

Street politics in Hamburg, 1932-3



Anthony McElligott examines the street fighting and battle for control of territory between fascists and the working class in the run-up to the Nazi seizure of power.

The Nazi seizure of power took place at many levels: at the top Hitler (with industry and finance capital in the background) outmanoeuvred the Weimar politicians; lower down, his Brownshirts, under the leadership of the former army captain, Ernst Rohm, and the propagandist Joseph Goebbels (the man who 'won over' 'red' Berlin in the Reichstag elections of September 1930) set about conquering the streets. Long before the night of 20 January 1933, the Nazis had set about working at the grass-roots of the Weimar Republic: the working class strongholds of the towns and cities. The aim was to demoralize and conquer the working class in the very streets which made up their territory.

In Hamburg and Altona this process began in early 1927 when the Nazi organization in neighbouring St. Pauli founded a commando group to launch a counter-offensive against the social democrats and communists in the struggle for the streets. The first large propaganda demonstration was staged in 1927 in the Hamburg and Altona area and Goebbels came to speak before the 'masses'. According to one Nazi description of Goebbels' talk in Altona 'for the first time in their history, in their stronghold' the Left were 'clearly defeated'. This was an exaggeration but it indicates the policy behind the Nazi strategy of moving into the working class 'Hochburgen'. The emergence of a militant Nazi street politics meant that a dichotomy deepened in the structure of German political life. The parliamentarians become increasingly divorced from a political process which was taking place much nearer the working class. This did not threaten the bourgeois parties at first since street politics tended not to involve their mainstream constituency, but the SPD made a fatal error in reacting too late when it did involve their membership. The founding of the Iron Front in 1931 as counterweight to the reactionary 'Harzburger Front' failed to deal with the problem at street level. The republican organisation 'Reichsbanner', which by the end of the 1920s was really almost exclusively social democrat, never condoned violent street action, but some neighbourhood branches did take part in clashes with both Nazis and Communists.

Quite different was the policy of the Communist Party (KPD). In 1924 the communist party founded its own commando group, the 'Rote Frontkämpferbund', which had its roots in the earlier 'Hundertchaften', militant groups organized at local level. The RFB, as it was known, was banned in 1929 after a series of bloody street battles but continued to function underground. In Altona and Hamburg it was highly organised and its local leaders were skilled in revolutionary political action. At the same time however, there is evidence to suggest that the communists managed to prevent their policies from becoming estranged from the realities of working class life. The fact that the lower functionaries of the party's different organizations were persons with roots in local working class life also helped to cement some sort of bond between the two which was not necessarily immediately political.

By the end of the Weimar Republic it is plausible to argue that the communists were far more astute in shaping their politics to fit working class political culture. The latter was certainly not a static factor. Given the horrendous increase in unemployment within two years (for the whole of Germany it rose from 3.2 million in 1930 to 6.1 million in 1932), the importance of the working class as a political factor moved from the factories to the streets. This is all the more so considering where the Nazi party, and thus the conservative powers in Germany, decided to put the full weight of their forces against the Weimar 'Marxists'. This is not to underestimate the relevance of what was going on in the factories both in terms of struggle between worker and capitalist and between the traditional SPD orientated trade union and the Nazis' own organization, the Nationalsozialistische Betriebsorganisation (NSBO), but is intended to give due consideration to the important shift in politics precipitated by mass unemployment. Already as early as 1922 a local communist functionary, Jonny Jensen, had declared that the unemployed were an important factor in the workers' movement and the struggle against the inequity of the capitalist system. In Altona in 1930, 4.3 per cent of the total population were receiving some sort of unemployment benefit and in midsummer two years later this had risen to 13.4 per cent. By the summer of 1932 nearly one in three of Altona's workers was unemployed. More persons therefore found themselves thrown back into the domain of the neighbourhood; for some it was a new experience after many years of the rhythm of working life; for others, especially young people, the streets were already a familiar haunt. Political life took shape in the form of discussion groups (Debattier Klubs) on streetcorners or on the doorsteps of the apartment houses or in the neighbourhood taverns. At the same time the KPD did its best to politicise these developments in partisan terms. With the incursion of the Nazis (identified with the notorious cuts' governments of Brüning and Papen) into the Altona working class areas (especially the Altstadt) the communists called on the local inhabitants to defend themselves and their 'property', meaning their neighbourhoods, the seat of their traditional culture.

