

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 267

“The Brown Battalions”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Clear the streets for the brown battalions,

Clear the streets for the storm division man!

Millions are looking upon the swastika full of hope,

The day of freedom and of bread dawns.

Das Horst-Wessel-Lied.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 267. The Brown Battalions.

Horst Wessel was born on October 9, 1907 in Westphalia. His father was an Evangelical minister. (In the United States, we would say a “Lutheran minister.”) Horst grew up in Berlin, where his father was serving a church. In 1926, the now 18-year-old Horst enrolled in Friedrich Wilhelm University in Berlin, and took up the study of law.

Horst’s father was a staunch supporter of the conservative monarchist National People’s Party, and Horst joined the party’s youth group when he was 15. As he grew older, he migrated to young men’s groups that were connected to the Freikorps, and shortly after he turned 19, he joined the Sturmabteilung, the SA, the paramilitary brownshirts of Adolf Hitler’s NSDAP.

The leader of the National Socialist Party in Berlin was the 29-year-old Joseph Goebbels, a writer and academic who held a degree in philology from the University of Heidelberg. The Berlin branch of the Party was small, but it was zealous, and it had its own SA unit. Goebbels subscribed to the principle that there was no such thing as bad publicity, and so he encouraged the SA in provocative street demonstrations and acts of violence, especially against Communists and Jews, as a way of drawing attention to the National Socialist movement. A favorite tactic

was to have a group of brownshirts congregate outside a venue where the Communists were holding a meeting and harass those entering or leaving. Often this escalated to entering the meeting itself and disrupting it with disorderly behavior and violence. Typically, the police would look the other way when the stormtroopers became violent, but would respond instantly to any Communist transgressions. We saw the same pattern in Italy in episode 198.

This was just the thing for young Horst Wessel, who idolized Goebbels. He lived something of a double life: earnest young law student by day, stormtrooper thug by night, who hung out with other young toughs in seedy bars or cavorted with prostitutes when he wasn't out in the streets attacking Jewish pedestrians, or beating up Communists. Not at all the life you'd expect a pastor's kid to be leading.

In October 1929, the same month as the stock market crash in New York, Horst dropped out of school to devote himself full time to the SA and the National Socialists. By that time he had taken up with a young woman named Erna Jänicke. She was an ex-prostitute or, depending on which version of the story you believe, an active prostitute. Some claim Horst Wessel was pimping her. In November, Horst invited her to move in with him.

Horst was subletting the flat he and Erna lived in from a woman named Elisabeth Salm. It appears there were disputes over late rent payments and perhaps also concerns that Erna was using the flat to ply her trade. Salm asked Erna to move out. She refused. Salm had friends among the Communist Party's Red Front Fighters, the KPD's answer to the SA, so she approached them about helping her get rid of her undesirable subtenants. The Red Front wasn't particularly interested in helping out a landlord at first; then they heard who Erna was living with. The name Horst Wessel was well known and despised in Communist circles, and the opportunity to catch one of the SA's most prominent thugs alone was too good to pass up.

The night of January 14, 1930, a Red Front gang knocked on the door to the flat. An unsuspecting Horst Wessel opened the door and was immediately shot by one of the Communists, all of whom then fled the scene. Horst was taken to the hospital.

The National Socialists had already established a practice of celebrating their martyrs, especially the 16 Nazis who fell during the Munich putsch of 1923. Joseph Goebbels felt the Berlin chapter needed its own martyr, and Horst Wessel fit the bill nicely. Within days after the attack, Goebbels was denouncing what he called "degenerate communist subhumans."

Horst Wessel never recovered from his wounds and, in an age before antibiotics had been discovered, died of sepsis on February 23. He was 22 years old. After his death, Goebbels devised a whole mythology around the young man's life and death and Horst Wessel would be singled out as the Nazi Party's most famous martyr and one of its most powerful symbols. As one historian of Nazi propaganda remarked, Horst Wessel served the Party far better as a dead pimp than he ever had as a live stormtrooper.

