# *21: Hierarchy of Death*

At the end of January 1933 Hitler was elected to power. The Brown tide had swirled ever closer to the Reich Chancellery that winter. It had taken betrayals, bribes, and blackmail for Adolf Hitler to take these final steps through that Chancellery doorway. It was an unexpected victory. Writing it up in his diary Darré emphasised how little any of them – Frick, Hess and the rest – had dared hope that Hitler might actually be appointed Reich Chancellor. 'Himmler and Röhm then come in and mention ever so casually, "Hitler has already been sworn in." We all laugh out loud: "Good joke." . . . Soon after that Hitler himself appears: "Now I've been proved right."'

Equally, many of his opponents assumed that his government was just a flash in the pan, and that another would replace it just like all the others, but he muttered to Julius Schaub as he entered the building: 'No power on earth will get me out of this building alive!' Just as his predecessors had passed special laws banning or designed to hamstring their opponents, now the National Socialists would do the same, only with more radical effect.

It was an untidy victory, one that left many loose ends. With the Left still dominating the other side of the Reichstag, Hitler was short of absolute power. For a year or more after this electoral tsunami hit Germany, eddies and undercurrents persisted, leaving whirlpools

of chaos and disorder: the rule of law no longer obtained, human rights had been set aside, and thousands vanished into the darkness of the maelstrom. Ernst Röhm's hordes of power-hungry and *déclassé* SA militiamen began a reign of terror. Their 'auxiliary police' ('*Hilfspolizei*') arrested people at whim; secret dungeons, torture rooms, and holding camps sprang up across Germany. Himmler's SS partly emulated, partly resisted them.

The receding revolutionary storm-surge left pockets of Germany in other hands – unresolved. Bavaria, the largest province after Prussia, and the real seat of Himmler's power, was still in the hands of the Bavarian People's Party, the BVP, which had run a minority government since 1930. The prime minister was Heinrich Held, sixty-five years old, and he held out against *Gleichschaltung*, the National Socialist 'synchronisation' of the provinces, for as long as he could.

ON THE NIGHT that Hitler came to power, January 30, 1933 the serried ranks of the SA and SS, marching twenty abreast and carrying blazing torches, tramped past cheering crowds of Berliners through the Brandenburg Gate, symbol of Berlin, and spilled out onto the Unter den Linden boulevard. Himmler marched at the head of his contingent, with Reinhard Heydrich perhaps at his side – 'I think,' he later said, Recalling it ten years later, after Heydrich had gone, Himmler was no longer sure whether he actually was at his side that night or not. More likely Heydrich was already at his desk somewhere, working up the lists of enemies to be neutralised. Carl Severing, the outgoing Prussian minister of the interior, had long prepared such lists and Heydrich now had only to expand them.

Himmler brought Heydrich and his national *Sicherheitsdienst* headquarters from Munich to Berlin's West End, installed in a building in Eichenallee. 'Himmler and Heydrich,' recalled Heinz Jost, one of their senior collaborators, 'had agreed at an early stage in their collaboration that the several German police forces must be merged into a single "Reichspolizei" under their control.' Heydrich plunged into this monumental task, leaving his heavily pregnant wife Lina behind in Munich to pack their furniture for the move to Berlin.

If – like Dr Goebbels – Himmler had expected some immediate reward for his ten years of loyalty to the Party, he was disappointed. For the next months Hitler would be held back by the presence of 'Old Gang' politicians in his Cabinet, as part of the deal he had struck with President Hindenburg. There were just not enough posts to go around. In fact Hitler's ministers were in the minority. Besides, he needed Himmler in Munich. Reviewing some of Himmler's intricate instructions on a later occasion he commented to his private staff: 'Himmler is a pedant, like his father. Really an ideal man for Reich Minister of Culture,' he mused, but then remarked: 'I need him where he is.'

That was in Munich. Here for many weeks the SS Reichsführer agitated and fabricated – even spreading rumours of a plot on Hitler's life to document his own indispensability. (Later he had no need to fabricate, as the Communists made half a dozen attempts on Hitler's life that first year alone; from 1934 Jews were statistically the main perpetrators.) Since November 1932, mere membership of the Communist Party, the KPD, was high treason. Steered by the Moscow-based Comintern, the Communists were experts in revolution and subversion; they had now gone underground and would continue the struggle by every illegal means, as the coming narrative of the battle fought against them by Himmler and Heydrich will show.