The most usual venue for political meetings (branch meetings of trade unions or the political parties) was the tavern. It was here that the social and the political merged. Karl Kautsky had already noted the importance of the working class tavern in the 1890s: 'The sole bulwark of the proletariat's political freedom . . . is the tavern. . . . In Germany the tavern is the only place where the lower classes can congregate and discuss their common problems. Without the tavern the German proletariat has not only no social, but also no political life.' If control of the taverns were to pass from their hands 'the cohesion of the proletariat would be broken . . . [they] would be reduced to a mass of atoms, disconnected and consequently incapable of resistance.' Already in the 1890s, therefore, the taverns were recognized as the fulcrum of working class political culture. This was still very much the case in Weimar Germany.

It would seem logical from the Nazi view to begin the quest for power and control over the working class, and thus the destruction of 'Marxist' Weimar democracy, via this path. The process by which the Nazis began their undermining of political culture in working class Altona became most pronounced from the end of July 1932. On the 31st of July they had experienced an electoral triumph which must have led them to believe their hour had come. In the Reich they had received 37.3 per cent (of valid) votes cast; in the province of Schleswig-Holstein they attained 51 per cent; in the whole of Altona they received 37.9 per cent, and also gained the highest percentage (33.2) in the Altstadt. It is conceivable that the Nazis took

their cue from these formal successes. In June, the Papen government lifted the ban in force since April on civilians' wearing uniforms (this had directly affected the SA). Hitler was hovering at the edge of the seat of government power and the depth of the cuts in the welfare state exacted through decree (i.e. bypassing the parliamentary process) revealed the weakness - or unwillingness - of the trade unions and the SPD to resist or counter-attack. The only area of resistance was to be located within parts of the working class and from the communist party in parliament and in the streets.

Although the Nazis were never able to transform all taverns to their advantage and their number remained small in comparison to the taverns of the KPD and SPD, they were established in key positions in the neighbourhood and the pattern of establishment follows roughly an invasion of the area. Their earliest known tavern in the Altstadt was situated in the relatively bourgeois and nationalist part which bordered onto a large avenue known as the Allee and which formed the northern border of the neighbourhood. One eyewitness account describes how the first flags with the Swastika emblem appeared here. Now, there is no evidence to suggest that the petty bourgeoisie of the surrounding streets patronized this tavern - they usually frequented the cafe's and more respectable bars in the Allee and near the railway station, but evidence suggests that the tavern was frequented by some of the small traders active in the Nazi party. It is probable that the tavern took on more of a barracks character for the young homeless members or those brought in from outside; its proper name was 'Zum Lornsenburg' (it was also known after its owner, Flath's) but it was soon nicknamed 'House of the Fighter'. Yet the very nature of the tavern was reassuring to the bourgeois inhabitants. A sister-tavern was established in September 1932 some streets away. Prior to its becoming the quarters for the SA, it had been a communist meeting place, and its function under the Nazis was to provide a base of operations for activities around the area. In between these two Sturmlokale was the SPD tavern 'Weber's'. This tavern was one of the main meeting places of the SPD-Reichsbanner branch in the Altstadt. Weber's was situated barely two minutes from 'House of the Fighter'. These taverns were close to the main trading streets of the neighbourhood, consisting of mostly small traders and other small businesses. Here the Nazis had a relatively strong basis (either in electoral terms or actual active members). Some of the local figures of importance in the SA and in the party organization (the two were not synonymous) came from this group. The northern part of the Altstadt was republican and communist in feeling, but as one moved through the streets towards the harbour and fish-market area

