

Chapter 3

The Poison Kitchen: The Forgotten First Explainers

In which the heroic but doomed reporters of the Munich Post capture the essence of a “political criminal” in the blackmail consciousness of the Munich demimonde

Hitler’s party called it the Poison Kitchen. That was the preferred epithet for his newspaper nemesis, the persistent poisoned thorn in his side, the *Munich Post*. The running battle between Hitler and the courageous reporters and editors of the *Post* is one of the great unreported dramas in the history of journalism—and a long-erased opening chapter in the chronology of attempts to explain Adolf Hitler.

The *Munich Post* journalists were the first to focus sustained critical attention on Hitler, from the very first moment this strange specter emerged from the beer-hall back rooms to take to the streets of Munich in the early 1920s. They were the first to tangle with him, the first to ridicule him, the first to investigate him, the first to expose the seamy underside of his party, the murderous criminal behavior masked by its pretensions to being a political movement. They were the first to attempt to alert the world to the nature of the rough beast slouching toward Berlin.

But the drama of their struggle has largely been lost to history. The exposés they published are remembered, if at all, only in obscure footnotes; the names of those who risked their lives to report and publish those exposés rarely appear even there. Their full story has never really been told, even in Germany, or perhaps especially in Germany, where it’s more comforting for the national self-image to believe that nobody *really* knew who Hitler was until it was too late, until after 1933, when he had too much power (or so it’s said) for anyone to resist.

But the writers of the *Munich Post* knew, and they published the truth for those who cared to see it. While their opposition to Hitler grew initially out of ideology (the *Post* was founded and sponsored by the Bavarian Social Democratic Party), their struggle with Hitler became extremely personal. They came to know Hitler in a way few others have known him; they knew him and his circle as intimate enemies, grappling at close range with them in the streets, in the courtrooms, in the beer halls, attacking Hitler with a combination of *Washington Post*-like investigative zeal and

New York Post-like tabloid glee—and a peculiar streetwise, wised-up *Munich Post* edge all their own.

Their duel with Hitler lasted a dozen years and produced some of the sharpest, most penetrating insights into his character, his mind and method, then or since. Much of their work has been forgotten, but not much has been surpassed. And, as the name Poison Kitchen suggests, they succeeded in getting under Hitler's skin.

The Poison Kitchen: Let's linger a moment on that epithet. As a metaphor, its literal meaning is probably intended to convey the notion of a kitchen "cooking up" poisonous slanders, poison-pen journalism. But "poison" was not a word Hitler used lightly—it was one he reserved for his most profound hatreds. In his final testament, the last words he addressed to the world before committing suicide in his Berlin bunker, he enjoined the German people above all else never to cease from the "struggle against the Jews, the eternal poisoners of the world."

Hitler's final epithet for the Jews: "poisoners." It's an appellation with medieval roots in the accusations of well-poisoning that were used to incite pogroms in plague-stricken Central Europe. But "poison" and "poisoning" are more highly charged words than that; "poison" most often took on a racial, sexual meaning when referring to Jews, as in "blood poisoning": the sexual adulteration, pollution, tainting, and infection of Aryan purity. Jewish blood for Hitler was a sexually transmitted poison. It's hard to think of another word in his vocabulary more fraught with hatred and loathing.

And Hitler's hatred for the Poison Kitchen nearly matched in self-destructive fury the hatred he had for the "eternal poisoners." An argument can be made (and has been made by J. P. Stern, Lucy S. Dawidowicz, and others) that Hitler sabotaged his chances to hold the eastern front against the Red Army in 1944 because he insisted on withdrawing troop trains from his fighting forces in order to use them to accelerate the delivery of Jews to Auschwitz and other death camps, where he used poison gas to poison the "poisoners."

Similarly, at the crucial turning point in his putsch attempt in November 1923, at the moment Hitler most needed to mobilize maximum armed support for his march on the government center, Hitler's strongest and most fanatically devoted cohort—the Stosstrupp Hitler (the personal-bodyguard troops who were to evolve into the SS)—were dispatched instead to Number 19

Altheimer Eck, the building that housed the *Munich Post*, where they spent crucial hours sacking and looting and ripping apart the offices and presses of the Poison Kitchen. In what sounds like an early instance of the tactic of deniability that Hitler would employ to distance himself from the order for the Kristallnacht pogrom (and the Final Solution itself), he later proclaimed himself shocked, *shocked* at the assault on the Poison Kitchen by his personal bodyguards.

On that occasion, the Poison Kitchen rebuilt itself and rejoined the struggle. But ten years later, in March 1933, the moment the Nazi takeover in Bavaria was completed, a vicious troop of SA thugs burst into the *Munich Post* building, gutting it completely, dumping trays of broken type onto streets, and dragging writers and editors away to prison.

This savage attack is a perverse tribute to just how galling the *Post* had been to Hitler from the very beginning. They knew how to get to him, get under his skin. They had his number in a sense far deeper than skin-deep: in the sense that they'd seen into him, through him, in a way that few others had or would. They'd seen the Hitler within Hitler, and—I believe—he knew they knew. It's been largely lost or forgotten to history, their vision of Hitler, but it's still there, it's still possible to retrieve it, or at least to glimpse, in the crumbling pages of the issues of the *Munich Post* decaying in Munich archives, some elusive truths about the Munich Hitler that have largely been eclipsed by the postwar focus on the Berlin Hitler, the Auschwitz Hitler.

The battle between Hitler and the Poison Kitchen began as far back as 1921, before Hitler had succeeded in solidifying his control over the fledgling Nazi Party. In August of that year, the *Post* found a way to cause Hitler severe embarrassment, enough to provoke a howl of outrage and a resort to the courts. They'd obtained the text of a vicious attack on Hitler by an internal faction of the Nazi Party.

This poison-pen polemic, entitled “Adolf Hitler, Traitor,” had been circulating privately until the *Post* made it available for all to see. And it struck home, raising what would become persistent questions about Hitler and persistent themes of the *Munich Post*'s reporting: Hitler's alienness, his strangeness, both of origin and personality, his mysterious sources of support (“Just what does he do for a living?” the pamphlet asked), and, most woundingly, the question of his possible Jewishness or of some subterranean relationship to Jews. In his sudden grab for dictatorial power over the party, in his scheming divisive behavior, the anonymous Nazi authors of the poison-pen

pamphlet claimed, Hitler was not only serving “Jewish interests” but acting “like a real Jew” himself.

Hitler’s response was typically twofold, licit and illicit: Nazi death threats against the writers of the *Munich Post* in the night; by day, he took them to court, suing them for libel and fraud, taking advantage of the right-wing nationalist character of the Bavarian judiciary, as he would repeatedly in the twelve-year struggle that followed.

When the libel suit came to trial later that year, Hitler shamelessly accused the *Post* of fabricating, counterfeiting the poison-pen polemic that originated within his own party. The verdict, as would become the pattern, went against the *Post*, and a fine of six hundred marks was imposed. The headline on the story the *Post* ran about the verdict starkly defined the combat in the epic duel that would ensue:

HITLER GEGEN DIE MÜNCHENER POST

Hitler against the *Munich Post*. It was an unfair, uneven struggle. They were a small band of unarmed scribblers taking on a well-financed army of murderous thugs. But in ways large and small, they made his life miserable. Hitler “has no secrets from us,” they liked to boast. And throughout the extraordinary, nightmarish last-ditch war they waged in the final years of Hitler’s ascent to power, they found a way to obtain and publish one damning secret after another, often internal memos and correspondence of Hitler’s inner circle that linked him and his cronies to sexual scandal, financial corruption, and serial political murder. They had eyes everywhere: If Hitler went to Berlin and spent lavishly at a luxury hotel, the next morning the *Post* would print the hotel bill under the derisive headline “How Hitler Lives.” More grimly, they printed a running total of another kind of Hitler bill: the growing number of political murders credited to the account of the “Hitler Party,” as they preferred to call the National Socialist gang.

