German historian Lothar Machan argues that Hitler's active homosexuality can be seen in his long string of close friendships with notorious members of the homosexual worlds of Vienna and Munich from the 1900s, through his years in the trenches in the First World War, and in the 1920s. As his political career developed, there was a danger that this aspect of his character would lead to his downfall, and some of the details of his manoeuvrings with members of his entourage suggest the ever-present threat of blackmail. In these extracts from his new book, The Hidden Hitler, Machan shows that the rise and fall of Ernst Röhm, and the list of victims of the Night of the Long Knives in June 1934, reflect not merely rivalry and differences of political aim but also the need to protect Hitler's own past from prying eyes.

Looming large in Hitler's decision-making: Ernst Röhm in the early 1930s. Before 1934, Hitler tolerated Röhm's flagrant homosexuality.

When Adolf Hitler joined the Deutsche Arbeiter Partei (DAP, German Labour Party) in September 1919, he was still, politically speaking, an unknown quantity. Yet only three years later he was regarded as the repository of the deutsch-völkisch (German ultra-nationalist) movement's hopes. By November 1923 in Munich he was able to venture an out-and-out coup d'état against the Reich government that was far less doomed to fail than it may appear in retrospect. The reasons for his meteoric rise are partly structural; but without the patronage of certain men, of whom Ernst Röhm was one, it would have been quite impossible.

Captain Ernst Röhm played an active part in Adolf Hitler's life from March 1919 onwards. Röhm was present in October of that year, when Hitler delivered his first public speech as a 'politician' at a DAP rally in Munich's Hofbräukeller. He was so impressed by the young agitator's performance that he not only encouraged him in his political ambitions but soon joined the splinter party himself. Röhm regularly consorted with senior representatives of both the official military and of the paramilitary Freikorps, and his patronage brought about a swift and substantial widening of Hitler's horizons. From Hitler's point of view, therefore, it was a definite stroke of luck that this particular man should be making such an effort to further his career. The officers' mess atmosphere prevailing among Röhm's conspiratorial associates was well suited to Hitler's talent for self-promotion, and it was not long before he made a very favourable impression on the men who mattered.

Ernst Röhm, a career staff officer during the First World War, had become adjutant to Ritter von Epp, the Freikorps commander, when the German Empire collapsed. In company with Epp's troops he helped to bring down Munich's revolutionary 'Councils Republic' in April-May 1919, and he remained bitterly opposed to the youthful Weimar democracy. Epp had beenentrusted with command of the infantry stationed in Bavaria, so Röhm himself acquired a key military position. The two soldiers had resources at their disposal that greatly augmented the influence of Hitler the politician, whose assets had hitherto been limited to his charisma as an orator and actor. At the end of 1920, for instance, Epp, then Reichswehr commander, gave the party leader contributions from his secret fund – a 'purely personal matter', as he
termed it later. In addition, Röhm helped Hitler become acquainted with promising party recruits in the Freikorps battalions. In Hitler's own words, they were 'all vigorous young men, accustomed to discipline and reared during their military service in the principle that absolutely nothing is impossible'.

Hitler managed to commend himself to this nationalistic military milieu as a like-minded repository of political hopes. Röhm must have helped in this respect, so the remark made later by Gerhard Rosbach, the notorious Freikorps commander, may well have been apt: 'Röhm helped this intelligent and weak but obsessive man into his boots and got him moving.' But for his ability to adopt a warlike, martial pose – perfectly modelled on Röhm's own – the thirty-four-year-old ex-lance corporal would never, as he himself wrote later, have managed to induce 'loyal comrades' to join the Party by means of 'verbal persuasion'.

Hitler was profoundly impressed by Röhm's soldierly manner, which was a habitual blend of the staff officer and the trooper. Here was someone roughly his own age who staunchly went his own way and later publicly proclaimed that he had seen the world from a 'deliberately one-sided', exclusively 'soldierly' standpoint and who uncompromisingly championed the aim of winning for the German veteran 'his due share in running the country'. Such a credo naturally entailed ostentatious contempt for everything effeminat and unsoldierly: 'Windbags must shut up and men alone make decisions. Political deserters and hysterical women of both sexes must be unloaded.'

Yet the fact that ideologically charged homosexual eroticism and sexuality were cornerstones of the fascist male-bonding culture prior to 1933. In an article 'Friendship or Homosexuality', published in 1925, Dr Karl-Gunther Heimsoeth, a close friend and Freikorps comrade of Röhm, betray how readily the military stylisation of 'male homosexual eroticism' could be racially charged and employed against the 'inferiority of feminism and Semitism'. This ideologising of homosexual tendencies into 'the German race' paid tribute to homoeroticism for political purposes, as a contribution to the establishment of a male-structured völkisch state. Such was the world in which Röhm lived and whose ideals he sought to impose on post-revolutionary German society, primarily by means of a brutal assault on the values and representatives of democratic political culture.

Röhm's militant virility fantasies are in contrast to his aesthetic side. His memoirs, published in 1928, show him to have been an excellent wordsmith. He was probably a good public speaker, and he also loved music, especially Wagner. So unorthodox in other respects, Röhm could also express himself very tenderly in private, for instance, when writing to his protégé and 'sweetheart', the art student Martin Schätzl.

