

Hitler's Speech at the Putsch Trial (February 1924)

Abstract

After the failed putsch of November 8/9, 1923, Hitler, Ludendorff and eight co-defendants were put on trial for high treason at the People's Court in Munich. The proceedings were held from February 26 to April 1, 1924. The eight co-conspirators were Ernst Pöhner (judge at the State Supreme Court), Wilhelm Frick (senior officer in the Munich police department), Friedrich Weber (veterinarian), Ernst Röhm (retired captain), Wilhelm Brückner (retired first lieutenant in the reserves), Robert Wagner (lieutenant), Hermann Kriebel (retired first lieutenant) and Heinz Pernet (retired first lieutenant). Presiding judge Georg Neithardt did little to conceal his sympathies for the putsch's instigators and gave them ample opportunity to present their political convictions and launch demagogic attacks against the Reich government at the largely public proceedings. Hitler, in particular, seized the opportunity: on the very first day, he discussed his defense in a speech that lasted about three-and-a-half hours. His address at the conclusion of the trial, which appears in excerpted form below, went on for about two hours. The strikingly lenient verdict, delivered on April 1, 1924, sentenced Hitler, Weber, Kriebel and Pöhner to five years' imprisonment for high treason, less their time in pretrial detention, and payment of 200 gold Marks or an additional twenty days in prison. They were eligible for parole after just six months. Brückner, Röhm, Pernet, Wagner and Frick were found guilty of abetment and sentenced to fifteen months' imprisonment, less their time in pretrial detention, as well as a fine of 100 gold marks or an additional ten days in prison. However, they were immediately released on parole. Ludendorff was acquitted.

Source

[...] Lossow said here that he had spoken with me in the spring and had not noticed then that I was trying to get something for myself and had thought that I only wanted to be a propagandist and a man who would rouse people.

How petty are the thoughts of small men! You can take my word for it, that I do not consider a ministerial post worth striving for. [...]

From the very first I have aimed at something more than becoming a Minister. I have resolved to be the destroyer of Marxism. This I shall achieve and once I've achieved that, I should find the title of 'Minister' ridiculous. When I first stood in front of Wagner's grave, my heart overflowed with pride that here lay a man who had forbidden any such inscription as 'Here lies State Councilor, Musical Director, His Excellency Richard von Wagner'. I was proud that this man and so many others in German history have been content to leave their names to posterity and not their titles. It was not through modesty that I was willing to be a 'drummer' at that time for that is the highest task [*das Höchste*]: the rest is nothing. [...]

Mr. Public Prosecutor! You emphasize in the indictment that we had to wait with clenched teeth until the seed ripened. Well, we did wait and when the man came, we cried: 'The seed is ripe, the hour has come.' Only then, after long hesitation, did I put myself forward. I demanded for myself the leadership in the political struggle; and secondly, I demanded that the leadership of the organization for which we all longed and for which you inwardly long just as much should go to the hero who, in the eyes of the whole of German youth, is called to it. The witness Seisser declared cynically that we had to have Ludendorff so that the Reichswehr would not shoot. Is that a crime? Was it treason that I said to Lossow, 'The way you are beginning it must come to a conflict; as I see it, there need be no conflict'? [...]

What did we want on the evening of 8 November? All these gentlemen wanted a Directory in the Reich. If one has striven for something in the Reich, one cannot condemn it in Bavaria. The Directory already existed in Bavaria, it consisted of Messrs Kahr, Lossow and Seisser. We no longer knew anything of a legal government, we only feared that there might be scruples over the final decision.

I am no monarchist, but ultimately a Republican. Pöhner is a monarchist, Ludendorff is devoted to the House of Hohenzollern [Prussia-Germany]. Despite our different attitudes we all stood together. The fate of Germany does not lie in the choice between a Republic or a Monarchy, but in the content of the Republic and the Monarchy. What I am contending against is not the form of a state as such, but its ignominious content. We wanted to create in Germany the precondition which alone will make it possible for the iron grip of our enemies to be removed from us. We wanted to create order in the state, throw out the drones, take up the fight against international stock exchange slavery, against our whole economy being cornered by trusts, against the politicizing of the trade unions, and above all, for the highest honorable duty which we, as Germans, know should be once more introduced—the duty of bearing arms, military service. And now I ask you: Is what we wanted high treason? [...]

Now people say: But His Excellency von Kahr, von Lossow and von Seisser did not want the events of the evening of 8 November. The bill of indictment says that we pushed these gentlemen into an embarrassing situation. But it was through these gentlemen that we ourselves had got into an embarrassing situation; *they* had pushed *us* into it. Herr von Kahr should have said honorably: Herr Hitler, we understand something different by a *coup d'état*, we mean something different by a march on Berlin. He had a duty to say to us: In what we are doing here we mean something different from what you think. He did not say that, and the consequences should be borne solely by these three gentlemen. [...]

The army which we have formed grows from day to day; it grows more rapidly from hour to hour. Even now I have the proud hope that one day the hour will come when these untrained [*wild*] bands will grow to battalions, the battalions to regiments and the regiments to divisions, when the old cockade will be raised from the mire, when the old banners will once again wave before us: and the reconciliation will come in that eternal last Court of Judgment, the Court of God, before which we are ready to take our stand. Then from our bones, from our graves, will sound the voice of that tribunal which alone has the right to sit in judgment upon us. For, gentlemen, it is not you who pronounce judgment upon us, it is the external Court of History which will make its pronouncement upon the charge which is brought against us. The verdict that you will pass I know. But that Court will not ask of us, 'Did you commit high treason or did you not?' That Court will judge us as Germans who wanted the best for their people and their fatherland, who wished to fight and to die. You may pronounce us guilty a thousand times, but the Goddess who presides over the Eternal Court of History will with a smile tear in pieces the charge of the Public Prosecutor and the verdict of this court. For she acquits us.

Source: Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism 1919–1945*, Vol. 1, *The Rise to Power 1919–1934*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1998, pp. 34–35.

Source of original German text: *Der Hitler-Prozeß vor dem Volksgericht in München*. Part Two. Munich, 1924, pp. 88–91; reprinted in Albrecht Tyrell, ed., *Führer Befehl...Selbstzeugnisse aus der „Kampfzeit“ der NSDAP. Dokumentation und Analyse*. Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1969, pp. 64–67.

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