“The Hitler Party”: Their repeated use of the term was a relentless reminder to their readers that the crimes they reported on by Nazi Party members were the personal responsibility of one man, that the party they reported on was less a serious, ideologically based movement than an instrument of one man’s criminal pathology.

At the close of the *Post*’s 1932 exposé of the death squad within the Hitler Party known as “Cell G,” a story that was picked up by newspapers all over the world (and soon forgotten, alas),

the *Munich Post* writers appended a revealing quotation from Adolf Hitler about his personal responsibility for his party's acts, a remark that has resonance beyond that particular scandal: "Nothing happens in the movement without my knowledge, without my approval," Hitler boasted. "Even more, nothing happens without my wish."

The Nazi Party and its crimes were Hitler's personal responsibility, the Poison Kitchen always insisted. And they had no hesitation about making their attacks on Hitler relentlessly personal. They never, for instance, let Hitler or his followers forget Hitler's notorious belly flop in the face of hostile fire at the climactic moment of the November 1923 putsch attempt, the march on the Munich Odeonsplatz. As soon as loyal government troops fired at his mob, Hitler dived to the street and used the corpses of comrades to shield himself from bullets. There are conflicting interpretations of the belly flop: Some say Hitler was deliberately or inadvertently dragged down out of the line of fire by the grasp of a falling comrade, others that it was the instinct of a combat soldier to hit the deck when shots were flying. But it's also true that Hitler's chief ally, General Erich Ludendorff, picked himself up and marched straight into the hostile fire after that first volley, while Hitler, suffering from a dislocated shoulder, slunk away in pain before being carried off into hiding.

But for the *Post*, Hitler was always *on his belly*, a creature both craven and dangerously serpentlike. In reviewing the *Post* issues from the final months of the struggle against Hitler, I came across a cartoon they published in November 1932. It was a moment of heartbreaking false hope. After surging for two years, Hitler's vote in the final free national election, the one held on November 7, plummeted. There were those, even at the *Post*, who believed that at last Hitler's threat was fading, short of takeover. The cartoon showed a Hitler having been kicked out of a door by voters and landing ignominiously on the pavement.

ON HIS BELLY AGAIN!

was the prematurely triumphant caption.

There was something about seeing that cartoon that brought home to me the exhilaration and tragedy of the *Munich Post* struggle. They always seemed to be one more story, one more exposé away from scotching the serpent. Once it seemed they were one story away from driving him to suicide. At the time of Geli Raubal's death, the questions the *Post* raised about the nature of

Hitler's relationship to his attractive half-niece and about his role in her death and the suggestion that her nose had been broken in a quarrel brought Hitler close to the brink of shooting himself, according to several associates who were with him at the time. According to Hitler's attorney, Hans Frank, whom he'd dispatched to threaten the *Post* with a lawsuit over its Geli Raubal coverage, Hitler was moaning that "he could not look at a paper any more, the terrible smear campaign would kill him."

Alas, it didn't: In the end, in the sixteen months following Geli's death, as their pitched battle with Hitler and the Hitler Party reached a peak, they were still one story shy of bringing him down on January 30, 1933, when it became too late.

There were other journalists engaged in the same struggle. There was Konrad Heiden, Munich correspondent for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, who went on to found an anti-Nazi press syndicate based in Berlin, and Rudolf Olden, Munich correspondent for Berlin papers, both of whom escaped with their lives to write scathing books about Hitler in an attempt to warn the West. And there was Fritz Gerlich of *Der Gerade Weg*, who did not escape.

But the *Munich Post* reporters—men such as Martin Gruber, Erhard Auer, Edmund Goldschagg, Julius Zerfass, among others—were in the trenches every day, taking on Hitler, facing down his thugs and their threats, testing the power of truth to combat evil, and sharing the Cassandra-like fate of discovering its limits. They lost, but there is more to their legacy than the heroism they displayed (although that in itself deserves far more recognition than it's received from their contemporary successors among German journalists). They also left behind a vision of Hitler, a coherent explanation, a perspective on him that's been lost, for the most part, to history and to the debate over who Hitler was. It's a perspective they never had the leisure to sum up in so many words in a tract, but it's one that emerges clearly from an immersion in their day-to-day coverage of Hitler and the Hitler Party.

Those hectic, nightmarish final two years were dominated in the *Post* coverage by a series of serial, detonating, closely linked Hitler Party scandals that began with a relatively small-time sexual-blackmail plot that, when exposed by the *Post*, led to escalating revelations of far more serious and deadly Hitler Party scandals: First, the exposé of "Cell G," the Hitler Party's secret death squad, which had been caught red-handed trying to assassinate the party members who'd brought them embarrassment in the original sexual-blackmail scandal. This led to an even more

frightening and unfortunately prophetic exposé: secret Hitler Party plans for a bloodbath, a massacre of their political enemies once they came to power, a mass murder in embryo for all to see.

They even glimpsed, through a glass darkly, the shadow of the Final Solution. In fact, they picked up on the fateful Hitler euphemism for genocide—*endlösung*, the final solution—in the context of the fate of the Jews as early as December 9, 1931, in a chilling and prophetic dispatch called “The Jews in the Third Reich.”

More than a year before Hitler came to power, the *Post* reported it had uncovered “a secret plan” from an inside source in Hitler’s SA. A secret plan in which the Hitler Party had “worked out special orders for the solution of the Jewish question when they take power, instructions that are top secret. They have forbidden discussion of these in public for fear of its foreign policy effects.”

What followed was an extremely detailed list of a score of anti-Jewish measures that foretold with astonishing precision all the successive stages of restrictions and persecutions the Nazi Party was to take against the Jews in the period between 1933 and 1939. And the *Post* hinted at more: It spoke of a further “*final* solution.”

The list of restrictions it predicted seems familiar now: removal of Jews from the courts, from the civil service, the professions; police surveillance, including residency and identity permits; confiscation of Jewish enterprises and property; detention and expulsion of “unwanted” Jews; Nuremberg-type laws against intermarriage and sexual and social intercourse.

All of this leading up to a further “final solution” beyond that: “for the final solution of the Jewish question it is proposed to use the Jews in Germany for slave labor or for cultivation of the German swamps administered by a special SS division.”

One feels a chill reading this: the division between the ratcheting up of legal and civil restrictions and something beyond that—a final solution that involves removal of the Jews physically from German society for a worse fate in “the swamps” at the hands of the SS. That invocation of the final solution in the swamps carries with it a premonitory echo of an ugly euphemistic jest about the Final Solution Hitler, Himmler, and Heydrich would share ten years later as recorded in

Hitler's "Table Talk": Isn't it terrible the "rumor" that we're exterminating the Jews when we're only "parking them" in the swamps of Russia.

Were the *Munich Post* writers aware then that those swamps would become euphemisms for the mass graves to come? One can only guess at what they sensed beneath the swamps of the "final solution" they reported on in 1931. (A survey of contemporary German and foreign newspapers for that period shows no evidence that any of them thought this premonitory report on a "final solution" worthy of further investigation.) But in the concatenation of their exposés and investigations, in the chronicling of the string of political murders committed by the Hitler Party, the *Munich Post* reporters left little hidden about the party's murderous nature and intent. They saw it as a homicidal criminal enterprise beneath the facade of a political party.

The emphasis on the down and dirty criminality of the Hitler Party is a signature of the *Munich Post* writers' vision: They were, in effect, enlightened police reporters covering a homicide story in the guise of a political one. This point was brought home to me vividly in a conversation I had with a son of one of the foremost chefs of the Poison Kitchen, their star political reporter, "the Prussian Nightingale." The Prussian Nightingale was the nickname his *Munich Post* colleagues gave to Edmund Goldschagg, one of the most visible point men in the *Post*'s war against Hitler—"Prussian" because he had come to the *Post* in 1928 after a long stint writing for a Berlin paper and "Nightingale" because he was known for his exuberant, convivial, often musical way with words, the way he would brighten the *Post Stammtisch* (communal table) at the Café Heck with his high spirits and songs.

