

Germany, Adolf Hitler, and the Second World War

MacGregor Knox *

Genghis Khan purposely and with a joyful heart drove millions of women and children to their deaths; history sees in him only a great state-founder.

– Adolf Hitler, to his commanders, August 22, 1939¹

The Great Khan has had many admirers. But only one secured absolute power over continental Europe's most literate and scientifically advanced society, the world's second-largest industrial economy, and an army that initially dwarfed in skill and power those of Germany's adversaries – and launched the greatest war in history. That a seemingly awkward and insignificant Austrian immigrant entirely without inherited connections to the elites of the German Reich could have achieved all that has posed abiding puzzles. Solving them even partially requires analysis of the German context that made Hitler's rise possible, of the international disorder that permitted him to rearm and strike, and of the unique qualities and bold decisions of the individual himself.

THE REICH: FROM MILITARY MONARCHY TO MILITANT DICTATORSHIP

Social and political cleavages, domestic structures and power relationships, ideological delusions, and military-organizational cultures are the decisive factors in how great powers behave.

* Professor of International History at the London School of Economics.

The German Empire that perished in 1945 was born between 1864 and 1871 in three wars – against Denmark, the Austrian Empire, and France. The Prussian military monarchy, the most powerful German-speaking state, crushed all opponents both foreign and domestic under the uninhibited leadership of its prime minister, Otto von Bismarck. But the Reich that emerged in 1871 from victory over the French ancestral enemy was lamentably incomplete. Bismarck astutely curbed German ambitions – in order to preserve Prussia’s own character as a Protestant military monarchy and to prevent a Europe-wide coalition against German aggrandizement. He exploited the German nationalist movement but thwarted its most cherished aim: the subjugation of all lands in which “the German tongue resounds” – starting with the German-speaking portions of the Austrian Empire.² The corresponding insistence of the “Iron Chancellor” that his creation was a satiated power likewise cut across the long-treasured nationalist dream that Prussia’s ostensible mission to unify Germany was mere prelude to an infinitely more grandiose German mission in the wider world.

German nationalism was indeed an uneasy and discontented beast. Its 19th- and 20th-century mythology incorporated an inflated sense of historic victimization – first by Roman invaders, then by the hated French, and finally by the Jewish minority rooted in western Germany since the Romans. It claimed European domination based on a fierce belief in German cultural superiority, racialist ancestor-worship, and misunderstood Darwinism. It slavishly revered great leaders, for whom Bismarck provided a shining contemporary model. And it drew further nourishment from the immense popular enthusiasm surrounding the army that followed the Napoleonic Wars and – above all – the swift and crushing victories over Austria and France. Yet the irremediable internal disunity of the new state nevertheless filled nationalists with agonized dismay and imposed inescapable duties. For the society locked within the boundaries that Bismarck and the royal Prussian army had drawn was deeply riven both vertically and horizontally in at least five ways. It was multinational: in addition to ethnic Germans, the 1871 Reich included three million Poles, 200,000 French in annexed Alsace-Lorraine, 100,000 Danes along

the northern border, and an assortment of Slavic minorities in the east. It had inherited and only partially cleared – by force – a thick internal patchwork of centuries-old mini-states and local, regional, and dynastic loyalties. The murderous religious strife that had culminated in the great slaughter of the Thirty Years' War (1618-48) had left the populations of the 1871 Reich two-thirds Protestant and one-third Catholic, distributed in part along regional lines but with many areas of mixed settlement. Uncommonly rigid quasi-hereditary divisions between “estates” – *Stände* – clove the resulting society – or societies – horizontally into nobility, clergy, townsman, peasant, and Jew. The German states had in addition created new functional “estates” in their service: professors, lawyers, bureaucrats, and – above all – officers. Finally, the industrial revolution that struck Germany with gathering force from the 1840s onward filled the swiftly expanding great cities with an entirely new class: industrial workers hostile to – and opposed by – Germany's industrialists, financiers, nobles, bureaucrats, learned middle classes, army officers, shopkeepers, and peasants.

Many of Germany's divisions inevitably crystallized into political parties – an intolerable affront to the many Germans who yearned for the seamless unity the nationalist faith promised and demanded. Bismarck's constitution unintentionally offered an opening for abhorrent “party-strife”: the Reichstag, a national legislature elected by universal male suffrage and equipped with budgetary powers that increasingly forced the authoritarian-monarchical executive into demeaning haggling for votes. By 1912 Germany's two mass parties, the Center Party of Germany's Catholics and the Social-Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) held between them over half the Reichstag's seats. Both parties stood against the existing order; the SPD was theoretically committed – not wholly sincerely – to its violent overthrow. The North-German Protestant “national camp” by contrast remained split between a patchwork of conservative and liberal parties led by local notables with diminishing mass bases.