Perhaps the best pointer to the way in which Röhm dealt with his homosexual proclivities is supplied by an article published in 1932, 'National Socialism and Inversion', which, if not written by him, must at least have been instigated by him. Its anonymous author went so far as to make the – never disavowed – assertion that he was expressing 'not just a personal view, but the opinion that prevails all the way' up to the Führer'. The gist of the article was that what really mattered was to do one's duty as a soldier and comrade. Anyone who did that should be allowed a free hand in private, so long as he concealed his activities from the public gaze.

If that was the moral aspect of the matter, so to speak, what of the personal aspect? 'I fancy I'm homosexual,' Röhm confided to his friend Heimsoeth in 1929, but I didn't really 'discover' it until 1924. I can recall a series of homosexual feelings and acts extending back into my childhood, but I've also had relations with plenty of women. Never with any great pleasure, though. I also caught three doses of the clap, which I later saw as nature's punishment for unnatural intercourse. I now detest all women, especially those who pursue me with their love – and there are quite a number of them, more's the pity.

Röhm is reputed to have had a fiancée before the war, but the liaison was evidently of brief duration. He then entered the exclusively male society of the trenches and the Freikorps, in which he had no need to disguise his homoerotic preferences. We do not know with whom Röhm 'really discovered' his homosexuality in 1924, and the date may also be wrong. There are indications that he had a longish sexual relationship, at the beginning of the 1920s, with Edmund Heines, another of his 'sweethearts'.

I therefore state that he first became fully aware of his proclivity while in Stadelheim Prison in 1923-24.

Whatever the truth, Röhm accepted himself as he was, and in 1929 he confided to those who cared to listen that he was 'far from unhappy' about his homosexuality. Indeed he was 'perhaps even inwardly proud' of it. He seems in general to have been quite unabashed about such matters.

Ideologically-charged homosexual eroticism and sexuality were cornerstones of the fascist male-bonding culture prior to 1933.
proclaimed that he was not one of the ‘well-behaved’ and insisted that the ‘morality’ of the ‘moral’ seldom amounted to much. It later transpired that he had not only patronised male prostitutes in the mid-1920s but openly advocated the repeal of Paragraph 175, the German law against homosexuality.

When Röhm and Hitler first met, the thirty-two-year-old captain was a far from unattractive man. Photographs of the period show him not as the plump, bull-necked figure familiar later. Moreover his heavily scarred cheeks would have been perceived by comrades and lovers more as an honourable badge of courage than a physical blemish. Hans Frank, a former Freikorps comrade of Röhm, described him thus: ‘Until then I had thought of homosexuality merely as a characteristic of unmanly, soft, self-indulgent, parasitic weaklings. But Röhm was the absolute prototype of a brave, daredevil soldier.’ The reasons for his success were certainly not confined to his unscrupulous resort to violence.

Many sources suggest that Röhm and Hitler had a sexual relationship. This is referred to, for example, in the diary of an unnamed Reichswehr general, extracts from which were published abroad in 1934, and the possibility of such a liaison cannot be entirely ruled out. They must have spent some time together in private, for nothing else could have accounted for their intimate and thoroughly informal relationship. But were they lovers? I consider that improbable.

The memoirs of Hitler’s close friend Ernst Hanfstaengl (published in 1970) do contain a hint that, around 1923, their friendship developed an intensity ‘that transcended the fraternal Du and gave rise to rumours of a more far-reaching mutual affection’. But Hanfstaengl too considered such rumours to be highly exaggerated.

Hitler recognised Röhm’s talent for planning and organisation. He also learned from him how to reconcile a self-assured, masculine manner with the homosexual tendencies that had been manifest since his teens. It was not long before he could demonstrate ‘manliness’ so convincingly that even hard-boiled soldiers were taken in.

Conversely, Röhm recognised Hitler’s talent for politics. He saw him as the charismatic prophet who could beguile the masses with rousing speeches and imbue them with rapturous enthusiasm. Thus the two men complemented each other. They got on well as comrades and brothers in arms, each in his own sphere. They were also united by their love of music. Finally, the fact that they were both homosexual, which can hardly have escaped them, would have been conducive to a great sense of attachment.

‘Hitler and I,’ Röhm wrote in his memoirs, ‘were linked by ties of sincere friendship.’ He had felt obliged ‘to speak candidly to my friend, like a loyal comrade’ even when they fell out in 1925. The two men had drawn different conclusions from the failed putsch of November 1923. When Röhm was released from detention in April 1924, Hitler had appointed him commander of the Sturmabteilung (SA). In that capacity Röhm founded the Frontbann, a new edition of the pre-putsch Combat League. Now that the Weimar Republic was becoming consolidated, however, Hitler soon realised that an updated version of the Freikorps strategy would be a political blind alley. In December 1924, therefore, he removed the SA from the Frontbann – and Röhm, who categorically demanded that the National Socialist movement recognise ‘the primacy of soldiers over politicians’, felt that he had been overridden. Hence their ways parted in the spring of 1925. But it was a parting devoid of intrigues and public recriminations. Röhm remained loyal, his personal relationship with Hitler intact.

Röhm’s Return

At first Röhm was compelled to subsist by means of odd jobs. He also wrote his memoirs. For a soldier as keen as Röhm, however, these were only occupational stopgaps. Consequently, when offered the post of military adviser to the Bolivian army in December 1928, he promptly accepted. It was in South America in the autumn of 1930 that he received a letter from Hitler inviting him to become chief of staff of the SA.

Accepting with alacrity, he took up his new post on January 5th, 1931. He soon acquired political power, and late in 1933 Hitler made him a government minister. Yet within a few months, on June 30th, 1934, he had fallen victim to an unparalleled bloodbath, the ‘Night of the Long Knives’, a crime committed at the Führer’s behest. What lay behind this remarkable development? Part of the answer, as we shall see, lies in Hitler’s homosexuality.