When I spoke to Goldschagg's son Rolf in Munich, I found him largely unaware of the details of his father's most dramatic clashes with Hitler. They had, it's true, taken place before Rolf was born. But the limited-edition memorial volume Rolf had commissioned about his father dwelt for little more than a chapter on the pre-1933 struggle. In part, this can be attributed to the fact that his father's life *after* the Hitler takeover was so eventful—and also quite heroic. After the *Post* was sacked, the Prussian Nightingale was arrested and drafted into the army. But after being expelled for his political views, he went to ground in Freiburg, where, despite his own suspect status, he risked his life harboring a Jewish woman for a year until she could escape to Switzerland. Afterward, he became one of the founders of what was to become the powerful South German daily, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

In part, the son's lack of detailed knowledge about his father's anti-Hitler journalism might be due to his temperamental distance from the flamboyant, socialist, anti-Hitler firebrand his father was. But the son of the Prussian Nightingale did make one memorable, defining remark to me about his father's vision of Adolf Hitler. I'd asked him a question I'd put to a number of survivors and chroniclers of the Hitler period: Did he think Hitler's evil could be explained by some insanity or mental derangement?

"No," the son insisted to me, with more passion than he'd summoned for any other comment on the Poison Kitchen, "my father did *not* think Hitler was crazy. He always referred to him as a *political criminal*."

Not a criminal politician; a political criminal. When I first heard it, I thought this phrase had the ring of sterile Marxist rhetoric. But after spending time in the archives with their back issues, it was clear to me the *Post* was not a captive of Marxist orthodoxy; they were, in fact, anticommunist and contemptuous of the police terror masquerading as Marxism in the Soviet Union, a contempt embodied in the derisive name they gave to the death-squad infrastructure they exposed in the Nazi Party: "The Cheka in the Brown House," Cheka being at one time the informal name of the feared Soviet secret police. The *Post* was more liberal and populist than Marxist.

And, in fact, after immersing myself in their reportage on Hitler and the Hitler Party, I came to see that "political criminal" was not an empty epithet but a carefully considered encapsulation of a larger vision: that Hitler's evil was not generated from some malevolent higher abstraction of belief, from an ideology that descended into criminality and murder to achieve its aims; rather, his evil *arose* from his criminality and only garbed itself in ideological belief.

One sees this in the paper day by day, not so much in the big scandals, the headline-making events, but in the daily log of murders. "Feme [Death Squad] Murder in Thuringia," "Brown Murder in Stuttgart," "SA Killing in Halle," "Brown Terror in Magdeburg," "Nazi Murders in Lippe." Scarcely an issue went by in those final two years without one and usually two, three, or four brief dispatches reporting the blatant cold-blooded murder of political opponents by Hitler Party members. Cumulatively, what one is witnessing is the systematic extermination of the best and bravest, the most outspoken opponents of the Hitler Party as they're gunned down or clubbed to death with truncheons or as bodies are found stabbed, strangled, drowned,

or simply never found at all. Followed frequently by reports of how one court after another has allowed the murderers to go free or get off with sentences more appropriate for petty theft.

Reading the *Post's* despairing daily drumbeat of murder adds a missing dimension to the account of Hitler's rise, one that has been lost in some of the grand postwar explanations, which tend to assume some deep causal inevitability to Hitler's accession to power—economic conditions, generational psychic trauma, Christian anti-Semitism, fear of modernism, the techniques of mass propaganda, the torch-lit Nuremberg rallies, the manipulation of emotional symbols, the mesmerized crowds, the rhetoric, and, above all, the ideology.

All of these may help explain Hitler's appeal, but they do not necessarily explain Hitler's success. As Alan Bullock was the first to demonstrate, Hitler came almost as close to failing in his drive to seize power as he did to succeeding; what's missing from the grander explanations is what one sees on the ground, so to speak, the texture of daily terror apparent in the pages of the *Munich Post*, the systematic, step-by-step slaughter of Hitler's most capable political opponents, murdered by his party of political criminals.

But there are two other crimes that emerge from the seamy web of political criminality the *Post* exposed, two types of crimes that, if less violent and bloody than murder, cumulatively emerge in the pages of the *Post* as the peculiar, metaphoric *signature* crimes of the Munich Hitler and the Hitler Party: blackmail and counterfeiting.

Perhaps the best way to get a feel for the Poison Kitchen vision of the Hitler Party is to look closely at one of the emblematic blackmail scandals they exposed and then move on to the sources of their preoccupation with counterfeiting, not just the small-time forgery of documents but the Hitler Party's wholesale counterfeiting of history itself.

It began, the two-year-long final protracted battle between Hitler and the Poison Kitchen, with the June 22, 1931, issue and a sardonic banner headline that read:

WARM BROTHERHOOD IN THE BROWN HOUSE

followed by the subtitle:

Sexual Life in the Third Reich

What followed was a plunge directly into the seamy heart of Hitler Party blackmail culture, a thriving criminal subculture preying on itself, which raised the blackmail letter to a black art.

The focus of the story is an elaborate masterpiece of a blackmail missive directed to SA chief Ernst Roehm in the guise of an investigation by the letter writer *on behalf of Roehm* into another blackmail plot against Roehm. Here we have the characteristic syndrome of Hitler Party blackmail intrigue: Every blackmail plot generates, hives off, a parasitical doppelgänger blackmail plot leeching off it. It's a Hobbesian vision of predators preying on predators in a jungle of criminality. This one features, in addition, a Watergate-like break-in to retrieve the deeply embarrassing pornographic correspondence that gave rise to the original blackmail plot.

But before presenting its sensational report on "Sexual Life in the Third Reich," the *Munich Post* carefully defined its own ostensibly high-minded motives for bringing to light this sordid material. The epigraph opening the article is a quotation from Nazi Party ideologist Gregor Strasser attacking the attempt by parties on the left to abolish the Weimar Constitution's famous paragraph 175, the clause that made homosexual acts serious crimes. "But," the article begins, "every knowledgeable person knows, especially Gregor Strasser, that inside the Hitler Party the most flagrant whorishness contemplated by paragraph 175 is widespread."

"Now," they continue, "Hitler is making Roehm [who'd spent several years in semiofficial exile in Bolivia to let previous homosexual scandals die down] his chief commander, [which] is like trusting the cat to guard the cream." The *Munich Post* is *not*, it goes to great length to make clear, condemning homosexuality but rather "the disgusting *hypocrisy* that the Nazi Party demonstrates—outward moral indignation while inside its own ranks the most shameless practices ... prevail." It is for this reason "we feel the need to denounce the shocking events inside the Hitler Party. Herewith we publish a report by a press officer of the Nazis, Dr. Meyer in Regensburg, sent to Roehm in Munich. ... This report is both a letter of confirmation [of tasks completed], at the same time it is a blackmail letter addressed to the commander in chief, making him aware of his own words about his illegal homosexual activities—in order to gain further promotion [for the letter writer] above others in the party."

It's a brilliantly insidious piece of work, Dr. Meyer's letter. The talented Restoration rakes and poets were once famously described as "the mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease" in the late

seventeenth century. Meyer was one of the mob of educated thugs among the Hitler Party inner circle who wrote blackmail literature well.

Meyer's letter to Roehm, obtained by and published in full in the *Post*, begins with an ostentatiously detailed recounting of his previous meeting with Roehm, a recounting that would be unnecessary if he had not wanted to put his potential leverage against Roehm in written form. It was a night, he recalls, in which the well-oiled SA chief was flushed with the triumph of his return to head Hitler's private army. He gives us Roehm joking boastfully that "homosexuality had been something unknown [in Bolivia] until [he] arrived, but [he'd] been working to produce rapid and lasting changes in *that* situation."

Then, according to Meyer's "reminder" to Roehm, the SA chief commissioned Meyer to intervene in a blackmail attempt against him, which initiates the spying and break-in mission Meyer proceeds to describe—ostensibly for Roehm's benefit, but more to demonstrate the dirt he has on him.

