

# The Röhm Crisis Worsens

BY GEN. LEON DEGRELLE

*Mollified by Adolf Hitler's moderation and carefully calculated attentions, the German army, known as the Reichswehr, had little by little fallen into step with the new regime—although without enthusiasm and ever on its guard, and very attentive especially to the verbal outbursts of men like Ernst Röhm, who did not hesitate to proclaim that he would throw the old system out on its ear.*

Adolf Hitler continued to hope that by temporizing, the Reichswehr and the SA would balance each other off, the former growing larger and more modern within its proper sphere—the military—and the latter acting with greater wisdom to support the political initiatives of the new government.

Again and again the Führer repeated: "The one serves the nation, whose territory it defends. The other is the instrument of the party, whose ideas it protects. They form the two columns upon which the Third Reich rests."<sup>1</sup>

Röhm owed everything to Hitler. Without Hitler, in 1921, he would never have commanded a single SA unit. If Hitler had not called him back from South America in 1931, he would have continued on in Bolivia as just another lieutenant colonel or colonel frequenting the cafes. Yet in 1934 he thought himself to be a secular Saint Peter called to command by the good Lord Himself.

"I'll never go downhill again," he used to roar, haunted by the memory of the comedown that had previously taken him to South America among those millions of mestizos, him, the racist. He saw himself become a new Carnot—nay, Napoleon Bonaparte. The German army would be his fief. "All victorious revolutions based on an ideology must have their own army. . . . You cannot conduct a revolutionary war with reactionary troops."

Hitler, who knew how to maneuver and diligently work his way around obstacles to get safely to his goal, was getting on Röhm's nerves and exasperating him. In June of 1933, after finishing a substantial meal at the famous Kempinski Restaurant in Berlin, and having drunk too much as usual, he had burst out: "Hitler is leading me around by the nose. He'd rather not rush things. He is betraying all of us. Now he's getting chummy with his generals."<sup>2</sup>



*When they were not yet in power, German National Socialists dealt with their opponents on the streets in savage fighting. Above, SS and SA men pose around banners captured from the communists during street fighting of the Kampfzeit or "time of struggle."*

Then Röhm reproached Hitler with the supreme crime: "He is becoming a man of the world. He has just ordered himself a black suit."<sup>3</sup> In order to be a proletarian, Hitler should have received the diplomatic corps, or called on Marshal von Hindenburg, in a cap and overalls.

Bringing the Reichswehr to heel (and, above all, replacing it) was becoming a veritable obsession with Röhm: "I don't want a replastering job done on the old imperial army. Are we or are we not making a revolution? If we're making a revolution, something new has got to come out of our momentum, something like the *levée en masse* of the French Revolution. We do the same thing, or we're done for. The generals are old fogies; the officers and the cadets mollycoddled at school don't know anything but their old notebooks and their barracks. Enough of their rigmarole. It's time we got rid of them."<sup>4</sup>

The trouble with Röhm was that those "old notebooks" had formed indispensable specialists in an exact strategic science. And Röhm did not possess that science. Nor did anyone in his entourage. To win international wars, or even to control a civil war, more is required than just being a valiant military hard case.

Moreover, there were rumors circulating about Röhm with regard to his morals, rumors of a very special nature that were readily exploitable and being exploited. These days, being a homosexual no longer seems to be an indelible stain. It is even demanded that such abnormal individuals be granted the right to a legally authorized marriage. Some priests here and there even take the initiative and receive their conjugal vows with a melting eye in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. But in 1933, especially in the army, such ways were viewed with disfavor. An officer who was a homosexual was inexorably cashiered.

**I**t so happened that some letters of Röhm's had just been sold, letters written to one of his partners, alluding to these rather special practices. These letters left no room for doubt about the homosexual exploits of the writer, who, it seemed, had put them into practice in the course of his stay in Bolivia. These tropical distractions, transposed to a morally strict Germany, seemed at best in very bad taste. A valise was even found in Berlin that Röhm had left on the stairway of a house that openly specialized in such activities. The most serious thing was that Röhm had gained adherents and that a few emulators had been found among his immediate coworkers.

Also very offensive were the acts of violence of some of his leaders, their noisy drinking bouts, the luxury that several among them paraded, their racing cars and stables. The wild and dissolute life of several of them, relatively young men, sometimes in their 30s, had attained the proportions of a scandal.