THE BLOODY STREET battles between the illegal Communists and Hitler's men continued for many months. They had one unexpected consequence when a gang of fifty Reds ambushed and shot SS *Scharführer* Kurt von der Ahé in a Berlin street on February 19, 1933. Having always wanted a son, Heinrich Himmler impulsively adopted one of Ahé's sons, the then five-year old Gerhard. Like many who acquire a pet, however, he soon lost interest in the lad, and cast him off to a boarding school at Hohenlychen. 'I only know,' Karl Wolff

was later heard to remark about the foster-son, 'that he was accorded the most unkind treatment.'

The evidence bears this out, despite carefully posed photos in the Himmler family albums showing himself and the lad in Bavarian *Lederhosen* – in one, Heini is demonstratively laying a paternal hand on the boy's head. 'We've adopted a boy meanwhile,' he wrote to a Louise Niedermeyer, perhaps a former domestic, 'as we unfortunately don't have one of our own.' Unwanted by his biological mother and ignored by Himmler, Gerhard von der Ahé would have a difficult childhood. While Gudrun was mollycoddled and well-loved, and sent adoring letters and poems from school to her distant father, the boy penned desperate letters in copperplate handwriting pleading to come home. The school principal begged the Himmlers to heed this, saying the boy was lonely, homesick, and crying. He was suspended from school more than once, and scattered entries in Marga's private diary betray his increasing delinquence until he joined the Waffen SS at Brno (Brünn) in 1945.

AT FIRST THE National Socialists had real power only in Prussia. Here Hermann Göring was prime minister. Himmler's name does not figure once in Göring's 1933 pocket diary. Fate however played into their hands – and, as Hitler so often preached, the 'Goddess of Fortune passes only once, and you must grab her by the hem.'

On February 27, 1933, a few days after the shooting of Von der Ahé, a Dutch Communist wastrel, acting alone, set fire to the Reichstag building. The phone rang in Dr Goebbels' Berlin apartment with the news. It certainly took Hitler, visiting him that evening, by surprise. Describing it as a signal for a Red takeover, Hitler the next day persuaded President Hindenburg to sign an Emergency Decree for the Protection of the People and the State. Democracy's coffin had its final nail.

Inevitably, rumours ran through Berlin that Hitler's men had torched the building. Communists both then and later fanned these rumours into a propaganda blaze, and not a few Nazis willingly believed it. Count Wolf-Heinrich von Helldorff, a singularly nasty SA commander and later police chief in Berlin, told his son that he knew

who the culprits were, but that he himself had had nothing to do with it. Be that as it may, Hitler used the new emergency decree, the *Notverordnung* of February 28, to eliminate the Social Democrats and other leftist members of the Reichstag. Around 1,500 Communists were arrested and put into the new prison camps erected by the SA. In Prussia at least, Hitler could now do as he wanted.

That left Bavaria.

SUPPRESSING HIS OWN injured feelings, at his Führer's bidding Himmler had returned to Munich to stage-manage the next act there. 'We were tied to Munich at that time,' he reminisced ten years later, introducing Heydrich's successor. 'Munich was what mattered to us. In Munich our turn did not come until March 12 – it never bothered me and I never thought any particular thoughts about that – and I became Police President of Munich and took over the Police Headquarters. Heydrich took over the Political Police.'

It was high time. His unofficial Intelligence service, the *Sicherheitsdienst*, was crippled by debt. There was no money to pay even the few salaried staff. Paul Leffler, head of the SD field office in Berlin, stopped drawing his salary for the first two weeks of March 1933.

A NEW ELECTION was held on March 5, 1933. With the Left now excluded – languishing in prison or prison camp – Hitler had the muscle he needed to push through radical laws giving him absolute power. Bavaria would be a pushover. Whether in or out of uniform, the ordinary Bavarians now backed his movement anyway (and did so increasingly as the years passed). The swing in this new 1933 election to Hitler's Party in Bavaria was dramatic: the BVP, the ruling party, attracted only 27·2 percent of the vote, while Hitler's NSDAP soared to 43·1 percent. It was still not an absolute majority, and the prime minister Heinrich Held still clung to office, but not for long. Hitler's men rudely invaded city halls throughout Bavaria and hoisted the swastika banner. Hitler invited Ernst Röhm and his local gauleiter Adolf Wagner to Berlin to discuss taking over in Bavaria by force.