Meyer proceeds to take us on a tour of Roehm's demimonde as he tries to trace Roehm's blackmailer back to its source. First stop is a den of iniquity passing as the offices of a certain Dr. Heimsoth, a figure out of later Raymond Chandler. "You mentioned," Meyer meticulously and unnecessarily recalls to Roehm, that "inadvertently you have visited some homosexual pubs together with Dr. Heimsoth to get to know some homosexual boys. You also have been, several times, to Dr. Heimsoth's doctor's office and had the opportunity to see his 'artistically precious' collection of homoerotic photographs. You called my special attention to the fact that Dr. Heimsoth has some letters from you that you are very anxious to get back."

It's useful to consider, as we accompany Roehm's designated blackmail troubleshooter to the office of the blackmailing doctor, how such an account would play if it was an American newspaper publishing the results of an investigation into the chief aide of a homophobic American presidential candidate.

At the doctor's office, Meyer accuses Heimsoth of being the source of previous scandalous articles about the Hitler Party that appeared in the *Munich Post*. Heimsoth plays it cool and reads to Meyer his own thinly veiled blackmail letter to Roehm "asking for the organization of a news service and the provision of funds to supply it"—a blackmail letter within a blackmail letter.

“I calmed him,” Meyer deviously reassures Roehm, “and asked him to consider that you are completely occupied with the Stennes case” (an internal rebellion within the SA). This does not satisfy the anxious Roehm. When Meyer returns empty-handed, without the doctor’s stash of Roehm’s love letters, Roehm tells him the letters “have to be recovered *a tout prix* and you [Roehm—he’s still ostentatiously recalling these events that Roehm needs no reminder of] asked me to arrange ‘the payoff.’” He further inflames Roehm’s paranoia by telling him that “according to my judgement [there are] relationships between Dr. Heimsoth and Dr. Strasser,” referring to Otto Strasser, a Hitler Party defector and now opponent (and Gregor Strasser’s brother).

Not wishing to neglect any opportunity to embarrass Roehm should this letter become public (i.e., should Roehm fail to pay him off), Meyer then reports some of Roehm’s bitter denunciations of Goebbels. Then he comes to the break-in: “The room in Bayreuther Strasse in which Dr. Heimsoth runs his doctor’s office and keeps the letters can be opened without difficulties by a skillful toolmaker after seven o’clock in the evening,” he reports.

The canny Meyer, obviously not wishing to incriminate himself—and perhaps wishing to keep Roehm guessing about who has the letters now—leaves it ambiguous as to whether he went ahead and executed the burglary. This dizzying whirl of break-ins, extortion, counterextortion, and primary, secondary, and tertiary overlapping blackmail threats, suggests a web entangling Hitler’s chief of staff like the snakes around Laocoön—all of it laid out in the words of Roehm’s “friend,” Dr. Meyer, on the front pages of a Munich newspaper.

Roehm and the Hitler Party responded the following day by claiming that the letter from Meyer was forged or counterfeit. In the complicated litigation that dragged on afterward for many months, it emerged that Meyer did write the letter, that he may not have sent it to Roehm directly but used it to blackmail the SA chief with the threat of giving it to the *Munich Post*, which he eventually did. In the end, eight months later, Roehm withdrew his charges against the *Munich Post* over the letter and agreed to pay all the costs of the proceeding and those of *Munich Post* editor Martin Gruber.

But the repercussions of this story went beyond litigation. It exposed and further provoked a deadly schism in the party between Roehm and his blackmailing enemies within; it led to the formation of the Nazi Party death squad, “Cell G,” which provided sensational material for another *Post* exposé, and ultimately brought the swamp of murder, prostitution, and blackmail to

Hitler's doorstep: "*Nothing happens in the movement without my wish,*" as the *Post* reminded the people of Munich and a world that wouldn't listen.

What's revealing about these scandals is not so much the specific misdeeds as the culture of blackmail it opens a window into—a swamp of secret shames, a web of covert, coercive bonds with Hitler in the center. *That* is the unspoken assumption: Hitler can't act, he can't purge the tainted players in this sordid farce, because he, too, is caught in the web. They all have something on *him*, too.

Consider the comment of the Bavarian weekly *Die Fanfare* on Hitler's relationship to the blackmail stew within his party. In September 1931 (three months after this scandal broke), in an editorial addressing the rumors about the perverse nature of Hitler's relationship to Geli Raubal that arose in the wake of her mysterious suicide, *Die Fanfare* asserted that "leaders of subordinate rank know so much about their top leader that Hitler is, so to speak, their hostage and thus unable to intervene and conduct a purge if party leaders are involved in dark affairs."

Here we have the quintessential vision of the Munich Hitler: Hitler as Laocoön, utterly enmeshed in serpentine blackmail plots, unable to extricate himself from his own implication in "dark affairs."

I've devoted scrutiny to the texture of the blackmail consciousness in which Hitler was enmeshed because I believe that there is something more serious than tabloid sensationalism to the dogged attention the *Munich Post* reporters paid to the concatenation of blackmail scandals that plagued the Hitler Party. I've come to believe that they found reflected in them a defining truth about the party and movement Hitler created, a truth that emanated from something essential about Hitler himself. It's the Hitler we've seen enmeshed in the minutiae of blackmail negotiations with his black-sheep nephew, a Hitler who we'll see enmeshed in blackmail intrigues that arose from his relationship with his half-niece Geli Raubal, a Hitler for whom blackmail has become more than second nature but an aspect of his *primary* nature, his defining relationship to the world.

While the term "blackmail" is most often employed today to describe a threat to reveal shameful secrets, a threat to harm by exposure such intangibles as reputation and image, I'm speaking here of blackmail in its original, more expansive sense of "any payment extorted by intimidation or

pressure” (as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it), which includes the threat of physical or economic harm as well as damage to image. The essence of the blackmail relationship is a threat of future harm to extort present compliance. And one truth about Hitler which the *Munich Post* journalists were the first to capture in their reporting was the way he saw the world, the way he rose to power—the way he’d go on to manipulate statesmen and nations—with the mentality and the method, with the hard-won experience, and the discerning art of the blackmailing extortionist.

It was crucial in almost every stage of his rise to power. In the final, feverish months of vicious factional infighting, street warfare, political murder, and cynical deal making that led to Hitler’s capture of the chancellorship on January 30, 1933, many (not all) historians believe blackmail played a crucial role in sealing the deal. Particularly in overcoming the reluctance of Reichspresident Hindenburg—who’d famously dismissed Hitler as “that Bohemian corporal”—to appoint Hitler to the chancellorship.

relationship." Unfazed by this onslaught, the nephew says he produced his trump card: "He said he then acquainted Hitler with the fact that he had documents from the British consul to the effect that his story about his father [being no blood relation to Adolf] was not true and that copies of these documents were deposited with the English government as well as with his mother in London."

If we can believe the nephew—and at a certain point (perhaps here) I suspect his imagined vision of himself defying the Führer feared by the world exceeds the reality—Hitler could not have relished the notion of the British government and the loose-cannon mother having his personal genealogical documentary touchstones in their hands. The deal that followed was, according to the nephew, an uneasy truce of mutual hostage taking and reciprocal threat. First, "Hitler arranged a job for [William Patrick] at the Opel Auto Company" in Berlin. (Pictures exist to confirm his employment there.) This provided the nephew with the cash flow he'd sought; it gave Hitler the nephew as a kind of hostage (now that he'd come to power in Berlin) within watching distance; and it gave the English relatives a kind of counterthreat with the documents they supposedly held hostage in London.

With an eerie ability to echo his Uncle Adolf's characteristic fusion of cravenness and boastfulness, William Patrick Hitler bragged to the OSS that, with the deal sealed, he had Hitler in the palm of his hand. He depicts himself as the kind of fellow who could stroll into Hitler's Reichchancellery and make the raging Führer of the German people quail into quiet submission: "From that time on," he told the OSS, "Hitler became more tolerant of him and whenever he began to rage about William Patrick's activities he [William Patrick] had only to mention the documents in order to get Hitler to calm down."

