ABSTRACT

SUBTLE SOCIALISM?
CAPITALIST DISAFFECTION WITHIN THE NSDAP, 1925-1934

by Zachariah James Golder

During the Weimar Republic of Germany (1919-1933), the NSDAP, or Nazi party, rose to prominence, eventually ending the Republic and giving way to the infamous Third Reich. Pursuing a policy of “National Socialism,” Nazi leaders sought to influence the German electorate by utilizing socialist rhetoric to gain support from a materially deprived nation. Gregor Strasser, leader of the so-called “Nazi-left,” was a key player in this endeavor. I argue that despite clashes with more mainstream Nazi leadership, Strasser and his ideas would heavily influence Nazi rhetoric throughout the Republic’s existence. I also contend such rhetoric was vague by necessity because of its uncomfortable closeness to radical left-wing entities, most notably the KPD, or Communist Party of Germany. Several key years and decisions, notably the conflict between Strasser and mainstream party elements in the mid-1920’s, the national election of 1930, and two additional elections in 1932, best demonstrated the power and effectiveness of these social ideas.
SUBTLE SOCIALISM?
CAPITALIST DISAFFECTION WITHIN THE NSDAP, 1925-1934

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Dedication

The dedication of this thesis is split three ways:
To my late grandfather, Gordon Golder, a true scholar.
To my father, Ed Golder, for his love of the written word.
And to my mother, Lisa Golder, who sarcastically asked if the dedication was really all that important.
Ich liebe euch, jetzt und immer!
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Introduction

On June 30, 1934, an SS captain shot a man who was awaiting interrogation in his Berlin jail cell. The man succumbed to his wound after bleeding out for almost an hour. The victim, named Gregor Strasser, had been a member of the National Socialist German Worker’s Party, often referred to as the NSDAP or Nazi party, until his abrupt resignation from the organization in December 1932. His death, directly ordered by Nazi party leadership, was one of many executions that were carried out as part of a purging operation to consolidate power in the Nazi party called “Nacht der langen Messer,” or Night of the Long Knives. Strasser had been one of the Nazi party’s leading figures and an active contributor to the ideology of National Socialism. His legacy, however, is often tied to his promotion of socialism as a key feature of the party, if not the key feature. Frequently referred to as leading the “left-wing” of the Nazi party, Strasser was an early advocate for socialist policies during Germany’s politically and financially turbulent Weimar Republic. Socialism as a concept was popular for German citizens, so much so that many political parties in Germany advertised themselves as being sympathetic to socialist policies. The Nazi party was no exception, with socialism filling a key role in their plan to rebuild the German nation after its defeat in the First World War. This “socialist oriented” Nazi group would be gradually excluded from the Nazi party as the organization took power.

Popular interest in the Nazis makes the historiography of National Socialism a vast field. Countless books, articles, and documentaries have discussed the Nazis as principal movers and shakers of the 20th century. Their involvement in World War II and shaping the policies of the Cold War even after their downfall guarantees their continued relevance in historical dialogue. Particularly striking is their infamous racial ideology, largely targeting Jews, that fueled the Holocaust against the so-called “undesirable” populations of Europe. Consequently, their rise to power in the interwar years is also a subject of immense controversy. How an obviously authoritarian and hate-mongering group was able to achieve absolute authority in Germany and lead Europe into arguably the most destructive event in world history naturally inspires questions. It also requires academic scrutiny.

Socialism itself, as well as what constitutes a noticeably socialist policy, is also not an agreed upon concept. Strasser’s policies can be interpreted as simply a reaction against free-market capitalism, or a broader challenge to the status-quo. As abstract as their platform was, the so-called Nazi-left built its socially oriented policies on the assumption that capitalism was a
flawed and damaging system, specifically injurious to Germany. While the broad definition of socialism as a check on the free market yields considerable influence, Strasser’s followers were more interested in promoting a nation free of foreign influences, fairly managed economic competition, nationalizing efforts focused on providing for the destitute, and widespread land redistribution. The extent of this latter feature would prove to be a divisive issue between Strasser and more mainstream elements of the Nazi party.

Post-war academics were split on interpreting the policies of National Socialism. As Germany faced a political partition in the mid-1940’s, narratives changed. Many historians sympathetic to communism ignored the socialist aspect of Nazism due to the popular perception of the party as being a product of big business. West of the Iron Curtain comparisons between the authoritarianism of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were not uncommon. Indeed, historian Conan Fischer remarked that these arguments of comparable authoritarianism found their most “capable and eloquent advocates” during the Cold War.¹ The result was a politically charged historical dialogue based on geographic sympathies, with Nazism playing the part of ultimate despotism for both sides.

The “socialist” element of the Nazi party has naturally been a part of continued academic analysis, but it tends to be overshadowed by other features. The widespread perception of the NSDAP as a nationalist, “right-wing” organization often encourages dismissal of any early socialist features. In one sense, this is not surprising given the purge of socialist elements from the Nazi party, but it often ignores how social promises shaped the Nazi rise to power. Strasser himself was widely regarded as a key individual of Nazi leadership. His influence in shaping the party and many tenets of National Socialism is often acknowledged by historians, but also quickly dismissed.

Peter Stachura’s *Gregor Strasser and the Rise of Nazism* is the most recent and comprehensive of Strasser’s biographies. His work, liberally applied in this thesis, nonetheless represents a standard historical account of the man and the very concept of a “Nazi-left.” Despite its usefulness as a way to understand Strasser and his followers, many of my arguments directly challenge Stachura’s. This is especially prevalent in his contention that Strasser’s socialism was unimportant in formulating the Nazi party. Stachura refers to this socialism as “vacuous” and amounted to “little more than an emotionally based, superficial, petty-bourgeois anti-capitalism.”

Furthermore, any notion of socialism “ceased playing an important role in his ideological and political outlook” after 1928 and that any argument depicting Strasser as leading the left-wing of the Nazi party cannot be made because such and entity did not exist “as a coherent ideological, organizational or political” group.²

These points are well taken. Strasser was indeed not the leftist martyr of the Nazi party many believed him to be. His adherence to party politics and inability to articulate a clear socialist agenda for the NSDAP has led to widespread dismissal of the importance of early socialism in the Nazi party. Many contend that any chance for socialism in the NSDAP was lost as soon as it was clear Adolf Hitler would be the uncontested leader of the Nazis. However, this ignores the importance of a social message to Weimar-era Germans. However imperfect Strasser was at adhering to a clearly defined socialist policy, the government-sponsored alleviation of economic disaster was a popular idea, especially during the Weimar Republic. Hitler was able to obtain power by deft political maneuvering, but in order to get into position to do so he needed popular legitimacy. The promotion of socially sympathetic policies was an essential way to inspire confidence in the German electorate.

Stachura’s work also conforms to a wealth of scholarship that distances the NSDAP from class consciousness. Perhaps most formative for the field is the work of historian Tim Mason on National Socialism and its efforts to repress classist terminology in the hopes of recreating German society. Mason argued that NSDAP policy was driven by “a determination to destroy any autonomous working-class organizations” and eventually “integrate workers into a classless, ethnically and racially based community.” These decisions were additionally driven by fear of another “stab in the back” by the working-class should such policies fail. He concluded that worker laziness, insubordination, carelessness or otherwise disobedient actions to be illustrative of “the failure of Nazi ideology and social policy to win working-class support.”³ Mason’s unification of economic and political factors also manifested itself in his discussion of elites. He went beyond the simplistic vision of Nazi leaders being mere tools of big business in Germany.

Instead, he proposed businesses, which indeed shared many interests with the Nazi government, were “bought” by the Third Reich’s political elites.\(^4\)

Mason’s focus on the materialist aspects of Nazism are not surprising given his status as a Marxist historian, but my argument diverges from his work mainly due to his theories of conceptual longevity. He sought to understand National Socialism “in terms of its end” in the “broadest possible context.” National Socialism was presented as a grand vision to uncover the policy decisions of the Third Reich and the lived experience of the everyday citizen.\(^5\) My own assertions of socialism as a vague notion specifically catered to the political environment of the Weimar Republic defies the idea that National Socialism was an ideology whose doctrines and purpose were evident from the beginning. Rather, National Socialism and specifically the strategies designed to implement it on a national scale, transformed as the Nazis obtained power. Political authority changed the party dynamic; the relationship between the government, the working class, and big business changed with it.

Mason’s works also inspires questions about the historiographic role of the Weimar Republic as a whole. Authors writing specifically about this era are forced to contend with the National Socialist question and what exact factors in the era led to its success. Classic works on the Weimar Republic tend to emphasize the widespread issue of unemployment as the decisive factor fueling the NSDAP, but little is said about the party’s flirtation with socialism. Their insight into what groups found the NSDAP most appealing, however, hints at the importance of social policies. Detlev Peukert’s *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* takes a broad view of the era and mostly stresses middle-class support for the Nazi party. Nazism had a diverse group of supporters, but he claims this was mostly prevalent in “the ‘bottom’ of the middle-class scale” and the “élites at the ‘top’” who most rejected the Weimar system “clearly antedated the surge of support” for Nazism and its leader.\(^6\) He later concludes that the NSDAP was a ‘people’s party’ only in “a significantly skewed sense.” It made little headway in attracting a working-class presence, which was the purview of more left-wing parties, and was “disproportionately” middle class. Peukert’s definition of what constitutes a “middle-class

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\(^5\) Nolan, “Time Mason and German Fascism,” 244.

German is questionable given the economic depression. He contends many in the NSDAP’s street fighting force, often considered lower-class individuals, to be “between social classes,” or “downwardly, rather than upwardly, mobile.”

Conan Fischer’s *The Rise of the Nazis* also casts doubts on whether the NSDAP could adequately attract the working-class. Fischer argues the claim that the Nazis most appealed to middle-class Germans largely holds, but only in a “modified form.” He believes the NSDAP’s ability to appeal to the middle-class to be most important, but cautions not to ignore the substantial minority of the working-class that supported Nazism. Most involved in “organized, socialist labor movements” did not support the NSDAP, but rather “those workers who subscribed to pre-industrial values or aspired to middle-class ideas.” He is primarily concerned with discovering why the NSDAP was able to attract a mixed group when evidence points to more benefits for lower middle-class individuals. Eric D. Weitz’s more recent *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* directly challenges Peukert, and to a lesser extent Fischer, particularly their claims on the dearth of working-class Germans in the Nazi party. He fully embraces the idea the Nazis formed the first people’s party, or Volkspartei, and that it was composed of people “from all across the political spectrum.” They drew people “from every class,” attracted to the party’s “dynamism, impassioned anti-Marxism, and unrelenting hostility to the republic.” Weitz also recognizes the effectiveness of self-financed social work programs, but like Peukert makes little reference to socialism’s role as a founding principle of National Socialism.

Most scholars tend to recognize the revolutionary aspects of Nazism over the vague social points. One of the most prolific scholars of the era, Richard J. Evans, writes in his seminal work *The Coming of the Third Reich* that Nazism succeeded mainly because of its “synthesis between the revolutionary and the restorative.” The scholarly interpretation of the NSDAP as a new revolutionary force also exists in the work of Ian Kershaw. He wrote how the hopes of the German electorate voting for the NSDAP rested on a “new start,” a complete upheaval of the social, political, and economic factors in Germany. Kershaw also takes pains to note that many in Germany, particularly farmers, were “completely apathetic” towards politics but still voted based

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7 Ibid, 238.
10 Ibid, 348.
on a belief in the radical innovation to replace the existing government. There is no doubt that the revolutionary aspects of National Socialism following the humiliation of World War I contributed greatly to its popularity, but it is the contention of this study that social elements also played a key role.

Recent scholarship has delved into the widespread appeal of socialism following the First World War. The NSDAP was not the only party to recognize this as a political strategy. In particular, the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) were competitors for a socially conscientious group. Consequently, the overlap in political rhetoric has raised questions about the fundamental ideologies of these leading German parties. Historians tend to dichotomize the NSDAP and KPD in particular as groups that were in a state of fundamental opposition. As the title suggests, Beating the Fascists? by Eve Rosenhaft takes this approach by focusing on the communist relationship to the Nazi party. She describes how young left-wing groups did not care about the “social conditions” that prompted outrage in other elements of Weimar society, but rather saw the “progressive penetration of an alien and openly inimical movement into every aspect of daily life.” That Nazism advocated social change was irrelevant to young KPD street fighters. Rosenhaft states that if these fighters were “aware of the ideological content of National Socialism,” it was “not apparent.” Nazism was, in short, a “disruptive element” in every aspect of life, political or otherwise.

In contrast, my research relies on the presence of a shared social connection between the working-class elements of both parties, relying on more recent scholarship advocating understood similarities between these radical Weimar elements. Timothy Brown’s recent work on the ideological overlap between the NSDAP and KPD has been invaluable in this respect. In his book, Weimar Radicals: Nazis and Communists between Authenticity and Performance, he contends there was a radicalism that was “staged” and one that was “felt and experienced” for both parties. The Nazis thus constructed a “performance of ‘leftism’” that was enforced by their thuggish paramilitary organizations. He is also dubious of a “Nazi left” calling it “misleading in a fundamental sense.” The vagueness of Nazi-defined leftism or socialism “made

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it susceptible to different interpretations” that could be spun as “ideas of the moment” for a Weimar audience.15

The comparison between the working-class forces of the KPD and NSDAP is not uniquely Brown’s. In an earlier book, Conan Fischer notes the similarities between the two groups, calling “transfers” between membership “part of the political life of late Weimar,” but frames his argument as principally addressing the KPD.16 Fischer also addresses notions of Nazism’s ability to attract working-class individuals, but fails to adequately highlight socialism as a leading factor, particularly in the depression years. He acknowledges the struggle to win the votes of the working-class and unemployed, but does not delve into the ideological forces behind it. Brown’s analysis is groundbreaking not because it puts undue importance on left-wing Nazism as a concept, but because he considers the socialist messages in a state of flux. Socialism served as a slogan, and oftentimes a source of anxiety for Nazi leadership who worried about being swept up in a worker’s revolution. In many ways, the popularity of the Nazi party was built on its vague socialist promises. The presence of this “constructed social ambiguity” is a key feature of my argument that I have attempted to impart in this thesis.

To demonstrate the importance of socialism in the NSDAP, this thesis utilizes a wide array of source material. The personal writings of Nazi leaders have proven essential to understanding their views on the subject and each other. The surviving speeches of Strasser are important, but materials from Adolf Hitler as the eventual leader of the Nazi party are crucial in determining other considerations of National Socialism. This study has particularly benefited from the extensive diaries of Joseph Goebbels. As the future Minister of Propaganda, Goebbels was an important voice in the Nazi party, but his unique closeness to Adolf Hitler makes his diary an excellent foundation for commenting on the party politics of the NSDAP. His initial attraction to Strasser’s socialist-oriented message also reveals the complex nature of interpersonal relationships in the party.

