

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 285

“The Night of the Long Knives”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“At the risk of appearing to talk nonsense, I tell you that the Nazi movement will go on for a thousand years...Don’t forget how people laughed at me fifteen years ago, when I declared that one day I would govern Germany. They laugh now, just as foolishly, when I declare that I shall remain in power!”

Adolf Hitler, quoted in *Time* magazine, July 2, 1934.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 285. The Night of the Long Knives.

Adolf Hitler was chancellor of Germany for a mere 52 days when the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act that effectively made him Germany’s dictator. Within months after that, Hitler’s political party, the NSDAP, was the only political party in Germany; all the others had disbanded or were forcibly dissolved by the government. We covered these events in episode 270.

Today I want to look at Hitler’s further efforts to secure power in Germany, but before we begin, I want to say a few words about the concept of *dictator*. If you’re familiar with the history of ancient Rome, you know that the Roman Republic included the institution of dictator. The word comes from Latin and literally means “the one who gives orders.” The Roman Republic allowed for the elevation of a dictator in extreme circumstances and granted that person extraordinary powers for a limited term of six months to deal with the emergency.

The word *dictator* did not have the same connotations in ancient Rome that it has today. Indeed, it did not even have all those connotations in Hitler’s time. When the Reichstag passed the Enabling Act and gave Hitler and his cabinet extraordinary powers, they were more or less doing what the ancient Romans did when they appointed a dictator. In our time, the word *dictator* carries some pretty specific negative connotations, including abandonment of the principle of rule by law, harsh repression of political dissent, and a cult of personality around the dictator. But the word acquired these connotations precisely because of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini and, later, Joseph Stalin.

And there are degrees of dictatorship. You might say that Hitler became a dictator when the Enabling Act was passed in March 1933, and I wouldn't argue with you if you did, but it's also true that at that time there was still a multiparty Reichstag with opposition political parties, and even a President, Paul von Hindenburg, who at least on paper held the power to remove Hitler from office. Hitler spent the first year or so of his chancellorship working to increase his power. His government dissolved opposition political parties and labor unions, shut down newspapers, and reorganized Germany into a one-party state.

I want to caution you, however, to avoid the trap of thinking that even if the leader of a nation is a dictator, even if in theory that one person alone has absolute power over the government and the nation, in practice no one ever does. A dictator may wield a vast amount of power, but none ever had or ever will have total control. Even a dictator has to reckon with supporters and opponents, and even among the supporters, there will be different groups with different agendas, working at cross purposes. The dictator will have to keep abreast of what everyone is doing, and will not always succeed. The dictator may also be called upon to negotiate compromises among supporters, or failing that, choose which supporters' priorities to embrace and which to reject. The dictator will not always succeed in these efforts.

All this is another way of saying that even a dictator is still a politician, and no government and no nation is ever entirely the expression of just one person's views and decisions, not even a dictatorship. A nation is a bundle of different groups with different interests and goals, even if it is led by a dictator, and those different interests and goals still find expression at various times, even though they may contradict each other.

Hitler was certainly aware of all this and he moved quickly to consolidate his own position and weaken the positions of anyone who might oppose him. It's worth noting here that the Enabling Act that gave Hitler and his cabinet broad powers came with an expiration date: April 1, 1937. It also expired if and when the current government was removed from office. That was unlikely to happen so long as the National Socialists controlled the Reichstag, but the wild card in the deck was President Hindenburg, who could, in theory, remove Hitler from office at any time just by putting his signature on a piece of paper.

In practice, that was also unlikely to happen. Hindenburg had been a Hitler skeptic before making him chancellor, which he did only at Papen's urging, but once Hitler was chancellor, Hindenburg warmed to him. Hitler went out of his way to praise the old field marshal in his speeches and flatter him in person, all of which pleased Hindenburg, but Hindenburg was also a right-wing traditionalist, meaning Hitler's policies also pleased him.

So in the short run, Hitler and the National Socialists were in a pretty strong political position, but a "pretty strong political position" wasn't good enough for Adolf Hitler. He and his party were looking to establish permanent Nazi rule. With that in mind, Hitler placed a high priority on unemployment programs to put people back to work and stimulate the economy. It has to be said

that the German economy bottomed out sometime in 1932, and by the time the Enabling Act took effect and Hitler had full control, things were already improving. As fate would have it, Hitler reaped the dividends of the economic policies of his predecessors: Schleicher, Papen, and Brüning, as well as the Allied moratorium on reparations payments, now extended indefinitely.