Although the OSS summary makes no skeptical comment, one really has to laugh at this picture for its peculiarly Hitlerian self-aggrandizement: the preening little blackmailer supposing he's got the world-conquering Führer wrapped around his finger. If there's something Adolfin in William Patrick, there's also something William Patrickian in Adolf: that combination of low cunning and grandiose imagination. The glimpse William Patrick Hitler gives us into the thought-world of the blackmailer—his own and that of his uncle—brings us closer to the Munich Hitler. This is the Hitler his disreputable Brown House cronies knew. This is the film noir Hitler, the poison-pen Hitler, the Hitler exposed with pitiless clarity by the journalists of his chief newspaper enemy, the paper called "the Poison Kitchen."

C H A P T E R 3

The Poison Kitchen: The Forgotten First Explainers



In which the heroic but doomed reporters of the Munich Post capture the essence of a "political criminal" in the blackmail consciousness of the Munich demimonde

Hitler's party called it the Poison Kitchen. That was the preferred epithet for his newspaper nemesis, the persistent poisoned thorn in his side, the Munich Post. The running battle between Hitler and the courageous reporters and editors of the Post is one of the great unreported dramas in the history of journalism—and a long-erased opening chapter in the chronology of attempts to explain Adolf Hitler.

The Munich Post journalists were the first to focus sustained critical attention on Hitler, from the very first moment this strange specter emerged from the beer-hall back rooms to take to the streets of Munich in the early 1920s. They were the first to tangle with him, the first to ridicule him, the first to investigate him, the first to expose the seamy underside of his party, the murderous criminal behavior masked by its pretensions to being a political movement. They were the first to attempt to alert the world to the nature of the rough beast slouching toward Berlin.

But the drama of their struggle has largely been lost to history. The exposés they published are remembered, if at all, only in obscure footnotes; the names of those who risked their lives to report and publish those exposés rarely appear

even there. Their full story has never really been told, even in Germany, or perhaps especially in Germany, where it's more comforting for the national self-image to believe that nobody really knew who Hitler was until it was too late, until after 1933, when he had too much power (or so it's said) for anyone to resist.

But the writers of the *Munich Post* knew, and they published the truth for those who cared to see it. While their opposition to Hitler grew initially out of ideology (the *Post* was founded and sponsored by the Bavarian Social Democratic Party), their struggle with Hitler became extremely personal. They came to know Hitler in a way few others have known him; they knew him and his circle as intimate enemies, grappling at close range with them in the streets, in the courtrooms, in the beer halls, attacking Hitler with a combination of *Washington Post*-like investigative zeal and *New York Post*-like tabloid glee—and a peculiar streetwise, wised-up *Munich Post* edge all their own.

Their duel with Hitler lasted a dozen years and produced some of the sharpest, most penetrating insights into his character, his mind and method, then or since. Much of their work has been forgotten, but not much has been surpassed. And, as the name *Poison Kitchen* suggests, they succeeded in getting under Hitler's skin.

The *Poison Kitchen*: Let's linger a moment on that epithet. As a metaphor, its literal meaning is probably intended to convey the notion of a kitchen "cooked up" poisonous slanders, poison-pen journalism. But "poison" was not a word Hitler used lightly—it was one he reserved for his most profound hatreds. In his final testament, the last words he addressed to the world before committing suicide in his Berlin bunker, he enjoined the German people above all else never to cease from the "struggle against the Jews, the eternal poisoners of the world."

Hitler's final epithet for the Jews: "poisoners." It's an appellation with medieval roots in the accusations of well-poisoning that were used to incite pogroms in plague-stricken Central Europe. But "poison" and "poisoning" are more highly charged words than that; "poison" most often took on a racial, sexual meaning when referring to Jews, as in "blood poisoning"; the sexual adulteration, pollution, tainting, and infection of Aryan purity. Jewish blood for Hitler was a sexually transmitted poison. It's hard to think of another word in his vocabulary more fraught with hatred and loathing.

And Hitler's hatred for the *Poison Kitchen* nearly matched in self-destructive fury the hatred he had for the "eternal poisoners." An argument can be made (and has been made by J. P. Stern, Lucy S. Dawidowicz, and others) that Hitler sabotaged his chances to hold the eastern front against the Red Army in 1944 because he insisted on withdrawing troop trains from his fighting forces in order to use them to accelerate the delivery of Jews to Auschwitz and other death camps, where he used poison gas to poison the "poisoners."

Similarly, at the crucial turning point in his putsch attempt in November 1923, at the moment Hitler most needed to mobilize maximum armed support for his march on the government center, Hitler's strongest and most fanatically devoted cohort—the Stossstrupp Hitler (the personal-bodyguard troops who were to evolve into the SS)—were dispatched instead to Number 19 Altheimer Eck, the building that housed the *Munich Post*, where they spent crucial hours sacking and looting and ripping apart the offices and presses of the *Poison Kitchen*. In what sounds like an early instance of the tactic of deniability that Hitler would employ to distance himself from the order for the Kristallnacht pogrom (and the Final Solution itself), he later proclaimed himself shocked, shocked at the assault on the *Poison Kitchen* by his personal bodyguards.

On that occasion, the *Poison Kitchen* rebuilt itself and rejoined the struggle. But ten years later, in March 1933, the moment the Nazi takeover in Bavaria was completed, a vicious troop of SA thugs burst into the *Munich Post* building, gutting it completely, dumping trays of broken type onto the streets, and dragging writers and editors away to prison.

This savage attack is a perverse tribute to just how galling the *Post* had been to Hitler from the very beginning. They knew how to get to him, get under his skin. They had his number in a sense far deeper than skin-deep: in the sense that they'd seen into him, through him, in a way that few others had or would. They'd seen the Hitler within Hitler, and—I believe—he knew they knew. It's been largely lost or forgotten to history, their vision of Hitler, but it's still there, it's still possible to retrieve it, or at least to glimpse, in the crumbling pages of the issues of the *Munich Post* decaying in Munich archives, some elusive truths about the *Munich Hitler* that have largely been eclipsed by the postwar focus on the Berlin Hitler, the Auschwitz Hitler.

The battle between Hitler and the *Poison Kitchen* began as far back as 1921, before Hitler had succeeded in solidifying his control over the fledgling Nazi Party. In August of that year, the *Post* found a way to cause Hitler severe embarrassment, enough to provoke a howl of outrage and a resort to the courts. They'd obtained the text of a vicious attack on Hitler by an internal faction of the Nazi Party.

This poison-pen polemic, entitled "Adolf Hitler, Traitor," had been circulating privately until the *Post* made it available for all to see. And it struck home, raising what would become persistent questions about Hitler and persistent themes of the *Munich Post*'s reporting: Hitler's alienness, his strangeness, both of origin and personality, his mysterious sources of support ("Just what does he do for a living?" the pamphlet asked), and, most wounding, the question of his possible Jewishness or of some subterranean relationship to Jews. In his sudden grab for dictatorial power over the party, in his scheming divisive behavior, the anonymous Nazi authors of the poison-pen pamphlet claimed, Hitler was not only serving "Jewish interests" but acting "like a real Jew" himself.

Hitler's response was typically twofold, licit and illicit: Nazi death threats against the writers of the *Munich Post* in the night; by day, he took them to court, suing them for libel and fraud, taking advantage of the right-wing nationalist character of the Bavarian judiciary, as he would repeatedly in the twelve-year struggle that followed.