Also indispensable to this study is Nazi self-portrayal to the general public. I discuss key pieces of propaganda, but nowhere is this better exemplified than in the NSDAP’s newspaper, the Völkischer Beobachter. The paper, particularly important because of Joseph Goebbels’s involvement in its pieces, was an excellent mouthpiece for party policy, programs, and

15 Ibid, 80.
ideological strife with opposing groups. This combination of public and private materials, or intended message with understood message, is the ideal platform to flush out meaning for an idea that was purposefully defined ambiguously.

This thesis is divided into three chapters in order to give distinct analysis of crucial Weimar time periods. My first chapter focuses on the social and ideological background of the Nazi party, occasionally comparing it to the KPD, its radical counterpart. In particular, I examine the roots of left-wing Nazism, mainly through the writings of Gregor Strasser, Joseph Goebbels, and Adolf Hitler. The political and personal works by Goebbels play a key role in my analysis because of his eventual acceptance of Hitler’s leadership over all else. Goebbels’s propaganda on the ideological viewpoints of the Nazi party is an excellent source for this project, but his diary is equally as important because it maps his factional leanings throughout the NSDAP’s rise to power. Goebbels had sympathy for the Nazi-left, but over time his enthusiasm for the cause fizzled out. His personal thoughts, often written with brutal honesty, offer a glimpse into why the mainstream Nazi faction gradually became more disillusioned with Gregor Strasser’s ideas. I conclude the first chapter by discussing the implications of the socialist exodus from the Nazi party in the summer of 1930. This departure was led by Gregor Strasser’s brother Otto Strasser, a distinctly less important figure than Gregor Strasser himself but noteworthy enough to warrant concern from Nazi leadership. The much-publicized event made the Nazi need to convey socialist sympathy even more pressing.

My second chapter focuses on the election of 1930 and its importance as a means to advertise the Nazi conception of socialism. This election was unique for two reasons: it was relatively soon after the full effects of the financial crisis had hit Germany, and it was only months after a socialist exodus from the party due to disagreement with Adolf Hitler’s leadership. I argue that the election, characterized by a distinct NSDAP victory, was the first real step to legitimate Nazi power and was possible by appeals to vague socialist rhetoric. Another important aspect of this chapter is the emergence of the SA, the main Nazi paramilitary organization, as an essential component of Nazi policy. I explore the widespread perception of the SA as a socially driven entity. The organization occupied a distinct sphere of party life, but drew worrying parallels with active left-wing forces, most notably the Communist Party of Germany. The events surrounding the election offer insight into the importance of promoting socialism while maintaining political unity against opposition parties.
Finally, my last chapter focuses on two significant elections in 1932, one in July and the other in November. These not only demonstrated a continuation of socialist appeals, but also how historical circumstances shaped the NSDAP’s strategy in confronting both radical and moderate opponents. This chapter also emphasizes the unique role of politics on the German electorate as a whole. The July election epitomized a continuation of the NSDAP’s largely successful appeals to materially-deprived Germans. The political landscape after the election, however, necessitated that the NSDAP alter their strategies, with consequences many in the party considered disastrous. I contend that the inability of the party to effectively focus on their social appeal was largely what caused this near-fatal shift.

To write about Nazism is to contend with hate. The majority of the individuals in the following pages are widely believed to be some of the most contemptable human beings in recorded history. This thesis aims to portray the Nazi party as objectively as possible, a political entity vying for power in the Weimar Republic. Beneath the narrative, however, is the knowledge of their future role in racially inspired genocide and total war. It is not my intention to ignore the appalling rhetoric, largely based in anti-Semitism, of the NSDAP as they came to power. Nor do I mean to aver that these socialist policies should inspire sympathy with early Nazi ideology. Rather, this is an attempt to understand the rise of Nazism in the context of the Weimar Republic. Without the continued efforts of historians to understand groups like the Nazis, our thinking becomes stale, our ability for nuance reduced to fatuous sloganeering. History must be better than that, even with the most abhorrent of subjects.
Chapter 1: To Rebuild the German Nation, 1925-1930

Less than seven years after the creation of Germany’s Weimar Republic, prominent Nazi party member Gregor Strasser drew up a proposal for the political goals of National Socialism, the party’s guiding philosophical principle. Called the “draft of a Comprehensive Program of National Socialism,” or simply “the Draft,” this document offered a more socially oriented agenda for Nazism. Particularly revealing was its apparent appeal for working-class individuals. Points calling for state participation in industrial ownership, the creation of agricultural cooperatives, and the widespread redistribution of property had a distinctly socialist flavor. The Draft, composed by Strasser in the fall of 1925, would face a series of obstacles and was eventually rejected in February 1926 by Adolf Hitler and his supporters within the party, but its significance as a challenge to Nazi leadership and the fundamental structure of National Socialism hints at a larger identity issue within the NSDAP.

The years following the creation of the Weimar Republic were some of the most chaotic in German history. The era is famously known for political radicalism and economic turmoil defined by the inflation crisis in the early 1920’s and the economic crisis beginning in 1929. It was within this turmoil that the NSDAP began to define its political agenda, particularly the concept of National Socialism. This dominant Nazi philosophy was imagined as an ideal synthesis between the two respective ideas. The state would shake off the foreign interests that were continuing to hurt it after the humiliating Treat of Versailles and promote policies designed to help Germans prosper. In consolidating the party around a semblance of ideological unity, leadership, and the ideas it stressed, mattered. The eventual leader of the Nazi party, Adolf Hitler, advocated a definite “nationalist first” approach that emphasized the dominance of the state and the prominence of the nation over class as an axiomatic social category.

The years 1925 and 1926 were watershed moments for determining the fate of National Socialism. Strasser’s failure to introduce his Draft as a guiding light for the Nazi party doomed his chances at leadership, but also his vision of the NSDAP. Following the decisions in those years that further cemented Hitler as the uncontested leader of the Nazi party, prominent members who represented the less conventional Nazi groups became steadily more disenchanted. Many of the self-proclaimed socialists in the NSDAP were further angered by Hitler’s insistence
on a democratic transition of power. By 1930, the socialists, including Strasser’s brother, left the party in a widely publicized display.

These later events leading up until 1930 have their roots in the personal and ideological disagreements in 1925 and 1926. It was then that Hitler’s method was most seriously contested by other National Socialists, particularly Strasser and Goebbels. Understanding the role of these dominant individuals within the Nazi party is imperative, as major programs in the NSDAP were often enforced by specific loyalties to imposing personalities. Goebbels was the key player in this field because his doubts about Hitler’s nationalist-first philosophy were largely forgotten after falling for the Führer’s famous personal magnetism. As the Nazi party grew, particularly in the years of 1925 and 1926, minor divisions appeared in National Socialist philosophy that would eventually split the party and culminate in the widespread purging of any member who did not toe the accepted party line. Within the philosophical debate, the role of socialism became one of the key issues.

While it was still a major piece of National Socialism, the principal argument stemmed from how socialist changes should be applied in practice. In this debate, Gregor Strasser would play a key role because of his belief in a “socialism first” agenda when helping develop Nazi party ideals. To quote one historian, Strasser was a believer in “a German revolution’ through a German form of socialism,” that was characterized by a “return of the guilds and the payment of wages in kind rather than in money.” This chiefly anti-capitalist view was shared by numerous party members in the Northern faction of the NSDAP, many of whom had not met Hitler and owed “little or nothing” to his leadership. Most of these individuals disliked the existing Nazi party based in Munich and proclaimed their intent to replace it with one “more in tune with their own ideas.” Perhaps most significantly, however, many of these party members in the Northern faction had not met Hitler and had “not fallen under the spell of his growing personal charisma.”

In part, Strasser’s anti-capitalist view was inspired by his upbringing. He was never regarded as captivating or oratorically gifted when compared to Hitler, but his humble, thoroughly German background lent credence to his ideas. After Germany joined the First World

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17 Hitler’s reluctance to endorse revolutionary action was no doubt influenced by his participation in the failed Beer Hall Putsch in 1923.
18 Richard Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 203.
War, Strasser, along with two of his brothers, joined the military and underwent substantial combat action on the western front, earning him numerous medals and commendations, as well as the respect of his fellow soldiers. Strasser believed his experiences in the trenches drastically shaped his political views and emphasis on comradeship to overcome obstacles. The war also cemented his hatred for the failed Wilhelmine Reich that so completely failed to unite the German people in a system whose basis for an individual’s position in society was not determined by merit or loyalty to said society.

He was even less enthusiastic about the Weimar system. To Strasser as to many Germans, the new Republic represented a shameful capitulation to foreign powers. The notorious “stab in the back theory” heaped blame on the home front, and fostered the myth that while Germany was undefeated abroad, the war effort was halted from within. The Weimar Constitution, drawn up amidst the humiliating Treaty of Versailles, promised a new future. Unfortunately, that future was marked by political instability, widespread violence, and most damningly, economic uncertainty. The need for a change in the German financial system, which many believed the Weimar government had not only failed to address but actively damaged by capitulating to demands from the Allied powers, was a theme that was unquestionably linked to the political changes the Nazi party endorsed. Interestingly, the main areas of contention between rival political parties derived not from fundamental differences, but rather whose system was more in line with a ‘socialist’ message. Their main concern, it seems, was to promote themselves but also paint their opponents as false prophets of socialism with misguided, or even corrupt, economic concepts. The foremost of these “false prophets,” according to the Nazis, was the Communist Party of Germany. The KPD would not be a serious contender for political influence in Germany until after the economic downturn of 1929, but their Leninist rhetoric and close connection to the Soviet Union made them a frequent target of disdain.

To initiate a discussion of Strasser’s views on economics, it was apparent he did not advocate a Marxist-Leninist worldview, but parallels between the two were still plentiful in his arguments for socialism. Their similarities, not surprisingly, begin with what they detested, in this case the capitalist system that had, in their view, ravaged Germany. More specifically, Strasser disliked the “materialism” that capitalism inevitably brought. Materialism as a concept envisioned by National Socialists was also inherently connected to Judaism, and was described

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19 Stachura, Gregor Strasser and the Rise of Nazism, 12-14
by Strasser in a 1925 speech as “a soulless Jewish-materialist outlook” that turned an employee into “a wage-earner, work slave” who was at the mercy of capitalist overlords. Instead, Strasser proposed to fix the problem with a nationalized economy and a “believing, sacrificial and unselfish old German community sentiment, community purpose and community feeling,” a concept similar to later communist calls for a national brotherhood of German citizens under a single government.

The power of socialism appealed to many who would go on to become key figures in the Third Reich, perhaps most notably Joseph Goebbels. Goebbels, future propaganda minister and widely considered to be one of Hitler’s key confidants until his death in 1945, was an early believer in the NSDAP’s philosophy, but he was also entranced by the socialist message Strasser advocated. It is perhaps not surprising then that for a time, Goebbels considered Strasser to be among his closest friends and allies within the party. The relationship between the two men was unstable, due in no small part to the constant shifting of allegiances inherent within the party structure. The mercurial nature of Goebbels himself also proved to be a puzzling inconsistency, but his initial reactions to Strasser were indicative of an emerging comradeship. Goebbels’s first impressions of Strasser, noted in his diary on August 25, 1925, were of a “splendid guy” with a “wonderful sense of humor,” whom “one can work with…a wonderful character.” By working with Strasser, the relationship continued to grow. On October 2, Goebbels wrote how after attending several events with Strasser, he thought they were in “perfect agreement” and felt “very close to him as a man.” Goebbels’s “perfect agreement” with Strasser is particularly interesting due to the latter’s obvious embrace of a socialist-leaning mentality. Speeches from before he met Goebbels confirm that Strasser’s belief in socialism started early. His continued reliance on the term only grew along with his friendship with Goebbels, as did his desire to distinguish the NSDAP from “Jewish-led Marxism.” Strasser remarked in a speech that, contrary

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20 The process of ‘Rationalization’ was common in the Weimar era and helped to drastically increased unemployment by emphasizing output over the good of the labor force, no doubt contributed to Strasser’s dislike of the materialistic tendencies of capitalism.


23 Goebbels Diary, 2. Oktober 1925, 131.
to communism, the Nazis believed socialism was not the “domination of the masses” but rather a distinctly “Prussian German idea of ‘service to all.’”

The friendship between Strasser and Goebbels was born from a mutual respect and recognition of a common goal. However, their aspirations for Germany’s future mainly relied on what they disliked. Their hatred for the Weimar Republic, ‘materialist’ capitalism, and economic control of the German state by foreign powers gave them common cause. There is very little evidence of real, substantive socialist policies discussed between the two men, simply their belief in socialism as a concept. This practice of relying on vague socialist rhetoric would also carry over to the Nazi political approach. Their methods of fighting these perceived weaknesses in Germany would diverge, however, deriving mainly from Goebbels’s personal devotion to Adolf Hitler and his distinctively nationalist philosophy.

In confronting the “nationalist question,” the issue of German relations with the Soviet Union became an obvious point of contention. The Soviet system was very clearly communist, but also a promoter of policies intent on nation building. One of these nation-building policies was establishing relations with Germany, an idea that prompted angry debates in both states. The KPD initially supported a close relationship with the Soviet Union, but after Ernst Thälmann took over as leader of the party in the mid-1920s, the relationship devolved into a slavish promotion of Soviet partnership. Contemporary historians have debated whether the KPD and its leader were simple puppets of Stalin’s nation building. Russel Lemmons, one of the few modern scholars to examine the relationship between Stalin and Thälmann, concludes that there is an abundance of evidence pointing to Thälmann’s subservience to Moscow. Stalin protected Thälmann from scandal and expulsion while the latter led the party, and in return Thälmann toed the party line as dictated by Moscow. Lemmons concludes that Thälmann’s “kowtowing to Moscow clearly had little appeal to the German proletariat” and that his slavish devotion to Stalin had “dramatic consequences” as the NSDAP gained power. Consequently, the KPD became steadily more Stalinized and lauded the accomplishments of the Soviet Union in contrast to the failing Weimar Republic. Thälmann, the KPD, and the greater Eastern threat embodied

by the Soviet Union were distinct enemies for the NSDAP, but their potential usefulness as allies to fight a greater danger posed by the west was not lost on Strasser or Goebbels.

While the KPD committed to promoting a Soviet style system as the Communist party grew, the NSDAP would remain deeply divided on how to incorporate the Soviet Union into its party platform. The question proved to be a divisive subject for party members, with both Strasser and Goebbels playing key roles in the debate. Strasser’s rhetoric may have emphasized an opposition to Bolshevism, but he also recognized that Germany and the Soviet Union had similar interests by being broadly opposed to capitalism. As Strasser’s biographer put it, the “road to friendship and alliance with Russia…had to be kept open despite the ideological cleavage.” Strasser’s rhetoric was decidedly against capitalism, but also had undertones of praise for non-materialist societies. In a 1926 speech titled “Thoughts about Tasks of the Future,” he called for “an entirely new kind of economic thinking” that was free from systems “rooted in money, in property, in profit and false success.” He criticized the “dead ideas” that stemmed from the capitalist obsession with profit when the National Socialist goal was “satisfying the needs” of its people. He admittedly did criticize Marxism, calling it “false socialism” but it was clear that he believed the destinies of the Soviet Union and Germany were intertwined, even if it was just to defeat the corrupt west.