The national camp nevertheless had the state – but a state unequal to the implacable demands of the German national cult. Bismarck inevitably grew old, and his dismissal in 1890 by the impetuous young Emperor Wilhelm II – and last – left a vacuum at the summit

that persisted until Hitler's advent in 1933. The state itself inherited and perfected Germany's fragmentation. After Bismarck, only the emperor could coordinate its central institutions and focus the loyalties of the German people – tasks for which Wilhelm was too impressionable, indolent, feckless, irascible, impolitic, and deluded. The legendary precision of the government bureaucracy and the mass army's deep social roots and stunning victories made the absence of a *Führer* for whom the German people could “march through fire” supremely galling.³

Wilhelm II's efforts to fill that daunting role increasingly placed the Reich in harm's way. Repeated diplomatic bullying of France and Russia backed by military threats, and the great battle fleet constructed from 1897 onward, summoned up the very “encirclement” that seemingly confirmed Germany's entirely mythical victimization by foreign powers. The fleet was an offensive instrument aimed at displacing Britain – the allegedly declining “world power.” But geography barred Germany from the open ocean, the naval planners characteristically underestimated British resolve to preserve the naval supremacy that guarded Britain's maritime lifelines, and the prospect of a two-front land war against the Franco-Russian alliance fatally limited the navy's claim on the Reich's finances and industrial capacity.

When the navy confessed failure in 1912, the army took the lead in repeatedly demanding “war the sooner the better.” German military culture – the “toolkit” of values, beliefs, and templates for action shared not only throughout army and navy but also by many of Germany's civilian leaders – dictated that the adversaries that Germany's erratic aggressiveness had summoned up were as predatory as Germany.⁴ The army responded by outdoing the navy's already astonishing underestimation of

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Germany's antagonists. It planned and launched the first of the three unreasonable gambles that determined Imperial Germany's ruin: a Prusso-German "preventive war" to destroy France in six weeks and checkmate Russia.⁵ The Balkan crisis of July 1914 and the resulting Russian precautionary mobilization offered perfect pretexts. The Reich was well aware that invading France through neutral Belgium would add to Germany's two formidable continental enemies the naval, financial, and industrial might of the British Empire. But Britain lacked a mass army, and was therefore in the Prusso-German general staff's blinkered reckoning not a serious foe. Battlefield disaster, stalemate in east and west, and the British navy's ever-tightening blockade prompted Germany's leaders by 1917 to stake the nation's fate a second time upon a single card: unrestricted submarine warfare to starve Britain. But that step challenged the USA, the world's greatest industrial power – just as revolution in Russia freed Germany from "encirclement" and opened the road to the domination of Eurasia. The submarines failed. The United States improvised a mass army. And the German high command, as its organizational culture dictated, responded with further escalation. The great German spring offensives of 1918 wrecked the army and destroyed Germany's remaining chance of a negotiated settlement that would preserve its immense conquests in Russia.

Summer-autumn 1918 battlefield disaster in the west, naval mutiny, and the almost bloodless revolution of November 1918 destroyed the monarchy and turned the world of the German people upside down. Germany's great-power status and its claims to European domination and world mastery lay in ruins. The Social Democrats diffidently inherited the wreck, founded a democratic republic, and in 1919 signed the unequal Treaty of Versailles: disarmament, demilitarized zones along Germany's borders, reparations payments for the immense destruction Germany had wrought upon its neighbors, and stinging territorial losses to France, Belgium, Denmark, and the new Polish state. Stability proved elusive. Communist uprisings in Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, and central Germany summoned up murderous repression by radical-nationalist paramilitaries that the government, lacking

alternatives, recruited from the vengeful debris of the “old army.” Coup attempts by those same paramilitaries in 1920 and 1923 likewise failed, even as nationalist assassins eliminated prominent republican statesmen.

Worst of all, the Republic’s founding coalition of Social Democrats, Catholics, and Left-Liberals lost its governing majority in the catastrophic 1920 election. The extremist forces against the Republic – from the German Communist Party on the left to conservatives and racist-nationalists on the right – now commanded over a third of the Reichstag’s seats. The economy almost foundered in 1922-23, when French and Belgian forces occupied the Ruhr valley, the heart of German heavy industry, to force payment of reparations. Germany responded with passive resistance and the eminently false claim that Germany could not pay. It then unleashed its printing presses and boosted Germany’s already rapidly devaluing currency into hyperinflation – proving merely that Germany *would not pay*.

