'Third Reich' constitutes yet a fifth category beyond the scope of this thesis.

While their boundaries can be somewhat murky, these modes of representation are the best evidence for identifying a shift in the SA's role for several reasons. First, the SA relied on its visual impact and self-representations to evoke particular responses from onlookers. As early as 1926, Brownshirts were prohibited from distributing NSDAP pamphlets or speaking to journalists.[18] While the Nazi Party apparatus communicated political messaging through highly intentional rhetoric and propaganda literature, an organization such as the SA proved too unwieldy to do the same; the Nazi Party lacked the resources to ensure that every SA man could be trained as an expert propagandist prepared to relay and defend the political messaging of the party. As Siemens remarks, "The Brownshirts were expected to make a lasting visual impression in the German streets, but not to explain party politics."[19] Thus, the SA's appearance was to be their political statement and the perfectly-unified front suggested by the organization's appearance bolstered the Nazi Party's rhetorical messaging. Second, examining records of the SA's visual representation, as opposed to written records, allows for a concrete means of access

[18] Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, xxvii.
[19] Ibid.

into precisely how the SA was presented to Germans who were not members of the organization. Official NSDAP directives delivered to the SA often contradicted the direct orders handed down to SA men; hence, evaluating what the SA was instructed to do does little to shed light on what the organization actually did. Third, evaluating modes of representation prevents analysis of the SA's organizational goals from getting bogged down in the internal workings of the SA, instead prioritizing its highly-intentional external messaging and resulting impact.

The first chapter of this thesis explores the SA's role as political agitators from the organization's founding in 1921 to the summer of 1933. Here, the SA uniform is investigated as the basic unit of the NSDAP's early political agitation, and the SA's early public presence is discussed with regard to the street fight and propaganda march. Finally, chapter one concludes with a consideration of events in the spring of 1933 that were more impactful than the Night of the Long Knives for transforming the SA from political agitators to ideological enforcers. The second chapter considers the SA as ideological enforcers, emphasizing the SA's involvement in NSDAP ceremonies – especially the annual party rallies in Nuremberg – as well as the commemorative practices which emerged to memorialize SA martyrs who died during the so-called years of struggle from 1921 to 1933. The second chapter spans from the fall of 1933 to 1938, as in 1938, the SA underwent yet another transformation for the purposes of mobilization for World War II.

Chapter One: Political Agitators (1921-1933)

The Brown Shirt as the Basic Unit of Nazi Political Agitation

As one of the most notorious Nazi symbols after the swastika, the brown shirt of the SA uniform provides a concrete starting point for understanding the organization's role as political agitators in Weimar Germany. While the brown shirt eventually became iconic in its own right and, of course, gave the SA the Brownshirts epithet, its origins do little to indicate the mythic status that the garment eventually possessed in the 'Third Reich'. The first SA uniform issued in 1922 was grey and included a ski cap, styling the organization as a sort of pseudo-sports club. This was apt, given that the first mention of the SA in the *Völkische Beobachter*, (*People's Observer*) the official Nazi Party newspaper, urged German youth to join the "*Sportabteilung"* (Sport Detachment) to fight against the Jews.[20] The SA's adoption of the brown shirt two years later was purely a marriage of convenience. The uniform adopted in 1924 was derived from a consignment of belted jackets intended for Imperial German troops in East Africa during World War I.[21] The brown shirt, its colour calling to mind the Nazi slogan "blood and soil" and offering a distinct German counterpart to Mussolini's Blackshirts, was thus entirely coincidental. These surplus uniforms would be updated again in 1925 to be shirts, rather than jackets, with accompanying neck ties.[22]

Having been literally cobbled together from sporting gear and military surplus, SA leader Franz von Pfeffer's attempts to standardize the SA uniform began in earnest in the later 1920s following the SA's 1925 re-establishment in the aftermath of the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch. By 1928, following the establishment of a centralized depot of Nazi goods which had been

[20] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* 9.
[21] John Toland, *Adolf Hitler* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 220.
[22] Torsten Homberger, *The Honor Dress of the Movement: A Cultural History of Hitler's Brown Shirt Uniform, 1920-1933* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2021), 39.

transferred to the jurisdiction of the SA, SA men were required to buy the official SA uniform, which consisted of the brown shirt, breeches, windbreaker, puttees, body belt, waist belt, boots, and party badge (see fig. 1).[23] Overnight, the SA uniform went from cheap surplus to being unaffordable for the average SA man. Standardization efforts continued into the early 1930s, with Ernst Röhm only fully regulating SA dagger inscriptions as late as 1931.[24] The regulation of the SA uniform was undeniably an effort to lend legitimacy to the paramilitary wing of the Nazis' growing political organization. However, Hitler also used it as a legal defense for the SA's violent skirmishes and street fights. Testifying in a court case in the town of Schweidnitz on behalf of the SA, Hitler suggested that he had adopted the brown shirt to proclaim the organization's function visually and to combat the assertion that the group was a militant secret society.[25] In both cases, the visibility and uniformity of the brown shirt was an integral part of the SA's burgeoning political language. In 1929, the SA Leadership Office decreed that previously acceptable uniforms were only to be used for hiking or while at work; SA men were strictly required to wear the official uniform.[26] Thus, the first impression an SA man was to make was to be a visual one.

[23] Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 95.
[24] Jill Halcomb, *The SA: A Historical Perspective* (Overland Park, KS: Crown & Agincourt Publishing, 1985), 243.
[25] *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung*, December 14, 1929, accessed January 2, 2023, https://dfg-viewer.de/show?id=9&tx_dlf%5Bid%5D=https%3A%2F%2Fcontent.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de%2Fzefys%2FSNP2436020X-19291214-0-0-0-0.xml&tx_dlf%5Bpage%5D=4.
[26] Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 95.

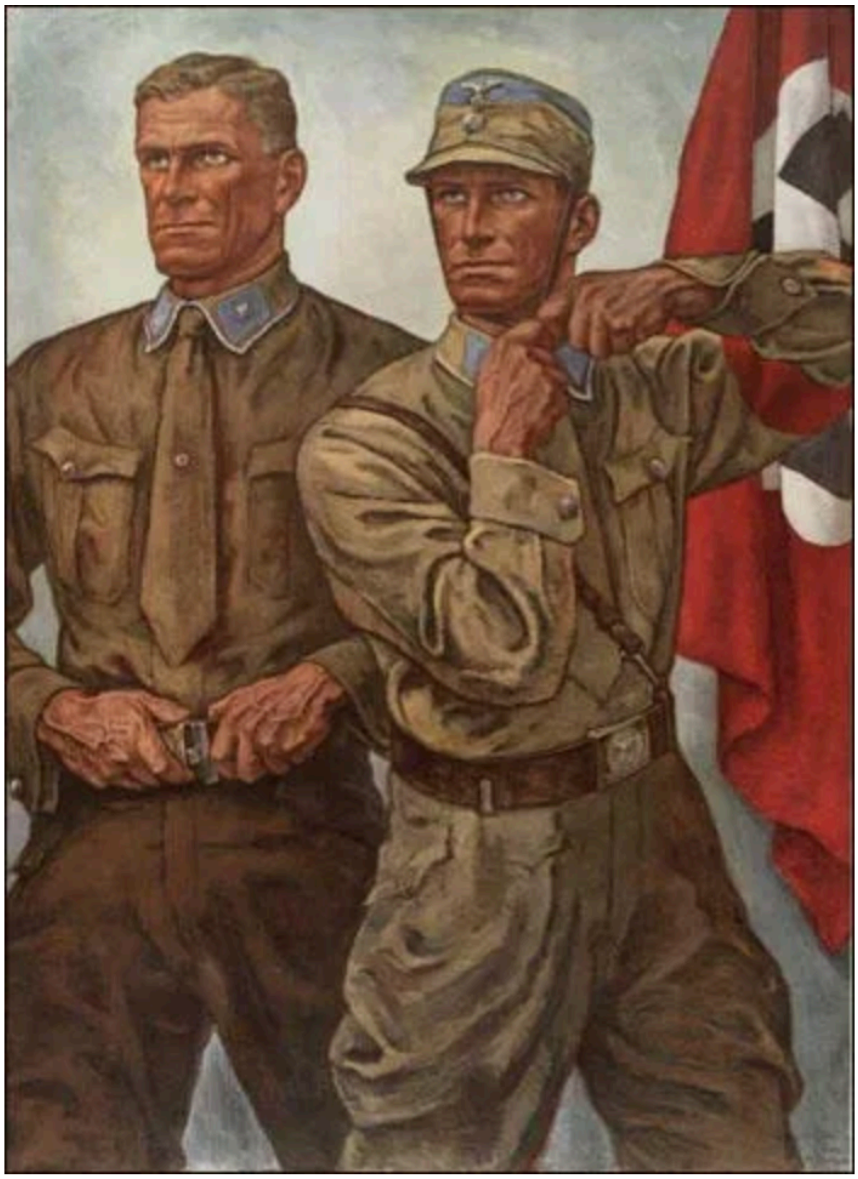

Figure 1. Elk Eber's 1933 painting "Brownshirts Take Over" shows standard SA uniforms.

