

INTRODUCTION

Enough time has passed that, to younger generations, telling someone that you study the stormtroopers makes them think not of Germany in the 1930s, but of a galaxy long ago and far away.

As ever fewer people who remember the Nazis' murderous regime first-hand are still living, disparate elements of their authoritarian system have become blurred in the public mind. Images of brown shirts fighting in the streets mix with scenes of gray-clad soldiers swarming across European borders, then mingle with apparitions of black-suited SS men guarding death camps. Over time, the various perpetrators of Nazi violence have been melded into a broad stereotype of unquestioned villainy, a case study for the rise of demonic forces in political realms.

For decades now, whenever a book, television show, or film has needed a bad guy that audiences will immediately and unquestionably accept as evil, the Nazis again pull on their boots and begin their goose-stepping march. In the public mind, Nazi depravity has reached the level of a Platonic ideal, as if it still exists somewhere as an embodiment of pure evil, waiting to be conjured again into the real world. But within this seemingly unified authoritarian ideal there existed a wide array of factions, rivalries, and social networks—all of which cooperated, and competed, to create the violent history that the world has found impossible to forget.

Of the various Nazi factions, the stormtroopers persist as a uniquely compelling group. As the first Nazis, they embodied the worst excesses of the early movement, but they did so in a way that was closely connected to pre-Nazi structures of political and family life. In other words, the stormtroopers show the Nazis as they emerged from normal interactions of politics, culture, neighborhood, and family.

The stormtroopers also command enduring interest because of a series of strange associations with sexuality, homosexuality, and the political meaning of sexual orientation. From the start, significant numbers of both fascist and antifascist observers of Nazi politics believed that sexual energies fueled the stormtroopers' rise, brought them political victory, and then caused their downfall in a massacre that forever cemented a link between sexuality and violence in Nazi politics.

The stormtrooper story thus offers a strange and compelling drama in which public debates over human sexuality mixed with violent political conflict, creating and ultimately destroying the men who birthed the Nazi beast. The story has fascinated and confused the public ever since.

While many historians complain that the public misreads their subject, in this field public misconceptions pair with the Nazis' very high profile to create dangerous misunderstandings. Indeed, every few years images of gay Nazis recur: as a weapon to be wielded against fascism, as a misguided argument against gay rights, or in the service of otherwise unrelated political conflicts of the day.

This book explains the truth behind the connection between sexuality and Nazism, going beyond typical formulations that merely seek to explain political evil through personal pathology. Instead, *Stormtrooper Families* demonstrates how Nazi sexuality combined with political forms connected to larger structures of family, locality, and society that crossed all sexual and political orientations.

You will read how the stormtroopers' first forays into politics came through exploiting natural social alliances, close personal relationships, and authentic local connections. You will learn how the early Nazis built political structures based on emotional bonds, and how they mobilized these otherwise positive emotional experiences to distract attention from their negative goals.

Stormtrooper Families presents the daily life experiences of a political paramilitary, and it conveys what it meant to live as a member of an all-consuming political fraternity. Finally, it shows how political movements gain strength from their interaction with human sexuality, as well as the challenges they face once they begin to exploit this powerful dynamic. In the end, these lessons will illuminate not only the Nazi past but also our political present.

Stormtroopers: A Primer

To navigate the coming narrative, it can be useful to understand a series of basic facts concerning the stormtroopers, their role in the Nazi state, and the general way historians have interpreted their specific function within the National Socialist movement. As readers follow the story to come, they should bear in mind the following six important aspects of the stormtroopers:

1. The stormtroopers took their name from the *Sturmabteilung*, a shock unit of the German Army used in World War I's later stages to penetrate enemy trenches and open the way for massed assault. The choice of name, usually abbreviated SA, thus highlighted the connection between the early Nazis and the communities of war veterans that had formed during the Great War, and which during the subsequent Weimar years influenced politics of the right, left, and center. The Nazi stormtroopers also saw tactical similarities between themselves and their wartime namesakes, as both saw themselves as an elite vanguard whose service in the literal or political trenches would prepare the way for later national triumph.