Karl Ernst, the most notorious of them and one of the youngest generals of the SA, was spending on banquets alone more than 30,000 marks a month (30 times a deputy's salary) from party funds. He had the command in Berlin of

300,000 SA men, whereas in a normal army he would perhaps not have been the commander of so much as a company, or even a platoon. He pranced around on his horse in front of the troops like a Napoleon entering Potsdam. He owned a dozen very expensive cars and horses of the finest blood. He had the highest order of the grand duchy of Coburg hung around his neck—by the grand duke in person, a relative of the king of Belgium.

Ernst had previously been a traveling salesman. His father was a janitor. His special morals, too, caused a lot of gossip. But he had been a placard poster emeritus and an intrepid battler at a time when there were only a handful of SA in Berlin. The dizzy rise of Hitler had carried him from a minor local militant to stupefying heights.

Hitler knew very well that the corrupt little princelings of the SA would have to be gotten rid of one day. But he was busy with extremely harassing political and social duties. He was also afraid of upsetting many naive militants by hasty expulsions and feared, too, that such nettlesome revelations might arouse the indignation of a public newly won over.

**E**rnst's counterpart in Breslau, chief of police Heinz, was a boozing parvenu of the same stripe. He was young like Ernst, and like Ernst, he had hundreds of thousands of men following his orders. He was flanked by a whippersnapper of an assistant with a wiggly rump who never left his side by so much as a foot, not even a foot of the bed. "Mademoiselle Schmidt" he was called, by all the chief's associates. Just as with Ernst, it not only no longer even occurred to Heinz that without Hitler, he and his like would still be waiters or clerks; they both thought they still hadn't received enough. Karl Ernst was very free in voicing gross insults against Hitler. He had uttered "unequivocal threats": "We shall know how to keep Germany from going back to sleep again." Hitler, still silent, had kept an eye on them for months. Their remarks were noted down. Then an incident aggravated the distrust. One day Hitler was about to get in a car that was to take him to Karinhall, Göring's country estate. Sensing, with his special instinct, an impending danger, at the last moment he had changed cars, and Himmler had taken his place in the official car thus abandoned.

While that car was rolling down the highway to Stettin, a window was shattered by a projectile that passed within a few centimeters of Himmler's face. [The projectile was obviously intended for Hitler.] Himmler was only slightly wounded, but the affair gave pause for thought. Only someone very much up on the Führer's movements could have followed or waited for the car with such painstaking precision. Who? And on whose orders?

Ernst Röhm was less and less secretive about his plans: "Assault battalions will become the praetorian guard of the revolution."<sup>5</sup> He would create "a sort of praetorian and socialist republic, an anti-bourgeois SA state in which the brown shirts, whose number had not stopped growing, would exercise power dictatorially."<sup>6</sup> And this was only in June of 1933.



*Dressed in civilian garb, these German men called up for the Volkssturm march through Berlin on their first parade. The organization was launched on September 25, 1944, as a home guard for the Nazi Party. This military militia was not part of the German army and never had its own complete uniforms, although members could wear party uniforms. The lack of Volkssturm uniforms later allowed members in the west to pose as civilians, while it meant that those in the east risked being shot by trigger-happy communists as guerrillas. The men, mostly skilled engineers, steelworkers, miners, shipbuilders and the like, are armed here with Panzerfaust anti-tank rocket launchers and other weapons.*

“At the very least,” historian Brissaud writes, “the camarilla gathered around Röhm was methodically preparing the psychological conditions for the proclamation of a ‘second revolution.’”<sup>7</sup>

With his customary divination of peril, Hitler had charged his most faithful disciple, Sepp Dietrich, with forming, for his immediate protection, a special guard that would thereafter bear his name and that was soon to be celebrated: the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler. On July 1, 1933, Hitler once again warned the potential rebels, but this time far more harshly:

I am resolved to put down without mercy any activities which would tend to disturb the present order. I shall oppose any second wave of revolution with all my energy, because that would end in veritable chaos. Anyone at all who rises up against the authority of the state will be arrested regardless of his rank or position in the party.

