

# 1. 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<sup>th</sup> 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 Rohm 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 Rohm 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 (German Army). Rohm 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.

Nazi infighting also played a major role. Since the early 1920s there had been tension between Rohm'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 Rohm and led Hitler to believe that the SA leader was planning a coup to embark on a 'second revolution'. Although Rohm said some things to suggest this, 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 settling out to the Right

### Threat from the Right

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

## 2. Why was Hitler able to get away with murder?

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 1-9.

### **ACTIVITY 1**

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? (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 4 and 6 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 1 – Law passed by the Reichstag, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1934, legalising the action**

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

#### **SOURCE 2 – Extracts from Hitler's address (lasting several hours) to the Reichstag, 13<sup>th</sup> 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 5 – Defence Minister Werner von Blomberg, 5<sup>th</sup> July 1934**

*The Fuhrer 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 7 – 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 3 – Intelligence reports from socialist party agents within Germany to SOPADE (Social Democratic Party in Exile) on public relations**

*Wide sections of the population have gained the impression from Hitler's [13<sup>th</sup> 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.*

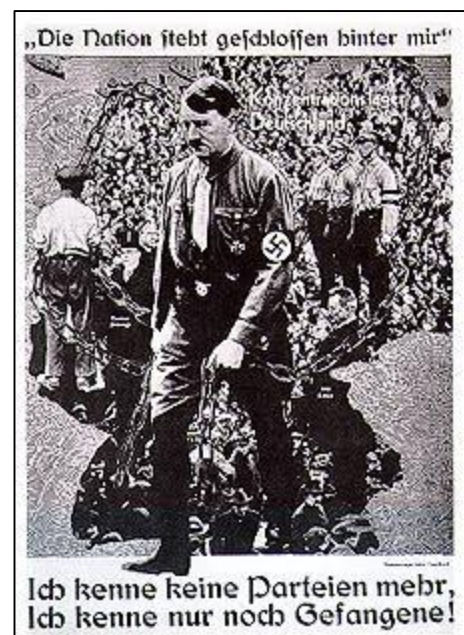
#### **SOURCE 4 – Gestapo and other government reports on public relations.**

*The suppression of the Rohm 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 Rohm revolt. It is realised these were excesses, which took place without the knowledge and against the will of the Fuhrer.*

#### **SOURCE 6 – A German citizen interviewed in a 1980s TV programme**

*After June 30<sup>th</sup> 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 8 – 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'.



#### **SOURCE 9 – 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.*

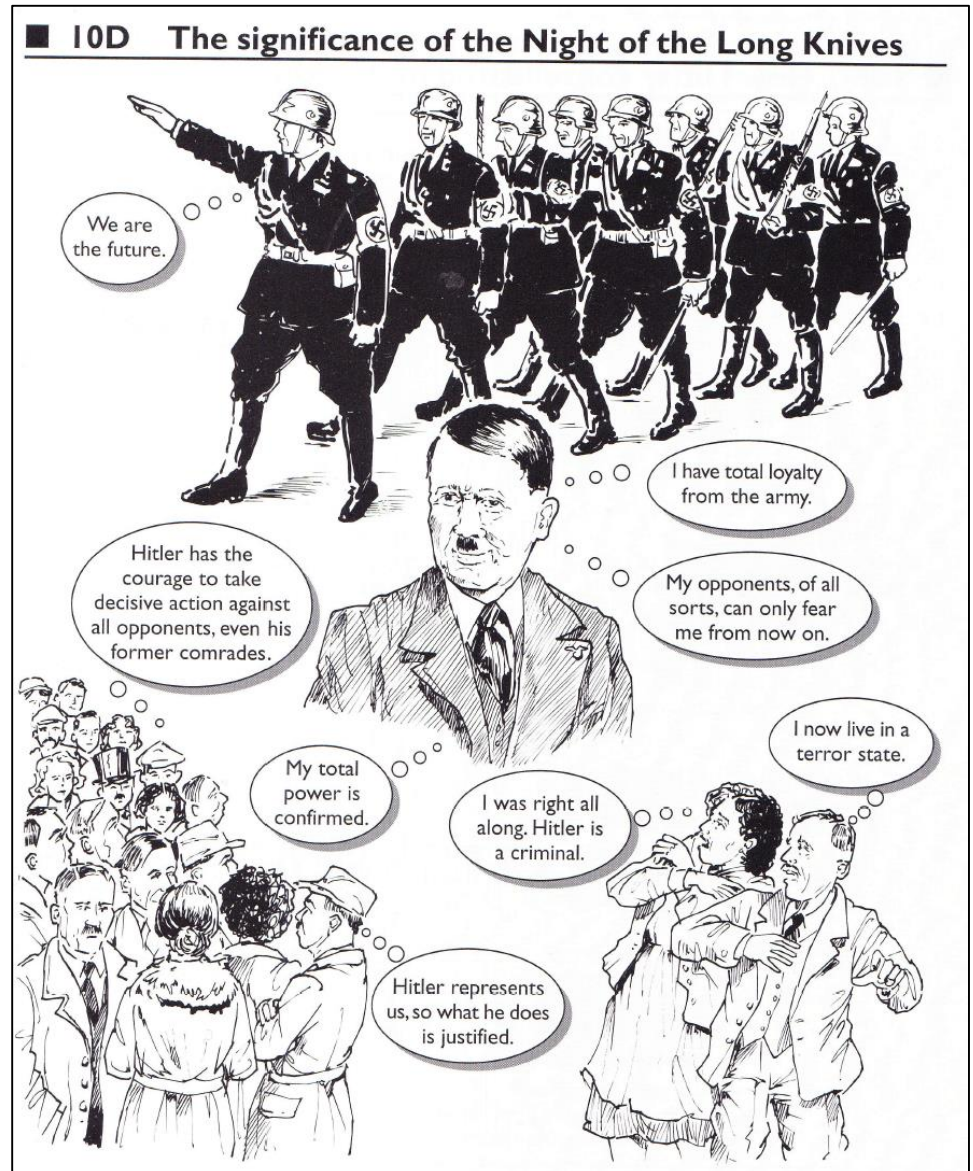


### 3. How significant was the Night of the Long Knives?

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 Fuhrer, replacing the traditional oath of loyalty to the constitution. 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 Fuhrer.' 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 Fuhrer 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.



#### **ACTIVITY 2**

5. 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.
6. Why was Hitler able to get away with such blatant lawlessness?
7. Why was this event so significant?