For his part, Goebbels believed early in his career as a National Socialist that the rejection of materialism, an idea often expressed by Strasser, would make Russia a natural ally. In an open letter, Goebbels suggested Germany “should look toward Russia, because she is most likely to show us the way to socialism” that would fundamentally oppose “the diabolical temptations and corruption of the West.” He additionally lamented how “so-called German statesmen” operating on behalf of the Weimar Republic “destroy[ed] bridge after bridge” between the two natural allies. He justified his suggested alliance with communism by stating that the party was “pained” not because they have any love for Bolshevism but because he believed there was “the building of a truly national and socialist existence” in Russia. Months later, Goebbels also wrote how Germany must be allied with the East, which “abound[ed] with

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26 Stachura, Gregor Strasser and the Rise of Nazism, 42.
creative health” while the “diseased neighbor” to the west could not be trusted. Goebbels’s open letters can be dismissed as public stunts that do not reveal his true thoughts, but his diary entries only confirm his views that an alliance with the East, even while they suffered under the influence of Marxism, was necessary to ensure German survival. On October 23, 1925, he lamented that Germans would be “the mercenaries hired against Russia on the battlefields of capitalism,” but concluded that it was “better to fall with Bolshevism than become eternal slaves to capitalism.” In combination with his statement made two days earlier that he wanted to study in Russia, it was clear Goebbels has some sympathy with the Russian cause, even if his alliance was proposed as a way to combat a greater evil. The willingness of both men to recognize the Soviet Union as a necessary ally made a socialist-first agenda a feasible concept, but it faced stiff opposition from more nationally minded party members.

The Russian question was simply part of a larger argument within the NSDAP that revolved around the ideologies of Adolf Hitler. The future German dictator had been head of the Nazi party since 1921. A gifted speaker and possessing an absolute certainty in his ideas, Hitler’s natural charisma inspired members of the NSDAP to follow his lead with absolute loyalty. His early writings, the most famous being his work Mein Kampf, outlined an ideological program for the Nazi party that heavily relied on both nationalism and socialism. Hitler began his book by detailing his own personal stories, but connected his anecdotes to the larger question of why his ideological lessons were essential for Germany. He addressed the issue of the “social problem,” and concluded that it was one of the founding principles to restore pride in one’s nation. With the end goal of “‘nationalizing’ a people,” one must first establish “healthy social conditions.” By living in ideal social conditions, the citizen could receive an education that would confirm “knowledge of the cultural and economic and, above all, the political greatness” of one’s nation. He reiterated the need to materially provide for the masses, stating that by “improving [the workers’] social conditions…every citizen will be able to share in the cultural life of the nation.” He wrote that “half-measures” would achieve nothing and that only “by a ruthless and devoted insistence” would their national goals be realized. The masses, in short, would not

29 Ibid, 46.
30 Goebbels Diary, 23. Oktober 1925, 137.
respond to high-minded ideals, but rather to “a manifestation of strength” that the simple concept of nationalism provided.\textsuperscript{33}

While there were many similarities, the subtle differences between Hitler’s book and the works of Strasser and Goebbels are worth noting. In particular, most of Hitler’s political venom seemed reserved for Marxists, with little room left for western capitalism. In a 1924 speech defending his actions in the failed Beer Hall Putsch, Hitler framed his enemies not as the imperialist western powers, but rather as Marxists. He claimed he did not commit high treason because he was defending Germany from Marxism, which was “destroying the foundation of all human cultural life.” He went further, saying that Germany’s future was contingent on Marxism being destroyed because “either Marxism poisons the people…or the poison is going to be eliminated” and only then could Germany recover. He concluded by saying that Germany could be saved from its current predicament only when “the last Marxist has been converted or broken.”\textsuperscript{34} The same uncompromising attitude manifested itself in \textit{Mein Kampf}. Hitler stated the two “perils” that posed a threat to German society were “Marxism and Judaism.”\textsuperscript{35} While Judaism was without a doubt the main target of Hitler’s wrath, Marxism, and particularly its principles denying the importance of the individual, was demonized in similar ways. Communism was later described as the “most striking phase” of the Jewish conspiracy to “eliminate the dominant significance of personality in every sphere of human life” and replace it with the will of the masses, whose strength lies in numerical power alone. Hitler not only found Marxism deplorable, but ineffective and unable to solve the economic problems Germany faced.\textsuperscript{36} He valued the individual, as well as their ability to contribute to the larger group. Mass demonstrations were essential to “not only reinforce the individual but…draw him still closer to the movement.” In this way, the “will, the yearning and indeed the strength of thousands of people are in each individual,” which according to Hitler was fundamentally opposed to the Marxist emphasis on the will of the masses.\textsuperscript{37}

Hitler’s program may have differed from that of Goebbels, but the latter found himself drawn to the party leader nonetheless. The relationship revealed Hitler’s leadership abilities to

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 213-214.
\textsuperscript{34} Adolf Hitler, “Hitler’s speech in his own defense” contained in Roderick Stackelberg and Sally A. Winkle \textit{The Nazi Germany Sourcebook: An Anthology of Texts} (New York: Routledge, 2002), 86.
\textsuperscript{35} Hitler, \textit{Mein Kampf}, 23.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 281.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 272-273, 300.
overcome philosophical differences. This made the future Minister of Propaganda, who was a key ally of Strasser in the mid-1920’s and controlled the party newspaper in the critical election years of 1930 and 1932, more susceptible to Hitler’s strategy of maintaining a nationalist approach with socialist rhetoric to keep the attention of a financially destitute German electorate. Goebbels’s devotion toward Hitler was particularly curious considering his condescending attitude toward many key party members, whom he found to be lacking in intelligence. His growing admiration and loyalty to the Nazi leader would have drastic consequences for his relationship to Strasser, but also his ideological notions of socialism. Goebbels was smitten with Hitler even before the two formally met. At around the same time as Goebbels was interacting heavily with Strasser and his socialist ideas, his obsession with Hitler was beginning to form. On August 29, 1925, Goebbels mentioned he had been reading Hitler’s book, noting how it spoke to Hitler’s “political instinct” and how it completely “thrilled” him.38 Eleven days later he noted disappointedly that Hitler had important business and could not make the trip to see him,39 but was clearly ecstatic on September 12 when he wrote “Hitler is coming! What a joy that will be!”40

When Hitler expressed mistrust of Goebbels, it clearly pained the latter. But instead of directing his anger against Hitler, Goebbels only admired him more and reserved his venom for Nazi party members he believed were incompetent. His diary entry from October 12, 1925, revealed him to be in an agitated state. He wrote fretfully that “Hitler does not trust me” and how it “pains him” that Hitler had “talked badly about me.” He further stated that he would leave the party if Hitler disapproved of him at any future meetings. In the same entry, he cast blame on Hitler’s inner circle for the bad feelings between the two men. Calling them “scoundrels” and “idiots” who feared his superior intellect, Goebbels lamented how they surround Hitler and turned him against both himself and Strasser.41 A mere two days later, however, Goebbels seemed too enthralled by Hitler’s writing to care. As he neared the end of Hitler’s book “with growing excitement,” he rhetorically wondered, in a very telling phrase, “Who is this man? Half plebian, half God! Perhaps Christ, or only John?”42

38 Goebbels Diary, 29. August 1925, 123.
39 Goebbels Diary, 9. September 1925, 126.
40 Goebbels Diary, 12. September 1925, 127.
41 Goebbels Diary, 12. Oktober 1925, 134.
Goebbels’s admiration for Hitler had mutated into, as one biographer put it, “a state of pathological dependence, with all its implications.”\textsuperscript{43} Another biographer asserts a November 6, 1925 entry marked the point “that Hitler is the center of all [Goebbels’s] thoughts,” making everything else “insignificant,” including “the program, Strasser,” and the slight differences between other factions of the Nazi party.\textsuperscript{44} Goebbels described meeting with Hitler after the latter had finished speaking at a conference. He was instantly smitten by Hitler’s warmth, friendliness, and enthusiasm, and he confessed he was “overwhelmed with happiness.” He was struck once again by the depth of Hitler’s speeches, as well as the passionate tones in which they were delivered. He concluded that Hitler had “everything to be a king,” was “the tribune of the people,” and, more chillingly, the “coming dictator.”\textsuperscript{45} Goebbels’s particular obsession with Hitler may be attributed to a combination of exhaustion and awe (his diary entries around this time often mention the need for sleep and coffee) but the same boyish enthusiasm did not diminish with time. While numerous examples are worthy of discussion perhaps the most telling is his simple inclusion nearly half a year later, in which he wrote in his diary “I love you, Adolf Hitler, you are both great and straightforward…what they call a genius.”\textsuperscript{46}

Despite Goebbels’s obsession with the Nazi leader, it is puzzling that their political differences did not drive a wedge between them.\textsuperscript{47} A recent biography of Goebbels dismisses the significance of this philosophical chasm by stating that for Goebbels’s “questions of content were unimportant” when it came to differences between his beliefs and those articulated in Mein Kampf. He viewed it not as a “political program” but instead as a “prophecy” that was “beyond criticism and discussion.”\textsuperscript{48} There is a lot to be said for this argument, but it leaves out Goebbels’s complex relationship with Strasser and Nazi socialism. Goebbels still held socialist convictions throughout his career, but often they would give way to personal loyalty to Hitler. This loyalty gave way to Goebbels abandoning socialist principles out of devotion to the Nazi

\textsuperscript{43} Reimann, Goebbels, 41.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 40.
\textsuperscript{45} Goebbels Diary, 6. November, 1925, 141.
\textsuperscript{46} Goebbels Diary, 19. April 1925, 175.
\textsuperscript{47} This is not to say Goebbels gave up arguing his case against the West. His diary contains numerous refutes of Hitler’s position, including an entry from April 16, 1926 when he traveled to Munich and had a long conversation with Hitler about the importance of Russia. Goebbels left the meeting unconvinced, stating he needed to “rethink a lot” about the situation. His doubts did not diminish his enthusiasm for Hitler, however, as is made clear in his next entry. For more information see: Goebbels Diary, 16. April, 1926, 174.
leader, most critically in his failure to support Strasser’s Draft in 1925. At a cursory glance, the Draft reads like a standard layout of basic NSDAP principles. It emphasized a strong executive to be carried out by a “national dictatorship” that would exercise broad powers to appoint local leaders and influence industry and production on a national scale. The importance of the state, one of the key features of fascism, was heavily featured in Strasser’s Draft, as well as the state’s right to expel Jewish citizens who immigrated after the outbreak of the First World War. Strikingly, Strasser also proposed the state’s right to redistribute huge tracts of land and restructure large corporations under the supervision of nationally appointed chambers.49

The fate of Strasser’s program, however, was sealed by the growing alliance of Hitler and Goebbels. Hitler rejected its adoption as a party platform to “avoid any commitments to specific social and economic reforms.” The rejection of the Draft by Hitler is not surprising considering his hesitance to adopt any kind of program that promoted what many were calling “German socialism.” The so-called “defection” of Goebbels, a close friend of Strasser and a believer in German socialism, spelled the end for Strasser’s proposal.50 It is clear Goebbels disagreed with Hitler on many fundamental points. However, Goebbels was so taken with the image of Hitler and convinced his leadership was necessary for National Socialism to survive that he was willing to compromise his principles. Evidence for Goebbels’s frustration and servility to Hitler lies in the former’s diary entries detailing his debates with the Nazi leader. One of the larger entries was from the April 13, 1926. Notably more comprehensive than his other daily pieces, Goebbels went into detail about Hitler’s ideas, which both amazed and disgusted him. Most of the ideas Goebbels was hesitant about were unsurprisingly related to foreign affairs. He still found some of Hitler’s beliefs could “make you crazy,” especially his proposed alliance with Britain and Italy to combat the Soviets who wanted to “devour” Germany. Nonetheless, he was impressed with Hitler’s answers. “We come together. We question. He answers brilliantly. I love him. I now have totally new insights into the social question.”51 He devoted several more passages to his awe toward Hitler’s superior intellect and methods of persuasion, but his enthusiasm for Hitler’s other ideas trumped even his distaste for alliances with the west.

51 Goebbels Diary, 13. April, 1925, 172.
Goebbels was thoroughly impressed by Hitler’s economic beliefs, specifically those of a “mixed economy.” For him, the mixed economy was the answer to the dreaded “social question.” Utilizing the Nazi strategy of making broad promises, Hitler’s economic plan was “a mixture of collectivism and individualism” that would be “something solid for the people.” Goebbels, not going into much detail after that, boldly claimed Hitler’s ideas to be promoting productivity, creativity, and individuality. He further stated his excitement that “corporations, trusts, finished products, transport, etc.” would be “socialized.”

Unfortunately for Strasser and the projects he proposed, Hitler, and by extension Goebbels, did not agree on how Germany was to be socialized. Hitler wanted to avoid committing to any specific reforms, but also took issue with Strasser’s ideas, especially his suggestion of redistributing estates larger than 1000 acres.

The failure of the Draft was due to the swift response of Hitler to maintain his position as the undisputed leader of the NSDAP, but also Strasser’s inability to get his allies behind his proposals. His failure to inform Hitler of his actions also bred mistrust and fears of a takeover by less mainstream elements of the Nazi party, leading to the Bamberg Conference on February 14, 1926, where Hitler reaffirmed his total control of the NSDAP. There were indications, however, that the Draft was doomed from the start. In meetings with his colleagues on November 22, 1925 and January 24, 1926, Strasser’s hopes of a “uniform and favorable response…were dashed.” As one of his key, and certainly more influential, confidants, Goebbels’s failure to unconditionally support the Draft meant Strasser and his Northern faction were guaranteed to be subservient to more mainstream Nazi forces in Munich.

It was with the slavish-like devotion of Goebbels to Hitler, culminating in the rejection of Strasser’s program, that made 1925-26 a key turning point for socialism in the NSDAP. It would never again have the chance to manifest itself in any organized capacity. Strasser was partially to blame due to his failure to articulate and assert his ideas to the Nazi party. The inability of Goebbels and his followers to see past Hitler’s leadership capabilities, however, also doomed the socialist-first faction of the NSDAP. After this prioritization of the nationalist aspect, the Nazi party largely focused the importance of the nation with Hitler as the central guiding figure. The role of socialism as articulated by Hitler and Goebbels, however, should not

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52 Goebbels Diary, 13. April, 1925, 173.
54 Stachura, Gregor Strasser and the Rise of Nazism, 47-50.
be casually dismissed. As I discuss in chapters 2 and 3, promising vague socialist policies became popular after the financial crisis of 1929, but even before then Goebbels never completely abandoned his social sympathies. A couple pieces of widely distributed propaganda hint that mainstream Nazi leadership was firmly on the nationalist path, but did not simply forget socialism.