Why Hitler should have recalled Röhm at all and offered him com-

SA troops in action on November 8th, 1923, during the abortive Munich putsch.
mand of the SA, despite their earlier differences, is a question that cannot be answered without an eye to the political situation prevailing in 1930-31. After Röhm’s withdrawal from the NSDAP (Nazi Party) leadership in 1925, Hitler had initially succeeded in getting the Party to endorse his new conception of the SA as an electoral strong-arm force specializing in public intimidation and propaganda. It made a substantial contribution to the electoral victories gained in the years that followed, including some spectacular gains in the Reichstag elections on September 14th, 1930.

From then, Hitler had to think and act on a ‘macropolitical’ scale. This meant, first and foremost, harnessing the traditional elites as a route to further support. Hitler tackled this problem with instinctive flair and considerable success, realizing that, to gain power, he would have to go some way toward accommodating the old elites’ conception of political morality. The SA clearly failed to see the need for this, continually overdoing things in its flamboyant way. In the middle of the election campaign in August 1930, the commander of the Berlin SA, Walter Stennes, disliking the strategy of seeking power by legitimate means, had openly rebelled against the Party’s Munich leadership. This led to a grotesque incident in which rampaging SA stormtroopers occupied Party headquarters in Berlin. Hitler, who had hurried to Berlin and assumed supreme command of the SA, did succeed in getting the situation under control. But the political damage was considerable. The ‘Stennes crisis’ became so acute that Hitler eventually called on Röhm for help.

He could not have made a shrewder decision, for Röhm hailed from the male-bonded milieu from which SA men were largely recruited, spoke their language and shared their outlook. As one of the early activists of the National Socialist movement, he naturally carried considerable weight within the Party. These twin anchorage points afforded the best guarantee that the SA and the Party would not disintegrate further, and that the ‘brown battalions’ would be politically disciplined. In short, Röhm was the man who could render the SA ‘presentable’ without alienating the simpler souls in its ranks.

Yet Hitler knew he was running a political risk by reinstating Röhm, who had, by contemporary standards, been remarkably frank about his homosexuality and was thus vulnerable to attacks by opponents inside and outside the Party. Hitler was expressly warned of this danger and was requested at least to make a public statement on the subject of homosexuality – without success, needless to say. Instead, he tried to protect himself and the SA commander in a more non-commital way. As early as February 3rd, 1931, he issued a remarkable decree concerning ‘attacks on the private lives’ of ‘very senior and senior SA officers’. Here he stated that the SA was ‘not a moral institution for the education of refined young ladies, but a formation of tough fighting men... Their private life cannot be an object of scrutiny unless it runs counter to the vital principles of National Socialist ideology.’ Hitler wanted to show that he was above the matter and, at the same time, to offer Ernst Röhm the protection he needed. This did not at all suit the homophobic Joseph Goebbels, who wrote in his diary on 27th February, 1931, that he would ‘oppose with all my might’ the Nazi Party becoming an ‘El Dorado’ for homosexuals.

Politically, Röhm soon fulfilled all of Hitler’s expectations. He managed to put a stop to excesses like those of recent months and reduced the tension existing between the SA and the Party organisation. The SA
recruited members in increasing numbers, not only from its tradition- al Freikorps base but from elsewhere as well. Even Goebbels unreservedly conceded this: ‘Chief of Staff Röhm has accomplished the miracle of moulding loose, scattered groups into a tight-knit, tear-proof organisation’. Outwardly, the SA had now joined Hitler on his ‘legality course’ and renounced any idea of a putsch.

But Röhm owed his successes not only to his efficiency but to his personnel policy. He assigned key SA positions to men of homosexual bent, and they, in turn, installed friends in certain posts. One example was Edmund Heines, Röhm’s lover of the 1920s, with whom Hitler is also reputed to have been on close terms. He was appointed Röhm’s deputy in Silesia with the rank of SA-Obergruppenführer (roughly, general). Another man who enjoyed a sensational career in the SA was Karl Ernst, who had got to know Captain Paul Röhrbein, the SA’s first Berlin commander, at the ‘El Dorado’, a favourite haunt of the German capital’s homosexual community. In 1931 Röhrbein introduced Ernst (‘Frau Röhrbein’) to his old friend Röhm. By April of that year Ernst was commanding SA Subgroup East, and a year later he was in the Reichstag. The result of such wire-pulling was that the SA gradually acquired the reputation of a fraternity devoted to homosexual excesses. As the homosexual art historian Christian Isermeyer recalled in an interview not many years ago: ‘I also got to know some people in the SA. They used to throw riotous parties even in 1933... I once attended one... It was quite well-behaved but thoroughly gay, men only... But then, in those days the SA was ultragay.’ Homosexuals acquired political influence even in the Braunhaus, headquarters of the SA’s supreme command.

For Hitler, the SA’s homoerotic orientation became an unprotected flank exposed to attack by political opponents, internal Party rivals and Nazi moralists. Not even Röhm’s successes could alter that.

Röhm in Trouble
Gauleiter Joseph Goebbels openly attacked Röhm. According to a report in the Communist Rotfront, the Berlin gauleiter’s offices were ‘a hotbed of corruption and intrigue’ dedicated to bringing Röhm down by every available means. Compromising information about the SA boss was not only being disseminated but sold to the highest bidder. At an editorial meeting of Der Angriff, attended by Hitler’s faithful henchman Max Amann, Goebbels demanded that the latter ‘request Hitler, on behalf of the Party members of North Germany, to dismiss the chief of staff’.