Shortly before his death, Wessel had written lyrics to a song intended to be a marching song for the SA. It was called “Die Fahne hoch,” or “Hold the Flag High,” although it was more often referred to as simply *Das Horst-Wessel-Lied*—“The Horst Wessel Song.” It would become the Nazi Party anthem, and later Germany’s second national anthem.

Goebbels turned Horst Wessel’s funeral into a major propaganda event and delivered a fiery eulogy. When the Berlin government denied the Party the necessary permits for a mass funeral procession, the Nazis filmed the funeral and used the film as a propaganda tool. The attendees at the funeral included Great War flying ace Hermann Göring and Prince August Wilhelm, ex-Kaiser Wilhelm’s fourth son, now an ardent Nazi.

Not in attendance at the funeral: Party Leader Adolf Hitler. This was spring of 1930, just as the German government was collapsing. The 1930 general election, which vaulted the Nazis into second place in the Reichstag and which we discussed last time, that’s still six months in the future. Hitler had every reason to believe, even as early as March, that his Party would do well in the coming election, but in the meantime he had to deal with a schism within the Berlin branch of the Party between Goebbels, the leader of the Berlin party, and 32-year-old Otto Strasser, who along with his brother Gregor operated a Nazi newspaper called the *Berliner Arbeiterzeitung*, the “Worker’s News.” Goebbels operated his own newspaper in Berlin, *Der Angriff*, which you could translate as “The Attack” or “The Onslaught.”

Goebbels was a master of Party propaganda, but the *Berliner Arbeiterzeitung* was in direct competition with Goebbels’s publication and had a much larger circulation. The Strasser brothers were ex-socialists who had joined the NSDAP from the left. So had Goebbels, in fact, but by 1930, Goebbels had come around to Hitler’s viewpoint on just about everything. The Strassers, by contrast, were among the members of the National Socialist German Workers Party who still took seriously the “socialist” and “workers” parts of the name.

Goebbels was more loyal to Hitler, but the Strassers were also useful to him. As Party Leader, Hitler tried to keep both factions of the Berlin branch happy, but Otto Strasser in particular was becoming increasingly critical of Hitler’s leadership. Strasser disagreed with Hitler’s taking the 1925 pledge that in the future the Party would seek power only through legal means, the pledge that made it possible for the NSDAP to participate in German elections. Hitler, he claimed, had sold out revolutionary socialism for the right to hobnob with wealthy and powerful figures of the German right wing. Hitler told Strasser, “I am a socialist...but what you mean by socialism is nothing but crass Marxism. The masses of workers only want bread and circuses. They have no comprehension of any sort of ideals...There can only be one revolution, the revolution of race. There is no economic, political, or social revolution. The fundamental struggle is always the same: the struggle of a racially inferior lower class against a dominant high race. The day the higher race forgets this iron law, it has lost the battle.”

Strasser asked Hitler whether, if he were in government, he would preserve large, privately owned industrial firms like Krupp or IG Farben. Hitler answered, “Of course! Do you think I’m crazy...?” Strasser told Hitler that if once he gained power, he meant to retain capitalism, then he had no right to use the word *socialism*. That was the final break. Hitler told Goebbels to expel from the Berlin chapter all of the “salon Bolsheviks.” Goebbels was delighted with this turn of events. Soon after, he would be made leader of the Party’s national propaganda operation. Otto Strasser avoided the humiliation of being expelled from the Party by resigning first. He went on to create his own leftist National Socialist party, but it attracted few followers.

Best of all, from Hitler’s point of view, this kerfuffle in the Berlin chapter attracted little attention from the press. The Young Plan, the economic slowdown, the new government’s austerity plan, all these larger stories pushed intramural Nazi squabbles off the front pages, preventing the schism from becoming an embarrassment just before the election.

[music: Wagner, *Lohengrin*]

You already know the outcome of the 1930 German election: the National Socialist Party’s share of the vote soared and the NSDAP became the second-largest party in the Reichstag. At the first meeting of this new Reichstag, in October, a month after the election, the 107 Nazi deputies turned up in the Party uniform: brown shirts and swastika armbands. Outside, in the streets of Berlin, brownshirts demonstrated all afternoon, chanting “Heil Hitler” and “Death to Judah,” in defiance of police efforts to disperse them. By nightfall, the brownshirts had turned violent, smashing windows of Jewish-owned stores and businesses. Hitler blamed the violence on Communist agitators.

