THE NAZI SEIZURE OF POWER
THE EXPERIENCE OF A SINGLE GERMAN TOWN 1930-1935
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QUADRANGLE BOOKS
Mass extremism, intolerance, a desperate desire for radical change—all factors that make a stable democracy impossible—are difficult to evoke. When the community is secure, political agitators find themselves ranting in near-empty halls. It takes a haunting fear, a sudden awareness of hitherto unsuspected dangers, to fill the halls with audiences who see the agitator as their deliverer.

The average Thalburger looked upon himself as a Spiesbürgler: calm, oblivious to great problems, satisfied with life, pleasantly filled with good food, modest hopes, and a sense of simple order. On Sunday afternoon Thalburgers are wont to take family walks in the neat and ancient woods above the town, slowly strolling along the well-kept paths to points where they can look across the Grade Valley to the misty western hills. And then, Sunday dinner digested, they return to the snug town with its medieval houses. The setting gives a sense of continuity to life; the old ways can be trusted; stability is both desirable and inherent.

But in 1930 new fear began to haunt the town, for the world depression was spreading and cascading quotations on the New York Stock Exchange affected even this remote valley in central Germany. It was the depression, or more accurately, the fear of its
continued effects, that contributed most heavily to the radicalization of Thalburg’s people. This was not because the town was deeply hurt by the depression. The only group directly affected were the workers; they were the ones who lost their jobs, stood idle on the corners, and existed on the dole. Yet paradoxically the workers remained steadfast in support of the status quo while the middle class, only marginally hurt by the economic constriction, turned to revolution.¹

The economic structure of Thalburg kept the middle classes from being hard pressed. Merchants lost only a small portion of their trade. Artisans, apart from those in the building trades, found plenty of work. Civil servants had their wages reduced, but none of them lost their jobs, and if their pay was less, prices also dropped so that their relative position was not weakened. Total savings increased slightly during the years of the depression in Thalburg, and the number of savings accounts also rose. By 1933 over half of the adult population of Thalburg had savings accounts, and almost half of these were for substantial amounts: from 100 to 500 marks.²

But the depression engendered fear. Businessmen whose own enterprises were doing well worried about the general situation in Germany. Banks which had no difficulty collecting on loans began to reduce all credit allotments.³ Only the workers were directly hurt, but the rest of the townspeople, haunted by the tense faces of the unemployed, asked themselves, “Am I next?” “When will it end?” Because there were no clear answers desperation grew.

In this situation, the voice of the Nazi began to be heard. Thalburg had previously ignored the NSDAP * (as it had ignored other extremist groups after the Jung deutsche Orden battle which was largely the work of outsiders); in the national elections of 1928 the total vote for the Nazi party in Thalburg was 123, or 2½ per cent of the votes. In the local elections of November, 1929, the Nazis received only 213 votes out of 5,133 cast.⁴ Before the depression they were an insignificant fringe in Thalburg.

This was not for want of Nazi effort, for the Nazis were tireless in putting their ideas before the public. In the early months of 1930 the NSDAP held a meeting roughly every other week, advertised with such titles as “The German Worker as Interest-Slave of Big International Capitalists” or “Saving the Middle Class in the National Socialist State.” Like most Nazi meetings, each of these featured an outside speaker, promised a discussion after the speech, and charged an admission price of about thirty pfennig (the price of two loaves of bread). The meetings were held in the Thalburg Cattle Auction Hall which, according to the Socialists, simply exemplified the Nazi slogan “To Each His Own.” But the hall was well suited to Nazi needs; it was cheap to rent, emphasized Nazi connections with the rural population, and was small enough so that a poor turnout would not be conspicuous. This was important, because, in these early months of 1930, attendance at the meetings was very small.⁵

But the meetings were not without effect, for they created an image of the Nazis. To the average Thalburger the Nazis appeared vigorous, dedicated, and young. A housewife put it clearly:

The ranks of the NSDAP were filled with young people. Those serious people who joined did so because they were for social justice, or opposed to unemployment. There was a feeling of restless energy about the Nazis. You constantly saw the swastika painted on the sidewalks or found them littered by pamphlets put out by the Nazis. I was drawn by the feeling of strength about the party, even though there was much in it which was highly questionable.⁶

Thus one function of the constant Nazi activity was to demonstrate to Thalburgers that Nazis really believed in the ideas they preached. But who were the Nazis? Most Thalburgers would have found it difficult to answer this question in 1930, for individual Nazis were rarely in the public eye. Yet most Thalburgers could have identified at least one member of Hitler’s party: Walther Timmerlah, the owner of a bookstore on Broad Street. Walther Timmerlah came from an old Thalburg family; his father owned the town’s first bookstore. One of his brothers fought and died in World War I and another became a university professor. Walther became a high school teacher in a German school in South America, where he lived from 1912 to 1921, when he returned to take over the bookstore:

¹ Nationalsozialistische deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers’ Party).
It was shortly after the *Spartakus* uprising in the Rhineland; practically every windowpane was broken on the train in which I re-entered Germany, and the inflation was reaching fantastic proportions.

I had left Germany at the height of the power and glory of the Wilhelmine Reich. I came back to find the Fatherland in shambles, under a Socialist republic.7

In his years abroad Timmerlah had come to admire the writings of Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Shortly before the Munich *Putsch* he heard, at a literary tea, that Chamberlain had said of Hitler, “There’s a man I could follow with my eyes shut,” and consequently Timmerlah joined the NSDAP as the first member in Thalburg.