Mirroring von Pfeffer's continued efforts to standardize the SA uniform, the use of the term *Braunhemd* (Brownshirt) also became more regular throughout the later 1920s, presumably as SA men in brown shirts became increasingly visible on the streets. One of the term's earliest usages appears in an issue of the *Kölnische Zeitung* (*Cologne Gazette*) on 21 December 1925, in which "Brownshirt" is clarified as a reference to Hitler's "shock troops".[27] The editors elaborate

[27] *Kölnische Zeitung*, December 21, 1925, accessed January 2, 2023, https://zeitpunkt.nrw/ulbbn/periodical/zoom/9764344.

further, equating the organization with the Italian Blackshirts.[28] In the years just following 1925, Social Democrats began to use the term "Brownshirt" more regularly and it seems to have entered the mainstream political vernacular, appearing without further elaboration in SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) newspapers.[29] Crucially, the term "Brownshirts" unified the SA around a common external visual signifier while the uniform itself functioned as a core element of community formation within the SA.

As one might expect, the brown shirt, and certainly, the SA uniform more generally, served both an internal and external organizational function. Internally, while binding the SA community, the brown shirt governed and sometimes transformed the conduct of SA men. In one fascinating example, the day after the Austrian *Anschluss* in 1938, an SA man wore his uniform to get his usual haircut from his long-time barber, an Austrian Jew. Rather than paying the barber for his services, as the SA man had done many times before, he spat on the floor and left, doubtless emboldened by what his uniform represented.[30] By donning the brown shirt, a range of taboo and illegal behaviours became a political responsibility. Ironically, however, in 1926 Hitler ordered that SA men neither drink nor smoke while wearing the uniform, as donning the brown shirt meant a Stormtrooper was on duty.[31] In addition to embodying the broader sociological functions of uniforms generally, such as functioning as a group emblem, certifying legitimacy, and suppressing individuality – none of which are unique to the SA – the brown shirt became a staple of political agitation in Weimar Germany, serving a blatant external function.[32]

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[28] *Kölnische Zeitung,* December 21, 1925.
[29] *Sozialdemokrat*, April 24, 1927, accessed January 2, 2023, https://fes.imageware.de/fes/web/index.html?open=st07095; *Vorwärts*, May 5, 1927, accessed January 2, 2023, https://fes.imageware.de/fes/web/index.html?open=VW44210; *Vörwarts*, October 1, 1928, accessed January 2, 2023, https://fes.imageware.de/fes/web/index.html?open=VW45464.
[30] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* 193.
[31] Ibid.*,* 42.
[32] Nathan Joseph and Nicholas Alex, "The Uniform: A Sociological Perspective," *American Journal of Sociology* 77, no. 4 (January 1972): 720, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2776756.

Externally, the brown shirt served as a deliberate political provocation designed to increase the likelihood of violence. As such, SA political agitation weaponized negative responses to the brown shirt. A favourite tactic was to send a few uniformed SA men into a communist bar with dozens of SA men waiting in their civilian clothes to intervene once a fight broke out.[33] Nazi propagandists did not downplay the provocative nature of the brown shirt, even highlighting it in a heated exchange between the protagonist of the propaganda film *SA-Mann Brand* and his SPD father, who demands that his son remove his SA "costume" while at the dinner table.[34] The brown shirt was similarly ridiculed by artists such as George Grosz, whose caricatures of portly, uniform-obsessed SA men reveal the political impact of the symbol as well as its significance to the organization.[35] The political statement made by wearing the brown shirt cannot be overemphasized. Controversy erupted after German Crown Prince August Wilhelm continually appeared in the SA uniform, and Hitler frequently chose to don the brown shirt in public appearances, illustrating the political currency of the garment.[36] The brown shirt was capable of vitriolic political messaging with only minimal assistance from its wearer.

Given the visceral responses to the SA brown shirt, it is unsurprising that there were various state and nationwide initiatives to prohibit the SA uniform prior to Hitler's appointment as chancellor. Beginning in 1927, a series of uniform bans attempted to curb the activities of the SA, suggesting that the organization's political agitation was perceived to be at least in part a function of public visibility of the brown shirt. In Berlin, multiple murders committed by the SA

[33] Joseph and Alex, "The Uniform," 23.
[34] *S.A. Mann Brand*, directed by Franz Seitz, 1933, 12:00, accessed May 15, 2022, https://archive.org/details/S.a.MannBrand1933.
[35] George Grosz, *Nach Getaner Arbeit, [The End of a Perfect Day]*, 1939, drypoint, Delaware Art Museum, accessed October 6, 2022, https://emuseum.delart.org/objects/3198/the-end-of-a-perfect-day-nach-getaner-arbeit.
[36] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* xl.

resulted in a ban of both the Berlin SA troop and the uniform from April 1927 to April 1928.[37] In July 1930, Prussia attempted a state-wide ban of the SA uniform but quickly abandoned this policy when it became clear that SA men were content to wear white shirts (see fig. 2) or go shirtless to circumvent the ban.[38] The sensationalism and gutsy commitment of Brownshirts to parade half nude rather than forego their political agitation was even venerated by those outside of the SA (see fig. 3). As exemplified in the Prussian case, attempts to ban the uniform created opportunities for political agitation even more sensational than the brown shirt itself. Attempted bans of the SA and its uniform unified the organization against hostile authorities.

Figure 2. SA men don white shirts to circumvent the 1930 Prussian uniform ban.

[37] Sven Reichardt, "Violence and Community: A Micro-Study on Nazi Storm Troopers," *Central European History* 46, no. 2 (2013): 279, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43280583.
[38] Conan Fischer, *Stormtroopers: A Social, Economic and Ideological Analysis, 1929-35* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), 6.

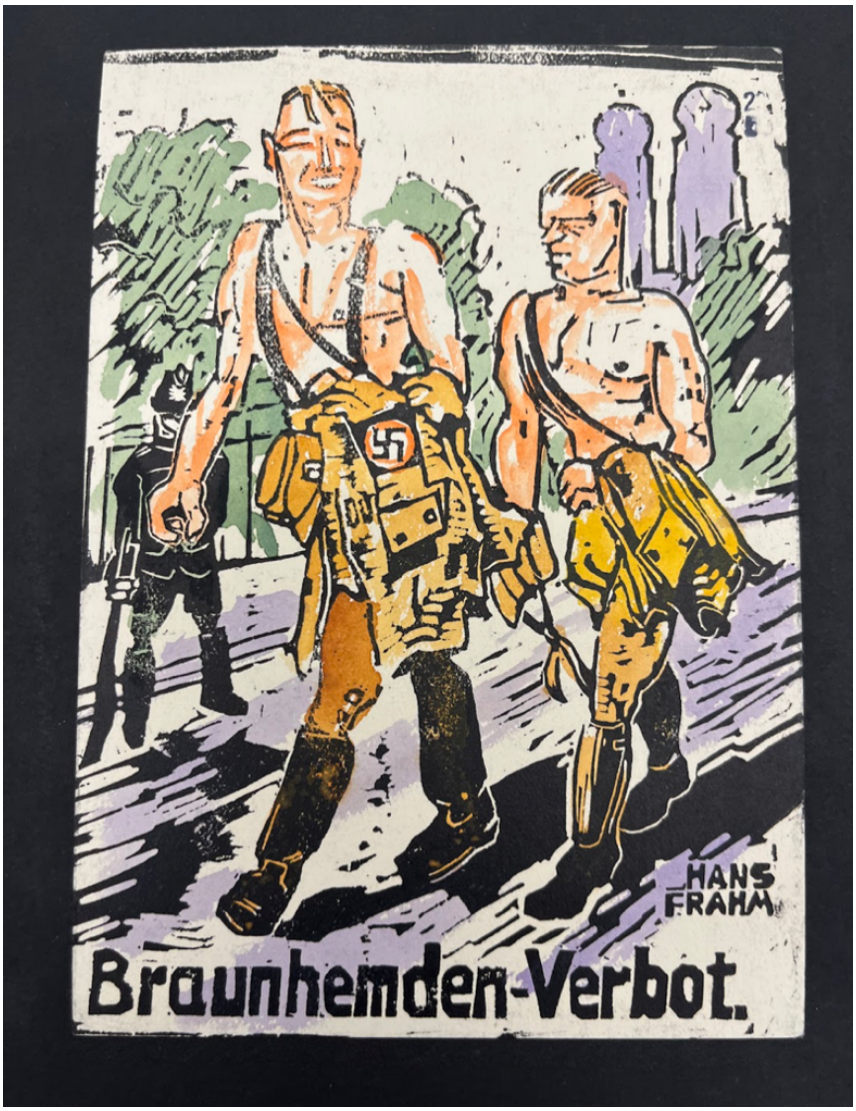

Figure 3. Hans Frahm's 1932 "Braunhemden-Verbot" cartoon shows two shirtless SA men carrying their uniform shirts past a disapproving state police officer.

