

C) How important were the SA and the role played by violence?

'We must struggle with ideas, but if necessary also with fists.' Hitler's words neatly summarise the main role of the *Sturm-Abteilung* or SA. They were formed in 1920 as the *Sportabteilung*, or sports detachment of the Nazi Party, intended primarily to protect Nazi speakers. More aptly renamed the *Sturm-Abteilung* (storm detachment) in 1921, they had developed into a mass organisation of 500,000 by 1933. SA members were provided with a distinctive brown shirt, emblazoned with the swastika after, in 1924, the Party bought a stock of cheap, surplus German army tropical shirts. This was the origin of their other name, the Brownshirts.

From 1921 to 1923 and from 1930 to 1934, they were led by Ernst Rohm, who had participated in the 1923 Munich Putsch and was a friend of Hitler. He was eager for the Nazis to seize power and saw the SA as the army of a new Nazi state. Rohm represented the more radical, socialist aspect of Nazism, although, unlike fellow radicals the Strasser brothers, he was not a sophisticated thinker. He once explained his approach: 'Since I am an immature and wicked man, war and unrest appeal to me more than good bourgeois order.'

The original core of ex-soldiers expanded into a vast army of young men, attracted for a variety of reasons, ranging from hatred of communism, commitment to Hitler and love of excitement and violence to a desire for free soup and a new purpose in life. Over half came from the working class, especially the unemployed. Many were just ruffians and bullies. They were provided with a uniform, meals and sometimes accommodation in SA hostels. The SA ran occasional camps, with the stress on sport and military training. As an SA leader explained, the SA offered recruits 'what they almost always lack at home, a warm heath, a helping hand, a sense of comradeship.'

The SA's work entailed distributing propaganda leaflets, protecting Nazi meetings and trying to drive the hated Communists from the streets. From 1930 to 1932 city streets saw increasing violence between political paramilitaries. Although these groups were not allowed to carry arms, many members were killed - nearly 100 in July 1932 alone. SA casualties were held up as martyrs for the cause. In 1932 Chancellor Brüning banned the SA. They formally obeyed but paraded without shirts. Brüning's successor as Chancellor, Papen, in an attempt to appease the Nazis, ended the ban.

The SA played a major role in Hitler's success. Their 'propaganda by deed' focused attention on the communist threat and the Nazis' determination to smash it. Despite the violence and disorder they caused,

Otto Strasser, 1897-1974

- A former member of the SPD, he became a Nazi in 1925.
- Born in Bavaria to a middle-class family, Otto was on the left wing of the Nazi Party. He advocated a nationalist and racist form of socialism that appealed to the lower middle classes and workers.
- Otto became disillusioned when he realised that the party as it was evolving under Hitler was neither socialist nor for the workers. He left in 1930.
- In 1934 he survived the Night of the Long Knives and went into exile.



Gregor Strasser, 1892-1934

- The brother of Otto, Gregor joined the NSDAP in 1920.
- In 1925 he took part in the Munich Putsch and led the party during Hitler's imprisonment.
- A gifted public speaker and organiser, he built up a mass movement in northern Germany with the help of his brother and the young Joseph Goebbels.
- By the early 1930s he was second only to Hitler in power and popularity and a potential rival.
- Opposed to Hitler's anti-semitism and his courting of big business, Gregor resigned in 1932.
- On Hitler's orders, he was murdered during the Night of the Long Knives.



their disciplined marches created the impression that the Nazis would offer firm government to restore German law and order. The fear of an SA seizure of power persuaded some in the elite to favour Hitler playing a role in government, since they fought he was the only one who could control the SA.

Source 9 – A leader explains the power of the SA

The only form in which the SA appears to the public is that of the military formation. This is one of the most powerful forms of propaganda. The sight of a large number of calm, disciplined men whose total will to fight may be seen or sensed makes the most profound impression on every German, and speaks to his heart in a more convincing and inspiring language than writing and speech and logic can ever do. Where whole hosts march purposefully, stake life and existence for a cause, all must be great and true.

ACTIVITY 4

1. Who joined the SA and why?
2. Why did the SA make a positive impression on many Germans?
3. Draw up two lists of evidence for and evidence against the Nazi Party being a socialist party.
4. Draw a left-wing caricature of an SA man.

How socialist was the National Socialist German Workers' Party?

Students often have trouble with the word socialist in the full name of the Nazi Party because it seems to contradict that fact that it is considered a right-wing party. Here we try to clarify this issue.

1. **In what sense were Hitler and the Nazis Socialists?** There is a strong argument that the Nazis, as their name states, were national Socialists, as opposed to Marxist international Socialists. By socialism they meant a system that put the needs of the community before the needs of individuals. However, they saw community (Volksgemeinschaft) in national not class terms. In this respect they were similar to Fascists Italy.
2. **Were the Nazis anti-capitalist?** Unfortunately the answer is yes - and no! The Nazis were certainly not left-wing Marxist Socialists. There were, though, anti-capitalist elements in the Nazi Movement, but increasingly this anti-capitalism was modified, focusing only on some types of capitalism. There was hostility to *finance capitalism*, where wealthy people used their money to exploit others; finance capitalism was often synonymous with (considered the same as) Jewish capitalism. This view was attractive to indebted farmers. Nazism also opposed big business at times. This appealed to the petty bourgeoisie of artisans and small traders, who could not compete with department stores and mass production. The danger was that anti-capitalism might alienate the business elite, but Hitler reassured industrialists that it would not threaten their interests. In power, Hitler's ambitions were achieved through developing industrial might, not by protecting the petty bourgeoisie.
3. **Was Hitler a Socialist?** Unlike Mussolini, Hitler had never been a member of a socialist party. Issues of wealth distribution and class were never important to him. His concern was with a racially pure, ideologically unified and powerful Germany. He used the word socialist in the sense identified above but opposed party members with a traditional view of socialism.
4. **Were there genuinely left-wing Socialists in the Nazi Party?** Yes. They were strongest in the north where the Strasser brothers were based. They looked to attract workers by supporting strikes, and talked of social change, favouring ordinary Germans, not the economic elite. For them socialism meant a new order of society in which the material position of workers would be greatly improved. Some advocated co-operation with Communists, hoping to win them over to a national form of socialism. In 1932, some Nazis in Berlin co-operated in a strike with Communists. Schleicher's attempt in 1932 to split the Nazis and gain the co-operation of trade unionists and the Strasserite Nazis was based on understanding this left wing of Nazism, and was not as unrealistic as is sometimes portrayed. Revolutionary socialist Nazis were strongly represented in the SA, whose leader Rohm favoured radical change. Tension continued between them and the mainstream movement until the Night of the Long Knives which effectively decapitated Nazi social radicalism. Left-wing elements were also strong in the NSBO, the National Socialist Factory Cell Organisation. These were bodies set up from 1925 by factory workers as a Nazi rival to socialist unions. They provided services for members and ran strikes. By 1933 they had 250,000 members.
5. **Were the Nazis a workers' party?** Right from its creation, the Nazi Party had 'workers' in its name, but the Nazis initially failed to gain much support from workers. The first sign of it becoming a mass party was in rural areas in 1928, when it shifted its emphasis to target farmers, whilst seeking a broad, pan-class (across class) base. Increasingly, the term 'workers' was interpreted loosely as all Germans working for the good of Germany, by hand or brain. Thus the Nazis could still appeal to industrial workers on a more socialist basis, whilst reassuring industrialists that their interests would also be looked after.