Some critics of Hitler and the NSDAP pointed to the demonstrations and the violence as proof that Hitler had been insincere in his pledge to seek power only through legal, democratic means. Thomas Mann, the German writer who had won the 1929 Nobel Prize for literature, gave a lecture a few days later in which he decried Germany’s turn away from liberty, equality, and progress and toward what he called a “gigantic wave of eccentric barbarism and primitive, populist fairground barking.”

But this was a minority view. Most commentators saw the Nazis as goofs—silly people who liked to dress up and prance around in uniform but had no coherent political agenda. And though decent middle-class people deplored the Nazi tendency toward violence, their implacable hostility toward socialism made them useful allies.

Hitler’s most useful ally at this moment was the chancellor, Heinrich Brüning, who retained his position as head of government and continued his policy of tough austerity as the antidote to the Great Depression, a policy that benefited no one more than Hitler, by discrediting the conservative political parties and democracy generally. The Social Democratic Party, or SPD, which had left the governing coalition in protest over exactly these kinds of austerity measures, felt obliged to tolerate the Brüning government, meaning they did not support the government,

but neither would they support motions of no confidence meant to bring it down. The SPD leadership felt this was the best way to keep the National Socialists out of power, but it opened the Social Democrats to criticism from their archrivals in the Communist Party, who could point to the SPD policy of tolerance as further proof that the Social Democrats said all the right things about defending the working class, but when push came to shove, they always sided with the capitalists.

I told you the story last time how shortly after this election, Chancellor Brüning took a meeting with Adolph Hitler to discuss the possibility of the NSDAP joining the government. At first, Hitler was so quiet and deferential that Brüning asked him questions to draw him out. But after about fifteen minutes, Hitler became louder and more insistent until he was talking over any attempt to ask him a question or redirect him. He seemed to think he was giving a speech. When Brüning asked him how he intended to rebuild the German economy, especially given that the Nazi electoral gains had already led to a flight of foreign investment capital from Germany, Hitler ignored him and spoke instead of annihilating Russia and Bolshevism.

Brüning left this meeting convinced that Hitler was a political lightweight, unfit to serve in government. The NSDAP would not join or tolerate the Brüning government, instead staunchly opposing it, just like the Communists. The Nazis and the Communists would be the two largest opposition parties in the new Reichstag.

Over the course of the following year, 1931, the economic situation in Germany got worse and worse, as we saw in episode 261. Banks and businesses failed; unemployment soared. Within the NSDAP, Hitler struggled to keep a lid on discontent within the SA, the brownshirts, the stormtroopers, who were chafing at the restraints Hitler was putting on them. They aligned more with Strasser, seeing themselves as a force for revolution; Hitler increasingly saw them as a blemish on his public image. He put control of the SA back into the hands of Ernst Röhm, who had helped create the SA back in 1923, in the old days, but who had resigned from the organization after Hitler made that pledge to seek power only through legal means. Röhm had left for Bolivia in 1928 to serve as a military advisor; now Hitler called him back to Germany to resume command over the stormtroopers.

Under Röhm's leadership, the SA ballooned from 77,000 when he took control, to 290,000 a year later. And 450,000 six months after that. Most SA members were young, unemployed men, attracted to the stormtroopers not only by National Socialist ideology, but also by the offer of free meals and a place to sleep in an SA barracks. Members could also spend their free time in SA pubs, where they grumbled about Jews and Communists and dreamed of doing battle in the streets. They even grumbled about the Party Leader: the SA battalions were ready and able to take to the streets and settle Germany's political questions once and for all, but Hitler was too cowardly to unleash them.

Membership in the Party itself also mushroomed, from 380,000 dues-paying members as of the 1930 election to over 800,000 by the end of 1931.