then the colours turned a deeper red. In these neighbourhoods the 'Lumpenproletariat' inhabited the grey streets and broken-down houses. Contemporary observers described this area as one with a 'busy low life' of criminals and prostitutes. Here 'the houses, doors, windows, the sneaking forms had something ghostly' about them, 'secondhand businesses of every kind, corner taverns, temporary lodgings neighbored one another. Here, the most private and the most indifferent goings on mixed together with the most furtive, quickly concealed doings.' But it was precisely in this area that the fiercest resistance to the rise of the Nazis took place. This resistance manifested itself both in staunch electoral support for either of the working class parties but increasingly for the KPD and also in the resort to physical and armed resistance to the brown-shirted opponent.

Around November 1932 the Nazis set up another Sturmlokal on the staunchly socialist Breitestrasse. It is not clear if the woman who ran the tavern was herself a Nazi or whether she saw the chance of improving her trade. At all events - although some local patronage of the tavern cannot be excluded - the local inhabitants did not take kindly to the incursion of a Nazi meeting-place in their neighbourhood. Its presence was a brooding menace and foreshadowed, correctly, the destruction of a certain autonomy of lifestyle that had been hammered out by the working class. Its windows were stoned by some of the local youth, and Nazis were given a rough welcome each time they appeared in uniform on the streets near the tavern. The continuous bother forced the Nazis to place a guard in front of its doors. This, however, failed to deter. On the 20th of December an armed attack took place: no one was killed but one man was wounded and the tavern sustained considerable damage. A few days before the attack the communists

had distributed a leaflet signed 'Proletariat of the Altstadt' warning the inhabitants of the threat to the working class represented by the spread of the Nazi taverns and calling for their expulsion from the whole area.

In March 1933, during the period when the Nazis had not yet established full political and social control in the area, the Ortsgruppe leadership decided to move the headquarters of the SA-Sturm 2/31 (a particularly brutal troop) from its headquarters in the neighbouring part of Altona, Ottensen. The SS was also based in Ottensen and it is probable that the Sturm 2/31 was felt to be superfluous here. Also, many of its members either came from the Altstadt or had at one time been in one of the fighting organizations of the KPD. They were thus thoroughly familiar with the area and its activists, the structure of the party and its militant wing. The new quarters for the Sturm 2/31 was the tavern run by M611er in the Grosse Elbstrasse. This street neighboured the waterfront and with its many smoky sailors' bars, dives and rooming houses had traditionally been a cause for concern for the various policing agencies of the state. Moreover, this area was traditionally oriented towards an uncompromising but healthy anarchism which at the beginning of the Weimar Republic had manifested itself on some occasions in an all out war against the police. At the end of the period the returns for the elections show an increasing support for the KPD, which might suggest that the party's militant behaviour coupled with its working class roots in the Altstadt were able to find a resonance here. The transfer of the Sturm 2/31 brought the strength of the Nazi militant wing to a fairly secure level since based nearby in the Fish market itself was the Marine Sturm 1/31.

The functions of the SA in this area are illustrated in an incident in mid- March 1933 in which a worker was shot down. The SA had spent a day patrolling the Altstadt, concentrating particularly in this part. Late in the evening two members, who had apparently been drinking, decided to go into the socialist/ communist tavern, Kahn's, in the Breitestrasse. Some of the SA had been meeting with 'resistance' from the landlord Otto Kahn, and on one occasion he had allegedly thrown some members out of the tavern. The two SA men therefore wanted to 'make clear the political situation' and to 'inform' Kahn that the Sturm 2/31 had been moved into the area to guarantee law and order. Unfortunately, this also meant shooting anyone who looked like disagreeing with this plan. Their ready resort to firearms attests to the overall nervousness of the SA men. They entered into the lion's den with a certain drunken cockiness and self-assurance guaranteed by the guns they were carrying. The man who was shot had been sitting at the bar and was out of sight of the man who shot him. His mistake had been to get up from the bar in order to mediate between the SA men and the landlord. His killer heard only a movement and spun around with his finger on the trigger. After the shooting the two men hurried out of the bar shooting more shots into the air before making their way to safety.