A brief five-year window of illusory stability followed: a new currency, negotiated French and Belgian withdrawal from the Ruhr, markedly reduced reparations payments, and a United States loan to underwrite those payments. The 1925 Locarno security treaty with the Western powers guaranteed Germany against another Ruhr invasion, but left the Reich free, once its strength returned, to pursue reconquest of the “lost territories” – and more – in the east. Germany subsequently entered the League of Nations established by the Versailles Treaty, and in 1927 secured the end of on-site disarmament inspections. The following year Germany’s democratic forces briefly reconquered a Reichstag majority and established a coalition government led by the SPD. But that breathing space was deceptive – for in the meantime the Reich presidency had fallen to the national camp. The president, as head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, possessed far-reaching emergency powers. The first incumbent, Friedrich Ebert of the SPD, had exploited those powers to the fullest in the Republic’s defense. But on Ebert’s premature death in 1925, the mutual rivalries of the democratic parties handed the presidency to the venerable army chief of 1916-19, Field

Marshal Paul Ludwig Hans Anton von Beneckendorff und von Hindenburg. The Field Marshal's absolute electoral majority rested on the Protestants of the north and east, and showed that the national camp could coalesce to dominate Germany if and when a suitable *Führer* emerged. And despite the aged Hindenburg's characteristic inertia, his umbilical connection to the army soon yoked his considerable powers to that organization's implacable demands.

Of all the purported iniquities of Versailles, the German Republic's 100,000-man "dwarf-army" was perhaps the most charged with future doom. Demobilization and disarmament threw upon the streets of Germany – the highway to paramilitary violence – 30,000 of Germany's 34,000 surviving regular army officers. The fewer than 4,000 who remained on active service from 1919-20 onward were an elite of elites: seasoned by four years of industrial slaughter and diligently selected primarily from the general staff corps – the finest brains of the "old army." The leaders of the Republic's army were thus the concentrated essence, unintentionally distilled by the "shameful Treaty" itself, of the most independent, innovative, craftsmanlike, narrow, reckless, willful, ruthless, and implacably nationalist officer corps in Eurasia and the world. From the beginning the army's organizational culture dictated a hegemonic war of revenge. From the beginning the camouflaged general staff established 102 divisions – roughly four million men – as the army's force-structure target for its next war. From the beginning, the staff projected rearmament with the most modern weapons conceivable – including the tanks, aircraft, and poison gas banned by the hated Treaty. It understood war as a total social-industrial process that demanded the relentless commitment of the entire resources both of the Reich and of any societies unlucky enough to fall under its domination. The army shrank from no sacrifice of lives, treasure, or moral or political scruples. From the early 1920s it happily allied itself with Bolshevik Russia to secure secret manufacturing, testing, and training facilities for Germany's forbidden weapons. And almost from the beginning the army aspired to discover and serve a "ruler of souls," a "man of remarkable qualities who can and will rule as

a dictator.”⁶ For the total war faction of the general staff was perfectly aware that rearmament on a scale and speed commensurate with its aims was wholly incompatible with German democracy.

The end in 1927 of Western on-site inspection of Germany’s far from total disarmament thus inspired the army to launch its long-meditated 1928-1933 “first rearmament plan.” But by spring 1930 the planners had grown increasingly anxious: their next four-year plan demanded massive multi-year funding increases and force-expansion far beyond Treaty limits. Neither was compatible with the coalition government led by a Social Democrat that had ruled since the 1928 election. When that government duly collapsed from internal squabbling in March 1930, Hindenburg and his army advisors orchestrated a minority government with support from the Right and the backing of presidential emergency decrees. The constitution nevertheless provided that the Reichstag could overturn decrees by majority vote – which it duly did. Hindenburg’s chancellor, Heinrich Brüning, thereupon called national elections for September 1930 in the fatuous hope of recruiting a docile governmental majority. But the desperate unpopularity of government and Republic, the onset of the economic slump that shortly became the Great Depression, and a factor that has escaped most commentators instead produced an electoral earthquake. That factor was the French army’s premature withdrawal on June 30, 1930 from its last Treaty-designated bridgehead over the Rhine. “Freedom for the Rhineland” liberated the German people at last – to vote their nationalist beliefs without fear of French military action.⁷ They expressed their will on September 14, 1930 after a tumultuous election campaign, and made the National Socialist Germany Workers’ Party the Reich’s second party after the SPD, with 18.4 percent of the vote. The leader of the upstarts – a hitherto obscure Austrian immigrant and 1914-18 German army veteran,

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Adolf Hitler – could credibly claim the role foreordained by the national mythology: “ruler of souls,” Führer of the national camp, and healer of Germany’s fragmentation.

As the Great Depression deepened and the army’s rearmament deadlines drew ever closer, the Hitler Movement sucked life and votes from all political camps – including the Communists. By summer 1932 Germany was ungovernable even by emergency decree: the anti-republican parties – National Socialists, conservative nationalists, and Communists – had conquered almost three-fifths of the Reichstag’s seats. Nor was military dictatorship an option; force could not generate the popular enthusiasm for rearmament and military service that the army’s planners demanded. The sole remaining alternative was capitulation to Hitler’s relentlessly repeated demand for the chancellorship, in return for the support of his fanatical following – now Germany’s largest party. On January 30, 1933 Hindenburg and his advisors duly handed the fate of the nation and of Europe to Adolf Hitler.⁸