Goebbels was so impressed by Hitler’s notion of a mixed economy that elements of it appeared in his propaganda as early as 1926. Between the turning point of 1925-26 and the elections in the early 1930’s, these social ideas did not simply disappear or exist in a void. Rather they were utilized as useful tools to forge a Nazi connection to disenchanted German workers. In a piece of propaganda titled “The Nazi-Sozi” first published in 1926, Goebbels outlined the National Socialist program. He began by listing the ‘Ten Commandments’ of National Socialism that exalted both the individual and collectivism. First Goebbels commanded a love of Germany before anything else, and to hate Germany’s foes because its “enemies are your enemies.” The good National Socialist must additionally love Germany’s poor “as you would love yourself,” have pride in one’s nation, and physically confront anyone who insults Germany. He also commanded, however, to “ask for yourself only duties,” because it was the only way for Germany to recover. The crucial aspect of this piece lay in Goebbels’s emphasis on political thinking being more important than material needs. He definitively stated that “politics, not the economy, determines the fate of a people,” a clear rebuke of socialist oriented legislation. Only through a strong political system could “the necessary economic policy” be implemented. His section on “Social and Socialist” is brief, but he described it as a second step in an overall goal. He rejected the idea of “social legislation,” preferring a “full share of what Heaven has given us, and what we have created with our own hands and minds.” While impractical, his writing clearly revealed sympathy with socialism, though he was adamant it was secondary to nationalism. He later distinguished socialism from Marxism and connected them to the German laborer. The worker had “the duty to doubt Marxism” but “no right to doubt socialism.” In short, socialism was the Nazi answer for the worker who might be drawn to Communism.55

Similar propaganda produced later by Goebbels showed he maintained loyalty to Hitler’s ideas in the years leading up to the Financial Crisis of 1929. A good example of propaganda

recycling his views on the role of socialism lies in a piece Goebbels wrote for a widely-distributed Nazi pamphlet in 1929. The piece is called Die verfluchten Hakenkreuzler, Etwas zum Nachdenken, which translates to, roughly, “Those damn Swastika lads, something to consider.” It outlined the values of the NSDAP, including why they were against the Jews, their revolutionary goals, why they were nationalists, and why they considered themselves socialist. Most of the information toed the typical Nazi party line, and emphasized notions of racial purity as well as the necessity for a powerful German state. His explanation for “why we are socialist” was given more serious consideration, but even though socialism was used to appeal to German workers, it still took on a secondary role compared to nationalism. Goebbels first defined true socialism as the “liberation for the working class” that was absolutely essential to “breaking the present slavery” and liberating Germany as an entire nation. However, he went to great lengths to distinguish his socialism from other more Marxist forms. He first declared that without nationalism attached, socialism was “a phantom, a mere theory, a castle in the sky, a book,” but with it was “everything” that can make Germany a free state. Second, he specifically attacked “the sons of Marxism” that reduced the socialist message to “a question of wages of the stomach” and inherently put it in conflict with nation building. He later expressed confidence that the working class would gradually abandon Marxism, and the communists would be forced to cooperate with the bourgeoisie and protect capitalist interests.56

As Goebbels basked in the light of his growing fame, Strasser struggled to retain credibility. It is clear that Strasser, thanks to his socialist-first ideals, had fallen out of favor with the mainstream Nazi party. The year 1930, however, marked the beginning of the end for the “radical” elements of the NSDAP. Tension began in January, when Gregor Strasser announced he and his brother Otto Strasser would be producing a paper in March called the Nationaler Sozialist. The announcement angered Goebbels, because the Strassers’ project threatened to hurt his readership and because Hitler did not immediately shut the project down. His frustration was evident from his diary entries, which stated how Hitler could not make decisions like a leader, which made Goebbels “sick of him.”57 The personal tension and Goebbels’s own impatience, however, appeared to be not as important as maintaining party ideology. Indeed, the next day,

57 Goebbels Diary, 30. Januar 1930, 491.
Goebbels’s confided in his diary that he and Hitler had a lengthy discussion that revealed the Nazi leader’s thoughts on the radical faction of National Socialism. Goebbels claimed Hitler said he “cannot stand the Strassers,” but more importantly he “reserves the hardest judgements for this socialism” that the brothers promoted.\(^{58}\)

Goebbels’s biographer portrays Hitler’s strange attitude as a balancing act: he avoided antagonizing the Strassers and dividing the party, but kept Goebbels in check by “complaining vociferously” about the Strassers. While Hitler’s complaints about the Strassers’ socialism may have been a political tactic, there is little reason to believe they were fabricated complaints. Goebbels may have been “slow to grasp Hitler’s strategy in the Strasser crisis,” but his eventual triumph over the Strassers was more evidence of an ideological rift in the early 1930’s.\(^{59}\) Hitler did not mention, however, the specific socialist policies he detested so much. As Strasser’s biographer notes, even during the formative years of ‘Strasserism’ in the mid-1920’s, his ‘socialist’ ideas “remained nebulous and eclectic” and were largely used “in a popular fashion.” In short, he frequently invoked “the concept of a ‘national Socialism’” but “did little to explain systematically” what specific policies defined the term. Instead, the socialist-leaning forces of the NSDAP should offer a “unique, idealistic kind of socialism designed to return to the working class dignity of labor and a place in the national community.”\(^{60}\)

The events of April and May 1930 marked Hitler’s public stance against Strasser, and by extension the socialist path of the NSDAP. Goebbels’s diary entries are filled with references to an “other,” more sinister sect of the party. His clear dislike of the socialist wing of the party was coupled with his own suspicions of Strasser. On April 13, Goebbels gleefully recorded Hitler’s supposed remarks to members of the press in Saxony, when he said that he “does not want to handle Strasser anymore,” and additionally called Strasser “his greatest disappointment.” This comment, Goebbels noted, went beyond personal distaste. Instead, Hitler was finally ready to go against “this literary direction” because it “also threatens him.” This “literary direction” was not directly quoted as being the pervasive influence of socialism, but it was nevertheless a direct reference to the Strasser faction as a whole, suggesting something beyond a mere power rivalry. In the same entry, he wrote how it would be a “triumph” for Strasser to seize control of the SA

\(^{58}\) Goebbels Diary, 31. Januar 1930, 492.
\(^{59}\) Longerich, Goebbels: A Biography, 125-26.
\(^{60}\) Stachura, Gregor Strasser and the Rise of Nazism, 51.
because then the “whole clique would be gone.” Strasser was the “evil spirit” within the party, so much so that the next Reichstag Fraction would be “set up against him.” He concluded that Strasser was beat simply by being related to his much more radical brother and that the “Strasser nonsense” must be “exterminated root and branch.”

The beginning of this “extermination” process began soon after in late April when Hitler publicly denounced Gregor Strasser, his brother, and the entire socialist wing of the Nazi party. He then announced that Goebbels would be head of Reich propaganda. According to Goebbels’s entry on April 28, 1930, Hitler gave a “magnificent definition of socialism” that contained “no compassion” and was “only about our people.” This was seemingly contrary to Strasser’s ideology because he “and his circle,” Goebbels gleefully recorded, “are destroyed.” With Strasser “already being driven out” by a very concentrated attack by Hitler himself, Goebbels also confidently declared “Goebbels triumphs!” As Goebbels’s biographer notes, the next few weeks seemed to vindicate the new manager of propaganda’s hopes. Gregor Strasser was ordered to shut his evening paper down, and despite some setbacks and a nasty confrontation between Hitler and Otto Strasser, the paper was discontinued in June. This significantly coincided with Otto Strasser and his socialists leaving the party for good.

Otto Strasser is largely excluded from this study because he was not nearly as influential in Nazi circles as his brother, but his importance in developing the socialist faction of the Nazi party deserves some attention. His socialist sympathies may have gained little attention, and his separation movement even less, but the effects of his ideas on the socialist faction were undeniable. Of principal concern to the mainstream Nazi party, including Gregor Strasser, was Otto Strasser’s emphasis on revolutionary action to achieve socialist ends. Mainstream Nazi forces had committed to a lawful transition of power years before, but Otto Strasser’s insistence on a revolutionary movement caused tensions and rumors of separation into a second, more socially conscious party. Four days after the separation, Otto Strasser was already busy devising a strategy to spread his socialist message. Citing his newspaper as the “first and most important weapon,” Otto Strasser clearly believed the use of information to be of vital importance,

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61 Goebbels Diary, 13. April 1925, 528.
63 Longerich, Goebbels: A Biography, 129-130.
specifically information that would be contrary to other mainstream NSDAP propaganda.\textsuperscript{64} He hoped to specifically attract “friends of the socialist attitude” that were still “within the NSDAP” despite the split. The “task of the revolutionary socialist” may lie “outside of the NSDAP,” but Otto Strasser seemed to imply that there were sympathetic socialist forces still in the organization. Indeed, he wrote that the revolutionary forces left because they could no longer deal with the “attitude” of the split, but he was confident that soon the real work would be “outside the members’ circles” of the mainstream NSDAP.\textsuperscript{65} 

Otto Strasser’s positions were so extreme that Gregor Strasser had to distance himself from his own brother to maintain his status in the party, but he was also clearly unwilling to give up his focus on socialism. In a letter to a friend, Gregor Strasser clarified why he had to denounce his brother, and specified which ideological notions he believed Otto Strasser and his followers to be incorrect about. He specifically criticized Otto Strasser’s insistence that revolution from below was the only way to gain power. Speaking as one of the “oldest” and most “consistent” National Socialists, Gregor Strasser asserted that, despite the NSDAP’s failed putsch attempt in 1923, there was never any point at which revolution could only be achieved by one specific path. He addressed concerns that he had betrayed the socialist point of view by remaining loyal to Hitler’s vision of a “nationalist first” program. The revolution-from-below tactic was a possibility, as infamously demonstrated by the Beer Hall Putsch, but achieving power legitimately seemed, to Gregor Strasser at least, far more likely. He had explained to his brother “a thousand times” that socialism would destroy the already decaying capitalist system, but for the time being it was simply a proclamation of “exaggerated theoretical formulations.” For Gregor Strasser, socialism would be achieved only when “a National Socialist Minister of Labor [publishes] the necessary law” with other “like-minded” individuals backing the action.\textsuperscript{66} 

In defending the need for legitimate revolution, Gregor Strasser even defended Hitler. For him, Hitler’s vision for National Socialism still resonated with the majority of party members, and despite disagreements and numerous humiliations, he believed it was the best chance to

\textsuperscript{64} Otto specifically named three papers: Der nationale Sozialist, Märkischer Beobachter, and Sächsischer Beobachter. Assumedly, these publications were potentially welcoming to the socialists.

\textsuperscript{65} “Dokument Nr. 1: Die Aufgabe der revolutionären Nationalsozialisten liegt außerhalb der NSDAP,” contained in Kurt Gossweiler, \textit{Die Strasser-Legende: Auseinandersetzung mit einem Kapitel des deutschen Faschismus} (Berlin: Banetzki Berlin, 1994), 55. This and subsequent translations from Gossweiler’s book are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

\textsuperscript{66} “Document I” in Udo Kissenkoetter, \textit{Gregor Straßer und die NSDAP} (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1978), 196-197. This and subsequent translations from Kissenkoetter’s book are my own, unless otherwise indicated.
bring about the end of the Weimar Republic. “In the end,” Gregor Strasser wrote, “National Socialism was formulated by Adolf Hitler.” The socialist revolutionaries presumed to know the roots of National Socialism, or if they understood them at the beginning of the movement since adopted new points of view. Gregor Strasser was most critical of those within the separatist socialist movement who accused Hitler of betraying National Socialism. Considering their movement “came much later” after Hitler’s, they were to “the highest degree illogical” and ultimately their accusations were “destroyed” as a result.\(^{67}\)

Gregor Strasser still considered Otto Strasser, and presumably other members of the revolutionary group, intellectuals. He leveled additional criticism at his brother and the socialist revolutionaries, however, for relying too much on theoretical concepts. Gregor Strasser did not go into detail about any specific policies, but he implied that his ideas of socialism stemmed from a more involved approach that addressed the material concerns of the German citizen. Otto Strasser was “the product of his purely intellectual abstract convictions” with his own work tainted by a growing ego, a lack of discipline, and an absence of “knowledge of the authority of the Führer.” Gregor Strasser acknowledged that some theoretical formulations based on rational discourse were of value and, interestingly, that “exaggerated criticisms” may have a “certain value” for any organization. He felt, however, that Otto Strasser failed to grasp the more concrete matter of life and the life of “the living man.” His current formidable position in the NSDAP, which would be most ideal to affect change by destroying the corrupt Weimar system, was the result of “ten years of struggle” and would be “betrayed” by Otto Strasser and his revolutionaries.\(^{68}\)

Based on Goebbels’s account, Gregor Strasser was clearly distressed by Hitler’s loss of confidence in him, and Otto Strasser’s divide within the NSDAP on socialist grounds was another reason for the Nazi leader to be suspicious. In his letter, Gregor Strasser also emphasized how the loss of personal loyalty had adversely affected the socialist message. He claimed Hitler’s confidence in him had been “destroyed,” but that the leader must be “served unconditionally” to achieve any revolutionary goal. Trust, the “soul-like attachment of man to man,” was necessary for political leadership. In this regard, Gregor Strasser believed the socialist revolutionaries had failed their own cause. Not only were they “not strong enough to distinguish

\(^{67}\) Ibid, 197.
\(^{68}\) Ibid, 197-198.
tactics and principles,” they also were simply not “trustworthy enough to believe in the men who, in every position, were the true German revolution.”

As historian Richard Evans observes, the split was “serious,” with observers “holding their breath” to see if the NSDAP would survive “this exodus of its left wing.” He concludes, however, that the days of party revival with “socialist slogans” had passed. Otto Strasser’s decision to break with the Nazi party would attract few followers to his “Black Front” movement. In the wake of the socialist exodus, other Nazi leaders were trying to control the damage to the party. On July 3, Goebbels complained about having to meet with party officials to discuss “socialism, radicalism, tactics, and revolution,” but concluded by saying that at the end of the discussion “everything is in order.” In fact, after the “socialists have left,” he felt as if the “air had been cleared” and the party had “been cleansed.” Socialism from July 1930 onward would be a far more carefully considered concept. The time for socialist slogans may have passed, but socialist rhetoric, particularly rhetoric in opposition to other competing political entities, would endure.

