

Erich Kempka's Eyewitness Description of "Operation Hummingbird" on June 30, 1934 (Retrospective Account, 1954)

Abstract

Ernst Röhm (1887–1934) founded the SA (the paramilitary wing of the new NSDAP) in 1921. By 1934, the organization had grown to more than 4 million members. With its penchant for street violence and intimidation, the SA had provided the NSDAP with crucial support right up to Hitler's appointment as Reich Chancellor. Initially, SA brutality was also helpful in building up Hitler's dictatorship. At the same time, however, the SA also alienated various traditional powers in the state, military, and economy, whose support Hitler needed. For example, the SA was a thorn in the side of Reichswehr generals, who regarded Röhm's vulgar, bloodthirsty Brownshirts as unworthy rivals in the struggle for German military leadership. As a result, Reichswehr leaders and high-ranking Nazi functionaries, such as Göring, Himmler, and Joseph Goebbels (1897–1945), decided to convince Hitler that the SA was planning a coup to spark a "second revolution." On June 21, 1934, Hindenburg ordered Hitler to take control of the unpredictable SA once and for all, so that peace and order could be ensured throughout the country. Afterwards, Hitler decided it was time to finally rid himself of the politically untenable organization. On the morning of June 30, 1934, he ordered "Operation Hummingbird," a purge that obliterated the SA leadership. The operation is described in the following postwar account by Hitler's chauffeur, Erich Kempka (1910–1975). From June 30–July 2, 1934, at least 85 leading SA functionaries and other inconvenient opponents of the regime were killed. Current estimates on victim numbers run as high as 150 to 200.) Hitler subsequently arranged for the passage of a law that retroactively legalized these murders as measures in defense of the state.

Source

[...] It is already dawn when we land at the Munich airport, Oberwiesenfeld. During the flight, there had been a light shower and the grass at the airport is sparkling in the morning light. When Hitler jumps out of the machine, two officers of the Reichswehr report to him. He takes them aside and gives them their orders.

Outside the reception building three cars are waiting which have been ordered by wireless from the garage of the Reich Party headquarters in Munich. Some old friends of Hitler's from the early days of the Party are standing by them. Hitler goes up to the cars and orders the hoods to be raised. I am struck by the harshness of his voice. His face is even more serious than during the flight. I am already at the wheel when he sits down beside me: "Kempka, we're going to the Ministry of the Interior first."

[...]

Hitler sits down beside me and gives the order: "To Wiessee, as fast as possible!"

It must have been about 4:30 a.m., the sky has cleared up, it is nearly bright daylight. We meet watering carts and people on their way to work. [...] Hitler sits beside me in silence. From time to time, I hear Goebbels and Lutze talking in the back.

Just before Wiessee, Hitler suddenly breaks his silence: "Kempka," he says, "drive carefully when we come to the Hotel Hanselbauer. You must drive up without making any noise. If you see an SA guard in

front of the hotel [...], don't wait for them to report to me; drive on and stop at the hotel entrance." Then, after a moment of deathly silence: "Röhm wants to carry out a coup."

An icy shiver runs down my back. I could have believed anything, but not a coup by Röhm!

I drive up carefully to the hotel entrance as Hitler had ordered. Hitler jumps out of the car, and after him Goebbels, Lutze and the adjutants. Right behind us another car stops with a squad of detectives which had been raised in Munich.

As soon as I have turned the car so that it is ready to leave in a moment, I rush into the hotel with my gun at the ready. In the hall I meet Standartenführer Uhl, the leader of Röhm's staff guard. Hitler's chauffeur, Schreck, is taking him at gunpoint down to the laundry room which for the next hour serves as the first prison for the arrested SA leaders. In passing, Schreck calls out to me: "Quickly! Run up to the boss! He needs you!"

I run quickly up the stairs to the first floor where Hitler is just coming out of Röhm's bedroom. Two detectives come out of the room opposite. One of them reports to Hitler: "My Führer [...] the Police-President of Breslau is refusing to get dressed!"

Taking no notice of me, Hitler enters the room where Obergruppenführer Heines remains. I hear him shout: "Heines, if you are not dressed in five minutes I'll have you shot on the spot!"

I withdraw a few steps and a police officer whispers to me that Heines had been in bed with an 18-year-old SA Obertruppführer. At last Heines comes out of the room with an 18-year-old fair-haired boy mincing in front of him.

"Into the laundry room with them!" cries Schreck.

Meanwhile, Röhm comes out of his room in a blue suit and with a cigar in the corner of his mouth. Hitler glares at him but says nothing. Two detectives take Röhm to the vestibule of the hotel where he throws himself into an armchair and orders coffee from the waiter.

I stay in the corridor a little to one side and a detective tells me about Röhm's arrest: Hitler entered Röhm's bedroom alone with a whip in his hand. Behind him were two detectives with pistols at the ready. He spat out the words: "Röhm, you are under arrest." Röhm looked up sleepily from his pillow: "Heil, my Führer." "You are under arrest!" Hitler bawled for the second time, then turned on his heel and left the room. [...]

Meanwhile, upstairs in the corridor things are getting quite lively. SA leaders are coming out of their rooms and being arrested. Hitler shouts at each one: "Have you had anything to do with Röhm's schemes?" Naturally, they all deny it, but that doesn't help them in the least. Hitler usually has all the information; occasionally, he asks Goebbels or Lutze a question. And then comes the decision: "Arrested!"

But there are others whom he lets go. Röhm's doctor, SA Gruppenführer Ketterer, comes out of a room and to our surprise he has his wife with him. I hear Lutze putting in a good word for him with Hitler. Then Hitler walks up to him, greets him, shakes hands with his wife and asks them to leave the hotel; it isn't a pleasant place for them to stay in, that day.

We follow Hitler into the yard and here he tells his chauffeur, Schreck, to charter a bus as quickly as possible to take the SA leaders who are in the laundry room to Munich. How slowly the minutes pass! More and more SA leaders arrive from outside and are brought into the laundry room. I stand at the hotel entrance and hear Röhm order coffee from the hotel manager for the third time.

Suddenly [...] there is the sound of a car arriving! At first I thought it was the bus chartered by Schreck but instead, to my horror, a lorry full of heavily armed SA men rattles into the yard. Now there'll be some shooting, I think to myself. I can see Brückner negotiating with the Sturmführer of the SA. The man seems to be refusing. Walking backwards, he tries to get to his lorry. [...] At this moment Hitler goes up to him: "Drive back to Munich immediately!" he tells the puzzled fellow. "If you are stopped by SS on the way, you must let yourselves be disarmed without resistance."

The Sturmführer salutes and jumps into the lorry, and the SA men leave again. No shot, no sign of resistance. All this time, Röhm is sitting unsuspectingly drinking his third cup of coffee. Only a single word from him, and the whole thing would have worked out differently. [...]

Now the bus arrives which has been fetched by Schreck. Quickly, the SA leaders are collected from the laundry room and walk past Röhm under police guard. Röhm looks up from his coffee sadly and waves to them in a melancholy way [...].

At last, Röhm too is led from the hotel. He walks past Hitler with his head bowed, completely apathetic. Now Hitler gives the order to leave. I sit at the wheel of the first car with Hitler beside me and our column, which in the meantime has grown to about twenty cars, starts moving [...].

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