2. The stormtroopers served as the Nazi Party's paramilitary militia. They began as a protection squad that guarded Party speakers at that era's volatile political meetings, and they later attempted to build a mass political army to seize power. After Hitler's failed attempt at revolution in 1923, he reconceived the stormtroopers into a political rather than a revolutionary force. In other words, the masses of stormtroopers marching through the streets did so not to overthrow the state directly, but to promote electoral campaigns that could bring a Nazi victory through political channels. The SA thus represents the mix of legal and illegal means through which the Nazis eventually took power.

3. While the stormtroopers tactically attempted to claim legality, ideologically they represented the Nazi movement's radical and revolutionary side. They voiced the Party's social and economic demands, loudly advocated for structural economic changes and material assistance for the impoverished masses, and sought maximalist political solutions that would end democracy once and for all. The SA embodied this ideological stance as the organizational home within the Party for the young, the radical, and the unemployed, and for those who hoped to promote the Nazis' otherwise specious claim to socialism. This radicalism at times threatened the SA's relationship to the larger Party, which in general sought to cooperate with the established economic interests it would need to fight its future wars.

4. Stormtroopers embraced the use of direct personal violence against their enemies. In later years, the Nazi state became famous for inflicting violence through systemic, pseudo-legal, and bureaucratized means. This allowed the state to increase the scale of its persecution while lessening the psychological impact on the perpetrators. The SA, in contrast, inflicted violence spontaneously rather than calculatedly, locally rather than nationally, and passionately rather than aloofly. Historians have called this violence “artisanal,” a tactic of the early Nazi movement that eventually evolved into the infamous, “industrial” mass murder the regime later conducted.
5. In daily life, the SA represented the social side of the Nazi movement. The SA tried to care for its members, provide social services to its allies, and build networks of support that would enhance its appeal to neighbors while converting its enemies. Over time the SA built an effective network of social spaces in which stormtroopers could live, eat, and sleep together in political and personal harmony. This unity of personal and political life became one of the movement’s greatest strengths.
6. The SA combined its social and emotional claims into an all-consuming lifestyle of daily activity, common living, and close bonds between fighting comrades. While the intense emotions of same-sex camaraderie had long been a powerful political force in European history, by this point modern concepts of homosexuality had reached the public’s consciousness. It now seemed that those seeking camaraderie also sought sexual relations—and, indeed, a series of public revelations established that open homosexuals existed comfortably within the SA. The presence of homosexuals in the SA, as we will see, was never as pervasive or influential as opponents claimed. However, the association between homosexuality and fascism became a consistent theme of antifascist politics and an enduring smear against generations of gay men.

If these six traits described the daily life of the SA as it strove for power between 1923 and 1933, they also caused its death after 1933. Most historians of the SA’s fate agree that its downfall was all but inevitable. After

all, as a revolutionary, paramilitary, oppositional fraternity, the SA existed to cause chaos rather than to impose order. Once the victorious Nazi movement gained control of the state, the SA identities and practices that it had once exploited became drawbacks. The Nazi Party would no longer encourage revolutionary attitudes, paramilitary agitation, or other disruptive behaviors that could reveal a lack of control and alienate key military and industrial elites. It would no longer encourage spontaneous personal violence, moving instead to systemic and bureaucratized persecution. Social programs would also move beyond the personal and toward the universal, demonstrating the movement's need to transcend the local social networks that had created the SA in favor of creating the unified ethnic identity that it claimed all Germans possessed.

All these elements made the stormtroopers' cliquishness and close attachments—mythologized in the image of the homosexual—into a threatening identity that Hitler eventually decided to extirpate. Thus did the stormtroopers, particularly the homosexual ones whose small numbers had belied their symbolic importance, discover that they would be among the first victims of the persecutory state they had helped to create.

