

WARFARE AND THE THIRD REICH

THE RISE AND FALL OF HITLER'S
ARMED FORCES

CONSULTANT EDITOR CHRISTOPHER CHANT

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BATSFORD

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PART 1

HITLER'S WAR MACHINE

GERMANY IN THE THIRTIES

The Treaty of Versailles, signed in the Hall of Mirrors in the palace of the French Sun King on June 28, 1919, the anniversary of the Sarajevo murders, would, it was fervently hoped by Mankind, banish for ever the spectre of German aggression. Under the Treaty Germany lost 25,000 square miles of territory, six-and-a-half million subjects, over half of them German-speaking, and much valuable industrial potential, particularly in Upper Silesia. In the west Alsace-Lorraine, annexed by victorious Prussia in 1871, was restored to France. As partial compensation for the ravages of war, the industrial Saarland was placed under French administration for 15 years. In the north a plebiscite returned Danish-speaking North Schleswig to Denmark. In the east the triumph of nationalism – a dynamic historical force, largely outside the control of Woodrow Wilson, Lloyd George and Clemenceau, which had already destroyed three giant empires in a matter of weeks before the Peace Conference met – cost Germany much land in Posen, West Prussia and Pomerania.

It was here that the peace settlement was most bitterly resented; the separation of East Prussia from the rest of the Reich by the so-called Polish Corridor and the creation of the anomalous Free State of Danzig under League of Nations control (to guarantee Polish access to port facilities) were in German eyes intolerable impositions to be endured just so long as Germany was weak and despised. Resentment – though less acute – was aroused by the allied powers' refusal to permit the union of Austria and Germany so that when Hitler annexed Austria in 1938 his action could be represented, plausibly enough, as a rectification of a blatant injustice in the

application of the self-determination principle. Germany lost all her former colonial possessions, which were taken over by the League of Nations and administered by the victorious powers as mandated territories.

As 'Prussian militarism' was widely regarded as a major cause of the war, Germany was severely restricted in respect of armaments. She was forbidden to have military aircraft, heavy weapons and tanks; the general staff was abolished; conscription was forbidden; and she was allowed a professional army of no more than 100,000 men and 4000 officers. In addition, the Rhineland and a 50-kilometre strip on the right bank was permanently demilitarised and an allied army of occupation stationed there for 15 years. Severe restrictions were imposed on the navy which was limited to 15,000 men, forbidden to have submarines, and allowed a total of 12 cruisers and 24 destroyers. The Kiel Canal was internationalised and coastal defences restricted. Finally, Germany was forced to acknowledge her sole war guilt and was saddled with an unknown burden of reparations. The fact that the German delegation was allowed only 48 hours in which to register objections strengthened the widespread conviction in Germany that the treaty was a '*Diktat*' deriving its validity exclusively from the armed might of the victors.

No major power takes kindly to defeat, especially a country as accustomed to the ostentatious display of power as Imperial Germany. The shock of defeat, revolution and economic dislocation failed to bring about any radical re-appraisal of Germany's foreign policy objectives. The permanent officials who staffed the foreign office in the Wilhelmstrasse and the military establishment in the ministry of defence in the nearby Bendlerstrasse lived on happily in the power-conscious world of 1914 believing as steadfastly as ever in Germany's natural right to dominate Europe. Left to their own devices by successive chancellors and presidents, they set about the uphill task of reversing the verdict of the battlefield as quickly as possible.

Geography made Germany the country of the middle destined to live in constant fear of being 'encircled' and trapped into disastrous

two-front wars by envious and powerful neighbours to east and west of her. Subjugation or conquest were the stark strategic alternatives facing her in the twentieth century. No middle way was open to her – or so it seemed to Germany's political and military rulers between 1871 and 1945. The same reasoning was applied to her future as a highly industrialised power. Unless she wished to remain dangerously dependent on foreign countries for the ever-increasing quantities of food and raw materials essential for survival, then the only alternative compatible with 'national independence' was the creation of a *Grossraumwirtschaft* in Central and Eastern Europe, an economically self-sufficient area dominated by Germany and responsive to her economic needs. And in a sense the pre-occupation with *Weltpolitik* at the beginning of the twentieth century was an attempt to correct the precarious balance of diplomatic and economic power in Europe in Germany's favour by transforming her into a broadly-based world power with colonial possessions and a large navy.