When the libel suit came to trial later that year, Hitler shamelessly accused the *Post* of fabricating, counterfeiting the poison-pen polemic that originated within his own party. The verdict, as would become the pattern, went against the *Post*, and a fine of six hundred marks was imposed. The headline on the story the *Post* ran about the verdict starkly defined the combat in the epic duel that would ensue:

HITLER GEGEN DIE MÜNCHENER POST

Hitler against the *Munich Post*. It was an unfair, uneven struggle. They were a small band of unarmed scribblers taking on a well-financed army of murderers thugs. But in ways large and small, they made his life miserable. Hitler "has no secrets from us," they liked to boast. And throughout the extraordinary, nightmarish last-ditch war they waged in the final years of Hitler's ascent to power, they found a way to obtain and publish one damning secret after another, often internal memos and correspondence of Hitler's inner circle that linked him and his cronies to sexual scandal, financial corruption, and serial political murder. They had eyes everywhere: if Hitler went to Berlin and spent lavishly at a luxury hotel, the next morning the *Post* would print the hotel bill under the derisive headline "How Hitler Lives." More grimly, they printed a running total of another kind of Hitler bill: the growing number of political murders credited to the account of the "Hitler Party," as they preferred to call the National Socialist gang.

"The Hitler Party": Their repeated use of the term was a relentless reminder to their readers that the crimes they reported on by Nazi Party members were the personal responsibility of one man, that the party they reported on was less a serious, ideologically based movement than an instrument of one man's criminal pathology.

At the close of the *Post*'s 1932 exposé of the death squad within the Hitler Party known as "Cell G," a story that was picked up by newspapers all over the world (and soon forgotten, alas), the *Munich Post* writers appended a revealing quotation from Adolf Hitler about his personal responsibility for his party's acts, a remark that has resonance beyond that particular scandal: "Nothing happens in the movement without my knowledge, without my approval," Hitler boasted. "Even more, nothing happens without my wish."

The Nazi Party and its crimes were Hitler's personal responsibility, the Poi-

son Kitchen always insisted. And they had no hesitation about making their attacks on Hitler relentlessly personal. They never, for instance, let Hitler or his followers forget Hitler's notorious belly flop in the face of hostile fire at the climactic moment of the November 1923 putsch attempt, the march on the Munich Odeonsplatz. As soon as loyal government troops fired at his mob, Hitler dived to the street and used the corpses of comrades to shield himself from bullets. There are conflicting interpretations of the belly flop. Some say Hitler was deliberately or inadvertently dragged down out of the line of fire by the grasp of a falling comrade, others that it was the instinct of a combat soldier to hit the deck when shots were flying. But it's also true that Hitler's chief ally, General Erich Ludendorff, picked himself up and marched straight into the hostile fire after that first volley, while Hitler, suffering from a dislocated shoulder, slunk away in pain before being carried off into hiding.

But for the *Post*, Hitler was always *on his belly*, a creature both craven and dangerously serpentine. In reviewing the *Post* issues from the final months of the struggle against Hitler, I came across a cartoon they published in November 1932. It was a moment of heartbreaking false hope. After surging for two years, Hitler's vote in the final free national election, the one held on November 7, plummeted. There were those, even at the *Post*, who believed that at last Hitler's threat was fading, short of takeover. The cartoon showed a Hitler having been kicked out of a door by voters and landing ignominiously on the pavement.

ON HIS BELLY AGAIN!

was the prematurely triumphant caption.

There was something about seeing that cartoon that brought home to me the exhilaration and tragedy of the *Munich Post* struggle. They always seemed to be one more story, one more exposé away from scotching the serpent. Once it seemed they were one story away from driving him to suicide. At the time of Geli Raubal's death, the questions the *Post* raised about the nature of Hitler's relationship to his attractive half-niece and about his role in her death and the suggestion that her nose had been broken in a quarrel brought Hitler close to the brink of shooting himself, according to several associates who were with him at the time. According to Hitler's attorney, Hans Frank, whom he'd dispatched to threaten the *Post* with a lawsuit over its Geli Raubal coverage, Hitler was moaning that "he could not look at a paper any more, the terrible smear campaign would kill him."

Alas, it didn't: In the end, in the sixteen months following Geli's death, as their pitched battle with Hitler and the Hitler Party reached a peak, they were still one story shy of bringing him down on January 30, 1933, when it became too late.

There were other journalists engaged in the same struggle. There was Konrad Heiden, Munich correspondent for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, who went on to found an anti-Nazi press syndicate based in Berlin, and Rudolf Olden, Munich correspondent for Berlin papers, both of whom escaped with their lives to write scathing books about Hitler in an attempt to warn the West. And there was Fritz Gerlich of *Der Gerade Weg*, who did not escape.

But the *Munich Post* reporters—men such as Martin Gruber, Erhard Auer, Edmund Goldschagg, Julius Zerfass, among others—were in the trenches every day, taking on Hitler, facing down his thugs and their threats, testing the power of truth to combat evil, and sharing the Cassandra-like fate of discovering its limits. They lost, but there is more to their legacy than the heroism they displayed (although that in itself deserves far more recognition than it's received from their contemporary successors among German journalists). They also left behind a vision of Hitler, a coherent explanation, a perspective on him that's been lost, for the most part, to history and to the debate over who Hitler was. It's a perspective they never had the leisure to sum up in so many words in a tract, but it's one that emerges clearly from an immersion in their day-to-day coverage of Hitler and the Hitler Party.

Those hectic, nightmarish final two years were dominated in the *Post* coverage by a series of serial, detonating, closely linked Hitler Party scandals that began with a relatively small-time sexual-blackmail plot that, when exposed by the *Post*, led to escalating revelations of far more serious and deadly Hitler Party scandals: First, the exposé of "Cell G," the Hitler Party's secret death squad, which had been caught red-handed trying to assassinate the party members who'd brought them embarrassment in the original sexual-blackmail scandal. This led to an even more frightening and unfortunately prophetic exposé: secret Hitler Party plans for a bloodbath, a massacre of their political enemies once they came to power, a mass murder in embryo for all to see.

They even glimpsed, through a glass darkly, the shadow of the Final Solution. In fact, they picked up on the fateful Hitler euphemism for genocide—*endlösung*, the final solution—in the context of the fate of the Jews as early as December 9, 1931, in a chilling and prophetic dispatch called "The Jews in the Third Reich."

More than a year before Hitler came to power, the *Post* reported it had uncovered "a secret plan" from an inside source in Hitler's SA. A secret plan in which the Hitler Party had "worked out special orders for the solution of the Jewish question when they take power, instructions that are top secret. They have forbidden discussion of these in public for fear of its foreign policy effects."

What followed was an extremely detailed list of a score of anti-Jewish measures that foretold with astonishing precision all the successive stages of restrictions and persecutions the Nazi Party was to take against the Jews in the

period between 1933 and 1939. And then the *Post* hinted at more: It spoke of a further "final solution."

The list of restrictions it predicted seems familiar now: removal of Jews from the courts, from the civil service, the professions; police surveillance, including residency and identity permits; confiscation of Jewish enterprises and property; detention and expulsion of "unwanted" Jews; Nuremberg-type laws against intermarriage and sexual and social intercourse.

All of this leading up to a further "final solution" beyond that: "for the final solution of the Jewish question it is proposed to use the Jews in Germany for slave labor or for cultivation of the German swamps administered by a special SS division."

One feels a chill reading this: the division between the ratcheting up of legal and civil restrictions and something beyond that—a final solution that involves removal of the Jews physically from German society for a worse fate in "the swamps" at the hands of the SS. That invocation of the final solution in the swamps carries with it a premonitory echo of an ugly euphemistic jest about the Final Solution Hitler, Himmler, and Heydrich would share ten years later as recorded in Hitler's "Table Talk": Isn't it terrible the "rumor" that we're exterminating the Jews when we're only "parking them" in the swamps of Russia.

Were the *Munich Post* writers aware then that those swamps would become euphemisms for the mass graves to come? One can only guess at what they sensed beneath the swamps of the "final solution" they reported on in 1931. (A survey of contemporary German and foreign newspapers for that period shows no evidence that any of them thought this premonitory report on a "final solution" worthy of further investigation.) But in the concatenation of their exposés and investigations, in the chronicling of the string of political murders committed by the Hitler Party, the *Munich Post* reporters left little hidden about the party's murderous nature and intent. They saw it as a homicidal criminal enterprise beneath the facade of a political party.

