

Political Agitators to Ideological Enforcers: Representations of the Brownshirts in Germany 1921-1938

Introduction

The complex role of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) or Brownshirts – a paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) – in Nazi Germany has been hotly debated by historians. Although the SA played a key role in facilitating Hitler's seizure of power, the organization had a turbulent relationship with the NSDAP at best. In the summer of 1934, the state-sanctioned purge of SA leadership known as the Night of the Long Knives destabilized the Brownshirts to the point of crisis. Resultantly, historians have largely treated 1934 as marking a decline of the SA's influence in Nazi Germany. However, this could not be further from the case. The surge of antisemitic violence in the summer of 1935 and the horrific November Pogrom of 1938 – both perpetrated by the Brownshirts – indicate that the organization was still formidable. By evaluating the Brownshirts' various modes of representation, this project suggests that the transformation of the SA was not one of relevance to irrelevance, but was instead an organizational transformation in their role as political agitators in Weimar Germany to ideological enforcers within the 'Third Reich.' Furthermore, it becomes apparent that this shift in the SA's role was not the product of the Night of the Long Knives purge as historians have previously suggested, but instead began in the first months of Hitler's chancellorship in 1933.

Methodology

This project used visual primary sources, such as photographs, artwork, and film, to investigate the SA's transformation from political agitators to ideological enforcers. These sources revealed four main modes of SA representation which the organization used to achieve political and ideological goals: 1) the SA uniform; 2) the physical public presence of SA men; 3) the SA's ceremonial presence; and 4) the memorialization of the SA. These modes of representation are the best evidence for evaluating a shift in the SA's role. First, the Brownshirts relied on their visual impact to evoke particular responses, both positive and negative, from onlookers. Second, official directives from the Nazi Party often contradicted the orders handed down to SA men, making written records unreliable for understanding precisely how the Brownshirts were presented to the German public.



Figure 1. SA men don white shirts to circumvent the 1930 Prussian uniform ban.
Image: HU 6897, Chamberlain Peter Collection, Imperial War Museum, London, UK.

Political Agitators (1921-1933)

- SA political agitation was designed to destabilize Weimar Germany and bring about a Nazi seizure of power.
- The SA uniform, especially the brown shirt, quickly became a provocative symbol of political agitation.
- The brown shirt became so synonymous with inspiring street violence that it was frequently banned on both a national and regional level, inspiring malicious compliance among SA men who wore white shirts or went shirtless to circumvent the bans.
- SA men engaged in politically-motivated brawls and street fights with members of the German communist fighting league, often in broad daylight.
- Uniformed SA men participated in Hitler's failed Beer Hall Putsch (1923).
- *Propagandamarches*, parades of uniformed SA men, dominated public space to raise the profile of the NSDAP and assert dominance over political opponents. These parades often incited violence.



Figure 2. Painting depicting an SA man wielding a chair in a brawl.
Image: Felix Albrecht, *Saalschacht (Brawl)*, 1930.



Figure 3. Woman looks on as SA men block the entrance to a department store 1 April 1933. The placard reads "Germans! Do not buy from Jews!"
Image: AKG74289, AKG Images.

Key Moments in 1933

30 Jan – Hitler is appointed chancellor and thus the ultimate goal of the Brownshirts' political agitation is realized. The Weimar government is eliminated as an existential enemy to the SA and Nazi Party.

27 Feb – The German parliament (Reichstag) burns down in an act of arson.

28 Feb – The **Reichstag Fire Decree** curbs German citizens' civil liberties including freedom of speech, assembly, and press. Serves as the legal justification for the Nazis' purge of German communists who are implicated by the Nazis in the Reichstag Fire.

23 Mar – **Enabling Act** is ratified, allowing Hitler to act independently of the Reichstag.

1 Apr – Antisemitic boycott of Jewish businesses commences. SA men stand guard outside Jewish shops to dissuade 'Aryan' Germans from patronizing.

7 Apr -- **Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service** removes Jewish Germans and "politically unreliable" individuals from the civil service.

22 June – Social Democratic Party of Germany is outlawed

14 July – Law Against the Founding of New Parties is ratified

Ideological Enforcers (1921-1938)

- SA ideological enforcement served a normative function in Nazi Germany by strengthening and disseminating the Nazis' dominant ideological narratives.
- Like political agitation, ideological enforcement hinged on the physical presence and presentation of SA men but was intended to illustrate the psychological pull of National Socialism.
- Artifacts such as the Blood Flag and Horst Wessel Song provided the content of NSDAP rituals. Hitler consecrated SA battalion flags at the annual Nuremberg Party Rally with the Blood Flag.
- Beginning in 1935, Brownshirts participated in the *Reichswettkampf der SA*, a ceremonial athletic competition intended to demonstrate core NSDAP values such as collaboration of pure 'Aryan' *Volk* and physical health.
- The construction of memorials to SA 'martyrs' in urban areas sought to normalize and elevate NSDAP narratives of immortality, sacrifice, struggle, and martial heroism.



Figure 5. Shirtless SA men march in formation while singing at the 1935 *Reichswettkampf der SA*. This photograph was originally captioned "after the struggle, the song." While not pictured here, many of the spectators of these displays were young German boys.
Image: Erster Reichswettkampf der SA, 1935, LOT 11413 (F) [P&P] DD253.7.E77, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.



Figure 4. Brown shirted SA men hold swastika banners beyond the ranks of the SS dressed in black at the 1933 Nuremberg rally.

Image: *Deutschland Erwacht: Werden, Kampf und Sieg der NSDAP*, 1938, DD 253.B24, Library of Congress, Washington DC, 146.

Conclusion

Visual records provide the best evidence for evaluating a 'visual' organization like the SA. The SA uniform and the physical public presence of SA men in Weimar Germany were mediums of political agitation designed to sow disorder in the young republic and bring about Hitler's seizure of power. However, when the NSDAP's newfound political domination in 1933 replaced the original functions of the SA with legislation, the organization's role had to shift. Thus, the SA's involvement in NSDAP ceremonies, as well as the memorialization of SA martyrs, became crucial mediums employed by the Nazis to overcome the initial doubts of Germans about the new regime and to communicate the ideological narratives of the nascent 'Third Reich'.

Further Reading

Baird, Jay W. *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon*. Bloomington (Ind.): Indiana University Press, 1992.
Bessel, Richard. *Political Violence and the Rise of Nazism: The Storm Troopers in Eastern Germany 1925-1934*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.
Fischer, Conan. *Stormtroopers: A Social, Economic and Ideological Analysis, 1929-35*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1983.
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Siemens, Daniel. *The Making of a Nazi Hero: The Murder and the Myth of Horst Wessel*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013.
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