



Röhm, Ernst (1887-1934)

by Gordon Babst

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Ernst Röhm in 1934.

Ernst Röhm was both an avid supporter of the national socialist movement in Germany and a homosexual. Despite having been crucial to Hitler's rise to power, Röhm, at Hitler's behest, was assassinated soon after the infamous "Night of the Long Knives," June 30, 1934, when the German leader consolidated his hold over the military and "cleansed" the party of homosexuals.

Röhm was born in Munich, Germany, on November 28, 1887. He joined the German army in 1906, was wounded in World War I, and became an original founding member of the Nazi party in 1919. He helped Hitler secure the support of the Bavarian regional army and was imprisoned for his role in the failed Beer Hall Putsch of 1923.

Röhm represented the militant left wing of the Nazi party, and considered the elderly top brass of the German military too stodgy to lead the socialist revolution in Germany and too aristocratic to exemplify Nazi ideals.

In 1931 Hitler chose Röhm to head the *Sturm Abteilung*, or SA, also known as the Brown Shirts, a paramilitary group of specially trained, emblematic male soldiers who swore oaths of loyalty to the Nazi party, unlike members of the *Schutzstaffel*, or SS or Gestapo, who were personally loyal to Hitler and whose leader was Röhm's chief rival, Heinrich Himmler.

In its heyday Röhm's SA had over four million members, and purportedly eclipsed the regular army in size, impact, effectiveness, and ideological purity. Its mission was to destroy opposition to Hitler and the Nazi party, its specialty being the break-up of meetings of rival political organizations.

The underside of the SA was the reputed homosexuality of many of its members, including Röhm. Interestingly, Röhm's homosexuality was not veiled, but widely known, even to Hitler, according to Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (1959): "And yet Hitler had known all along, from the earliest days of the party, that a large number of his closest and most important followers were sexual perverts and convicted murderers. It was common talk . . . These things Hitler had not only tolerated, but defended; more than once he had warned his party comrades against being too squeamish about a man's personal morals if he were a fanatical fighter for the movement."

By the early 1930s, however, the sexual profligacy and indiscretion of Röhm and his SA were sources of embarrassment for Hitler, having been an issue in the parliamentary elections of 1931. Moreover, their growing voice in military matters and desire to foment a more thoroughgoing socialist revolution aroused the fear, ire, and consternation of senior military and Nazi leaders, who tried repeatedly to convince Hitler to absorb the SA into the SS and eliminate its leader.

Although not eager to betray an old friend, Hitler finally agreed with the anti-Röhm conspirators (among them, Himmler, Hermann Göring, and Richard Heydrich) that Röhm had become disloyal and moved to

eliminate him and reorganize the SA.

During the night of June 30, 1934, over 2,000 members of the SA were massacred across Germany. Those present at a gathering of its leaders at Lake Wiessee in Bavaria were either killed straightaway, or arrested, taken prisoner, and then summarily killed. Röhm was among this latter group. He was personally arrested by Hitler with revolver in hand and initially spared; then, the following afternoon, July 1, he was executed on Hitler's orders.

Although this purge garnered Hitler the support of the regular German army, it created a political problem for him to finesse: how to explain to the German people the extensive purge of the organization whose members swore allegiance to the party and whose leader had been essential in Hitler's rise to power?

The events of June 30 were kept secret until Hitler's speech on July 13, in which he described the Röhm Putsch as the "Night of the Long Knives."

Tellingly, he explained the massacre as a purge of homosexuals and a cleansing of the party: "I expect all SA leaders to help to preserve and strengthen the SA in its capacity as a pure and cleanly institution. In particular, I should like every mother to be able to allow her son to join the SA . . . without fear that he may become morally corrupted in their ranks. I therefore require all SA commanders to take the utmost pains to ensure that offenses under Paragraph 175 are met by immediate expulsion of the culprit"

Hitler also spoke of the predispositions and proclivities of Röhm and his associates, professing, as Shirer observes, "to be shocked by the moral degeneration of some of his oldest lieutenants."

Paragraph 175, the law that prohibited sexual activities between men, was strengthened in 1935 to become the chief tool under which homosexuals were persecuted.

Röhm's assassination sent a message to all future conspirators against Hitler, forcefully suggesting that the German leader would himself order their executions without benefit of legal process, murder having become a legitimate means to achieve state objectives. It also reinforced the supposed connection between homosexuality and treason, and breathed life into the Gestapo's effort to rid Germany of homosexuals, an effort that would eventually send thousands to concentration camps.

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