On 13 April 1932, Chancellor Heinrich Brüning implemented yet another ban on the SA and the brown shirt throughout Germany. His successor, Franz von Papen, reversed this position as early as 14 June 1932 due to the total inefficacy of the prohibition.[39] Interestingly, both the 1927-1928 Berlin ban and the 1932 nationwide ban of the SA specified that both the organization and the uniform were prohibited. In Weimar Germany's political and legal

[39] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* 44.

imaginary, the brown shirt had become an entity of its own. However, uniform and general bans were impossible to enforce and were rarely upheld by the judiciary. A verdict from 13 March 1931 on the proposed law in Berlin On the Prohibition of the Public Display of NSDAP Party Uniforms, which also sought to ban the substitute uniforms of the SA, concluded that members of the public could not be expected to understand Nazi dress code and substitute uniforms were therefore permissible.[40] Uniform bans provided a unique avenue for the SA's political agitation in which the message conveyed by wearing a brown shirt in public was heightened further by the mocking compliance embodied by wearing a white shirt or no shirt at all. Having explored one of the SA's chief mediums of political agitation, it is now useful to turn to the mode of representation within which it was wielded: public presence.

The Nature of the SA's Public Presence 1921-1933

The early public presence of the SA, from 1921 to 1925, can be characterized as unregulated and illegal but clearly intentional. In other words, while the SA's activities during this period – and indeed, well into the 1930s – appeared to spark spontaneous outbursts of violence, this phenomenon was a calculated form of political activism designed to destabilize democratic public order in Weimar Germany for the purposes of an eventual Nazi seizure of power.[41] As such, records of the physical public presence of the SA constitute a distinct mode of representation that suggests the initial aim of the SA was political agitation. The brawl and street fight were staples of the SA's early public presence, emerging just two months after the organization's founding in August 1921. The 11 November 1921 Hofbräuhaus Battle in Munich, also the birthplace of the SA, was the first test of the Brownshirts. Incited when Hitler's speech

[40] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* 45.
[41] Ibid., 89.

was interrupted by what the Nazis described as a 'Judeo-Marxist hit squad,' about fifty SA men violently subdued the supposed four hundred protesting Marxists, likely members of the German Communist Party's (KPD) fighting league which would eventually become the *Roter Frontkämpferbund* (Red Front Fighters' League).[42] Hitler noted in *Mein Kampf* that "after half an hour the applause slowly began to drown out the screaming and shouting."[43] The Hofbräuhaus Battle set the tone for the Nazis' subsequent political agitation. This incident was an early indication of the NSDAP's continued willingness to use violence against political opponents.[44]

The SA street fight and brawl as acts of political agitation, as opposed to other forms of public presence such as a parade or putsch, served several purposes. First, Brownshirts quickly garnered a reputation for being Hitler's 'Praetorian Guard' who were more than willing to enforce his will through sometimes lethal physical violence.[45] Second, once the SA had made a reputation for itself, the organization came to represent a symbolic manifestation of Hitler's control over the streets of Munich.[46] Third, the increased frequency of this form of political agitation created a wealth of material from which the NSDAP could construct its infamous narrative of struggle. The Brownshirts' street battles and their exaggeration by sympathetic media outlets gave the average Stormtrooper reason to believe that he was embroiled in an existential struggle.[47] Even in 1930, sympathetic artists produced renderings of the Brownshirts' noble struggle for existence through the medium of the brawl (see fig. 4). The SA's rapidly developing reputation for violence came to present the Brownshirts as a fighting force any time they appeared on the street. Even though the brawl constituted just one point of contact between

[42] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* 13.
[43] Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim, ed. Abraham H. Foxman (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 370.
[44] Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, 114.
[45] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* 17.
[46] Ibid., 26.
[47] Ibid., 13.

the SA and opponents, the presence of uniformed SA men had become tantamount to the threat of violence. Indeed, by making a name for itself that was synonymous with the street fight, uniformed SA men came to represent one of the first manifestations of the symbolic violence that became a core element of Nazi politics.[48]

Figure 4. Felix Albrecht's 1930 painting "Saalschlacht" or "Hall Battle" is one of the rare pieces of SA art depicting the SA in the midst of a brawl from a sympathetic artist viewpoint.

The capstone to this era of the SA's political agitation was the infamous 1923 Beer Hall Putsch. On the evening of 8 November 1923, heavily-armed SA surrounded the Bürgerbräukeller, where Munich's top civilian and military leaders had gathered to hear

[48] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* 76.

Bavarian State Commissar Gustav Ritter von Kahr speak. Still clad in their early grey uniforms and ski caps, an SA detachment escorted Hitler inside the beer hall, where he proclaimed that a German revolution had broken out.[49] Meanwhile, other SA units carried out their orders on the streets. The unit commanded by Ernst Röhm had been directed to seize the Reichswehr (German armed forces) District IV headquarters, which they accomplished with no shots fired. The SA subsequently occupied bridges and distributed placards that declared that a new revolutionary government had been established in Munich.[50] Even in this relatively early iteration of SA political agitation, a decade before the infamous 1 April 1933 anti-Jewish boycott, the organization's vitriolic antisemitism was made plain. Roving bands of Brownshirts harassed, beat, and detained Jews on the streets of Munich, holding some as hostages in the cellar of the Bürgerbräukeller.[51]

The putsch disintegrated as the night continued. Hitler's key hostages were released, much to his chagrin, and the SA could not capture any of the Municipal Police Directorate, City Military Command, or army barracks.[52] The SA detachment under Röhm's command soon found itself besieged by government troops at the Reichswehr District IV headquarters, a base for the regular German armed forces. While it was soon apparent that their effort would fail, the putschists marched through Munich to liberate Röhm and his men while also trying to rally popular support for the uprising.[53] Approaching the Feldherrnhalle, a large military monument on the Odeonsplatz, putschists encountered an unexpected police line, and shots were fired.[54] In the chaos that ensued, four policemen and sixteen SA men were killed. Far from a success, the

[49] Childers, *The Third Reich,* 55.
[50] Ibid., 58.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., 61.
[54] Ibid.

Beer Hall Putsch and Hitler's subsequent resolution to seize power through legal channels had a resounding impact on the nature of the SA's political agitation post-1923.

Following his release from Landsberg Prison, Hitler attempted to curtail some of the illegal activities of the SA, including the street fight. On 26 February 1925, just two months after his release, Hitler called for the refounding of the NSDAP with himself remaining as party leader.[55] Crucially, the SA would not only be refounded but also totally reformed. As Siemens describes:

> This new SA, he now claimed, should no longer carry weapons, but should operate on strictly legal terms, serving as a propaganda tool for the NSDAP and as a training school for the party youth. Its members should wear uniforms in public in order to be recognizable to everyone in the streets.[56]

Despite Hitler's façade of legality, he privately authorized the continuation of the SA's violent political agitation. Joseph Goebbels, the future Minister of Propaganda, was to oversee the activities of the Berlin SA. Under Goebbels' guidance, this detachment became highly confrontational, seeking out violent clashes in broad daylight to raise the profile of the NSDAP.[57] However, by 1927 the situation was out of control. The Berlin SA was perhaps too effective in raising its profile and was banned by the German government for one year, a fact made even more incredible considering that Goebbels was serving as Berlin *Gauleiter* (Regional Leader) at the time. Thus, Hitler's public statements in 1925 did nothing to curb the illegal activities of the Brownshirts. The organization always continued to engage in violent political agitation. SA political agitation during this period became centralized, standardized, and strategic. In addition to Goebbels' insistence that agitation take place during the day, intentional provocations in KPD

[55] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* 30.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid., 39.

bars led to the perception of the SA by the German public as the embodiment of party-sponsored violence.[58] As the SA's numbers grew throughout the latter 1920s, another means of occupying public space became more common: the *propagandamarsch* (parade).[59]

The Brownshirts' reputation for violent outbursts only served to make their political agitation through the medium of the *propagandamasrch* more impactful. The organized presence of SA men in public constituted a form of symbolic violence just as effective as its physical counterpart. As Joshua Hagen, a specialist in urban geography, argues, parades are a type of public presence that simultaneously allows for increased visibility, a rejection of marginal status, a means to perform national identity, and a method of dominating public space and discourse.[60] All of these qualities certainly hold true for the SA *propagandamarsch*. Consisting of neat rows of SA battalions – some donning flags, trumpets, and drums, while others gave the Hitler salute – the SA *propagandamarsch* was a sort of paramilitary parade that traversed an area of several blocks. The Brownshirts depended on threatening counter-protestors, either real or imaginary, to transform this symbolic violence into a physical outburst. Unsurprisingly, the SA *propagandamarsch* often resulted in street fights, especially with members of the KPD's *Roter Frontkämpferbund*. Purportedly "peaceful" marches quickly became violent when the mere presence of uniformed SA men in a working-class neighbourhood was considered a violent provocation.[61] Indeed, the looming threat of violence that accompanied the appearance of Brownshirts was not taken lightly.