The alliance of Goebbels and Hitler to block Strasser’s program indicated a shift in Nazi party policy already well underway in 1925 and 1926. The years that followed would solidify the NSDAP’s certainty that a nationalist program was superior to a socialist oriented one. In the years leading up to the Great Depression the Nazi party would continue to grow, but it was not until the financial crisis of 1929 that the NSDAP would become a national player in German politics. The first half of 1930 was thus marked by need to consolidate the party, a process that eventually ended in the formal expulsions of the Nazi socialists. Their departure secured Hitler’s position even further, but socialist concepts remained. The depression would make the ideology, and its emphasis on providing materially for German citizens, an even more serious problem. It was also a key issue that propelled the radical parties of Weimar into a competition with more mainstream elements of German politics.

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69 Ibid, 198.
70 Richard J. Evans, The Coming of the Third Reich, 244.
Chapter 2: A Betrayal of Socialist Principles? 1930-1931

In her autobiography written decades after the end of the Second World War, famed film director Leni Riefenstahl recounted the allure of National Socialism for Germans in the 1930’s. Like Joseph Goebbels, Riefenstahl was impressed by Hitler’s personality. She was clearly overwhelmed by his charisma and charm, but also stated she chose to distinguish it from his “racist ideas” because they were “entirely different things.” She “could never have joined the National Socialist Party” because of its racist rhetoric, but nonetheless “welcomed [Hitler’s] socialist plans.” Riefenstahl believed the Nazi’s socialist plans had the best chance of reducing the widespread unemployment rocking the country in the early 1930’s. In that endeavor, socialism was the key. The racist ideology, for Riefenstahl and “many others,” was simply “a theory and nothing but campaign rhetoric.” Her account, though written in part to justify her relationship with Adolf Hitler, implied most Germans believed the socialist aspects of Nazism to be some of the more concrete promises of the NSDAP. In the early 1930’s, it was the promise of real (if vaguely defined) socialism that caught the attention of Germans and caused a shift in the conduct of Weimar politics. In the case of the early 1930’s, that shift would bring about the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Third Reich.

It is clear that within the National Socialist camp, personal alliances and ideologies were dictating party policy, but what of public opinion? The idea of a socialism friendlier to the German nation was a growing concept in the mid-1920’s, but its influence would not be widespread until after the economic meltdown of late 1929. Faced with real economic panic and widespread unemployment, radical parties like the NSDAP and KPD became more viable options. Consequently, Nazi leadership found itself in an ideological paradox. Issues of socialism were more popular than ever, but they could also undermine the party’s gradual emphasis on nationalism as well as their attempts to appeal to other voting groups, most notably the middle-class and big business. This delicate transition brought certain aspects of Nazi policy to light. First, it was clear the NSDAP was unwilling to abandon the idea of socialism. Like Riefenstahl, Germans believed socialist ideas were the only chance of German salvation. The Weimar Republic may have been founded on the rhetoric of Social Democrats, but the assertions of radical parties that the Weimar system was corrupt and unsalvageable were only amplified by the events of 1929. Second, by 1930 the idea of socialism was transitioning from a realistic system

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to an even more nebulous concept that came to represent the “radical” elements of the NSDAP. Fear of the socialist message eclipsing nationalist sentiments led to a bifurcated party message that downplayed socialism within the party but praised it in public.

The desire to convey the National Socialist message is perhaps best demonstrated in the Nazi party newspaper, the Völkischer Beobachter. The Beobachter had been the official party newspaper since the early 1920’s, but in April 1930 Hitler placed it under Goebbels’s control. With the September elections just months away, Goebbels prepared by putting out issue after issue of the newspaper to convince the public of Nazi superiority. The pieces leading up to the elections were rife with examples of the Nazi party’s ideological compromises and insecurities. There was the expected anti-Semitism, nationalist cant, and criticism of other political groupings. Beyond the obvious message, however, was a party afraid of the socialist blemish but unwilling to relinquish it. Indeed, the word “socialist” appears very little in the Beobachter, unless preceded by “National.” The underlying message of a supposed real socialism, one that was meant to attract German workers but still remain subservient to Hitler’s nationalism, was one of careful planning by Nazi leadership. In this balancing act lay the complex ideologies and relationships of Hitler, Strasser, and Goebbels, as well as the principles they claimed to represent.

Increasingly, socialist elements in the NSDAP became associated with dissidents who were not perceived as toeing the party line as laid out by Adolf Hitler. Such elements could be represented by high-ranking individuals like Strasser, but mainstream Nazi forces became far more concerned about the movement’s most powerful internal organization, the SA (Sturmabteilung), a paramilitary force that dated back to before the NSDAP’s official founding. Often referred to as “brown shirts,” the SA quickly built a reputation for violent tendencies and a willingness to enforce the policies of the NSDAP. Comprised of a growing membership of restless and often unemployed young German men, the SA was a fighting force that was effective at spreading Nazi terror, but dangerously unpredictable and potentially detrimental to the Nazi party. Amid public displays of gratitude and trust for the SA, suspicions of its leaders’ loyalty were often expressed by NSDAP leadership. This combined with the knowledge that the violent, revolutionary SA often alienated conservative, middle-class voters and denounced their
“insufficiently radical” political approach made Nazi leaders wary of the powerful but unwieldy organization.\textsuperscript{73}

It would be imprudent to definitively draw a direct connection between socialism and the SA, but it is the contention of this study that mainstream Nazi leadership increasingly associated one with the other. Evidence of the connection lay not simply in their shared fate during the Night of the Long Knives in 1934 and Strasser’s personal connection as a former SA leader, but also the make-up of rank-and-file members. In Timothy Brown’s study of the SA, he portrays it as an organization deeply committed to socialism. The dangers of the SA acting as a “bridge to the working masses,” however, was that they were “fundamentally suspect” for harboring communist sympathies.\textsuperscript{74} Brown asserts that this was based more on suspicion than actual policy positions, but the actions of many SA units seemed to corroborate such suspicions. A flyer that circulated in major German cities in the period leading up to the September 1930 election proclaimed that any participation in the Weimar system after the election was a “betrayal of socialism.” Interestingly, it also claimed that governmental participation would betray the idea of “the common good over the individual good,” a distinctly socialist or even communist idea. The flyer was anonymously published, but considering it began with the proclamation that “we are nationalists and socialists, but we are above all revolutionaries,” Nazi leadership suspected SA involvement. Blamed on communists and even Otto Strasser, the SA was a source of pride for the NSDAP, but also anxiety at the thought of becoming too socialist.\textsuperscript{75}

The broader anxiety about socialism and revolutionary intentions of the SA often mixed with a pride in the organization that cautiously championed the collective action of its working-class members. In the Beobachter, for instance, pieces praising the courage of the SA appeared frequently. One such piece was a series of short poems, all of which praised the bravery and revolutionary zeal of the SA. One such poem had the distinct ring of socialist slogans. Called “Volk ans Gewehr” or “People to Arms,” this poem emphasized the coming struggle was not about “crowns” or “money,” but branding a new world order as a united people, though no specific nationality is mentioned. This is not to say nationality was not implied (another poem specifically mentions the “dawn of the Third Reich”), but it is clear nationalist sentiments were

\textsuperscript{73} Brown, Weimar Radicals, 112.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, 243.
not the first priority. Similarly, another of the poems called “An die Fahne” or “To the flag” did not mention Germans or Germany once. Small exclusions aside, Brown notes how the very presence of the SA reminded NSDAP members of the “old ideals” of National Socialism and of the betrayal of “‘socialist’ provisions.” He also notes how a concept as simple as unity became dangerous to the Nazi elite. “Socialism and solidarity” became “synonymous,” which could then frame soldierly comradeship, perfectly exemplified by the SA, as tantamount to socialism. Such ideas equating socialism and comradeship were “a connection straight out of the postwar radical right’s fantasy” of a “socialism of the trenches,” an ideology not dissimilar to Strasserism. Socialism was thus “in the language of the SA both a radical egalitarianism and a revolutionary intransigence that rejected compromise” with the Weimar system.

The Nazi promise to overthrow the existing government was a motivating factor for SA members, but the NSDAP’s commitment to do so legally through the system concerned them. In his travels across Germany in the early 1930’s, Frenchman Daniel Guérin frequently noted how socialist hopes were invested in the NSDAP. In one interview, Guérin talked with a former member of the NSDAP who quit because he wanted “real socialism.” The young man claimed he was without a party because the NSDAP, and even the communists whom he admired, had “all betray[ed] socialism.” The theme of both the NSDAP and KPD betraying socialism appears frequently in Guérin’s writings. Another account was from a worker who, despite professing an admiration for Ernst Thälmann, complained how both parties could have “forged a unity of action” but simply “didn’t want to.” His conclusion was that the workers would simply have to liberate themselves and establish a “German workers’ state.” Brown notes the KPD connection, as well as the communist efforts to undermine the Nazis. One method was through flyers, produced by the KPD, that urged SA members to end violence against workers and “fight with the workers for real socialism.” Such pieces were printed to look as if they were produced by members of the SA and repeatedly cited the betrayal of socialism as the key reason to rebel. One claimed that NSDAP members were sent to a concentration camp because they “demanded the

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76 Völkischer Beobachter, August 26, 1930. This and subsequent translations from the Völkischer Beobachter are my own, unless otherwise indicated.
78 Ibid, 248.
80 Ibid, 118.
carrying out of the socialist revolution.” The same document mentioned party members leaving due to “Hitler’s betrayal of socialism.” It continued with “we revolutionary SA men…in agreement with our communist comrades recognize “Hitler’s betrayal,” and ended with “long live the socialist revolution, the Red Front!”

While much of the propaganda produced in the early 1930’s was fabricated by communists hoping to appeal to the socialist sentiments of SA men, NSDAP leadership was still fearful of potential rebellion. In the summer of 1930 with the election just months away, such fears were seemingly justified by the Stennes Revolt. Taking place during the summer of 1930 and the spring of 1931, the revolt was instigated by Walter Stennes, then the commandant of the SA. Stennes was mostly concerned about pay for his men and was angered by Nazi leadership’s attempts to rein in SA vigilantism, but the revolts were worrisome for the Nazi elite because of their socialist undertones. Given the near identical causes and demands of both rebellions, I treat them as essentially linked. Though many important elements of the revolt took place in 1931, I argue their relevance in analyzing the tensions of 1930 are equally valid. Indeed, many secondary authors treat the revolt as a single event drawn out in several stages. The initial Stennes crisis of 1930 was carefully resolved by the reassurances by Hitler and Goebbels that the Party had the SA’s best interests at heart. This was a temporary fix, however, and the next stage of the conflict would have similar tensions that would not be resolved as easily. The second part of the revolt in the spring of 1931 applied even more pressure on party elites.

According to Richard Evans, Stennes’s revolt was specifically targeted against party leadership (or Bonzen, meaning big shots). Stennes denounced Bonzen extravagance, but also their “betrayal of socialist principles” in pursuit of power. Brown expands on this concept, particularly the theme of betrayal along the lines of a socialist-style revolution. The revolt, again led by Stennes, “unleashed an explosion of extravagant hopes and fears” for both members of the NSDAP and its enemies. Brown again emphasizes the KPD connection because many SA members acknowledged a sense of solidarity between their own revolutionary ideas and those of the communists. Hitler and Stennes himself both worried that the more radical elements inspired by the revolt might leave for the Communist party. Stennes even included a piece in his political

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82 Evans, The Coming of the Third Reich, 273.
training for SA members that asked “What distinguishes us from the KPD?” Attempts to separate the two parties appeared frequently in the *Beobachter*, and mostly stressed the numerous street brawls between the SA and KPD. An article appearing on September 12, 1930 titled “Police and the KPD” highlighted how both groups frequently beat brave and dedicated SA men, a typical portrayal of how the NSDAP hoped to discredit any potential connections to the communists. Another called “Here the SA Fought” was similar, but also highlighted how communists went out of their way to provoke violence; it recounted how in one instance the communists “brought party friends from Neustadt to Lambrecht” (a distance of about 5 miles) simply to “break up the national socialist collection.”

Stennes also took great lengths to classify the party *Bonzen* as the bourgeois enemy socialism was fighting against. As Brown notes, the chief accusation Stennes leveled at Nazi leadership was their transformation of the party from a revolutionary movement to a “bourgeois association” led by Hitler. This transformation into a struggle against a “system” gave Stennes’s movement some legitimacy. Rebelling against a system transformed the “bureaucratizing tendencies in the NSDAP into a synonym” for what National Socialism was supposed to struggle against. The rebellion was put down by a combination of Stennes’s poor leadership capabilities and the swift mainstream party response, but its legacy represented a danger that NSDAP leadership would not forget in the coming years. As one biographer of Hitler notes, the Nazi leader officially condemned the revolt in party newspapers, including the *Beobachter*. He first reaffirmed that socialism was an integral part of the Nazi movement, but then dismissed Stennes’s followers as “‘the buffoons of salon-bolshevism and salon-socialism,’” comparing Stennes’s ideas of revolt to be similar in nature to communism. Hitler’s cautious approach, characterized by the endorsement of socialism on the party’s terms, would drastically influence the Nazi strategy from 1930 onward.

It was into this atmosphere that Goebbels emerged as the National Propaganda Director charged with winning the September 14, 1930 elections. Goebbels was confident of the Nazi chances in the election, but the Stennes Revolt and the tensions associated with it caused him no

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84 *Völkischer Beobachter*, 12 September, 1930.
85 *Völkischer Beobachter*, 11 September, 1930.
86 Ibid, 247.
small measure of anxiety. During the first revolt on August 8, 1930, Goebbels lamented that he must compromise with Stennes, considering it would shrink the SA from “15,000 to 3000 men.”\footnote{Goebbels Diary, 8. August 1930, 586.} He frequently underestimated the rebellion, and mentioned weeks later it was “worse than he feared,” but the loss of manpower was not the only aspect that troubled Goebbels.\footnote{Goebbels Diary, 30. August 1930, 595.} On March 29, 1931 during the second crisis, he remarked how the SA “stinks again,” and complained about having to work against a “strong clique,” including Strasser. It’s his description of the revolt as a “latent crisis with the SA around socialism,” however, that pointed to an ideological divide.\footnote{Joseph Goebbels, \textit{Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels: Sämtliche Fragmente, Teil 1, Aufzeichnungen 1924-1941, Band 2 1.1.1931-31.12.1936} (München: K.G. Saur, 1987), 29. März 1931, 40-41.}

Goebbels thus faced the daunting task of appealing to the working class with socialism while still maintaining the party’s firm stance against socialist inspired deviation. His new position as the National Propaganda Director also meant he was responsible for conveying the public face of the NSDAP to voters in preparation for the September 14 elections. The \textit{Beobachter} was the chief party tool for reaching voters and the types of articles it ran in the weeks leading up to the election are integral to understanding the dual space socialism occupied in the early 1930’s.

