

Hitler's stormtroopers

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Reviewing: *Stormtroopers: A New History of Hitler's Brownshirts*, by Daniel Siemens, Yale University Press, Oct 2017, 459 pp, ISBN 978 0 300 19681 8

When the International Military Tribunal convened at Nuremberg shortly after the end of the Second World War, one of the many objects of its attention were the Storm Divisions (*Sturm-Abteilungen*, SA) of the Nazi movement. The SA, the prosecution alleged, had been a criminal organisation involved in war crimes and crimes against humanity. The 'National Bolshevik' Ernst Niekisch, imprisoned during the war, described the SA in 1953 as

a counter-elite; it attracted all those characters who were rotten and frail from within. In the SA, all criminal inclinations were let loose. The SA barracks were dens of vice; there were work-shy individuals, drinkers, losers [*Lebensbankrotteure*], homosexuals, ruffians and killers who hatched their sinister attacks by which Germany should be 'awakened'. The human quality of this brown heap, in which the sons of the German bourgeoisie were trained in gangland methods, illustrated the desolate human decline of the German middle classes.

Later historians called the SA a 'criminal gang with a political accent', and the 'most degenerate form of a deviant soldierly tradition'. Thugs, crooks, perverts: one might think the stormtroopers hardly deserved the serious attention of historians at all. What's more, the consensus was that they had really been significant only for a relatively brief period of time, from shortly before the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 to shortly afterwards. During the establishment of Hitler's dictatorship, the ranks of the SA swelled to more than four million, and by early 1934 its leader, Ernst Röhm, proclaimed the need for a 'second revolution' that would push aside the Nazis' conservative collaborators in government and replace the tradition-bound German armed forces with a new, radical people's militia – the SA itself. Hitler, warned by senior generals in the regular army that this would not be tolerated, ordered the Night of the Long Knives. On 30 June 1934, virtually the entire leadership of the SA, along with sundry other figures, were arrested and executed.

From this point on, the SA's defence lawyers argued at Nuremberg, the organisation had dwindled into insignificance. Its surviving members wrote it off as little more than a drinking club in which 'old fighters' of the Nazi movement reminisced about the 'time of struggle' under the ill-fated Weimar Republic. In any case, the lawyers added, the undoubted fanaticism of Röhm and his entourage aside, the ideological commitment of the SA's rank and file was heavily diluted after the Nazis seized power by the enrolment of hundreds of thousands of members of the Steel Helmets (a veterans' organisation), sports clubs and other supposedly non-political institutions. The judges at Nuremberg accepted these arguments and ruled that it would be unjust to categorise the SA as a criminal organisation (which would have made mere membership of the

brownshirts an offence). Also, since the SA was, as the judgment had it, ‘reduced to the status of a group of unimportant Nazi hangers-on’ after the 1934 purge, it would be unjust to convict it as a whole of war crimes or crimes against peace, even though ‘isolated units of the SA’ had been ‘involved in the steps leading up to an aggressive war and in the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity’. The Nuremberg verdict has been overwhelmingly endorsed by subsequent historians. It is generally agreed that after 1934 the SA had lost almost all its political significance; the vast majority of historical studies essentially end at that point. In his major new history of the brownshirts, Daniel Siemens summarises much of this literature, adjudicates convincingly where historians have differed, and adds some significant details of his own.

The SA first emerged in the atmosphere of violence and civil conflict that permeated Germany in the immediate aftermath of defeat in 1918, particularly in the counter-revolution that took place in Bavaria early the following year. The armed bands – the so-called *Freikorps* – that put down a short-lived communist republic in Munich in 1919 with considerable loss of life were no more than a minimal source of recruits for the protection squads of the nascent Nazi Party. Far more important was the 200,000-strong Home Defence Guard (*Einwohnerwehren*), whose appearance in the Bavarian capital legitimated the presence of paramilitary squads on the streets. The stormtroopers didn’t don their brown shirts until 1924 (wearing them wasn’t made compulsory until two years after that), but by then they had already expanded their function from defending Nazi Party meetings to acting as a party army.

In this capacity, they became increasingly violent, attacking Jewish-owned shops and cafés without provocation, insulting staff and customers in lightning raids and sometimes beating them with rubber truncheons. Röhm, though not yet the SA’s leader, used his military connections to obtain arms and ammunition for them from sympathetic elements in the regular army. The part the SA played in Hitler’s failed attempt to seize power in the ‘beer-hall putsch’ of November 1923 was an important part of its self-image in subsequent years. Hitler went to prison for leading the putsch, and the period following his release in 1924 was pivotal. Believing that Röhm’s continued advocacy of the violent seizure of power was counterproductive, and alienated by his close relations with other far-right organisations, Hitler banned the SA from speaking or writing on politics and even from talking to the press. He installed Franz Pfeffer von Salomon as its leader and set about restructuring it on more orderly and centralised lines. When the Depression hit Germany in 1929 the SA was ready for concerted action.