THE FOREIGN POWERS: DISUNITY, DELUSIONS, IRRESOLUTION, COMPLICITY

The new world that Hitler faced in 1933 offered openings that would have astonished Berlin’s pre-1914 leaders. War and defeat had paradoxically magnified rather than diminished Germany’s military and geopolitical potential.⁹ Its industrial core, its mastery of science and technology, its highly educated population, and its demographic edge – three men of military age to France’s two – remained intact. Of the two great powers on the wings, Russia was now no ally of France, but rather a vengeful pariah-state in semi-clandestine league with the German army. The second – the United States of America – had sealed Imperial Germany’s doom in 1917-18 but then disclaimed responsibility for upholding the precarious post-1919 truce. To the west, Germany’s war had bled France white and had so shocked Britain that its elites and peoples quailed at the prospect of further continental entanglements. To the east, a quarrelling patchwork of rickety impoverished multi-ethnic “states for a season” had emerged in 1918 from the ruins of the German,

Russian, and Austro-Hungarian empires. All were predestined prey once Germany and Russia revived.

France and Britain, whose unity and resolve alone could keep Germany caged, were united primarily by cordial mutual detestation. Paris looked east in fear and sought to thwart or delay German resurgence. London perversely chose to believe that the cause of the Great War lay not in German aggression, but in military alliances and great armaments; that the Versailles Treaty had desperately wronged Germany; and that the Great War had been so ghastly that a repetition was beyond the bounds of possibility.¹⁰ Britain thus intermittently viewed France's fearful transitory continental preponderance as a threat. Misplaced moralism and superficial pseudo-realism instead moved London to mollify Germany in the delusional hope that "peaceful change" would eventually assuage the existential fury of the German elites and people at the bloody defeat of their bid for hegemony.¹¹ London thus sabotaged the Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr basin in 1923-24 and sponsored the 1925 Locarno pact that blocked further French intervention against Germany while preserving the Reich's free hand against its eastern neighbors. From 1929-30 the Great Depression further cowed and demoralized the democracies, and encouraged competitive devaluation and tariff walls that drove them yet further apart. Japan's seizure of Manchuria in 1931 first demonstrated the absurdity of the claim of the League of Nations to serve as world-peace panacea. If security was "collective" no power was responsible for ensuring it – and none did.

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the Reich the European supremacy that its new leadership sought. But the gradual realization that Germany as well as Japan was rearming furiously – and especially that the still semi-clandestine German air force potentially threatened Britain itself – led London to reassess. A series of hesitant incremental naval and air armaments programs followed. But Britain's supreme financial authority and – from 1937 – prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, blocked army modernization and expansion until 1939, lest possession of combat-ready ground forces trap Britain once again into fighting on the continent in alliance with France.

Justified lack of faith in British support correspondingly moved France to seek allies against Germany elsewhere. The Soviet Union proved elusive, and efforts to woo it lowered France's already abysmal reputation in London. Paris likewise courted the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, and in 1934-35 tacitly encouraged Fascist Italy to attack Ethiopia, the last independent native state in Africa, in the bizarre expectation that in exchange, Italian military support against Germany in Europe would be both forthcoming and effective. But Ethiopia was – inconveniently – a member of the League of Nations – and in November 1935 the British government had to face a general election and a population besotted with the League's ostensibly fundamental role in ensuring world peace. London, with the embarrassed French in tow, thus felt compelled to organize League economic sanctions against Italian aggression.

The British and French navies commanded the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal, Fascist Italy's sole supply line to the 400,000 troops and laborers it had boldly engaged in East Africa. A "peaceful" naval blockade would have ignominiously crushed the Italian dictatorship. Had the dictator answered with war, overwhelming force would have swatted away Italy's still-puny navy and held the peninsula's coastal cities and industries hostage. London instead fawningly if furtively assured Mussolini of its benevolence, and Italian victory in East Africa in spring 1936 demonstrated to Berlin's satisfaction that the British lion was a mangy toothless beast. The concurrent electoral triumph of the French Left, which Britain's ruling Conservatives distrusted and despised above all other French political tendencies, further

exacerbated Franco-British friction.

Chamberlain's advent as prime minister in May 1937 yet further compounded divisions between the Western powers. For he held in exaggerated form all the superstitions of the British "official mind": the necessity of keeping the purportedly belligerent, immature, shifty, and corrupt French at arm's length; contempt for and mistrust of the United States; and a naïve faith that at the root of German policy were "grievances" subject to diplomatic remedy. Once those grievances disappeared, the Reich would – and logically must – docilely accept the mutual security guarantees, armament limitation agreements, and economic concessions that London repeatedly proffered. Domestic qualms reinforced foreign policy delusions. By 1937-38 national mobilization on the scale the German threat dictated would purportedly jeopardize Britain's still delicate recovery from the Depression, and – infinitely worse – would require sharing power with the opposition Labour Party.¹² Finally, in the myopic and desperately pessimistic view of the government's military advisors, Britain's belated and fitful rearmament as yet offered no assurance that the Royal Air Force could defend Britain, and especially the vast urban agglomeration of London, from a German "knock-out blow." Soothing the dictator thus seemed the path of least resistance.¹³

