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THE *WEHRMACHT* AND GERMAN REARMAMENT

by

Wilhelm Deist

Foreword by

A. J. Nicholls

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Contents

<i>Foreword</i> by A. J. Nicholls	vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>Introduction</i>	i
1 Reich Defence Minister Groener and the Problem of National Defence	4
2 Blomberg's Military Policy 1933/4	21
3 The Army Armament Programme of August 1936	36
4 The Growth of the <i>Luftwaffe</i>	54
5 The Armament Aims of the German Navy	70
6 The <i>Wehrmacht</i> at the Outbreak of War	86
7 Armaments within the Framework of German War Policy	102
<i>Notes</i>	113
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	129
<i>Index</i>	144

Foreword

For some years scholars in Germany have been conducting intensive research into their own military history between the two World Wars. It is important that the fruits of their research should be made available to English readers. Dr Deist is uniquely qualified to fulfil this task. As a distinguished member of the Institute for Military Historical Research at Freiburg-im-Breisgau he has immersed himself in the voluminous documentation available on this subject, and has made substantial contributions to German historical literature in the field. In 1978 he was a Visiting Leverhulme Fellow at St Antony's College, Oxford, where he delivered a most original and stimulating series of lectures. The present volume is based on those lectures, though it has been revised and expanded.

In discussions about the origins of the Second World War reference is always made to the level of rearmament achieved by the Germans between 1933 and 1939. The victories of the Nazi Armies in the first two years of the War would have been inconceivable without a very remarkable growth in Germany's military strength since the era of the Weimar Republic, when she had been so weak that even defensive operations against Poland could not be regarded with any sort of optimism. In 1919 the Germans had had to accept the humiliating restrictions of the Versailles Treaty, which held their army to a level of 100,000 men on long-term enlistment; abolished their military air force and placed such restrictions on their navy as to render it incapable of all but the most elementary defensive tasks. Despite some erosions of the Treaty during the 1920s, Germany was still a very weak military nation when Hitler took office in January 1933. Only six years were needed to transform her into a power capable of defeating France and Poland, chase the British army out of the European continent and inflict grievous losses on the Soviet Union.

Yet the Nazi rearmament programme still remains a matter of controversy. Historians have been divided over its extent and the purpose behind it. Figures are sometimes produced which seem to

show that in 1939 the Germans were not well equipped by comparison with their adversaries. Some historians have claimed that the German economy was not particularly orientated towards war and that investment was mainly for peaceful purposes.¹ Others stress the overriding priority given to armaments by Hitler and the economic distortions which arose from it.²

The first merit of Dr Deist's admirable book is that it finally disposes of any doubts about the massive extent of Nazi Germany's rearmament in the first six years of the Third Reich. Here we find set out the enormously rapid – not to say hectic – expansion of all three armed services between 1933 and 1939. As with many other aspects of Nazi economic and social policy, the ground had been prepared by the governments of Brüning, von Papen and von Schleicher in the depression period, but Hitler's appearance as Chancellor altered the tempo and the scope of their policies. More and more ambitious objectives were set for the Army. At the same time the new German *Luftwaffe* was being created and the Navy was preparing itself to attain parity with France before going on to a programme which would enable it to threaten British naval superiority.³ In the autumn of 1939 Germany mobilised an army of two and three quarter million men in 103 divisions. This included six armoured divisions and four motorised infantry divisions. The Air Force had over 4000 front line aircraft of modern design with 302 operational squadrons trained and ready for combat.⁴ The Navy was, of course, less advanced, and in no condition to wage war against Britain, but it had increased its personnel strength five-fold since 1933 and was equipped almost exclusively with modern warships. The naval budget of 1939 was twelve times that of 1932 and expenditure had risen steadily to this peak from 1933.⁵ Clearly a tremendous amount of investment and labour had been necessary to produce this result.

There were, however, aspects of the German rearmament programme which have still led historians to doubt its purpose, even if they accept the monumental nature of the achievement itself. Rearmament appeared to be in 'breadth' rather than 'depth' and the armed forces were certainly not prepared for a long war which would require major stockpiles of military materials. Since Hitler himself is known to have been opposed to a cautious, long-term approach to the problem of rearmament,⁶ it seemed plausible that the Nazis deliberately opted for a strategy of short, sharp conflicts – so-called '*Blitzkrieg*' operations – rather than a long war of attrition.

Here again, Hitler's originality and the crucial influences of his own personality were seen to be demonstrated. Yet here again the issue is complicated by conflicting evidence. Hitler never really spelled out his '*Blitzkrieg*' strategy, and the timing of his expansionist policy was clearly affected by pressures of an economic and administrative kind over which the Führer himself had no overriding control. As a result, a rather unreal conflict has arisen between those who see the warlike policies of the Third Reich as largely the outcome of Hitler's personal influence and those who prefer a more mechanistic explanation based on pressures arising from inconsistent economic policies and the rivalry of competing bureaucratic Empires.⁷

Dr Deist's account in this book makes us realise that there is really no need to adopt exclusive positions on this issue. The fact is that Hitler's persistent impatience for military strength, and his desire to use it to expand Germany's territory, was one factor in a dynamic process; inter-service rivalry and the ambitious plans of the military were others. At different times one or the other might be of greater significance, but taken together they added up to an explosive mixture which made Nazi aggression inevitable.