Walther Timmerlah was exceedingly well liked in Thalburg. A spare, lively man, he was gentle and kindly, friendly to everyone yet thoughtful and reserved enough to hold people’s respect. His bookstore was the intellectual center of the town, for he was acquainted with many of the writers and poets the town admired, and he was chairman of the Thalburg Lecture Society. In addition, he was a prominent member of the Lutheran church. “Walther Timmerlah bears a heavy burden, for it was mainly his example that led many people to join the NSDAP,” remarked one Thalburger. “People said, ‘If he’s in it, it must be all right.’”8

What were the ideas that drew men like Walther Timmerlah into the Nazi movement? To most Thalburgers the NSDAP was first and foremost an anti-Marxist party.9 When a Thalburger thought of Marxism he was not likely to think of the Communists, who in 1928 had received only 28 of the 5,372 votes cast in the town. The “Marxist” party in Thalburg was the Social Democratic party, the SPD, the Socialists. The Socialists were the dominant political force in Thalburg. In the 1928 elections they cast almost 45 per cent of the town’s votes—more than the next three largest parties combined.

The fact that the SPD was a non-revolutionary party (espousing, in fact, the status quo) and “Marxist” only in rhetoric probably did not matter to most of the town’s burghers. The Socialists carried a red flag. They sang the *Internationale*. There had been laws against them in the days of Germany’s glory. They were associated

with the cataclysm of 1918. They represented the proletarians, the unwashed workers, the restive unemployed. They preached Marxism and class struggle. Their leaders who sat in the city council were cited by improbable occupations: “oiler,” “union secretary,” “track-walker.” One never met them socially, yet there they were in the City Hall—touchy, aggressive, demanding. To oppose these radical apostles of equality was of paramount importance in a depression environment.

This was a fact in middle class thinking which the Nazis understood clearly. The Socialists, for their part, appreciated the Nazi threat very early. In March, 1930, their militia organization, the *Reichsbanner*, passed a resolution at their Thalburg County conference which called for “an energetic stand against . . . the ruffianly behavior of the NSDAP” and demanded action; “otherwise the comrades will turn to their own solutions.”10 A month later the *Reichsbanner* combined with the unions, the SPD, and the tiny Democratic party to sponsor a mammoth rally in opposition to the Nazis. Plans called for a series of parades, a demonstration on the Market Square, and a speech in the huge shooting hall, *1910er Zelt*, on the subject “Dictatorship or Democracy?” The affair was planned for April 27, a Sunday. This was what the Nazis were waiting for, and three days after the Socialists’ announcement, Thalburg’s Local Group of the NSDAP advertised that they would hold a meeting on the same day with a parade led by a band, a speech on the Market Square, and a “Gigantic Meeting in the Cattle Auction Hall” featuring a Nazi Reichstag representative. Moreover, the Nazi program was geared to conflict directly with the SPD’s; both parades were to start at one in the afternoon, both demonstrations on the Market Square were set for two o’clock.11

This confluence was too much for the police. Because of previous outbreaks of violence, Prussia had prohibited all open-air meetings and processions of a political character for a three-month period which had just ended on March 30, 1930.12 In the week of the two announcements there had been two outbursts of violence in Thalburg. In one, which occurred in front of a tavern on Broad Street, ten Nazis and Socialists had a short fight which sent one of the participants to the hospital in an ambulance. In the other fight,
which took place in the woods above the town, eleven people were involved and one emerged with a broken nose. In view of the tense situation the police forbade both April 27 meetings.

This provided the Nazis with another opening. In an advertisement emblazoned “Trotz Verbot—Nicht Tot!” (“Despite Prohibition—Not Dead!”) they announced that their demonstration would be held as planned, but in a village about two miles from Thalburg. To the meeting the Nazis brought over two thousand people, drawing on the entire district. Eight hundred Stormtroopers marched in what the GHC called “a powerfully impressive recognition of Nazi ideas.” After the event three truckloads of Stormtroopers passed through Thalburg scattering leaflets. By this demonstration of organizational agility the Nazis had not only blocked the Socialist meeting; they had dominated the press and “powerfully impressed” Thalburgers with their size and determination. Their mood was so exultantly bellicose that at a County Council meeting the following day, they heckled the Socialist speaker to a point almost precipitating a brawl. The Nazi image was projecting itself upon Thalburg. Perhaps for this reason, May Day of 1930 was celebrated in full strength. Workers from all areas, especially the railroad workers, were present for the march through town in closed ranks. There was much drinking, many speeches, and of course the sentimental singing of the Internationale.

The second idea of Nazism that Thalburgers recognized clearly in these early days was their claim to fervent patriotism and avid militarism. This was a foot in the door of respectability, as the number and nature of the town’s nationalistic social organizations shows. The extent to which the people of Thalburg accepted these values was demonstrated by the big event of May, 1930—a visit to Thalburg by Field Marshal von Mackensen. The occasion was the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Thalburger “Militia and Reservist Club.”

The Field Marshal arrived on the morning of May 17, by special train, and was greeted by a thousand people at the Thalburg station. A small girl presented him with flowers while the Thalburg city band played a stirring march. After inspecting the local veterans’ clubs, drawn up in uniform on the platform, the Field Marshal mounted a white horse and rode up Broad Street followed by the band and the clubs, including contingents from neighboring towns. Crowds lined his route, many houses were bedecked with the old Imperial colors, and roses were strewn in his path at the Market Square, where a rousing cheer welcomed him. His brusque speech on the importance of a strong army led to the general singing of Deutschland über Alles. Three days of parades and festivities followed.

