

Document exercise: The Night of the Long Knives

Source A

Hitler outlines his plans for the army

...a militia as Röhm suggested would not be the least bit suitable for national defence. He sought to establish this by examples from military history. In the course of this he came to his own experience. The hastily and superficially trained division to which he belonged in 1914 as a private, had come to grief at Langemarck with the most heavy losses. Therefore he was resolved to raise a people's army, built up on the *Reichswehr* [army], rigorously trained and equipped with the most modern weapons....This new army would have to be ready for any defence purposes after five years, and after eight years suitable also for attacking. The SA must confine itself to internal tasks...

An account of Hitler's speech to SA leaders and army generals in February 1934

Source B

Notes concerning the murder of General von Schleicher

...I had a long conversation with Attorney-General Tetzlaff about the motive for the murder....As far as we were concerned, there were only two possibilities. First, that General von Schleicher was murdered by Röhm's henchmen...Or on the other hand, that the same bunch that had taken steps against Röhm...had then also taken the opportunity to eliminate Schleicher. Attorney-General Tetzlaff then expressly cautioned me at the end of our conversation that I should not mention this second possible motive...even though we were both fairly confident that the perpetrators could only have come from the ranks of the SS...The official press release from party headquarters had said that Schleicher committed suicide, but this was changed during the course of the afternoon to read that Schleicher had been shot in self-defence...

A reconstruction of events made by an investigating officer in 1952

Source C

Evidence of Schleicher's cook about the events of 30 June 1934

Today during the noon hour, possibly around 12.30, I was looking through the window toward the street, where I spotted two gentlemen. I asked what they wanted, to which they replied that they 'had to see General von Schleicher'...The gentlemen kept insisting more and more...I replied that 'I would go and see!' I then made my way into the general's study, while being followed by the strangers. Once we had arrived at the study, the strangers stood close behind me and asked Herr von Schleicher...if he were General von Schleicher. The general said yes and turned his body in order to see the men who had asked the question. At that very moment shots rang out. I do not know what happened then, because I was terrified; I screamed and ran out of the room...When I afterward again went back to the room I found Frau von Schleicher and the general, both shot and lying on the floor...

Statement given by Schleicher's cook, a witness

Source D

Hitler justifies his actions to the Reichstag

Without informing me...Chief of Staff Röhm entered into relations with General Schleicher through an utterly corrupt and dishonest go-between... It was General Schleicher who spelt out the secret aims of Chief of Staff Röhm...

The present regime in Germany is not to be tolerated.

Above all, the army and all national associations must be united in a single band. The only man to be considered for such a position is Chief of Staff Röhm

Extract from Hitler's speech to the Reichstag in July 1934

Examination-style questions

1 Comprehension in context

Study Source A. Using the source and your own knowledge, explain why Hitler wanted the SA to confine itself to 'internal tasks'.

2 Comparing the sources

How far, and for what reasons, do Sources B and C differ in their account of Schleicher's death?

3 Assessing the sources

'Source D provides an inaccurate version of events and is, therefore, of little value to the historian.' How far do you agree?

4 Making judgements

Using the sources and your own knowledge, to what extent do you agree that the Night of the Long Knives was necessary for Hitler's survival as dictator of Germany?

Hitler becomes Führer

President Hindenburg died on 2 August. Hitler combined the post of President with that of Chancellor, naming himself 'Führer' (leader) of Germany. This automatically made Hitler the Supreme Commander of the German army. Not only did the army accept this action, but its members also swore an oath of loyalty to their Führer on 2 August. Such an oath was not taken lightly; the soldiers meant what they were saying and believed that it was their duty to uphold it. So Hitler had succeeded in getting the army absolutely on his side. Thus, by 1934, his power was seemingly complete, with all potential challenges to his authority removed. But it is one thing to establish oneself as a dictator and quite another to sustain that role in the long term. The strategies adopted by Hitler and the Nazis are outlined in the next chapter.

Conclusions

By the end of 1934 Hitler and the Nazi Party had succeeded in establishing a powerful dictatorship in Germany. This was achieved through three steps:

- Step One: January – March 1933: control at the centre. During this period, Hitler gained the power to bypass the Reichstag and enact laws on the authority of his Cabinet. Civil liberties were suspended to enable him to arrest and imprison political opponents
- Step Two: April – July 1933: control beyond the centre. During this period, Hitler attempted to bring any potential enemies under control. Organized opposition was now almost impossible
- Step Three: January – August 1934: the final stage. During this period, Hitler brought the SA firmly under his control and won the support of the army. He became the Führer of Germany after Hindenburg's death.

Although opposition to Hitler was never entirely removed, he was now in a strong enough position to begin the transformation of society he wanted and to pursue the foreign policy that lay at the heart of his ambitions.

Quotation

I swear by God this sacred oath: that I will render unconditional obedience to the Führer of the German Reich and people, Adolf Hitler, the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and will be ready as a brave soldier to risk my life at any time for this oath.

Oath taken by the army in 1934

Activity KEY SKILLS

Prepare for a whole-class discussion on the following question: 'How powerful was Hitler by August 1934?' Make notes using this chapter and any other source of information to prepare yourself fully. During the discussion, remember to listen and respond to others' ideas as well as to make your own contributions.