But a mere lessening of the Great Depression wasn't good enough. Hitler had made big promises to the German people. Now he meant to keep them, and he meant to insure that the German economic recovery was dramatic and bore an unmistakable National Socialist stamp.

To start, the Hitler government enacted a one-billion-mark jobs program in May 1933. Four months later, they added an additional half billion marks. A more distinctly National Socialist program was the marriage loan program created in June. Under this program, newly married couples received an interest-free loan of RM 1000. This was equivalent to two or three months' salary for an average person. The loan was not in cash; it came in the form of vouchers which could be used to purchase furniture and household goods, the sorts of things a newly married couple would likely need.

There were a couple of catches. One was that this was a positive eugenics program. Applicants had to demonstrate Aryan ancestry and a healthy genetic background, as determined by the Nazis. Another condition was that the bride could not work—outside the home, I mean—not unless her husband's income fell below a certain level. If only the husband held a job, the couple could pay off the loan at the rate of ten marks per month, but the minimum payment went up to thirty if the wife also took a job outside the home. For every child the couple had, 250 marks were forgiven, so by the time you had your third child, you would likely be free and clear.

It was a clever program. It created demand for furniture and household goods, stimulated the economy, and opened new jobs for men by encouraging women to leave the work force, which was very fascist. It also encouraged the births of new Germans, but only Germans of the sort the Nazis approved of. It put into practice principles of eugenics that had been under discussion in academic circles for the past fifty years, episode 248.

Adolph Hitler was a great automobile enthusiast. He loved cars, even though he never learned to drive one himself. A chauffeur took him wherever he needed to go, usually in a BMW. There had already been discussion during the 1920s about building a network of limited-access, automobile-only, high-speed roadways across Germany. Hitler loved this idea and began talking it up as soon as he became chancellor, and in June the government enacted the law for the creation of the *Reichsautobahn*, a network of modern highways designed to allow a car to move rapidly across the country. The autobahns were gleaming and modern, with breathtaking bridges and overlooks. The highways deliberately curved and forests were encouraged to grow right up to the edges of the roadway, to give a naturalistic feeling of traveling through the woods. It was a jobs program, but it was also something brand new, the world's first superhighways, or

motorways if you like, hailed as a modern wonder, and in Germany, presented as the brainchild of Adolf Hitler.

Hitler was also an admirer of Henry Ford, as you know, and despite the grand autobahn project, Germany still had far fewer automobiles per capita than the United States, and in the 1930s, they were still very much a luxury item. In 1934, Hitler proposed the *Volkswagen*, the “People’s Car,” a mass-produced affordable vehicle that could carry two adults and three children on the autobahn for a price not to exceed RM1000, which would make it affordable to every German family. It would also make it the equivalent of US\$200 cheaper than the cheapest cars available in the United States. A government-subsidized savings program was set up to allow would-be buyers to set aside five marks every week out of their paychecks toward the goal of buying a Volkswagen in four and a half years. This program was far less successful than the autobahn; the first Volkswagens would not appear until 1938 and production and sales depended heavily on government subsidies and the whole thing never really worked out. A car with those specs at that price was simply not feasible, although by 1938 no one dared tell the *Führer* that what he had already publicly promised was in fact impossible.

Consumer products never were Nazi Germany’s strong point. The Americans had nothing to fear on that score. Military production was a whole other story. The real backbone of the coming German economic recovery was not autobahns or marriage credits or jobs programs or even Volkswagens. It was rearmament.

Chancellor Hitler began pushing a program of rebuilding the German armed forces from the very beginning: even before the Enabling Act, even before the March election. Within days after his appointment as chancellor, Hitler was telling the cabinet and the military leadership that rearmament was job one. He warned the cabinet that the price tag was going to be in the billions of marks, but stressed that money was no object. The survival of the German nation depended on it.