Paradoxically enough, the general strategic situation in 1919 was potentially much more favourable for the realisation of these ambitions than ever before in German history. The collapse of Imperial Russia and its replacement by a weak and ostracised Bolshevik regime removed at a stroke the 'Slav nightmare' that so oppressed Germany's leaders in 1914. Where the mighty Romanov and Habsburg empires once stood, was a mosaic of medium-sized and small states, economically weak, divided by deep suspicions and unlikely in the long run to represent a serious obstacle to German ambitions notwithstanding strenuous French efforts in the 1920s to create a *cordon sanitaire* in the Little Entente and to cultivate the Polish connection. In the west victorious Britain and France were manifestly weakened by the economic price of war and by the withdrawal of America into isolation. French power might be irresistible in the short term as the traumatic experience of the occupation of the Ruhr by French forces in 1923 and the subsequent capitulation of the German government amply demonstrated. But the essential unity of the Bismarckian *Reich* had survived peace

treaty and Ruhr invasion; so that once Germany had a sizeable army at her disposal she stood every chance of being able to re-establish her political and economic hegemony in Europe in the long run in the absence of countervailing Russian and American pressure.

Within the narrow constraints of the treaty the foundations of a first-class army were already being laid in the 1920s largely through the efforts of General Hans von Seeckt, the talented and imaginative chief of army command. What the new *Reichswehr* lacked in numbers was more than compensated for by a high level of efficiency and intensive training in the tactics of mobile warfare. The *Blitzkrieg* tactics of 1939-41 with their emphasis on armour and air power were forged twenty years before in the manoeuvres and war games Seeckt made an integral part of officer training. With government connivance, the army successfully evaded many of the disarmament provisions of the treaty. The general staff survived thinly disguised as a *Truppenamt*; through short-term enlistment, cadres for a much larger army were illegally trained; prototypes of heavy weapons forbidden under the treaty were manufactured abroad in Holland and Spain with the help of German industry; and from 1921 onwards, in return for German financial and technical assistance to help build a Russian armaments industry, German pilots and tank crews were trained in Russia. By 1926 when Seeckt resigned, Germany already possessed a great army in miniature which could be transformed into a mass army when the political situation was ripe.

The rehabilitation of German military power was accompanied by corresponding steps in the diplomatic field. At first co-operation between army and foreign office was strictly limited; Seeckt, ever suspicious of the 'frocks', tended to plough his own furrow. But after his resignation the army ceased to pursue an independent line in foreign affairs and accepted the general line laid down by the foreign office largely because senior officers came to realise that Seeckt's hopes of a Russian alliance were exaggerated and that more could be gained out of good relations with the western powers.

For the next few years Germany benefited considerably from the growing feeling in Britain, France and America that Europe needed a

stable and prosperous Germany. France, too, was forced to try the policy of reconciliation with the old enemy if only because the Ruhr episode had shown the futility of trying to extract reparations at bayonet point. With the Dawes Plan of 1924 a more realistic attitude was at last adopted on that question. In 1925 Gustav Stresemann, who bore responsibility for foreign policy between 1924 and 1929, was able to play a significant role in the negotiation of the Locarno Pacts which made Germany a member of a western security agreement. In 1926 the War Guilt clause was conveniently forgotten when she was allowed to join the League of Nations with a permanent seat on the Council. Finally, in 1929, in return for a final reparations settlement, allied troops left the Rhineland five years ahead of schedule. Yet the success, though real enough, was strictly limited; it cannot be denied that the major provisions of the treaty were all intact at the time of Stresemann's death in October 1929. That did not surprise him. For, though widely regarded as an apostle of European reconciliation – he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace – Stresemann remained what he had always been: an old fashioned *Machtpolitiker* from the Wilhelminian era with no illusions about the role of force in the international jungle. Only countries with large armies were likely to be respected by other powers and until Germany was again in that enviable position the correct policy in respect of the recovery of Danzig, the Polish Corridor and Upper Silesia and the Anschluss with Austria was 'to finesse and avoid major decisions'.

