

## B How significant was the Night of the Long Knives?

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### FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 Explain how the Night of the Long Knives helped consolidate Hitler's position by
  - a) removing a left-wing threat to him
  - b) winning the support of the army
  - c) reducing the conservative opposition to him.
- 2 Why was Hitler able to get away with such blatant lawlessness?
- 3 Why was this event so significant?

### Why did Hitler turn on the SA in the Night of the Long Knives?

A convoy of lorries moved quietly through the night. Moonlight glistened on numerous silvery revolvers, contrasting with the sinister black uniforms. The SS was moving into position for the first of its many deadly tasks. The night was 29 June 1934, the Night of the Long Knives.

This was the most dramatic and most significant single event during the establishment of Hitler's supremacy. The main victims, unsuspecting in a lakeside hotel at Bad Wiessee, were the leaders of the SA, Hitler's own storm troopers. Now Hitler was in power he had less need of these potentially rebellious shock troops with their radical ideas. The dazed SA leaders were brutally pulled from their beds, taken to Nazi headquarters and gunned down. At the same time, in Berlin and other cities, the SS moved on others whom Hitler disliked or feared. The scheming Schleicher, the potential rival Gregor Strasser and Hitler's old enemy of 1923 Gustav von Kahr as well as the 'arch traitor' SA leader Röhm died in the bloodbath. Figures for the numbers of victims vary, with some estimates as high as 1,000. Most historians now say about 90, including over 50 SA leaders.

Hitler proudly defended his actions to the Reichstag and took full responsibility. He said he was defending Germany against a plot by Röhm and the degenerate homosexuals around him. Ten years earlier in Fascist Italy the murder of one man, Giacomo Matteotti, had nearly caused the early collapse of Mussolini's regime, yet this bloodbath strengthened Hitler's regime. Why was this?

The main victims were the SA, feared by the conservative elite and resented by the Reichswehr. Röhm had talked of merging his 3 million-strong SA, the 'brown flood', with the 'grey rock' of the army into a vast people's militia. But Hitler had other ideas. Now he was in power, he needed the SA far less than the support of the elite. Mussolini, at his first meeting with Hitler in June 1934, had advised him to eliminate his left wing.

**SOURCE 10.5** Photomontage by John Heartfield; published in Prague on 19 July 1934



Photomontage: John Heartfield

Nazi infighting also played a major role. Since the early 1920s there had been tension between Röhm's view of the SA, as the key body for seizing and retaining power, and Hitler's view of it as having a subordinate role to the party. In addition, Heinrich Himmler was ambitious for his SS to break away from the formal control of the SA. Goering also resented Röhm and led Hitler to believe that the SA leader was planning a coup to embark on a 'second revolution'. Although Röhm said some things to suggest this (see Chart 10C), it was far more likely that he hoped to persuade Hitler to take more radical measures. Instead, Hitler, more concerned to reassure the elite, especially the army, decided to destroy this pressure for a 'second revolution'.

There was a second, and less well noticed, purpose to the coup. Some conservatives, centred around Vice-Chancellor Papen and his 'Reich Complaints Ministry', were increasingly worried at the growing lawlessness of the regime and the power of the SA. They realised that Hitler was not playing his anticipated PUPPET role. Hitler would be in trouble if these groups gained the support of Hindenburg or the army. So, to deter a conservative backlash, the conservative critic Edgar Jung was murdered; Papen, placed under house arrest, was fortunate to survive. By acting against the SA, Hitler had reassured his conservative supporters but he had also intimidated his conservative critics.

### ■ 10B Pressures on Hitler in the lead-up to the Night of the Long Knives

#### Hitler's aims

- to increase his own power
- to control the left-wing of the Nazi Party
- to win over the army



#### Threat from the Nazi Left

- 3-million strong SA: many of them expecting a 'second revolution'
- Concerned about Hitler selling out to the Right

#### Threat from the Right

- Elite, especially the army, worried about Nazi radicals, especially the SA
- Growing criticism of Nazi excesses

**Ernst Röhm, 1887–1934**

Röhm was a professional soldier who rose to the rank of captain in the First World War but found it hard to adjust to the post-war world. After the war he joined the Freikorps for excitement and was used by the General Staff of the German army to gather political intelligence on opposition groups. Röhm recruited Hitler to infiltrate the German Workers Party but was impressed by his oratory, became his friend and joined the Nazi Party. Röhm helped form the SA and after the failure of the Munich Putsch he was jailed but released on probation.