Despite the hesitancy of the \textit{Beobachter} to mention socialism on its own, it is clear doing so was unavoidable given the ideological basis of National Socialism and the economic crisis. Contributors to the \textit{Beobachter} therefore gave readers enough information to prove they did not betray their socialist principles. On the eve of the election, one small piece listed the NSDAP’s campaign promises, the first of which were “freedom and bread” and “true socialism.”\footnote{\textit{Völkischer Beobachter}, 14/15 September, 1930.} The party’s apparent need to distinguish the type of socialism it offered (without giving any details) made it clear that the contest for socialism was an important issue. Socialism not specified in name could also be promised by reputation. One piece quoted an earlier article by Strasser himself harshly denouncing capitalists as monsters who “withdraw from [their] dying people” and thus committed treason, an offense that should be “punished by death.”\footnote{\textit{Völkischer Beobachter}, 13 September, 1930.} Strasser’s hatred of capitalism was not necessarily a distinctly socialist idea, and could simply have been a reaction against opposing parties courting capitalist voters. However, Strasser and, for a time, Goebbels
based their understanding of socialism on the notion of ideological opposition to western capitalism and tyranny. Capitalism was additionally suspect in the economic collapse after 1929, making a more socialist approach much more appealing.

The disappointment in capitalism was also prevalent in the NSDAP’s criticism of other parties, most notably the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). The SPD was a frequent target of the National Socialists and the Communists, both of whom associated the moderate party with the corruption and dysfunction of the Weimar Republic. The NSDAP also frequently denounced the SPD for portraying a false socialism. Although the SPD was the traditional socialist party of Germany since the 19th century, the NSDAP set out to paint them as wasteful, capitalist, and corrupt; essentially, they were remade as non-socialist elites who betrayed socialist principles to solidify their own power. One article titled “If the SPD pursues socialism” was full of accusations that the party employed capitalist methods. It alleged the SPD had suspicious connections to I.G. Farben, a large chemical conglomerate that formed shortly after the period of hyperinflation.\(^93\) Citing the conglomerate’s “brutal capitalist exploitation” of workers, the NSDAP claimed that there was a “straight path that leads only to the German State Party,” the SPD. It then implored the German worker: “do you still not notice you are abused in a capitalist oil scheme?”\(^94\) An article titled “The Big Bosses of Democracy, Preserve your Most Sacred Goods!” further solidified the connection between wasteful spending, capitalism, and the SPD. The article listed the extravagant spending habits of the SPD, ranging from “superfluous items in the 1930 budget” to funds used to “protect the Republic in the household of the Reich Ministry of the Interior.” Next to each item was an estimation of how much it cost the German people (24,800,000 and 200,000 marks for the superfluous items and protection budget respectively). The article created the impression of a system built on lavish spending in the midst of an economic crisis.\(^95\)

The problematic similarities with the KPD also became a key feature the Beobachter tried to stamp out. The KPD’s socialist emphasis on revolution from below and on greater rights for the working class was bound to clash with the NSDAP, and, as a result, a primary goal of Nazi propaganda was to differentiate itself from the Communists. It was essential to Nazi

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\(^93\) After the NSDAP seized power, I.G. Farben would continue to operate in Nazi Germany and was responsible for producing much of the gas used against concentration camp prisoners.

\(^94\) \textit{Völkischer Beobachter}, 11 September, 1930.

\(^95\) \textit{Völkischer Beobachter}, 13 September, 1930.
leadership that National Socialism not be confused with the revolutionary socialism of the KPD; this would keep the SA more moderate but still allow them to advertise socialist attitudes. On August 28, 1930, the front page of the Beobachter boldly proclaimed that the KPD was “stealing slogans” from National Socialism. The article detailed how the communists stole key concepts of National Socialism, a “new fraud” to attract workers to the communist party. Specifically, they believed the communists had copied their ideas of a dual system, relying on nationalism and socialism in unity with each other. According to the author, “social freedom” is impossible without the “aggregate totality” of the nation, a message the KPD only recently adopted. This was especially infuriating to the NSDAP because of the KPD’s former insistence on internationalism, a strategy that was faced with an “unmasking” for the German people. The slogan copying had seemingly trivial tactics (the author cites how the Beobachter used the slogan “freedom and bread” and soon after the KPD used the slogan “bread and freedom”) but the consequences of a nationally conscious KPD were not lost on the Nazi party. Nationalism was an expanding concept, thus outcompeting rivals in socialism or “social freedom” became incredibly important.96

Part of portraying the KPD as purveyors of false socialism was branding their own “revolutionary” socialism as hurtful to the working class. Considering the infamous Russian Revolution of 1917, as well as the KPD’s connection to the Spartacist Uprising in 1919, the communist reputation for violence was a justifiable claim. Violence against workers, however, was an idea the NSDAP pushed in their publications. The KPD had strong connections to the Soviet Union, and attacking both became a common policy for the Nazis. The Soviet Union was not the ideal example of a socialist state, but its perception as a utopian society where socialism had triumphed was an idea the NSDAP was determined to destroy. In an August 28, 1930 article, on the same page as the article accusing the KPD of stealing slogans, was a small piece targeted to the “working women” of the KPD. Most of the article was an account from a recent traveler to Russia about their working conditions. He described the long hours and harsh circumstances, but especially the frequent use of child labor to fulfill the needs of the communists.97 A later article, published in the Beobachter on the day of the September elections mentioned the communist

96 Völkischer Beobachter, 28 August, 1930.
97 Ibid.
“struggle” against the working class in the Soviet Union. The Beobachter also attacked the idea of the Soviet Union as some sort of socialist utopia. Two days later, an article titled “Hunger in ‘Paradise’” detailed the material depravations of the Soviet experiment, a clear “fraud of the people.”

The September elections were a resounding success for National Socialism, with the NSDAP taking 18.3 percent of the vote. Goebbels, who had predicted a sweeping victory and had worked nonstop on the campaign, was ecstatic about the results. The election would only be the first of many political movements that would propel the Nazis to national power, but the 1930 election confirmed the NSDAP to be a mass movement. The Beobachter declared the decision to be “unprecedented in the history of politics…the Enlightened Germany Awakens!”

At a Munich speech the same day, Adolf Hitler called the election not a victory, but rather a “new weapon for our fight” to liberate the German people.

The NSDAP was on the rise, but what of socialism? The second stage of the Stennes Revolt was only months away and the SA was still a prominent force in the party. The radical socialists may have left the party in July but Strasser and his followers, while humbled, were still significant actors in the politics of National Socialism. The rhetoric of socialism was also still an active strategy of the NSDAP. In the same September 16 speech, Hitler made overtures to the idea of individuals before the state. Stating that the “fundamental principle” of the Nazi party was that “men do not exist for the State, the State exists for men” and the “idea of the people” stood “first and far above all else,” the appeal for a socially conscientious Nazi party was a clear priority. This is not to say the nationalist argument was abandoned or diminished, but the quest to obtain political power required a balancing act. The party would maintain its nationalist stance, but increasingly appealed to moderate socialist concepts. The next major shift for socialism would not be until 1932, when the question of how to deal with the socialist dissidents in the Nazi party would be a far more dangerous and potentially fatal issue.

98 Völkischer Beobachter, 14 September, 1930.
99 Ibid.
100 Longerich, Goebbels, 137.
101 Völkischer Beobachter, 16 September, 1930.
103 Ibid, 187.
Chapter 3: The Brown Plague, 1932-1933

At the beginning of his “walking tour” through Germany in August 1932, Daniel Guérin noted the special place politics had taken in the lives of German citizens. As a communist sympathizer and Frenchman exploring the unfamiliar terrain of Weimar Germany, it was not surprising the permeation of political culture into German society would stand out to him; the shifts in how the public perceived their own reactions and those of their neighbors, however, was altogether new. After stopping in a village inn and glancing at the visitor book, Guérin was shocked by the controversial statements within. Despite a warning to “keep your politics out of this book,” Guérin noted that “politics tormented these youths to the point where they were unable to resist.” Shortly after, he was informed that “it wasn’t so long ago that German youths were far more interested in champions and stars than in Hitler or ‘Teddy’ Thälmann.” Change had come in the form of “unemployment, poverty, and the boisterous arrival of National Socialism.” Material deprivations were apparent, with “anguish and hunger” and “tightening belts” that sparked the “contagion of political fanaticism” even in the very young. He concluded that “the uncommitted were few; everyone had taken sides.”

Guérin’s experiences in August marked a unique period for socialism in Weimar Germany, a few short months between two parliamentary elections in July and November 1932. Both would have mixed results for the political ambitions of the NSDAP; their importance in a larger sense was not lost on the population, as they would also be the last free federal elections in Germany until December 1990. In both, appeals to socialism played an essential role, with material deprivations and increasing political violence calling the very foundations of the Republic into question. For his part, Guérin was not shy about the importance of socialism in Germany in the early 1930’s. Before his encounter at the village inn, he described a feeling of optimism for the ideological prospects of Germany. Socialism would triumph in Germany, “or nowhere” because it had “the world’s best organized and most educated working class,” as well as economic and social inconsistencies that had “reached a point of extreme tension.” Soon, he believed, wage earners would be compelled to fight Germany’s economic elite. And yet, perhaps with the benefit of hindsight, he also felt the “seeds of a mortal illness” in the Republic that only deepened the more he traveled.

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105 Ibid, 48.
Guérin is just one example, but his eyewitness account of Weimar Germany as a politically charged, yet materially deprived nation spoke volumes about the pressures political parties were under. Appealing to the public while expressing partisan loyalty often tied enemies reluctantly together and changed the priorities of party rhetoric virtually overnight. Tied into all these questions was the vague concept of socialism that appealed to constituents, but did not violate the party platform. The elections of 1932 offered a chance for political parties to express their values, denounce the values of others, and prove they could win the support of German voters. The fate of Germany would ultimately be decided by the political maneuvering of Nazi leadership, but by 1932 the need to demonstrate the popular legitimacy of the NSDAP proved to be a decisive factor in the creation of the Third Reich.

The parliamentary election in late July 1932 coincided with a crisis of German politics after the appointment of Franz von Papen as Reich Chancellor. Widely perceived as representing a “Catholic political authoritarianism,” the Papen administration signified a shift from the parliamentary practices of the Weimar Republic. The new Chancellor and his associates characterized themselves as “above parties” and opposed to the more democratic notions of the Republic, with elected bodies being strictly limited in their practice of political power. His “self-appointed task to roll back history” would give the NSDAP an additional chance to augment their political influence. Despite Papen’s dislike for parliamentary representation, the popularity of the Nazi movement required gaining the support of the NSDAP before these anti-democratic policies could be realized. With President Hindenburg’s blessing, Papen and Kurt von Schleicher, his Minister of War, dissolved the Reichstag in early June 1932 and called for new elections in July.106

As with the 1930 election, the mainstream Nazi leadership pursued aggressive tactics that paired nationalist rhetoric to a vaguely socialist ideology meant to appeal to the material needs of German workers. In addition, Nazi strategy again relied on a demonization of opposition parties, particularly those that sought to claim their brand of socialism was superior. The differences between the 1930 election and the new July contest were not exactly subtle, but nonetheless represented the NSDAP’s growing confidence that their methods had thus far been effectively applied.

One key difference for the issue of socialism in 1932 was the active presence of Gregor Strasser in the campaign effort. As opposed to the 1930 election when he had been recently denounced by Hitler, Strasser had consolidated enough political power to once again wield influence in the NSDAP. This influence was felt soon after the election announcement, when on June 9 and 10, 1932 Hitler and Strasser respectively denounced the political organization of the party. With the complex divisions of responsibility and the subordination of individual main departments within the NSDAP, many felt “personal helplessness” in regards to the structural layout of the party. Strasser was tasked with its reorganization, a move that made many Nazi leaders fearful, particularly Goebbels. As the official denouncements were underway, Goebbels wrote that Strasser’s “apparatus” for reorganization “looks like a greenhouse plant...thick and swollen, but without an inner skeleton.”

Goebbels’s biographer notes that the next day, he complained “Strasser will give radio talks, Strasser will put together the list of candidates, Strasser appoints the Gau commissars,” but also the more sinister fear that “Strasser takes Hitler for a ride...[Hitler] doesn’t put up any resistance.”

More telling than Goebbels’s fear of the left-wing Nazis’ newfound influence over Hitler was his reaction to Strasser’s national broadcast. In the address, Strasser emphasized “state intervention to boost the feeble economy and reduce unemployment,” showing sympathy for what could be considered socialism. Goebbels was unimpressed. He wrote that the speech was “not aggressive enough,” but more damningly, members of the “opposing press” believed it to be “state-politically wise.” In Goebbels’s mind, this compliment from the opposition was “the most destructive judgement one can think of.”

Goebbels’s fears of Strasser’s influence over the party and the Führer may seem unfounded in retrospect, but by 1932, Nazi power structures were still uncertain. Strasser’s active role in the political process and his interactions with Hitler gave his allies more reason to be optimistic and his rivals more reason to worry. Even people who saw him in public knew him by reputation. Guérin referenced a speech by Strasser that he witnessed and provided a scathing account of both the military fanfare of the NSDAP and Strasser himself, who he called “grotesque” with a “vulgar petit-bourgeois bearing.”

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107 Udo Kissenkoetter, Gregor Straßer und die NSDAP (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1978), 68.
109 Longerich, Goebbels, 181.
110 Ibid.
111 Goebbels Diary, 14. Juni 1932, 185.
conceded, however, that Strasser was “no fool” and also the “most gifted and furthest to the ‘left’ of all the Nazi leaders,” to the point that some claimed he was the “real leader” of the NSDAP. Strasser’s speech, delivered with a “highly eloquent demagogy,” demonstrated a passion that one had to be “foolish to underestimate.” Strasser’s speech was a seemingly ordinary one railing against capitalism and demanding a new system, but even this was met with great enthusiasm by his supporters.112

Despite Goebbels’s criticisms, he had no choice but to allow Strasser to make his mark on the campaign, with demands for what his biographer describes as “job-creation” measures. One of the prominent examples of Strasser’s influence on the campaign was the widespread production of his booklet, Urgent Economic Program of the NSDAP. Strasser was able to distribute over six hundred thousand copies of the booklet to NSDAP organizations, no small feat for a man Goebbels confidently claimed was “finished” a few short years ago.113 The booklet, which went into impressive detail considering Strasser’s usual vagueness, made some interesting references to socialist messages. Described as containing proposals that “would have looked attractive to Germans suffering through the Great Depression,” the proposal also “aroused considerable opposition from business and financial circles.” Such opposition was formidable enough to warrant Hitler personally banning the booklet’s continued distribution in October 1932, shortly before the November election.114

While limited in size, Strasser’s booklet offered a fairly detailed plan for stimulating the German economy conveniently laid out point by point so as to be accessible to the average voter. Overall, the plan was similar to Strasser’s 1925 proposal, but promised the full authority of Nazi leadership. He noted at the beginning that “all statements by party comrades that deviate from or contradict this material are to be viewed as private opinions,” a strong assertion of authority.115 His proposals were far from revolutionary, but nonetheless representative of the NSDAP’s willingness to advertise procedures with a distinctly socialist nature. The policies outlined in the booklet were not described as socialist inspired, but advocated state intervention to provide

113 Longerich, Goebbels, 181.
114 Gregor Strasser, Wirtschaftliches Sofortprogramm der N.S.D.A.P. (Munich: Eher Verlag, 1932) in German Propaganda Archive, Calvin College, accessed March 15, 2017. http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/sofortprogramm.htm#a. The secondary analysis of this piece comes from Dr. Randall Bytwerk, a professor of communication arts and sciences at Calvin College. Dr. Bytwerk is the creator and maintainer of Calvin College’s German Propaganda Archive.
115 Ibid.
employment, reclaim and redistribute land, set prices when necessary, and engage in social issues. While these only represented a few of the issues Strasser discussed that had socialist connections, their importance for a suffering German electorate made them essential.