Chamberlain added two further perilous strands to British policy: a sublime self-assurance and a determination to seize the initiative through preemptive concessions. His emissary and future foreign secretary, Lord Edward Halifax, visited Hitler in November 1937, ingratiatingly preached "that mistakes had been made in the Treaty of Versailles which had to be put right," and fatuously urged that "peaceful evolution" should settle Germany's claims on Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland.¹⁴ When Hitler seized Austria in March 1938 and prepared to annihilate Czechoslovakia that September, Chamberlain desperately sought to retain the initiative by flying repeatedly to Germany to implore the Führer to accept Czechoslovakia by slices.

The resulting September 1938 agreement at Munich handed Hitler mastery of central Europe without the small war that Germany was – despite pessimism in London – certain to lose.

The German air force was as yet radically deficient in training and equipment; neither designed for nor capable of striking Britain; and fully committed to supporting the ground campaign against the Czechs. The French, by late September, were showing unexpected resolve. The Czechs stood ready behind formidable border fortifications. The German army had less than half the striking power of mid-1939, and Germany had no assured supplies whatsoever of strategic raw materials – oil least of all.¹⁵

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The breathing space bought at Munich lasted less than six decisive months, which the German armed forces exploited to the full to expand toward combat readiness. The mass state-sponsored violence against Germany's Jews in November 1938 nevertheless belatedly moved British public and elite opinion against Hitler. In January 1939 rumors of a coming German attack on the Netherlands and Belgium galvanized the British cabinet to overrule Chamberlain tacitly, and seek strategic cooperation

with Paris. London belatedly discovered in horror that France was so divided and demoralized that without wholehearted support it might collapse – leaving Britain without a continental ally.

London thereupon sought to slow Hitler's advance by diplomatic deterrence, after he tore up what little remained of the Munich agreement and occupied the Czech capital, Prague, on March 15, 1939. The result was as stunningly unstrategic as Chamberlain's 1938 fawning on Hitler: London and Paris offered paper guarantees to Poland and Rumania that were manifestly unenforceable militarily. Hitler scoffed. And London's firm public undertaking to fight in Poland's defense handed the initiative throughout spring-summer 1939 to Josef Stalin, who had been awaiting just such an opportunity to play Germany and the Western powers against one another.

The West held the weaker hand by far. A Soviet-Western

alliance might deter Hitler by threatening a two-front war and a corresponding cutoff of strategic imports. But that war, if it came, would inevitably take the form of an immense Russo-German ground struggle in which Britain and France could play little part. Stalin therefore set his price impossibly high: Soviet forces must be authorized to intervene in Poland, Romania, the Baltic states, and Finland should he unilaterally determine that they were victim of “indirect aggression.” London not unreasonably saw that demand as a pretext for Soviet conquest of two of the independent states it had just guaranteed.

Hitler however could – and did – offer Stalin a “non-aggression” pact that partitioned Poland and eastern Europe between Germany and Russia; the certainty that Germany and the West would fight long and hard; and thus new worlds of opportunity for Soviet expansion.¹⁶ Stalin gleefully accepted, and at the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact on the night of August 23-24, 1939 delightedly toasted Hitler: “I know how much the German people loves its Führer.”¹⁷ As “the Boss” gloated to his subordinates two weeks later, “The non-aggression pact is to a certain degree helping Germany. Next time we’ll urge on the other side.”¹⁸

London’s strategic innocence and pre-emptive concessions had opened Hitler’s road to the authentically large war that began on September 1, 1939 and expanded inexorably until its strategic climax in December 1941. Soviet Russia judged National Socialist Germany the weaker contender, encouraged it to strike, and subsequently neutralized Britain’s naval blockade by copiously supplying Hitler with grain, iron and chrome ore, scrap iron, manganese, copper, nickel, and rubber. Hitler’s war was indeed his own creation – but the other European great powers by their actions – and the United States by its inaction – made it possible.

ADOLF HITLER: “IN ALL MODESTY...MY OWN
PERSON: IRREPLACEABLE”¹⁹

The ascent of a figure once mocked for his alleged resemblance to a “second-string waiter in a suburban garden-café” to supreme leader of a major political party, *Führer* of the German people, and

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author of the greatest war in history remains puzzling but not in the end inexplicable.²⁰ The tortured history of the German people and state provided myths, institutions, and opportunities ripe for exploitation. Ideological blindness and paucity of imagination led domestic opponents and foreign statesmen to underestimate, time after time and with ever-diminishing excuse, the man and his objectives. But Hitler was entirely correct: triumph and catastrophe alike

depended upon his own unique qualities.

