

THE MILITARY IN THE THIRD REICH

»No peace with the German generals!« This heading for an article then appearing in *Current History* was becoming a national watchword in the mid-war period and encountered little dissent. The tensions of the war were stimulating punitive sentiments, conditioning the American public and its leaders to identify the German nation, and especially the military, with the Nazi regime.

In the case of Franklin D. Roosevelt, this viewpoint fortified an addiction to an interpretation of the ill-famed stab-in-the-back legend that was both simplistic and misleading. This sinister myth ascribed defeat in 1918 to the machinations of traitorous elements (usually a strange trinity of Socialists, Jews, and the Catholic Church) and to the inability of a spineless government to contain them. Doubtless the propagation of the legend was a real knifeblow in the back of the Weimar Republic. In the minds of many Germans, though perhaps fewer than is commonly supposed, the Republic was therewith saddled with the loss of the war and, by extension, with the disastrous peace. Roosevelt, however, went on from there to develop a thesis which sought to explain Hitler's success in leading the country into aggressive war. This held that the military had led the nation in embracing the legend with little if any reservation. The delusion was believed to have persuaded the Germans that there was not too much risk in another world conflagration. The generals, in particular, were believed by Roosevelt to have based their hope in future victory on faith that Hitler had now provided the purposeful government and firmly disciplined the nations that were needed.

The President's adherence to this thesis undoubtedly did much to fix his purpose in pursuing the war to the point of total German defeat. Here was the genesis of his determination to impose unconditional surrender. Here is equally the explanation of his rejection, unheard, of successive overtures of German opposition elements to secure some assurance on the kind of peace that might be expected by a Germany that had expelled Hitler. These preconceptions on a problem of vast complication — the relation of the military to the history of the Third Reich — were to hang like a pall over a number of pregnant post-war issues, such as the punishment of war crimes, rearming Germany, and the role of the West Ger-

mans in the Atlantic Alliance. In effect, today's topic confronts us with one of those historical questions about the Second World War which will demand frequent reexamination as long as the sequellae of that conflict are woven into the world order.

At first glance this may appear to some observers a gross overestimation of the significance of the subject. How dare one, it may be asked, assign to it an importance equal, for example, to one so momentous as dropping the second and third atomic bombs to induce the surrender of Japan? In reply, it may be argued that because of this particular interpretation of the role of the German military under Hitler, Eastern Europe is today locked in the Soviet orbit, the shadow of the Kremlin lies across the rest of the continent, and world relations for a quarter century were dominated by »cold war.« It may be maintained with much cogency, of course, that the opposite interpretation and related options could have had equally ominous consequences. To recognize this, however, is but to underscore the far-reaching character of the issue in question.

The 12-year history of the Hitler regime saw continuous domestic and foreign scrutiny of the interrelation between sword and swastika. Since then many an absorbed reader has laid down the latest treatise on the subject wondering whether the last word had now been spoken. Yet each new item of source information that becomes available only brings home the many gaps in our knowledge and understanding of the history of military affairs in the Nazi Reich.

The years of Hitler's rule are equally divided between a period of increasingly troubled peace and one dominated by the world conflict he unleashed. A review of what was known contemporaneously about the role of the military leadership certainly fails to yield much that is impressive. The general world public learned little that was reliable from the accounts and judgements of journalistic, academic, or other interested observers. More surprising, foreign governments were not too much better informed from the reports of their military and diplomatic representatives. Much that these latter managed to »learn« was misleading in that it stemmed from what the regime or its military services wished to have believed. Witness the almost always far-from-the-mark and occasionally absurd estimates of the size and capacities of Goering's Luftwaffe. As for the military leaders, their interrelationships and associations with the dictator, one need only glance through British diplomatic reporting at the Public Record Office for the hectic months of the Blomberg-Fritsch affair of 1938 to note how fragmentary was the information and how wrong the guesses frequently were.