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[58] Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 36.
[59] Here I use the German term *propagandamarsch* to differentiate this medium from other forms of parade. While parade implies a variety of visual content such as the later culture parades held in the 'Third Reich,' an observer of an SA *propagandamarsch* could anticipate the most prominent feature as being an orderly procession of uniformed SA men.
[60] Joshua Hagen, "Parades, Public Space, and Propaganda: The Nazi Culture Parades in Munich," *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* 90, no. 4 (2008): 350, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/stable/40205064.
[61] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* xxxvi.

German authorities often felt the need to mitigate the risk of violence by dispersing large gatherings of SA men. For example, as early as May 1923, the SA May Day parade was broken up by Bavarian Reichswehr and State Police when thousands of SA men gathered on the Oberwiesenfeld, a military airfield.[62] Despite often being thwarted by unsympathetic authorities, the *propagandamarsch* continued to be an incredibly effective tool for wielding the public presence of the SA (see fig. 5). This regimented domination of public space left deep impressions on spectators throughout the later 1920s. In the spring of 1925, one man recounted seeing an SA battalion marching and being so overwhelmed by their presence that he was overcome and marched alongside them.[63] Similarly, other onlookers viewed the SA *propagandamarsch* as proof that German communists had been pushed aside in favour of these more "patriotic troops."[64]

[62] Childers, *The Third Reich,* 51.
[63] Werner Goerendt, "Meine Erinnerungen aus der Kampfzeit," n.d. [1937], Bundesarchiv Berlin, NS26/530 in Peter Fritzsche, *Hitler's First Hundred Days* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2021), 55.
[64] Fritzsche, *Hitler's First Hundred Days,* 56.

Figure 5. 1932 SA Propagandamarsch in Munich celebrating the lift on the uniform ban.

However, a smattering of positive public responses to the SA *propagandamarsch* did not mean that these displays were not continuing to foment violent political agitation. To the contrary, chants of the "Horst-Wessel-Lied", also known as "Die Fahne hoch" ("Raise the Flag") vehement antisemitic slogans, and anti-communist insults were uttered with the intention of either sparking physical violence or at least heightening the symbolic violence being inflicted upon spectators. In one example from Altona, a suburb of Hamburg, on 17 July 1932, the spectre of "communist snipers" at an SA *propagandamarsch* led to such extreme violence that it was

termed “Bloody Sunday”; the event proved so catastrophic that it served as the pretext for Chancellor von Papen to remove Prussia’s democratic state government three days later.[65]

The SA’s most notable *propagandamarsch*, the 30 January 1933 torchlight parade celebrating Hitler’s appointment as chancellor, was no exception. The event was celebrated by SA men around the country, and while there was far less bloodshed than had been anticipated, various forms of symbolic violence took center stage.[66] Brownshirts transformed the urban landscape, symbolically occupying public spaces; they held bonfires, hung banners, and raised the swastika flag on public buildings in major cities.[67] Perhaps in their most brazen act of symbolic violence, SA men engaged in widespread burnings of the Weimar flag, eerily hinting at Weimar’s total destruction following Hitler’s appointment.[68] In the months to come, many relics of the Weimar era met their demise at the hands of the SA; whether Weimar flags, “un-German” books, or political enemies, it was made clear that opposition to the NSDAP had no place in Nazi Germany. Hitler’s appointment had realised the ultimate goal of the SA’s political agitation. The following months bore witness to the legislation that ultimately transformed the SA from political agitators to ideological enforcers in Hitler’s Germany.

Transition to Ideological Enforcers: Key Moments in 1933

After 30 January 1933, the SA found itself in a position similar to that of the dog that had finally ‘caught the car’. Suddenly deprived of the existential threat posed by the democratic Weimar government, Stormtroopers set their sights on smaller targets: opposing political parties. On 23 February 1933, not even one month into Hitler’s chancellorship, the SA conducted a

[65] Fritzsche, *Hitler’s First Hundred Days,* 69.
[66] Childers, *The Third Reich,* 229.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.

massive raid on KPD headquarters at the Karl Liebknecht House, renaming the building after the SA man Horst Wessel who had been killed by communists in 1930.[69] Four days later, in the aftermath of the Reichstag fire and then Nazi President of the Reichstag Hermann Göring's assertion that further KPD "terror groups" planned to blow up more public buildings and department stores, the SA had a convenient excuse to carry out the arrest and torture of German communists.[70] The Reichstag Fire Decree of 28 February curbed German citizens' civil liberties such as freedom of speech, assembly, and press, and became the legal justification for the imprisonment of the Nazis' political opponents, facilitating this purge of the KPD.[71] The ensuing violence was, by all accounts, extraordinary. However, once the SA had subdued the "red" communist threat, they quickly moved on to persecuting more moderate leftists, such as "pink-red" Social Democrats.[72]

The 5 March 1933 federal elections were another opportunity for the SA to intimidate political enemies. In the days leading up to the election, Brownshirts confiscated the placards and pamphlets of their political opponents and beat up men who dared display SPD campaign signs.[73] The actions of the SA during the March 1933 federal elections represented a shift from previous years. Finally, the organization had found itself in a position of power – or at least one with a more sympathetic chancellor than in previous years – and instead of strictly campaigning to raise the profile of the NSDAP, it engaged in the sabotage of the NSDAP's political opponents. While it is impossible to pinpoint the moment that the SA officially became a body of

[69] Fritzsche, *Hitler's First Hundred Days,* 138.
[70] Ibid., 139.
[71] Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005), 333.
[72] Fritzsche, *Hitler's First Hundred Days*, 141.
[73] Ibid., 131.

ideological enforcers, the organization's conduct leading up to 5 March suggests that they were striving to maintain the power that the NSDAP already held in the form of the chancellorship.

Despite being much lower than Hitler had anticipated, the 43.9% of the popular vote won by the NSDAP in March 1933 had been the party's highest percentage to date. Emboldened by the turnout, the SA sprang to action in the days following the election. On 7 March, the SA occupied the SPD trade union headquarters in Breslau.[74] On 8 March, the SA deposed the mayor of Koblenz, a Catholic Center politician, who had refused to raise the swastika flag above city hall. Dissatisfied with the mayor's eventual capitulation to raise the flag, Brownshirts breached the mayor's office and escorted him to the window where a crowd looked on as he was publicly dismissed.[75] On 9 March, SA men in Munich attacked Jewish business owners and demanded the resignation of the Catholic Center Bavarian government.[76] While these events certainly share some similarities with mediums such as the street fight and putsch, they are a fundamental departure from the SA's previous brand of political agitation. For the first time ever, the SA widely engaged in violence and intimidation against politicians and voters as opposed to members of KPD or SPD fighting leagues – though there was certainly violence perpetrated against these old foes as well. Furthermore, the locus of legal authority had begun to shift. Without intervention from state authorities, the SA established hundreds of so-called wild concentration camps to torture political opponents, mostly KPD and SPD activists who had been summarily arrested by the SA.[77] Far beyond mere political agitation, these acts enforced political hegemony in the early months of the 'Third Reich'. By eliminating political opponents of the

[74] Fritzsche, *Hitler's First Hundred Days*, 141.
[75] Ibid., 142.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., 163.

NSDAP, the SA began to create a landscape in which Nazi ideology could be implemented and enforced.

However, the SA was quickly running out of enemies. Less than a month after the SA's purge of political opponents in earnest, the organization launched its first coordinated attack on Jewish Germans. Of course, the Brownshirts had engaged in antisemitic violence since the organization was founded, but under Goebbels' guidance in April 1933 the SA's antisemitism was directed into more organized efforts. On 1 April, uniformed SA men blocked the entrances to Jewish shops and department stores, brandishing signs which read "Germans! Do not buy from Jews!" (see fig. 6). Jewish-owned shops were vandalized with antisemitic slogans warning Germans not to support "world Jewry's" declaration of economic warfare on Germany.[78] While the boycott was intended to last the entire week, it was called off after three days; patrons had continued to shop at their preferred stores, and Jewish-owned banks and department stores remained mostly unscathed.[79] This instance of antisemitic violence occupies an analytical grey area between political agitation and ideological enforcement. While indisputably a form of pro-NSDAP political agitation for its blatant references to talking points such as a global Jewish economic conspiracy, the boycott's failure also makes it an unsuccessful attempt at ideological enforcement. In other words, while the Brownshirts attempted to wield their physical presence and associated threat of violence to dissuade customers from patronizing Jewish shops, it was not enough to compensate for the lack of widespread violent antisemitism or complicity with such among the general German population in the earliest moments of the 'Third Reich'.