A Party growing so rapidly needed additional space, so in 1930, the Party purchased a hundred-year-old urban villa in Munich and converted it into a new Party headquarters, which came to be known as the Brown House. It cost 800,000 RM, which the Party paid for through a special dues assessment. Hitler and other Party leaders, including Hermann Göring, Heinrich Himmler, and Rudolf Hess, maintained offices at the Brown House. Hitler's own office was decorated with images of his heroes: portraits of Frederick the Great and Henry Ford, and a bust of Benito Mussolini.

The Brown House was so splendid that it drew criticism from left-leaning Party members, who thought that Hitler and the NSDAP were selling out—losing touch with their working-class roots. Socialists and Communists took it for granted that the NSDAP was secretly funded by wealthy capitalists who found the Nazis a useful weapon with which to fight back against the socialist revolution. However much they wanted to believe this, it was not true, although after the Party's stunning gains in the 1930 election, the wealthy and powerful in Germany began to take an interest in the movement. One of the Party's earliest wealthy supporters was Fritz Thyssen, heir to a mining and steel conglomerate that was one of the largest in Europe. Thyssen co-signed a 300,000 RM bank loan to help the Party buy the Brown House. Thyssen also gave at least 100,000 RM directly to Hermann Göring, which Göring used to secure himself a nice apartment in Berlin and underwrite an ostentatious lifestyle. Part of Thyssen's strategy in donating money to individual Nazis rather than the Party as an organization was to strengthen the "moderate" faction of the NSDAP, people like Göring, as opposed to Party leaders with more socialist tendencies.

The other big name Nazi sympathizer of this time was someone we've met before in the podcast: Hjalmar Schacht, the man who had led Germany out of the catastrophic inflation of 1923 and became president of the Reichsbank. You'll recall that Schacht resigned that position in protest against the Young Plan. Now he was increasingly sympathetic to the Nazis, to the point that his wife was seen at social functions wearing a necklace with a swastika pendant. When asked about this by a newspaper reporter, Schacht asked the reporter, "Why not give the National Socialists a chance?"

Not all Party members were pleased to be associated with German business and financial elites, but Hitler was quite pleased that such people as Thyssen and Schacht were taking an interest in National Socialism. He well understood that supporters like these would make it much easier for the NSDAP to gain political power. Schacht in particular lent the Nazis credibility. Hitler knew little about economics and cared even less, but with Schacht on his side, the man who had saved the German economy once before, it became much easier to portray the National Socialists as the one party capable of rescuing the Fatherland from the travails of the Great Depression. It also

became easier to persuade other members of the monied classes not to fear the rise of the NSDAP.

[music: Wagner, *Lohengrin*]

Support from business and financial leaders was all well and good, but Hitler's most valuable political allies remained the economic crisis of the Great Depression and the harsh austerity policies of the Brüning government. Brüning continued to push austerity and deflation as the only way to rebuild the German economy, and he had the full support of President Hindenburg. If ordinary Germans were suffering under the government's policies, well, that was a potent argument to the Allies to lighten up on Germany's reparations payments. You'll recall that US President Herbert Hoover organized a one-year moratorium on German reparations payments. Brüning aimed to make the moratorium permanent. In the meantime, the economic pain would spur the Nazis and the Communists to stir up trouble, but Brüning had faith that he could navigate Germany through the crisis.

In the 1931 state elections, the NSDAP continued to rack up impressive gains, proving that the result in the 1930 federal election was no fluke. In Oldenburg, the Nazis took 37% of the vote, becoming the largest party in the Landtag, the state parliament. In the socialist stronghold of Hamburg, the Nazis polled second, just behind the SPD.

The economic crisis went from bad to worse in 1931, as we have seen. The collapse of Credit Anstalt in Vienna triggered a chain reaction of bank failures across central Europe. German banks shut their doors; an emergency government decree forced Germans to surrender their holdings of foreign currency. The dwindling Weimar Coalition parties, even the Social Democrats, felt they had no choice but to continue to support, or at least tolerate, the Brüning government.

For what was the alternative? If the SPD brought down the Brüning government, which would be easy enough to do, given that the Nazis and the Communists also opposed it, that would lead to another general election, one that would likely see the Nazis and Communists increase their numbers of seats further and give the centrist democratic parties even less political room to maneuver than they already had. Better to support the status quo until the economy got better.