Goebbels was not alone in this opinion. Captain Paul Schulz, the successor to Stennes as boss of the Berlin SA, sought to make common cause with him. At the end of May 1931 they called on Hitler at the Hotel Kaiserhof in the hope of gaining his support. After Hitler refused to take the bull by the horns, Schulz wrote him a stinging letter on June 2nd. Schulz sought to draw Hitler’s attention to ‘the dangers... necessarily entailed, in my opinion, by the employment of morally objectionable persons in positions of authority’. In addition to Röhm, he named Karl Ernst; Paul Röhrbein; Röhm’s aides Reimer and Count Du Moulin-Eckart; and the ‘V-Mann’ (confidential agent) Dr Meyer. These now formed a ‘homosexual chain’ that extended from Munich to Berlin. What aggravated the situation, wrote Schulz, was that ‘Captain Röhm makes absolutely no secret of his disposition; on the contrary, he prides himself on his aversion to the female sex and proclaims it in public’. He concluded: ‘Things have now reached the stage where rumours are being spread in Marxist quarters that you yourself, my most esteemed Führer, are also homosexual’.

Schulz may well have sent a copy to Gregor Strasser, his friend and superior, because late in June Strasser’s brother Otto leaked the letter to the editor of the Münchener Post with the avowed intention of ‘dealing a blow at Hitler and the Movement’. When it was actually published, Goebbels described the mood at the Party’s Munich headquarters as one of ‘utter confusion’.

The publication of the letter was a minor disaster for the Nazi party. Hitler thought it preferable to keep quiet about the matter, even though the newspaper, citing, inter alia, Dr Meyer, one of Röhm’s companions from the early 1920s, featured further articles on Röhm’s homosexual disposition. Meyer was subsequently, on December 15th, 1931, found hanged in his cell while remanded on a charge of fraud. Official cause of death: suicide.

But Röhm was not yet out of the woods. He directed all his odium at Paul Schulz and made strenuous efforts to eliminate him, but without any immediate success. The SA commander’s position within the Party remained precarious until early 1932, because Hitler made no move With the boys from the SA in the Brown House, Munich, c.1930.
The German exile press attacked Röhm’s homosexuality and the culture of the SA, as here in December 1933.

to quell these intrigues by exerting his authority. No reaction from him was forthcoming throughout 1931.
The political imponderables were too great for Hitler to adopt a public position on the matter. He may even have regarded ‘the Röhm case’ as a kind of trial balloon that would enable him to gauge public reactions to a charge of homosexuality. Was he, perhaps, exposing his personal ‘problem’ to public debate without endangering himself?

In order to understand the following events, we must view them against the power-political situation prevailing toward the end of 1931. Hindenburg was standing for re-election as president and there were also five Landtag (provincial parliamentary) elections, including one in Prussia where the Social Democrats would be defending their most important power base.

Hitler’s position was difficult. To stand for election against Hindenburg would carry a great personal risk. A would-be head of state had to fulfil criteria quite different from those of a party leader. His life would be closely scrutinised. Many people refused to buy the curriculum vitae Hitler had set forth in Mein Kampf, so he would have to supplement it in some way. Torn between his supporters’ expectations and an awareness of his own vulnerability, Hitler agonised for weeks before making a decision – one that his ongoing dispute with the Münchener Post could not have made any easier.

It was not until February 22nd, 1932, that propaganda director Goebbels could announce Hitler’s candidacy and finally launch the campaign. Its essential purpose was to extol the Nazi leader not only as a brilliant politician but as a man of integrity. This it did on two quite different levels, of which one has often been described, ‘The Führer over Germany’. Goebbels wrote a series of scenarios for public appearances by the Führer as Germany’s last hope winging his way to mass meetings. To Hitler’s growing band of supporters it seemed as if the Holy Ghost was descending on them.

The other method by which Hitler achieved a semi-mythical aura is less well known but no less important: he underwrote his chances of gaining power at the expense of a close friend. On March 7th, 1932, the left-wing VfZ am Montag printed three letters written by Ernst Röhm. Two days later they appeared in the Münchener Post. Soon they were reprinted as a pamphlet, two of them even in facsimile form. Their authenticity was beyond doubt.

The letters in question, which dated from 1928-29, were extremely intimate in tone. They were addressed to Röhm’s friend and personal physician Karl-Günter Heimsoth, who was also in contact with other homosexual Nazi leaders. In the first letter Röhm had railed against that ‘blockhead’ Alfred Rosenberg, whose homophobic writings were ‘directed primarily at me because I make no secret of my disposition’. The second, written in La Paz, the Bolivian capital, on February 25th, 1929, included references to his ‘homosexual feelings and acts’ and his abhorrence of ‘unnatural’ intercourse with women. In his third letter, dated August 11th, 1929, and sent from Uyuni, Bolivia, he dilated on the pleasures of Berlin:

The steam bath there is, in my opinion, the acme of all human happiness. At all events, I particularly enjoyed the way things are done there ... And now, give our mutual friend Fritz Schirmer my warm regards, and, on my behalf – worse luck – a kiss ...

Incidentally, I take definite exception to the fact that your husband (or

A group of women and transvestites in the El Dorado, Berlin’s most notorious homosexual club in Weimar days.
The man who obtained the letters and published the pamphlet was a certain Helmut Klotz. A naval officer during the First World War, he joined the Freikorps thereafter and had been one of the joint founders of the SA. In the ensuing years, however, he became a staunch champion of Weimar democracy. How had Klotz got hold of these explosive documents? And what did it all have to do with Hitler?