[78] Childers, *The Third Reich,* 256.
[79] Toland, *Adolf Hitler,* 310.

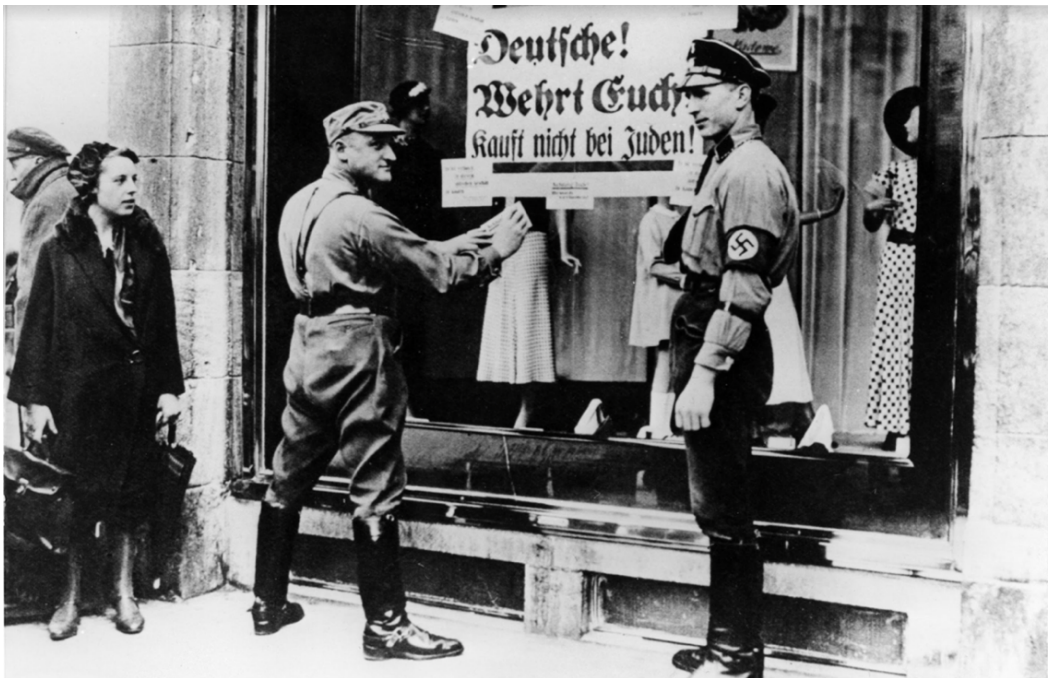

Figure 6. A woman looks on as SA men block the entrance to a department store 1 April 1933.

The most decisive acts of marginalization for political enemies and Jewish Germans came in the form of legislation. Thus, it was the series of laws passed in the spring and summer of 1933 that solidified the SA's transformation from an organization concerned with political agitation to one designed to enforce the most fundamental narratives of Nazi ideology. Commencing with the Enabling Act on 23 March 1933, Hitler was able to act independently from the Reichstag, avoiding conflicts with other political parties while they still existed.[80] The NSDAP no longer had to seriously contend with political opponents, and by extension, neither did the SA. Surely, there was no need to intimidate politically irrelevant entities. On 7 April 1933, the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service purged Jews and "politically unreliable" individuals from civil service.[81] In the first weeks of March, the SA physically removed these people from public office, but with the stroke of a pen, their removal was codified

[80] Childers, *The Third Reich,* 231.
[81] Fritzsche, *Hitler's First Hundred Days,* 229.

by official legislation. On 22 June, the SPD was officially outlawed on the grounds that it was hostile to the nation, and many of its leaders were detained in concentration camps, as members of the KPD had been in the weeks prior.[82] The capstone of this flurry of legislation was the 14 July 1933 Law Against the Founding of New Parties, which, as the name implies, prohibited the formation of new political organizations.[83]

After Hitler's Germany was transformed into a one-party state, there was no demand for SA political agitation against the physical bodies of the SPD or KPD; the SA would eventually take part in the NSDAP's ideological campaign against the ideas of the SPD and KPD. Still, the ensuing surge in antisemitic attacks suggests that the Brownshirts had found an immediate outlet for their violence elsewhere. With no external enemies to rage against, the SA began to transform, though not without growing pains. The SA came into more serious conflict with the Nazi Party after political opponents had been subdued. Without a clear unifying goal such as opposing and destabilizing the Weimar government or agitating against the KPD, the SA was adrift. With fewer still powerful enemies in common, SA leaders such as Röhm appeared to seek internal enemies both in the regular German military and the Nazi Party, even directing frustration at Hitler. Increasing agitation for a second revolution had also become popular among rank-and-file SA men, who, like their leaders, favoured a new German social hierarchy with the SA at the top.[84] While there is little proof to indicate that an SA putsch was actually imminent, Röhm's talk of a second revolution made it clear that the SA needed an existential struggle to survive, something the Nazi political apparatus could no longer accommodate without risking its newfound authority. The resulting 1934 Night of the Long Knives purge put an end to this

[82] Toland, *Adolf Hitler,* 313.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* 155.

nascent cannibalism, and in the months that followed, the SA settled into its role as the ideological enforcers of the ‘Third Reich’.

Chapter Two: Ideological Enforcers (1934-1938)

The Ceremonial Role of the SA

If the SA of 1921-1933 had relied on physicality – whether through uniforms, bodies, or violence – to play a central role in the NSDAP's struggle for power, the SA after 1934 relied on ceremonial involvement and proximity to the Nazis' fundamental ideological narratives to maintain that centrality. To be sure, the SA would never be totally divorced from an emphasis on physical presentation. Indeed, the ceremonial role of the SA often hinged on the display of uniformed masses with the capacity for violence. Yet, the Brownshirts' new role as the domestic ideological enforcers of the 'Third Reich' transformed their existing modes of representation and gave birth to several new ones. For instance, the brown shirt transformed from a provocation by a marginal group to a show of allegiance to the dominant political power. Furthermore, the SA hardly had to seek out an unwilling audience for their *propagandamarsch*. Displays of Brownshirts in the 'Third Reich' drew crowds of onlookers who attended the demonstrations for a variety of individual motivations but without the intention of counter-demonstrating. Through the ceremonial presentation of SA men, it became clear that the SA was no longer working to upset the political establishment but served as a powerful normative force encouraging submission to the Nazi political apparatus.

As the activities of the SA's years of struggle from 1921-1933 were transformed into part of a founding myth rather than a lived reality for SA men post-1934, consecrated artifacts from this chapter of the SA's history became even more crucial to NSDAP pageantry. Perhaps the most infamous of these artifacts is the *Blutfahne* (Blood Flag). The Blood Flag was the swastika banner that had been carried by SA men during the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch and soaked in the

blood of one of the sixteen original SA martyrs.[85] Introduced at the first Nazi Party rally in 1926, the Blood Flag made annual appearances at Nuremberg, where Hitler used it in a sort of medieval ritual to consecrate the banners of SA and SS units by touching the dried martyr's blood to the untarnished unit flag (see fig. 7).[86] Indeed, even the suffix "*Fahne*" implies the Blood Flag's sacred status by suggesting that the article is derived from precious materials. "*Flagge*", another word for flag, refers specifically to the more mundane article not imbued with such a mythic quality. While not a physical artifact, the Horst Wessel Song, also known as "Die Fahne hoch" ("Raise the Flag"), was treated with a similar religious air. Written in 1929 by the martyred SA unit leader Horst Wessel, the song became the Nazi Party anthem following Wessel's murder in 1930 by members of the communist *Roter Frontkämpferbund*.[87] The "Horst Wessel Song" was obligatory on official occasions and was to be sung immediately after the German national anthem.[88] With Goebbels' 26 July 1933 Protection of Sacred Songs decree, it became illegal to play the Horst Wessel Song and other patriotic anthems in places of entertainment.[89] Like Hitler's physical consecration of unit flags, the linkage of an SA artifact to a physical action such as singing made the Horst Wessel Song a critical part of creating a sense of national community.[90] With Goebbels' 1933 decree, it was ensured that the Horst Wessel Song would likely only be performed in the presence of uniformed SA men at official party functions, elevating both the presence of the song and the SA to a ceremonial rite. As David Kertzer suggests in *Ritual, Politics, and Power,* "symbols provide the content of ritual."[91] These

[85] Childers, *The Third Reich,* 95.
[86] David Biale, *Blood and Belief: The Circulation of a Symbol between Jews and Christians* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 155.
[87] Daniel Siemens, *The Making of a Nazi Hero: The Murder and the Myth of Horst Wessel* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 3.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid., 119.
[90] Ibid., 108.
[91] David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, & Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 11.

