

The Storm Troopers of Yorkville

The great mass-meeting of the Hitler-hellers was bound to leave many second thoughts in its wake. Here was a fairly large-scale demonstration of the well worn Hitlerian technique for exploiting all the best principles of democracy to democracy's own destruction. Anti-Semitism is proclaimed by every possible insinuation, not because anti-Semitism makes any sense, but because of its emotionally explosive effect. It is better calculated to incite to violence, division and general disturbance in the community than almost any other available doctrine. But it is disseminated—another important part of the technique—in phrases which remain carefully legal. And the meeting is surrounded by uniformed storm troopers. The technical function of the storm troops is in part to inspire the faithful and intimidate the opposition; it is in part (though the Nazis are still far from this stage in America) to create and add to the general violence, whereby democratic institutions are to be disrupted; but it is primarily to prove that the new gospel is capable of taking over control and is in fact taking over control from the nerveless hands of the decaying democratic state.

Mr. Kuhn obligingly put on a kind of model illustration of the whole tactic: first, confuse and disrupt the democratic community by whatever may be the most efficient propaganda weapon; second, remain just out of reach of democratic law while doing so; third, present the substitute power, impressive in its order and discipline, visibly replacing the agencies of the state. But in making the technique so clear, and in making it so clear that it is simply a technique, Mr. Kuhn not only removed much of its danger but also gave us some valuable pointers on how best to meet it without departure from the normal democratic methods.

The storm trooper is particularly important in the technique, but his vital role is as that of a substitute government, and once that is understood it is easy to nullify most of his real effectiveness. It was a cardinal point of pre-1933 Nazi tactics that the storm troopers should always be the agency to keep order at Nazi meetings—at any cost, the police had to be shouldered from the scene. And there is a cardinal point which democracy cannot yield. It was perhaps worth having the Bund meeting and certainly worth mobilizing 1,700 New York City policemen if only to demonstrate that the police of New York were in command, and that not only would order be kept but that they would keep it. And they did. As long as the storm trooper is simply a uniformed usher he is relatively harmless; as long as he is simply a parade goosestepper he is relatively ridiculous. What democratic government must do is to keep him from violence and above all keep him from assuming the functions which the community is thoroughly able to discharge through its own uniformed representatives. That reduces the storm trooper to little more than a nuisance, and that is not difficult to do.