Hitler’s assumption of power in 1933 drove Klotz into exile. But when France was occupied in 1940 he was tortured into giving an account of what had happened in 1932. His statements are credible, since their veracity could be checked at any time. Klotz confessed that publication of the Röhm letters was instigated by the Prussian ministry of the interior, in particular by Regierungsrat (senior executive officer) Rudolf Diels.

Apparently an ardent republican, Diels had in fact been a ‘subscribing member’ of the SA since 1932 and maintained remarkably close personal contacts with the Führer. (In 1933 as supreme commander of the SA, Adolf Hitler appointed him an honorary officer of that organisation.) According to his heavily embroidered autobiography, Lucifer ante portas, which appeared in 1949, he had collected evidence against Röhm on Hitler’s direct orders. It is indeed almost impossible that he would have dared grasp such a hot potato in the absence of an express order from Hitler.

To understand how Diels obtained the documents, we must first go back to 1931, when the public prosecutor’s office in Berlin was investigating Röhm for ‘unnatural sexual offences’. On July 13th, 1931, acting on a tip from Otto Strasser, the authorities searched the home of Röhm’s correspondent, Dr Heinsoh, and confiscated the three outspoken letters that would later appear in the pamphlet. These were handed over to the Munich public prosecutor’s office. Soon it became apparent that though Röhm admitted being ‘bisexually inclined’ and having ‘often had to do with young boys in that direction’, he refused to admit engaging in criminal intercourse ‘as defined by Paragraph 175’——the standard argument advanced by all accused men, and one that was hard to refute. The case was therefore dropped. But in February 1932, just prior to the announcement that Hitler would stand for the presidency, the Röhm affair came alive again. The Munich papers were obtained by the Prussian ministry of the interior, and Diels was able to conduct his interview with Helmut Klotz only a few days later.

It was in February 1932, when the presidential election was impending, that Hitler must have made common cause with those who were denouncing Röhm. He did so — I contend — for two reasons. The first was to gain a hold over the SA commander. A few contemporary observers already guessed what was going on, among them the former head of the SA, Hitler reviews a youth member of the SA, in about 1933.

Franz Pfeffer von Salomon, ‘Hitler,’ he said after the war, ‘did not appoint Röhm in spite of his proclivity, but probably because of it.’ The ‘Röhm case’ perfectly exemplifies the behaviour strategy Hitler adopted toward his closest associates: he entrusted them with ‘great’ assignments and influential positions, guaranteed them wide discretion in the running of their departments, sought out their ‘flaws or weak points’ and, finally, threatened them with the ‘emergency brake’. The effect on his henchmen was total dependence, indeed subjection. If one examined each member of the Nazi leadership in turn, exactly the same pattern would emerge in

November 2001 History Today 11
Shoulder to shoulder: Hitler and Röhm at the Nuremberg rally, 1933.

almost every case: fascination, flattery, corruption, coercion. In 1932, in a mood of profound resignation, Röhm frankly admitted that his 'vulnerability' had 'delivered me into his [Hitler's] hands ... I stuck to my job, following him blindly, loyal to the utmost'.

The second, and more important reason, for Hitler's action was to insure himself against similar attacks. For rumours were circulating that Hitler himself had homosexual proclivities, and some, including Albert Grzesinski, the Berlin police chief, were convinced of their authenticity. Yet Hitler refused to dismiss Röhm. Instead he preferred to pose as a comrade and man of honour who profusely abhorred such scabrous attacks, as a man to whom 'loyalty' was no empty word, and thus as a man with absolutely nothing to hide.

On the emotional level, those on the left of the political spectrum fought the election exclusively by campaigning against 'Röhm and associates'. They avidly fell on the documents that were fed them, hoping that evidence of the SA chief's homosexuality would destroy their hated opponent, and failed to see that Hitler was throwing them this bait as a means of self-promotion. While his opponents were concentrating exclusively on Röhm, the Führer could pose as a national Messiah far removed from such inter-party squabbles. Sexual strictures on the SA leadership simply bounced off Hitler's statesmanlike façade. As a result his popularity increased during the scandal.

Admittedly Hindenburg was re-elected, but Hitler managed to garner many more votes than ever before. In April he succeeded in eroding the last major bastion remaining to the defenders of the Weimar Republic, the Prussian Landtag; and in the Reichstag elections of July 31st, 1932, the NSDAP gained a brilliant victory. It was now by far the strongest political force in Germany.

Röhm Retaliates
Röhm's career might now have ended. Hindenburg is said to have remarked in private that, in the Kaiser's day, an officer like Röhm would have had a pistol left on his desk; and if the scoundrel had refused to take the hint, he would have been hounded out of public life in disgrace. But nothing of the kind happened to Röhm. Indeed he was firmly back in the political saddle by the end of the year. The next year, 1933, he was once more numbered among the most powerful figures in the Nazi hierarchy. Official propaganda explained that he had previously been the victim of the most disgusting kind of character assassination from 'Marxist circles' and 'the entire Jewish press'. In December 1933, Hitler even persuaded Hindenburg to appoint Röhm a minister. To confirm the SA boss in office must have come hard to the elderly Reich president, who had declared, only a year before, that he had found it 'positively nauseating' to shake hands with 'that breechloader'.

