CHAPTER XXVII

The Nazi Revolution (1933-34)

The years of Hitler's control of Germany up to the outbreak of the war in 1939 can be divided into three sections. The first of these is the Nazi revolution proper, which occupied about eighteen months until August 1934. Although Hitler was appointed chancellor as the result of a shady political deal, he nevertheless was appointed legally and peacefully. The revolution took place after the Nazis achieved the highest positions in the German state. They effected a complete overthrow of the traditional relationships between the national government and the great fulcrums of social responsibility and power: the federal states, the political parties, the trade unions, the army, big business and industry, and the organized Christian churches. By August 1934 only the army, business, and the churches preserved any considerable measure of independence. As the years went on, even these, except for some heroic individuals, underwent synchronization (Gleichschaltung) into the total state.

One of the astonishing aspects of this overturn of society is the relative ease with which it was achieved and the lack of opposition which it encountered. Aside from the fact that the Nazis controlled most of the available force and were ruthless in their use of it, this success would seem to stem in great measure from the weaknesses and divisions in German society dating back for many years and brought into sharp relief during the turbulent period of the Weimar Republic. Furthermore, the weakening effects of the depression and the terrible figure of over six million unemployed in early 1933 had so cooled the Germans' lukewarm devotion to democracy that they were hardly likely to strike many blows for its preservation. The historian must also not discount the fact that the appeal of the Nazis in 1933 contained a very considerable measure of idealism. Such slogans as national regeneration and German awakening were attractive to the downtrodden, the defeated, and the resentful. Young people in particular were possessed by the idea that it was now possible for them to live in a Germany which was again strong, virile,
dynamic, and clean. By the time they realized the extent of their deception, it was too late to do anything about it.

Rarely in history has a man been so underrated as Adolf Hitler. Papen and Hugenberg felt sure that their superior experience and culture plus their majority in the cabinet would make it possible to tame the demagogue while retaining the support of his enormous following. Much the same attitude was taken all along the political line. The Communists, in fact, were under orders from Moscow not to oppose the Nazis too much. Instead they were to let them have a few months of power to expose their incompetence and fatuity so that they would lose their followers to the far left and thus actually facilitate an assumption of power by the reds. The Communists continued even at this late date to treat the Social Democrats as their principal foes.

Hitler’s first act as chancellor was to carry out his promise to Hindenburg to try to achieve a working majority in the Reichstag. This required support by the Catholic Center. The chancellor had a conference with the Center leader, Monsignor Kaas, which Kaas thought was just to be a preliminary discussion. Hitler, however, clearly insincere in his effort, declared after a few minutes that there was no basis for agreement. Therefore he obtained a decree from Hindenburg dissolving the Reichstag and set March 5, 1933, as the date for new elections.

This time the Nazis were not reluctant to hold an election campaign; now they could control much of the state apparatus. They made it clear that this was going to be the last election for years to come. Hitler raced to and fro throughout the land, ably seconded by Goebbels with his intensified propaganda machinery, now heavily subsidized by big business. Hitler did not announce any definite program or make election promises. He devoted his time to violent attacks on Marxism and to denouncing the Weimar system for its decadence and corruption.

Although Papen held the title of commissioner for Prussia, Goering had been appointed Prussian minister of the interior. This was perhaps the most strategic spot in the whole government, for it placed the large Prussian police force under Goering’s control. The burly aviator was tireless in his dismissals of opponents in the Prussian government. He established an auxiliary police made up largely of S.A. and S.S. men. He delivered tirades against the Communists and the red terror. He made it clear that in the street brawls which abounded during the campaign the police were on the side of the Nazis. The brown terror had begun. Its first big overt act was a raid on February 24 on Communist headquarters in Berlin. Not very much of interest was found, but the newspapers the next morning reported that plans for a Communist revolution had been uncovered.
On the evening of February 27 Hitler, Goering, and Goebbels were all in Berlin, an extraordinary fact considering that the election was only a few days off. While they were at dinner, word was received by telephone that the Reichstag building was on fire. They raced to the scene to find flames high in the air over the great dome. Through the large french windows on the main floor could be seen a half-naked man with shaggy hair rushing about with burning rags in his hands. Hitler hardly paused to catch his breath, but shouted words to the effect that this was a beacon light which would show the world the depths of Communist infamy.