The most important, often highly authentic, sources of information were often revelations made either to foreign representatives or directly to their governments by German opposition groups or by disaffected individuals operating independently. It is astounding, and at times scarcely believable, what such informants conveyed to

trusted friends such as the Dutch military attaché, Major Gijsbertus Sas, or his Yugoslav colleague, Colonel Vladimir Vauhnik. In virtually all really critical situations the reports of these keen observers were not believed. This is less true only in degree of the innumerable pilgrimages of opposition figures to London, Paris, and even to New York and Washington. The difficulty lay in their usually bringing information or advice disturbing to policymakers committed to fixed lines of policy. Or, as the war crept closer to the capitals involved, they demanded attention to situations the leaders in question lacked the resolution to face.

As we move into the second, war-time, phase of the Nazi era, the scene changes in a number of ways. On such strictly military matters as plans, operations, troop strengths, tables of organization, and logistics, the Anglo-Americans gained by far the most extraordinary inside picture of what was going on behind enemy lines that has ever fallen to the lot of belligerents. Well before the United States entered the war, the British had pulled off two of the most remarkable intelligence coups of history. On the one hand, they had converted the entire German intelligence network on their island into a British instrument. On the other, they had gained lasting access to *Ultra*, the German code machine system, a feat General Eisenhower was to describe as one of the decisive features in the winning of the war.

Except when differences among the German generals and between them and Hitler on matters operations were reflected in the ether, however, the Western allies gained precious little insight from these sources into relations between German military leaders and between them and the regime. Once again, and with far more determination than before the war, they evaded reception of communications from German oppositional groups. And what they could not entirely avoid hearing they chose to disbelieve. Churchill, who before the war had been among the more receptive to such messages, was later to claim that during the conflict he had at times deliberately been kept in the dark by subordinates who feared his vulnerability to such appeals. (As related by him in 1948 to Fabian von Schlabrendorff, now a member of the Supreme Court of the German Federal Republic.)

The Soviets had greater faith in their German informants, having a better grasp of their motivations as Communist sympathizers and no inhibitions about post-war commitments. However, the Red Orchestra, Richard Sorge, and Lucie (Rudolf Rössler), were not figures ensconced in the higher regions of the German military hierarchy. The information they conveyed, like that which the Western allies secured from *Ultra*, therefore revealed little about the role of the German military generally.

Some greater awareness of the state of affairs in German military circles, of course, could not be avoided in London and Washington when the conspiracy finally surfaced on July 20, 1944. But

the interpretation of any such move, it has been noted, had been determined well before the event. The generals, it was now said in the Allied capitals, were merely trying to cheat them of total victory by throwing the burdensome Hitler overboard. Along this line it was easy to reject whatever aspects of the affair were difficult to fit in the preconceptions.

From the standpoint of the historian, one of the more tragic features of what happened after July 20 lays in the bonfires of opposition records which marked the months from then to the final collapse. The most elementary rules of safety in clandestine operations dictate a minimum of recording and preserving sensitive data. The numerous rank amateurs of the various German opposition sectors violated this dictum in wholesale fashion. In part this was done for such good reasons as assembling evidence for the anticipated trials of the more criminal Nazi leaders. No doubt in other cases, a sense of obligation to history, force of habit, or plain human vanity were more determining.

Well before July 20 much paper had been destroyed during real or fancied crisis when the Gestapo seemed to loom just around the corner. A related example is the frantic burning of papers by opposition contacts in Rome in May—June 1940, when Hitler got wind of warnings having gone via the Vatican to London, Paris, The Hague, and Brussels. The Pope even begged the British government to purge from its files all references to his role as go-between. (Confirmed by Vatican sources and by the then British ambassador to the Holy Sea, the later Duke of Leeds.)

The main repository of opposition documents, the vast »chronicle« collected by Hans von Dohnanyi at Military Intelligence (*Abwehr*) headquarters, had been preserved until after July 20 at the orders of General Beck despite the pleas of its imprisoned curator. Beck felt that at almost any cost one must save for posterity this proof that the conspiracy was no last ditch expedient to get out of the war cheaply but had been in existence and active since the summer of 1938. There was to be a heavy price in lives when the SD (Security Service) on September 22, 1944 got hold of the famous »Zossen safe« which contained this material.

