

How the Nazis Succeeded in Taking Power in 'Red' Berlin

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By Uwe Klußmann

Conquering the Capital The Ruthless Rise of the Nazis in Berlin

In the mid-1920s, Joseph Goebbels was given the difficult task of fostering support for the growing Nazi Party in Berlin, "the reddest city in Europe besides Moscow." But, by 1933, a combination of street brutality and political smarts succeeded in catapulting the party past rival parties.

By [Uwe Klußmann](#)

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Editor's Note: Berlin is currently celebrating its 775th anniversary. In the coming days, SPIEGEL ONLINE International will be publishing a series of stories on the history of Germany's capital. This is the fourth part of the series. The [first](#), [second](#) and [third](#) parts can be read here.

On that gray Nov. 7 in 1926, there was no indication that the short 29-year-old man who walked with a limp and had just stepped off of a train at Berlin's Anhalter Station would shape the destiny of the German capital. Joseph Goebbels, a career official with the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP), or Nazi Party, had arrived on what seemed to be an impossible mission. As *Gauleiter*, or regional party leader, he had been tasked with leading the fight for power in Berlin.

At the time, the splinter group led by Adolf Hitler had 49,000 members throughout all of Germany. It was in sad shape in the capital, where it could only boast a few hundred members. In a report written in October 1926, a party official wrote of the "complete breakdown of the Berlin organization," which he described as a self-destructive, confused group that was almost beyond repair.

The party office at Potsdamer Strasse 109 could only reinforce this impression. It consisted of a dark basement room that reeked of cigarette smoke, sweat and beer. Party members referred to it as "the opium den."

At the end of the year, Goebbels rented a more acceptable office for the party on Lützowstrasse. He kicked the do-nothings and the troublemakers out of the party and called upon the remaining members to participate in various campaigns.

Goebbels had been in office for hardly a week before he organized a march through the Neukölln district, a communist stronghold, that devolved into a street riot.

Goebbels wanted Hitler's party to show its colors in Berlin, which he described as "the reddest city in Europe besides Moscow." Together, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) captured 52.2 percent of the vote in the 1925 municipal elections. Berlin's new Nazi leader decided to combat the left's superiority in numbers with a frontal attack.

He went to the Pharussäle, a meeting hall often used by the KPD for its mass rallies in Berlin's Wedding district, and gave a speech on the subject of "The Collapse of the Bourgeois Class State." This provoked the communists.

On Feb. 11, 1927, the Nazi Party meeting turned into a violent brawl between the two groups. Beer glasses, chairs and tables flew through the hall, and severely injured people were left lying covered with blood on the floor. Despite the injuries, it was a triumph for Goebbels, whose thugs beat up about 200 communists and drove them from the hall.

A Strategy of Provocation

Goebbels turned Berlin into a violent laboratory for the future dictatorship, availing himself of the services of the uniformed *Sturmabteilung* ("Assault Division"), or SA, whose members were known as the "brownshirts." The SA combined soldierly romanticism, the hatred of younger people for the older elites, and the rage of Berlin's working-class in the eastern part of the city against its wealthier western districts.

For the Nazi Party, the brownshirts -- who included the unemployed, the underemployed, apprentices and high-school students -- were "political soldiers." In Goebbel's view, their task was the "conquest of the street." In the melting pot of Berlin, these primarily young men were supposed to reconcile and embody two previously hostile worldviews: nationalism, which Goebbels believed had to be "reshaped in a revolutionary way," and a "true socialism" free of Marxism.

Berlin's Jews became the lightning rod for this experiment, which aimed to bring the social and political tensions of the metropolis to the breaking point. Goebbels, who had done his doctoral work under a Jewish professor, assigned the Jews the scapegoat role.

"The Jew" was a "negative aspect" that had to be "eradicated," Goebbels wrote in 1929. He viewed the Jews as simultaneously embodying capitalism, communism, the press and the police. His simplistic slogan "The Jews are to blame!" proved to be a slow-acting poison.

As the head of Berlin's Nazis, Goebbels chose Bernhard Weiss, the Jewish deputy chief of the city's police force, as a target of his anti-Semitic agitation. Goebbels nicknamed him "Isidore" and, after Weiss sued Goebbels for libel and won, he called him "Weiss, whom one isn't allowed to call Isidore." Goebbels derided Weiss's police officers as "Bernhardiner" ("St. Bernard dogs") and "Weiss guardsmen."