The mysterious stranger turned out to be a young, imbecilic, Dutch Communist pyromaniac named Marinus van der Lubbe. The fact that he was a Communist gave credence to the Nazi story. The next day Hitler issued a decree “for the protection of the People and the State,” giving the government almost complete power to suspend the most basic personal and civil rights and to take authority in any of the states. It went far beyond the provisions of Article 48 of the constitution. However, the Communist party was not yet outlawed. It still had one more useful service to perform for Hitler. During the next days the campaign was intensified with all the emotional overtones of the fire adding fuel to the national conflagration.

The full story of the Reichstag fire will probably never be known, but certain facts seem to emerge pretty clearly. First, it is physically impossible for one moron with only an hour or two and some gasoline at his disposal to start a fire of such proportions in a massive stone and mahogany building. Second, there was a basement corridor from the house which Goering occupied as president of the Reichstag leading to the main building. There is hardly any doubt that a number of S.A. men went through this corridor armed with all sorts of inflammable materials and that they did a thorough job. Then they planted the innocuous van der Lubbe, who had been picked up drunk by some storm troopers a few days before in a Berlin bar.

Months later van der Lubbe and several leading Communists, including Ernst Torgler and Georgi Dimitrov, were publicly tried before the supreme court at Leipzig with Goering as witness. The Nazis had not yet suborned the German legal system. The Communists made a fool of Goering and all were acquitted except van der Lubbe, who was beheaded. However, that was not important; by then there were other things to worry about. The Reichstag fire more than served its purpose.

The last relatively free election in Germany until after World War II produced rather disappointing results for the Nazis. Although they increased their votes by five and one half million, they did not achieve
the majority for which they longed; they polled seventeen out of thirty-nine million, just under 44 per cent of the total vote. However, if the Nationalist votes were added to the Nazis’, the two together had a small majority; but the Nazis were not concerned about that. As soon as the eighty-one seats won by the Communists were disqualified, the Nazis alone would have their majority. This was to be the last service to Germany of the Communist party.

March 21, 1933, was set for the meeting of the Reichstag to be held at the Garrison Church at Potsdam, tomb of Frederick the Great and the central shrine of the old cult of Prussian militarism. It would be difficult to imagine a greater contrast from the inception of the republic at Weimar. To the flag-bedecked royal town hobbled in full regalia the remains of the senior officers of imperial Germany, led by bushy old General von Mackensen wearing his shako bearing the skull and crossbones of the death’s-head hussars. Hindenburg in his field marshal’s attire tottered from his car and was met by the new chancellor, dressed not in his corporal’s uniform but in cutaway and striped trousers. Inside the church the relics of the past sat across from the masters of the present, the Nazi delegates in their brown uniforms and swastika decorations. The ceremony was brief. Hindenburg read a dedication of a new Germany, and Hitler emphasized the continuity between Hohenzollern and National Socialist. When the field marshal visited the crypt, guns fired in salute for miles around. The rest of the day was spent in parades, demonstrations, and concerts. The bridge was connected from 1918 to 1933 with the interval forgotten. The Nazis spoke of this occasion as the Day of National Regeneration.

On March 23 the Reichstag met again, this time for business, in the Kroll Opera House in Berlin. However, there was only one piece of business, the Enabling Act. This act provided that for four years the government would have the right to decree any law or treaty independently of the Reichstag. It was an invitation to the Reichstag to vote itself out of effective existence. Since it was a constitutional amendment, it needed a two-thirds vote. Therefore Hitler had wooed the Center, even giving Monsignor Kaas a written promise that he would always act legally. At the meeting Hitler called for the passage of the bill, even threatening that the National Socialists would go ahead regardless of the result of the vote. Otto Wels spoke for the Social Democrats and announced that his party would vote against the measure. It was a brave gesture, but it infuriated Hitler, who jumped back on to the rostrum and lashed out against the socialists. The other party leaders spoke, and the vote was taken amid tumult from the galleries and the streets. The only opposition came from ninety-four Social Democratic members.
Everyone else voted for the act. The Reichstag ceased to exist except as a ceremonial body which Hitler addressed from time to time on important policy developments.

