

## HISTORY This Week EP. 308: Hitler Takes the Stand EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

*NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.*

**Sally Helm:** HISTORY This Week. February 26, 1924. I'm Sally Helm.

As they enter the courtroom in Munich, the audience has to submit to a search. To make sure they're not smuggling in any weapons. A reporter writes the next day: "Their hair, hats, purses, muffs and even stockings were inspected for daggers, hand grenades, and bombs..." and also for "hatpins exceeding the limit allowed by the authorities."

Those authorities are not taking any chances—the defendants in this trial are charged with an attempted coup. In German, a putsch. They tried to overthrow the government of the Weimar Republic...and almost succeeded. There have been rumors that their supporters might try to storm the courtroom. Free the defendants and finish what they started.

When the audience finally makes it through security, they enter a big, drafty room. It wasn't designed as a courtroom. This building had been a school for soldiers, and this room was their dining hall. The school was shut down recently...because the majority of the cadets had supported the attempted coup. Marched against the government. Alongside the defendants—who now enter this former dining hall to face a charge of high treason.

The first defendant is a general in civilian clothes—a blue suit. The second follows a few steps behind, carrying a briefcase. He isn't an imposing figure. One observer writes he looked, "for all the world like a traveling salesman for a clothing firm." When the judge enters a few minutes later, and reads this man's name into the record, he identifies him as a Munich writer named Adolf Hitler.

Today: Hitler's first attempt to seize power. How did his 1923 coup fail? And why would Hitler later say that this failure was "perhaps the greatest good fortune of my life?"

Adolf Hitler will stage his 1923 coup in the city of Munich. He'd moved there in 1913 from Austria as a broke artist selling postcards for money. He left home because he was dodging the Austrian draft. And also, he'd come to hate the multicultural, multilingual Austrian empire. He adopted the city of Munich as his true home.

When World War 1 breaks out in 1914, soon after his big move, the 25-year-old Hitler is suddenly eager to enlist.

**Peter Range:** He loves the idea of getting into the German army. He wanted to be fully German. And this was one more chance to prove what a German he was.

**Sally Helm:** That's longtime journalist, Peter Ross Range, author of several books on Hitler. He told us, the young Hitler fights in the Bavarian army. (Munich is the state capital of Bavaria.) And in October of 1918, a mustard gas attack leaves him temporarily blind. He's in the hospital, recovering, when he hears the news of Germany's surrender.

**Peter Range:** He was devastated according to his own account by the news, you know, after four years, all was lost

**Sally Helm:** And soon, all was chaos in Germany. The economy tanks. Inflation skyrockets. People can't trust that money will have value tomorrow.

**Peter Range:** Sometimes people would prefer to barter food for things, for instance, two eggs for a very expensive opera tickets

**Sally Helm:** Then food itself becomes scarce.

**Peter Range:** There was starvation, there were hunger riots

**Sally Helm:** In the midst of it all, Germany establishes its first democracy. The Weimar Republic. But that only creates more political instability. People resent the government in the capital city of Berlin. They're mad that Germany lost the war and had to pay punishing reparations. And all this tension is especially evident in Bavaria. It had always been a conservative state. And now:

**Peter Range:** Bavaria became a kind of a safe Haven for right-wing forces. And they continued to gather there, where a very nationalistic mood was developing.

**Sally Helm:** It was German nationalism that had driven Adolf Hitler into the army. And now, even though the war is over, the army is where he wants to stay.

**Peter Range:** And why did he want to do that? Because he had no other place to sleep or eat. Being a soldier was the only real job that Hitler had ever had.

**Sally Helm:** He's assigned a job as an army educator and informant. He's supposed to teach soldiers the principles of nationalism and sniff out any Marxist sympathizers in the ranks.

Hitler also begins crystalizing his own political views at this time, influenced by the right-wing politics in Munich and by anti-Communist and anti-Semitic periodicals and books.

**Peter Range:** And so he thought he had figured out, why communism was bad, why mixing races was bad and he regarded Jews as a separate race from Germans and even the French for that matter, and had developed very strong ideas about these things. Not very sophisticated, but he, he could declaim on them

**Sally Helm:** He gets the chance to do that in his role as an army educator. He lectures to a group of soldiers. And it's at this point that he discovers his greatest skill.