The sacrifice proved in vain. The immense assembly of documents, described to me by two principal officials instrumental in moving and examining it as well over two meters of solid material, was burned by these custodians in April 1945. The story is pertinent to our present topic in that the better part of the collection transcended the affairs of the opposition and covered every imaginable aspect of military affairs in the Third Reich. (An example would be the detailed account and documents connected with the Blomberg-Fritsch affair.)

Flames lit by the SD also consumed the many thousands of pages of the famed Canaris diary. This had been produced by the Admiral

specifically as a record of Hitler's criminal aggressions and tyrannical rule, reflecting most particularly events, attitudes, and the role of individuals in high military posts. The diary of the *Abwehr* chieftain can have had no rival as a source on such matters: precisely the subject of our present discussion.

The SD and Gestapo showed at least equal assiduity in destroying all files which reflected whatever watch they had kept over suspect military circles. Missing, too, are most of the minutes of interrogations of July 20 and other military prisoners. A further blow to historians of the epoch is the loss of much of the *Heeresarchiv* (Army Archives) of Potsdam in an air raid.

For the outside world, and most Germans also, the end of the war and Western allied control over most surviving records pertinent to this discussion brought a flood of new light. The interrogation of German military leaders threw light for the victors on many paths that had been travelled on »the other side of the hill« and that heretofore had been only dimly lit by the instrumentalities of intelligence, including the ubiquitous ULTRA. True, what became public knowledge through the utilization of such testimony and of captured documents at the Nuremberg and other trials was highly selective. The historian of war crimes was a greater beneficiary than more broad-gauged colleagues. Yet there was something for everyone, including much spin-off for those whose primary interest was the role of the military in the affairs of the regime.

To the world audience much also filtered through that had not been vented at the trials or in the many books in blue or other bindings which furnished more of »the evidence.« Many of the men who in official capacities had poured over documents or asked questions were academics or other writertypes who carried off much that was still classified, and brought back to their civilian pursuits information and sophisticated insights to guide their literary endeavors. Studies of many kinds, whether scholarly or not, that bear upon our topic were accordingly advanced.

The dialogue with surviving military leaders or with men who had dealt with them extensively has gone forward since then outside the walls of prisons and interrogation centers. It benefited from a general flowering of oral history. For the first time this medium of historic investigation has commenced to approximate the level of utilization of which it is capable. In the period between the World Wars it had still been in its infancy. To underline the contrast in my own experience, I need only think back to a long summer in 1938 when no more than six of over ninety World War figures interviewed were found to have ever been interviewed before by historians or journalists. Even such a personage as Liddell Hart had then only a limited experience of exploiting this way to discover what had happened on both sides of the hill.

One noteworthy by-product of an age of arms race and cold war rivalries between superpowers has been an accent on the fact that one of the contending parties is identical with the state which on land was most fully locked in a struggle to the death with Germany. The prospect of a clash with the Soviets has enhanced in the West the already large interest in the German military side of World War II. The German military expert was for many years a favorite target for consultation. Under American auspices he was set to work on recording and reexamining his experience, to participate in such labors as the editing of the vast Halder service diary, and to contribute to the analysis of strategic, logistic, and other problems whose importance again seemed more than academic. Though much of the concern was about straight operational history, it could hardly fail to skirt and penetrate broader aspects of the role of the military under Hitler.

When such study teams were disbanded, these men often continued on their own to produce memoirs or publish diaries. Their experience in writing war histories also stood them in good stead in contributing extensively to military and historical periodicals. A string of these were established or reestablished (*Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau*, *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen*, *Marine Rundschau* and so on). The *Vierteljahrschrift für Zeitgeschichte*, looking at the times in broader perspective, has done much to link up the military side of the recent German experience with political and other aspects.