Röhm was a natural rebel who held revolutionary views, though of an instinctive not ideological kind. He once commented that he had more in common with Communists than with the bourgeoisie. In his autobiography he wrote: 'Since I am an immature and wicked man, war and unrest appeal to me more than good bourgeois order.' He drank heavily and was homosexual.

In 1925 he went to Bolivia as a military instructor. In 1930 Hitler called him back to Germany to train and gain tighter control of the unruly SA. He built up a tough, committed leadership, and vastly expanded the membership. In 1933 he was appointed to the Cabinet, but tension grew over his view that the SA should be a major force for radical revolution. His riotous behaviour further worried the conservatives whom Hitler needed to appease. Hitler let his political sense override his longstanding friendship and decided to eliminate Röhm. Arrested on 30 June 1934, Röhm refused to commit suicide and was shot in prison two days later. Just before he died he commented, 'All revolutions devour their own children.'



■ Learning trouble spot

**In what sense did Röhm and the SA represent the radical Left, and the SS the radical Right?**

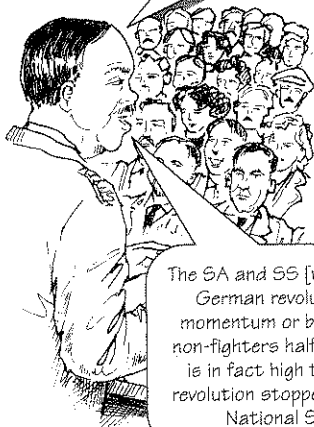
Röhm and the SA are sometimes described as left-wing, socialist Nazis or as radical Nazis, a description also used of the SS who are described as the radical Right. This can appear confusing but it is a valid view in some respects.

Röhm was a radical or extremist who disliked bourgeois society and wanted to reorder Germany, especially by replacing the army with the SA. However, neither he nor other SA leaders had a clear socialist view of the future, but arguably just wanted power for themselves. As the historian Fest has commented in *The Face of the Third Reich* (1979, p. 222), 'The slogan "Second Revolution", so often misinterpreted as indicating a predominantly socialist programme . . . was merely an expression of the aim of many individuals to enrich themselves or to regain a place in society.' There were, however, some more genuinely socialist elements in the Nazi Party that do justify the term 'Left' (see page 117).

The SS were also Nazi radicals, but it is even more inappropriate to use the term Left or Right for them. Unlike Röhm, Gregor Strasser and other 'left-wing' Nazis, the SS did not talk in class terms, nor did they attract members disproportionately from the working class. They prided themselves on forming a disciplined elite. If one describes Nazism as a right-wing movement, then as radical Nazis they can be described as the radical Right. However, the term Right is perhaps best used to describe the conservative groups who had hoped to use Nazism for their own purposes, not the radical SS. Both the SA and the SS can be seen as revolutionaries, but the former were impatient and overreached themselves. The SS, under Heinrich Himmler's careful leadership, sought a racial revolution and achieved the dominance in the Third Reich ('the SS state') that Röhm had wanted for the SA.

## 10C Political tension in the lead-up to the Night of the Long Knives

Anyone who thinks the tasks of the SA have been accomplished will have to get used to the fact that we intend to stay. The SA is the Nazi Revolution.



The SA and SS [will] not permit the German revolution to lose its momentum or be betrayed by the non-fighters halfway to the goal. It is in fact high time the national revolution stopped and became the National Socialist one.