**Peter Range:** **Hitler kind of claims that that was the moment that he realized quote, "I could speak."**

**Sally Helm:** He'd never been a great soldier. But he turns out to be a powerful orator. His students give him high marks. One writes, in his course review, "Herr Hitler is, if I may say so, a born popular speaker."

That skill will come to define the next months and years of Hitler's life. Soon after he gives those lectures, in September of 1919, something happens to set him on a new path.

**Peter Range:** **I mean, it was the turning point in him going into politics. And, you know, it was a critical moment in history for all of us.**

**Sally Helm:** It happens at a shabby looking pub in Munich. Hitler has been sent there as an army spy. He's supposed to observe a small meeting held by a fledgling right-wing political group called the German Workers Party. And near the end of the meeting, one of the members starts making a speech. About how Bavaria should separate from Germany. According to Hitler's telling, he springs into action.

**Peter Range:** **Hitler stands up and makes the opposite argument. They said not only should the various stay with Germany and Prussia, but also annex Austria, Austria should be part of greater Germany. Hitler was a great believer in greater Germany and in his own telling he talked this guy into the floor and sorta chased him out of the meeting, quote, "like a wet poodle" unquote. So, this was the alleged moment of birth of Hitler's political career.**

**Sally Helm:** Hitler surely manipulates this story over the years, as he hones his own political mythology. But most historians agree on what happens next.

**Peter Range:** **the head of the party, said, "Hey, that guy can talk," and send him a postcard a few days later, inviting him to join the party, which he did.**

**Sally Helm:** Within just a few months, the party realizes his strength. He's drawing large crowds. Riling them up with his speeches. He'd start slow and simple:

**Peter Range:** **Which had the effect generally of quieting the crowd down. And his speaking style then would rise to a crescendo and he would become very physical and waving his arms and shaping his words with his hands, and this was something that folks were not necessarily used to in a political speaker..**

**Sally Helm:** Hitler would hammer on topics that, for a growing number of Munichers, hit home.

**Peter Range:** German nationalism, national greatness, the inflation problem, the horrible guys in Berlin who were running the country into the ground,

**Sally Helm:** The guys who many Germans blamed for their loss in World War I. This appealed in particular to working class Germans. Especially those who had been soldiers.

**Peter Range:** And they felt that Hitler was a person who could get the country back on the right track. and who was promoting their point of view,

**Sally Helm:** In his speeches, Hitler finds a scapegoat. He singles out Jewish people as a quote “virus” infecting the country. At the time, anti-Semitism was not uncommon in Germany, but:

**Peter Range:** Hitler's, way of thinking was much sharper, much more aggressive, encouraging violence among the members. And turning it into what we came to know as the Nazi party.

**Sally Helm:** It wasn't just Munich's working class who loved Hitler's speeches. He also made friends among the Munich elite. One of them helped him start a newspaper that would become a major propaganda outlet for the Nazis. And in the summer of 1921, Hitler declares himself the sole leader of his party.

Over the next two years, the Nazi presence in Munich continues to grow. Membership skyrockets from 20,000 to 55,000 in 1923 alone.

But in the larger world of German politics:

**Peter Range:** The Nazis were just a blip. Communists alone had 300,000 members in Germany and the social Democrats had 2 million.

**Sally Helm:** Hitler is undeterred. In fact, in 1923, he decides it is time for the Nazi party—and him—to seize control of Munich...and then Berlin.

The year before, Mussolini had staged his famous "March on Rome" and taken over the Italian government. This galvanizes Hitler.

**Peter Range:** He wanted to take over the government of Bavaria at the state government, and then very shortly thereafter stage quote, a March on Berlin, just like Mussolini's March on Rome.

**Sally Helm:** He's planning a coup. In German, a putsch. And in November of 1923, he sees his moment.

German society is still in turmoil. Inflation has continued to soar. And the general state commissioner of Bavaria announces that he is going to hold a meeting at a big beer hall in Munich. He's a conservative politician named Gustav von Kahr. And with him at the meeting will be two other powerful Bavarians: General Otto von Lossow who controls the German military in Bavaria, and Colonel Hans Ritter von Seisser, head of the Bavarian state police.

If Hitler wants to take over Berlin, he'll need their support. Luckily for him, they all hate the Weimar Republic and have talked of about overthrowing it themselves. Unluckily for him:

**Peter Range:** They considered him a crazy extremist

**Sally Helm:** And they want nothing to do with Hitler's putsch.

But he is persistent. He decides, he's just going to show up to the beer hall gathering. See if he can "persuade" the three men to view things his way. With the help of a few hundred of his armed supporters.