Organization of the Book

The story will proceed as follows:

CHAPTER 1, “Fathers and Forefathers,” introduces readers to the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg as it existed in the imaginations of the boys who later became stormtroopers. The stormtroopers are present in this chapter only as children. However, their childhoods first introduced them to several themes critical to their later political journeys: their city's contested heritage of democratic governance, its vibrant economic and political life, and the first debates over political homosexuality. This grand and worldly imperial *Vaterstadt*—the “father city” of their childhood—endured throughout their lives as a symbol of a vanished golden age that had been tarnished and betrayed.

IN CHAPTER 2, “Shattered Sons,” the war generation marches off to fight and returns to a changed city. Their fear of political and economic crisis often intensified existing social panic about increasing rates of divorce,

unwed motherhood, abortion, venereal disease, homosexuality, and other alleged symptoms of degeneracy. These youths joined the nascent Nazi movement, which had positioned itself as a self-consciously pro-family party whose earliest meetings and events showcased marriage, family, and respectable domestic life. Yet the stormtroopers also loudly proclaimed their allegiance to an all-male lifestyle, which they had honed during the Great War and now continued to rely on for emotional stability in an unstable world. They therefore existed uncomfortably between two competing kinship networks—one familial, one comradesly. The tension between the two became one of the most important characteristics of the movement.

CHAPTER 3, “Stormtroopers Confront the Criminal,” cuts to the heart of the stormtroopers’ paradoxical family lifestyles. On the one hand, they married, they founded their own families, and they claimed to be entering politics in order to protect the traditional nuclear family. On the other hand, they actively sought to live as soldiers, disconnecting from their families in favor of their comrades, embracing violence and combat, and at times demonstrating so much affection with one another as to call their sexuality into question. The conflict came to a head in 1928, when a murder trial outed a stormtrooper as homosexual. The SA then sought absolution through a public homophobic protest against a play, *The Criminal*, whose tolerant stance toward homosexuality became a flashpoint the SA could use to unite the radical right’s squabbling factions under the stormtrooper banner.

The next three chapters represent the SA at its fighting peak, from the beginning of the Depression in 1929 to the Nazis’ takeover of the state in 1933.

CHAPTER 4, “The Battle of Sternschanze,” describes a notorious battle in which an ill-planned SA march erupted into a widespread riot. This highly publicized media event established heroic masculinity and spectacular martyrdom as the stormtroopers’ best political weapons.

CHAPTER 5, “Community and Violence,” shows how the stormtroopers created an all-consuming daily lifestyle of intense political and personal associations. Through a network of hostels, barracks, and kitchens, they drew recruits and mobilized comrades for political violence. The stormtroopers’ communal living spaces tried to root them in neighborhood and family

life, but the homoeroticism, drunkenness, and debauchery found there bred conflict with more socially traditional and family-oriented wings of the Nazi movement. The tensions increased as a small number of homosexuals within the SA leadership became known, which led to the political left's increasing eagerness to challenge the Nazis' sexual self-image.

CHAPTER 6, "Bloody Sundays," describes events of 1932, the Weimar Republic's final year. A series of violent encounters that took place on Sundays culminated in Bloody Sunday, when an SA march through the suburb of Altona so provoked local Communists that it set off an epic confrontation between Communists and police. The resulting riot seemingly gave evidence to Nazi claims of Communist criminality versus Nazi righteousness. It helped align the forces of order on the Nazi side and set off a national chain reaction that began the Republic's final descent.

CHAPTER 7, "The Stormtroopers Take Power," relates how SA men used violence to secure authority that they immediately abused. The SA drove its enemies from public life, arrested them without warrants, and consigned them to "wild" concentration camps that it ruled with brutality. However, the SA simultaneously integrated itself into the community in new ways. SA men now took jobs with the police and in city government, seized patronage positions, enjoyed the fruits of corruption, and claimed psychological ownership of taverns, pubs, and restaurants that had formerly resisted their presence. These actions increased tensions between the SA's two communities, because they highlighted the conflict between two opposing goals. On the one hand, the SA sought to establish the stormtroopers as responsible young men, while on the other it hoped to strengthen the brawling same-sex society that had brought the movement this far. At the same time, the rush of victory attracted a new wave of self-interested recruits who knew little of the emotional and spiritual foundations of the stormtrooper lifestyle and instead sought only their own advantage. Victory therefore brought more grief than solace to many SA men, who now faced the irreconcilability of their two families as never before.