SA artifacts were laden with symbolic meaning and provided much of the content for the Nazi rituals which emerged at party functions.

Figure 7. Hitler consecrates an SA unit flag which reads "Germany Awaken" with the Blood Flag at the 1929 Nazi Party rally.

The most extraordinary official NSDAP ceremonies undoubtedly took place at the annual party rally at Nuremberg. The first official Nazi Party rally was held in 1926 in Weimar and attracted eight thousand participants, four thousand of whom were Brownshirts.[92] However,

[92] Childers, *The Third Reich,* 94.

following Hitler's appointment as chancellor, these gatherings grew rapidly. From 1933 to 1938, the weeklong rallies at Nuremberg attracted hundreds of thousands of participants.[93] Replete with cultural parades, athletic exhibitions, military demonstrations, and speeches, the annual Nuremberg rally was designed to make a lasting impression. As Thomas Childers aptly notes, "these public spectacles were intended to demonstrate the irresistible psychological pull of National Socialism and to overwhelm any onlookers who still harbored reservations about the regime."[94] The SA was integral to this function of the party rally, their seemingly infinite uniformed ranks suggesting a vast 'brown army of millions' dedicated to the *Volksgemeinschaft* and to the *Führer* (Leader).[95] The crisp lines of these participating SA battalions were punctuated with bright red swastika banners; Brownshirts were always tasked with holding swastika flags and military standards. In this particularly evocative image from the 1933 Nuremberg party rally (see fig. 8), the SA's ceremonial role is juxtaposed with the military role of the SS. While their ceremonial role was undoubtedly integral to the aesthetic impact of the Nuremberg party rally, the Brownshirts notably stand behind the black-clad ranks of the SS. Furthermore, while the SS stands emptyhanded; the SA literally carries the mantle of the regime, proudly displaying the swastika flag. Indeed, as this image plainly demonstrates, the SA was beginning to transition toward ideological enforcement the year prior to the Night of the Long Knives. Even in 1933, it was becoming apparent that the NSDAP's paramilitary wings were vying for too similar a role in the 'Third Reich' to coexist indefinitely. Perhaps more significant about this image is its appearance in the cigarette book *Deutschland Erwacht* (*Germany Awaken*). This collectible

[93] Childers, *The Third Reich,* 314.
[94] Ibid., 317.
[95] Siemens, *Stormtroopes,* 189.

scrapbook provides a visual chronicle of the SA's struggle to rouse members of the German Volk from their slumber and elevate them to national consciousness.

Figure 8. Brown shirted SA men hold swastika banners beyond the ranks of the SS dressed in black at the 1933 Nuremberg rally.

While the SA played a prominent ceremonial role at each of the Nuremberg rallies, they ironically featured most prominently at Nuremberg in 1934. At this party rally held just months after the Night of the Long Knives, the Brownshirts captured on film in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* were undoubtedly still reeling from the aftershocks of the purge. It is no accident, therefore, that Hitler explicitly emphasized the unwavering loyalty of the SA to the NSDAP. In a short speech delivered in the middle of the film, Hitler attempted to quell anxieties that the purge represented a fragmentation of the NSDAP.[96] "Those who believe that a crack has

[96] *Triumph des Willens*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl, 1935, accessed May 16, 2022, https://archive.org/details/TriumphOfTheWillgermanTriumphDesWillens, 1:07:30.

appeared in our movement are mistaken," Hitler says, gesturing firmly at the marble podium upon which he is speaking, "it stands as firm as this stone here!"[97] He also takes care to distance the purged SA leaders from the organization, stating that "if anyone sins against the SA, it does not affect the SA, but only those who dare to sin against it."[98] While the personal testimonies of SA leaders and rank-and-file reveal that this official absolution did little to remedy the SA's organizational crisis, it is clear that Hitler needed the SA to create the appearance of an unfractured bulwark of National Socialism, and indeed it did. Following Hitler's speech in Riefenstahl's film comes an almost three-minute montage of him consecrating SA battalion flags with the Blood Flag, further suggesting that neither the SA's integrity nor its continuity had been compromised by recent events.[99] With the organization's legitimacy as well as its ideological pedigree officially reaffirmed, the SA once again became a useful tool illustrating dominant NSDAP ideological narratives through ceremony.

The *Reichswettkampf der SA* (Reich Competition of the SA) was an SA sporting competition and ceremonial athletic display first held in 1935. While athletic training and sporting competitions had emerged as an official part of the SA regimen in 1933, these activities – in addition to state-sanctioned antisemitic violence – proved crucial for shifting the SA away from the self-destructive political agitation that had justified the 1934 purge. Furthermore, these new SA athletic competitions became a key part of solidifying the organization's ability to enforce the ideology of the 'Third Reich'. Despite the fact that nationalist paramilitarism in Germany finds its heritage in the *Turnbewegung* (Gymnastic Movement) of the nineteenth century – a movement which advocated disciplined physical exercises and war games as a form

[97] *Triumph des Willens*, 1:08:00
[98] Ibid., 1:08:30.
[99] Ibid., 1:10:00.

of nationalist resistance to Napoleonic hegemony – some Brownshirts rejected what they perceived to be a demilitarization of the SA.[100] To be sure, the SA never actually demilitarized nor ceased to be a paramilitary organization. However, many Brownshirts believed that the NSDAP intended to replace the SA's previous military ambition with athletic aspiration and feared that the SA was in danger of becoming a glorified sports club.[101] Rather than relegate the SA to benign sports, it is more likely that the NSDAP sought to establish historical continuity between the SA and the athletic nationalism of the nineteenth-century while also conveniently redirecting the violent energies of SA men who were still eager to fight. This redirection of the SA's energies was no secret; photographs of the *Reichswettkampf* were often captioned with phrases such as "after the struggle, the song", (see fig. 9) suggesting that the SA had done its part in the struggle for power and now the organization could rest on its laurels.[102] The NSDAP's redirection of the SA's energies toward athletics was not unfamiliar. The SA had long occupied a niche between paramilitary group and sporting league. As noted in the Introduction, in the first recorded mention of the SA, the organization is referred to as the "*Sportabteilung"* by the *Völkische Beobachter.*[103] Moreover, in addition to the first SA uniforms being a combination of sporting gear and military surplus, SA units often disguised themselves as sporting groups throughout the 1920s to evade bans.[104]

[100] Udo Merkel, "The Politics of Physical Culture and German Nationalism: Turnen versus English Sports and French Olympism, 1871-1914," *German Politics and Society* 21, no. 2 (67) (2003): 72, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/stable/23740767.
[101] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* 184.
[102] *Erster Reichswettkampf der SA*, 1935, LOT 11413 (F) [P&P] DD253.7 .E77, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
[103] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* 9.
[104] Ibid*.,* 32.

Figure 9. Shirtless SA men march in formation while singing at the 1935 SA Reichswettkampf. The caption reads: "after the struggle, the song."

The *Reichswettkampf der SA* was a prescribed marriage of militarism and sport. Here, SA men competed in relay races, navigated obstacle courses carrying heavy rucksacks, marched alongside military vehicles, and rode horses. These events drew a range of spectators, though young boys tend to occupy the margins of photographs taken at the inaugural 1935 *Reichswettkampf* (see fig. 10). In addition to serving the practical purpose of redirecting the SA's energies, the *Reichswettkampf* relayed several ideological messages. Notably, SA sports consciously rejected the elevation of individual athletes in favour of collective performances by teams.[105] This demonstration of militant collaboration toward a noble common goal was meant to inspire corresponding sentiments of national unity in the audience. Furthermore, public displays of young, chiseled, supposedly physically superior SA men evinced the NSDAP's ideological

[105] Siemens, *Stormtroopers*, 200.

narratives of physical health and 'Aryan' racial purity.[106] The SA *Reichswettkampf* served as a microcosm of the *Volksgemeinschaft*; racially 'pure' Germans working together toward a shared goal. By using the SA to perform a particular set of ideological values within a controlled tournament setting, thus guaranteeing their success, the NSDAP further legitimized these ideals. While the ceremonial presence of SA men served to enforce particular ideological narratives of the NSDAP, the memorialized absence of SA men did so even more effectively.