Three years later the Republic was in its death throes and Hitler's accession to power was a matter of weeks away. The rise of the Nazis is too complex a phenomenon to be investigated here. In general one can say that the great economic crisis which swept through Europe in the early 1930s exposed grave structural weaknesses in the social and political fabric of *Weimar* Germany and favoured the growth of what in good times had been nothing more than a fringe movement destined to permanent opposition. What is of interest in this context is that even before Hitler became chancellor in January 1933 German foreign policy was entering a new and more aggressive phase.

A recrudescence of xenophobic nationalism accompanied the economic crisis in most European countries in the early 1930s as a kind of group reaction to the stimulus of external peril. In Germany mounting nationalist resentment of the Government's record obliged successive chancellors to pursue a bolder policy if only to maintain their quasi-authoritarian regimes. Bruening's abortive attempt to arrange a customs union with Austria in 1931 as the first step towards political Anschluss, and Papen's refusal to return to the Disarmament Conference in 1932 until the German demand for equality of armaments was met reveal a greater readiness than in Stresemann's day to challenge the status quo of 1919. This was also reflected in the growing confidence of the military. At this stage the army was still thinking exclusively in terms of defence against possible Polish aggression. Nevertheless, in April 1930 Wilhelm Groener, the Minister of Defence, issued a directive ordering the army to plan for rapid expansion from ten to twenty-one divisions in a future emergency – in effect a mobilisation plan and as such forbidden by the treaty. So that in one sense Chancellor Hitler, heading an orthodox right-wing cabinet with two other Nazis in it, simply continued and radicalised this new trend in German policy.

The Nazi movement itself expressed in a more extreme form ideas commonplace in right-wing political circles for generations. The Nazis glorified physical violence, accepting the crude Social Darwinian proposition that life is struggle, i.e. they popularised what 'respectable' foreign office officials had believed since the days of Bismarck. Nations, like individuals, struggled for existence and survived only at the expense of the weak; that was Hitler's constant theme from *Mein Kampf* to the last days in the Berlin bunker. War was a natural instrument of policy and within certain limits had a therapeutic value as a purgative of weak elements in a people. Hitler's rabid anti-semitism and his fanatical belief that Germany had a mission to save the Aryan race from the infamous schemes of 'World Jewry' infused a sense of cosmic urgency into traditional nationalist demands for the union of all Germans in one *Reich* and for eastward expansion to obtain 'living space' for the German

people. Possibly, too, as many German historians now believe, Hitler envisaged a second phase of expansion in the distant future when a German dominated continent would wrestle with America (and possibly Britain) for Western Mastery. To realise the immediate objectives in Europe, whether by war or intimidation, Germany needed a large army.

The form rearmament took under Hitler was determined by internal and external constraints. For the first 18 months relatively little was done partly because of the overriding need to get Germany back to work again and partly because the form military expansion should take was in dispute. Ernst Roehm, leader of the restless and powerful Brownshirts, pressed for the creation of a peoples' militia under Brownshirt control. Only in February 1934 did Hitler finally decide in favour of a mass army trained and led by professional soldiers. And not until after the Blood Purge of June, which decimated the Brownshirt leadership, did rearmament get under way in earnest.