Flexing their muscles, the SA, SS, and other Hitler formations staged noisy mass demos in Munich's city centre on March 9. The

prime minister wavered, and declined to order his police to open fire – a crucial error in the eyes of the more bloodthirsty modern historians. This weakness marked the beginning of the end.

At midday Heinrich Himmler went with Röhm and Wagner to confront Held in his chambers. They issued an ultimatum to him to appoint a dictator, a *Generalstaatskommissar*, to take control and restore order. The man they suggested was Franz Xaver Ritter von Epp. He was not a senior Nazi but a monarchist Bavarian general, a prominent Catholic, and a Reichstag member.

Held resisted. He called a Cabinet, and he appealed to the Reichswehr for support. The army refused to help him. He weakly offered a coalition government instead. The Hitler delegation declined to consider it. That afternoon they reappeared, accompanied by General von Epp himself. Held bravely refused their terms, but events had already passed him by. In Berlin the new Reich Minister of the Interior Wilhelm Frick, a National Socialist, had already appointed Epp as *Reichskommissar*, citing the Emergency Decree of February 28 as the legal basis.

Hitler's men created faits-accomplis. At six-thirty p.m. Röhm's SA men seized the city hall. From the building's balcony city councillor and publisher Max Amann, another Hitler man, proclaimed that Epp had taken power and that Himmler had been given command of the entire Bavarian police force. The radio broadcast the announcement. Lina Heydrich had just put their last furniture aboard the removal van for Berlin when the news came.

Epp moved fast under his new powers, appointing Himmler as the city's *Polizeipräsident*, chief of police, and then a month later as chief of the Bavarian political police. Himmler's headed notepaper gave him this style: Political Police Commander of Bavaria (*Der Politische Polizeikommandeur Bayerns*) in the provincial ministry of the interior. These were state positions, not Party: there was no swastika on the official notepaper. Himmler immediately turned over Munich's political police department to Heydrich. It became the model for other provinces except for Prussia, where Göring and his police chief Rudolf Diels ruled the roost.

To be chief of police at age thirty-two was impressive, but Himmler

wanted more. He wanted close access to the vital springs of power. Meeting Karl Wolff, 'Wölffchen,' that evening of March 9 outside the canteen at the Brown House, Himmler instructed him to become his liaison officer to General von Epp. That posting extended to six weeks, and when Wolff then modestly asked whether he might now revert to his business affairs, as they were stagnating, Himmler invited him to become his own adjutant. On June 15, 1933 Wolff took over that position instead, with the rank of *Hauptsturmführer*, or captain, and eventually became Himmler's Chief of Staff and liaison officer to Hitler, positions he would hold for the next ten years.

His island of authority shrinking, Held tried to remain in office for a few more days. With the writing clearly on the wall, he fled to Switzerland on March 15, pleading 'health reasons.' He was one shrewd politician who still had his wits about him.

TO BE *POLIZEIPRÄSIDENT* was normally a task for a fifty- or sixty-year-old career civil servant with legal training, not a thirty-two year old novice like Heinrich Himmler, but the subordinates he found when he marched into the palatial police headquarters on Arcisstrasse as its new chief, mostly holdovers from Held's BVP, were happy to flatter him as 'Herr *Präsident*,' and he was no less gratified to receive this accolade. He would have to rely on these veterans, and in their eyes ability and professionalism still came before Party loyalty, so he trod carefully. This fine villa had previously been the British consulate-general. (On this same lot the 'Führerbau,' an important Party building, would soon be built.) With little time left for the running of the SS, Himmler had his hands full. He now had to learn the ropes as a policeman. Karl Wolff took over the ante-room and dealt with the mail, fielded the phone calls, organised his visitors, and brought in letters for signature once a day – Himmler usually signed Wolff's drafts without further ado.