The emphasis on the down and dirty criminality of the Hitler Party is a signature of the *Munich Post* writers' vision: They were, in effect, enlightened police reporters covering a homicide story in the guise of a political one. This point was brought home to me vividly in a conversation I had with a son of one of the foremost chefs of the Poison Kitchen, their star political reporter, "the Prussian Nightingale." The Prussian Nightingale was the nickname his *Munich Post* colleagues gave to Edmund Goldschagg, one of the most visible point men in the *Post*'s war against Hitler—"Prussian" because he had come to the *Post* in 1928 after a long stint writing for a Berlin paper and "Nightingale" because he was known for his exuberant, convivial, often musical way with words, the way he would brighten the *Post* *Stammtisch* (communal table) at the Cafe Heck with his high spirits and songs.

When I spoke to Goldschagg's son Rolf in Munich, I found him largely unaware of the details of his father's most dramatic clashes with Hitler. They had, it's true, taken place before Rolf was born. But the limited-edition memorial volume Rolf had commissioned about his father dwelt for little more than a chapter on the pre-1933 struggle. In part, this can be attributed to the fact that his father's life after the Hitler takeover was so eventful—and also quite heroic. After the *Post* was sacked, the Prussian Nightingale was arrested and drafted into the army. But after being expelled for his political views, he went to ground in Freiburg, where, despite his own suspect status, he risked his life harboring a Jewish woman for a year until she could escape to Switzerland. Afterward, he became one of the founders of what was to become the powerful South German daily, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

In part, the son's lack of detailed knowledge about his father's anti-Hitler journalism might be due to his temperamental distance from the flamboyant, socialist, anti-Hitler firebrand his father was. But the son of the Prussian Nightingale did make one memorable, defining remark to me about his father's vision of Adolf Hitler. I'd asked him a question I'd put to a number of survivors and chroniclers of the Hitler period: Did he think Hitler's evil could be explained by some insanity or mental derangement?

"No," the son insisted to me, with more passion than he'd summoned for any other comment on the Poison Kitchen, "my father did *not* think Hitler was crazy. He always referred to him as a *political criminal*."

Not a criminal politician; a political criminal. When I first heard it, I thought this phrase had the ring of sterile Marxist rhetoric. But after spending time in the archives with their back issues, it was clear to me the *Post* was not a captive of Marxist orthodoxy; they were, in fact, anticommunist and contemptuous of the police terror masquerading as Marxism in the Soviet Union, a contempt embodied in the derisive name they gave to the death-squad infrastructure they exposed in the Nazi Party: "The Cheka in the Brown House," Cheka being at one time the informal name of the feared Soviet secret police. The *Post* was more liberal and populist than Marxist.

And, in fact, after immersing myself in their reportage on Hitler and the Hitler Party, I came to see that "political criminal" was not an empty epithet but a carefully considered encapsulation of a larger vision: that Hitler's evil was not generated from some malevolent higher abstraction or belief, from an ideology that descended into criminality and murder to achieve its aims; rather, his evil arose from his criminality and only garbed itself in ideological belief.

One sees this in the paper day by day, not so much in the big scandals, the headline-making events, but in the daily log of murders. "Feme [Death Squad] Murder in Thuringia." "Brown Murder in Stuttgart." "SA Killing in Halle." "Brown Terror in Magdeburg." "Nazi Murders in Lippe." Scarcely an issue went

by in those final two years without one and usually two, three, or four brief dispatches reporting the blatant cold-blooded murder of political opponents by Hitler Party members. Cumulatively, what one is witnessing is the systematic extermination of the best and bravest, the most outspoken opponents of the Hitler Party as they're gunned down or clubbed to death with truncheons or as bodies are found stabbed, strangled, drowned, or simply never found at all. Followed frequently by reports of how one court after another has allowed the murderers to go free or get off with sentences more appropriate for petty theft.

Reading the *Post*'s despairing daily drumbeat of murder adds a missing dimension to the account of Hitler's rise, one that has been lost in some of the grand postwar explanations, which tend to assume some deep causal inevitability to Hitler's accession to power—economic conditions, generational psychic trauma, Christian anti-Semitism, fear of modernism, the techniques of mass propaganda, the torch-lit Nuremberg rallies, the manipulation of emotional symbols, the mesmerized crowds, the rhetoric, and, above all, the ideology.

All of these may help explain Hitler's appeal, but they do not necessarily explain Hitler's success. As Alan Bullock was the first to demonstrate, Hitler came almost as close to failing in his drive to seize power as he did to succeeding; what's missing from the grander explanations is what one sees on the ground, so to speak, the texture of daily terror apparent in the pages of the *Mitteleuropäischer Post*, the systematic, step-by-step slaughter of Hitler's most capable political opponents, murdered by his party of political criminals.

But there are two other crimes that emerge from the seamy web of political criminality the *Post* exposed, two types of crimes that, if less violent and bloody than murder, cumulatively emerge in the pages of the *Post* as the peculiar, metaphorical signature crimes of the Munich Hitler and the Hitler Party: blackmail and counterfeiting.

Perhaps the best way to get a feel for the Poison Kitchen vision of the Hitler Party is to look closely at one of the emblematic blackmail scandals they exposed and then move on to the sources of their preoccupation with counterfeiting, not just the small-time forgery of documents but the Hitler Party's wholesale counterfeiting of history itself.

It began, the two-year-long final protracted battle between Hitler and the Poison Kitchen, with the June 22, 1931, issue and a sardonic banner headline that read:

WARM BROTHERHOOD IN THE BROWN HOUSE

followed by the subtitle:

Sexual Life in the Third Reich

What followed was a plunge directly into the seamy heart of Hitler Party blackmail culture, a thriving criminal subculture preying on itself, which raised the blackmail letter to a black art.

The focus of the story is an elaborate masterpiece of a blackmail missive directed to SA chief Ernst Roehm in the guise of an investigation by the letter writer on *behalf of Roehm* into another blackmail plot against Roehm. Here we have the characteristic syndrome of Hitler Party blackmail intrigue: Every blackmail plot generates, hives off, a parasitical doppelgänger blackmail plot leeching off it. It's a Hobbesian vision of predators preying on predators in a jungle of criminality. This one features, in addition, a Watergate-like break-in to retrieve the deeply embarrassing pornographic correspondence that gave rise to the original blackmail plot.

But before presenting its sensational report on "Sexual Life in the Third Reich," the *Munich Post* carefully defined its own ostensibly high-minded motives for bringing to light this sordid material. The epigraph opening the article is a quotation from Nazi Party ideologist Gregor Strasser attacking the attempt by parties on the left to abolish the Weimar Constitution's famous paragraph 175, the clause that made homosexual acts serious crimes. "But," the article begins, "every knowledgeable person knows, especially Gregor Strasser, that inside the Hitler Party the most flagrant whorishness contemplated by paragraph 175 is widespread."

"Now," they continue, "Hitler is making Roehm [who'd spent several years in semi-official exile in Bolivia to let previous homosexual scandals die down] his chief commander, [which] is like trusting the cat to guard the cream." The *Munich Post* is not, it goes to great length to make clear, condemning homosexuality but rather "the disgusting hypocrisy that the Nazi Party demonstrates—outward moral indignation while inside its own ranks the most shameless practices . . . prevail." It is for this reason "we feel the need to denounce the shocking events inside the Hitler Party. Herewith we publish a report by a press officer of the Nazis, Dr. Meyer in Regensburg, sent to Roehm in Munich. . . . This report is both a letter of confirmation [of tasks completed], at the same time it is a blackmail letter addressed to the commander in chief, making him aware of his own words about his illegal homosexual activities—in order to gain further promotion [for the letter writer] above others in the party."