That level of military spending was going to require a Reichsbank willing to go along with it and expand the money supply and credit necessary to finance it. You’ll recall the banker Hjalmar Schacht, who had restructured German currency and banking after the hyperinflation of 1923. Schacht had been head of the Reichsbank afterward, until he resigned in 1930 in protest over the Young Plan, even though he himself had signed it.

In the three years since, Schacht had become an outspoken supporter of the Nazis. His old job was taken up by Hans Luther, whom you may recall once held the post of chancellor for a little over a year back in 1925 and 1926. Hitler asked Luther to resign and reappointed Schacht as head of the Reichsbank once again. As a consolation prize, Luther was appointed Germany’s ambassador to the United States. In November 1933, Ambassador Luther was invited to speak at Columbia University in New York City, which triggered student protests. The administration went ahead with the speech anyway, citing academic freedom, though Luther’s appearance drew

numerous protestors and hecklers. The more things change, the more they stay the same, am I right?

Hitler's government would budget 35 billion marks over eight years to finance the arms buildup. That works out to about 4.4 billion marks per year. Hjalmar Schacht helped devise a system of loans and credits to obscure where the money was coming from and what it was for.

I can't resist noting that that the price the Hitler government committed to, for the sake of this arms buildup—4.4 billion marks per year—was triple the amount of money the Allies were asking for in reparations; the amount that Schacht, the National Socialists, and other right-wing leaders insisted for years was beyond Germany's ability to pay.

On the other hand, after he became chancellor, Hitler was very unhappy to hear of the secret German military program to skirt the restrictions the Treaty of Versailles by entering into agreements with the Red Army in the Soviet Union to share research, development, and training programs. Hitler's long-term foreign policy goal was war with the USSR, so he was not pleased about this military cooperation, and he quickly ordered an end to it.

[music: Wagner, "Siegfried's Funeral March" from *Siegfried*]

The rise of Adolph Hitler and the NSDAP was particularly disconcerting to Germany's approximately one-half million Jewish citizens and residents, who amounted to less than one percent of the country's population. Hitler and his party were pretty open about their anti-Semitism. Sometimes they talked about it more, and sometimes less, but it was never what you would call a secret.

This sudden eruption of anti-Semitism came as a shock. Most Jewish Germans were educated, middle-class city dwellers, typically doctors, lawyers, teachers, civil servants, business owners, journalists, and academics. They considered themselves as German as their non-Jewish neighbors. Most were not religiously devout. They only went to the synagogue on holidays, if then.

One segment of Jewish people in Germany, less than 20% of the total, were not culturally German. They were immigrants, including many Jewish Poles, who more closely resembled Jewish people of Poland or Russia, living in more closed communities, more religiously devout, and often speaking Yiddish among themselves. Some Jewish Germans found this group embarrassing.

Anti-Semitism was a fact of life in Germany. Jewish Germans were accustomed to the existence of clubs and civic organizations that denied membership to Jewish people, as well as the occasional outbursts from political leaders and other public figures, but the National Socialists took it to a whole new level.

SA vandalism targeting Jewish property and stormtrooper assaults on Jewish people in the streets—or people believed to be Jewish—had already become commonplace by 1933, but the frequency of these incidents increased yet again when Hitler became chancellor. On Sunday, March 26, just days after the Enabling Act became law, a million people in the United States participated in protests against the persecution of Jews in Germany, including about 250,000 in New York City, which by this time had the largest Jewish population of any city in the world. The German government reacted with hostility, blaming the protests on Jewish propaganda casting Germany in a negative light.

While the protests were still under way in America, Hitler and Goebbels met to discuss them and decided to retaliate against foreign criticism by organizing an anti-Jewish boycott in Germany. They agreed that a boycott of just a few days' duration would be enough to serve as a warning. The NSDAP newspaper, *Völkischer Beobachter*, announced the boycott on Tuesday, scheduled to begin on Saturday, April 1. The Nazis promoted the slogan: "No good German buys from a Jew."

Hitler offered to suspend the boycott, provided that the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom issue statements denouncing the anti-German protests. Both governments complied with that request, but did not make their statements public until Friday, the day before the boycott, which was deemed too late to stop it.

