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The Feeble 'Putsch' That Started Hitler's Rise

A következő cikk írója, Edmund Demaitre /valódi neve: Demeter Ödön/, magyar közíró, jelenleg, 1993-ban Washingtonban él. Hosszu időt töltött Németországban, ahol évekig a Voice of America munkatársa volt.

1913

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Voice of America munkatárs volt.



50 Years Ago

By Edmund Demaitre

On Nov. 8, 1923, about 3,000 men and women gathered in Burgerbraukeller, a large, old beer hall on the outskirts of Munich. They came to sip the famous local beer and to hear an address by Gustav von Kahr, High Commissioner for Bavaria, representing the federal government in Berlin. Standing on the tribune still festooned with the faded garlands of the *Oktoberfest*, the Reichskommissar was flanked by the two men; General Otto von Lossow, commander in chief of the armed forces, and Hans von Seisser, chief of the state police. They, along with von Kahr, formed the triumvirate ruling Bavaria, the former Wittelsbach kingdom.

The Reichskommissar was in the middle of his speech when there was sudden commotion in the hall. A man of pale complexion, wrapped in a battered trenchcoat and sporting brush-like moustaches favoured by small-town barbers' apprentices, jumped on a table and, in order to attract attention, fired a bullet in the ceiling. He battled his way to the rostrum and, pushing von Kahr aside, announced in a stentorian voice that the government of the Reich and Bavaria were overthrown and "the national revolution has begun."

THIS WAS THE FIRST EPISODE in a sequence of events that was to go down in history as the Munich Beer Hall putsch. The final scene of that story was to be played out 22 years later when Adolf Hitler, the man in the trenchcoat, killed himself in the *Gotterdammerung* of the Third Reich. Yet some effects, including a restructuring of Europe and some other parts of the world, are still seen today.

Although in many respects the Beer Hall putsch resembled a tragi-comedy rather than a Wagnerian drama, it is a milestone in the 20th Century. However, to understand the significance of the event and the character of its protagonists, the putsch must be viewed against the background of the strange, and often sinister, developments that had taken place in Germany following the collapse of the Hohenzollern empire.

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Five years after the World War I armistice, the pall of despair hanging over Germany cast a particularly ominous shadow on Bavaria where an ever-sharpening political polarization added another highly explosive element to the woes of the defeated nation. It was in Munich, one of the great intellectual and artistic centers of Germany, that the first attempt had been made to set up a Soviet-style republic in Western Europe. The Soviet republic proclaimed in 1919 by a motley coalition of anarchists and communists, lasted only a few weeks. It was suppressed by the army, supported by a variety of secret paramilitary organizations proliferating in Southern Germany.

ALONG WITH THOSE organizations, various splinter groups emerging on the extreme right of the political spectrum found a haven in Bavaria. They included a tiny gathering of unemployed veterans, embittered misfits, incurable alcoholics, dedicated homosexuals and *lumpenproletariat* of all sort grouped in what they called the German Workers party. In September 1919, the party gained a new recruit in the person of a 30-year-old ex-corporal of Austrian origin called Adolf Hitler. He was enrolled as Number Seven of the party's ruling committee.

Who was Hitler? In his version, he came from a poor family, spent his childhood in Braunau, a small Tyrolian village, and, after finishing high-school, went to Vienna to seek admission to the prestigious Academy of Fine Arts. Rejected twice, he eked out a miserable existence from occasional employment as a construction worker, living in unheated tenements on the outskirts of the city. When unable to pay his modest rent, he slept on benches in the public parks or in doss-houses. After a few years of hopeless struggle, he moved to Munich.

Hitler's self-portrait became part of the Nazi myth and was accepted as authentic even by respectable historians. It is only recently that the German historian Professor Werner Maser succeeded in revising the traditional story after unearthing scores of unknown documents pertaining to Hitler's "formative years."

THE DOCUMENTS clearly show that Hitler's version of his Vienna years, as told in *Mein Kampf*, is a tissue of lies, half truths and distortions. His family was not poor; measured by Austrian standards the Hitlers were well-to-do. They owned a house that was sold for ten thousand crowns at a time when the monthly salary of a school-teacher was sixty crowns. After his mother's death, Hitler received a monthly income of 58 crowns, plus the 25 crowns paid by the state to orphans.

In addition to this steady income, Hitler earned some money painting aquarelles and drawing sketches of famous Vienna monuments. His agents always found some rich buyers prepared to help a young, struggling artist. Professor Maser lists Hitler's early patrons: At least five of them were Jews.

He also reports differently on the motives that prompted Hitler to move from Vienna to Munich. Hitler sought to escape military service, he says. And had he not volunteered in the Bavarian army at the outbreak of World War I, he would have been prosecuted as a draft dodger by the Austrian authorities.

In World War I, Hitler served on the Western front, was gassed, recovered and, after the armistice, returned to Munich. He had been decorated with the Iron Cross, first class, an unusually high decoration for a corporal. For what services or exploits he received the decoration remains a mystery. Hitler never mentioned the circumstances in which he had been awarded the Iron Cross, and Prof. Maser searched in vain for any document that would throw light on that episode.