This spectacle could hardly be matched by the Nazis, who were still reveling in their triumph of April 27 over the Socialists. The day before the Field Marshal arrived the Nazis held another of their small meetings in the Cattle Auction Hall, entitled “What’s Going on in Thalburg? Confusing Newspaper Reports, Deliberate Errors, and the Forbidding of the Demonstration of April 27.” In the ensuing weeks of May and June the Nazis kept plugging away with meetings on unemployment, on the “Protocols of the Wise Men of Zion,” and on youth in Germany. But such meetings lacked the spark of controversy and the pageantry needed to impress the public.

In 1930 the Prussian Ministry of the Interior was trying a variety of expedients to limit the violence that was corroding German life. The main contributos to street fights were Hitler’s Brownshirts, the SA.* The shirt was significant, for it emboldened its wearer and was a provocation to others. Hence, in 1930 the wearing of uniforms by political groups was prohibited in Prussia. This provided the Nazis with a new propaganda tool. In the last week of June the Thalburg NSDAP again drew on neighboring areas to stage a protest march over the Prussian uniform prohibition. About four hundred SA men marched (all wearing white shirts instead of brown) accompanied by a fife-and-drum corps from a larger town about ten miles from Thalburg. On the Market Square a vitriolic speech was given by a Nazi imported from Hamburg, featuring the slogan: “Heads Will Roll in the Sand.” The rest of the afternoon was given over to speechmaking in the Cattle Auction Hall.

This spurred the Socialists to counteraction. On June 26 the

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* Sturmabteilung, literally “Storm Section,” commonly known as Stormtroopers.
 SPD sponsored a meeting in the spacious 1910er Zelt on “The Crimes of the National Socialists.” Over a thousand people heard what the TNN called “an objective and calm” analysis of Nazism. There were some catcalls but no violence, and when a Nazi attempted he was “easily dispatched by reference to his personal record,” according to the TNN. The experience must have cut the Nazis, for the following day they distributed one-page leaflets attacking the SPD’s speaker.20

A second event growing out of the Nazi demonstration against the uniform prohibition shows how seriously the Socialists took the Nazi threat. The Deputy Chief of Police for Thalburg was Senator Wilhelm Mahner, leader of the rightist faction in the City Council. He had been present at the Market Square meeting where the Nazi speaker promised that “heads will roll in the sand.” Thalburg’s Socialists thought that Senator Mahner should have had the police arrest the speaker for inciting to violence. Mahner’s failure to act was taken as a sign that he was partial to Nazism. Consequently the Reichsbanner called a special public meeting at which it was determined to send a complaint to the Prussian Minister of the Interior and the Provincial Governor (both, providentially, Socialists). Mahner was then stripped of his police powers by the provincial authorities, and Senator Karl Hengst, the leader of the SPD faction in the city council, was made Deputy Police Chief in his stead.21

About the same time, the Volksblatt began to report incidents which suggested that the Nazis were violent and vicious. For example, it reported that when a Nazi leader told some of his SA men, marching in the parade in Thalburg, that they looked like “a herd of sheep,” bystanders who had laughed were threatened with assault. It later recounted that a Nazi from Thalburg, while hitchhiking into town, showed the driver his revolver, fired two shots into the air, and then fled before the driver could call a policeman.22 Thus even before the Reichstag election campaign of 1930, the political atmosphere in Thalburg was tense and the lines were drawn between the Nazis and the Social Democrats.

The Socialists had long since evolved a method of electioneering; they had been fighting election campaigns in Thalburg since the 1870’s. The method was to make every effort to fuse the working class into a solid bloc by big, impressive demonstrations and meetings, and at the same time to give evidence to voters on the periphery that the SPD was solid, effective, and responsible. In August of 1930, when the campaign for the September Reichstag elections began, the SPD was favored by the coincidence that the opening of the campaign came about the time of the annual Constitution Day holiday, August 8. This was the chief festival of the Weimar Republic, with which the Social Democrats were so closely identified.

As early as June of 1930 the Reichsbanner announced that it would hold a torchlight parade and a dance in the 1910er Zelt in support of the holiday. In addition they pressured other organizations to support Constitution Day by publicly excoriating clubs which refused to participate and promising “certificates of honor” to those who co-operated in the celebration. To assure a large crowd, teachers and pupils from the schools were required to attend. The torchlight parade involved over eight hundred torches and twenty-one clubs, including the Military Club and the Naval Society. In the words of the TNN, it was “the first really successful Constitution Day celebration in Thalburg.” 23

The SPD was also active on the legislative front. By June, 1930, there were 272 registered unemployed in Thalburg, a matter of obvious concern to the Socialists, who therefore presented the City Council with petitions and concrete plans for a limited public works project. In August these efforts paid off when the council adopted the SPD’s program and voted funds for the lengthening of a few streets, the construction of a playground, and the erection of two extra sets of emergency barracks for the “shelterless.” 24 The SPD could now enter the election campaign countering constructive action to Nazi demagoguery.