For much of its early history, the SA was not a working-class movement, as some historians have claimed, but attracted mainly students and the middle class. While many of its leading figures were war veterans, the overwhelming majority of members were too young to have experienced the war. They were men in search of violent means to avenge themselves on those they held responsible for Germany’s defeat. This ‘war youth’ generation was won over in particular by the militant masculinity of the brownshirt movement. As unemployment spread – by 1932 it had risen to 35 per cent or higher – more and more young working-class men joined up, attracted by the SA’s function as a job agency (in some cities quite literally). It would be wrong, Siemens argues, to write all these people off as thugs with ‘the jungle mentality of sadist hooligans’, as one contemporary observer put it. On the contrary, their violence, extreme though it could be, was directed at particular targets and unleashed on particular occasions: in other words, it wasn’t the expression of undirected pathological tendencies, but was political in character.

Siemens has especially interesting things to say about the economic activities of the SA. It gained significant income from a deal with a cigarette manufacturer to sell Storm cigarettes, which stormtroopers were pressured into buying in preference to other brands; a portion of the income went to the SA itself, adding to the funds it was already accumulating by producing and selling uniforms, belts and badges to its members. Moribund clothes firms such as Hugo Boss, started up in 1924 but now on the verge of bankruptcy as the Depression deepened, were rescued by contracts for stormtrooper uniforms by the SA. The young stormtroopers had to pay for their own uniforms and insignia; on the other hand many of them saw membership as a kind of insurance against economic disaster, and expected to get jobs and money when the Nazis came to power, as they expected they would.

By early 1931 there were a hundred thousand stormtroopers roaming the streets looking for socialists, communists and Jews to beat up. Their ceaseless activism prompted the satirical magazine *Ulk* to joke that 'recently three SA men caused a stir at [Berlin's] Leipziger Strasse by walking along silently and lost in thought.' Meanwhile the SA's numbers continued to grow. There was talk at the time of 'beefsteak' stormtroopers (brown on the outside, red in the middle), but Siemens sensibly argues that former communists accounted for no more than one or two per cent of the SA, and that a number of these men had joined after the Nazis took power more as a means of self-protection than a declaration of ideological conversion. The communists had their own close-knit community of aggression in the Red Front Fighters' League, and other parties followed suit: the Social Democrats mobilised the Reichsbanner Black-Red-Gold, while the conservative Nationalists had the war veterans of the Steel Helmets at their disposal. Siemens gives statistics attesting to the astonishing levels of political violence in the final years of the Weimar Republic, with 143 Nazi stormtroopers killed in street brawls between 1930 and 1932, and more than eight thousand paramilitaries of all parties injured or murdered in political clashes in 1931 alone (4699 stormtroopers in fights with the paramilitaries of other parties, 1696 members of the Reichsbanner, 1228 communist Red Front Fighters and 625 of the Steel Helmets). The police seemed powerless in the face of the aggression, though they did at least act against the perpetrators of Nazi-organised bomb attacks in the Palatinate, and discovered the 'Boxheim documents', plans for a violent coup to be carried out by the SA in the event of a communist putsch.

The violence was central to the Nazis' seizure of power in 1933. Hitler, having been appointed head of a coalition government with the Nationalists on 30 January 1933, forced through the suspension of civil liberties in the Reichstag Fire Decree of 28 February, then issued a raft of new laws purging the civil service, transferring legislative power to the cabinet alone and outlawing all opposition to the new government. Meanwhile the SA, now more than a million strong, ran riot on the streets, attacking opponents of the Nazi Party, above all communists and Social Democrats, and throwing about a hundred thousand of them into improvised concentration camps, where they were sadistically treated. Hundreds were tortured to death. Although they had been enrolled as 'auxiliary police', the stormtroopers regarded themselves as beyond the law, and frequently attacked police officers known to have been loyal to the Weimar Republic. Jews were singled out from the beginning, and the violence against them often had an additional element of cruelty. The violence meted out to inmates of these early camps was so chaotic and extreme, and the camps' administration so corrupt and inefficient, that the Nazi government soon turned the running of them over to Heinrich Himmler's elite black-uniformed

SS. (At that time the SS was a far smaller organisation which had originated a few years before as Hitler's personal protection squad; no less brutal than the SA, it was far more tightly run.)