Young party members sang satirical songs about "Isidore" and wore "Isidore" masks -- and they often had the laughs on their side. Indeed, the Nazis used coarse humor as a sharp weapon in their struggle with the Weimar Republic. "We scoffed at an entire system and brought it down with resounding laughter," Gunter d'Alquen, the young editor-in-chief of *Das Schwarze Korps* (The Black Corps) wrote in 1937. This was the official newspaper of the *Schutzstaffel* ("Protection Squadron"), or SS, which was founded in 1925 as a sort of Praetorian Guard for Hitler.

Goebbels believed that "horseplay is necessary." At a showing of a film adaptation of the pacifist novel "Im Westen nichts Neues" ("All Quiet on the Western Front") on Dec. 5, 1930, at the Mozartsaal cinema on Berlin's Nollendorfplatz, members of the SA released white mice into the audience. Screaming women caused the film to be interrupted while SA men roared with laughter. Goebbels himself was sitting in the audience.

He justified his strategy of provocation by saying that the Nazis could be accused of many things, but certainly not of being dull. Street battles and brawls at political meetings forged a sense of unity and camaraderie among party members in Berlin. On May 1, 1927, Hitler spoke to them for the first time at the dignified Clou concert hall. Goebbels enjoyed Hitler's confidence and was moved to tears by his speech about "space and the people."

Party members in Berlin loved the man they called "our Dr. Goebbels" because he spent time in direct contact with them. He comforted the severely wounded, held the hands of the dying and attended the funerals of the dead.

Modest Initial Success

Goebbels, who was unable to fight in World War I because of his deformed right leg, proved to be the top soldier of an army fighting an insidious civil war. During it, the Nazis survived severe challenges. Five days after Hitler's speech at the Clou, the police banned the Nazi Party in Berlin. But that didn't stop its ascent. Goebbels, who had read the memoirs of August Bebel, a Marxist politician and co-founder of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany, had learned a lesson from the Social Democrats' struggle against Bismarck's anti-socialist laws.

The Nazis established seemingly harmless groups, such as bowling, savings and swimming clubs. Using the motto "Not dead, despite the ban," Goebbels established the newspaper *Der Angriff* (The Attack) in July 1927,

initially as a weekly. The subheading, "For the Oppressed -- Against the Exploiters," targeted working-class readers.

At first, the Nazis enjoyed only modest success. Some 39,000 Berliners, or 1.6 percent of the city's entire population, voted for Hitler's party in the May 1928 election to the Reichstag, as the parliament was called. However, Berlin's ban on the Nazi Party was lifted for the election campaign. When Goebbels became one of 12 Nazi members of the Reichstag, he did so with the challenging words: "We have nothing to do with the parliament. We reject it from within."

Indeed, the strategy of the Berlin branch of the Nazi Party was to serve as an extra-parliamentary opposition, forming cells on the street and in businesses, using the communist approach as a model. In 1928, the party staged a rally with several thousand supporters, filling the Sportpalast winter sports venue on Potsdamer Strasse.

In 1929, the party headed by "bandit-in-chief Goebbels," as the communists called him, captured 5.8 percent of the vote for city council, securing 13 seats in the city's parliament.

The Weimar Republic's "system," which the Nazis attacked, was relatively stable for a long time. But that changed in late October 1929, when the stock market in New York crashed. Mass unemployment rose sharply, increasing the potential for urban unrest.

Battling All Sides, but Mostly Left

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Part 2: Battling All Sides, but Mostly Left

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Berlin's Nazis waged a political war on two fronts. One front was against the Social Democrats and the established parties running the city and the country. The other was against the communists, whose ranks swelled when people uprooted by the crisis were driven into their arms.

In its struggle with the propagandists of world revolution, the Nazi Party had only one chance to differentiate itself from the reactionary right wing. In *Der Angriff*, Goebbels polemicized against the "black, white and red fat cats," referencing the colors of the flag of the German Empire favored by many right-wing nationalists. "You say 'fatherland,'" he wrote accusatorily, "but what you're talking about are percentages."