Among the more fortunate circumstances in the promotion of studies on the Nazi period is the capture by the Western allies of the lion's share of surviving official documentation. This made such materials relatively accessible to scholars at an early date as compared to that which came under Soviet control. It also meant return to German custody under conditions assuring liberal access. American microfilms, prepared before such release, further meant a convenient facility in Washington, cutting down on trips to the West German military archives at Freiburg.

There is reason to assume that Western policies in dealing in captured documentation exercised some influence on Soviet practice. The reestablishment of the *Heeres-archiv* at Potsdam and more relaxed attitudes associated with détente raises hopes for eventual full access for Western scholars to documents of the Nazi period. Did the Soviets, for reasons of their own, retain some files in Moscow? There is some indication of this in one case known to the author of this paper. In this instance a copy of a document of primary significance was delivered to a Western scholar, apparently as a *quid pro quo* for some favor on his part.

In attacking a topic of such broad scope and endless ramifications within the space allotted, it is necessary to be highly selective. Of necessity the gaps are wider than the areas chosen for analysis and the wisdom of such choice is open to question.

In all candor, the writer of this paper acknowledges adherence to that school of interpreters of the Nazi era who believe that Hitler, well before he attained power, had fixed on goals to which he remained constant to the dying days of the Third Reich in the Berlin bunker. It is further assumed that, however much he was prepared to be opportunistic as to means and timing, he had some well developed notions on how these aims were to be implemented. Dreams of eastward expansion were nothing new in Germany. One need think only of the »Drang nach Osten«, the more ambitious sides of the concept of *Mitteleuropa*, and some of the fantasies revealed in dealing with defeated Russia in 1917—18. Hitler's wholesale gusto was essentially peculiar to himself and a small circle of fanatics. Even after six years of increasingly absolute rule he could not count on anything remotely like a great national surge for the achievement of his kind of program.

The type of program Hitler had in mind can be summarized here only in starkest and most simple terms. His intentions, as perceived by the writer of this paper, are presented without reference to the web of evidence on which the analysis rests.

The first element in his vision of the future is the most extreme imaginable form of the old pan—German dream. For him the fusion with Germany of such contiguous Germanspeaking people as the Austrians was no more than a beginning. Immediately in line behind these he saw the Germanic peoples of Northern Europe: the Scandinavians, Dutch, and Flemings. Logically as the next stage, probably intermingled time-wise with the formation of the greater Germania, would come the building of a solid block of German-dominated territory from the North Cape to the Black Sea. The final stage, extending dimly into the distant future would be the successive colonization of immense stretches of the old Russian Empire paced only by the forced-draft expansion of the German populations. Along the way the elimination of the Jewish components of the European nations would do double duty as a series of dress rehearsals for a presumably endless genocidal process.

A perusal of this scenario helps to clarify a dictum expressed by Hitler in 1931: »We do not want to come to power to rule but to work on a program of world-embracing policy (Weltpolitik).« The dictator-to-be knew well that neither the German nation nor its armed forces as he found them in 1933 were suitable instruments to pursue policies of this type. As he put it, only a »total mobilization« of all resources could hope to accomplish this and he calculated on a time-space of then years. The job of »coordinating« (*Gleichschaltung*) would be difficult and complicated and could hardly proceed on all fronts at the same pace. The chief problems would lie in dealing with the two most autonomous forces in Germany — the Army and the Christian Churches. Hitler was resigned to advance against

them slowly and with caution while he was consolidating his hold generally.

With respect to the Army, the failure of this coup in 1923 persuaded him that he would never rise to power in confrontation with it. He kept a close watch on what went on in the Reichswehr of the Republic and tried to learn what he could about its leaders. By the time he became Chancellor his observations had led him to one important amendment. Though he still was resolved to walk softly for the time being, he was convinced that some where along the line the traditional Army would have to be drastically transformed and given a completely different leadership. »A new Army will come into existence«, he said, »and that with a new General Staff.«

Full insight on the actual role of the Army in the more immediate aspects of Hitler's rise to power awaits a firmer judgment of history than has yet been achieved. There are large areas that remain shadowy in this picture and small likelihood of any new flood of light. The chief military architects (Blomberg and Reichenau) and their principal victims (Schleicher and Hammerstein) are dead. The still unpublished memoirs of General Adam were looked to hopefully but only throw light in a few corners. Every so often there is the opportunity for a revealing peck; just enough usually to indicate that there is more to one or another aspect than meets the eye.