Until recently, Himmler and Heydrich had been the targets of the police. Now the boot was on the other foot, but he was still careful not to offend. If the old hands at police headquarters looked down on him to start with, they soon stopped. The police veterans found that he was an administrator par excellence. Now, moreover, they

For my editors: a rare picture of Heinrich Müller.

could focus on just one enemy, the Communists, who were a very real danger.

As he cast around for the best men to work with, he disregarded their political colour. Many of the best police officials he selected for promotion were decidedly to his Left. His first job was to reform the headquarters' 'political department' into a separate Bavarian Political Police. Typical of the experts Himmler brought in here were Franz Josef Huber, a *Kriminaloberinspekteur*, and the criminologist *Kriminalrat* Friedrich Panzinger.

Like his father before him, Huber was an avowed anti-Nazi; he had worked in the Political Department in Munich, directing operations against the right wing. He was a close friend of Heinrich Müller, whom we shall very shortly encounter in greater detail. The true Nazis did not like him. Until Hitler's 'seizure of power' Huber had displayed a sneering and cynical manner toward Nazi offenders brought before him. He was known to have jeered that Hitler was a 'vagrant unemployed house-painter' and an 'Austrian deserter,' and he had denounced colleagues for greeting each other with 'Heil Hitler.' 'Together with his benefactor,' an angry and sarcastic note on his personnel file said, 'namely *Kriminaloberinspektor* Heinrich Müller who has recently been put forward for promotion to *Oberregierungsrat* and *Kriminalrat*, he was of the belief that they should

use force to oppose the SA and SS occupation of Police Headquarters on March 9, 1933.' Huber was however a brilliant criminologist, and that was what counted in Himmler's eyes; besides, they did not have enough trained National Socialists to step into these men's shoes.

As for Friedrich Panzinger, he had attended the Munich police academy with Heinrich Müller and became one of his most trusted lieutenants. He would become deputy chief of the Gestapo in Berlin in 1938. Himmler thought very highly of his skills and, much later, the Russians, British, and Americans all tacitly shared that assessment, and vied with each other to make use of him. The Americans won. He vanished momentarily in 1945, in a sequence of events which may seem significant when Müller's own fate is considered. Finally arrested on October 3, 1946 in Linz, he was turned over to the Russians. The Russians found that they could use his skills, granted him immunity from war crimes prosecution, and sent him back to Germany in 1956 as an agent to penetrate UPSWING, the new German Intelligence Service. He at once reported to the Americans, who ran him as double-agent UJNUTLET until his unfortunate end in 1959.

WHICH BRINGS US TO Heinrich Müller, the notorious 'Gestapo' Müller. In 1933 Himmler found him manning the Communism desk at Munich Police Headquarters together with his comrade Reinhard Flesch. These two men willingly helped Himmler and Heydrich to mop up the Reds in Bavaria, and when Himmler finally transferred his police operations to Berlin he would take Müller with him. A slightly-built, intense-looking Bavarian, Müller had belonged to the Bavarian People's Party. He had become viscerally anti-Communist after they butchered their hostages during the brief Soviet regime in Bavaria. He was no Nazi, and it would take four years for the Party even to allow him, now an *Oberregierungsrat*, to join; it was Heydrich who pushed it through. He was a few months older than Himmler, born like him in Munich, and so far as can be said with certainty he too appears also to have died young. Few photographs exist of him, and his actual end is shrouded in mystery.

Heinrich Müller was a calculating, sensitive, taciturn man with a hint of suppressed humour forced to each corner of thin, mean lips.

His narrow, elongated forehead suggested suppressed intelligence and determination, above gimlet eyes which were set perhaps a millimetre or two closer together than normal. He eventually became chief of the Gestapo, '*Amt* IV' in Himmler's national police web. His name was so ordinary, it might almost have been an alias. To distinguish him from other Müllers unfortunate enough to share it, in secret-police circles they nicknamed him 'tiny Müller,' *der kleine*, but History knows him better as 'Gestapo Müller.'