The German army made him in at least five ways. It transformed the peculiar Austrian immigrant of 1913-14 into a four-year veteran of the western front with two wounds and an Iron Cross first class – a decoration not idly bestowed upon enlisted men. In spring-summer 1919 the intelligence branch of the Munich army command enrolled him in a propaganda training course organized to combat “Bolshevism” among troops and population. Lance-Corporal Hitler thus acquired a political education and emerged as a “born agitator [*Volksredner*] whose fanaticism and folksy manner...indisputably compel the attention and assent of his audience.”²¹ The army happily injected its protégé into Munich radical-nationalist politics and sustained his early career as beer-hall preacher of hatred with its pervasive influence, extensive contacts, and substantial secret funds. And in the end the army’s increasingly desperate need for a government that would wholeheartedly back rearmament, crush the Left, and rouse the German people to warlike enthusiasm meshed fatefully in 1932-33 with Hitler’s implacable demand for the chancellorship.

The world-view acquired in 1919 and elaborated in the following years was an extreme expression of Germany’s national mythology, hardened and tempered by the Great War and Germany’s post-war street-fighting.²² History was biology; *race* was “the driving force of world history.” Germany’s cosmic mission was to arise

from defeat and humiliation, purge its politics of class- and party-strife and its population of racial pollution, and emerge “as Führer in the coming global struggle of the Aryans against the Jewish world peril.” The stark contrast between Germany’s expanding population and its constricted borders dictated neither colonial nor commercial expansion – gross errors of Wilhelm II’s Germany – but the conquest of the vast spaces and resources to Germany’s east. London’s perennial efforts to thwart France seemingly encouraged Hitler as early as 1921 to foresee the “carving up of Russia with English help.” He subsequently added a prospective alliance with Italy, which was likewise at odds with France and from October 1922 under the command of Mussolini, *Duce* of Europe’s first radical-nationalist paramilitary ruling party. By 1928 Hitler concluded that the United States would be Germany’s final adversary in his quest for world mastery.²³ Finally, Hitler offered from the beginning an appeal to the individual unique in German politics: the revolutionary career open to talent without regard for birth, wealth, or education. Hitler’s own rise strikingly exemplified that proposition, which set a devastating explosive charge under Germany’s rigid distinctions of “estate” and class, and mobilized immense social forces for National Socialism. The Hitler Movement and in due course the German armed forces thus tapped a seemingly endless supply of likely youths entirely without prospects under previous German regimes, yet determined to rise – or perish in the attempt.²⁴

Yet the pre-existing traditions, immediate circumstances, and army support that Hitler exploited in his early career would have had little effect without his unique talents as speaker and political strategist. Post-1918 Munich was not at all short of radical-nationalist agitators. Yet within six months of his entry into beer-hall politics Hitler’s hate-filled diatribes against Germany’s purported oppressors both foreign and domestic were attracting audiences of 2,000 or more. The minuscule racist sect to which he had attached himself, the German Workers’ Party (DAP), matured under his guidance into the National Socialist German Workers’ Party (NSDAP). Almost from the beginning Hitler proclaimed that the Party would one day rule Germany, and by summer 1921 he

had exploited his own indispensability to secure “dictatorship over the Movement” itself.

A favorite concept of the greatest of all sociologists, Max Weber, provides the most economical explanation of Hitler’s peculiar power: *charisma*, the “quality of an individual personality by which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or...exceptional powers or qualities.” The master [“*der Führer*”] affirms himself through “magical capabilities, revelations or heroism, power of the spirit and of the spoken word.” But charisma is far more than the innate qualities of the chosen one. It is above all a reciprocal or dialectical relationship in which the charismatic following is directly linked – or feels linked – to the leader, and in turn partakes of and extends his charismatic aura. And for Weber charisma was the “specifically revolutionary force in history” that “inverted all value hierarchies and overthrew custom, law, and tradition.”²⁵

Hitler instinctively understood his revolutionary role; his seeming laziness insulated him from day-to-day political and bureaucratic squabbles and reserved his interventions for decisive moments. He nevertheless showed a precocious understanding of the logistical and bureaucratic underpinnings of mass agitation, and uncanny skill at picking and promoting effective if frequently unsavory subordinates. Even more crucially, he harnessed to politics the fierce dynamism and uncanny flexibility of the army’s mission-tactics tradition. As early as 1922 he defined the mission of local Party leaders with the impressive parsimony of a German army tasking order: to “grasp political power in our Movement’s fist” – leaving the choice of methods entirely open.²⁶ And above all else he took, often after solitary meditation, the strikingly bold decisions that carried the NSDAP to power, the Reich almost to the domination of Eurasia, and the German people to ruin.