So the boycott went ahead, albeit only for that one day, Saturday April 1. Enforcing the action were burly stormtroopers, who took up intimidating stances outside Jewish businesses, as if daring anyone to walk past them. A few Germans made it a point to intentionally visit Jewish stores or doctors or lawyers that day as a counter-protest. Most Germans muttered a little bit in disapproval, but stayed home. The Nazis were satisfied with the outcome; they had made their point. If Jewish people in other countries wanted to make trouble for the Nazis, then the Nazis would make trouble for Jewish people in Germany, effectively holding them as hostages against foreign criticism.

The boycott only lasted one day, but was not the end of government actions against Jewish Germans. It was just the beginning. Only days later, the government decreed a new law on the German civil service, one that would allow government workers deemed politically unreliable to be dismissed. This was aimed primarily at purging the civil service of socialists and sympathizers, but it also meant Jewish civil servants. This went a little too far even for President Hindenburg, who intervened to demand an exception for Jewish civil servants who had fought in the war or had lost close relatives in the war. Hitler agreed to the exemption. Even so, it was a watershed moment in German history. Jewish Germans had only won full legal equality across Germany upon the creation of the German Empire in 1871. Now, 62 years later, the first steps had been taken to undo those gains and reduce Jewish Germans to second-class status. It was soon followed by other laws, restricting the rights of Jewish people to attend universities and hold law licenses.

On October 2, 1933, President Hindenburg celebrated his 86th birthday. His health was not good. By this time, Hitler and Goebbels had already conferred privately to discuss the Presidential succession. Goebbels suggested that the office of President should be merged with the office of Chancellor. Hitler liked that idea. The merger would have to be effected quickly, preferably as soon as the old man passed. And it was essential that the military leadership support the plan, because the President was constitutionally the commander-in-chief of the German military.

But relations between the Nazis and the German military were a little uneasy, and it was principally because of the SA. The stormtroopers. The NSDAP's paramilitary. When Hitler first became chancellor, the SA had a membership of roughly half a million. Keep in mind that under the Treaty of Versailles, the official German military was limited to 100,000, meaning the SA outnumbered the military five to one. And as Party membership ballooned in 1933, so did SA membership.

When the National Socialists were the political opposition, the SA were the muscle that marched, protested, and frequently intimidated their opponents. We've already seen how the SA would become restless when Hitler tried to rein them in, which he did when political expedience demanded he and the Nazi Party look reasonable. Many of the SA rank and file had leftist tendencies; they supported strikes and labor actions, and looked forward to a time when the NSDAP would break up Germany's big industrial concerns and concentrations of wealth among industrialists and landowners.

But once Hitler was firmly in power, his own interests lay in placating industrialists and landowners, not to mention the military leadership, who looked upon the much larger paramilitary SA with reactions ranging from disapproval to alarm.

In a strange way, the success of Hitler and the Nazi Party in 1933 left the SA adrift. Hitler now controlled the full power of the state, the Communists and socialists had been driven underground or out of the country, and all other political parties have ceased to exist. There's no one left for the SA to push around and bully. The stormtroopers saw themselves as a revolutionary vanguard that would bring down the corrupt status quo. But as soon as Hitler became chancellor, all talk of revolution stopped. This didn't make sense to the SA. Sure, it was great that the boss was now chancellor, but the movement was about far more than that. Wasn't it?

In August 1933, Hermann Göring even rescinded the decree that deputized the SA into an auxiliary police force. Göring filled the official German police forces with Nazi loyalists. He merged the political and intelligence units of German law enforcement into a new force dubbed the *Geheime Staatspolizei*, or "Secret State Police." The *Geheime Staatspolizei* would soon be known universally by the shortened form of its name: *Gestapo*.

If the cops were now Nazis, what did that make the stormtroopers? Lacking an official role, the SA was back to being a gang of restless thugs who liked to dress up in brown shirts. But

although the SA was bereft of a mission, it had an abundance of members. It started 1933 with half a million. The year saw a rush of new recruits; also, as you'll recall, the SA had absorbed other right-wing veterans' groups, such as the *Freikorps* and *Der Stahlhelm*. By 1934, the SA numbered more than four million, but they still lacked a purpose.

