

German Communist Party (KPD) Chairman Ernst Thälmann on his Interrogation by the Gestapo (Retrospective Account, c. 1944)

Abstract

Eliminating political enemies was a key strategy of the National Socialists in the early stages of the regime. Upon assuming power, the Nazis began an immediate and violent crackdown on the Communist Party of Germany [*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* or KPD]. The Reichstag Fire of February 23, 1933, while not set by the KPD, nonetheless proved a crucial event in the justification of anti-Communist violence. Propaganda following the blaze called the fire a harbinger of a Communist coup.

Ernst Thälmann (1886–1944) joined the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany [*Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* or USPD] in 1917. Later he was part of the exodus of members who, in 1920, split from the USPD and attached themselves to the KPD. (The split was over the question of joining the Communist International.) Thälmann became chairman of the KPD in 1925. In the March 1932 elections, Thälmann ran for president against Paul von Hindenburg and Adolf Hitler. After the National Socialists came to power, he called for general strikes but to no avail. A key target of Nazi aggression, Thälmann was arrested on March 3, 1933, as part of the roundup of KPD leaders, parliamentarians, and activists following the Reichstag Fire Decree.

In preparation for Thälmann's trial, Nazi attorneys tried to compel him to utter incriminating statements that could be used against him. They failed. He was therefore delivered to the Gestapo on March 3, 1933, for special handling. Although Thälmann was brutalized during his interrogations, he did not confess any crimes. He was held in "protective custody" [*Schutzhaft*] until August 18, 1944, at which point he was shot, apparently on Hitler's orders, at the Buchenwald concentration camp. This excerpt is part of the secret accounts that Thälmann recorded about his imprisonment. His notes, which were smuggled out by supporters, provide some examples of Gestapo interrogation techniques: the use of supposed reasoning and what Thälmann describes as a "good guy" [*freundschaftliche Biedermannsmethode*] routine but also blackmail and brutal torture.

Source

It is nearly impossible to describe what happened for the next four and a half hours, from 5:00pm to 9:30pm, in that interrogation room. Every conceivable cruel method of blackmail was used against me to obtain by force – and at all costs – confessions and statements about comrades who had been arrested and about political activities. It began initially with that friendly "good guy" approach, as I had known some of these fellows when they were still members of Severing's Political Police (during the Weimar Republic). Thus, they cajoled me, etc., in order to discover, during the course of this playful banter, something about this or that comrade and other matters of interest to them. But the approach proved unsuccessful. This was followed by brutal attack methods, during whose process four of my teeth were knocked out of my jaw. This proved unsuccessful, too. For the third act, they tried to hypnotize me, which was completely ineffective. [...] But the climax of this drama was the final act. They ordered me to take off my pants, and then two men grabbed me by the back of the neck and placed me across a footstool. A uniformed Gestapo officer with a hippopotamus-hide whip in his hand then beat my buttocks with measured strokes. Driven wild with pain, I kept screaming at the top of my lungs!

Then they held my mouth shut for a while and hit me in the face and whipped me across chest and back. Having collapsed, I writhed on the floor, always keeping my face down, and no longer replied to any of their questions. I was still given a few kicks here and there, always keeping my face covered, but I was already totally exhausted, and my chest felt so tight that I could no longer hear or see. Also, I was desperately thirsty.

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