Gerhart Seger, a Social Democratic Reichstag deputy who managed to escape from the Oranienburg concentration camp in December 1933, reported that the hundred or so SA men who ran the camp were poorly educated and possessed only a minimal understanding of politics. 'Before they came into contact with us political prisoners,' he wrote, 'how many SA men had not the faintest idea that there existed other worlds than Rifle 98, Army Revolver 08, truncheon, cards, beer and sex!' So pervasive was the violence of the stormtroopers in 1933 that Hitler went so far as to issue a public call for restraint, though at the same time he insisted that no mercy should be shown to the new regime's opponents. In the late summer of 1933 the SA itself tried to curb the violence by setting up its own internal police force. The two-thirds of ordinary Germans who were neither communists nor Social Democrats (and therefore largely escaped the brownshirts' attentions), numbed by the political violence of the previous years, tended to write off the stormtroopers' brutality, or see it as the birth pangs of a revolutionary regime that would settle down to a kind of normality once socialism and communism had been defeated.

In the event, the rowdiness continued even after the Nazis' opponents had been eliminated from the public sphere. The fundamental drive of the SA had always been towards a radical transformation not just of politics but of society as a whole, in which class divisions would give way to an organic racial community of all Germans, the much vaunted *Volksgemeinschaft*. It was the stalling of this ambition between the summer of 1933 and the summer of 1934 that gave rise to a growing frustration among rank-and-file stormtroopers, which they increasingly vented on one another in brawls, fights and drunken encounters, but directed above all against Jews, whose premises groups of stormtroopers continued to attack. Siemens perhaps doesn't make enough of the SA's aimlessness at this time, which was a key impulse behind Röhm's attempt to give the organisation a new sense of purpose by turning it into a people's militia.

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Siemens leaves the reader in no doubt that the Night of the Long Knives in June 1934 marked a decisive turning point in the SA's history, curbing its political autonomy and precipitating a fall in numbers much greater than the 15 per cent or so of the leadership removed in the purge itself. Hitler justified the purge in part by denouncing the SA as a hotbed of homosexuality: allegedly when they broke into the hotel bedrooms occupied by Röhm and other leading brownshirts, Hitler's enforcers had discovered several of them in bed with 'toyboys' (the term used by the Reich Press Office in its official account of the purge). Though Siemens cautiously notes that such propaganda images are impossible to verify, it was well known that Röhm and other leading figures in the SA were indeed homosexual – a fact that hadn't troubled the Nazi leadership at all until it became convenient to use it against them. Siemens could have gone further in his exploration of the stormtroopers' homosociality, evident for example in a scene deleted from abridged versions of Leni Riefenstahl's film of the 1934 Nuremberg Rally, *Triumph of the Will*, in which burly young brownshirts strip off and run naked through the woods.

The most original and striking chapters in Siemens's book are the ones dealing with the history of the SA after the purge, a period neglected or trivialised by most historians, following the lead

taken by the judges at Nuremberg. Although it had lost more than half its members, the organisation found a variety of new things to do. It took on a leading role in sports training, for example, particularly in areas relevant to military preparedness such as horseriding and shooting. It also involved itself in the campaign for 'Winter Aid', established soon after the Nazis took over, in which people were invited to make contributions to fund welfare payments to the poor and the unemployed during the hard winter months. The intimidating presence of armed and uniformed SA men, standing on street corners and in town squares, or going around knocking on people's doors, made these contributions effectively mandatory; people wore badges if they had already paid, to avoid having to pay twice. The Nazis boasted that they were creating a *Volksgemeinschaft*, but Siemens shows that as much as this was the product of the constant barrage of propaganda pumped out by the Nazi media and education system, it was also the result of coercion and the continued threat of violence towards dissenters on the part of the SA. Outside the borders of the Reich it assumed the task of mobilising ethnic Germans in the borderlands of Poland and Czechoslovakia. Not all the SA's activities were a success: in particular, its drive to create agricultural settlements staffed by Germans in the European East came to very little.

By the late 1930s more than a million men remained in the SA, and their anti-Semitism grew ever more violent as legal protection was removed from the Jews of Germany. Stormtroopers mounted numerous boycotts and attacks against Jewish-owned shops, culminating in a series of local pogroms in the spring of 1938, following the takeover of Austria, and then in the nationwide destruction of the *Reichskristallnacht* on 9 and 10 November the same year, when 7500 Jewish-owned premises were trashed, largely by SA men out of uniform, and virtually all the synagogues in Germany were burned to the ground by organised gangs of brownshirts.

With the coming of war, more than half the membership of the SA was almost immediately drafted into the armed forces. For those who remained, men who were too old for the Hitler Youth but too young for military service, the organisation provided military training. Its other tasks during the war included the maintenance of order at home, the assertion of German domination in the occupied territories of the East, the transport and guarding of prisoners, the policing of forced labour, the cleaning-up of German cities after air raids, and the provision of aid to wounded soldiers and their families. The SA's collaboration with the armed forces, severely compromised by the events of June 1934, was restored in full measure. SA units, provided with arms and equipment by the Wehrmacht, played a key role in the takeover of Danzig and the subversion and subjugation of Poland in 1939. Following the defeat of Poland, the SA expanded rapidly in the occupied areas: more than 25,000 ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*) were enrolled in the so-called Warthegau, around Posen, alone. These units often took the lead in policing the occupied areas and in the 'cleansing' of Jews and Poles from villages and communities behind the front.

