



Stormtroopers with their bikes during a 1933 parade. A new book argues they played an important role in attracting people to the Nazi regime

of fascist bullies, Siemens portrays the SA as an integral part of the Nazi vision for German society; one might describe them as the paramilitary wing of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, or 'national community'. In this, he suggests, the SA played a central role in the seduction that Nazism represented; promising direct action, indoctrination and violence, certainly – but also (a Nazified) inclusivity, a sense of social conscience, and a vital feeling of common purpose and belonging.

In addition, the SA fulfilled an important ideological role, not only for its violent 'action' – a traditional piece of fascist dogma – but also as a crucial propagator of anti-Semitism, the militarisation of society and the preparations for the German settlement of the newly won *Lebensraum* in the east. Indeed, in 1939, Hitler assigned responsibility for the pre-military and ideological training of a generation of German men to the SA. Clearly, the organisation was still vital to the Nazi project, even after the cudgels and knuckledusters had been set aside.

Aside from the ideological, Siemens suggests that the SA also played an important practical role, turning out *en masse* for Nazi ceremonial events and providing everyday support to the regime on the home front, as auxiliary air raid wardens, prison guards or policemen. During the bombing of Hamburg, for instance, in the summer of 1943, SA men found themselves on the front line, securing buildings, recovering the dead and dealing with the bombed-out. In the process, one of their number swooned that "trust in the SA man was simply boundless. The SA man knows everything, can achieve anything, is capable of doing anything."

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## Nazi thugs and boot boys

**ROGER MOORHOUSE** recommends an exemplary book that sheds new light on the notorious Brownshirts



### Stormtroopers: A New History of Hitler's Brownshirts

by Daniel Siemens  
Yale, 504 pages, £25



History has largely by-passed the Sturmabteilung, or Stormtroopers. Also known as the Brownshirts, or the SA, Hitler's thugs and boot boys provided "hall security" for the Nazis in their early years, and were notorious for battling their communist and socialist counterparts for control of the streets in the dying days of the Weimar Republic. Yet, despite its significant role in Hitler's rise, the SA has only rarely

been the subject of a dedicated study, lacking as it does the diabolical glamour of the SS or Gestapo.

Daniel Siemens' latest volume is welcome, therefore, but not just by virtue of its novelty. The author brings a genuine rigour to his subject. He is not content simply to retread the stereotypical, half-formed narrative of the SA – that of an organisation solely defined by political violence, which drifted into obscurity after its leaders were executed on Hitler's orders in 1934. He seeks instead to challenge those assumptions, to uncover the real role that the SA played, and to divine the influence the organisation may have had.

His conclusions might be surprising. First of all, far from being 'just' a gang