This was important, for the Nazis, spurred by the election campaign, became increasingly active. On August 10 they held their first election meeting, with an outside speaker, on the subject: “Eleven Years Republic—Eleven Years Mass Misery.” A week later there was a second Nazi meeting featuring a Gauleiter who spoke on: “Down to the Last Tax Penny.” This drew such a large crowd that many had to be turned away from the Cattle Auction Hall. Five days later there was a meeting featuring a member of
the Prussian Diet, with standing room only, and a week after that yet another.\textsuperscript{25}

The Social Democrats held fewer campaign meetings but strove to make them more impressive. On August 24 the SPD staged a "County Party Festival" involving six hundred Reichsbanner men who converged in four columns upon the Market Square. After numerous speeches there was a second parade through Thalburg with 1,200 participants and five bands. The parade wound up at a beer garden where there were speeches, songs, acrobatic acts, and, in the evening, a dance. Ten days later the SPD held a second mass rally in the \textit{1910er Zelt}. Admission was only 20 pfennig (unemployed free) and the hall was jammed. A series of speeches defended Social Democratic policies and attacked the Nazis, a few of whom were on hand to heckle.\textsuperscript{26}

The efforts of other parties were far less strenuous. The German Nationalist party held only one meeting, a small one. The GHC was their main campaigning instrument; in the last two weeks before the voting it ran at least five advertisements a day for Alfred Hugenberg and the DNVP.\textsuperscript{*} By election eve the paper was filled almost exclusively with Nationalist party propaganda. Page one, for example, was completely taken up with a picture of Hugenberg, a poem in honor of the party, and an appeal to vote DNVP. The People's party also made extensive use of the TNN for election advertisements, with at least one a day for the three weeks preceding the voting. The general line of the DVP\textsuperscript{**} was "Order, law, morality, and unity," which left it free to attack both the SPD (for "causing the depression") and the Nazis (for "destructive radicalism"). This was also the theme of the DVP's one meeting during the campaign, at which the Nazis were condemned in astringent terms while the People's party was extolled as the carrier of the spirit of the late Gustav Stresemann and the solid core of the middle class. It was well attended by a quiet crowd.\textsuperscript{27} The only other election campaign meeting was held under the auspices of the Staatspartei, a reactionary successor to the defunct Democratic party. The speaker called for orderly, middle class parliamentary rule, and for laws by which "Jews would be allowed citizenship only according to their character and accomplishments."\textsuperscript{28} There was sparse attendance.

At the climax of the campaign there occurred an event which, though not directly related to the electioneering, must have aided the cause of nationalism, and thus probably the Nazis. In the last days of August the Seventeenth Infantry Regiment, one of the crack units of Germany's tiny \textit{Reichswehr}, passed through Thalburg on its way to fall maneuvers. One company was quartered in the town for a night and the regimental band gave a concert on the Market Square which drew a large crowd and much applause. Both newspapers gave considerable space to the event, and the TNN noted slyly that the soldiers got along well with the local girls. Many children were up with the troops at six the following morning to watch the regiment march out, band still playing.\textsuperscript{29}

The last days of the campaign were hectic, with all parties pasting up posters and distributing leaflets. Inevitably violence flared. Five days before the voting three Communists beat up a Reichsbanner man because he refused to accept a propaganda leaflet they were handing out. Shortly thereafter, another Reichsbanner man was beaten by two Nazi Stormtroopers. Feeling ran so high that it became necessary for the leaders to insist that Reichsbanner men not carry canes in their demonstration parades. The state authorities had also issued ordinances requiring all meetings to close by ten o'clock and providing stiff penalties for anyone found with a knife or cane on his person at a campaign meeting.\textsuperscript{30}

On election eve the SPD held a final mass meeting in the \textit{1910er Zelt} with a direct appeal to its followers to vote Socialist and do away with the "unsocial bourgeois-bloc cabinet." For their last meeting the Nazis appealed to the religious element in Thalburg by bringing in a Lutheran minister as a speaker. The Cattle Auction Hall was overflowing and the speaker assured his audience that Nazis were neither economic nor anti-religious radicals.\textsuperscript{31}

On Sunday, September 14, 1930, Thalburgers cast their first ballots of the depression period. The voting was extremely heavy: 6,235 people voted, 94 per cent of those eligible. In Thalburg as all over Germany the most amazing result of the election was the meteoric rise of Nazi strength. In the Reichstag, Nazi representa-

\textsuperscript{*} \textit{Deutschationale Volkspartei} (German Nationalist People's Party).

\textsuperscript{**} \textit{Deutsche Volkspartei} (German People's Party).
tion went from twelve to 107 seats. The NSDAP in Thalburg went from 123 votes (in 1928) to 1,742 votes, or 28 per cent of the electorate. Nazi gains did not come at the expense of the SPD (with 2,246 votes the Social Democrats actually gained slightly) or at the expense of the People's party (which, with 788 votes, showed a net loss of only forty-six compared to the 1928 elections). But 805 "new" votes were cast, and the various splinter parties lost over a thousand votes; it was here that the Nazis garnered support. At least three-quarters of the new voters voted NSDAP; at least half of the Nazi vote gain came from those who had previously voted for another party. Votes were taken especially from the Nationalist party and the Staatspartei. Since there were fewer than 350 newly qualified voters, the Nazi gain had to come from those who were not especially young but had either voted for another party in 1928 or had not bothered to vote at all.