The passage of the Enabling Act was the signal to go full speed ahead. It provided the legal basis for all subsequent acts. Hitler had outwitted his non-Nazi colleagues in the cabinet, for now he could act on his own authority without even the approval of Hindenburg. From this time on there was to be no halt.

In the spring of 1933 the Nazis initiated a thoroughgoing purge from German government and society of anti-Nazi groups. The purge was carried out through the whole nation but was particularly noticeable in Prussia, where Goering conducted it with ruthless brutality. By the national Civil Service law of April 7 Jewish officials of all levels could be retired. The phrase “concentration camp” was added to the world’s language of despair, as Jews, Communists, Social Democrats, and other anti-Nazis were cast out of the government, the teaching profession, and other liberal professions, and sent to endure an existence of sadistic ferocity such as the world has rarely witnessed. As early as April 1 a boycott was ordered against all Jewish businesses and professions; the Jews were gradually deprived of all civil and political rights, and often forced to pay large indemnities to maintain their bare existence from day to day. The brown terror of arrests, beatings, imprisonment, and shootings was on full rampage and shocked civilization; it was efficient and thorough.

More important than the outrages committed against individuals was the Nazi determination to eradicate institutions. Individuals are ephemeral, but institutions endure. During 1933 the Nazis launched attacks against three major institutions—the federal states, the political parties, and the trade unions—all of which were potential focuses of opposition. By the end of the year all three were crushed.

The first big step to eliminate the autonomy of the federal states was taken six months before Hitler became chancellor when Papen seized control of Prussia in July 1932. He rendered the Nazis an important service in advance.

On March 31 Hitler ordered that all the parliaments of the states be dissolved and reconstituted without elections, giving the parties in each state (except the Communists) the same proportion that they had in the Reichstag. A few days later he appointed governors (Reichsstathalter) for each state, in whom reposed all effective executive authority. The Statthalter was usually also the Gauleiter or local party chief; thus the unification of state and party was advanced. Hitler named himself Statthalter in Prussia, but appointed Goering minister-president to do
the actual work. In Bavaria, where some opposition might have been expected, Hitler was wise enough to select the old free corpsman, General Ritter von Epp, who was popular there. By January 1934 the liquidation of the states was completed by the abolition of the Reichsrat or national upper house, which had been intended to represent the states. Although the Nazis paid much lip service to the unique qualities of the various Germanic areas and encouraged folk dancing and local costumes, Germany was ruled from Berlin.

The abolition of all political parties except the National Socialists occurred rapidly. The parties of the left were the first to disappear. The Communists were not allowed to seat their members in the Reichstag. In fact, most of them were in concentration camps within a few weeks. At the end of May the government simply confiscated the property of the party. The Social Democrats seem to have imagined that they could continue as a legal opposition. They did not yet know Hitler. On May 10 their property and funds were confiscated, and some weeks later the party was officially banned. It might have been expected that the center and right-wing parties, some of which actually had representatives in the cabinet, would have been able to endure. But in late June the Nationalist party simply dissolved itself, and Hugenberg retired from the government. In early July the Center and Bavarian People’s party ended their careers voluntarily. By July 14 Hitler was able to decree that the Nazi party was the only legal party in Germany and to prescribe a penal sentence for anyone who tried to start another. It seems hard to believe that institutions with the traditions and prestige of the German parties would simply surrender without a fight. The fact is that they did.