Figure 10. Young boys observe an SA relay race at the 1935 SA Reichswettkampf

The Memorialization of the SA

At first, memorialization appears to differ from modes of representation that tacitly preserve the agency of the SA man. Certainly, in the case of the uniform, public presence, and ceremony, a living SA man was required to relay particular political and ideological messages. By contrast, memorials dedicated to the SA functioned without any direct involvement from the

[106] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* 88.

organization. Indeed, rather than highlighting the presence of SA men, memorials tend to emphasize their absence. Instead, SA memorials and their associated commemorative practices constitute a posthumous extension of the same approaches to symbolic messaging employed by the first three modes of representation. SA memorials sparked protests, aesthetically occupied public space, and communicated elements of NSDAP ideology. SA memorials were a key component in the NSDAP's expansion of notions about heroic death, national sacrifice, and the immortality of martyrs. Historians of Nazi Germany have long acknowledged the prominence of the 'cult of heroism' in the 'Third Reich' and its role in shaping national identity. Martyred NSDAP heroes were immediately canonized and effectively mythologized in the name of heroic nationalism.[107] After the outbreak of World War II, there was no shortage of candidates for induction into the NSDAP's pantheon. However, before the outbreak of war on a massive scale, and – naturally – excluding the SA men killed by the NSDAP in the 1934 purge, SA men killed during the years of struggle from 1921 to 1933 were heroic favourites among Nazi propagandists. Figures such as the sixteen SA men martyred in the Beer Hall Putsch were mythologized as early as 1924 when Hitler dedicated *Mein Kampf* to the Blood Witnesses of the movement.[108] After his murder in February 1930, the SA unit leader Horst Wessel was elevated to the status of martyr and Blood Witness, quickly becoming one of the most well-known figures in the NSDAP's pantheon.[109] Notably, the NSDAP's memorialization of SA martyrs from this era suggests that the years of struggle had ended; the SA is situated in these memorials – and indeed by the medium of memorialization in general – as having served its purpose struggling

[107] Jay W. Baird, *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon* (Bloomington (Ind.): Indiana University Press, 1992), xi.
[108] Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, v.
[109] Horst Wessel remains an interesting choice for canonization. At the time of his death, Wessel was embroiled in a conflict with his landlady due to both a rent dispute and the fact that his female partner was either formerly or actively engaged in prostitution. There is still historical debate as to whether or not Wessel was serving as her procurer when he was murdered.

against the Weimar Republic. After 1934, the memorialization of SA men martyred from 1921 to 1933 marked a break with the organization's past political agitation by committing this era to history.

The memorialization of the SA was largely a phenomenon of the mid to late 1930s. In the early years of Hitler's chancellorship, the SA was commemorated through the refurbishment of small grave sites around Berlin.[110] Urban SA monuments such as the Monument for the Six Murdered of the Movement of the Inner City of Berlin (see fig. 11) and the Monument to the Murdered of the Movement in Magdeburg were only constructed in 1936.[111] Whilst serious commemorative ceremonies had begun in 1933, the delayed construction of centrally located SA monuments reveals the degree to which the NSDAP's ideological narratives had not yet been unanimously accepted. Using these SA monuments as a measure, it seems that it was only by the mid-1930s that the NSDAP had reached a point of ideological hegemony over the German population where these sites could function as a unifying force rather than the locus of division.[112] Narratives of martial heroism and the post-humous immortality of those who had made the ultimate sacrifice to the Nazi movement would have been ineffective if faced with an audience unsympathetic to the National Socialist cause. Even from beyond the veil, it seemed that the SA could not manufacture ideological consensus; narratives of SA sacrifice and martyrdom were only effective if onlookers had come to accept these dominant narratives of the NSDAP. By providing citizens with physical places where it was possible to access these narratives, and by heightening these sites of memory with solemn ceremonial activities, the

[110] Siemens, *The Making of a Nazi Hero, 146*
[111] Ibid., 145.
[112] Ibid.

memory of martyred SA men became extremely effective in enforcing Nazi ideology through processes of normalization and commemoration.

Figure 11. A stonemason works on the "Monument to the Murdered of the Inner City of Berlin" in 1936. Note that Horst Wessel's name appears first.

As the only mode of representation which centers on places as much as people, it is helpful to provide a brief geographic survey of the memorial landscape of the 'Third Reich' through its most important site of national worship. The Feldherrnhalle is a large, three-arched structure located on the south end of the Odeonsplatz in Munich. Commissioned in 1844 to commemorate the Bavarian field marshals Johan Graf von Tilly and Karl Fürst von Wrede, in November 1923, it was the site where the Beer Hall Putsch culminated with the deaths of sixteen

SA men.[113] After Hitler's appointment as chancellor, the Feldherrnhalle became a central fixture in the NSDAP's memorial landscape. Here, on the tenth anniversary of the failed putsch, Hitler dedicated a small memorial and plaque to the martyred SA men in an especially somber ceremony as described by historian Jay Baird:

> Upon [the procession's] arrival at the spot where the shots had rung out exactly ten years earlier, a cannon reported in the Hofgarten. It was answered by the fire of artillery pieces stretching across the city. At that point a minute of silence was observed…the crowd sang the Horst Wessel Song and shouted a round of "Sieg Heils!"[114]

Each year, with the notable exception of 1934, the Nazis repeated this ceremony which culminated with a dramatic swearing-in of new members of Hitler's elite SS bodyguard unit at midnight.[115] It is significant that rather than inducting new Brownshirts during the annual ceremonies commemorating the Beer Hall Putsch, the SS, an organization uninvolved in the putsch, took center stage. Standing before the memorial to the sixteen Blood Witnesses, the newly-inducted SS men were the symbolic fruits of the SA's labor in bringing Hitler to power. Furthermore, the centrality of the SS at these ceremonies suggests that the SS, following the Night of the Long Knives Purge, had become the NSDAP's predominant paramilitary organization while the SA settled into a more demilitarized domestic role. If 1921 to 1933 had been the SA's years of struggle, from 1934 onward, the decade belonged to Himmler's SS for whom the SA was represented as having paved the way.

In 1935, a more substantial memorial to the Blood Witnesses was opened. The *Ehrentempel* (Temple of Honour) consisted of two neoclassical marble structures constructed on

[113] Gavriel David Rosenfeld, *Munich and Memory: Architecture, Monuments, and the Legacy of the Third Reich* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 110.
[114] Baird, *To Die for Germany*, 57.
[115] Ibid.

the nearby Königsplatz, which housed the sixteen iron sarcophagi of the martyred SA men.[116] The monument itself seamlessly conveyed messages about the eternal aspirations of Hitler's 'Thousand-Year Reich' based on a classical model.[117] While the architect of the Temple of Honour did not live to see his design completed, his wife described the SA martyrs' heroic self-sacrifice as embodying the "eternal bonds between a Volk and its leadership."[118] Furthermore, the fallen SA men were to stand as the eternal guards for the ideals for which they died, guiding the decision-making in the government buildings surrounding the temples.[119] However, while the memorialization of the Blood Witnesses was largely rooted in a geographic space, the memorialization of Horst Wessel transcended geography to become a national affair.

Joseph Goebbels' elevation of Horst Wessel to the status of SA martyr had been convenient for a multitude of reasons. First, Wessel was a commissioned officer in the SA who had been murdered by communists during the SA's years of struggle. Second, as previously mentioned, Wessel wrote the lyrics to "Die Fahne hoch" which was posthumously named the Horst Wessel Song and became the anthem of the NSDAP.[120] Third, while serving as *Gauleiter*, Goebbels had met Wessel before his death and visited him several times while he was in the hospital before he succumbed to blood poisoning from his wounds.[121] Goebbels had undoubtedly started planning his propaganda blitz before Wessel had even been pronounced dead. On 23 February 1930, just hours after the SA man's death, Goebbels wrote in his diary that Wessel would be a new martyr for the 'Third Reich'.[122] Wessel's death was an opportunity for a massive

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[116] Childers, *The Third Reich,* 316.
[117] Baird, *To Die for Germany,* 58.
[118] Gerdy Troost, ed., *Das Bauen im Neuen Reich,* I, pp. 15-16 in Jay W. Baird, *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon* (Bloomington (Ind.): Indiana University Press, 1992), 58.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Siemens, *The Making of a Nazi Hero,* 3.
[121] Ibid., 15.
[122] Ibid.