CHAPTER 8, "The Night of the Long Knives," shows how tensions between same-sex camaraderie, revolutionary demands, and the SA's new pretension to legitimate authority reached a head by mid-1934. By then, Hamburg

had had enough of the bullying SA. The stormtroopers' loud insistence on their honor and privileges, their rampant corruption and excess, and their continued use of violence in public spaces now threatened to undermine the Nazi movement. Hitler and his cronies took action, purging the SA of its leaders and settling old scores in a national massacre that lasted for days. Hitler then mobilized political homophobia as his prime justification for the purge, arguing that he had acted to extirpate the rot of homosexuality from SA and party ranks. Now that the group was cleansed, he said, every German mother could again feel safe with the party in charge. The stormtroopers had thus fallen victim to sexualized political paradigms that they themselves had strengthened, as in their homophobic protest against *The Criminal*. After June 1934, not only were homosexual stormtroopers chased out of the organization, all SA men were now under the scrutiny of a Nazi Party able and eager to police its citizens' sexual morality and family circumstances. In other words, the authoritarian family policies the Nazis later imposed on all Germany came first to the stormtroopers.

THE EPILOGUE, "From Sodom to Gomorrah: Hamburg in Ruins" traces the final decline of an SA that had little purpose in the Nazi state. This concluding chapter tells how war came home to the stormtroopers, either as soldiers on the front lines of the battlefield or as old men on the home front trying to defend their neighborhoods from a rain of Allied bombs. The stormtroopers' efforts to protect their families during the destruction of Operation Gomorrah often brought them into conflict with the Party, their neighbors, and their former comrades. The SA men had always been caught between family and party. Now, at the very end, those who chose their families over their public responsibilities were purged yet again. In any case, all stormtroopers were helpless to prevent the destruction of their beloved "father city." This chapter relates the final fates of the stormtrooper leaders whom readers have met in the preceding chapters: their death, or exile, or imprisonment as broken men who had lost both their same-sex and traditional families. The book ends by tracing the enduring legacy of the sinister figure of the gay Nazi. The legend of this figure, while based on reality, has been mobilized out of all proportion to its actual authority in the Nazi system, with very real political consequences that reach into the 21st century.

A Note on Terminology

The Weimar Republic is notorious for its multitude of squabbling political parties. The number of factions and their often unclear relationships can perplex modern English-speaking readers, who are used to political systems that feature two major factions and no more than a few minor parties on the margins. In the Weimar system, however, major political orientations often generated several competing parties, and these parties cooperated, argued, fractured, and re-integrated with remarkable frequency. Readers may therefore find useful the following brief definitions of the major political factions, the parties that carried their messages, and the paramilitary armies that fought for them.

Political Factions

CONSERVATIVE

The term *conservative* as a catch-all for the parties of the center-right is defined as resistance to the social, economic, and cultural changes wrought by the French Revolution and its imitators, in this case the German revolution of 1918. Weimar conservatives admitted that the possible return of monarchy was slim, but even so they hoped to steer German politics toward the values that monarchy had enshrined: nationalism, militarism, religious traditionalism, and, all too often, antisemitism. In general, conservative parties promoted values of authority, hierarchy, and obedience as forces for national good.

Of the many small and short-lived parties of the center-right, the most important conservative party was the German National People's Party (DNVP). Formed during the 1918 revolution from the remnants of imperial conservative and nationalist parties, the DNVP united a coalition of monarchists, wealthy merchants, and rural landowners in opposition to both liberal democracy and socialism. It drew its strength from a combination of respectable and populist nationalism in the Protestant north, but this combination proved difficult to manage. From the start, the DNVP displayed a strong tendency toward radicalization in both the content and conduct of conservative politics. This trend led to eventual cooperation with its upstart cousins, the Nazis, who for their part never fully trusted the "reactionaries" of traditional conservatism.