The typical brownshirt was a young man without much money, working class, probably a veteran, and likely held some quasi-socialist views about the distribution of wealth and power. Adolf Hitler, like Mussolini before him, began at once to refer to his assumption of power as a "revolution." The brownshirts ate up this revolutionary rhetoric, but by 1934, they couldn't help noticing that little had changed. The wealthy industrialists and landowners were still wealthy industrialists and landowners, and they were still penniless working-class outsiders sleeping in dormitories, watching others enjoy the good life. Even worse, they now had to share their dorms and soup kitchens with a slew of newcomers who wore the brown shirts and sported the swastika armbands, but had done nothing to help bring about this revolution—this revolution that didn't feel much like a revolution.

In this environment, there was lots of grumbling to the effect that the revolution had been co-opted by the wealthy and powerful, who exchanged champagne toasts with Nazi Party bigwigs while the common people remained destitute. You heard talk in the SA ranks that the revolution was not yet complete, or of the need for a "second revolution."

The leader of the SA at this time was the 46-year-old Ernst Röhm. Röhm had served as an Army officer during the Great War; he held the rank of captain at the time of the Armistice. He remained in the Army until 1923. By then, he was a member of the NSDAP and a personal friend to Adolph Hitler. He'd participated in the 1923 putsch, was prosecuted, and drew a suspended sentence. In 1925, he left the Nazi Party because he disapproved of Hitler's decision to foreswear violent means and pledge that the Party would henceforth remain within the law. In 1928, he traveled to Bolivia to take up a position as a military adviser there. Following the 1930 election in Germany, Hitler invited him to return and take up his former position as head of the SA.

Owing to their long friendship, Röhm was one of the few people who could use the familiar pronoun *du* with Hitler or address him as "Adolf" or sometimes even "Adi," and get away with it. Most everyone else used the formal pronoun *Sie* and addressed him as "*Mein Führer*." Röhm was also gay, and he appointed other gay men to high-ranking positions in the SA. Hitler, in contrast, was hostile to LGBT people, and gay men in particular. After he took over as chancellor in 1933, investigations and prosecutions of gay men in Germany soared. These were mostly conducted by the Gestapo, and the targets mostly men under the age of 25. Nevertheless, although Hitler was fully aware of Röhm's sexuality, he was willing for many years to overlook it. After the 1930 election, when the Nazi Party became prominent, an SPD newspaper ran an exposé on Röhm's personal life, in an attempt to embarrass him, the SA, and the Nazi Party, but the revelations had no noticeable effect. When the subject of Röhm's sexual orientation came up before Hitler, his typical response was that the SA was a military organization, and as was

customary in military organizations, so long as soldiers did their duty, what they did in their personal time was their own business.

In fact, the close relationship between Röhm and Hitler, along with Röhm's homosexuality and Hitler's unwillingness to condemn it and Hitler's being unmarried and his own personal life lacking any publicly known relationship with a woman, all these circumstances led to rumors that Hitler was himself gay, although given what we now know, there's no reason to take those rumors seriously anymore.

Despite Röhm's close friendship with Hitler, he took up the complaints of the SA rank and file that the revolution was not yet finished and even published an article to that effect, in which he warned what he called "wimpy bourgeois" that the struggle would continue. Röhm was pushing Hitler and the Party leadership to fold the much smaller German Army into the SA, make the SA the new Army, and make him the Minister of Defense. Naturally, the military leadership were aghast at this idea. The German military may not be what it used to be, but it was still a highly trained force with a skilled officer corps and a proud tradition, whereas the SA was a bunch of shiftless drunkards. And remember that, with Hindenburg getting up there, Hitler very much wanted to keep the military leadership on his side. He rejected Röhm's proposal.

Relations between the SA, on the one hand, and the Party, the government, and the military on the other, were strained for a time, but by summer 1934, tensions between Hitler and Röhm appeared to have eased. Röhm told Hitler that he was giving the SA a summer holiday while he personally would vacation in the spa town of Bad Wiessee, in southern Bavaria, near the Austrian border.

But appearances were deceiving. Behind the scenes, Hitler was ordering Göring, as head of the Gestapo, and Heinrich Himmler, as head of the SS, to investigate the SA leadership. Meanwhile, the ailing President Hindenburg, suffering from a bladder infection, left Berlin for his estate in East Prussia.