Rearmament posed serious economic problems for Germany because of her heavy dependence on food and raw material imports. Once the slack in the economy had been taken up by 1935, continued emphasis on rearmament led inevitably to balance of payments difficulties. What is significant is Hitler's refusal to tolerate any substantial depression of living standards as the price of rearmament, for the very good reason that dictatorships are in practice more sensitive than democracies to the mood of the public or what their secret police suppose is the public mood. Gestapo reports revealed much dissatisfaction just below the surface which Nazi leaders feared (probably quite erroneously) would assume serious proportions should economic conditions worsen appreciably. Another consideration that weighed heavily with Hitler was an instinctive feeling that long-term investment in the armaments industry and the general disruption of the peace-time economy consequent upon in-depth rearmament of the 1914-18 variety would endanger his personal rule by placing too much power in the hands of economic overlords.

The alternative strategy of rearmament in breadth fitted the bill exactly. For by restricting war production to a limited sector of the economy it proved possible to combine the production of large quantities of tanks and guns with minimum dislocation of the economy. No undue strain was placed on the people and in addition Hitler was able to build up an impossibly large army in the shortest possible time. The existence of a considerable army would of itself tend to demoralise Germany's small neighbours. And to this end the propaganda machine deliberately exaggerated the extent of rearmament so effectively in practice that only after the war did it become apparent how far Germany had been from total mobilisation in 1939. The fact was that, despite Goering's defiant boast of a choice between 'guns and butter', the Germans continued to have reasonable quantities of both up to 1942.

Finally, rearmament in breadth made military sense in the opinion of at least some of Hitler's generals. If it came to war, a small army with a core of powerful armoured units supported by motorised infantry and trained in *Blitzkrieg* tactics could strike quickly and win decisive battles in a matter of days, always provided of course that the Führer could isolate the victim and guarantee that Germany would not be plunged into a long war which she could not possibly win.

Externally, the progress of rearmament was dependent upon the attitude of the Great Powers towards the Nazi regime. As Hitler expected vigorous reactions from the French he moved cautiously at first, seeking to reassure the powers of his peaceful intentions though not with any great success. What proved decisive was not Hitler's manoeuvres but the feeling in British, Italian and American government circles that it was intolerable for Germany to remain disarmed while other powers – especially France – refused to reduce their arms levels. With the tacit consent of the powers Hitler was able to take Germany out of the Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations in October 1933, a defiant gesture calculated to show the German people that, like preceding chancellors, he intended to pursue an active foreign policy. By the spring of 1934,

when France precipitately broke off further disarmament negotiations, it was clear that Hitler's fears of France had been grossly exaggerated and that rearmament could proceed without hindrance from that quarter.

It was the gathering pace of German rearmament that dictated the next move. By the beginning of 1935 the *Reichswehr* had increased in size from 100,000 to 240,000 men (not counting another 200,000 policemen trained outside the army as infantrymen), and military command was already planning a peace-time army of twenty-one divisions. But without conscription it was impossible to produce the reserves that army would need in wartime. The opportunity to put this right presented itself in March 1935 when France increased the period of compulsory service and lowered the age of enlistment to offset the effects of a falling birth-rate. On March 9 Goering had already announced the existence of a German air force, which amounted to some 2000 machines, few of them fit for front line service. As the news met with little adverse reaction in the west, on March 16 Hitler announced the re-introduction of conscription and the creation of a peace-time army of 36 divisions (the army's revised target). The western powers, as expected, confined themselves to verbal protests at this clear breach of treaty.

In March 1936 Hitler re-militarised the Rhineland, his most daring diplomatic move so far. The disunity of the western powers over the Abyssinian affair was too good an opportunity to miss and three battalions were sent into the demilitarised zone as a token of the restoration of complete sovereignty. The re-occupation marked a new and more aggressive phase in German foreign policy. For had France ordered immediate counter measures – as common prudence suggested she ought to have – it would have been quite beyond the military capacity of Germany to have resisted at this stage; in that event the battalions were under orders to stage a fighting withdrawal. Hitler's intuitive judgment – supported by the experience of the last three years – that France would remain passive proved right. Germany derived considerable strategic advantage from the re-occupation. Her exposed western flank could now be

protected and work commenced on the famous West Wall. But it was the psychological significance of the French failure to resist that encouraged Hitler most, revealing as it did a deep malaise at the heart of Germany's old foe.