CENTRIST

Centrist political factions in Weimar Germany supported the republican form of government that the revolution had created. This broad agreement, however, concealed a wide spectrum of political beliefs, including liberalism, political Catholicism, and socialism—the three major factions that cooperated as the “Weimar Coalition.” These groups supported and ran the government. The Coalition’s power, however, steadily weakened as economic depression pushed voters toward increasingly radical parties that rejected democracy from both left and right.

Within the centrist coalition, the three major factions were:

Liberal

Liberalism in 19th- and early 20th-century Europe functioned as the ideology of business, of progress, and of personal and economic liberty. In its early stages, it often fought against established states and promoted new values of freedom and personal choice, arguing that these values would bring economic gains to all. Over time, as businessmen and industrialists converted economic influence into political power, liberal parties increasingly became the establishment. In the united Germany of the 19th century, the National Liberal Party allied with the crown to support nationalism, militarism, and an expansionist foreign policy, especially in the naval and colonial realms. National Liberals cited Britain and America as examples of this model’s success in promoting and protecting international trade, as well as national prosperity. In 1918, National Liberal support for the Great War destroyed the party along with the monarchy, and two new parties emerged to continue the liberal tradition:

The German People’s Party (DVP) was formed in 1918 to represent the National Liberals’ right wing, a role quite close to what the party had performed during the imperial period. It represented big-business interests, argued for limited government, and opposed socialism as a threat to the established economic system (which, of course, the liberals led). While initially quite hostile to the socialist-led revolution, the DVP grew increasingly cooperative over time and eventually became a reliable governing partner. The German Democratic Party (DDP) was formed in 1918 to represent the National Liberals’ smaller left wing. It combined the former insistence on national economic might with an acceptance of democracy as the best way to promote a strong nation. The DDP also embodied the side of liberalism

that sought to protect ethnic and religious minorities. While initially popular and always influential among the governing classes, it steadily lost votes throughout the Weimar period.

Catholic

German Catholics during the imperial era had been represented by their own political party, the Catholic Center Party (Zentrum). The Zentrum argued for Catholic reliability as loyal citizens of the German state—once a contested issue—and it continued into the Weimar era reasonably intact. As a Catholic party in the Protestant city of Hamburg, the Zentrum played almost no role in local elections. Its national importance, however, was immense. Its political pragmatism led it to accept both monarchy and democracy as acceptable forms of government, and it therefore proved a reliable partner for a variety of governing coalitions. During Weimar's strongest years, the left-wing faction of Christian trade unionists cooperated effectively with the socialists and other parties of the Weimar Coalition. During the Republic's final crises, however, the Zentrum's authoritarian faction gained the upper hand and forged the fatal deal that cemented Hitler's power.

Socialist

Those who assume that socialism is left wing forget that such descriptors are always relative. Socialism originally appeared in European history as an oppositional and revolutionary movement that sought increased political power and economic equality for the working class. Socialism was particularly strong in Germany, especially in the large cities like Hamburg, where it appealed to those working for the newly powerful industrial and trading firms. Eventually the movement united under the banner of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which, despite being banned for many years, grew in popularity until it became Germany's largest party in 1912. In 1918, the same socialist movement that was often oppositional and revolutionary in the imperial era took leadership of the new republic. In the Weimar context, therefore, we can consider socialism to be centrist, even if doing so locates the center further left than many English-speaking readers generally expect. Thinking of the socialists as both centrist and leftist also helps to properly define their role in the Weimar Republic as the party most interested in the political values centrists always claim: good governance, productive compromise, and the rule of law. Social Democrats combined these technocratic

approaches with the old socialist values of economic justice and poverty mitigation to bind working- and middle-class supporters of democracy together in support of the hard-won republic. They also mobilized their own paramilitary group, the *Reichsbanner*, to vigorously defend democracy against the radical paramilitary bands that sought its destruction.