**SOURCE 10.6 Ernst Röhm speaking in 1933**

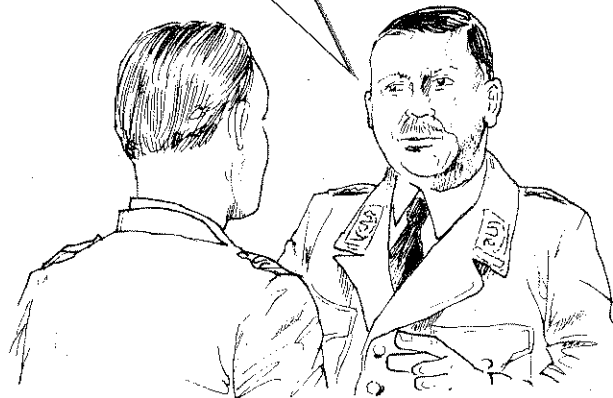
Adolf is rotten. He's betraying all of us. He only goes around with reactionaries. His old comrades aren't good enough for him. So he brings in these East Prussian generals. They're the ones he pals around with now ... Are we a revolution or aren't we? ... Something new has to be brought in, understand? A new discipline. A new principle of organisation. The generals are old fogies. They'll never have a new idea ... But Adolf is and always will be a civilian, an 'artist', a dreamer. Just leave me be, he thinks. Right now all he wants to do is sit up in the mountains and play God. And guys like us have to cool our heels, when we're burning for action ... The chance to do something really new and great, something that will turn the world upside down – it's a chance in a lifetime.

But Hitler keeps putting me off. He wants to let things drift. Keeps counting on a miracle. That's Adolf for you. He wants to inherit a ready-made army all set to go. He wants to have it knocked together by 'experts'. When I hear that word I blow my top. He'll make it National Socialist later on, he says. But first he's turning it over to the Prussian generals. Where the hell is revolutionary spirit to come from afterwards?



**SOURCE 10.7 Röhm privately in a drinking session with friends**

He wants to use it at will, as pressure on the German Army and on big business here and abroad. But if he thinks he can squeeze me for his own ends forever, and some fine day throw me on the ash heap, he's wrong. The SA can also be an instrument for checking Hitler himself.



**SOURCE 10.8 Ernst Röhm in conversation with the Nazi Kurt Lüdecke, June 1933, describing Hitler's attitude to the SA**

### SOURCE ACTIVITY

(Marks are given in brackets.)

Sources 10.6–11 give an indication of the views of three of the key tendencies in Germany in 1933: Röhm and the SA radicals, Chancellor Hitler and the conservative elite.

- 1 Explain Röhm's distinction in Source 10.6 between a 'national revolution' and a 'National Socialist' revolution. (2)
- 2 What do Sources 10.6–8 show about Röhm's view of the SA? (3)
- 3 'Just as the elite were trying to use Hitler for their own ends, so Hitler did the same with the SA.' What evidence is there in Sources 10.8 and 10.9 to support this view? (4)
- 4 With reference to the provenance and content of Source 10.10, explain what this shows about Hitler's view of the new state. (3)
- 5 a) What criticisms of developments in Germany does Papen make in Source 10.11? (2)
- b) To what extent might Hitler share these concerns? (3)
- 6 How fully do these sources explain why Hitler turned against the SA in the Night of the Long Knives? (8)

(Total: 25 marks)



My dear Chief of Staff,  
The fight of the National Socialist movement and the National Socialist Revolution were rendered possible for me by the consistent suppression of the Red Terror by the SA. If the army has to guarantee the protection of the nation against the world beyond our frontiers, the task of the SA is to secure the victory of the National Socialist Revolution and the existence of the National Socialist State and the community of our people in the domestic sphere ... It is primarily due to your services ... this political instrument could develop that force which enabled me to face the final struggle for power and to succeed in laying low the Marxist opponent. At the close of the year of the National Socialist Revolution, I feel compelled to thank you, my dear Ernst Röhm.

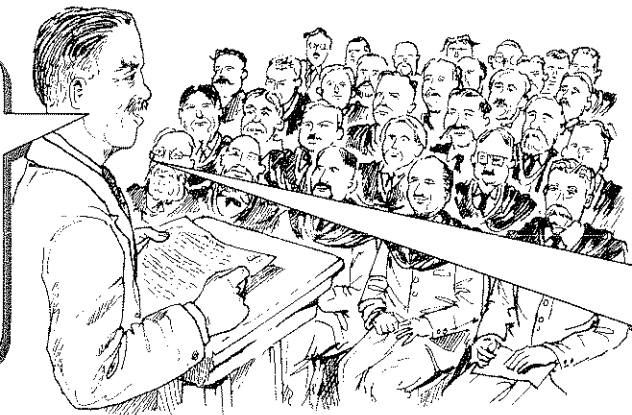
**SOURCE 10.9** Letter, 1 January 1934: Hitler to Röhm, SA Chief of Staff



Revolution is not a permanent state of affairs and it must not develop into such a state. The full rush of revolution must be guided into the secure bed of evolution. The ideas of the [Nazi] programme do not oblige us to act like fools and upset everything.