In September 1936 Hitler began to mobilise the Germany economy for war. The Four Year Plan announced by Hitler at the Party Congress was intended to make Germany as self-sufficient as possible in respect of certain raw materials with particular emphasis on petrol and rubber, both essential ingredients of a modern war machine. Of course complete self-sufficiency was not possible within Germany's existing frontiers as Hitler knew full well. Only by expanding eastwards to the Ural mountains could Germany achieve a degree of autarky corresponding to her political ambitions. Meanwhile, the measures adopted in 1936 were more in the nature of a crash programme to prepare the German army for war by 1940. In the summer of 1938, under the pressure of the Czech crisis, the wider aspects of the plan were abandoned in favour of intensified efforts to attain maximum production of gunpowder, high explosives and vital chemicals by – significantly enough – the end of 1939.

Towards the end of 1937 Hitler was growing restless and inclined to accelerate the pace of German expansion. There were good reasons for this. In recent months the strategic situation had changed dramatically in Germany's favour. Italy was now the friend of Germany. The Abyssinian War strained Italy's relations with Britain and France, and close upon its heels came the Italian involvement in the Spanish Civil War. Italy moved closer to the German camp and in November the so-called Berlin-Rome Axis came into being. Hitler could now feel reasonably confident that Italy would be too pre-occupied with Mediterranean problems to intervene – as she had done over Austria in 1934 – should Germany move eastwards.

In the west France was gravely weakened by the collapse of the Locarno system. Belgium had lapsed into neutrality. Britain, though prepared to aid France in the event of German aggression, made it clear that this promise did not extend to France's allies in Eastern

Europe; Poland and the Little Entente were, in effect, left to their own devices whilst the weakness of Russia, ally of France since 1935, was dramatically illustrated by the purges in the summer of 1937 which decimated the top echelons in the Red Army.

Hitler was aware, too, that any military advantage Germany might possess over her opponents would certainly disappear by the mid-1940s when those powers would themselves have rearmed. Possibly he sensed that his regime, rigidly committed to rearmament, could not satisfy the growing social aspirations of a people now back at work; only by intensifying the pace of his foreign policy could he preserve his own dictatorial power, escape the inflationary effects of rearmament and maintain the dynamic of the Nazi state. Therefore, in the autumn of 1937 he decided, as he informed his closest associates at the Hossbach meeting on November 5, that Germany must secure her 'living space' by 1943-5 at the latest, and might seize Austria and Czechoslovakia before that date if favourable circumstances arose.

As a preliminary to a more aggressive policy, Hitler extended his control over the army. So far he had left the army to get on with the task of rearmament without interference. But he had grown increasingly impatient of conservative-minded von Fritsch, commander-in-chief of the army since 1934 and a constant opponent of Hitler's pressure for accelerated rearmament. Early in 1938 a scandal concerning the wife of von Blomberg, the Minister of War, and false charges against Fritsch were pounced upon by Hitler as a pretext to be rid of them both. The pliable von Brauchitsch replaced Fritsch. Blomberg was not replaced; instead Hitler assumed the post of commander-in-chief of the Wehrmacht and appointed the subservient Wilhelm Keitel head of a new planning staff – the *OKW* or armed forces command – immediately responsible to himself. The balance of power in the high command shifted decisively in his favour and a process commenced which ended logically with Hitler's assumption of personal command of the army in 1941.