It's a brilliantly insidious piece of work, Dr. Meyer's letter. The talented Restoration rakes and poets were once famously described as "the mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease" in the late seventeenth century. Meyer was one of the mob of educated thugs among the Hitler Party inner circle who wrote blackmail literature well.

Meyer's letter to Roehm, obtained by and published in full in the *Post*, be-

gins with an ostentatiously detailed recounting of his previous meeting with Roehm, a recounting that would be unnecessary if he had not wanted to put his potential leverage against Roehm in written form. It was a night, he recalls, in which the well-oiled SA chief was flushed with the triumph of his return to head Hitler's private army. He gives us Roehm joking boastfully that "homosexuality had been something unknown [in Bolivia] until [he] arrived, but [he'd] been working to produce rapid and lasting changes in *that* situation."

Then, according to Meyer's "reminder" to Roehm, the SA chief commissioned Meyer to intervene in a blackmail attempt against him, which initiates the spying and break-in mission Meyer proceeds to describe—ostensibly for Roehm's benefit, but more to demonstrate the dirt he has on him.

Meyer proceeds to take us on a tour of Roehm's demimonde as he tries to trace Roehm's blackmailer back to its source. First stop is a den of iniquity passing as the offices of a certain Dr. Heimsoth, a figure out of later Raymond Chandler. "You mentioned," Meyer meticulously and unnecessarily recalls to Roehm, that "inadvertently you have visited some homosexual pubs together with Dr. Heimsoth to get to know some homosexual boys. You also have been, several times, to Dr. Heimsoth's doctor's office and had the opportunity to see his 'artistically precious' collection of homoerotic photographs. You called my special attention to the fact that Dr. Heimsoth has some letters from you that you are very anxious to get back."

It's useful to consider, as we accompany Roehm's designated blackmail troubleshooter to the office of the blackmailing doctor, how such an account would play if it was an American newspaper publishing the results of an investigation into the chief aide of a homophobic American presidential candidate.

At the doctor's office, Meyer accuses Heimsoth of being the source of previous scandalous articles about the Hitler Party that appeared in the *Munich Post*. Heimsoth plays it cool and reads to Meyer his own thinly veiled blackmail letter to Roehm "asking for the organization of a news service and the provision of funds to supply it"—a blackmail letter within a blackmail letter.

"I calmed him," Meyer deviously reassures Roehm, "and asked him to consider that you are completely occupied with the Stennes case" (an internal rebellion within the SA). This does not satisfy the anxious Roehm. When Meyer returns empty-handed, without the doctor's stash of Roehm's love letters, Roehm tells him the letters "have to be recovered *a tout prix* and you [Roehm—he's still ostentatiously recalling these events that Roehm needs no reminder of] asked me to arrange 'the payoff.'" He further inflames Roehm's paranoia by telling him that "according to my judgment [there are] relationships between Dr. Heimsoth and Dr. Strasser," referring to Otto Strasser, a Hitler Party defector and now opponent (and Gregor Strasser's brother).

Not wishing to neglect any opportunity to embarrass Roehm should this

letter become public (i.e., should Roehm fail to pay him off). Meyer then reports some of Roehm's bitter denunciations of Goebbels. Then he comes to the breakthrough in "The room in Bayreuther Strasse in which Dr. Heinsoth runs his doctor's office and keeps the letters can be opened without difficulties by a skillful toolmaker after seven o'clock in the evening," he reports.

The canny Meyer, obviously not wishing to incriminate himself—and perhaps wishing to keep Roehm guessing about who has the letters now—leaves it ambiguous as to whether he went ahead and executed the burglary. This dizzying whirl of break-ins, extortion, counterextortion, and primary, secondary, and tertiary overlapping blackmail threats, suggests a web entangling Hitler's chief of staff like the snakes around Laocoön—all of it laid out in the words of Roehm's "friend," Dr. Meyer, on the front pages of a Munich newspaper.

Roehm and the Hitler Party responded the following day by claiming that the letter from Meyer was forged or counterfeit. In the complicated litigation that dragged on afterward for many months, it emerged that Meyer did write the letter; that he may not have sent it to Roehm directly but used it to blackmail the SA chief with the threat of giving it to the *Munich Post*, which he eventually did. In the end, eight months later, Roehm withdrew his charges against the *Munich Post* over the letter and agreed to pay all the costs of the proceeding and those of *Munich Post* editor Martin Gruber.

But the repercussions of this story went beyond litigation. It exposed and further provoked a deadly schism in the party between Roehm and his blackmailing enemies within; it led to the formation of the Nazi Party death squad, "Cell G," which provided sensational material for another *Post* exposé, and ultimately brought the swamp of murder, prostitution, and blackmail to Hitler's doorstep: "*Nothing happens in the movement without my wish*," as the *Post* reminded the people of Munich and a world that wouldn't listen.

What's revealing about these scandals is not so much the specific misdeeds as the culture of blackmail it opens a window into—a swamp of secret shames, a web of covert, coercive bonds with Hitler in the center. That is the unspoken assumption: Hitler can't act, he can't purge the tainted players in this sordid farce, because he, too, is caught in the web. They all have something on him, too.

Consider the comment of the Bavarian weekly *Die Fanfare* on Hitler's relationship to the blackmail stew within his party. In September 1931 (three months after this scandal broke), in an editorial addressing the rumors about the perverse nature of Hitler's relationship to Gell Raubal that arose in the wake of her mysterious suicide, *Die Fanfare* asserted that "leaders of subordinate rank know so much about their top leader that Hitler is, so to speak, their hostage and thus unable to intervene and conduct a purge if party leaders are involved in dark affairs."

Here we have the quintessential vision of the Munich Hitler: Hitler as

Laocoön, utterly enmeshed in serpentine blackmail plots, unable to extricate himself from his own implication in "dark affairs."

I've devoted scrutiny to the texture of the blackmail consciousness in which Hitler was enmeshed because I believe that there is something more serious than tabloid sensationalism to the dogged attention the *Munich Post* reporters paid to the concatenation of blackmail scandals that plagued the Hitler Party. I've come to believe that they found reflected in them a defining truth about the party and movement Hitler created, a truth that emanated from something essential about Hitler himself. It's the Hitler we've seen enmeshed in the minutiae of blackmail negotiations with his black-sheep nephew, a Hitler who we'll see enmeshed in blackmail intrigues that arose from his relationship with his half-niece Geli Raubal, a Hitler for whom blackmail has become more than second nature but an aspect of his primary nature, his defining relationship to the world.

While the term "blackmail" is most often employed today to describe a threat to reveal shameful secrets, a threat to harm by exposure such intangibles as reputation and image, I'm speaking here of blackmail in its original, more expansive sense of "any payment extorted by intimidation or pressure" (as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it), which includes the threat of physical or economic harm as well as damage to image. The essence of the blackmail relationship is a threat of future harm to extort present compliance. And one truth about Hitler which the *Munich Post* journalists were the first to capture in their reporting was the way he saw the world, the way he rose to power—the way he'd go on to manipulate statesmen and nations—with the mentality and the method, with the hard-won experience, and the discerning art of the blackmailing extortionist.

It was crucial in almost every stage of his rise to power. In the final, feverish months of vicious factional infighting, street warfare, political murder, and cynical deal making that led to Hitler's capture of the chancellorship on January 30, 1933, many (not all) historians believe blackmail played a crucial role in sealing the deal. Particularly in overcoming the reluctance of Reichspresident Hindenburg—who'd famously dismissed Hitler as "that Bohemian corporal"—to appoint Hitler to the chancellorship.

Many historians believe that a secret meeting between Hitler and President Hindenburg's son, private secretary, and factotum in charge of intrigue, Oskar von Hindenburg, resulted in a significant shift in the attitude of the revered but rapidly weakening octogenarian president. Many believed that the implicit threat Hitler held over the Hindenburgs' heads was the power of the Nazi Party in the Reichstag to support or kill the parliamentary investigation into the "East Help" scandal (allegations of massive, corrupt misappropriation of parliamentary subsidies for the aristocratic but impoverished Junker land barons in