The threat was clearly meant for the people at the top. Ten days later, on July 11, 1933, Mr. Frick, the minister of the interior, repeated the stern warning:

To talk of continuing the revolution, let alone carrying out a second one, would be to compromise the legal and constructive evolution desired by the Führer. Such talk constitutes rebellion against the Führer, sabotage of the national revolution, and a factor of discord for the German economy which the government is in the process of rebuilding successfully. Any attempt to sabotage the revolution, and in particular any arbitrary interference with the economy, will be severely repressed. National Socialist groups and organizations must not arrogate to themselves powers which belong exclusively to the head of the government.<sup>8</sup>

The next day Hitler returned personally to the charge: “The revolution is only a means of coming to power, not an end in itself. In any surgical operation there comes a moment when you have to sew back up, or kill the patient you intend to heal.” Despite the fact that Röhm had been forbidden to increase the SA enrollment any further or to hold spectacular public demonstrations without Hitler’s presence, he insolently replied to these orders by rallying 92,000 SA effectives at the Tempelhof air field as if he himself were the true Führer.

“Anyone who imagines,” he cried, “that the work of the SA is finished forgets that we are here and that we are going to stay here, come what may. I will not tolerate having the SA shoved aside under any pretext from the objective it has been assigned.” That bordered on rebellion. Already several sections of the SA, stirred up by Röhm’s appeals for a second revolution, had earlier come close to mutiny. It had been necessary to hurriedly dissolve them. A decree of August 25, 1933, had prohibited anyone not holding a rank from bearing arms.

Röhm had been eager to respond and did so in November 1933. Writes historian Jacques Bardoux in the *Temps* of November 11, 1933:

To prove that he fears no one, Röhm concentrates in Breslau the entire SA division of Silesia, comprising five brigades and 29 regiments amounting to a total of 83,600 men. Most of these units have made marches of several days with all their equipment; and the march-past itself lasts more than four hours. Led by Obergruppenführer Heinz, commandant of the area, the long brown column passes in review before the chief of staff, Ernst Röhm. In

the lead, flags to the fore, comes a delegation of the Horst Wessel Brigade of the Berlin-Brandenburg division and the military staff section of the Fifth Brigade of Stettin (Second District). Then comes the cavalry regiment of the Silesian SA, followed finally by 29 infantry regiments and a motorized regiment in five groups.

The defiance of Obergruppenführer Heinz, the commander of the Breslau march-past, had known no bounds: "We are just beginning."

How was Hitler going to react? How? It is almost unbelievable: by having the would-be rebel become part of his government. Hitler had discerned the plotting quite clearly. But in those months of uncertainty he could not and did not wish to upset the apple cart. The regime was not yet stabilized. The SA was not yet in a state to surmount a great crisis. The Reichswehr on the other hand could not be sacrificed in order to comply with the edicts of muddleheads. To make an enemy of the army at a time like this would be madness. And if the German army and the SA were to have at each other's throats, the other nations would die laughing.

That being the case, why should not Hitler make Röhm, the poacher, into an official game warden? Being made part of the administrative team would no doubt satisfy his vanity. To be a cabinet minister. The ex-captain with a nose like a billiard ball would take a seat in the chancellery. And then, Hitler told himself, if we put the two adversaries together on the same ministerial council, Gen. von Blomberg, minister of the Reichswehr, and the commander-in-

chief of the SA, they will have no choice but to rub shoulders with each other. They will be forced to understand and support one another.

That is a classic procedure that judges employ with married couples who want a divorce after a marital battle; or notaries with clients who are wrangling over divergent concerns. But with Röhm, a ministerial portfolio was not enough. Besides, in his own way he was an idealist and little impressed by favors. In any event, it was a stranglehold on the army that he meant to have, complete authority over the ministry that controlled the Reichswehr. He accepted the appointment haughtily on December 1, 1933, in fact almost scornfully. He announced to one and all that he would not even take up residence in Berlin as his functions would oblige him to do. He said he would continue to live in Munich, far from the government he was nevertheless henceforth to be officially part of. He insisted that his subordinates address him not as minister but as chief of staff. Just as before.

Instead of being glad at the possibility of an approach to the minister of national defense, he made it a point to affront him in the course of the rare government meetings he attended. He did not wish to conciliate him, but to throw him out, him and his accursed Reichswehr. The most he would consider—and that only provisionally—was that the SA enter the Reichswehr in force, with each unit strictly maintaining its own authority and all of his princelings keeping the inflated rank they held in the SA formations. The 30-year-old brigade leaders and division leaders would automatically be the equals of superior officers who had exercised high-level commands during or after World War I and had spent a quarter of a century or more obtaining their red collars.