Nor did Hitler have any qualms about promoting Röhm's (former) intimates. One such was Karl Ernst, whom he appointed to command the SA's Berlin-Brandenburg detachment, thereby investing him with every tittle of 'wartime' status and, in the homosexual scene with a rank roughly equivalent to that of general. Hitler is reported to have told Hermann Rauschning at lunch in the Reich Chancellery in the early summer of 1933: 'I won't spoil any of my men's fun. If I demand the utmost of them, I must also leave them free to let off steam as they want, not as churchy old women think fit ... I take no interest in their private lives, just as I won't stand for people prying into my own.' Röhm, who had been in the depths of despondency in the summer of 1932, now had every reason to exult that the 'Damocles sword' of his homosexuality was no longer hanging over him.

This surprising development requires explanation – the more so since it was followed, only a few months later, by the abrupt overthrow of Röhm and his associates. The answer lies with Hitler. He rehabilitated Röhm partly because he needed the SA for purposes of general political intimidation, but also for far more personal reasons.

There is evidence to suggest that, after the campaign against him, Röhm abandoned his hitherto steadfast loyalty to Hitler and decided to pursue a policy of his own. For this he needed allies, spies and informants. As early as April 1933 he had instructed the agent Georg Bell to build up an SA intelligence service. All this entailed at first was the intimidation of 'politicians inside the NSDAP who wanted to exploit Röhm's predicament'. But after the publication of the 'Röhm letters', he came to terms with opposition forces. Bell arranged a meeting with a former Reichswehr comrade of Röhm, the one-time intelligence officer Karl Mayr, who had since joined the SPD. With his help, the SA commander tried to track down the real authors of the campaign against him. He began to conspire with anti-Nazis like Kurt von Schleicher and refused to be intimidated by Hitler. 'If Hitler shouted,' recalled his attorney, 'Röhm shouted louder still.' Fritz Günther von Tschirschky, an associate of Vice Chancellor Franz von Papen, unexpectedly overheard such an altercation from Hitler's outer office at the Reich Chancellery early in 1934.

It was clear that a very heated argument was in progress in Hitler's room. After a short while I said to Brückner [Hitler's aide-de-camp]: 'Who's in there, for God's sake? Are they killing each other?' To which Brückner replied: 'Röhm's in there. He's trying hard to talk the Old Man (he always called Hitler that) into going to the Reich President and forcing him to grant his requests.' So I waited. The door was relatively thin, and one could catch isolated, particularly loud, scraps of conversation – indeed, whole sentences ... Again and again I heard: 'I can't do that, you're asking the

To confirm the SA boss in office must have come hard to the elderly Hindenburg, who had declared he found it 'positively nauseating' to shake hands with 'that breechloader'.

November 2001 History Today 13
On July 2nd, 1934, the Berlin press led with Hindenburg’s telegram of thanks to Hitler and Göring for their attack on the SA.

was now closed. Hitler’s political instinct for self-preservation, if nothing else, compelled him to escalate matters. At the same time, he was urged on by the prospect of concealing his own homosexuality forever by the elimination of dangerous witnesses, and right at the top of the list of potential blackmailers was Ernst Röhm. If Gestapo chief Rudolf Diels is to be believed, he was engaged in spying on Röhm from January 1934 on. The Reichswehr is documented as having done so from February of that year, and in April, if not before. Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler – freshly invested with new and wide-ranging powers – and his sidekick Reinhard Heydrich also took a hand. Finally, in mid-May, largely with an eye to forthcoming events, a new ‘decree on the imposition of terms of imprisonment’ was issued. By abolishing the judicial review of appeals against detention and placing other severe constraints on the ability of defence counsel to intervene on their clients’ behalf, this opened the door to Gestapo tyranny.

Röhm and his senior SA officers posted their own sentries and armed their men as best they could. According to his Berlin deputy, Karl Ernst, Röhm began at this time to deposit ‘important evidence’ in ‘a safe place’ because ‘we must be ready for anything’. So Röhm knew what was brewing.

Nevertheless the SA’s chief of staff had overreached himself; in particular by planning to build up an army of his own. This conflicted with the interests of the Reichswehr, which now became Hitler’s principal ally in his contest with Röhm. Moreover, Hitler got the other Nazi big shots on his side. He had something for everyone: for Himmler, who did not want his SS to be overshadowed by the SA any longer; for Heydrich, who was banking on a meteoric career; for Goebbels, who had had a score to settle with Röhm since the days of Stennes; for Göring, who was intent on becoming the regime’s number two. In the early summer of 1934, having largely isolated his former friend and patron from the rest of the Party, he was in a position to lure him into a lethal trap.

Early in June 1934, Hitler extracted a promise from Röhm that he would send the SA on four weeks’ furlough. The relevant order clearly betrays how uneasy the chief of staff felt about this step: ‘If the SA’s enemies delude themselves that it will not return from furlough, or not at full strength, let us indulge them in that short-lived hope. They will receive the appropriate answer in such a time and in such a manner as seems necessary.’ Hanfstaengl noted that an equally belligerent basic mood prevailed when he encountered Röhm, ‘clearly already drunk’, at a soirée at SA headquarters on June 6th, 1934: ‘He lapsed into the wildest bout of swearing I ever heard; he cursed, shouted, threatened... I wondered what sinister game was afoot behind the scenes.’

