

Module 04: The End of Optimism? The Great Depression in Europe

Evidence 14: Street Clashes in Germany: U.S. Diplomatic Report, 1932

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Questions to Consider

- What does this account by an American diplomat reveal about conditions in Germany in the summer of 1932, almost three years after the onset of the Depression?
- What tactics were being used by Communist and Nazi organizers and agitators, and what was the government's response?
- What does this observation suggest about how the outside world viewed conditions in Germany?

Document

The Ambassador in Germany (Sackett) to the Secretary of State

Berlin, August 9, 1932

SIR: With reference to my dispatch No. 1854 of August 2, 1932, particularly to that portion concerning political clashes in Germany and the activities of the Nazis in connection therewith, I have the honor to report that since the Reichstag elections of July 31, members of the National Socialist Party have perpetrated acts of atrocious violence at various places throughout the Reich from East Prussia to Bavaria. These political disorders have been of daily occurrence and are too numerous for accurate compilation, but the semi-official Wolff's *Telegraphisches Buero* reported, between August 1 and August 8, nineteen instances of terrorism resulting in deaths and serious damage to property.

The worst outbreak occurred at Königsberg, the capital of East Prussia where, early on August 1, a few hours after the results of the elections had been made known and almost immediately following the initiation of the Government's ten days' political truce (from August 1 to August 11 – Constitution Day), the Nazis produced a veritable reign of terror. Excited to partisan fury, apparently by their failure to obtain a parliamentary majority in the elections, and incensed by the murder of one of their members on the eve of the elections, persons now known to have been members of the

SA and SS (Nazi offensive and defensive organizations) stoned shop-windows, burned gasoline stations after ringing false alarms to divert the fire brigades from these fires, attempting to destroy democratic or socialist newspaper offices by fire and sought out prominent members of the Socialist and Communist parties who were murdered or assaulted in their dwellings, some whilst they were in bed. In this manner the local Communist leader and Town Councillor was assassinated; the former head of the administrative district, Dr. von Bahrfelt, a member of the People's Party who was known to have incurred the enmity of the Nazis and was in consequence recently relieved of this office by the Chancellor was shot, as was the editor-in-chief of the socialist Koenigsberger Volkszeitung, and a leader of the Jewish community at Königsberg was attacked. Shots were fired into the house of a Communist Reichstag deputy, one of them wounding a little girl.

Disorders were reported at other places in East Prussia as well as elsewhere throughout the Reich, and although at first they might have been thought to be sporadic incidents, as fuller details became known, they established the fact that the same methods were being followed everywhere, and make it clear that a premeditated plan of terrorism of last week, with its incendiary bombs and well planned personal attacks on individuals, has little in common with the former seemingly spontaneous street brawls.

While in the majority of instances the perpetrators of these acts of violence have evaded arrest, the fact that the persons involved in the outrages in East Prussia and Schleswig-Holstein were Nazis, and the similarity of the various occurrences – invariably perpetrated against persons of Left political thought or Jews – strongly implicated the Nazis. Also, reports from places where Nazis were arrested or their premises searched after minor disturbances, as well as from those places where serious occurrence have taken place, are to the effect that these persons generally were armed, and stores of arms and ammunitions, including machine guns, have been found. At Hofgeismar, near Cassel, the police discovered a Nazi truck converted into a military armored car.

It is difficult to see how this present course of terrorism can be stemmed save by most energetic measures on the part of the Government which is now virtually obliged to show whether it can maintain order impartially over all political factions or if it again must make concessions to Herr Hitler.

Since the appointment of a Reich commissioner for Prussia (see dispatch No. 1841 of July 25) a number of police and civil officers are reported to have been relieved simply because they were objectionable to the Nazis. Although urged by all elements in the country, except the extreme Right, to take vigorous measures to check the wave of terrorism, the Cabinet has been loath to take concrete steps, and this has increased popular uneasiness and given rise to the easily comprehensible suspicion that the Government would go to great lengths to avoid action which would lead to direct collision with the Nazis.

Source:

U.S. Diplomatic Report (1932).