Regardless of the origin of its votes, it was clear that the NSDAP had increased its backing by fifteen-fold. Over one-quarter of the adult population of Thalburg now placed its hopes with Adolf Hitler. The radicals, the extremists, the advocates of dictatorship had arrived in force.
CHAPTER 11

THE USES OF ELECTORAL SUCCESS

(Spring and Summer, 1933)

I run things here—all by myself—and it’s because I’m Local Group Leader.
—Statement of Kurt Aegelz, Deputy Mayor of Thalburg and Local Group Leader for Thalburg of the NSDAP

The first task of Thalburg’s Nazis after the local elections were over was to convert the town’s mechanisms of power from democratic, pluralistic ones into instruments of dictatorship. This involved a purge—of the City Council, of the administrative officials, and of the rank and file city workers. The precondition was absolute control over the Council.

As a result of the March 12 elections, the Nazis received fifteen seats and the Social Democrats five seats in the twenty-man Thalburg City Council. This was certainly a working majority for the NSDAP, especially since under the “Leader Principle” all Nazi representatives had to vote as they were told by the Local Group
Leader. Nevertheless, a three-to-one majority was not enough for the Nazis, since if the SPD had even five seats they could legally demand that at least one Social Democratic city councillor be included in each of the standing committees. This would have been intolerable to the Nazis since their goal was absolute control over the town’s affairs. If the SPD had only four representatives, though, they could, with complete correctness, be excluded from all committees.

The Nazis dealt with this problem with their customary thoroughness. On the one hand they were able to persuade one of the SPD representatives to declare himself “neutral,” i.e., disavow the party under whose name he had run for office. How the Nazis managed to do this was never made clear. This particular Social Democrat had always been vehemently anti-Nazi; hence his defection was characterized by the other Social Democrats as the act of a Judas. It was a hard blow to them, though they realized that the Nazis had many means of persuasion.¹

This reduced the Socialist delegation to four. As insurance, however, the Nazis arranged to have Bette (one of the four remaining SPD councillors) arrested the afternoon of the first meeting of the Council. Thus if the Social Democrat who had been persuaded to be “neutral” should change his mind in the actual session, the SPD would still have only four councillors and could still be excluded from committee seats.²

The first meeting of the new City Council took place on March 28. Contrary to all previous custom the meeting was not held in the room in the City Hall appointed for this purpose, but in the ballroom of Thalburg’s largest hotel. Long before the opening of the meeting the hall was packed with Nazis, including many SA men. The SS helped the police keep order.

Shortly before the Council session was to open, the fifteen delegates of the “National Unity” list arrived in a body, all wearing brown shirts. They were greeted with applause and then with “Heil Hitler!” Almost immediately thereafter the four SPD councillors arrived. On their way to the meeting from Karl Hengst’s house (where they had held a pre-session caucus) the police had seized Bette. When the others arrived they saw the packed hall, well sprinkled with brown and black uniforms. The hall itself was draped with laurel boughs and on the back of the stage there were enormous pictures of Hitler and Hindenburg, flanked by the swastika and Imperial flags. Two tables stood on the stage, one long one for the Nazi councillors and, over to one side, a small one for the representatives of Social Democracy.

Twenty-five years later, Karl Hengst still retained vivid memories of one incident. As soon as he sat down at his assigned place, Hengst took out a big cigar and lit it. Immediately an SA man came over to the SPD table and said, “Put that out! You can’t smoke here!” Hengst exhaled slowly and surveyed the Stormtrooper. Then he leaned forward and said: “Now listen closely. Are you SA people running the City Council or are we city councillors? I’ll smoke here if I like.” The SA man turned on his heel and walked away.

Mayor Johns opened the meeting. He was a courtly man, noted for his dry and legalistic personality. After calling the session to order he spoke of his hopes that the new rise of patriotism would reflect itself in solid work for the good of Thalburg. He enumerated the difficulties that lay ahead, mentioning especially the budgetary problems. After congratulating each new councillor personally, he gave the floor to Kurt Aergeyz for the first speech.

Aergeyz began by asking everyone to remember, in this hour, how Germany had been governed in the last fourteen years. The military collapse had brought unspeakable unhappiness to Germany. It was the SPD that had been responsible for the misery. Furthermore it had not even hesitated to rob its own workers. Today the time had come to settle up:

We haven’t forgotten a single thing. Nor will we hesitate to pay them back for every bit. In the reckoning up it won’t be the poor people who were blinded by them, it will be the seducers themselves that we’ll settle with, down to the smallest party hack. In locked concentration camps they’ll learn how to work for Germany again!

There was more to say. Democracy was finished; from now on a dictatorship would rule and it would hit every enemy, no matter where he came from. The struggle against the Jews would be taken up anew. They would be met head on. Remembering Hitler’s campaign pledge, “The common good goes before that of the indi-
vidual,” National Socialism was moving into the Thalburg town hall, conscious of Germany’s great past, to which Thalburg had also contributed.

Next, August Tiere, the new Speaker of the Council, read a list of committee appointments as determined by the majority in its caucus. All were Nazis. The floor was then given to the SPD member who was to play the role of turncoat. He declared that he was now “neutral!” and had left the SPD “since with the dawning of a new era I can no longer belong to this party.” The audience cheered this announcement and it was to cries of “Bravo!” that the former SPD representative moved to the big table.

After the applause ended, Karl Hengst rose to his feet and asked for the floor. Tiere replied, “For fourteen years you wouldn’t listen to the NSDAP and now we won’t listen to you. I refuse to give you the floor.” Hengst spoke anyway: “You have a majority in the Council and in addition you won’t even allow us to speak. I see, therefore, no further possibility of representing the interests of my constituents. If you will not give us the floor, then we will leave this session.” The other two Social Democrats rose beside him and, accompanied by the boos and catcalls of the audience, marched out of the hall. As they were walking down the aisle, SA men on each side spat upon them.