Several key ideas and phrases distinguished Strasser’s booklet as the work of a so-called “leftist” Nazi. At the forefront of Strasser’s plan was the public need to reduce unemployment. Strasser rejected the idea that Germany lacked the markets for creating jobs, citing the amount of unworked land and unused factories in Germany that remained unutilized. In terms of implementation, the only entity that had any hope of promoting this “generous program of job creation, which will also restructure the economy” was the state. Strasser next promoted the state’s role in land reclamation and, as in 1925 when he was censured by Hitler and Goebbels, land redistribution. Unlike his 1925 Draft, however, the wealth of the landowners was not mentioned, simply land “in need of improvement.” This, he believed, would increase state production by at least 500 million marks.116 Considering land redistribution was what made mainstream Nazi leadership wary of Strasser, proposing it on such a massive scale was most likely an unnecessary risk. His next section dealt with how laborers would be treated for all their work, particularly their right to housing. His worker proposals all had vaguely socialist elements, namely his proposal of a controlled economy to provide for workers. The right to a “private home and productive space” was guaranteed under Strasser’s plan, including the pledge to provide land (one quarter hectare) for worker use. The plan relied on reducing the hours of workers, but granted them a better lifestyle. The state would require that homeowners consume their own grown goods and could only buy directly from farmers, allowing the worker to “consume more than before.” To help with the cost, Strasser also pledged a “40% subvention from the government,” and if that proved insufficient a “guarantee[d] favorable terms and a quick decision” from the state bank.117

The common theme of economic restructuring at the discretion of the state was the necessity of consistent intervention to stimulate the economy. With the savings under the job creation system, Strasser proposed payments to the unemployed, “increased revenues” for social security, and an increase in tax revenue. Additional proceeds would be used for manufacturing, but the products manufactured “will receive subventions under the condition” that they were sold

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116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
“at specified prices and that large numbers of new workers be hired.”\textsuperscript{118} State control over monetary operations was repeated in the section on bank and credit policy, in which Strasser “demand[ed] the right of the state to supervise and intervene” in the banking system. The state’s power to affect pricing extended into Strasser’s discussion of administrative and tax measures when he declared it was “always socially unjust and economically dangerous” for prices to be raised above the “appropriate” amount. As long as prices were deemed “reasonable” by the state, he believed direct intervention was not necessary, but little is said about specifying what constituted economic freedom or exploitation. When discussing industry, Strasser again asserted that state intervention “is necessary” and only had a bad reputation because of Marxists who “always intervened in the wrong places.”\textsuperscript{119}

Looking at only these measures, Strasser’s plan might have seemed socialist to an average worker, but his additional measures for ensuring social harmony were no doubt even more clear. Initiatives such as his “increasing the burden on those with strong shoulders” measure meant that “sacrifices should come from those best able to bear them” and benefit the working-class. Additionally, the plan promised a renewal of social insurance, state care for the elderly, and a vague mention of “profit sharing;” while only given a single paragraph, profit sharing was a system Strasser promised would come after his job creation process had produced sufficient revenue. Finally, the booklet concluded with a concept that would certainly be familiar from socialist rhetoric: labor service. Strasser defined his system as “not compulsory labor for the unemployed” but rather as “a way to involve all young German men of a certain age range” in stimulating the economy. This would treat German citizens as equals, with “no exemptions for students and the wealthy,” and required that “each will take a shovel in hand to serve the nation through his labor.”\textsuperscript{120}

Strasser’s booklet should not be seen as promoting a purely socialist agenda. It went to great lengths to underscore the necessity of nationalization for every industry it discussed, a notion mainstream Nazi leadership would not necessarily oppose. Its various commitments to economic developments through the state, however, were boldly similar to Strasser’s proposed Draft in 1925, the program that was rejected by Hitler and Goebbels. Whether Strasser had

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
consolidated too much power to dismiss or the material shortages of the economic downturn required a strategy with more socialist language was unclear, but his influence over the issues of the election was certain.

Strasser was a key player in preparing for the election, but he was not by any means the only one. Essential to NSDAP strategy was continual promotion in the Völkischer Beobachter. The Nazi newspaper had become a crucial way to promote party policies, a lesson learned in the success of the 1930 election. As in 1930, Nazi strategy included appealing to vaguely socialist policies, demonizing the socialism of their rivals, and ensuring that their version of socialism did not overshadow their nationalist-based rhetoric. The differences between the strategies of 1930 and 1932 lay in Nazi sensationalizing of the issues their party faced. Casualties from the street battles against the KPD for territorial control in major German cities were updated daily; the incompetence of the Weimar system was portrayed as more obvious than ever; the SA and its heroic sacrifices in defending Germany were splashed across every issue of the paper. The role of socialism as a rarely articulated but clearly present feature ultimately made 1932 an extension of 1930, but with a more confident, expanding Nazi party.

The first and most important feature of the Völkischer Beobachter in 1932 was the presence of a clear enemy, the German communists. As Guérin observed in his travels across Germany the same year, the population had a politicized energy that permeated age, sex, and class. Displays of power, particularly by Nazis and communists, were common and fights over territory a frequent issue. In many ways, the sensationalizing of the Beobachter was a simple reflection of the political tensions present in Germany. In 1930 communists had certainly been an enemy, but shared the spotlight with the SPD and other centrist parties. By 1932, these other parties were still criticized in the Beobachter, but the communists, which NSDAP party members were actively fighting, became the most demonized. Words like “roten Mordfront” and “roten Mordpest” (“red murder front” and “red murder plague” respectively) were often splashed across pages of the Nazi newspaper, dominating the front-page headlines. One such headline from July 7, 1932, began with a brief tribute to the “daily victims of the red murder organization” and proceeded to recount how widespread such incidents were. They included the story of a National Socialist shot in Frankfurt, “Marxist disasters” in Leipzig, and a failed plot by the KPD to “steal 10,000 shotgun munitions” from a firm in Hamburg. Beneath these features was also an article
that proclaimed the “state black-red-yellow banner with the hammer and sickle,” describing a parade of “united” social democrats and communists before Berlin’s chief of police.\textsuperscript{121}

Acting as the main opposition to the KPD’s brutality, members of the SA were often lauded by the \textit{Beobachter} for their heroism and sacrifices. The paper often distinguished victims as an “SA man,” similar to the front page of the July 20 issue. The paper “demands accountability for this shed of blood,” directly pitting the SA and the KPD against each other as opposition forces.\textsuperscript{122} This was a typical example repeated even before the election process had begun. The expanded role of the SA in 1932 as responsible for fighting the communists in the streets was particularly interesting because of the organization’s connections to socialism that had by no means dissolved by 1932. The Stennes Revolt was over, but the memory of a swollen SA force committed to socialism, maybe even sympathetic to KPD interpretations of the ideology, was still a concern for Nazi leadership. Timothy Brown specifically cites the “crisis year of 1932” as a time when SA troops were likely to defect to the KPD. For many, the SA “represented a sort of ‘brown bolshevism’” that could potentially serve Moscow’s best interests. Brown is quick to point out that this represented “hopes and fears” more than actual reality, but was widespread enough to be taken seriously by the top brass of the NSDAP.\textsuperscript{123} Equally significant was the KPD’s belief in the fragility of the SA in 1932. As in 1930, the communists were confident they could sway the SA by promoting themselves as opposed to the “\textit{Bonzen}” party bosses of the NSDAP who had betrayed true socialism. Brown notes the presence of internal KPD reports entitled “From within the SA” and “Signs of Disintegration” that pointed to a troubled SA in the summer of 1932. One such report recorded a conversation between SA men where they said the “least they could do” was join the KPD to solve the economic problems of Germany, with “the rest” to be tabled once “everyone has work and bread again.”\textsuperscript{124}

The KPD was particularly threatening because they stood in marked contrast to the Nazi party in terms of evoking socialism. For all its faults and violent tendencies, the KPD articulated a clear message that purposefully reminded voters that socialism was a key component of their party structure. Socialism was a prominent feature of communist propaganda, dating back to the writings of Karl Marx and reinforced by Moscow. Indeed, in a speech only weeks before the

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Völkischer Beobachter}, 7 July, 1932.
\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Völkischer Beobachter}, 20 July, 1932.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid, 250.
election, Thälmann referred to the Soviet Union as “the only country of socialism.” As a well-known advocate for a “Soviet Germany” styled on the newly formed Soviet Union, Thälmann’s line in the same speech that “our flag is the flag of consistent class struggle” hinted that the KPD along with the Soviets would “make socialism a reality.”

This challenge made by the KPD in addition to the fear that the SA was sympathetic to the communist cause necessitated that the Nazi party distinguish its brand of socialism for the July election. The KPD was still the main enemy, but the ideological threat posed by the SPD still needed to be dealt with. As a moderate party, the SPD was not actively involved in street warfare, but their claim to represent the social interests of Germans still posed a threat to the NSDAP. In a section of the paper titled “Deutsche Volkswirtschaft” (German National Economy), a column by Fritz Reinhardt called “Marxistische Sozialpolitik in Theorie und Praxis” (Marxist Social Policy in Theory and Practice) appeared almost daily. These articles were characterized by a scathing critique of past and present SPD neglect for the working people of Germany. One typical example was found in the July 21 edition of the *Beobachter* that blasted the purpose of the party as “not to correct social damage and to create a human existence for the active masses of our people,” but “to pursue a policy of fomenting the social Red.” The social democrats thus “sow dissatisfaction” but gave the votes of the dissatisfied to “Jews, loud-mouths, the petty-bourgeoisie,” as well as the “Bonzen” in dignified, well paid government positions. This concept of the “social Red” to equate the SPD with the violent communists permeated Reinhard’s articles. In another issue of the *Beobachter* four days later, he wrote that the social policies of the SPD would have negative consequences for the financial sector, noting that their desire to “increase the social Red” would require the “financial need” to alleviate the damage the social democrats would inevitably cause.

The election results of July 31 saw massive gains in Nazi power, but NSDAP leadership quietly expressed concerns that the party had peaked. Goebbels confided in his diary that “we have won a little bit” but the “Marxists had won more.” “We will not get an absolute majority this way,” he concluded, “something has to happen.”

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125 Ernst Thälmann, *Ernst Thälmann: Zur Machtfrage, Reden, Artikel und Briefe 1920-1935* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag Berlin, 1983), 409. This and subsequent translations from Thälmann are my own, unless otherwise indicated.
126 Ibid, 407.
129 Goebbels Diary, 1. August 1932, 211.
party’s victory as problematic. As Goebbels hinted in his diary, the KPD triumphs were a particular source of anxiety for NSDAP leadership. The Nazis had gained ground, but mainly at the expense of center parties. The NSDAP was a majority party, but without a shift in approach, there was doubt whether they could maintain their political dominance. It was this attitude that led to a significant change in NSDAP tactics for the November 4 elections.

Historian Richard J. Evans describes the new NSDAP approach as a “furious attack on the government” that came about due to increased awareness by the Papen administration that the NSDAP was becoming too difficult to control. On July 29, two days before the election, Papen banned public political meetings and on August 9 he passed a presidential degree that imposed the death penalty for anyone who killed as a part of the political struggle in Germany. According to Evans, the latter decree was meant to apply “above all to the Communists” but had immediate ramifications for the NSDAP. The morning after Papen’s decree, five drunken SA men murdered a communist sympathizer, and were sentenced to death. The decision coincided with Hitler’s refusal to participate in Papen’s cabinet, a move that disappointed many rank and file members of the Nazi party. Hitler’s outspoken support for the SA men intimidated Papen, who reduced the sentence to life imprisonment, but without any support from the NSDAP as the largest party, the popular legitimacy of the administration was still in doubt. Determined to reduce the damage, Papen tried to dissolve the new Reichstag in its first meeting in September, but was stopped by a recalcitrant Herman Göring, who presided over the session as a representative of the largest party, the NSDAP. Göring not only ignored Papen’s calls for dissolution, he also allowed the KPD to motion for a vote of no-confidence in the administration, a move that passed overwhelmingly and forced the government to call for the November 4 elections. Still in the midst of his travels across Germany, Guérin was also in attendance. His account reflected his usual cynicism for the Nazi movement, but acknowledged how “Marxism and fascism had formed a bloc” against the “old spectral Germany” represented by a visibly shaken Papen.

The upcoming contest was thus defined by a strong opposition to the Papen administration and a hesitation to confront communist violence. Defiance to the government,

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130 Evans, The Coming of the Third Reich, 296.
131 Ibid, 296-297.
132 Guérin, The Brown Plague, 64.
however, had its own consequences. Socialism was again a key issue, but as a potentially negative feature of the Nazi party. Evans described the attacks on Papen as contributing to a decrease in NSDAP popularity because “they saw the Nazis’ ‘socialist’ character coming out again.” Even more damning was the brief cooperation with the KPD in the Berlin Transportation (BVG) strike. Beginning on November 3, the day before the election, the strike ensured continued disillusionment with the NSDAP by rural voters, the middle-class, and Germans who opposed communism. According to Evans, Louise Solmitz, a former teacher living in Hamburg, concluded that Hitler had “abandoned us” in favor of more power. She also believed “all her family’s middle class friends” who had voted for the Nazis in July were now “repelled” by the “Nazis’ move to the left in the November election campaign.”

The theme of the NSDAP betraying its voters by ‘moving left’ was a recurring one that harkened back to the issues of the 1930 election when Nazi leadership was accused of betraying socialism. By the autumn of 1932, however, with the main goals of Nazism predicated on opposing Papen, the NSDAP now had to contend with a frightened, non-leftist voter bloc. This is not to suggest that German voters were necessarily worried the NSDAP was becoming too socialist, but their reactions against the conservative Papen administration coupled with their cooperation with the KPD in such a short amount of time was cause for concern. In Timothy Brown’s book Weimar Radicals, he continues discussing the concern by Nazi leadership of SA men joining the communists, but asserts “their very approach fueled it.” According to Brown, “the need to ideologically battle Communism sometimes led to instances of official cooperation,” such as holding joint meetings or the BVG strike. He admits the strike in particular had “little lasting impact” on the relationship between the parties, but demonstrated “a striking willingness to work together.” Brown additionally calls the image of a rigid separation between extremist opponents” to be “no longer tenable.” The radical parties were thus “characterized by a familiarity verging on intimacy, by political discussion rather than just fighting, and by the not infrequent switching of members” between the two groups. Ideological divides were often subservient to “the allure of activism for its own sake” that led to “alliances of convenience.”