Amid the Republic’s first quasi-existential crisis, with the currency in ruins and the French army camped in the Ruhr, Hitler sought in November 1923 to launch a “march on Berlin” patterned on Mussolini’s 1922 seizure of power. When the Munich army command and Bavarian government balked, he personally led his armed followers in an all-or-nothing march into police rifle-

fire. He turned his trial for high treason into an eloquent hate-filled indictment of the Republic, and emerged as Germany's one nationalist leader capable of *deeds*. The Party's reconstruction after his brief imprisonment in 1924 was slow and arduous. But the NSDAP emerged as a smoothly functioning electoral machine equally adept at propaganda and street violence, with appeals tailored both to virtually every special-interest group and to the German people's abiding hunger for national integration. Hitler credibly presented himself as healer of the nation's historic fragmentation, whereas – as he remarked in 1932 with characteristic scathing wit – his enemies thought it “typically German to have thirty parties.” And in the Republic's 1932-33 endgame he overawed or eliminated doubters within the Party and held out successfully for the Chancellorship.

Once in power, he and his followers at all levels crushed all other parties, including his conservative allies, in a mere five and a half months. When the NSDAP's brownshirt militia threatened to wreck his carefully cultivated relationship with the army, Hitler had its leaders casually murdered in June-July 1934. The armed forces returned the favor by swearing an unprecedented oath to “the Führer of the German Reich and people” as commander-in-chief when Hindenburg at last died that August.

Rearmament without regard for expense and constrained only by the availability of suitable officers and NCOs was by then already underway, veiled by a curtain of lies. As accompaniment to frequent “peace speeches,” Hitler personally orchestrated Germany's 1933-36 sequence of diplomatic coups and bilateral agreements that overturned the post-1919 European order and freed Germany step by step from the League of Nations, the “shackles of Versailles,” and the Locarno security treaty. The dictator exploited brilliantly the pusillanimity of the Western powers and the dialectical interrelationship between foreign and domestic policy. He repeatedly crowned foreign success with plebiscitary acclamation by the German people.²⁷ By the final plebiscite that followed the annexation of Austria in March 1938, the army was almost operationally employable and Hitler had taken personal control of the armed forces after purging his foreign ministry and high

command of doubters.

But the Czech crisis did not go according to plan; to Hitler's abiding resentment, Chamberlain's strategic innocence saved Germany from military misadventure in autumn 1938. The dictator raged publicly at "English governesses," and intended his March 1939 seizure of Prague as Germany's last major "peaceful" coup. The army was fast approaching the 102-division target it had reaffirmed in 1936. The air force had reequipped itself with aircraft in general superior to those of its potential enemies. The Western guarantees reinforced rather than deterred Hitler's inclination to destroy Poland before the autumn rains. Stalin's encouragement and prospective participation in the campaign, and the correct assumption that Germany's edge in deliverable combat power was a wasting asset did the rest. The dictator accepted that Britain and France might declare war – ineffectually: "I saw those pathetic worms, Chamberlain and Daladier [premier of France], at Munich; they will be too cowardly to attack – blockade is their limit."²⁸

The German armed forces duly struck Poland on September 1, on Hitler's order. Over the next 27 months the dictator neglected no opportunity to escalate both geographically and ideologically. The Polish campaign and occupation were by design a trial run for race-war against Jews and Slavs. Denmark and Norway fell in April 1940 to an unprecedented German sea-air assault. When the daring and expertise of the army and air force unexpectedly crushed France in May and June, the dictator swiftly ordered preparation for a lightning spring 1941 campaign to destroy Soviet Russia. Triumph over the French ancestral enemy had brought to culmination the loyalty and faith in the Führer of the German armed forces and people. Army and economic planners willingly collaborated in preparing a continent-wide campaign of racial-ideological extermination and enslavement.

Speed was essential, for National Socialist Germany's strategic freedom was steadily shrinking. Despite the shock of French collapse, Britain fought on. Soviet Russia accelerated its already massive armament programs and nibbled at the periphery of the Reich's conquests. German dependence upon Soviet deliveries of strategic materials was rapidly increasing. The United States had

embarked upon the unprecedented naval, air, and ground rearmament that by 1944-45 gave it the world's largest and most powerful armed forces. Hitler was well aware that a German-Soviet war might destroy both National Socialism and the German Reich. But contempt for risk

– “victory or downfall” – was the very core of German military culture. And racist ideology and the army's demonstrated mastery of war appeared to guarantee the swift annihilation of the eastern “Judaean-Bolshevik sub-humans.”

On June 22, 1941 the German army and air force attacked with awe-inspiring speed and violence, while Hitler's security troops inaugurated the massacres that grew within months into the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question” and destroyed over six million men, women, and children. Yet once the immense gamble failed in front of Moscow in November-December 1941, Hitler held only a single remaining escalatory card. Japan's suicidal strike at Pearl Harbor inspired him to declare war – needlessly – on the United States. National Socialist Germany was now doomed, but Hitler never wavered. If world domination was beyond reach, Germany would and must go down fighting.²⁹ The Führer's immense residual authority sufficed to ensure that outcome even as the enemies he had provoked crushed Germany from east, west, and above. The Reich's smoking ruins and the deaths of up to 10 million of his people amply confirmed Hitler's judgment that his personal contribution was irreplaceable.