The rest of the meeting was more prosaic. The Nazi nominations for Senators were unanimously accepted. A loan for public works, which the old Town Council had prepared, was approved and allocated in such a way that it appeared to have been done entirely by the new council. Finally the new Speaker, Tiere, closed the meeting with these words: “Everyone will surely have noticed that from now on a new wind will be blowing. The tasks ahead will require the entire strength of every individual, but we will fulfill them, inspired by the great idea, and by the spirit of Adolf Hitler.”

The crowd responded with the “Horst Wessel Song” and a triple “Sieg Heil!” The first session of the new Thalburg City Council was ended.5

This session set the pattern for all which followed in the first six months of Nazi rule in Thalburg. The features were to be persistent harassment of the Socialist members, apparent vigor in dealing with the economic situation, and the theatrical exposition of measures pre-determined in the Nazi caucus.

Thalburg’s Nazis had a free hand in dealing with the Socialist councillors. According to a circular from Goering’s Prussian Ministry of the Interior, representatives elected on an SPD ticket were not to be “hindered from fulfilling their duties,” though this was not to preclude police action against them. If the SPD representatives were not “cooperative,” however, then they were to be “furloughed immediately (if this has not yet occurred).” They were then to be replaced by temporary appointees, to be chosen by the appropriate Nazi District Leader.6

On April 7, Bette gave up his councillorship, since he was still in jail. On April 12 (the day before the City Council’s second meeting), Karl Hengst resigned, Hengst and Bette were replaced by two Nazis. Thus the SPD delegation was reduced from four to two.7

At the second session of the Council, the SPD turncoat requested that he be allowed to serve on the Council’s Economic Planning Committee, since he had nine years’ experience on it. Speaker Tiere refused this but urged him to keep trying to cooperate with the Nazis. Next the NSDAP proposed, and it was unanimously enacted, that Hindenburg, Hitler, and Goering be made honorary citizens of Thalburg. The NSDAP’s second proposal was also unanimously accepted. This was to change several of the street names. The new names were “Adolf Hitler Strasse,” “Goering Strasse,” “Hindenburg Strasse,” “Darré Strasse” (for the Nazi Minister of Agriculture), and finally “Elisabeth Zander Strasse.” It was announced that the next two new streets built in Thalburg would be called “Schlageter Strasse” and “Horst Wessel Strasse.” Before the session closed one of the two remaining SPD delegates made two motions. One was for free books for school children whose parents were unemployed. The second was for a solution to the “settlement” question. Both motions were immediately tabled.8

Despite this kind of treatment, the two remaining SPD councillors continued to hold their posts. Thus they were present at the third meeting of the City Council on April 28. Most of the session was given over to listening to a report by the Mayor on the state
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handpicked Nazi Senators actually spoke up, to the great embarrassment of Aergeyz. It was on July 18, 1933, and the session was being used to explain the new public works projects planned. After all the money had been allocated, Senator Blanck, who had a farm outside of Thalburg, suggested that some of the money be spent to build a sidewalk from the town out to his farm. This was voted down and the meeting was immediately adjourned by Aergeyz.11 Henceforth, the councillors and Senators kept absolute silence in session meetings.

A similar series of events took place in the Thalburg County Council. The Nazis were unable to create a “National Unity” list, hence they were not in a position of overwhelming strength after the election. In fact, the Nazis were even incapable of presenting a united front for this election. The source of this anomaly was that during the previous summer the Prussian government had determined to unite Thalburg County with a smaller neighboring county. Local chauvinism was aroused by this measure, particularly in the neighboring county which was to lose its identity. Hence, when the time came to draw up a list of candidates, the members of the supposedly monolithic Nazi party presented two lists: the “NSDAP List” (Thalburg County Nazis) and the “Hitler-Movement List” (Nazis from the neighboring county). The SPD and the Nationalist party each managed to present a united front.10

The Nazis nonetheless gained an absolute majority with fifteen of the Council’s twenty-five seats (ten from Thalburg, five from the other county). The SPD won eight seats, the Nationalists two.11 Even before the County Council met for the first time the Nazis began arranging affairs to their own benefit. Sixteen SPD village councillors in Thalburg County were suspended from office. The county’s contract for publishing official notices with the Volksblatt was severed. The Volksblatt was already suspended, so this was mere legalistic neatness. It also enabled the county to award the contract to the new Nazi newspaper, the Thalburger Beobachter.12 Finally, the Nazis forced the County Prefect, Franz von Alberg, to join the NSDAP.