At this delicate moment in Hitler's rule, with the role of the SA unresolved and the 86-year-old President in failing health, a new challenge appeared from an unexpected direction. The Vice-Chancellor, Franz von Papen, gave the commencement speech at the University of Marburg on June 17, 1934, in which he called out the Nazis' reliance on violence, the cult of personality around Hitler, and denounced talk of a second revolution. Great nations are not made by violence and instability, Papen argued, but by law and order. The graduating students at Marburg reportedly cheered the speech.

Immediately afterward, Papen tried to cover himself by sending Hitler a telegram in which he described the speech as a defense of Hitler and his government. Hitler was not fooled. The Nazi leadership suspected Papen of trying to position himself as President Hindenburg's successor, and maybe they were right about that. Joseph Goebbels ordered the speech censored, so it could not be reprinted in newspapers or quoted on the radio. Papen's speechwriter was arrested by the

Gestapo. *Die Frankfurter Zeitung*, one of Germany's leading newspapers, did manage to print a few excerpts before the ban was issued, and foreign diplomats scratched their heads, wondering what was going on in German government.

Papen protested the arrest of his speechwriter and offered his resignation, which in these circumstances might have made Papen into a hero, someone around whom the opposition to Hitler could have rallied. But Hitler asked Papen to hold his resignation. He told Papen that he agreed with some of Papen's criticisms and was planning to rein in the SA. He suggested Papen wait until the two of them had the opportunity to meet with the President and discuss their differences before taking any action. Papen agreed to this proposal.

But Hitler had no intention of following through. Instead, he visited Hindenburg himself on June 21, to sound out the President. Hitler was pleased to find Hindenburg as friendly to Hitler as he had ever been, while the Minister of Defense, Army General Werner von Blomberg, who was also at Hindenburg's estate, took the opportunity to pull Hitler aside and voice once again the military's concerns about the violent rabble in the SA.

Hitler perceived an opportunity to neutralize both of these threats at the same time: Ernst Röhm and his out-of-control SA and Franz von Papen and his budding effort to set himself up as the leader of a conservative opposition. Himmler and his staff began generating forged documents meant to depict the SA on the verge of a coup against the government. Hitler met with the defense minister again to alert him to the pending action against the SA and get assurances that the Army would support him.

Papen, meanwhile, had learned of Hitler's private meeting with Hindenburg, an implicit violation of their agreement, and made his own appointment to meet with the President on June 30. That gave Hitler a deadline, one he was ready to embrace. "I've had enough," he is quoted as saying. He telephoned Röhm on the 28th and instructed him to order all the SA's highest ranks to assemble with Röhm there at Bad Wiessee for a meeting with Hitler.

On the 29th, Hitler was at Bad Godesberg, in western Germany, for a previously scheduled appearance. By now, all the plans were in place. Göring was sent back to Berlin with his instructions. In private, Hitler reviewed the falsified evidence against the SA. In a kind of vicious circle known only to the emotionally distraught or the insane, he became increasingly agitated as he reviewed each piece of "evidence," until he had convinced himself of even the most outlandish accusations, including the one that claimed Röhm was in the pay of the French government.

That evening, word came to Hitler that SA stormtroopers were reported out stirring up trouble in the streets of Munich. This was not unusual, and not in itself particularly noteworthy, but in his agitated state, Hitler decided to fly to Munich that very evening. His plane landed at 4:00 AM on the 30th. He went to the Bavarian Interior Ministry, where he was met by the head of the Munich SA. Hitler told the man, "You are under arrest and will be shot." And so he was.

Hitler and his entourage, with a police escort, proceeded by car to the Hanselbauer Hotel in Bad Wiessee. They arrived at the hotel just after dawn. The SA leadership were staying at the hotel, and they were all still in bed when Hitler arrived. He burst into Röhm's room. Röhm awoke and said, "*Heil, mein Führer.*" Hitler shouted "You are under arrest!" and left.

The police rounded up the entire SA leadership. One of them, a man named Edmund Heines, the SA commander in Breslau, was found in bed with an 18-year-old stormtrooper. These prisoners were taken to Munich. Hitler and his people also drove back to Munich. Along the way, they encountered more SA commanders headed in the other direction, on their way to the scheduled meeting with the *Führer* at Bad Wiessee. Each time they met, Hitler ordered them to accompany his motorcade back to Munich. There he went to the Brown House, the Nazi Party headquarters, where he gave a hysterical, spittle-flecked speech to an audience of Party officials and SA leaders. He denounced Röhm and the SA leadership, accusing them of the "greatest betrayal in world history." Afterward, he ordered the immediate execution of six SA leaders. Edmund Heines and his youthful paramour were both on the list. Ernst Röhm was not.