The Altona Altstadt was perceived as a pure working class and 'Lumpenproletariat' district, a communist 'fortress' and 'red sea' where, in the popular bourgeois consciousness, mostly criminal elements carried on their shady business; but the fact is that nearly 40 per cent of the local population belonged to the lower-middle and middle classes. From the material so far uncovered, one of the emerging impressions is that of a latent class antagonism, revealed in the political affiliation of the different classes and in perceptions of oneself as being better than one's neighbour. In the confines of the Altstadt these differences were sharpened by the suffocating closeness of living conditions. For the middle classes differentiated themselves not only by their professional titles but also by where they lived in the Altstadt, which part of a street, in one of the larger and grander front-houses or in the little dark back-houses to be found in the courtyards. It is probable that they generally tended to avoid the taverns, frequenting instead the more polite surroundings and atmosphere of the cafes. But in spite of all attempts to distance themselves socially from their rougher neighbours they never fully succeeded for they had to continue living next door to working class families.

In the case of the Altstadt one could plausibly argue that the rise of the National Socialists also depended on exploiting the social contradiction existing there. Many of the middle class would have equated the conscious and organized working class with Soviet communism and world Marxism (a typical identification of the times); ultimately with criminality and violence. This antagonism remained more latent than overt however, since after all, the classes relied on each other through the simple action of selling and buying, custom and credit. In the SA, many respectable citizens saw a neutral means with which to contain the working class 'usurper', the 'red menace' and the 'criminal element'. In one episode in the Altstadt's history all these images come together. A 12 year old boy was killed in cross-fire during a KPD-led attack on the SA-tavern, Zur Muhle, on the evening of the 18 November 1932. Three days later the SPD and the KPD were out together on the streets calling for a school-strike until the tavern was closed down. The strike went into action but was quickly and energetically put down by the police. For the middle class parents in the school who had organized themselves as the 'unpolitical Christian parents' within the Parents' Association, the SPD and KPD were the ones who posed the real moral and physical danger to the children of the Altstadt, not the SA. They opposed the strike and the protest raised by the SPD and KPD in the town's parliament maintaining that 'anyone who has some inside knowledge knows that the true reason for the protest is political, namely a power struggle between the communists and the police over the closure of the SA tavern, and that the supposed danger the tavern poses to the children is only a cover for this.' The two workers' parties were the real 'disturbers of the peace' and unless action was taken against them the 'unpolitical Christian parents' who had proscribed the strike as 'a considerable disruption of the school system' were themselves prepared to do the same since they 'could no longer send their children to school in an area left to the complete mercy of the communists'.

If the middle classes opted for the Nazis it is not necessarily because they were historically programmed to become fascist in the capitalist crisis, although many did opt for Hitler as a Bonapartist solution to a social and political crisis. The term 'fascist' does not allow us to come within touching distance of these people, nor does it contribute to our understanding of the role of politics in the dynamics of everyday life. Instead we have to immerse ourselves in the period and try and imagine the different roles and stances the political groups adopted and how their presence fitted into the existing local structures or helped to alter them. In the Altona Altstadt it was obviously the KPD which caused most concern to the respectable inhabitant. The young unemployed men associated with the party would hang about the streets, either in small knots of discussion groups, or Debating Clubs as they were popularly known; or they would roam the streets in gangs either looking for odd jobs or for Nazis to harass - the two were often combined; they might even try their skill at a bit of window smashing (and perhaps grabbing its display) especially if the shop happened to belong to a Nazi. Their presence was thus felt negatively. They appeared in the public imagination as uncouth, undisciplined, workless layabouts. In the case of the SA members, these most usually appeared in uniform, in small disciplined groups (all the evidence points to the fact that an SA man never risked walking through the Altstadt by himself); and although their behaviour did not always correspond to the image, they presented a picture akin to positive, military order. Moreover, the KPD were identified by the middle class with foreign and racial powers (the Soviet Union and international Jewry) whereas the Nazis spoke, if sometimes violently, the language of national identity. There were other reasons too, why the middle classes, especially the lower middle class, should opt openly for the Nazis, perhaps most importantly because many party and SA functionaries came from this section of the population. There was then, a concrete local class identification cementing political affiliation. They were brothers and sisters of the same class.