The night of the gathering is dark and cold. It's about to snow. Some 3,000 people have squeezed into the beer hall to hear Kahr speak: politicians, military leaders, the press. Waitresses are carrying beer steins from place to place. Some of the men are smoking cigars and eating ox steaks.

Meanwhile, outside the beer hall are Hitler's armed men. Around 8:30 PM, not long after the event begins, Hitler himself shows up in a bright red Mercedes.

**Peter Range:** Hitler, is dressed. Some people say he was dressed like a waiter, and nobody pays hardly any attention to him at all.

**Sally Helm:** Finally, a little late, Gustav Kahr gets up to begin his speech.

Not long after, Hitler bursts through the doors. He elbows his way through the crowd towards the podium.

**Peter Range:** Hitler shouts for the crowd to quiet down and absolutely nothing happens. Nobody pays a bit of attention to him. So, he jumps on a chair, and he pulls out his pistol and fires it into the ceiling, and that quiets everybody down. And that's when he makes his fateful announcement that the national revolution has begun.

**Sally Helm:** It has begun, in his mind, with this Beer Hall Putsch. He has tried to take a crowd of 3,000 people hostage. But...they're not having it. No one knows who he is, really. And he seems insane.

**Peter Range:** And so, he has rejected, out of hand by most of the people in the room.

**Sally Helm:** They jeer at him and call him names. Hitler again calls for silence. He warns the crowd: the hall is surrounded by 600 heavily armed men.

**Peter Range:** Which is a wild exaggeration, we believe but the folks in the beer hall didn't know that. And at this moment, the head of Hitler's, small storm trooper, brigade drags, a heavy machine gun into the entrance of the beer hall, which does indeed indicate that they mean business, and everybody freezes.

**Sally Helm:** By this point, Hitler is riled up.

**Peter Range:** He looks like a guy who may be a little bit crazy who may be foaming at the mouth,

**Sally Helm:** He takes Kahr, Lossow and Seisser into a side room guarded by armed men. There, he tries to convince them to join his revolution. He promises them high positions in this new government. He says they'll be serving a great nationalistic cause.

**Peter Range:** And he gets carried away with this at one point and lets them know that he has more bullets in his pistol. And if worse comes to worst, he will shoot them and maybe even shoot himself. This was the first time in this interesting event when Hitler talks about shooting himself. It's not the last time.

**Sally Helm:** But despite these threats, the three leaders aren't buying it. Hitler is starting to get antsy. He's anxiously awaiting the arrival of a secret weapon – but the guy is late. So, Hitler decides to do what he does best: stir up the crowd.

**Peter Range:** He knows he doesn't have the crowd on his side yet, so Hitler goes out and begins making a speech. Basically, preaching his nationalistic message. one eyewitness says it was like turning a glove inside out. I don't know about loving him, but they certainly came to support him very strongly.

**Sally Helm:** It's exactly what he had hoped for. The same people who had essentially booed Hitler are now cheering him on. Hitler walks back into the room where the three men are being held.

**Peter Range:** Now Hitler is able to say to them, you're not just with me, you're with this crowd, you're with the people.

**Sally Helm:** And then like clockwork, his secret weapon finally arrives. In the form of a famed German general: Erich Ludendorff.

Ludendorff was a World War 1 hero. A tall, old-school officer.

**Peter Range:** When he walked into the beer hall that night, people started standing ramrod straight and saying attention and acting as though he were the commander of the German armed forces, which he was not. But that's how revered he was in Germany at that time.

**Sally Helm:** Ludendorff enters the side room and addresses these three captive leaders. He urges them to join the cause. He one in particular:

**Peter Range:** He turned to Lossow who was a general like him and said, “Lossow let's do it”

**Sally Helm:** Lossow is now facing his one-time superior.

**Peter Range:** He said what a good German officer's supposed to say to a superior officer, “your excellence, his wish is my command,” and they shook hands.

**Sally Helm:** The other men protest for a little while...then finally relent. And Hitler leads them all back into the beer hall.