**SOURCE 10.10** Hitler to Reich Governors July 1933

There appears to be endless talk of a second wave which will complete the revolution ... There is much talk about socialisation. Have we experienced an anti-Marxist revolution in order to carry out the programme of Marxism ...? No nation that would survive before history can afford a permanent uprising from below.



At some stage the movement must come to an end; at some point there must emerge a firm social structure held together by a legal system secure against pressure and by a State power that is unchallenged. A ceaseless dynamic creates nothing ... Confidence and willingness to co-operate will not be furthered by incitement ... nor by threats against the defenceless classes of the community, but only by discussion based upon mutual confidence. The people ... will follow the Führer with unshakable loyalty, provided they are allowed to have a share in the making and carrying out of decisions, provided every word of criticism is not immediately interpreted as malicious, and provided that despairing patriots are not branded as traitors.

**SOURCE 10.11** Vice-Chancellor Papen in a speech, 17 June 1934, to the university of Marburg

This was to be the last speech openly critical of the regime. It was written by Edgar Jung, Papen's associate. Jung was warned of the dangers of a critical speech; he considered he was too well known to be in danger. A few days after the speech he was murdered in the Night of the Long Knives

### ■ Learning trouble spot

#### Tackling sources: the much ignored 'to what extent?' question – assessing degree

Students often lose marks by failing to understand the importance of certain key phrases in questions. This is frequently the case with questions such as 5b) and 6 (opposite). Another key phrase is 'how much light' does a source shed on an issue.

All these questions ask you to make a judgement as to degree. You should not just identify what the sources say or have in common, and where they contradict or say different (but not necessarily conflicting) things. You must also make a judgement as to how far they do this. To answer these questions effectively you need to express your opinion. The following phrases can be useful: 'Whereas both sources agree on the key issue of ... , they disagree considerably over ... Therefore overall they disagree to a large extent' or 'Although A sheds much light on ... , it does not ... nor ... Thus overall it is surprisingly limited in what it reveals about ...'

In the case of Question 6, you should refer to the views of Röhm, Hitler, Papen and the elite about the nature of the state (as revealed here and using any other knowledge you have). Then refer to other reasons for Hitler's actions that are not revealed here to make your judgement of 'how fully'.

To help your overall assessment in Question 6, you need to assess the reliability of the sources as well as the content.

**SOURCE 10.12** Law passed by the Reichstag, 3 July 1934, legalising the action

*The measures taken on 30th June, and 1st, 2nd July to strike down the treasonous attacks are justifiable acts of self-defence by the state.*

**SOURCE 10.13** Extracts from Hitler's address (lasting several hours) to the Reichstag, 13 July 1934, broadcast on the radio

*Everyone will know in future that if he lifts his hand against the state certain death is his fate, and every National Socialist will know that no rank and no position allows him to escape punishment . . .*

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

**SOURCE 10.16** Defence Minister Werner von Blomberg, 5 July 1934

*The Führer with soldierly decision and exemplary courage has himself attacked and crushed the traitors and murderers. The Army, as the bearers of arms of the entire people, far removed from the conflicts of domestic politics, will show its gratitude through devotion and loyalty.*

**SOURCE 10.18** President Hindenburg on the Night of the Long Knives

*Through your decisive intervention and your courageous personal commitment you have nipped all the treasonable intrigues in the bud. You have saved the German nation from serious danger and for this I express to you my deeply felt gratitude and my sincere appreciation.*

**SOURCE 10.20** A Saxon small businessman

*The main thing is that he has freed us from the Marxists [and has] got rid of the harmful influence [of the] dreadful SA . . . even if he is a mass murderer.*

## Why was Hitler able to get away with murder in the Night of the Long Knives?

It is not easy for us to understand how Hitler managed to get away with state-organised murder. Some of the reasons can be deduced from Sources 10.12-20.