On the home front, stormtroopers, as Hans Fallada noted in his novel *Alone in Berlin* (1946), seemed omnipresent, controlling public space, intimidating German workers when they protested against the conditions they were forced to endure in the factories, even sending refractory elements to the camps. As Germany's military situation deteriorated, the SA grew in importance once more, alongside the Party and the SS. The organisation still had around half a million men. It tried to boost morale by putting on street parades as it had in the final years of the Weimar

Republic. It provided training and leadership for the *Volkssturm*, the ‘dad’s army’ of overage and underage civilian men drafted in for a futile attempt to mount a final defence of the Reich. Its members responded with renewed violence and brutality to evidence of defeatism and dissent in many areas, executing anybody found waving a white flag at the approaching Allied forces, shooting Jewish and other slave labourers, killing stragglers in the notorious ‘death marches’ of prisoners evacuated from the camps that lay in the path of the Soviet invaders, and hunting down deserters. In one of many such incidents, a detachment of 150 stormtroopers from the town of Eisenerz was ordered on 7 April 1945, just a few weeks before the end of the war, to ‘kill as many Jews as possible’. They shot between 150 and 200 Hungarian-Jewish prisoners who were being evacuated from the Mauthausen concentration camp in Upper Austria.

By the end, as Siemens notes, the SA had become a notably heterogeneous body, bringing together ‘Old Fighters’, men who had joined during the Depression and came largely from working-class – though seldom communist or Social Democratic – backgrounds; middle-class men who saw in the organisation an opportunity to pursue their hobbies such as shooting and riding (neither of which had the upperclass connotations that predominated in countries such as Britain); young men from a variety of social milieux who saw it as a means of entry into the armed forces; and ethnic Germans from outside the Reich who embraced it as an opportunity to assert themselves over the local population of Czechs or Poles. What united it, in sharp contrast to its situation in the late 1920s and early 1930s, was a reputation for political loyalty to the Nazi Party leadership. It was not least for this reason that five SA generals, all of them Old Fighters, were appointed to serve as German ambassadors to client or allied states in south-eastern Europe from 1940 onwards, in Slovakia, Romania, Croatia, Hungary and Bulgaria. Hitler was suspicious of the aristocratic diplomats of the German Foreign Office (though he didn’t really need to be), and wanted men in post whom he could trust to carry out his radical intentions for the region. These included in particular the total extermination of the region’s Jewish population, which required the collaboration of the German Foreign Office because that population inhabited what were still nominally independent foreign states. The SA generals did their best to push forward with the policy, though their influence was not always the main factor impelling these domestic regimes towards exterminatory anti-Semitism. The generals’ position was anomalous, and as the military situation deteriorated, their ability to put pressure on regimes that were beginning to think of ways they could save themselves in the event of an Allied victory began to diminish. Still, their appointment does indicate the continued status of the SA within the Nazi Reich as a source of ideologically reliable and ruthlessly committed personnel willing and able to implement the regime’s most extreme policies.

By April 1945, most stormtroopers were burning their uniforms, throwing away their badges and insignia, and doing their best to conceal the fact that they had ever belonged to the SA. As the organisation’s premises were abandoned, people helped themselves to the contents, looting furniture, clothing and anything else they could lay their hands on, left behind by stormtroopers fleeing into anonymity. One eyewitness from the town of Höxter later remembered seeing dozens of stormtrooper uniforms floating in the River Weser in April 1945. As Siemens remarks, ‘these cast-offs represented more than a simple changing of clothes, as the Nazi identity of their former owners seems to have been washed off as well.’ But though the SA managed to evade condemnation by the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal as a collectivity, numerous ex-stormtroopers were subsequently arraigned by German courts for their crimes, as in the trial of

former brownshirts held in Marburg in 1948 for the part they played in the destruction of the town's synagogue ten years before.

It's a pity that Siemens doesn't have more to say about these trials, about which far too little is currently known. *Stormtroopers* is far from being the last word on its subject, and there is more to be discovered about the fate of the SA in postwar memory. He has, however, given us a comprehensive and carefully considered account, which will now be the standard work on the subject. His book reads like a classic German *Habilitationsschrift*: weighty, well argued, thorough and deeply researched. It may not be an easy read – the fact that its author isn't a native speaker of English shows at many points – but it is most certainly an indispensable one.