For some years after Hitler's accession to power army strategy remained defensive in nature. Plan Red, a deployment plan to deal

with a possible French attack, was drawn up in 1935. Although Blomberg had been interested in studying at that time the feasibility of attacking Czechoslovakia, not until 1937 was work begun upon Plan Green for a pre-emptive strike at Czechoslovakia and only then in the event of a two-front war. However, by the summer of that year the army was beginning to adopt a more aggressive posture largely because Blomberg, an ardent Nazi, was under Hitler's influence. Already the army was instructed to be ready for the exploitation of favourable circumstances as and when they arose. After the Hossbach meeting pride of place was given by Germany's military leaders to Plan Green. Army and air force leaders were now prepared to launch an attack on Czechoslovakia in peace-time if conditions were favourable, i.e. the army was no longer pursuing a defensive strategy but consciously underwriting Hitler's imperialist plans for living space.

Even so, when Hitler seized Austria in March 1938 it was by accident rather than design. Since July 1934 when an abortive Austrian Nazi coup resulted in the death of the then Chancellor Dollfuss and aroused world opinion against Germany, Hitler handled Austria with kid gloves. By the winter of 1937/8 the Austrian Nazis, like the Sudeten Germans, were growing restless. When Chancellor Schuschnigg visited Hitler in February 1938 to discuss Austria's future, the latter succeeded in driving a hard bargain with the Austrians which went a long way toward the peaceful absorption of Austria in Germany. Hitler was perfectly satisfied, and there the matter would probably have rested had not Schuschnigg tried to upset the arrangement by announcing a plebiscite to allow the Austrians to decide their own future. An angry Hitler, under pressure from the more aggressive Goering, intervened and when he had 'arranged' an invitation from a pro-Nazi chancellor ordered German troops into Austria.

Next day, March 13, Austria became part of the *Reich*. The Great Powers acquiesced in the Anschluss. Neither Britain, France nor Italy was prepared to help Schuschnigg as Hitler knew before his troops marched. Overnight the strategic situation in Central Europe was

transformed. Control of historic Vienna gave the Germans a dominant position in the Balkans. In the south Germany now had a common frontier with her friend Italy while in the north Czechoslovakia's strategic position suddenly worsened.

The ease of his victory undoubtedly encouraged Hitler not to wait any longer – as he might have done despite the Hossbach 'timetable' – but to turn his attentions to Czechoslovakia without delay. The 'neutralisation' of this democratic state, king-pin of the anti-German Little Entente and a spearhead in the German flank, was a strategic necessity to give Germany freedom of manoeuvre for eastward expansion. To achieve this end, Hitler relied on a mixture of political and military pressure. The grievances of three-and-a-half million Sudeten Germans against the Prague government were ruthlessly exploited by the local Nazis under strict orders from Berlin to keep the tension at boiling point throughout the summer and so demoralise the Czechs that military intervention in the autumn – a course to which Hitler committed himself in May – would deliver the *coup de grâce*. All the indications were that Britain and France would remain passive spectators while Italy was still too pre-occupied with Mediterranean problems to be concerned about a German attack on Czechoslovakia.

Though one cannot entirely discount the possibility that Hitler was bluffing from start to finish and never intended war over Czechoslovakia, the balance of probability strongly supports the view that the military threat to Czechoslovakia was a very real one and that the Germans could have defeated her. Thirty-seven divisions, including three armoured and four motorised, were concentrated around Czechoslovakia in a menacing semi-circle from Austria to Silesia when Chamberlain's unexpected intervention in mid-September upset Hitler's plans. To maximise the surprise element (so vital for the success of Blitzkrieg tactics) the Germans adopted the cunning stratagem of calling up reservists not for war – formal mobilisation would have been a provocative step likely to stretch French and Czech patience to breaking point – but ostensibly for routine autumn manoeuvres. In this way Germany 'mobilised' so

effectively that an attack on Czechoslovakia could have been launched without waiting for formal mobilisation orders. Significantly, too, assault divisions were moved into advanced positions at night and heavily camouflaged. An element of bluff entered the picture only in respect of Germany's military preparations in the west where five divisions were stationed to defend the half-completed West Wall which could not, in fact, have been held for more than two to three weeks in the face of a French offensive as Hitler must have realised.