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133 Evans, The Coming of the Third Reich, 298.
134 Ibid, 298-299.
Guérin confirmed the intimacy of these supposed ideologically opposed entities as the “brown plague” further engulfed Germany. Despite his clear distaste for National Socialism, Guérin in no way shied away from the ease with which rank and file party members changed allegiances. The protean nature of political allegiances for the working-class suggested a commitment to policy over party line, of which socialism was the key aspect. Guérin described how the “luckless” German workers inquired among themselves, across party lines, why they bothered to fight each other. Noting the “uncommitted drift” consistently made “from one camp to another,” Guérin witnessed firsthand “Social Democrats becoming Nazis, Nazis becoming Communists, and vice-versa.” “Socialists and fascists,” he noted, “found common ground in the myths of a centralized economy and apolitical trade unionism integrated into the state structure,” but by late 1932, they simply wanted work. Guérin finished the section with what he called the “death knell of democratic Germany,” a common complaint from the workers that recognized how unlikely it was that the leaders of their various parties would work together. Among themselves, they asked: “why shouldn’t I listen to these new saviors who promise bread and jobs, to free me from the chains of the Treaty of Versailles, and who swear that they are a revolutionary socialist workers’ party, too? Heil Hitler!”

The brief flirtation with a united radical front was short lived, but its effects were felt up to the election and beyond. Goebbels’s biographer notes the very idea was instrumental to an overall shift in campaign policy. Strasser’s presence in sponsoring a socialist message, which had been such a prominent feature of the July election, was largely lost in the widespread promotion of the party leader as the one true hope. Indeed, as opposed to the July election when Strasser “had been allowed to showcase his sociopolitical demands,” by September he “ceded…responsibility for film and radio” to Goebbels.

The confusion of how best to approach the November 4 elections translated into a noticeable tonal shift in the Beobachter. In terms of advancing appealing socialist policies, the paper seemed paralyzed as to what constituted a ‘safe’ socialist promotion. Headlines instead focused on criticizing Papen for his authoritarian tendencies, but also his lack of concern for the Germans who demanded socialist policies. “Papen’s ‘Economic Program,’” one headline

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137 Longerich, *Goebbels*, 190.
mocked, “is not only unsocial but also business driven.”138 Less than two weeks later, an article sardonically titled “A ‘Social’ Administrative Reform” also ridiculed the Papen administration’s attempts to cast their clearly unsocial programs in a positive light.139 By contrast, an article from the same issue proclaimed the NSDAP as the “Bastion of Social Politics.”140 As the front page in the October 11 edition referred to Papen’s administration, the “gentlemen’s club” was regularly trying to undermine social programs (in this case, social pension cuts).141 Admittedly it was not too much of a stretch to paint the conservative, authoritarian Papen as an enemy of positive socialist change, but the principal criticisms were mainly social as opposed to national in character.

The conservative government of Papen was the primary enemy. The NSDAP’s rivals were still targets of derision, but less blatantly so. As in the July election, the KPD and SPD were enemies, but their roles seemed diminished in light of the Papen controversies. Certainly, the same sensationalized journalism that characterized the July election was significantly reduced throughout the autumn of 1932. The term “Rotmord” and tributes to SA men who died in combat still appeared, but less frequently and with considerably less fanfare. The importance of social reform that only the NSDAP could provide was also prevalent throughout the paper. One article that focused on the SPD criticized its “betrayal politics” that led to the “grave of trade unions.”142 In contrast, the NSDAP promised they were “committed” to using striking power “as a weapon to fight against the politics of dependency.” On the same page, the party proclaimed in an article called “Socialism before the Front” that the “NSDAP was now sharply and distinctly isolated” in their conflict with the “Gentlemen’s Club government,” with the other parties unwilling or unable to take action against the shared enemy.143 Interestingly, this piece was published only days before the Nazi cooperation in the BVP strike, but this notion of the NSDAP as the last hope for social change was one that was repeated consistently throughout the autumn of 1932. Another piece from September refers to the NSDAP as a “haven of social policy” when compared to both their rival parties and the Weimar government.144 Even these misled rival

138 Völkischer Beobachter, 23 September, 1932.
139 Völkischer Beobachter, 2/3 October, 1932.
140 Ibid.
141 Völkischer Beobachter, 11 October, 1932.
142 Völkischer Beobachter, 25/26 September, 1932.
143 Völkischer Beobachter, 29 October, 1932.
144 Völkischer Beobachter, 23 September, 1932.
parties could conceivably recognize the error of their ways. In a small article two days before the
election, a “humble SPD worker” addressed the “honest proletariats of the SPD and KPD.”
Predictably, it railed against the Bonzen of the Papen administration, but also called for a “state
of social justice” and mourned how “we have been silent when socialization became nothing”
and national institutions like the German railway system have been “de-socialized” and
“transformed into a private capitalist enterprise.”

Paralyzed with indecision on how to proceed and unable to muster the same levels of
political support, the NSDAP lost a significant number of votes in the November 4 election.
While they could still claim to be the largest party in Germany, a fact they continually promoted
in the Beobachter, a permanent Nazi decline was a distinct possibility. The party was also
frightened by the KPD, that had gained a significant number of votes. In a renewed wave of
protest, Papen was forced to resign, prompting further political instability that would eventually
lead to Hitler’s appointment to power. As for Strasser, he would resign his party posts in early
December, partly due to efforts by Goebbels to portray him as a traitor and partly due to his own
frustration of Hitler’s insistence of only joining a government the Führer would lead. His legacy
remains controversial because of his relationship to a socialist Nazi party. His biographer
acknowledges Strasser was widely accepted as the leader of the “a ‘socialist’ wing of the
NSDAP,” but posits that not only was this unjustifiable, but by the time of his resignation a
socialist Nazi party was “a non-existent entity.”

Evans has a similar reaction, citing Gregor Strasser’s ideological opinions as “very similar to his leader’s,” while Otto Strasser, who’s
expulsion Gregor Strasser supported, represented the real left-wing presence in the NSDAP.
Evans does, however, acknowledge Strasser’s importance in the Nazi party, even in 1932. Had
he campaigned for his viewpoints, he “might well have taken a substantial portion of the party
with him, leaving it fatally damaged,” but instead “he did nothing.” Strasser’s centralized
management structure was dismantled and he played no further role in the Nazi party until his
violent death in 1934.

Strasser’s credentials as a genuine socialist may be questionable, but the perception that
he represented a left-wing Nazi movement is difficult to dispute. By the end of the Weimar

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145 Völkischer Beobachter, 2 November, 1932.
146 Evans, The Coming of the Third Reich, 299-301.
148 Evans, The Coming of the Third Reich, 303.
Republic, the movement he characterized symbolized both a source of opportunity and danger for the NSDAP. The 1932 elections were the last attempts to sell this brand of socialism to a politically charged German electorate. Distinguishing ambiguously defined socialist concepts from others became essential given the similarities between the SA and other revolutionary groups. In discussing this overlap, Guérin described a song called “Bruder, zur Sonne, zur Freiheit” as being “appropriated” from socialists and communists “like they have done with the red flag, May Day, dramatic recitations, and five-year plans.”149 The Nazis came to symbolize revolution, and more importantly a break from the socially defunct Weimar Republic.

The differences in the Nazi approach for the two elections reflected political circumstance, but also the adaptability of the entire party in pursuing social policy. The July election verified the ambiguous social strategy to be successful with the German population. The shift during the November election showed a less gaudy approach that was unable to produce similar results. We can only speculate whether Strasser’s active presence leading up to the July election influenced it greatly. His socialist-inspired rhetoric, though vague and ultimately frail, alluded to an effort by the NSDAP to demonstrate their social promises. Even that Strasser’s material was banned by Hitler before the November election indicated some level of hesitation by party leadership to fully commit to these promises. The material in the Beobachter reinforced this point, as social policies were given vague representation, with most emphasis on how rival parties had failed through their similar proposals. The NSDAP’s hesitation after the July election and the inability of Nazi propaganda to distinguish itself from its rivals also attacking the German government created a sharp drop in electoral support. The comparable inability of many to distinguish between the revolutionary forces of Weimar’s radical parties, especially when there was some measure of cooperation between them, similarly hurt the Nazi party. Overall, however, electoral losses for the NSDAP stemmed from the frustration of many Germans and their desire for concrete results from their perceptively incompetent political system. The vague social strategy worked, but was on the wane by November 1932.

Guérin’s lament of Nazis appropriating communist and socialist songs came from 1933, after the Nazis had achieved political power without being directly voted into office. In the wake of the steady Nazi takeover of 1933, the ability to express political plurality quickly diminished. By January of that year, Hitler had been named Chancellor and less than a month later the

149 Guérin, The Brown Plague, 97.
infamous Reichstag Fire Decree set the stage for implanting the NSDAP as the single ruling political party. With serious political competition outlawed, the need to appeal to Germans was minimalized, and further actions only served to consolidate Nazi power.
Conclusion

The Nazi rationale behind the choice between the NSDAP and the KPD is perhaps best demonstrated by the film *Hitlerjunge Quex*, a propaganda piece from 1933. In the film, a young boy named Heini Völker (nicknamed Quex) is forced by his father to join the Communist Party of Germany. After attending a camp with other young communists, he finds the organization barbaric and distasteful, but is enthralled by the camaraderie and patriotism of the nearby Hitler Youth. Heini is eventually killed by disgruntled communists, becoming a martyred hero of Nazism. While this may seem typical of Nazi propaganda, the film’s portrayal of communism hints at sympathy for economically deprived Germans. The film is clear that the KPD was the main antagonist and its members largely barbaric and murderous, but their ability to be reasoned with had not completely corroded. Heini’s father, a devoted communist and abusive drunk, is nonetheless a sympathetic character because he is a victim of the Weimar system. In another scene following a brief discussion with a Nazi official, he begins to question the communist rejection of a unified homeland and wonders about a common connection between all Germans predicated on the existence of a larger German nation. The film, released less than a year after the November 1932 elections, should not be analyzed as expressing covert sympathy with communism, but rather a willingness to accept certain reformed political adversaries as long as their loyalty to the German state remained intact. Unfortunately, the criteria for reformation was to be solely determined by a fully empowered NSDAP.

As exemplified by Strasser’s death in the Night of the Long Knives, the NSDAP ruthlessly asserted their authority on the German state. The twelve-year reign of the Third Reich would be marked by complete state dominance in the lives of citizens, giving it the ability to persecute, banish, and even kill. The financial recovery of Germany after the Nazi rise to power was often used to justify their legitimate right to rule. Scholars still debate whether Hitler’s policies or the efforts by Weimar politicians promoted economic recovery, but to the German population it made little difference. The socialist rhetoric by the Nazi party largely did not matter after 1933. Dedicated leftists who demanded more commitment by their government were systematically purged while trade unions and other organizations of the working class were put

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under direct control of the state. Strasser’s name was thrown in with other dissidents, a simple political upstart trying to undermine Germany’s beloved Führer.

The Nazi interactions with socialism is today considered another aspect of state domination. Looking outside the Weimar Republic, the centralized role of the state as the main vehicle of governance confirms this judgement. While the NSDAP was vying for power within the democratic Weimar Republic, however, their ability and methods to appeal to a frustrated German electorate were most crucial to their success. I have argued that their socialist rhetoric, defined by noncommittal language, was one of the indispensable features of building party legitimacy.

I have also argued that three turning points are most critical to understand these social policies: the personal maneuvering of 1925-26, the September election of 1930, and the two parliamentary elections of 1932. Hitler’s ability to win over party members who did not agree with his nationalist-first philosophy, most critically Joseph Goebbels, in the mid-1920’s made his ideas dominant and the “mainstream” components of National Socialism. By comparison, Strasser, a prominent member of the NSDAP, became associated with the “radical” faction of Nazism. Strasser’s inability to construct a coherent ‘socialist’ narrative also hampered his credibility when compared to Hitler’s more straightforward arguments, especially those from Mein Kampf. Eventually, Strasser’s ideas were reduced to anti-capitalist pleas capped with socialist sounding rhetoric. This gradual removal of Strasser from the core tenets of the Nazi party made a clearly defined socialist program a distinct impossibility. Despite the departure of Otto Strasser and the “socialists” from the NSDAP, the party was able to portray itself as a socially sympathetic entity. In fact, the socialist exodus largely served to unify the NSDAP under more nationalist principles.

The September 1930 election proved that socialist language was still a useful tool for the party. The Stennes Revolt, which had its origins in the period shortly before the election, raised concerns about whether rank-and-file members of the SA would defect to the communists because of a belief that Nazi leadership had betrayed its socialist values. The Stennes Revolt persisted after the election, but the propaganda campaign to convince voters of the NSDAP’s socialist sympathies was highly successful, as evidenced by the NSDAP’s triumph in the election.
The 1932 parliamentary elections are more distinguished by their different approaches and results. The July election was in part a continuation of the same ambiguous, socialist bombast sensationalized to a higher degree. The strategy worked, and the NSDAP saw great electoral gains. Following Papen’s dissolution of the Reichstag, elections were again called for November. Papen’s restriction on political parties prompted a shift in Nazi strategy characterized by a pronounced assault on the German government and even a willingness to cooperate in a limited capacity with their rivals. The result was a loss in votes, but also a widespread loss of faith in the Weimar system that arguably prompted Hitler’s appointment as chancellor. The effects of Hitler’s rise to power was the initiation of the Third Reich and the purging of any individual deemed threatening, including Strasser.

Overall, the NSDAP’s approach to socialism was a carefully considered, evolving idea. It was principally shaped by necessity; the need for a central, strong leadership in the mid-1920’s and a more materially driven response after the crisis of 1929. Even between the elections of 1930 and 1932, subtle shifts in portraying the party and its enemies echoed a political organization aware of the electoral hurdles they faced. The ability of Goebbels and other propaganda creators to keep their socialist appeals subtle was enough to reassure the middle-class and prominent capitalists that the NSDAP was committed to fighting serious challenges from the left, especially the KPD. That the NSDAP was able to appeal to them at a time when capitalism seemed problematic, ultimately allowed them to seize power with few complaints from such groups. The downplaying of Strasserism, a concept synonymous with anti-capitalism, further convinced Weimar officials that a government without National Socialist participation was an impossibility. However, hints of social reform in Nazi propaganda, as well as the revolutionary fervor of the SA, prompted many lower-class groups to also see no alternative but to support the NSDAP. Both these points suggest the Nazi party was indeed a diverse and effective Volkspartei, though the complexities of how it achieved those ends warrant both contextual awareness and further historical examination.