Certainly the military leaders had little idea what kind of a Phoenix was rising out of the ashes of the Republic. On much that had to do with the Nazi takeover the top figures were badly divided. Some, both among the winners and losers in the internal pulling and hauling that decided the issue, had played with fire with the thought that, as Franz von Papen put it, Hitler was being »hired« to do a job for them. They were, of course, eager to push rearmament and a foreign policy more purposeful than that of the Republic in furthering revision of the 1919—20 settlements. Hitler promised both. What he said beyond this, though still disturbing, was on the whole more restrained and sensible than what had been the case a few years before.

In 1933 Hitler failed to achieve fully the drastic personnel changes that would have given him the inside track he wanted on the road to armed forces coordination. In Blomberg he did win a war minister who straightway succumbed to his personal spell, did much to bring the rapidly growing Wehrmacht closer to National Socialism, and ignored the urgings of colleagues to use its weight in the struggle against abuses in state and society. Less satisfactory to Hitler was that he defended Wehrmacht autonomy against the Party and lacked iron in dealing with his Army subordinates. Thus he hesitated to clash with them over transforming their service into the kind of offensive force Hitler was determined to create.

Though the Fuehrer scored heavily through Blomberg's appointment, as well as in the elimination of Hammerstein and Adam, the

two violent anti-Nazi Army leaders, the replacement of these, in time, turned out to be something like an exchange of Scylla for Charybdis. The new Army commander, Werner von Fritsch, though differing from Hammerstein in being politically disinterested, proved less pliable and more devoted to business. In much that had to do with the utilization of manpower, mobilization, personnel policy, organization, and training he was a severe brake on Hitler's intention to build the most powerful striking force possible. These differences were not so noticeable in the initial stages of rearmament when virtually everything could be fitted into almost any pattern of military resurgence. The full clash in outlook and intention became starkly visible, however, when the restoration of German military power reached a point (1936—1937) where fundamental choices of direction became imperative.

Fritsch's new chief of staff, Ludwig Beck, one of the most distinguished military intellects of his generation, backed up and strengthened his superior's resolve to give the Army a defensive posture. Tensions rose as the earlier restraints on the Fuehrer's foreign policy evaporated. On the domestic front, the comparative moderation of the 1934—1936 middle period was followed by a revival of extremism, notably in attacks upon the churches. By 1938 the dictator was ready to rid himself of the brakes which Fritsch, Beck, and even the compliant Blomberg represented. The latter was described by Hitler as acting like an »hysterical old maid« at every sign of international crisis.

Blomberg and Fritsch were ruthlessly and, in the case of the latter, treacherously cast aside in the famous affair which joined their names. The showdown with Beck came in the summer of the same year (1938) over Hitler's drive to war on the Sudetenland question. The treatment of Fritsch, though hidden from the public, was sufficiently known to some of the key military figures and estranged a part of the Generalität (general officer corps) permanently from the regime. In effect, the silent coup d'état by which Hitler seized control of the Wehrmacht demonstrated how, in a totalitarian state, abuses are not subject to remedy »within the system«. The dictator, who could be as obtuse to what was going on around him as he was frequently amazingly intuitive, failed to appreciate that he was driving the opponents of his policies into illegality.