This, then, was the man who turned the German Workers party, to whose name the epithet "National Socialist" had been add-

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ed, into one of the strongest groups on the lunatic fringe of German politics.

EVER-WORSENING CONDITIONS in Germany — the occupation of the Ruhr, mass unemployment, repeated attempts to overthrow the Weimar Republic, strikes and riots staged by the Communists along with galloping inflation — greatly facilitated Hitler's task. Another important factor contributing to the spread of Nazism was the incredibly tolerant attitude the Bavarian authorities took toward right-wing extremists — including the secret or semi-secret terror organizations such as the Free Corps and the Ehrhardt Brigade.

In tolerating, if not tacitly supporting the activities of right-wing extremists the Bavarian authorities acted in hopes of promoting their own political objectives. Von Kahr, von Lossow and von Seisser were monarchists bent on destroying the Weimar republic. They sought to set up a separate Bavarian-Austrian state under the rule of the Wittelsbach dynasty. They expected that in the wake of a successful separatist coup it would be relatively easy to get rid of the Nazi rabble which General von Lossow was to describe as *komitadj* — a contemptuous epithet used in Western Europe to describe Balkan terrorists.

In plotting its course, the Munich triumvirate quite obviously underestimated the strength as well as the tactical versatility of those it planned to use in their scheme. Hitler was not a man to content himself with playing second fiddle to von Kahr or von Lossow. When rumors of the impending monarchist-separatist coup began to circulate in Munich, Hitler decided to act before it was too late.

THE PUTSCH was to take place on Nov. 11. Nazis and their allies would gather on the Froettmaninger Heath, north of the capital, march into the city and proclaim the end of the Weimar republic.

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But the plans had to be changed when it became known that on the evening of Nov. 8, von Kahr would address a meeting at the Burgerbraukeller. Hitler and his associates suspected the triumvirate of planning what they, the Nazis, were intending to do — that is to overthrow the Weimar regime. Hitler also feared that after ousting "the Weimar criminals," von Kahr and his followers would proclaim the restoration of the Wittelsbachs to the Bavarian throne.

Instead of openly defying the triumvirate, Hitler opted for a putsch within a putsch. In Hitler's scenario, the monarchists were to play the same role which they intended to assign to the Nazis. After helping the Nazis to seize power, the Reichskommissar and his monarchists were to be relegated to a political limbo — or to some more unpleasant place.

It was against that murky background of plots and counter-plots, with the defeated nation facing another winter of miseries, cold and famine, that final plans for the seizure of power were worked out. Success seemed certain. For Hitler and his associates were firmly convinced that neither the army nor the police would move if ordered to use force against "patriots" trying to overthrow the hated republic.

SO SURE WERE THEY that after proclaiming the "national revolution," Hitler announced to the crowd in the Burgerbraukeller that the barracks of the Reichswehr had already been occupied and "the army

and the police are marching on the city under the swastika banner."

This was a blatant lie, soon to be followed by a more momentous one. Pistol in hand, Hitler herded von Kahr, von Lossow and von Seisser into a neighboring room where he harangued them to join the "national revolution." Von Kahr was to be Regent of Bavaria, von Lossow Reichsminister of War, von Seisser chief of the Reich police. They rejected Hitler's offer, but he nevertheless returned to the hall to announce that the three men agreed to serve in a government headed by him, with General von Ludendorff assuming command of the armed forces.

The announcement was greeted with thunderous applause by the confused crowd which until then had watched with stupor, rather than enthusiasm, Hitler's antics. Ludendorff's name still possessed much of the magic it used to have when, as quartermaster general, he wielded extreme military and political power in imperial Germany. The audience could hardly suspect that, in fact, no revolutionary government had been formed and that Ludendorff actually had no inkling of what was going on in the Beer Hall.

In retrospect, the incident acquires particular significance since it reveals techniques Hitler was to use so consistently throughout his career. Terror, lies, bluff,

reliance on the opponent's weakness, readiness to take risks along with an unlimited faith in his own luck — those were to remain the main ingredients of Hitler's policies and actions regardless of the context, time or place in which they were to be carried out.

THAT NIGHT HE WAS particularly lucky. While he "negotiated," pistol in hand, with his captives, one of his closest collaborators, the Baltic adventurer Scheubner-Richter, went to fetch Ludendorff. A heated discussion ensued, with Scheubner-Richter working to persuade Ludendorff that the opportunity to overthrow the Weimar regime should not be missed. Ludendorff, for his part, was livid at not having been informed of Hitler's plans. Nevertheless, he agreed to go to the Beer Hall and to assume supreme military command under Hitler's political leadership.

Ludendorff's appearance in the Beer Hall and his readiness to participate in the "national revolution" tilted the balance in Hitler's favor. Von Kahr, von Lossow and von Seisser, who had refused to serve under Hitler, now declared themselves ready to follow Ludendorff.