The Prefect’s attitude toward the Nazis was mixed. He was convinced that increasing unemployment was driving people towards Communism and therefore that Nazism had saved Germany.
But he would never have joined the NSDAP freely, because "previous experience led me to believe that its ranks were filled with incompetents and bankrupts." This aloof attitude was not long permitted him. On the afternoon of March 29, just before the County Prefecture was closing, Walter Eckstein came into von Altberg's office. Taking off his own silver swastika pin, Eckstein tossed it on von Altberg's desk and said, "Put that on. If you don't, you won't be County Prefect tomorrow." So von Altberg joined the Nazi party.¹³

The first meeting of the New County Council was, like the first meeting of the Thalburg City Council, largely a ceremonial affair, open to the public and with the County Hall decorated with flags, pictures, and bunting. It did not have the tension-laden atmosphere of the Thalburg City Council's opening meeting largely because the personalities of the Nazi leaders (Walter Eckstein, the County Leader was jovial and folksy; Baron von Barten, Majority Leader in the Council, coldly aristocratic) were different from the personality of Kurt Aergeyz. Nonetheless, Karl Hengst took von Barten aside before the meeting started and said, "Look, if we're going to have a farce like the City Council meeting, then the SPD is going home right now." He was assured by von Barten that decorum would prevail.¹⁴

The meeting opened with a speech by von Altberg in which he expressed himself in accord with the various Nazi measures and finished by calling for a triple "Sieg Heil!" for "the Fatherland, for President Hindenburg, and for Chancellor Hitler." Next a speech was given by von Barten, who declared that the Socialists were there on sufferance and would be tolerated only if they conducted themselves with extreme objectivity. (The position of the SPD was already tenuous. Two of their representatives had refused to take up their mandates and a third, Bette, was in jail.) No "Marxist" would be allowed to hold any office in the county, and SPD representatives would not be allowed to serve on committees.¹⁵ Then he read the committee assignments from a prepared list. All went to Nazis.

Karl Hengst limited his reply to stating that the SPD had no choice now but to bow to the will of the majority. What this was to mean was made immediately manifest, for von Barten's first motion was that all county contracts be taken away from Jews and that Jews be expelled from the County Old People's Home and deprived of other county services. The motion was "referred to committee" and the session ended.¹⁶

The County Council was only infrequently convened after that. Most Nazi sniping was directed at the Nationalist members of the County Council, von Barten making statements such as: "You're like a cork on a champagne bottle. We touch you, you fly into the air with a bang, and then you're finished." The SPD passed silently out of the picture. By the beginning of June there were only two SPD representatives left; the others had resigned except for one who joined the Nationalists. It hardly mattered, since, like the City Council, the County Council had become primarily ceremonial, with all decisions resting with the Nazis, and all speeches being made by them too, since the other delegates were afraid to give speeches. By July all non-Nazi delegates were required to resign.¹⁷

With virtual control over administration of Thalburg and Thalburg County, the Nazis undertook the first and most obvious task: cleansing the city and county offices of actual or potential opponents. This was part of a pre-arranged plan, for as early as 1932 it was known that Tiere, the Nazi teacher, had a list apportioning the various offices and jobs among members of the NSDAP. There was no attempt to hide the fact that a purge was taking place, and the townspeople were clearly aware of it. The Nazis considered the "general cleaning action" one of their foremost accomplishments. It was so described in a special commemorative issue of the Thalburger Beobachter in 1936, and when Kurt Aergeyz made a report of his activities during the first two years of the Third Reich, it was the first thing he mentioned.¹⁸

Although the Nazis generally claimed to have dismissed a total of thirty workers and employees (Angestellter), the figure was actually higher. The sum of individual instances listed in contemporary newspaper accounts was forty-three, and this did not include persons edged out of their jobs with various other reasons given. In the latter category would be, for example, Mayor Johns, his assistant Dieter Thomas, and probably others. Of the forty-five persons fired, most were workers but some were tenured employees,
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Savings Bank and a night watchman. There were, however, other dismissals which took place without political reasons being given. In April a policeman was dismissed from service in Thalburg with no reason supplied. Later, extraordinary promotions and reinstatements occurred. In June, the night watchman who had been fired in May was rehired, according to the official announcement, "since he petitioned for this giving certain assurances." His reinstatement necessitated the dismissal of his erstwhile replacement. Later in the same month, one policeman was promoted and three others given tenure. This was an unusual and unprecedented series of moves.

A similar pattern took place in the county. The only person recorded to have been fired officially for his political opinions was Willi Brehm. Nevertheless, as a result of the union of Thalburg County with the neighboring county, a number of offices (and therefore jobs) became superfluous. The decision as to who would be retained and who would be transferred, pensioned, or simply fired lay with the all-Nazi executive committee on the County Diet. Needless to say, politics played a part in such decisions.

To Kurt Aergeyz, the most important single office to be transferred after the seizure of power was the mayorship of Thalburg. As far as political control was concerned, it was hardly necessary for Mayor Johns to be removed from office. As Walter Eckstein put it in a conversation with Dieter Thomas:

I can't understand Kurt Aergeyz. He and I are both businessmen and not civil administrators. I think we both have our hands full with just party matters. Now I'm sure that if I wanted to, I could have von Alteberg's job right now and be County Prefect myself. But I don't want to. As it now stands, he does what I tell him to in political matters and runs the administrative part quite well. Surely it is possible that Aergeyz could make some arrangement like that with Mayor Johns, don't you think?