He saw workers disappointed by the stolid SPD as a target group. He called the SPD "Germany's most shameless party" and held it responsible for "poverty, hunger, fat cats and thin workers." The Social Democrats, Goebbels said in August 1930, were "no longer the protagonists of a true, purposeful socialism," but instead had become the "lackeys and beneficiaries of market capitalism." In fact, with its aging and corruptible politicians, the SPD made things easier for the Nazis in Berlin.

The bigger challenge for the Nazis was the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), headed in Berlin by Walter Ulbricht, who would go on to become the de facto leader of post-war East Germany. The activist party had its strongholds in Berlin's blue-collar neighborhoods, like Friedrichshain and Wedding, and it had a powerful paramilitary organization in the *Roter Frontkämpferbund* (Alliance of Red Front-Fighters).

Politicians who hoped to succeed in Berlin's "red" neighborhoods had to speak a language understood there. In a flyer distributed in September 1931 to unemployed workers waiting at a government agency in Berlin, Goebbels wrote that the party was turning to "workers without work and without hope, exposed to the most horrible form of desperation," and he promised "to destroy the system of capitalism and replace it with a new, socialist order."

In their appeal "to all of the unemployed," the Nazis cleverly called into question the strength of the leftist parties, the SPD and the KPD. Goebbels courted the proletarians by treating them like cheated brides, addressing them as "you who have been left forsaken by your seducers."

Goebbels was familiar with the communists' weak points, namely, the often out-of-touch language of their officials and the control Soviet leaders exerted over them. In *Der Angriff*, Goebbels wrote that the KPD, as a "Russian foreign legion on German soil" created "with Russian money and German human resources," was alienating many members of the proletariat.

Helped by a "Martyr"

Horst Wessel was one of the Nazi propagandists who knew how to gain the support of workers. Born in 1907, he had graduated from a high school that emphasized the classics but dropped out of university before earning a degree. Wessel saw himself as a socialist who had been shaken by the "great social impoverishment and servitude of the working classes in all professions."

Wessel, the son of a Protestant pastor, was 19 when he joined the Nazi Party in 1926. By 1929, he had advanced to become head of an SA squad in Friedrichshain. Within a few weeks, Wessel's rhetorical skills had helped him recruit dozens of new members. Together, they would become the legendary "SA-Sturm 5."

Indeed, next to Goebbels, there was no one who spoke more often than Wessel for the Nazi Party in greater Berlin. Wessel's speeches even succeeded in convincing former communists to join the SA. With Goebbels' approval, they were permitted to bring their musical instruments, oboe-like wind instruments called shawms, to Nazi events.

Wessel and his friends sought to establish contact with proletarians in dark back courtyards and noisy taverns, on street corners and at unemployment offices. In doing so, they adhered to the third of the "Ten Commandments for National Socialists" penned by Goebbels: "Every national comrade, even the poorest, is part of Germany. Love him as you love yourself."

He soon became a hated figure in the "Commune," as the Nazis called the KPD. On Jan. 14, 1930, Albrecht Höhler, a communist pimp, shot the SA officer, who was living with a former prostitute, in the mouth. Wessel died of complications from the attack on Feb. 23.

His funeral illustrated how just out-of-control Berlin had become. Communists attacked the funeral procession and tried to seize the coffin. Before the funeral, they had painted the words "A final *Heil Hitler* to the pimp Horst Wessel!" on the wall of the Nikolai Cemetery.

Attracting Workers Away from the Communist Party

But the killing of one of its most powerful propagandists didn't weaken the Nazi movement in Berlin. Communists, in particular, increasingly became the victims of armed SA members. In one version of their song, "We March Through Greater Berlin," they sang "The red front, break them to pieces." In another version, the words were changed to: "beat them to a pulp."

The Nazi Party continued to attract new members, and Wessel became their martyr. In the SA "storm bars" -- which, according to the police, grew fivefold, to 107, between 1928 and 1931 -- SA members in their brown uniforms sang the anthem Wessel had supposedly written: "The flag on high! The ranks tightly closed! The SA marches with quiet, steady step."

Half a year after the Wessel's death, it was clear that Berlin was on the verge of a political earthquake. On Sept. 10, 1930, a crowd of more than 100,000 people turned up outside the Sportpalast, trying to gain get in for a rally attended by Hitler.