Objective but merciless, Müller rose to the highest positions, slotting in at No. 4 just below Hitler – Himmler – Heydrich in the SS hierarchy of death. 'He not only toed the line to the Heydrich brand of Machiavellianism,' said one close colleague, 'but began to preach it himself.' When Odilo Globocnik insisted in 1942 on a piece of paper authorising his *Einsatz* Reinhardt to kill a quarter-million Jews, and then demanded another signature for that many again, it was Müller who humoured him and signed the warrant. He was the immediate superior of No. 5 in that murderous hierarchy, Adolf Eichmann, whose name we shall encounter again. 'A terrible fellow,' assessed one diplomat who had dealings with Müller. 'Unassuming, worked like slow poison; he spoke quietly and slowly, watching all the time, you had the feeling that nothing can upset him, but he hears and sees everything.'

Himmler leaned totally on this faceless creature; he never really liked him, and was never as close to him as he was to Heydrich, but Müller was indispensable. When Heydrich died, 'Gestapo' Müller came into his own, and he was good at this task. Even when Hitler's Reich housed six million foreign workers and a similar number of prisoners of war, there was never even a whiff of uprising in the air. If Müller had a weakness it was only his distance from Germany's officer class, and this was nearly the Gestapo's undoing in July 1944.

LIKE MANY A MASS-MURDERER, Müller had a softer side. He had married a Sophie Dischner, but started an affair with 'Babette,' his secretary Barbara Hellmuth, who was three months younger than himself. In about 1940 Müller transferred his affections, if that can be said of a Gestapo chief, to an even younger girl, Anna Schmid. She

was thirteen years his junior. She was often questioned by his post-war successors, but what can a mistress ever really know about the man she has befriended? She described him twenty years later as a family man, modest, and a nature-lover. He was not power-hungry. Once in about 1942, said Anna, she had asked him when he would make an honest woman of her. Müller replied evasively as men do – let's see how the war goes first, and then we can discuss it.

He told her that the Yellow Star idea was his. 'Müller did not have a good relationship with Himmler,' she knew, 'but his relations with Heydrich had been excellent.' In the 1960s police found and copied eleven photos still in her possession. Being a Bavarian, he often wrote her in shorthand, 'outright love letters' rather in the style of Mills & Boone, or the German literary equivalent, Hedwig Courts-Mahler. He called her 'my darlingest most beloved little mousekin' and assured her, 'I carry you day and night next to my heart'.

Poor Anna was besotted with Müller, and her mother scolded her for having 'screwed up' her life like this. 'I was not aware that the Jews were being exterminated,' she testified, 'but I did have the impression that Müller was very tight-lipped about their treatment.'

WHEN AND WHERE 'Gestapo' Müller died are mysteries. Because so much else was happening to Himmler at that time, it will not impede our narrative if we travel briefly forward to 1945 to see. Müller's father told Anna Schmid in 1958 that he was buried at the *Standort Friedhof* or garrison cemetery at Nos. 3 to 5, Lilienstrasse, in Berlin-Neukölln. She hurried over there and found a cheap tin marker inscribed 'Heinrich Müller' on lot 6–1–1. His two adult children paid for a brown marble gravestone and she erected it there: 'Our dear daddy,' reads the inscription, 'Heinrich Muller, born Apr 28, 1900, killed Berlin May 1945' (*Unser lieber Vati, Heinrich Müller, geb. 28.4.1900, gefallen in Berlin Mai 1945*). Rumours persisted however that Müller had got away. The Americans called in Professor Gerhard Rommeney of the Berlin Institute of Forensic Medicine, and he determined in September 1963 that the grave contained the remains of three people; probably none of them was *Gruppenführer* Müller.

In the last weeks of the war his Gestapo headquarters at No. 8, Prinz-

Albrechtstrasse had been bombed out. Müller moved his office to the Tiergarten district, into No. 116, Kurfürstenstrasse, while he lived at No. 22, Cornelius Strasse in Berlin. It was here that Anna Schmid called on him on the evening of April 20, 1945, Hitler's last birthday; his radio specialist SS *Sturmbannführer* Christian Scholz was there, and his driver [••• *fnu*] Deutscher. Scholz had been Müller's principal assistant in the brilliant 'playback' operations about which we shall be hearing, and shared the Cornelius-Strasse accommodation with him. Müller had just come from a strategic conference in Wannsee, and broke it to Anna that the military situation was hopeless. He offered her a fake ID, but she declined it. They were burning ID cards and other documents.