Meanwhile, Goebbels had sent to Göring in Berlin the agreed-upon code word, *Kolibri*, the German word for hummingbird. This was the signal to Göring to unleash the execution squads. The next couple of days in German history are known as "The Night of the Long Knives." No one knows for certain how many people the Gestapo murdered. About 85 victims are known for certain, but no records were kept and the German press was not allowed to report on the killings, so no one can reconstruct the exact number. Some estimates range well into the hundreds. The names we do know include Papen's speechwriter and a couple of his other close associates and some Catholic political leaders, although Papen himself was spared. Kurt von Schleicher, Hitler's predecessor as chancellor, was murdered, along with his wife and some of his political associates.

And most of the SA leadership was killed. At Hitler's order, Ernst Röhm was handed a pistol in his prison cell. It held one bullet. An SS official told him he had ten minutes to shoot himself, or it would be done for him. Then he was left alone to decide. When the ten minutes were up and they returned to his cell, Röhm was still alive, shirtless, chest thrust forward in defiance. Then they killed him. Shortly before his execution, Röhm was quoted as saying, "All revolutions devour their own children."

There was also some score-settling. Gustav Ritter von Kahr, the former Bavarian prime minister who, back in 1923, had briefly agreed to support Hitler's putsch, before turning on him, was executed. So was Gregor Strasser, the former Nazi Party leader who had quit because Hitler wasn't socialist enough. So was Father Bernhard Stempfle, a Roman Catholic priest and Nazi supporter who had been in prison with Hitler in 1924 and had helped proofread *Mein Kampf*. No one knows why he was killed, but it's suspected that he may have received Hitler's confession and knew a little too much about the Führer's personal life.

Also slain was Wilhelm Schmid, music critic for a Munich newspaper. This was apparently a case of mistaken identity. The intended target was a different Wilhelm Schmid, this one a leader in the Munich SA.

And the names go on.

On the evening of July 1, Joseph Goebbels addressed the nation on the radio. He explained that the government was “cleaning house,” eliminating corrupt and immoral figures from positions of leadership. From the one instance of a same-sex relationship discovered at the hotel, Goebbels spun out a detailed indictment of an SA riddled with “disgusting sexual abnormality,” and explained this accounted for the bad behavior of the SA rank and file and the leadership’s conflicts with the government and the military.

Hitler gave the same account to the Cabinet, which voted a decree retroactively legalizing the killings. Vice-Chancellor Papen was released from his house arrest to attend the meeting. Everyone expected him to resign; instead, he spoke in support of Hitler. Afterward, Hitler and Papen agreed to a deal under which Papen would resign the vice-chancellorship in September, after the excitement died down. Hitler would appoint him German ambassador to Austria, where he could work on his pet project: the *Anschluss*, or unification of Austria with Germany.

After the Cabinet meeting, Hitler traveled to Hindenburg’s estate in East Prussia to brief the President on the affair. Hindenburg endorsed Hitler’s actions, saying, “That’s the right way to go.”

The Night of the Long Knives fully revealed to Germany and the world exactly what kind of government Hitler was running, but these events passed with scarcely a murmur of protest.

Hindenburg’s health continued to deteriorate, and he passed away on August 2, 1934, at the age of 86. He left behind a political testament and a personal letter to Adolf Hitler. Hitler opened both of them privately, at the Chancellery, not certain what to expect. Hindenburg’s political testament proved to be an endorsement of Hitler’s performance as chancellor. The old man wrote that he was grateful to have been permitted to live long enough to see the restoration of German greatness. And so it was released to the public.

The private letter was a plea to Hitler to restore the monarchy as soon as possible. This letter Hitler kept to himself. He had no intention of doing any such thing, although for now it was politically expedient to keep the possibility open. At least publicly.