As a matter of fact, Aergeyz could have eased Mayor Johns out of his position with very little effort if he had not tried to use underhanded tactics. Johns was sixty-one years old in 1933 and had been Mayor of Thalburg since 1903. In a private conversation...
with his assistant, Dieter Thomas, he confessed that he would have retired voluntarily and instantly if he had been approached decently, but that he would not bow before a smear campaign. 23

Since Aergeyz never tried anything except dirty methods, each new move he made simply hardened Mayor Johns’s resolve. Johns could not be removed simply on grounds of “political unreliability.” He was cold, objective, juristic. He was a conservative and in fact a member of the Nationalist party, but he suppressed his politics so completely that no one thought of him except as a professional administrator. Since Aergeyz could not use customary methods he developed a complex attack upon Johns. It took the form of trying to provoke Johns into acts or statements that could be used against him, attacking his subordinates in order to frighten him, intervening with higher officers to have him removed by administrative fiat, slandering him with incompetence and bringing him to trial on trumped-up charges of administrative malpractice, and, finally, getting him and his assistant dismissed with the elastic (and patently false) reason, “in order to simplify the administration.” 26

In Aergeyz’s plan of action, Mayor Johns was to be provoked into impudent statements or actions through one of Aergeyz’s good friends, August Blanck. Blanck, though a citizen of Thalburg, had a small farm a short distance from the city. He was a rough and uncouth man, a peasant in the pejorative sense of the word. He was constantly involved in legal squabbles with the town of Thalburg, which brought him into bitter contact with Mayor Johns. He was so well known in Thalburg for this that a joke went the rounds: “If August Blanck ever forgets to put his boots on in the morning, they automatically find their way to the County Courthouse.” One of the things he was supposed to have done was move the boundary stone on his farm so as to encroach on city-owned land. His dealings with the pre-Nazi Thalburg Senate eventually became so acrimonious that the Senators took the extraordinary step of refusing to rent him any land under the control of the town. 27

This was the man who was to provoke the Mayor. This became manifest by the time the Nazis composed their list for the division of elective offices in mid-March. At that time Kurt Aergeyz insisted that August Blanck be made a Senator. The other Nazi members of the City Council objected to this because of Blanck’s bad reputation. Kurt Aergeyz overrode their objections:

“I need Blanck as a fighter. The era of Mayor Johns is absolutely finished. Blanck will be the one to drive his fist to the Mayor’s heart.” And when the councillors still refused to do as he wished, the Local Group Leader declared: “As Local Group Leader I declare that Blanck is Senator!” 28

It was immediately apparent to many that this was Senator Blanck’s function. It was hard to imagine what other functions August Blanck could possibly perform in view of his low-grade intelligence. It proved a problem what “areas of competence” to assign him as a Senator. He was finally given only three: City Gardens, City Field Lands, and Garbage Collection. All this was clear to Mayor Johns and he maintained an attitude of cold correctness toward Senator Blanck in the face of the most vile harassment. 29

With the failure of these tactics, Aergeyz began to attack Johns’s subordinates, primarily his protégé and right-hand man, Dieter Thomas. Thomas, as City Inspector, was the town’s second highest administrator. He had attained this position in 1932; in a rare moment of complete accord the City Council had voted unanimous approval of his selection. Shortly after the Nazis came to power, Thomas learned that the Senate was petitioning Johns for his removal. Since each Senator refused to explain why, Thomas went directly to Aergeyz, who also refused to explain. When Thomas expressed indigation over this, Aergeyz exploded. Pounding the table he shouted: “I want to tell you something! If you think you can hide behind the Mayor’s skirts, you’re wrong! I run things here—all by myself—and it’s because I’m Local Group Leader!” 30

This again hardened Mayor Johns’s resolve not to be dislodged and not to permit Dieter Thomas’ career to be ended. Near the beginning of June, Johns went on vacation and Aergeyz, who now sat behind the Mayor’s desk as Deputy Mayor, was determined to make the vacation permanent. On June 28 Aergeyz took direct action. The minutes of the relevant Council meeting read, in part:

The National Socialist Faction, which today makes up the entire City Council, has determined in its meeting of today:
1. Mayor Johns no longer possesses the confidence of the City Council. The City Council refuses, therefore, any further collaboration with him.

2. The City Council concurs with the decision of the Senate to petition the Regierungspräsident to forbid Mayor Johns any further official activity and (in accordance with the decree of Ministerpräsident Goering) to strip him of police powers and to transfer these to Police Secretary Deuvelman.31

This, plus some intensive lobbying by Aergeyz at the upper levels of the government, resulted in the repeated extension of Mayor Johns's vacation. In the interim Aergeyz used the supine Senate to lodge formal charges that Johns and Thomas, as directors of the City Savings Bank, had conspired with Hugo Spiessmann, the manager of the bank, to give improper credit concessions to various Thalburg businessmen. Johns, knowing that Spiessmann (a March, 1933, member of the NSDAP) might perjure himself under the kinds of pressure that the Nazis were capable of, finally permitted himself to be dismissed. Dieter Thomas was suspended and then discharged "to simplify the administration." In return, the charges against both were dropped. (Hugo Spiessmann, an unwitting tool in the process, was dismissed as Bank Manager but given a job with the NSDAP.) Shortly thereafter Kurt Aergeyz became Mayor of Thalburg.32

This resolution came only in 1934, but by June, 1933, Aergeyz was in the Mayor's office and Thalburgers simply assumed that he was there to stay. Most Thalburgers (excepting, as will be seen, a significant group) had no idea that there was even a struggle in the City Hall. What the townspeople did know was that by the summer of 1933 the local political situation was radically different from what it had been before Hitler. It was clear that, whether as Deputy Mayor or as Local Group Leader of the NSDAP, Kurt Aergeyz was firmly in the saddle. Not only had the Nazis gained absolute control of Thalburg's Council, Senate, and Executive, they had also conducted a thorough purge of the city's administration. All actual or potential dissidents from Nazi goals and methods were eliminated or under control. The astute Thalburger, surveying his city government at the end of June, 1933, could not but see clearly that it was exclusively a Nazi instrument.