Much the same was true of the trade unions. The socialist unions had been one of the most powerful units in German society; in 1918 and 1919 they almost controlled Germany. During the depression they lost members, but their position still seemed secure. Hitler cleverly decreed May Day, the traditional socialist holiday, as a national holiday and addressed a large rally of workers. The next day Nazi forces confiscated and occupied the union offices and sent many of the leaders to prison. The union assets were transferred to a new institution called the German Labor Front under the leadership of an ardent Nazi, Robert Ley. All German workers became members of the Labor Front. The old techniques of collective bargaining were abolished, and the state assumed direct control of labor-management relations.

Politically speaking, Hitler was in almost complete control of Germany by mid-1933. He had eliminated his opponents outside the party with a brutal speed and a lack of opposition, both of which were amazing. During the year from the summer of 1933 to that of 1934 he had to con-
duct a more difficult struggle, this time against elements within the party interested in pushing the revolution further and in directions of which Hitler disapproved. The struggle was directed against the "socialist" groups in the Nazi party who found their principal spokesmen in the S.A. leadership and in particular in its chief of staff, Hitler's longtime associate, Ernst Roehm. Their aim was an attack on two remaining important constellations of power: business and industry, and the army. They wanted to wipe out the strongholds of what they called the "reaction." Much of the detailed story of the yearlong crisis is obscure and probably will remain so, but sufficient facts have emerged for a fairly coherent account.

By the spring of 1933 the S.A. numbered between two and three million men. Some of them were the "old fighters" who had come into the movement at its start and remained loyal to it over the years. Many were later acquisitions—unemployed, unsuccessful, or ambitious—who saw in the brown shirt formation the path to riches. During the early months of the regime they were the heroes; they carried out the actual work of the terror, the raids, and the confiscations. By July their work was almost done. They looked around and saw that they were without personal possessions and authority, while many non-Nazis were in important places. In particular, they noticed that the old aristocracy of German industry had not been budged from its high estate and was in fact operating closely with the new government.

The latent socialist tendency within Nazism began to make itself articulate. Goebbels, who in March had become minister for propaganda and public enlightenment and who, though personally loyal to Hitler, had always been associated with the left wing of the party, filled his editorials and speeches with invective against capitalistic evils and with pleas for the downtrodden. Some of the early party leaders, men like Gottfried Feder, tried to secure the adoption of their lower-middle-class principles, which had made up the party credo in the early twenties. Even Gregor Strasser emerged somewhat from obscurity.

Hitler was opposed to this tendency in 1933 as he had been in 1926. He was no economist; he was little interested in economic theory. He was a manipulator of men and so far had had remarkable success with the lords of industry. He was wise enough to recognize the immense power of the German economy as then constituted. His plan was to harness and control the existing leadership rather than to venture on a new untried revolutionary experiment which might not be successful. In this thinking he was supported by Goering and Hjalmar Schacht.

Even more of a worry to Hitler than the economic attitude of the S.A. was its designs on the army. The S.A. was now twenty times as large as
the army; it had carried the whole brunt of the Nazi revolution, from which the regular army had held deliberately aloof. Roehm, first and always a fighter and military man, would have loved a position of importance in the regular army. He would have enjoyed social recognition from the stiff-necked Prussian officer corps, which his social background, his wild and perverse life, and his rough personality had always denied him. He felt that the army and S.A. should be merged into the new large German military establishment, with the S.A. free corps attitude in control and a wild, free, all-German spirit succeeding the old narrow-minded bemonocled ethos.

Once again Hitler was in sharp opposition. He respected the army from his front-line days; more important, he remembered his defeat in 1923 when he had tried to pit the S.A. against the army. He also had a sound political understanding of the prestige attached to the army and in particular its importance to Hindenburg, who was not yet completely negligible. Time and again he asserted that the army was the legitimate bearer of arms and that the S.A. had as its function internal political matters only. He had to tread a narrow path.