It was precisely this fear of French intervention and the corollary of a two-front war which Germany could not possibly win that explains the mounting opposition in high military circles to Hitler's plans. In so far as Hitler could not guarantee absolutely that war with Czechoslovakia would be strictly localised, his entire policy in the autumn of 1938 amounted to a piece of reckless brinkmanship based on intuitive judgment about western reactions and not on the logistical reality of German military capabilities. On the other hand, Hitler did not allow his primitive desire to smash the Czechs by force to blind him to changes in the tactical situation. Thus, when the Czechs mobilised on September 23 and reports came in of partial mobilisation in France, Hitler was quick to appreciate that the vital surprise element was virtually eliminated from the picture leaving him with no viable alternative but to settle, reluctantly, for the surrender of the Sudetenland at the Munich Conference.

Six months later German troops drove through the snow-covered streets of Prague and completed the destruction of the Czech state. Once again Hitler relied upon a judicious blend of political and military pressure. In the spring of 1939 the Slovaks acted as his Trojan horse; their demands for independence were fostered by the Germans and precipitated a crisis which gave Hitler his chance to intervene – as always – at the 'invitation' of the victim. The army had been alerted to Hitler's intentions as early as October 1938 whilst, significantly, no-one anticipated serious opposition from the western powers. The balance of military power in Central Europe shifted decisively in favour of Germany. The Little Entente was smashed to

pieces and Romania and Yugoslavia hastened to make their peace with Hitler. German influence became predominant in the Danubian Basin and exploitation of the economic resources of the area entered a new and more aggressive phase. In the mid-1930s Schacht, Hitler's minister of economics, negotiated barter agreements with the countries of South-eastern Europe in order to acquire the essential raw materials for rearmament. In the late 1930s Goering, the new economic overlord of Germany, was attempting to create a *Grossraumwirtschaft* in the area, reducing Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria to quasi-colonial territories; Germany not only took their grain and ores but was pumping in capital sums to ensure that they produced the raw materials Germany needed.

In June 1939, exactly 20 years since the peace of Versailles had been forced on a resentful people, Germany's position had changed out of all recognition. She was again a power to be reckoned with and every utterance of her leader was studied in minute detail in every European chancellery. For example, pressure from her foreign minister von Ribbentrop was sufficient to make little Lithuania decide hurriedly in March 1939 to hand over the Memelland taken from Germany in 1919. Internally, though political opposition was ruthlessly repressed and the Jews were being systematically persecuted from 1933 onwards, the German people were back at work. Instead of the mass unemployment conditions which plagued western lands material conditions were tolerable and a shortage of labour actually existed in Germany on the eve of war.

Three months later Germany was at war with Poland, Britain and France and Hitler was set on a course which led in the end to the total and utter collapse of Nazi Germany in 1945. How did this come about?

Wars do not have trivial causes. Several factors must combine to produce an inflammatory situation where only a spark is needed to cause the final explosion. Such was the case in August 1939. A crisis existed in German-Polish relations ever since the breakdown of negotiations over the Corridor in March, a failure which signified the end of genuine German attempts to win Poland over as a junior