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1 *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik*, Serie D (Baden-Baden, Göttingen, 1950-1970), vol. 7, document 193 note (author's translation; henceforth ADAP D/volume/document); for the identical documents in English, see *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D (London, 1950-66). Richard Breitman, "Hitler and Genghis Khan," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 25:3/3 (1990), pp. 337-351 offers further insights.

2 Ernst Moritz Arndt, "Des Deutschen Vaterland" (1813), stanza 7 – celebrated doggerel from the wars against Napoleon, which legions of schoolmasters subsequently impressed upon the mind of every German child.

3 Friedrich Meinecke (1913), quoted in MacGregor Knox, *To the Threshold of Power 1922/33: Origins and Dynamics of the Fascist and National Socialist Dictatorships*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 2007), p. 123.

4 See Ann Swidler, "Culture in Action," *American Sociological Review* 51:2 (1986), pp. 273-286, and Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY, 2005).

5 The extraordinary popularity – especially in Germany – of Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, 2012) has little to do with its interpretive cogency. Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, 2001), and Isabel V. Hull, *A Scrap of Paper: Breaking and Making International Law in the Great War* (Ithaca, NY, 2014), Ch. 1 ("What we have forgotten") offer far better guides to the war's immediate origins.

6 Kurt Hesse and Joachim von Stülpnagel (general staff operations chief), quoted in Knox, *Threshold*, pp. 290-291; on the second, see also Gil-li Vardi, "Joachim von Stülpnagel's Military Thought and Planning," *War in History* 17:2 (2010), pp. 193-216.

7 Knox, *Threshold*, pp. 353-360.

8 Underlying analysis and detail, *ibid.*, pp. 371-389, 396-98, 403-404.

9 Gerhard L. Weinberg, "The Defeat of Germany in 1918 and the European Balance of Power," *Central European History*, 2:3 (1969), pp. 248-260.

10 See especially John C. Cairns, "A Nation of Shopkeepers in Search of a Suitable France: 1919-40," *American Historical Review* 79:3 (1974), pp. 710-743, and G. Bruce Strang, "The Spirit of Ulysses? Ideology and British Appeasement in the 1930s," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 19:3 (2008), pp. 481-526.

11 For the far too influential work of a onetime Foreign Office official – father of British policy "realism" – see E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939* (London, 1939).

12 See Maurice Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy, 1933-1940* (Cambridge, 1975).

13 Christopher Thorne, *The Approach of War, 1938-39* (London, 1967) remains an excellent brief guide to events; and for unsurpassed command of detail and trenchant analysis, see Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Starting World War II* (Chicago, 1980).

14 ADAP D/1/31, pp. 48-49, 52.

15 Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938-39* (Princeton, 1984), pp. 217-263.

16 See especially Rolf Ahmann, "Soviet Foreign Policy and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939: an Enigma Reassessed," *Storia delle relazioni internazionali* 1989:5 and R.C. Raack, "Stalin's Plans for World War II," *Journal of Contemporary History* 26:2 (1991), pp. 215-227.

17 ADAP D/7/213, p. 191. For Stalin's concurrent toast to Heinrich Himmler as "the guarantor of order in Germany," Hans-Günter Seraphim, ed., *Das politische Tagebuch Alfred Rosenbergs aus den Jahren 1934/35 und 1939/40* (Göttingen, 1956), s. 82.

Germany, Adolf Hitler, and the Second World War

18 Ivo Banac, ed., *The Diaries of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933-1949* (New Haven, CT, 2003), 115 (September 7, 1939).

19 ADAP D/8/384, p. 348 (to his commanders, 24 November 1939).

20 Hermann Rauschning, quoted in Ludolf Herbst, *Hitlers Charisma. Die Erfindung eines deutschen Messias* (Frankfurt am Main, 2010), s. 28.

21 Quotation and background: Knox, *Threshold*, p. 331.

22 Quotations and analysis: *ibid.*, pp. 340-343, 346-348.

23 For Germany's purported entitlement to "Weltherrschaft" and Hitler's evident belief that this claim was effective propaganda, *ibid.*, 359-361.

24 Many did both: Knox, "1 October 1942: Adolf Hitler, Wehrmacht Officer Policy, and Social Revolution," *The Historical Journal* 43:3 (2000), pp. 801-25.

25 Weber quotations and commentary: Knox, *Threshold*, 300-301.

26 *Ibid.*, 339.

27 On that interrelationship, Knox, *Common Destiny* (Cambridge, 2000), Ch. 3.

28 To his commanders, August 22, 1939: ADAP D/7/193 note.

29 Berndt Wegner, "The Ideology of Self-Destruction: Hitler and the Choreography of Defeat," *German Historical Institute London Bulletin* 24:2 (2004), 18-33 (<http://www.ghil.ac.uk/publications/bulletin.html>).