Amidst general euphoria events took a somewhat comic turn. About 600 of Hitler's armed storm-troopers had surrounded the beer hall. But when von Kahr, von Lossow and von Seisser, taking advantage of Hitler's momentary absence, surreptitiously left the place, nobody stopped them. After reaching the capital, von Kahr issued a proclamation outlawing the Nazi party and declaring nul and void the agreements made, "at pistol point," with Hitler. Army troops took the side of the government, and there was no popular uprising.

LATE AT NIGHT it became obvious that the putsch has fizzled out. Hitler saw the situation as hopeless. Not so Ludendorff. He still had unlimited confidence in his charisma — a feeling nurtured by his semi-deranged wife, a self-appointed prophetess of a new Nordic cult. Ludendorff suggested that the Nazis march on von Lossow's headquarters in the heart of Munich. He was convinced that the army would not resist since the soldiers would refuse to turn their weapons against the man who had lead them to victory at Liege and Tannenberg.



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After some hesitation, Hitler agreed. So the next morning, Nov. 9, the march on Munich began. After passing the Ludwig Bridge and the Marienplatz, the armed Nazi cohorts, singing patriotic songs and brandishing weapons, moved towards the Odeonsplatz. Hitler, Ludendorff, Goering and Scheubner-Richter marched at the head of the column as it reached the narrow Residenz Strasse. There they found themselves facing a cordon of armed police.

IT WAS NEVER established who fired the first shot. There was a rapid exchange of fire that left the street littered with dead and wounded. One of the first to be killed was Scheubner-Richter, who marched arm-in-arm with Hitler. This acquired some significance in the protracted debate that followed the putsch. It was suggested that as the first shots rang out, Hitler sought cover by throwing himself to the ground. But according to the Nazi legend, he was pulled down by his dead comrade, dislocating his shoulder as he fell.

The fact is that, except for Scheubner-Richter and Goering, who was badly wounded, the Nazi leaders emerged unhurt from the fracas. Of the 16 demonstrators killed, 15 had been in the fourth and fifth row, which seemed to suggest that at the first crackling of the guns the leadership scampered.

Except Ludendorff. With bullets whis-

ting around his head and the dead lying on the pavement, he marched, erect and seemingly unconcerned, towards the Feldherrnhalle, the War Memorial on the Odeonsplatz, pushing police aside on his way. As he was to say at his trial, he was happy to see that it was the police and not the army that fired on the "patriots."

Two days later, Hitler was arrested while hiding in the villa of Putzi Hanfstaengl, a millionaire art dealer who performed the role of court-jester in the salons frequented by the Nazi elite. Goering escaped to Austria; Hess, Rosenberg and Streicher went underground. The Nazi party and its allied terror organizations seemed to be dead and buried along with the 19 men, including three police officers, who fell on the Odeonsplatz.

In Hitler's opinion, expressed at the time, was that the Beer Hall putsch was a mistake. Historians generally agree.

But in the light of subsequent developments, it now appears that although a momentary failure, the Beer Hall putsch contributed more than any other event to the eventual rise of Hitler to supreme power.

BEFORE THE PUTSCH Hitler was, so to speak, a local phenomenon. His power base was Bavaria — and even there his political status was hardly higher than that of an eloquent and aggressive political agitator, a persuasive demagogue, operating on the lunatic fringe of South German politics.

In the wake of the coup attempt, Hitler's image changed into one of a courageous, energetic leader, sufficiently resolute and impressive to enlist the support, if not admiration, of a man such as Ludendorff. He was no longer seen as a wild-eyed agitator haranguing famished derelicts in ill-smelling taverns but as a man of action strong enough to challenge, even if momentarily, the Weimar Establishment.



Perhaps even more importantly, the putsch projected Hitler into the limelight of German politics. He became the best-known representative of a steadily developing movement seeking to unite under the banner of a new, revolutionary ideology the distraught German masses disillusioned with the stiff conservatism of the Hohenzollern empire as well as with the permissive liberalism of the Weimar republic.

The putsch, and particularly its aftermath, also enabled Hitler to address himself to a nation-wide audience in articulating his bewildering message. At his trial, which turned into a half-sinister, half-comic farce, Hitler seized the opportunity to spell out the disconcerting blend of extreme nationalism, romantic hero-worship and rabid antisemitism that became the hallmarks of his philosophy. The courtroom drama, or comedy, reached its climax with the public giving a standing ovation to Hitler when he vowed to carry on the fight for restoring the Reich "to its ancient splendor and glory."

With the newspapers publishing day after day Hitler's speeches and quoting his remarks, the trial turned into a triumph for the Nazi leader. He emerged as a new Saint George facing the dragon of treason and defeatism as personified by the Weimar republic. And when he was transferred to Landsberg prison to serve a sentence of five years — Ludendorff was acquitted — an aura of martyrdom added another fascinating touch to the burgeoning legend of the ex-corporal turned into Der Fuehrer. The wave of despair and hatred, as which Hitler would soon ride to power, was forming.

Edmund Demaitre, a former foreign correspondent, covered many events in the Nazi era of Germany.