But there was a ticking time bomb in the German election calendar. President Hindenburg's term of office would expire in 1932. The old man would be 84 by then, too old to run for another term. The prospect loomed of a President Adolf Hitler, a catastrophe for anyone who believed in liberal democracy.

Sundown on September 12, 1931 marked the beginning of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. In Berlin that evening, thousands of people strolled along the Kurfürstendamm, a wide boulevard that was the center of Berlin nightlife. They were on their way out to dinner or relax at a café or take in a film at one of the many cinemas or do some window-shopping, when the quiet

of the late summer evening was shattered by the arrival of 500 stormtroopers, who went wilding up and down the avenue. The brownshirts chanted, “Germany awaken; Judah must die!” as they shoved their way past innocent pedestrians, beating those they decided looked Jewish. The two leaders of the Berlin SA, Wolf-Heinrich von Helldorf and Karl Ernst, drove along the boulevard in an open car, calling out orders and encouragement to their troops.

Thirty-three of the rioters were prosecuted and given sentences that ranged as high as 21 months. Von Helldorf and Ernst were each sentenced to six months in prison. On appeal, their convictions were thrown out and a number of the other rioters saw their sentences reduced. Once again, and as we saw in Italy ten years earlier, the German criminal justice system revealed it had a soft spot for fascists.

In October, Chancellor Brüning and President Hindenburg each took meetings with Hitler in separate efforts to gain NSDAP support for the government. Hitler told Brüning he was open to the possibility of joining the government, but gave a hard no to Brüning’s pet idea: a special vote in the Reichstag to suspend the constitutional provision limiting the term of the President, thus allowing Hindenburg to serve for a few more years. The meeting between Hitler and Hindenburg was cordial; publicly the two men praised each other, although in private Hindenburg, whose image appeared on German postage stamps, is quoted as saying that the ideal government position for Hitler would be postmaster, “so that he can lick me from behind.”

It was this same month, October 1931, that Hitler, along with Göring and Goebbels, drove to the town of Bad Harzburg to participate in a joint rally with other right-wing opposition leaders, including Alfred Hugenberg, leader of the German National People’s Party, the leaders of the Stahlhelm, the right-wing veterans’ group, and the Pan-Germanic League, and also Hjalmar Schacht, who made his first public declaration of support for the right wing in a speech blasting the Brüning government’s economic policies.

This right-wing alliance was known to some as the “Harzburg Front,” but the most important aspect of this joint appearance was the credibility it lent Hitler and the NSDAP, who were treated as valued and respected members—perhaps even the leaders—of the right-wing nationalist opposition.

Also in October, the Brüning cabinet was reorganized. Out was former chancellor and current Interior Minister Joseph Wirth of the Centre Party. This was done at Hindenburg’s request. He had no more use for Catholics than for socialists. Replacing him was Wilhelm Groener, who already held the position of minister of defense. You may recall this name; Groener had been a general officer during the war; in the final days, he had succeeded Erich Ludendorff as Quartermaster General of the Army after Ludendorff’s resignation in October 1918. Hindenburg was happier to have an old Army buddy, rather than a Catholic, running the interior ministry.

The new cabinet was approved narrowly by the Reichstag, thanks to the support of the Social Democrats. Hitler gave a public statement explaining the NSDAP’s opposition to the reshuffled

government, arguing that the Treaty of Versailles was the cause of Germany's economic woes; any attempt to rebuild the economy without first renegotiating the Treaty was, in Hitler's view, getting it backward.

Hitler and his Party greeted the dawn of 1932 with optimism. In a newspaper interview in January, Hitler predicted that the National Socialists would soon take over the German government and found a new, Third, Reich. In speeches that month, he ducked details of economic policy, as usual, saying instead that only a strong state can enjoy a strong economy. Also as usual, he decried Bolshevism, declaring that Marxism had to be rooted out of Germany and suggested that the German people needed more *Lebensraum*, living space, while remaining carefully silent about which other peoples should give up their living space for the benefit of Germans.