The summer of 1938 saw the formation of a conspiratorial grouping near the top of the military hierarchy. At four stages in the remaining years of the Third Reich, participants were recruited, plans formulated, preparations for action completed, and a time set. But, quite aside from Hitler's string of foreign policy successes that began in the spring of 1936, topped by the march of victory in the first years of the war, there were serious impediments to moving effectively against him. There was the German mystique about oaths of loyalty to military leaders. In this case the oath of obedience to

Hitler personally had been sprung on the Generalität after Hindenburg's death but was taken nonetheless seriously. Traditionally, also, Germans had a particular aversion for treason, a category of disloyalty in which, especially in wartime, it was often impossible to discern the thin line between that directed against the head of state and that against the state itself. A problem that caused infinite worry was whether, if the generals could be induced to move, the lower ranks would obey orders. Also, would the nation get along or was there prospect of a civil war which would leave the fatherland helpless before vengeful enemies? As Hitler piled up international outrages, the question of how victorious allies would deal even with a Germany that had expelled him received a more sinister meaning.

There was one almost inescapable dilemma: (1) When the war went well for Germany and its opponents presumably more ready to compromise with a post-Hitler government, the more opportunistic generals would be less disposed to lead and the nation to follow a revolt against the regime. (2) When the generals were most inclined to cooperate because fortune was beginning to favor the allies, the latter would lean proportionately more to rejecting any overtures from opposition elements.

The proclamation of unconditional surrender further complicated the problem for those who were working for the support of the generals. It was both a genuine deterrence to revolt for those who hesitated to expose Germany to the mercy of the Grand Alliance and a welcome alibi for others who shrank from a Hazardous personal commitment.

The degree to which disaffection within the Generalität had developed by 1943 and early 1944 is best demonstrated by the fact that, except for a small circle of genuine Nazis and Hitler-devotees, such as Schoerner, Busch, Model, and Keitel, almost all the more prominent military figures were approached at one time or another by opposition emissaries. With but a single exception (Fritz Fromm), not one of those approached made as much as a motion of reporting the overture to the Gestapo or his superiors. Yet the crime of failing to do so was punishable in the Third Reich with the death penalty.

Despite this, the German Generalität stumbled on through the war years without ever developing a united voice. Though not lacking in individual heroes, its response to the great challenges it faced was a most unheroic one. Yet its footprints in the sands of history take on more character when one compares them with those of its opposite numbers in the other two warring totalitarian states. Italian generals did participate in the overthrow of Mussolini but were essentially late comers motivated by a desire to get out of the war as cheaply as possible. As for the Soviet generals, they had been so cowed by the hideous decimation of their ranks at the hands of Stalin, that their only instances of resistance developed in Hitler's prison camps.

Virtually nothing has been said here about such vital aspects of the topic as the relation of the Generalität to the blood purge of 1934, its knowledge, complicity, and reaction to war and other crimes, its part in the war in competition with Hitler's military leadership, or the whole complex of issues related to the background, course of events, and sequellae of the 20th of July. Much has been said and written about these burning questions during the last thirty years. The door to legitimate debate, however, remains fully open.

What is the outlook for discovery of hitherto unknown documentation? The question assumes ever greater import as the role of oral history continues to fade with the rapid dying of witnesses who may claim insight. Here and there a stray nugget may continue to turn up in some totally unexpected place, such as was the case with the Groscurth diary in Paris. Truly sensational finds that would necessitate the rewriting of history in the large, such as ULTRA promises to do for much of the more strictly military side of World War II, are most improbable. West of the curtain it would require nothing less than, say, one of the microfilms taken of the Canaris diary or the discovery, contrary to all report, that the part of Dohnanyi's »chronicle« buried by Colonel Schrader in the Schorf Heather was not really destroyed.

A mine of uncertain richness for Western scholars, of course, is what the Soviets and East Germans have been sitting on since 1945. If for this reason alone, historians must yearn for détente to flourish.

In looking at what has been produced thus far in the way of studies on the role of the German military under Hitler, one cannot escape the conclusion that thus far it is largely to be counted among the histories of the popes and cardinals. Though assumptions are often freely made about the attitudes and situations of the lower ranks, little solid work has thus far been done on the fate of these silent millions. Many of them, we may at least assume, will continue to be available for another decade or two to give whatever testimony may be desired of them.