That seems almost insane, but the former traveling salesmen or clerks, like Ernst or Heinz, who had not spent a single day in barracks, even as orderlies, intended in an instant to become the equals of the military commanders of the old Reichswehr. It was evident, moreover, that not a single one of them would consider having anyone but Röhm, whose strategic competence was virtually nil, become their Reichswehr minister or chief of staff, as he demanded.

The reaction of Minister-General von Blomberg was sensible. He did not run down the SA, but militarily he knew its limits, which were indeed evident to the eyes of any specialist who was even slightly informed.

The brown-shirt army is at the very most an army for civil war. It would not be capable of waging victoriously a foreign war. The Reichswehr will never enroll units of the SA *en bloc*, nor will it recognize the ranks achieved in the storm troops. Anybody who wants to enter the army must come here individually and begin at the lowest echelon in the hierarchy. To act otherwise would be to shatter completely the unity of the army.<sup>9</sup>



Before the National Socialists took power in Germany, they had their problems with the police. Here, SA men are being searched for weapons. At one point there was an attempt to break up paramilitary organizations such as the SA and to ban uniforms. The SA responded by wearing white shirts and forming bicycling clubs and ramblers' associations.



*Times were tough in Germany in the 1920s. Here, women rake through a coal refuse tip to try to find some fuel for their homes.*

Hitler thought the same way, not just by personal conviction, but because he was objective. "Placing the commander of the SA at the head of the army would have meant disavowing the political ideas I have followed for more than 14 years. Even in 1923 I proposed a former officer (Gen. Erich Ludendorff) to command the army and not the man who then commanded the storm troopers [Göring]."<sup>10</sup>

When France, convinced of Hitler's imminent fall, was preparing to break off all negotiations with the Reich, how could he lend himself to any such suicidal merger?

His conciliatory gesture *vis-à-vis* Röhm had thus served no purpose. Sooner or later Hitler would have to put an end to his extravagant ambitions. "Personal feelings," Gen. von Seeckt had written, "must never play any role in comparison with reasons of state."<sup>11</sup>

Röhm was raging, railing at the "bourgeois club," spewing out his hatred of the whole capitalist system that Hitler at that very moment was beginning to whip into shape, and thanks to which he had already sent nearly 3 million unemployed back to work and obtained the application of reforms which were completely ameliorating the physical and moral situation of the proletariat. On February 22, 1934, in a speech to the SA leaders of Thüringen, Röhm went so far as to proclaim that the accession of Hitler to power had been "only a snack": "The National Socialist revolution imposes new tasks on us, great and important tasks, beyond everything thus far obtained."

"The revolutionary élan of the SA will put an end to 'the stagnation and the spirit of the shopkeeper.'"<sup>12</sup> The shopkeeper in point, it was well understood, was Hitler. "If [he] does not agree," Röhm added, "I will forge ahead, and millions of men will follow me. We'll have to eliminate Hitler, put him under lock and key."<sup>13</sup>

"The revolt that is rumbling more and more in the ranks of the SA," historian Benoist-Méchin observes, "may very well become explosive at any moment. Settling the SA problem is the absolute No. 1 priority." From then on, Röhm, for all intents and purposes, was just a rebel. Either he would promptly use his bomb, or Hitler would set it off in his hands. A soft leader would allow himself to be surprised. There was nothing soft about Hitler, as Röhm was soon to learn. ♦

#### FOOTNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Benoist-Méchin, *op. cit.*, vol. III, 177.

<sup>2</sup> Brissaud, *op. cit.*, 156f.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Brissaud, *Hitler et son temps*, 167.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>8</sup> Benoist-Méchin, *op. cit.*, vol. III, 172.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Von Seeckt, *Gedanken eines Soldaten*, 191.

<sup>12</sup> Brissaud, *op. cit.*, 177.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 183f.

Leon Degrelle was an individual of exceptional intellect, dedicated to Western Culture. He fought not only for his country but for the survival of Christian Europe, preventing the continent from being inundated by Stalin's savage hordes. What Gen. Degrelle has to say, as an eyewitness to some of the key events in the history of the 20th century, is vastly important within the historical and factual context of his time and has great relevance to the continuing struggle today for the survival of civilization as we know it.