But the biggest topic of political discussion in Germany in early 1932 was the upcoming Presidential election. Chancellor Brüning dispatched his defense and interior minister Wilhelm Groening to meet with Hitler to discuss once again the possibility of the Reichstag suspending the constitutional requirement of a presidential election to allow Hindenburg to remain in office two more years. This would require a two-thirds vote of approval from the Reichstag, meaning that National Socialist support was essential. Hitler initially expressed a willingness to go along with this plan, but only on the condition that a new Reichstag election be called. Since that seemed likely to increase the number of NSDAP members in the parliament, which in turn would likely mean the end of the Brüning government, Brüning refused the offer.

The rest of January and the first half of February saw an elaborate waiting game, as Hindenburg vacillated over whether to run for re-election. He did not want to be the candidate of the centrist democrats, of the SPD and the Centre Party. He was contemptuous of those people. He wanted to be the candidate of the conservative nationalist right wing, but wondered if the right wing had passed him by. It was not until a coalition of veterans groups declared their support for their former commander that Hindenburg announced, on February 15, just thirty days before the election, that he would run.

Adolf Hitler also hesitated in making his announcement. Hitler and the National Socialists were by this time speaking of their coming rule in mystical terms, as something inevitable, of Hitler as the savior of the German people, ordained to rule by Fate itself. But the Hindenburg name appealed to the very same demographic groups that were the base of the National Socialists: disillusioned right-wing veterans, nationalists, and frustrated monarchists. Hitler had to confront the very real possibility that he could lose to Hindenburg, which would puncture this carefully constructed myth of his inevitability.

But on February 22, a week after Hindenburg's announcement, Hitler went ahead and declared his own candidacy.

The other nationalist groups that had been part of the Harzburg Front couldn't work up much enthusiasm for either Hindenburg or Hitler, so they put forward their own candidate: Theodor Duestenberg, the vice-chair of the Stalhelm veterans' group. The KPD struck out on their own, as usual, running Party chairman Ernst Thälmann for President, as they had in 1925.

That left the parties of the Weimar Coalition. They had to face the fact that the constituency for keeping Germany a democratic constitutional republic was dwindling. In 1925, the Coalition parties had feared a Hindenburg presidency. Hindenburg, the old-school aristocrat, the monarchist, the general who had once functioned as Germany's military dictator in all but name, seemed a likely person to undo the Revolution of 1918 and restore something like the old autocracy. But in the past seven years of his term as President, Hindenburg had certainly been a political adversary of the Weimar Coalition parties, but he had also been scrupulous in his exercise of Presidential authority, keeping everything within the limits of the constitution. German democracy had survived under Hindenburg this far; there was no reason to think that would change in a second term. And so, terrified by the prospect of a President Hitler, the Social Democratic Party and the Centre Party forewent the nomination of candidates of their own parties and instead endorsed Hindenburg.

Ironically, Hindenburg, the right-wing candidate who had frustrated the Weimar Coalition back in 1925 would this time around be the candidate of the socialists and the Catholics, whether he liked it or not. And he most certainly did not like it. But politics, as they say, makes strange bedfellows.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Gabe and Barbara for their kind donations, and thank you to Joshua for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Gabe and Barbara and Joshua help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue today's narrative through the 1932 German Presidential election and the not one, but two general elections Germany also held in 1932, as Hitler's opponents try to defeat him and his Party by wearing them down. That's next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Adolf Hitler was a strong candidate for the presidency, but there was one little hitch. He was not a German citizen, which was a requirement for the office. But Hitler could earn German citizenship by taking a government position. The first attempt to arrange this was made by Wilhelm Frick. You'll recall from last time that Frick had become interior minister in the German state of Thuringia. Frick tried to get Hitler a position as a police commissioner in Thuringia, but the NSDAP's coalition partners in the state government wouldn't go for it.

But by 1932, the National Socialists also held power in Braunschweig, and there they tried again, this time to have him appointed to the Technical University of Braunschweig as a professor of social theory and politics. But the Party's coalition partners in Braunschweig couldn't stomach that idea either, but they agreed to appoint him to the Braunschweig consulate in Berlin. On February 26, Hitler was sworn in to his new position and was granted German citizenship. His first official act was to request a leave of absence from his new post so he could run for President, which was granted.

[music: Closing Theme]