By getting the SA sent on furlough Hitler had managed to deprive his adversary of his principal means of protection. He also talked Röhm into taking several weeks’ vacation at Bad Wiessee on the Tegernsee. Then he went over to the offensive. Only a few days after Hitler’s conversation with Röhm, Rudolf Hess ordered the SA intelligence service to be disband ed. At Hindenburg’s Neudeck estate on June 21st, Hitler personally obtained the President’s approval of his plan to proceed against the SA leadership by force. Next, the SS under Himmler evaluated its ‘incriminating evidence’ and compiled death lists in which other Party bigwigs like Göring and Chief Justice Buch also had a say. On June 25th Goebbels delivered a long and menacing speech, broadcast by every German radio station, in which he referred to a virulent power struggle. But: ‘One person remains exempt from all criticism, and that is the Führer!’ This completed the requisite preparations. Within four days everything had been agreed, and without involving the army in this civil war-like scheme. ‘The army has
nothing to do with the whole affair.’ Hitler is said to have informed a Reichswehr officer in Munich on June 30th, 1934. ‘We’ll wash our dirty linen by ourselves.’

Recent estimates indicate that Hitler had a total of some 150 ‘opponents of the regime’ murdered between June 30th and July 3rd, 1934. Even while the operation was in progress, Hermann Göring decreed the destruction or confiscation of all the relevant documents, and immediately thereafter the Reich government enacted the ‘Law Relating to National Emergency Defence Measures’, which simply declared the murderous operation to have been ‘lawful’. This deprived the legal authorities of any grounds for investigations after the event.

The startled public naturally stood in need of explanation and justification, however, so the National Socialists’ most unscrupulous demagogue after Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, was obliged to ‘enlighten’ them on the background to the massacre. On July 1st, while the murders were still going on, he broadcast a speech whose length suggests that most of it had been drafted before June 30th. Goebbels portrayed the speed of the whole operation as a skilful tactic. What had been at issue was the suppression of ‘traitors’, but far from disclosing any conspiratorial plans to overthrow the government, Goebbels strayed off into stereotyped attacks on a ‘small clique of professional saboteurs’ which had refused to ‘appreciate our indulgence’. The Führer had now ‘called them to order’ with due severity. ‘A clean sweep is being made ... Plague boils, hotbeds of corruption, and symptoms of moral degeneration that manifest themselves in public life are being cauterised – drastically’.

What had mainly prompted this deliberate escalation was, of course, something else, something to which Goebbels alluded rather casually but with remarkable directness when he claimed that the SA leaders ‘were on the point of exposing the entire leadership of the Party to suspicions of shameful and loathsome sexual abnormality’. We should not be too quick to pass that sentence by. In the first place, no one in the Third Reich had ever heard of any ‘suspicion’ that the ‘entire’ leadership of the NSDAP might be homosexual. Second, who was supposed to have spread such a rumour, if even the Social Democrats had failed to do so while freedom of speech still prevailed? And what did ‘were on the point of’ mean? No, that sentence was no piece of sophistry, no demagogue’s punchline: it was a reflex reaction to a very real threat – one to which, in the summer of 1934, Hitler’s only possible response was lynch law.

The report that Hitler submitted to his cabinet on July 3rd, 1934, conveyed his true motives for the murderous operation of recent days. The ‘clique headed by Röhm’, which had been ‘held together by a particular disposition’, had ‘slanderously attacked’ him, and he charged the former chief of staff with ‘insincerity and disloyalty’. Röhm had threatened him and that threat had been ‘nothing more nor less than barefaced blackmail’. The ‘object lesson’ he had now administered would serve to make it clear to each of his men ‘that he risks his neck if he conspires against the existing regime in any way’.

The Victims
Hitler defended himself by going to extremes, so the few people who knew that he, too, was homosexual had to be murdered or thoroughly intimidated. This is revealed by a closer look at the individual victims. Those who were murdered or locked up included the homosexual SA commanders Röhm, Ernst and Heines, all of whom were on personal terms with Hitler; Gregor Strasser, who had hitherto been an intimate friend of Hitler and had even chosen him to be ‘the godfather of his sons’; Karl-Günther Heimsoth and Paul Röhrbein, who had been close friends of Hitler’s former intimates, even though they had long ago distanced themselves from ‘Röhm and associates’; senior civil servants privy to potentially explosive documentary evidence about Hitler; for instance Erich Klausener, head of the police department at the Prussian ministry of the interior, and his head of section, Eugen von Kessel; Reichswehr Minister and ex-Chancellor Kurt von Schleicher and his right-hand man,
Ferdinand von Bredow; the Munich police chief August Schneidhuber; the attorneys of Röhm, Strasser, Karl Lüdecke (an associate of Hitler’s during his early years in Munich) and of other senior Nazis, who had learned dangerous things from their clients and from trial documents; and, finally, the Munich journalist Fritz Gerlich, who probably knew more about Hitler and his inner circle than any other newspaperman of this period.

Anxious to prevent being compromised, Hitler took his revenge in a positively fanatical manner, thereby endeavouring to cut the ground from under any future conspiracy.

Potentially incriminating witnesses were also ruthlessly dispatched, as a few examples will demonstrate. Karl Zehnter, thirty-four years old, was the landlord of the Nürnberger Bratwurstglöckl, a hostelry situated a stone’s throw from Munich Cathedral. Politically naïve, Zehnter belonged to Röhm’s homosexual set and was also a close and long-time friend of Edmund Heines. Both SA leaders were regular patrons of his establishment, which Hitler, too, frequented on occasion. An upstairs room in the Bratwurstglöckl was permanently reserved for private meetings between these Nazi dignitaries, and Zehnter made a habit of serving them himself, so he inevitably overheard things—not least about Hitler. That, and that alone, was why he had to die.