The power of class identification was well understood by the Nazis. During the election in July 1932 they distributed a leaflet to all small traders in the Kdnigstrasse which played on class feeling. The K6nigstrasse cut through the heart of the Altstadt and catered for local consumption: many of its shops were small family businesses. A report in the social democratic newspaper, the Hamburger Echo, remarked shortly after the election in which the Nazis succeeded at the polls, on the 'colourful decoration' in the street the week before the election: swastikas hung from the windows and shop-fronts. The

newspaper thought it strange that the small traders were happy none the less to receive the money and custom of their 'politically left-oriented clientele'. The Echo then printed the main address of the leaflet:

Worthy fellow Germans! On the coming Sunday the miserable conditions in Germany will be put to an end. A means of propaganda of particular effectiveness is the decoration of houses with our flags. As a trader of the Kdnig Strasse you have absolutely no socialist or communist customers to reckon with. So you can hang out a Swastika without any hindrance. It would be an act of thoughtlessness towards the nationalist clientele if their wish was not taken into account because of a Jew or a socialist. For this reason we ask of you in the week before the election to fly our flag!

The point is clear: there is no excuse for a small trader to avoid 'flying the flag', not unless he or she was a 'thoughtless' character, and 'unworthy' German, betrayer of nation and class.

In the last months of the Weimar Republic the SA (and SS) increasingly took on the role of a police force (for a short while after 1933 they became an official ancillary force). On the 31st January and the 11/12th March 1933, the SA troops left their various bases in the Altstadt (as elsewhere in Altona and Hamburg) and set about putting up control checkpoints throughout the area. At the town hall they repeated this strategy. The police, according to press reports, were either demoralised or actually assisted the SA/SS in their actions. In the Altstadt they gave their full co-operation in the closing-off and policing of the inhabitants; they rode on horseback or sped through the narrow, wintry, grey streets in open armoured cars. For many of the socialist and communist residents this confirmed a suspicion they had long held: that the police had been conniving with the Nazis in their rise to power by putting down the working class at every opportunity. The success of such an operation depended not only on brute force, but on a certain amount of active support from the population too. At the same time, the working class as an organized force was split into two camps, and many of the SPD viewed the communists in much the same light as the bourgeoisie did. The working class when it did fight was engaged not in a vanguard action but a rearguard one. In the press and in public debate working class action was condemned (as violent action by the Nazis) as criminal and anti-democratic, the extreme left attacking centre and right and preparing the way for anarchy and then the communist takeover. But when one looks beneath the surface a different picture emerges. Much of the political behaviour at street level - despite the language of the Comintern - was directed at defending the tattered remains of the Republic and of working class traditions. Sometimes the two were synonymous and sometimes separate.

At present it is too early to come to any absolute conclusions about the rise of Nazism to political power and social consensus. One suggestion, however, would be that the route to '1933' lay through the streets of areas such as the Altona Altstadt. New research is beginning to show a similar pattern in other cities of the Weimar Republic and at some point a new and differentiated picture of the process leading to the Nationalist Socialist 'Seizure of Power' from below, will emerge. For the Nazis it was a matter of exploiting class antagonism in the Altstadt in order to reach their objective; before they could take formal hold of power they had first to make sure that at the base, the political, social and cultural and territorial possessions of the working class in their neighbourhoods had been wrested from their control and had been reallocated to themselves as the force most capable of protecting the interests of bourgeois society. Had this not been achieved then perhaps the Nazi mayor, Emil Brix, would not have been able to confidently report to the Ministry of the Interior on the success of the takeover during the night of the 11/12th March:

Absolute law and order prevails. Altona breathes freely. Our actions are known to the police president, Dr Diefenbach, and the commander of the police and are being tacitly approved.

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