In Reichstag elections held four days later, the Nazi Party became the second-strongest party in the country, capturing 18.3 percent of the vote. In Berlin, where it became the third most powerful party after the KPD and the SPD, it garnered 396,000 votes, or more than 10 times as many as it had just two years earlier.

The Nazis had become the political center of power and trendsetter in politics. Even the communists, who had initially hoped to fight off the Nazis with fists, brass knuckles and revolvers (their motto was: "Beat the fascists wherever you encounter them!"), were now courting Hitler's followers. In an appeal by the district office for Berlin-Brandenburg on Nov. 1, 1931, the KPD praised the "National Socialist workers" and "proletarian supporters of the Nazi Party," calling them "honest fighters against the system of hunger."

Indeed, the Nazis had broken the KPD's monopoly as the only protest party among Berlin's working classes. In August 1930, the KPD official newspaper *Der Parteiarbeiter* (The Party Worker) complained that new comrades in KPD were not finding "the spirit of camaraderie that is needed to be able to cooperate with friends." But the Nazis didn't have these kinds of problems.

Instead of the KPD's rigid ideological fare, the SA homes offered hot soup and solidarity. In 1932, there were 15,000 SA members in Berlin. During the Christmas holidays, unemployed party members were invited to the homes of the members who still had work in what Goebbels called the "socialism of action."

The concept gradually took hold in "red" Wedding, where the number of party members grew from 18 to 250 between 1928 and 1930. In a district where the majority voted communist, the Hitler Youth held "public discussion evenings" with titles such as "The Swastika or the Soviet Star."

Workers who had lived in the Soviet Union were popular guests at Nazi agitation evenings. They gave vivid accounts of the miserable lives of workers and the reign of terror of the secret police. One of the star attractions at the Nazi political circus was Roland Freisler. During World War I, Freisler had spent time as a prisoner of war in Russia. He would later become president of the Nazi-era People's Court, which handled a broad array of "political offenses" and became notorious for its frequent death sentences.

Popularity Breakthrough

In 1932, when the ranks of the unemployed throughout the Reich swelled to more than 6 million, and to 600,000 in Berlin alone, the Nazi Party achieved its breakthrough to become a major party, counting 40,000 members in its regional organization. In March 1932, the party mobilized about 80,000 people for a rally in the Lustgarten park (on what is now called Museum Island), which became a trial run for future events. On April 4, some 200,000 people congregated on the square between the Zeughaus building (currently housing the German Historical Museum) and the Berlin City Palace to cheer on Hitler.

The previous January, general student body elections in Berlin had demonstrated that university students were also anxious to support Hitler. The Nazis captured 3,794 of the 5,801 votes cast, or almost two-thirds. The Hitler wave had even reached children, who entered the German Youth, a subdivision of the Hitler Youth for younger boys, and the League of German Girls. In 1932, many an astonished grandmother was confronted with a 10-year-old granddaughter insisting: "Grandma, you must vote for Hitler!"

Young men who read *Der Angriff*, which began publication as a daily newspaper in November 1930, were opinion leaders in offices and factories. In early November 1932, the National Socialist Factory Cell Organization, together with the KPD's Revolutionary Union Opposition, organized a strike against wage cuts at the Berlin Transport Authority. Nazis and communists picketed alongside each other and joined forces to beat up strike breakers.

The strike cost the party a large number of votes in the Nov. 6, 1932 Reichstag election, especially in middle-class neighborhoods. But Goebbels was pursuing a strategic goal in the city, where the KPD was now the strongest party. "Our fixed position among the working people," he wrote in his diary, could not be allowed to totter.

Goebbels promised the "right to work" and "a socialist Germany that gives bread to its children once again." This awakened the hopes of the 31.3 percent of Berlin voters who voted for the Nazi Party in the last Reichstag election of March 1933. Only those who paid close attention to what Goebbels was saying could divine where the journey was about to go under Nazi leadership.

One such case was a 1932 radio broadcast in which he propagated the "creation and acquisition of space," which was code for Hitler's push to expand eastward. Another was in a speech he gave on Feb. 5, 1933, at the grave of a Berlin SA leader who had been shot to death. In this case, he offered radio listeners a taste of what was to come: "Perhaps we Germans don't understand what it means to live, but we are extremely good at dying."