partner for adventures in the east. In this tense situation the British guarantee to Poland on March 31 and the formal alliance in August – suggesting that Britain had reversed the traditional policy of disengagement in Eastern Europe and would now resist Hitler's designs in the east - strengthened his resolve to teach the Poles a lesson. Whether economic pressures played a significant role in the decision to strike at Poland it is difficult to say. Undoubtedly stresses and strains were mounting in Nazi Germany because of the unwise acceleration of rearmament in an already overheated economy, and may well have confirmed Hitler in his decision. That is very far from saying that economic pressures were so intense that Hitler was obliged on that account to go to war. But there were sound military reasons for striking soon. In two or three years, as Hitler often remarked in the winter of 1938/9, Germany's opponents would have a military advantage over her. If war was unavoidable to achieve his aims in the east then better war in 1939 than 1943. In that sense it can certainly be said that Hitler was driven to war ahead of the Hossbach 'timetable'. The parallel with Imperial Germany springs to mind. In the summer of 1914 a not dissimilar 'either-or' situation faced her (or so her leaders supposed); either Germany waited passively until the balance of military power moved inexorably against her and 'encirclement' turned into subjugation; or else she exploited her waning military power to break the ring of 'encirclement' closing round her and re-establish her hegemony in Europe.

Without doubt Germany's armed forces were ready for war with Poland. Instead of the ten divisions of 1920 Germany possessed a peace-time army of 52 divisions to call on, her total mobilised strength was 103 divisions; of these 70 were fit for active service. By 1942 it was estimated that Germany would have sufficient reserves for 150 divisions and would then reach the maximum capacity of her arms-producing industry. Morale was high in the armed forces on the eve of war. In the west the defences had been greatly strengthened and Hitler's generals were much more confident of

holding the line (with ten divisions) than at the time of the Czech crisis.

Though air power was primarily a support weapon for the ground forces, Germany's progress was impressive here also. In 1920 she had no military aircraft; in 1939 she possessed about 3000 aircraft including 1180 medium bombers, 771 single-seater fighters and 336 dive bombers. Most of the craft were types first produced in 1936 whereas French and British aircraft were of an older vintage. But once the western powers started to rearm in earnest from 1938 onwards, their aircraft were inevitably equipped with machines of slightly better design and performance than the Germans. From about mid-1939, all things being equal, the balance of air power would begin to move against Germany slowly but surely, another good reason for exploiting the temporary advantage quickly.

Economically, Germany was in a position to wage a short successful war in 1939. It is true that her dependence on foreign supplies of copper, zinc, lead and iron ore was greater in 1939 than ever before. On the other hand, Germany was producing sufficient synthetic rubber (22,000 tons in 1939) to meet current needs; aluminium output was in excess of demand; and though synthetic oil production at 2.8 million tons (all types of fuel) was disappointing and left Germany dependent on Romanian and Yugoslavian supplies she had considerable stocks of diesel oil and petrol. Thanks to Nazi agricultural policy, she was practically self-sufficient in bread, potatoes, milk, sugar and meat. Bearing in mind that Hitler intended to plunder occupied territory and to depress the living standard of the inhabitants to recoup his material losses, it can certainly be maintained that Germany was ready for war.

Not, of course, for a major war. Nor did Hitler intend to wage such a war. He assumed that Britain and France would abandon Poland in the final resort as they had abandoned Czechoslovakia. If there were any lingering doubts in the west these would surely be removed, so he supposed, by the Non-Aggression Pact Ribbentrop signed with Russia on August 23. The western powers were stunned by the news. Their hopes of an alliance with Russia to contain Nazi



Soldiers from Rommel's legendary Afrika Korps firing heavy artillery in the Western Desert. January 1943. Despite some notable victories, the German army struggled to adapt to conditions in North Africa and were finally defeated in May 1943.



First Nazi prisoners captured by Canadians are guarded by military police and soldiers with fixed bayonets, Normandy beaches, 6 June 1944. The ships that evacuated Allied wounded also ferried such prisoners of war to incarceration in Britain.



Short of high-quality equipment, the Germans stripped the bodies of the Allied dead. Here a German infantryman adjusts the boots he has just taken from one of the four US soldiers lying face-down in the mud.



Heavily armed and apparently well-equipped, German soldiers pose with US cigarettes captured during their advance in the Ardennes. Behind them is a knocked-out M8 light-armoured car.