**Peter Range:** And he stages this moment of sentimental togetherness in which he goes and shakes each man's hand individually with almost tears in his eyes, and then they all sing together 3000 people. What amounts to the national Anthem, which is called the song of Germany and has that famous opening line, “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles”

**Sally Helm:** Then Hitler lets the crowd go—though they're questioned at the door. And some, who seem disloyal, are detained. The three leaders—Kahr, Lossow and Seisser--he keeps at the beer hall.

Meanwhile, Hitler's men are out in Munich. Attempting to take over barracks and police stations, declaring the new government...and destroying Jewish stores and homes along the way. Everything seems to be going as they planned. Until early in the morning when Hitler makes a big mistake.

He leaves the beer hall to check how things are going with his putsch around Munich and he puts Ludendorff in charge of the three men.

They gradually ingratiate themselves with the general. And say, hey—couldn't you let us go?

**Peter Range:** They give him their words of honor, as officers, that they are still part of the plot.

**Sally Helm:** Ludendorff believes them.

**Peter Range:** Word of honor in Germany and in all of Europe in those days was considered a very serious business.

**Sally Helm:** In this case, though, it proves flimsy. As soon as the three men are free, they publicly refute their alliance with Hitler and call-in military back up.

**Peter Range:** And this is where it begins to unravel.

[AD BREAK]

**Sally Helm:** Hitler comes back to the beerhall to find the men gone. He's furious. Within the next few hours, it becomes clear that his plan is collapsing. But he decides to try one more thing - he calls for a march. He wants to show that he has the public on his side. More than 2,000 people show up. But halfway through their route, they clash with Bavarian police.

**Peter Range:** And total chaos breaks out; four policemen were killed, but thirteen of Hitler's men and one bystander are killed Hitler himself missed being shot by only two feet. The man next to him, with whom he was linked, arm-in-arm got a bullet in the chest and died immediately. Hitler fell and got a dislocated shoulder.

**Sally Helm:** He slinks away and jumps into a getaway car. He's driving towards the Austrian border when his car breaks down and he walks to a friend's villa nearby. The friend's wife, Helena, answers the door, and hides him in the attic.

**Peter Range:** Within two days, Bavarian police figured out where Hitler had gone. And they went down and surrounded this Villa on this lake. Hitler saw the police out there. He reached for his pistol yet again, and according to Helena, he had it up to his head, up to his temple and was about to kill himself when she walked into the room and snatched it out of his hand and threw it into a flour barrel. Yet another one of those incredible moments when history might have been spared a man named Hitler had it turned out differently.

**Sally Helm:** Instead, Hitler is taken to prison. He's despondent. He goes on a hunger strike. Outside the prison walls, his power is waning—importantly, the Nazi party's daily newspaper is banned. But as Hitler's trial approaches, he starts to realize...this could be an opportunity.

**Peter Range:** Hitler rightly sees the trial as a grandstand for politics and a way of trying to turn the tables on, the established political order, which is trying to put him in prison for a very long time.

**Sally Helm:** Hitler's right that this is a chance to grandstand. As the trial approaches, Munichers are watching. On the opening day, in late February 1924, every seat in the courtroom is taken, and some in the crowd support the coup. There are ten defendants. Including Ludendorff, who's widely seen as the ringleader. But people have also heard about this other conspirator.

**Peter Range:** Everybody's kind of waiting to see this guy, Hitler, who had done this wild and crazy and dangerous and almost possibly successful thing. So, it was a very dramatic scene. People knew that something dramatic was going to happen.



**Sally Helm:** Ludendorff enters the room first. But Adolf Hitler is right behind him.

**Peter Range:** And Hitler enters the courtroom, you know, with his eyes darting here and there, described as being like a hungry animal and all eyes are on him, he's kind of a star.

**Sally Helm:** The judge in this trial is a known rightwing sympathizer named Georg Neithardt. He calls things to order—and reportedly smiles at the defendants. And then he asks the prosecution to read the indictment. It's around 40 pages long.

**Peter Range:** Huge amount of detail. And the charge culminated when staying line said, for all the other actors and for all the other events, the truth of the matter is Hitler was the soul of the enterprise.

**Sally Helm:** A damning charge. But it also makes Hitler a figure of central importance. And in that way, it's music to his ears.

The court breaks for lunch. And then the judge calls Hitler to the stand. It's time for his opening statement.