### ACTIVITY

- 1 What reasons can you infer from each source as to why Hitler got away with the Night of the Long Knives?
- 2 What other reasons can you think of? (In particular, consider whether the Nazis had got away with violence during the Weimar Republic. Who were the main victims then? Who were they now? What did they have in common?)
- 3 How reliable do you think each of Sources 10.15 and 10.17 is as evidence of public opinion?
- 4 Construct a spider diagram to record your conclusions about why Hitler was not opposed over the Night of the Long Knives.

**SOURCE 10.14** Intelligence reports from socialist party agents within Germany to SOPADE (Social Democratic Party in exile) on public reactions

*Wide sections of the population have gained the impression from Hitler's [13 July] speech that through his brutal energy Hitler has prevented a much greater bloodbath.*

*[He has] paved the way for a moral renewal [and] elevated [his] standing as the cleanser of the Movement all the more as the muck was raked out into full view.*

**SOURCE 10.15** Gestapo and other government reports on public reactions

*The suppression of the Röhm revolt has been like a purifying thunderstorm. The nightmare which has burdened the people has been followed by a liberating sigh of relief . . . Wide sections of the population, however, have been deeply shocked by the shooting of persons unconnected with the Röhm revolt. It is realised these were excesses, which took place without the knowledge and against the will of the Führer.*

**SOURCE 10.17**

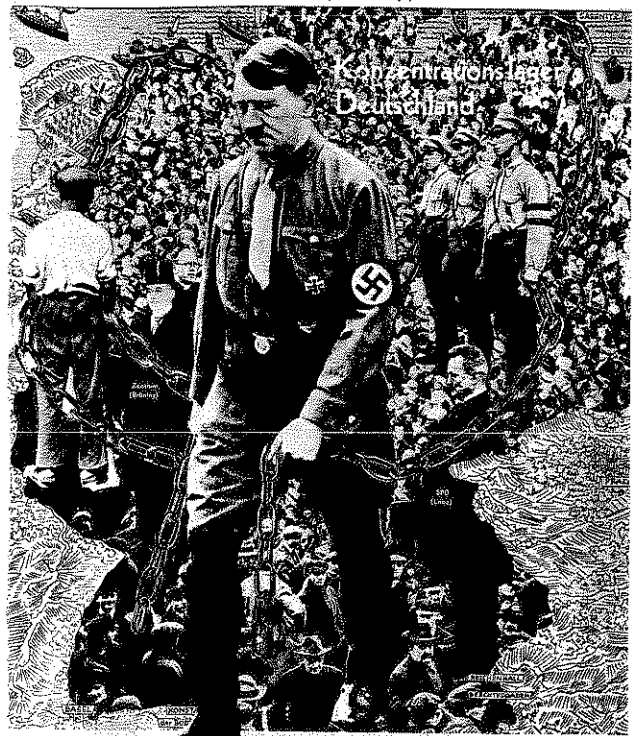
A German citizen interviewed in a 1980s TV programme

*After June 30th everyone was frightened. Everyone felt that he in turn might share the fate of the SA men. The name of Himmler sent shivers down the spine . . . The ordinary German no longer felt free.*

**SOURCE 10.19**

The caption at the top of this cartoon, a photomontage by John Heartfield, reads: 'The whole nation stands behind me.' Underneath it says: 'I don't see parties, I just see prisoners' – a parody of Kaiser Wilhelm II's remark, 'I don't see parties, I just see Germans'

