C How important were the SA and the role played by violence?

FOCUS ROUTE

1 Who joined the SA and why?
2 Why did the SA make a positive impression on many Germans?

'We must struggle with ideas, but if necessary also with fists.' Hitler's words neatly summarise the main role of the *Sturm-Abteilung*, or SA. They were formed in 1920 as the *Sportabteilung*, or sports detachment of the Nazi Party, intended primarily to protect Nazi speakers. More aptly renamed the *Sturm-Abteilung* (storm detachment) in 1921, they had developed into a mass organisation of 500,000 by 1933. SA members were provided with a distinctive brown shirt, emblazoned with the swastika after, in 1924, the Party bought a stock of cheap, surplus German army tropical shirts. This was the origin of their other name, the Brownshirts.

From 1921 to 1923 and from 1930 to 1934, they were led by Ernst Röhm, who had participated in the 1923 Munich Putsch and was a friend of Hitler. He was eager for the Nazis to seize power and saw the SA as the army of a new Nazi state. Röhm represented the more radical, socialist aspect of Nazism, although, unlike fellow radicals the Strasser brothers, he was not a sophisticated thinker. He once explained his approach: 'Since I am an immature and wicked man, war and unrest appeal to me more than good bourgeois order.'

The original core of ex-soldiers expanded into a vast army of young men, attracted for a variety of reasons, ranging from hatred of communism, commitment to Hitler and love of excitement and violence to a desire for free soup and a new purpose in life. Over half came from the working class, especially the unemployed. Many were just ruffians and bullies. They were provided with a uniform, meals and sometimes accommodation in SA hostels. The SA ran occasional camps, with the stress on sport and military training. As an SA leader explained, the SA offered recruits 'what they almost always lack at home, a warm hearth, a helping hand, a sense of comradeship'.

The SA's work entailed distributing propaganda leaflets, protecting Nazi meetings and trying to drive the hated Communists from the streets. From 1930 to 1932 city streets saw increasing violence between political paramilitaries. Although these groups were not allowed to carry arms, many members were killed – nearly 100 in July 1932 alone. SA casualties were held up as martyrs for the cause. In 1932 Chancellor Brüning banned the SA. They formally obeyed but paraded without shirts. Brüning's successor as Chancellor, Papen, in an attempt to appease the Nazis, ended the ban.

The SA played a major role in Hitler's success. Their 'propaganda by deed' focused attention on the communist threat and the Nazis' determination to smash it. Despite the violence and disorder they caused, their disciplined marches created the impression that the Nazis would offer firm government to restore Germany to law and order. The fear of an SA seizure of power persuaded some in the elite to favour Hitler playing a role in government, since they thought he was the only one who could control the SA.

SOURCE 7.9 A leader explains the power of the SA

The only form in which the SA appears to the public is that of the military formation. This is one of the most powerful forms of propaganda. The sight of a large number of calm, disciplined men whose total will to fight may be seen or sensed makes the most profound impression on every German, and speaks to his heart in a more convincing and inspiring language than writing and speech and logic can ever do. Where whole hosts march purposefully, stake life and existence for a cause, all must be great and true.

ACTIVITY

Draw a left-wing caricature of an SA man.