The Night of the Long Knives 1934: Hitler and the Nazi barons

Hitler’s reputation is as an all-powerful dictator of the Nazi Party and of Germany. But this reputation disguises the fact that Hitler was lazy and largely disinterested in the day to day business of running a dictatorship. Like a medieval king, Hitler surrounded himself with important Nazi officials or ‘barons’. Each was intensely loyal to Hitler, but they hated each other. Each of the Nazi barons wished to carve out more power and influence for himself. There were many leading Nazis in control of various aspects of German life. Herman Goring ran the police and the airforce, Josef Goebbels was minister for propaganda, Rudolf Hess was Hitler’s deputy, Heinrich Himmler was in charge of the SS (Schutz Staffel – Hitler’s elite bodyguard), Albert Speer was Hitler’s chief architect and Ernst Rohm ran the SA (Sturm Abteilung – the Brownshirts).

The Nazi barons jostled and fought with each other to gain power and prestige. Hitler allowed and even encouraged this, as long as it did not undermine his position as the Fuhrer. By 1934, Hitler felt threatened by Ernst Rohm. Rohm had been very important in the 1920s. He had founded the SA and by the early 1930s it had swollen in number to over 2.5 million members. Rohm fancied himself as the equal and successor to Hitler. Hitler used Himmler and the SS to bring down Rohm. On 29th June 1934, Hitler summoned the SA leaders to Wiesse for a conference. That night over 200 were arrested or murdered by the SS. Hitler claimed about 70 deaths, others about 400. This of course was illegal murder, but Hitler argued that:

"In this hour I was responsible for the fate of the German people, and thereby I become the supreme judge of the German people. I gave the order to shoot the ringleaders in this treason."

Hitler had consolidated his position further. By the thorough execution of his own people, Hitler showed that he would tolerate no opposition. This act of violence was known as the Night of the Long Knives. The SA faded after 1934 under the leadership of the nondescript Victor Lutze. Under Himmler, the SS went from strength to strength.
This is a very famous British cartoon published in 1934. It shows David Low’s view of the Night of the Long Knives.

David Low, the *Evening Standard*, 1934, ‘They salute with both hands now’.

1) Why is Hitler holding a smoking gun?
2) Who is lying dead on the floor?
3) Who is standing next to Hitler?
4) Why is he dressed as a Viking warrior?
5) Who is crawling on the floor?
6) Why have all the Brownshirts men got their hands up?
7) Why does Hitler’s swastika have the words ‘the double cross’ next to it?
8) What does the title of this cartoon mean?
9) How useful is this cartoon for a historian studying the Night of the Long Knives?

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Hitler speaking to the Reichstag after the Night of the Long Knives

10) How did Hitler try to justify the murder of Rohm and other leading SA members?
11) With so much power and control over the Reichstag, why did Hitler want to speak out about his actions?

For a full list of the Nazi barons and more information on the Night of the Long Knives try: http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/GERnazigermany.htm