„Die Nation steht geschlossen hinter mir“



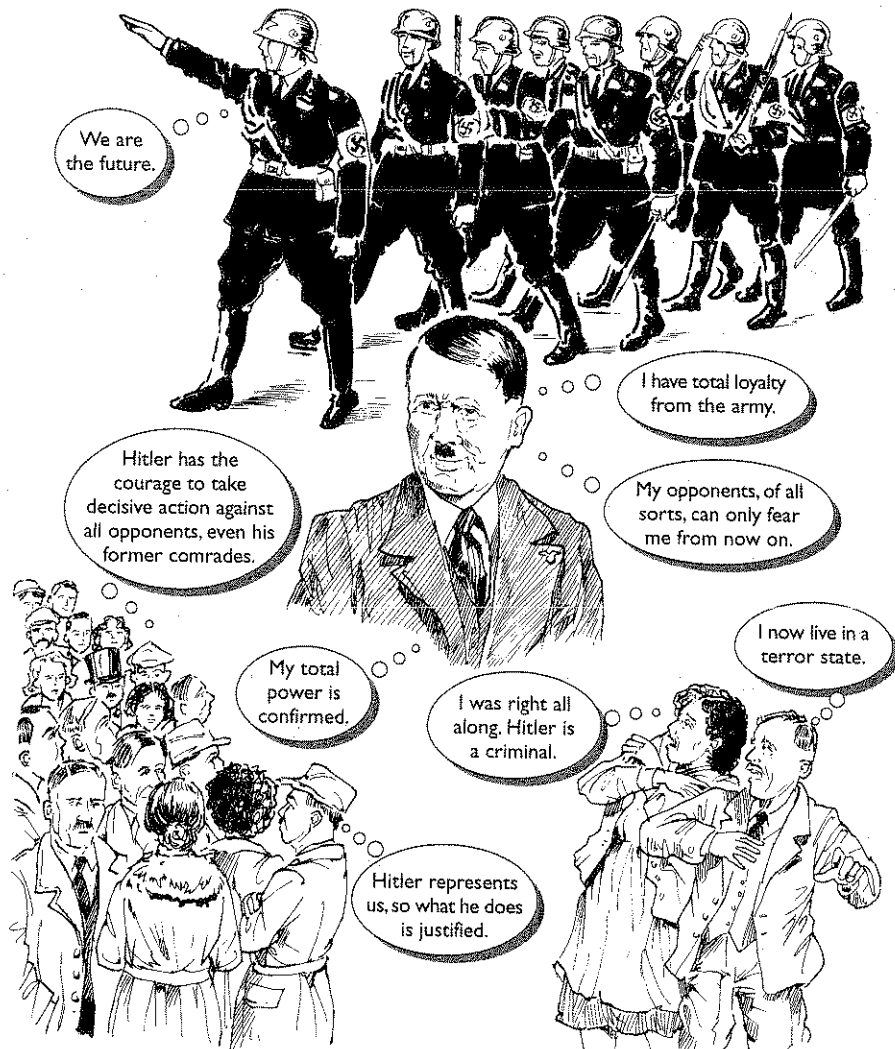
Ich kenne keine Parteien mehr,  
Ich kenne nur noch Gefangene!

## How significant was the Night of the Long Knives?

The Night of the Long Knives marked a major shift in the development of Hitler's dictatorship. In different ways, he had triumphed over both the Left and the Right. He had tamed his radicals in the SA and won the support of the elite, most crucially the army. The generals were conciliated by the weakening of the army's rival, the SA, and a promise that they would retain a monopoly of armed force. They hoped that with the SA weakened the army's influence would increase. Some generals proposed the army take an oath to tie Hitler and the army together. So, when Hindenburg died, all soldiers took a new oath of personal loyalty to their Führer, replacing the traditional oath of loyalty to the constitution (see page 171). But the generals' plan backfired. As Kershaw has recently argued (in *Hitler*, p. 525), 'Far from creating a dependence of Hitler on the army, the oath marked the symbolic moment where the army chained itself to the Führer.' It was the SS, not the army, which made the real gains. In July 1934 it became independent of the SA, under Hitler's personal and direct command.

The greatest winner of all was undoubtedly Hitler. He had gained the acceptance of the legalised murder of opponents. This served to intimidate future opponents and to embolden him. The traditional organs of the state had acquiesced in (accepted) his actions. Most of the German people accepted the view that as their Führer he would act only for the good of the nation. The Night of the Long Knives showed that the new state was not to be a traditional authoritarian one, but a new dictatorship, where the rule of law was to be replaced by the dictates of one man – a man who, contrary to appearances in 1933, had a horrific vision of the future.

### ■ 10D The significance of the Night of the Long Knives



#### ACTIVITY

Choose one of the following:

- an associate of Röhm who escaped the death list
- an associate of Papen
- a Reichswehr general
- a German Socialist in exile
- Himmler
- Hitler
- an ordinary German (you may decide what type).

Using the sources and your own knowledge, explain this individual's feelings before June 1934 about the SA and his or her reaction to the Night of the Long Knives.