The government was already prepared with a decree merging the powers of the President with the chancellor. Hitler declared that the title of President should be retired, because after Hindenburg, no one was worthy of it. The government disregarded Hindenburg’s wish to be buried with his wife on the estate and organized a lavish state funeral at the Tannenberg Memorial. Hitler declared, “Deceased field commander, enter now into Valhalla.”

The merger of the presidency with the chancellorship was ratified by a referendum held on August 19, just days after Hindenburg's funeral and the release of his political testament. Over 95% of the electorate turned out to give the merger a resounding 90% approval.

The decapitated SA would continue, but it would no longer be a factor in German government or politics. The SS, a division of the SA originally created to provide security to Party leaders, would be rewarded for its loyalty during the Night of the Long Knives by being severed from the SA and made into an independent organization, with Heinrich Himmler as its leader. He will answer to no one but Hitler himself.

Henceforth, Adolf Hitler will bear the title *Führer und Reichskanzler*, that is, Leader and Chancellor of Germany, until his death in 1945. All remaining obstacles, both in fact and now in law, to Adolf Hitler's absolute control over Germany have been removed, and Hitler will reign supreme. Few people in history ever held this degree of power over this many people. In the course of this podcast, the only other figure we've talked about who comes close might be Russian Emperor Nikolai II. Joseph Stalin will get there in a few more years.

Now that Hitler holds this power, his name and his legacy are and always will be tightly linked to how he chose to wield it.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Slawa for his kind donation, and thank you to Lauren and Danna for becoming patrons of the podcast. (And a belated happy birthday to Danna; sorry I missed your big day.) Donors and patrons like Slawa and Lauren and Danna 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 take a look at the Hitler government and its early moves in military and foreign affairs. Unwinding Versailles, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. In these early years of Hitler's chancellorship, as he was consolidating his political control over the German government and its military, the Nazi leadership was also working to bring German culture in line with Nazi ideology. Joseph Goebbels was the key leader in this effort. Early on, he installed Nazis and Nazi sympathizers into German radio, the

twentieth century's newest and most important medium of mass communication. Newspapers that weren't banned outright were subject to government pressure to keep their coverage close to the Party line. A few large and popular newspapers, like *Die Frankfurter Zeitung*, retained some freedom of action, though they regularly received government memos laying out guidelines, which they voluntarily followed to avoid closer monitoring.

In the arts, the Nazis disdained anything modern, which was denounced as corrupt and degenerate, part of an effort led by Bolsheviks and Jews to destroy what was good in Germany. Communists, socialists, and Jewish people were excluded, and in September 1933, the Nazis established the Reich Chamber of Culture, an office within Goebbels's Ministry of Propaganda. Only Chamber members were permitted to work in defined artistic fields: film, theatre, music, literature, journalism, radio, and the visual arts, and documentation of one's Aryan heritage was a prerequisite for membership.

One of the more disgraceful episodes of this era was the book burnings. These were mostly conducted by students in university towns across Germany, and later Austria, with the blessing of the administrators. Students ransacked bookstores and libraries, removing books deemed unacceptable, which would be thrown into huge piles in a public square, and burned in a massive bonfire. As many as 25,000 books at a time.

One of the first of these attacks was on the Institute for Sexual Research, which I told you about in episode 241. Its archives were destroyed. Dora Richter, a trans woman believed to be the first to undergo gender reassignment surgery, was killed during the attack.

Books were judged unacceptable if they contained ideas contrary to National Socialism, such as socialism, liberalism, pacifism, or Judaism, or anything written by a Jewish author. The list of writers whose work was targeted is very long, but here are the names of a few writers we've already discussed or will discuss on this podcast, in no particular order:

Albert Einstein, Stefan Zweig, D.H. Lawrence, Erich Maria Remarque, Sigmund Freud, Eduard Bernstein, James Joyce, Berthold Brecht, Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Mann, Upton Sinclair, Franz Boas, Leo Tolstoy, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Oscar Wilde, Rosa Luxemburg, Helen Keller, Aldous Huxley, Felix Salten, Bertha von Suttner, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Franz Werfel, Margaret Sanger, H.G. Wells, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Conrad, and anything that came out of the Bauhaus school.

These crackdowns led to a mass exodus from the country of Germans in the arts, culture, academia, and the sciences, many of whom could no longer work in their chosen fields. It would take Germany decades to recover from the loss of their talents.

[music: Closing Theme]