The winter of 1933–34 was filled with maneuvering among the several groups. Hitler tried various techniques, including a kind of bribery. For example, he gave Roehm a seat in the cabinet at the same time that Hess received one. Even then Roehm would not be quiet. There seems little doubt that Hitler was constantly fed anti-Roehm sentiments by Goering and also by Heinrich Himmler, who chafed at the fact that the S.S. was technically subordinate to the S.A. and saw in the struggle an opportunity to increase the prestige of the S.S. and thus his own.

The situation was complicated by the evident fact that Hindenburg had very little time to live. The doctors made this clear to Hitler, for whom it was an extremely important matter. Hitler had determined to succeed the old man in the functions of the presidency, but knew that this would require the support of the army because of the need for a new oath of allegiance. The crucial day seems to have been April 11, 1934.

On that day Hitler went aboard a naval vessel to watch maneuvers. In the party were General Werner von Blomberg, minister of defense, General Werner von Fritsch, commander in chief of the army, and Admiral Erich Raeder, commander in chief of the navy. There is reason to believe that on that occasion Hitler made a deal with the military that they would support his succession to Hindenburg if Hitler would quiet the S.A. and not touch the army's sacrosanct position.

The events of the following weeks are obscure and confusing, especially the workings of Hitler's mind. It eventually became clear to him
that Roehm was the key to the whole triple problem: the position of the
army, the socialist "second" revolution, and the imminent death of
Hindenburg. The days of June were filled with inventing a plausible story
of a coup d'état supposedly plotted by Roehm, Strasser, Schleicher, and
others to take control of the new Nazi state and lead it in their sinister
direction. In the meantime the S.A. was ordered to go on leave during
July without uniform, and Roehm himself left for a convalescent vaca-
tion at a hotel in the Bavarian Alps. Tension mounted high in the capital.

June 30, 1934, was the blood-soaked day. The events of the blood
purge, or the night of the long knives as it is sometimes called, are
familiar. On June 29 Hitler and Goebbels flew from the Rhineland to
Munich. During the night they arrested a number of S.A. leaders. In
the early morning they drove to Roehm's hotel, where they found him
still in bed. Some of his companions were shot on the spot. Roehm and
others were returned to Munich, where they were shot as the day went on.

In Berlin Goering and Himmler were in charge. There, too, numbers
of S.A. leaders were rounded up in barracks, where S.S. firing squads
shot them at intervals during the day and night. No accurate figures
are available, but the number killed was certainly upwards of one hun-
dred, many of them well-known people. The carnage was not limited
to the S.A. Among the list of the dead were Gregor Strasser, General von
Schleicher and his wife, Papen's secretaries, and several of the Catholic
Action leaders. By some mysterious fate Papen himself, who had given
an anti-Nazi speech some days before, was spared. A figure from the
past was General von Kahr, who in 1923 had put down the beer hall
Putsch; his aged and battered corpse was found in a swamp outside
Munich. The ferocity of the attack is shown by the fact that a newspaper
man named Willi Schmidt was killed by mistake by S.S. men looking for
another Willi Schmidt, who was listed as a victim. Panic and uncertainty
reigned throughout Germany.

Two weeks later on July 13, 1934, Hitler called together the Reichstag
to hear his version of the purge. He gave a long speech in which he
alleged that Roehm had been planning a coup to depose him and thus
had forced him into violence. He attacked the behavior of the S.A.
leaders, stressing Roehm's homosexuality, of which he must have known
for years. Hitler promised that the revolution was now over.

If it is true that Hitler was hurried into the purge by the approach-
ing death of Hindenburg, he was just in time. On August 2, 1934, the
old soldier died at his estate at Neudeck. The army lived up to its prom-
ise. Hindenburg was dead only a matter of minutes when it was an-
nounced in Berlin that the offices of president and chancellor would be
merged. Shortly afterwards the armed forces took a new oath. This oath
was personally to Adolf Hitler, the leader (*Führer*) of the German land and people. Hindenburg was buried with great state in a crypt at the foot of the monument to his victory at Tannenberg.

On August 19, 1934, the German people were invited to register in a plebiscite their approval of the new situation. About 88 percent of the population indicated approval. The Nazi revolution was over. The *Führer* was in complete control.