**Peter Range:** So, Hitler's moment has come. The courtroom was full, and he gets up to rebut the charge. He makes what by some accounts was a four-hour speech

**Sally Helm:** He starts by talking about his youth in Austria—how, at 16, he had to start earning his own bread.

**Peter Range:** Which is not true, but it made a good story, and he gets away with non-stop talk a flood of words.

**Sally Helm:** He talks about his time as a loyal German soldier. He rails against the communists. The social democratic government. And he doesn't hold back on the racism.

**Peter Range:** Right in the first couple of minutes, Hitler comes right out and says, “I went to Vienna as a world citizen open-minded world says, and I left as a convinced anti-Semite,” he just comes right it out and says it.

**Sally Helm:** And he uses the opportunity to make a case for himself as the leader Germany needs.

**Peter Range:** Hitler paints the picture of himself as a guy with nothing, but Germany's purest and best interests at heart from a nationalistic point of view, to prevent Germany's downfall, which he constantly harps on

**Sally Helm:** And he manages to turn the tables on the three men who he feels betrayed him: Commissioner Kahr, General Lossow and Colonel Seisser.

**Peter Range:** He successfully raises a number of questions about whether or not they were intending to do exactly the same thing, and that he simply got one step ahead of them.

**Sally Helm:** He claims they would have done it anyway.

The marathon speech turns the court room into a theater. People are clapping and laughing on cue. One reporter calls it a dazzling performance. Hitler is using the same tricks that have galvanized working class Munichers for years. But now, his audience is the world.

**Peter Range:** It made a very big first impression and it got the headlines to go with it, which is exactly what he wanted.

**Sally Helm:** From then on, the trial turns into something of an Adolf Hitler showcase. He even gets the chance to question some of the prosecution's witnesses. Which was legal, though not standard practice.

When he questions General Lossow, things get heated. They call each other names. The judge tries to calm things down—but no dice.

**Peter Range:** And finally, Hitler says the only one here who has broken his word about her is the Lieutenant general himself. And accusing a general of the army of having broken his word of honor, was the kind of thing that used to lead to duels or worse.

**Sally Helm:** Hitler does apologize. But Lossow walks out.

**Peter Range:** And declares that he is not coming back. So, it can also, once again, be said, Hitler got the upper hand.

**Sally Helm:** The trial lasts 24 days. On the day the judge announces his verdict:

**Peter Range:** Everybody wants to be in the court. The court is overcrowded. A lot of women have brought flowers and gifts the judge comes in and Hitler is indeed convicted of treason, but the judge gives him the lightest possible sentence under the law.

**Sally Helm:** Five years. With the possibility of parole in six months.

**Peter Range:** Both those things are sort of unheard of. He could have gotten life. This was high treason he was convicted of.-So, he got a wrist slap sentence.

**Sally Helm:** When the crowd in the courtroom hears the verdict:

**Peter Range:** Everybody cheers. Hitler is a hero.

**Sally Helm:** There are also cheers outside the courtroom.

**Peter Range:** It's still freezing cold, but Hitler finds a window that can be opened, and he opens it and waves to the crowds. He had the Munichers on his side by this time, if there were any doubters, it's a preview of what we're going to see eight years, later.

**Sally Helm:** When Hitler assumes power.

It wasn't the Beer Hall Putsch that allowed them him to do that. But the trial IS a springboard for Hitler. Just as he'd hoped it would be. He goes from an obscure right-wing extremist in Munich to a household name in Germany. He even makes headlines worldwide.

**Peter Range:** The newspapers went wild immediately, couldn't print newspapers fast enough

**Sally Helm:** In prison, he writes his autobiographical manifesto... Mein Kampf. And lays out his ultra-nationalistic plans for Germany, including the expulsion of Jews from any part of public life. That vision, of course, later becomes even more violent, as it shifts from expulsion to extermination.

Hitler emerges from prison with a new vision for his future. Instead of seizing power by force:

**Peter Range:** He figured out that he had to become a politician and run-in elections and have people running in elections just like anybody else.

**Sally Helm:** His political ascent doesn't happen right away. But in the 1932 elections, the Nazis become the largest party in parliament. Not long after, Hitler is appointed chancellor. And not long after that, he becomes dictator.

Range says, when you look at the years before that—Hitler's rise—, you can see, it was not inevitable. There were so many times things could have gone a different way.

**Peter Range:** From personal scandals to political missteps, to party schisms, he came close to going off the rails at least half a dozen times and each time Hitler seemed to Dodge a bullet at the last second.

So, he rises to power. And we know what happens next.