COMMUNIST

When war seemed imminent in 1914, the SPD chose to demonstrate its national loyalty by supporting government credit for war expenses. This decision sowed bitter seeds within the party, especially as famine and war exhaustion soured the national mood. When the SPD expelled several key members of its antiwar wing in 1917, the exiles focused left-wing anger into a new socialist movement, the German Communist Party (KPD). As the revolution of 1918 turned into the troubled years of the Weimar Republic, the KPD embodied the radical left flank of the socialist movement. Angry at the compromises the SPD made in governing, bitter at the lack of a full social and economic revolution, and eager to take inspiration, support, and even direct orders from Moscow's violent Soviet regime, the KPD became one of two great existential threats to the Republic. The Communist paramilitary, the Red Front Fighting Brigade (RFB), protected Communist political meetings, staged massive protests and riots, attacked symbols of capitalism, fought with police, and battled enemy paramilitaries of the center and right.

NATIONAL SOCIALIST

The other great threat came from the right, from the party of rightist revolutionary violence: the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP), or Nazi Party. At first the NSDAP was just one of many parties calling themselves national socialists (lower case—to the early Nazis, national socialism was a faction to which many parties could belong). As this book's opening chapters reveal, the national socialist faction emerged after 1918 as the successors to the discredited conservatism of the imperial era. The Nazis retained and often amplified many of conservatism's ideological traits—nationalism, militarism, and racist antisemitism being the most important—but the Party had none of conservatism's redeeming characteristics of respect for tradition, restraint, or continuity. Nazism's often youthful supporters sought instead to create a newly violent style of rightist politics, one that matched

what the Communists had developed on the left. In other words, the national socialists matched the conservatives in ideology and the Communists in tactics. Although the Nazis still considered both of these groups to be enemies, they also cooperated with them in turn. They attacked liberalism and socialism alongside the conservatives, furthering rightist ideology and political goals.

Meanwhile, they founded the paramilitary stormtroopers, whose tactics paralleled those of their Communist enemies: mixing protection duties with protest, and electoral actions with outright attempts at revolution. Although the SA and RFB proclaimed their undying enmity, they also cooperated in actions to ensure that violent and revolutionary means of political conflict became more common than peaceful compromise. Both Nazis and Communists took to the streets to stage violent encounters that destabilized the republican system, and both paramilitaries were perfectly happy to shatter the young democracy because both believed that they would be the one to reassemble democracy's shattered pieces into the preferred utopian state.

Other Terms

HANSESTADT

Citizens of Hamburg historically have used the term *Hansestadt* to memorialize their city's long heritage as an independent, worldly, liberal democracy focused on seaborne international trade. It comes from Hamburg's historical membership in the medieval Hanseatic League, a trading federation of city-states whose importance to Hamburg's modern political culture is discussed in chapter 1.

HOMOSOCIAL

Homosocial refers to living spaces and environments that feature interactions among members of a single gender. These spaces are quite common in history, and in many ways grew stronger in the late 19th century wherever Victorian concepts of gender separation took hold. Homosocial is not in itself a loaded term; it is a neutral descriptor of the gender balance of a group, location, or organization. It refers to social, not sexual, relationships.

HOMOEROTIC

Homoerotic refers to a certain charge of attraction that may exist within homosocial spaces or between members of the same sex. Homoeroticism often represents an unacknowledged thrill or unexamined sexual energy that some may find in same-sex associations, without expressing these feelings in sexual acts. As readers will discover in the following pages, some men of the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw homoeroticism as a productive political force, while others feared that it masked hidden homosexual depravity that would undermine political systems.

HOMOSEXUAL

The perhaps logical expression of homoeroticism in same-sex acts, or homosexuality, is the final side of this triangle. The term *homosexual*, as is explained in chapter 1, emerged only near the end of the 19th century. Although the word's meaning was intensely contested, it became the key term in an emerging understanding of same-sex orientation as a component of identity, rather than as a discrete and passing act without deeper psychological relevance. As such, it marks the transition in European thinking about sexuality from a religious view, which sees the act itself as a sin, to a psychological view, which sees the act as an expression of a larger identity or inner self. While the medical-psychological view could be just as stigmatizing as religious condemnation, increasing attention to the concept brought the first stirrings of a movement for decriminalization and tolerance of homosexuality.