Four days later, on April 24, 1945 she biked over to his office. She pleaded on her knees with him to fly out of Berlin. Reichsführer Himmler had left for the north-west, and Müller was standing in for him at Hitler's final conferences in the bunker. As she described it, this fifteen-minute farewell meeting was dramatic and moving. He had little time, he told Anna now, as he had to go over to the Chancellery, because his men had had to arrest Hermann Göring the day before.

'I found him,' she recalled, 'arrayed in his full uniform with the Knight's Cross around his neck' – Müller had been awarded the Knight's Cross to the Reich Service Cross for his work on the July 20 Bomb Plot. He scolded her for having come and handed her an ampoule of poison. 'He remarked that he was at the end of his tether, and had little interest in what was going on.' Softening, he added that he had seen a lot of the world, and he had gotten to known one wonderful person, namely Anna. He spoke with emotion and force, and she willingly believed his words.

*Gruppenführer* Müller finished with a rather odd admission. 'Yes,' he blurted out. 'The best men have won!' *Ja, die Besseren siegen*.

Anna rebuked him. The Russians – better?

'Precisely so,' he contradicted her. 'They are the better ones. *Doch, die sind die Besseren*.'

After it was all over, probably on May 10 or 12, 1945, this loyal young woman went back to find what had happened to him. The

Kurfürstenstrasse building was empty, and his office pockmarked with bullets. A sheet of paper covered something on the ground, she gingerly removed it, thinking it might be a corpse; but it was not. His room was almost unchanged, and the same little painting still graced one wall, but there was no trace either of his other possessions, or of blood stains – and nor was there the little attaché case he always used to carry with him at the end. Two or three days later she tried to visit the bomb-damaged main building in Prinz-Albrechtstrasse, but it was unsafe to enter and she gave up her search for Müller's body.

OTHER SOURCES THROW an uncertain light on the sequel. On the evening of May 1, 1945, the day after Hitler's death, Müller was still alive and in Berlin. He handed out Iron Crosses in the Chancellery bunker that evening. 'During the ceremony,' testified one recipient, Horst Kittler, 'Müller announced that a break-out attempt was planned for that evening. I asked him if he was going to participate, and he shook his head. He seemed very depressed.' At around seven p.m. Müller had told Hitler's pilot Hans Baur, like him an aviator in the First World War, that he had no intention of being captured alive. 'We know the Russian methods exactly.'

The first break-out attempt began around nine p.m., by a group of several hundred men and women including Baur, the drivers and other junior staff. Kittler saw Müller and Scholz – '*der lange Scholz,*' they called him – waving goodbye from the doorway of the office he was using. Henschel of the RSHA also saw Müller standing at the door, bidding farewell, and clutching a pistol in his right hand, a regulation police Walther PPK. Another officer, Kölz, heard Hans Rattenhuber, chief of Hitler's personal security detail, urging Müller that this was his last chance. 'No, Hans,' shouted Müller. 'The regime has fallen and therewith I fall also.' [*Nein, Hans, das Regime ist gefallen und damit falle auch ich.*] Like Müller, the army generals Hans Krebs and Wilhelm Burgdorf stayed behind in the bunker; these two shot themselves soon after. Their bodies were found, but not his.

Speculation as to the fate of this clever man remained. As U.S. Intelligence put it in October 1971, the German police found a lot of witnesses to Müller being alive that evening, but none who had

seen either him or Scholz dead; both had evidently had 'some special reason' for remaining behind.

Perhaps Heinrich Müller had his personal medals and papers placed on another body before making a long-prepared escape with one of those fake IDs. On May 4, 1946 the registrar's office of Berlin-Mitte turned over some of his more precious effects to an agency which passed them on to the German Armed Forces Notification Office for next-of-kin, the *Wehrmachtauskunftsstelle* (WASt), which forwarded them to his widow in Munich. His father eventually showed them to Anna Schmid. They did not prove anything one way or the other. So, had he survived? 'Our relationship was such,' she concluded sadly, 'that I am sure I would have heard from him.' She had not.

She admitted however that she would never have betrayed him.