Also murdered was Martin Schätzl, a twenty-five-year-old Munich painter who had accompanied Ernst Röhm to Bolivia. Although their relationship did not blossom into a love affair, Schätzl had for two years been Röhm’s closest companion in a foreign land. Schätzl joined the SA when Röhm assumed command and was appointed to his staff on February 1st, 1934. The two men must have talked a great deal together, not least about Röhm’s friendship with Hitler. That was why the young man could not, under any circumstances, be permitted to survive.

General Ferdinand von Bredow, who had been living in retirement at his Berlin home since Hitler formed a government, was bludgeoned to death in a police van and his body thrown into a ditch. What proved his undoing were his activities as head of military intelligence during Heinrich Brüning’s chancellorship. He had also been Schleicher’s right-hand man in the six months prior to Hitler’s assumption of power. As such he got to read some spicy documents, for instance the report of a meeting of the Jungdeutscher Orden 169 on July 3rd-4th, 1932. This stated that the main subject under discussion had been as follows:

Reichswehr Minister Schleicher supports the NSDAP because that movement is headed mainly and exclusively by homosexuals, and, according to evidence submitted by Otto Strasser, the Reichswehr minister is also abnormally inclined ...

Furthermore, while Herr Hitler was spending a longish sojourn at his home, Otto Strasser observed things that lead one to infer an abnormal disposition in that gentleman too.

Hence this essentially irrefutable Reichswehr general had to die like his boss, who was known to have taken a precious possession into retirement with him, namely, copies of confidential files.

One last feature of the June 30th scenario was the cynical way in which many survivors were informed that they, too, had been on a death list and could count themselves lucky to have survived. Not even Hitler’s associate Rudolf Diels was spared this threat. Heydrich is said to have told him to his face that Göring had unfortunately crossed his name off.

It may readily be inferred from these few examples that the operation carried out on and around June 30th was considerably more than a pre-emptive strike against the SA leaders and a few of their reactionary accomplices. It was a carefully planned campaign against people who knew, or were suspected of
knowing, too much about Hitler.

The violent imposition of a state of emergency was intended to enable the authorities to gain possession, at a stroke, of documents considered dangerous by Hitler and his regime. Of the more than 1,100 persons detained in the course of the purge, thirty-four were still behind bars in the autumn of 1934. Their arrest made it possible to seize private papers and sift them with the utmost care. Hitler's speech to the Reichstag on July 13th, 1934, revealingly disclosed that most of his time since the 'Röhm putsch' had been spent looking through countless files, diaries and other 'shocking documents' - in other words, confiscated material.

Hitler's principal motive for taking action against 'Röhm and associates' was fear of exposure and blackmail. What additionally confirms this is that the mountains of confiscated documents were not to be used in trials of any kind but handed over to Himmler's Gestapo and, thus, to Hitler himself. The elimination of witnesses and evidence - that was the real purpose of this act of terrorism.

Deutsche Volks-Zeitung announced that Hitler had eliminated 'initiates who had become dangerous' - men privy 'not least to the private life of the Führer, who is himself homosexual'. Nor, despite the passage six months after the Röhm murders of the Malicious Practices Act, which penalised remarks about NSDAP leaders which were 'openly malicious, inflammatory, or indicative of base sentiments', did all such statements stop. In the summer of 1935 a homosexual engineer who had worked for the Nazi party for ten years received the maximum two years' sentence for allegedly importuning a young man with the words 'Look at our Führer - he also pleases himself with gentlemen'. In 1937 an SA trooper who let slip a remark to the effect that Hitler was a '175er', like Röhm, spent the next two years behind bars. A similar fate awaited the editor Hans Walter Aust in 1942, when he claimed - correctly - that Hitler kept a young girl (Eva Braun) 'solely for the purpose of concealing his homosexuality from those around him'. The following year, such statements would carry a death sentence.

Clearly Hitler was mortally afraid that the homosexual milieu, which he himself had experienced first-hand in Vienna and Munich, could at any time yield up disreputable secrets - even some, perhaps, that might affect him personally. Hence he took further preventative measures.

In 1937 drastic steps were taken to strengthen Paragraph 175. From now on, mere suspicion of 'indecent acts' was sufficient to justify an arrest. This opened the door to arbitrary police procedures. Hitherto still partly intact, the homosexual subculture of Germany's cities was destroyed. A campaign of systematic persecution was launched. Around 30,000 persons were under surveillance by 1939. Many men were imprisoned, and between 5,000 and 15,000 were permanently consigned to concentration camps, where the death rate among inmates wearing the 'pink chevron' was exceptionally high.

The end result was that the dictator made homosexuality a privilege reserved for certain chosen associates, and he was the only one against whom legislation could never be used. Germany's 'Führer' had become a 'saviour' on his own behalf.

But Hitler was also pursuing a political policy. He had realised in 1934 that homosexual advances within his movement could no longer be tolerated. The public muddling campaign against Röhm had shown him that nothing could prevail over the stigmatisation of homosexuality. He could see no alternative but to yield, more and more, to conformist pressure; and once he had taken action against Röhm, his courage and initiative were extolled. The fact that he had ostensibly crushed a 'putsch' enhanced his power-political standing, enabling him to polish his image as 'the saviour of the nation'. To this extent, the Röhm affair not only consolidated Hitler's dictatorship but generated a renewed surge of admiration that rapidly drowned the harsh criticism levelled at his course of action by foreign observers.


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