Today the label "homosexual" is considered a retrograde term that reveals how medicine and psychology once stigmatized same-sex orientations as disordered and abnormal. Since the 1970s, the terms "gay" and "lesbian" have largely replaced it. However, for historical purposes it would be inappropriate to refer to men who inclined toward the same sex in the 1920s as "gay." The German equivalent term, *Schwul*, had indeed already emerged within the homosexual subculture, but in neither Germany nor the English-speaking world had it yet come to represent the identity itself. Since "gay" or *Schwul* represents a certain type of gay and lesbian identity that emerged only in recent decades, this book will use the historically appropriate term *homosexual*. It does so not to stigmatize, but, rather, to acknowledge how linguistic and cultural frames of reference limited the ways people of the time could conceive their sexual identity.

PARAGRAPH 175

This paragraph of the imperial German legal code came from existing legislation in the North German Confederation led by Prussia, which in essence exported much of its law to the other German states after unification in 1871. Paragraph 175 outlawed “unnatural sex acts” between men, as well as bestiality, but it explicitly did not apply to women. Despite attempts to both extend and abolish this law, it remained on the books into the 20th century, by which time it had taken on a cultural life of its own. Common use and popular imagery used Paragraph 175 as a code to discuss the still-uncomfortable topic of homosexuality, eventually functioning as a linguistic shorthand or slang for sex acts between men.

STURMABTEILUNG/STORMTROOPERS/SA

As mentioned earlier, the name *Sturmabteilung*, or SA, comes from a German army unit of the same name. This work will use “SA” for the Nazi organization and “stormtroopers” for the individuals. The stormtroopers most often called themselves “SA men,” a term I use in a generic sense, despite the fact that it was also an official title for the lowest rank of stormtrooper. I have generally avoided using specific ranks and titles, either for individuals or for the group, because ranks and titles changed frequently and in any case hold little meaning for 21st-century readers not already familiar with the SA’s organizational minutiae.

SS

Many people confuse the SA and SS. The *Schutzstaffel*, or SS, originally grew out of the SA as an elite protection squad for party speakers, a role the SA had been created to fill but which it necessarily abandoned as it grew into a paramilitary army. The SS thus represents a mirror image of the SA: exclusive rather than universal, secretive rather than showy, calculated rather than clumsy, and scheming rather than spontaneous. The conflict between the SA and SS is a running motif in several chapters, and it reaches its climax in the deadly confrontation described in chapter 8—a resolution that had great meaning for the character and practice of institutionalized violence in the Nazi state.

VOLK/VÖLKISCH

The German word *Volk* is easy to understand, once you know to pronounce the “v” as an “f”—*Volk*, therefore, means folk. On one level, this easy translation conveys its meaning as an organic community of uncomplicated, earnest people living in harmony with the land and with one another. However, this translation alone does not capture the more grandiose political meaning the term came to acquire in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In that sense, the term conveys the way many nations and political movements have invoked “the people” as a powerful source of political and cultural authority.

German nationalist politics grew increasingly focused on the *Volk* in the late 19th century, and many political movements indeed came to be known as *völkisch*. These movements blended politics, folklore, history, and mysticism into a political project that sought power by and for a unified ethnic German people—what today we would call a militant and authoritarian form of ethnic nationalism. *Völkisch* politics, ironically, was never unified. Its many parties and groups often fought and argued with each other over the proper interpretation of their racial doctrines, and they constantly competed for members, attention, and political influence.

The Nazi Party was born into this competitive ecosystem of *völkisch* politics, which it eventually took over and dominated. The Nazis were not the only *völkisch* party, and indeed they were relative latecomers to *völkisch* politics. But their skillful deployment of the movement’s symbols, their repeated emphasis on ethnicity as the basis of politics, and their aggressive persecution of their perceived enemies made them in the end the preeminent representatives of this political style. Their claim to the concept of the *Volk*, and the abuses they perpetrated in its supposed service, were so total as to discredit it after their defeat. Today the term is rarely used, except when referring to the historical period in which it wielded great political influence.