The German Army had, of course, never been willing to accept the Versailles Treaty, and it shared this view with most German political leaders in the Weimar Republic. Even in 1928 – a year of apparent peace and stability for Germany's new democracy – the Defence Ministry obtained cabinet approval of plans for a mobilisable army 16 divisions strong, as well as some stockpiling of war materials. This plan was so successful that in 1932 a second programme was adopted which envisaged creating an army of major proportions by 1938. The army's leaders were determined not to be restrained by any international agreement on disarmament. Initially, Defence Minister Blomberg and Foreign Minister Neurath were, if anything, more determined in their refusal to compromise with the Western Powers over disarmament than was Hitler, who was prepared to be flexible, if only for tactical purposes.⁸ However, right from the beginning of his period in office Hitler encouraged the Army to go ahead with plans for expansion, and this was very important in unleashing the pent-up energies of the military leaders. They fully shared the enthusiasm of their new political masters for the restoration of Germany's position as a great power. By December 1933 they were producing plans for a peacetime army of 300,000 with a mobilised strength of 63 divisions.

It is important to note that this particularly ambitious scheme was produced partly in response to a perceived threat from a potential rival to the Army in the shape of Röhm's brown-shirted para-military formation, the SA. The Army leaders wished to demonstrate their own zeal and give themselves more authority with which to repel Röhm, who seemed intent on extending his power into the military sphere. The Generals were only too willing to help Hitler destroy Röhm, and became his accomplice in the notorious blood purge of 30 June 1934, carried out by Himmler's SS with logistical support from the Army. Almost immediately afterwards – on Hindenburg's death – German soldiers took a personal oath of loyalty to Hitler.

The ambitious expansion programme upon which the Army had embarked would be impossible without flagrant breaches of the Versailles Treaty. Here we see in operation a dynamic process which gathered its own momentum as it went along. The Army leaders wanted to be able to free themselves from the restraints of Versailles to enable them to face hostile neighbours in the field of battle. But to gain this strength they had to take risks which raised the likelihood of war. Hence from December 1933 it was obvious that conscription would be necessary – a breach of the Treaty which could not be covered up. The month of March 1935 saw Hitler announce the creation of a military air force and the introduction of conscription. These were measures presaged by the rearmament programme already decided upon by the relevant authorities. In this respect Hitler's actions were the logical outcome of military policies. Similarly, the decision to remilitarise the Rhineland in March 1936 was entirely consistent with Army planning, even if the actual *coup* itself was the work of Hitler and created nervousness in the High Command. It had become clear that in the event of war the French could not be held back in the Rhineland long enough to enable the Army to secure the Rhine, and that would leave the Ruhr – the hub of the German armaments industry – vulnerable to attack. The remilitarisation of the Rhineland was, therefore, indispensable if the Generals' plans for a mobilised army of 63 divisions were to be implemented.⁹

Once into the Rhineland, however, new opportunities were opened up for even more grandiose military expansion. Schemes were now put in train for a mobilised army of over $3\frac{1}{2}$ million men by 1940 – a far larger force than Germany put into the field in 1914.

The cost of maintaining up-to-date equipment for such an army would be enormous,¹⁰ and raised the obvious likelihood that it would have to be used in combat soon after it had been brought up to the levels envisaged in the plan. However important Hitler's prompting was in accelerating the armaments programme, therefore, it is clear that the programme itself helped create a situation in which war was made probable, and the optimum date for that war would be the turn of the year 1939/40.¹¹

This also fitted in with Hitler's requirements for the German economy as set out in the Nazi Four Year Plan.¹² Where historians have sometimes been misled is in the assumption that an armaments programme and an economic policy which gave overriding priority to rearmament, was necessarily a co-ordinated, rationally organised economic system. This was very far from being the case. As Dr Deist points out, the military armaments programmes were unco-ordinated so far as the three armed services were concerned and quite unrelated to any realistic assessment of what burdens the German economy could sustain over an extended period. This itself was a major factor in producing – willy nilly – the so-called '*Blitzkrieg*' strategy. Armament in depth could not be achieved without long-term planning, effective economic co-ordination and clearly defined military priorities. Political expediency and departmental selfishness precluded such an ideal arrangement. Each service pressed ahead to create the largest possible front-line force in the shortest possible time. The Army and the Air Force attained this objective by September 1939. Even then, they were only able to do so as the result of Hitler's bloodless conquests in Austria and Czechoslovakia. Dr Deist's account illustrates once again the crucial importance of the Munich settlement for Hitler's success in the early years of the war; just as Munich transformed Germany's diplomatic position and quelled nascent resistance at home, so in the armaments field it gave the Reich vital foreign exchange credits and industrial capacity, without which the *Wehrmacht* could not have been effectively equipped a year later.

Much as Dr Deist's book helps us to understand the mechanics of the Nazi war machine, it has a wider significance. Historians are realising now that national boundaries are inadequate as a framework for the understanding of modern industrial society. The role of military requirements in shaping economic policies created problems throughout the industrially developed world. They were especially acute in the 1930s and 1940s. Military and social

historians in many countries are now beginning to tackle these questions and Dr Deist's book is a most valuable contribution to a discussion, the relevance of which transcends the frontiers of German – or even European – contemporary history.

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The Wehrmacht and German Rearmament is based on research into the history of the Second World War from a German perspective, which was taken up some years ago by the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt in Freiburg. The first volume to result from this research is concerned with the causes and preconditions of German war policy and was written by my colleagues Manfred Messerschmidt, Hans-Erich Volkmann, Wolfram Wette and myself. The present volume owes a great deal to the intensive discussions we conducted on the historical problems of the period leading up to the Second World War. But for the assistance of my colleagues I could not have made this contribution to the study of German rearmament. My thanks are also due to the Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv and the Institut für Zeitgeschichte for placing the relevant documents at my disposal.

The language barrier always hinders the presentation and publicising of the results of research. I am, therefore, especially indebted to Dr Johanna Geyer-Kordesch of St Antony's College, who, alongside her own time-consuming studies, was able to give me considerable help with the linguistic presentation of the seminar

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