NSDAP propaganda campaign which would begin with Wessel's funeral on 1 March 1930. Much to Goebbels' displeasure, the Prussian police prohibited public gatherings and displaying the swastika flag on the day of the funeral, fearing violent counter protests.[123] Even the SA uniform was only permitted to be worn during Wessel's burial at Nicolai Cemetery.[124] Still, the small procession Goebbels had organized attracted thousands of spectators, both those eager to pay their respects and those more interested in protesting the funeral. The Horst Wessel cult surged after Hitler's appointment as chancellor, a phenomenon exemplified by the flurry of Horst Wessel biographies, novels, and films, peaking after 1935 with the establishment of various sites of commemoration and even more elaborate commemorative practices.[125]

The most direct way in which Horst Wessel was transformed into a symbol of the 'Third Reich' was achieved through the strategic renaming of public buildings. This rebranding began as early as 1933, with the KPD headquarters at the Karl Liebknecht House becoming the Horst Wessel House after the SA had stormed the building and raised the swastika flag in February.[126] The square in front of the former KPD headquarters was to become Horst-Wessel-Platz just a few months later, on 26 May 1933.[127] It was here, three years later, that the monument for the Six Murdered of the Movement of the Inner City would be unveiled. By saturating public places with memorials to SA martyrs, whether by renaming buildings or constructing monuments, the NSDAP reinforced ideological narratives of national sacrifice and thus began to create a

[123] Siemens, *The Making of a Nazi Hero,* 15.
[124] Ibid.
[125] See Fritz Daum, "SA Sturmführer Horst Wessel: A Portrait of a Life of Sacrifice," 1933, in *Die Fahne Hoch: Three Biographies of Horst Wessel*, trans. Klokke van Aelst (n.p.: Antelope Hill Publishing, 2022); Max Kullak, "Horst Wessel: Through Storm and Struggle to Immortality," 1934, in *Die Fahne Hoch: Three Biographies of Horst Wessel*, trans. Klokke van Aelst (n.p.: Antelope Hill Publishing, 2022); Erwin Reitmann, "Horst Wessel: Life and Death," 1933, in *Die Fahne Hoch: Three Biographies of Horst Wessel*, trans. Klokke van Aelst (n.p.: Antelope Hill Publishing, 2022).
[126] Siemens, *The Making of a Nazi Hero*, 150.
[127] Ibid., 151.

landscape in which heroic death was synonymous with immortality. Further aiding this normalization of the Nazi "cult of the dead", as Siemens calls it, were the more highly ritualized commemorative practices that began to emerge with the construction of more elaborate memorials. Horst Wessel's grave, for instance, was refurbished in 1933 with the unveiling of a memorial stone inscribed with the words "Germany, dear Fatherland. A light has been extinguished that burned for you" and "Raise the flag!"[128]

In a fascinating series of photographs documenting the commemoration ceremonies of Horst Wessel from 1933 to 1939, the rituals involved in commemoration become increasingly expansive as the decade progresses.[129] For instance, the most notable photographs from 1937 are of a commemoration ceremony at Wessel's grave on what would have been his thirtieth birthday and a ceremony before the commencement of the 1937 SA *Reichswettkampf*.[130] This is unsurprising given that Wessel was an SA martyr, and the *Reichswettkampf* was a unique SA event. However, by 1939 most photographs capture the regular German military paying their respects at Wessel's grave (see fig. 12) and even an Italian delegation laying a wreath on the anniversary of the SA man's death.[131]

[128] Siemens, *The Making of a Nazi Hero*, 146.
[129] "Horst Wessel commemoration and memorial ceremonies 1933-39," LOT 3962 (F) [P&P], Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2005686473/.
[130] *Reichswettkämpfe der S.A. in Berlin*, 1937, photograph, LOT 3962 (F) [P&P], Horst Wessel commemoration and memorial ceremonies 1933-39, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.
[131] *S.A., Wehrmacht und faschistische Miliz gedenken Horst Wesens*, 1939, photograph, LOT 3962 (F) [P&P], Horst Wessel commemoration and memorial ceremonies 1933-39, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

Figure 12. Crew members of the ship named "Horst Wessel" pay their respects at Wessel's grave in 1939.

In just two years, Wessel had ascended from an SA martyr to an international fascist icon. To be sure, Wessel's appeal as a hero of National Socialism was so broad by 1937 that the attic room Wessel had rented for less than three months at the time of his death was featured as a main attraction in the travel guide *We Journey Through National Socialist Berlin.*[132] Even the

[132] Siemens, *The Making of a Nazi Hero*, 152.

gymnasium where Wessel had taken his school-leaving exams, which had originally been named for the archaeologist who discovered Troy, became the Horst-Wessel-Gymnasium.[133] The NSDAP had succeeded in fashioning Horst Wessel into a cultural and ideological icon. By 1938, it seemed that the SA's role in enforcing Nazi ideology had been a success. Unlike the anti-Jewish boycott in April 1933, the November Pogrom of 1938 would be followed by very few public displays of sympathy among 'Aryan' Germans who appeared to have been effectively educated by the SA.[134] However, this narrative is complicated by the observations of some contemporaries who reported that the 'Aryan' German population did not understand the pogrom and even felt sympathetic toward Jewish Germans following the destruction.[135] Regardless, the events of 9-10 November 1938 indicate that the SA had at least been successful in making 'Aryan' Germans complicit in state-sanctioned violence. Yet, considering the degree of non-SA participation in the pogrom, one might also argue that the ideological enforcement of the SA had inspired more than just a superficial toleration of Nazi ideology.

Spurred by the assassination of German diplomat Ernst vom Rath by the Polish Jew Herschel Grynszpan in Paris, the 1938 November Pogrom unleashed unprecedented antisemitic violence across Germany.[136] Led and often facilitated by the Brownshirts, men, women, and even children took part in the destruction of Jewish businesses, synagogues, and apartments. In a fascinating official directive from the NSDAP prior to the pogrom, SA men were prohibited from donning their uniforms during the vandalism and were even issued civilian clothes at town halls.[137] Despite the SA's normalization of antisemitic violence throughout the 1930s, it would

[133] Siemens, *The Making of a Nazi Hero,* 152.
[134] Childers, *The Third Reich,* 366.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* 195.
[137] Ibid., 196.

seem that the Nazi Party wanted to further cultivate the impression that the violence of the November Pogrom was only tacitly affiliated with the NSDAP; instead, it was to appear to be the grassroots uprising against Jewish Germans that had previously failed in April 1933. By barring Brownshirts from wearing their uniform, the SA engaged in widespread collaborative violence with a willing German Volk where it became virtually impossible to distinguish between civilians and Stormtroopers. By the end of the night, 30,000–60,000 Jewish Germans had been arrested, thousands of businesses, synagogues, and apartments were vandalized, and at least ninety-one Jews had been killed, not including the hundreds of suicides in the subsequent weeks.[138] Unlike the April 1933 boycott, there were few public displays of sympathy among 'Aryan' Germans following the pogrom. The little commiseration displayed following the 1938 November Pogrom criticized the destruction of valuable property rather than the extraordinary violence perpetrated against Jewish Germans.[139] Indeed, in the eyes of most of the German public, outward disapproval of Nazi leadership had become too dangerous.[140] The SA's legacy of violence and the looming threat it carried had aided in rendering the actions and ideology of Hitler's regime incontestable.

Conclusion

Visual records provide the best evidence for evaluating a 'visual' organization like the SA. By examining the functions of the SA uniform and the physical public presence of SA men in Weimar Germany, it becomes clear that these modes were, initially, mediums of political agitation designed to sow disorder in the young republic. Each mode of representation was

[138] Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2016), 87.
[139] Childers, *The Third Reich,* 366.
[140] Ibid.

integral to bringing about Hitler's seizure of power. At the same time however, the NSDAP's new political domination after 1933 rendered the SA without a unifying organizational goal. The original functions of the SA were being replaced by legislation. Following the 1934 Night of the Long Knives purge, the SA was brought even more firmly into the fold of the Nazi Party apparatus. This metaphorical renewal of vows stripped the SA of its remaining autonomy and stressed modes of representation that served the new ideological needs of Hitler's regime. The ceremonial use of the SA in National Socialist pageantry was crucial for overcoming the initial doubts of Germans about the new regime and for communicating the ideological narratives of the nascent 'Third Reich'. Then, through renaming, refurbishing, and finally erecting new monuments, the NSDAP's memorialization of martyred SA men transformed urban space into a commemorative landscape capable of enforcing ideological narratives of national sacrifice and immortality. Though beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth considering if whether the ideological narratives espoused by this commemorative landscape also helped to create a national community willing to consent to war and death on an unprecedented scale.

As this thesis has demonstrated, the greatest advantage of evaluating the transformation of the SA through modes of visual representation is that they are especially conducive to presenting the Night of the Long Knives in a more realistic historical perspective. While the diary entries of SA leaders and rank-and-file from around the time of the purge suggest that these men believed the event might hasten the 'death' of the SA, records of the SA's outward appearance told a different story.[141] Indeed, so do the records of the SA's surge in antisemitic attacks following 1934.[142] Far from becoming irrelevant after the Night of the Long Knives, representations of the SA expanded in myriad ways, as illustrated by the *Reichswettkampf* and

[141] Siemens, *Stormtroopers,* 184.
[142] Ibid., 191.

emerging memorial culture. By closely examining these facets of the SA which were regularly presented to the German public, it becomes possible to begin to grasp the extent of the role the organization played in bringing Hitler to power, and in turn, to understand the ways the NSDAP refined and wielded the power of the SA to devastating effect.

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