

ABSTRACT

BUNN, CATHERINE BREKKE LEWIS. "The Form Changes, the Spirit Remains the Same": German Officer Training, 1919-1938. (Under the direction of Dr. Noah Strote).

As the German Army lay in ruins in the aftermath of World War I, German generals recognized the army's desperate need for reinvention. This thesis traces the key changes that occurred in the structure and training of the German Army to argue that self-preservation was a defining theme in how the German Army restructured itself, trained its officers, and conceived of warfare. Tracing major themes of continuity and discontinuity in training, structure, tactics, and doctrine from 1919 to 1938, this thesis examines the influence of political ideology, technological advancements in warfare, doctrinal advancements in infantry policy, and the shifts in education in German war schools in this period.

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“The Form Changes, the Spirit Remains the Same”:
German Officer Training, 1919-1938

by
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents; though they have given me the world, I count their love of history as one of their greatest gifts.

BIOGRAPHY

Catherine Bunn was born in Raleigh, North Carolina. She completed undergraduate degrees in English literature and history at North Carolina State University in 2017, and her Master's degree in European history at NC State in 2019. Her research interests include 20th Century American and German military history, officer training, warrior mentalities, paramilitary organizations, war crimes, and weapons technologies. She plans to pursue a career in the federal service.

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INTRODUCTION

General Hans von Seeckt declared in his memoir *Thoughts of a Soldier* that “the higher the soldier rises on the military ladder, the heavier duty becomes, not in itself—for it changes only the form, and no one does more than his duty—but because his own duty and honor for his subordinates is added.”¹ Published in 1929, Seeckt’s memoirs were the culmination of a distinguished career marked by wartime losses and peacetime changes in the structure of the German Army. The Germany of Seeckt’s lifetime was a political battleground fraught with shifting tensions, loyalties, and casualties; his sense of responsibility for his subordinates and the significance of his position weighed heavily. As a veteran of the Great War and member of the German Army’s post-war clandestine general staff, Seeckt recognized the need for profound changes in the way Germans conceived of and waged war. As commander in chief of the army from 1920 to 1926, he would implement an abundance of doctrinal, strategic, and educational changes that would shape the German military for decades.

After Germany signed the armistice that ended the Great War in November of 1918, the Imperial German Army lay in ruins, defeated and humiliated on the world stage. In need of a rebirth rooted in new strategies and tactics that could prevent the stalemates of trench warfare, the German military spent much of the post-war years reevaluating their battlefield strategies and doctrines. Prior to the Great War, officer training was less invested in political components and focused on tactics that could not withstand modern military technologies such as tanks, chemical warfare, and machine guns. The stalemates of trench warfare had taught German generals that

¹ Hans von Seeckt. *Gedanken eines Soldaten*. (Berlin: Verlag für Kulturpolitik Berlin, 1929), 19.

positional warfare was no longer an effective tactic in war. The German Army was in need of profound doctrinal changes if it was ever to dominate the world stage again.

Though doctrinal changes were necessary for reinventing the defeated German Army, other aspects of training remained the same. Educational requirements for officers entering officers' schools remained somewhat constant throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries, though educational requirements became slightly stricter in 1921. The emphasis strong physical conditioning, mental toughness, and leadership skills remained constant in the interwar period as well. However, after the Great War, the German Army realized their tactical doctrines had directly contributed to their failures and losses on the battlefield. Generals like Seeckt believed these tactics were outdated and needed to be revised, but the Germans were also constrained by the military limitations placed on them by the Treaty of Versailles; navigating a post-Versailles military in desperate need of tactical reform comprised the German Army's largest post-war problem. Key changes that made the rebirth of the German Army possible were the innovations in the training of German officers, including both changes in tactical doctrine and a change in how political ideology played a factor in officer training. Hans von Seeckt helped shape the emerging Reichswehr through changes in doctrine and officer training.

The influence of Prussian and Imperial military traditions played an important role in the shaping of German military training in both the Weimar and early Nazi eras. Prussian success in wars prior to World War I helped convince later German military leaders that the foundations in training and soldier mentality built by Frederick the Great, Otto von Bismarck, and other Prussian leaders were essential to German military triumph. The training, discipline, and professionalism of the Prussian officer corps was a major part of the Prussian military tradition, and Weimar and Nazi military leaders sought to incorporate these themes into new training

doctrines informed by the loss in World War I. Prussian military traditions were also a manifestation of Prussian virtues that championed militarism, strict ethical codes, and aristocratic values. In the 1920s and 30s, officers' schools placed greater emphasis on studying the "German greats" in warfare as both sources of nationalistic pride and as evidence of German military superiority. The intersection of the continuity in Prussian soldierly mentalities and discontinuity in the incorporation of new modernizing infantry policies was one of the defining features of military training in the interwar period.

In the aftermath of World War I, individual federal war ministries in Bavaria and Wurttemberg were dissolved and military power became centered solely at the *Reichswehrministerium* in Berlin; General Walther Reinhardt's position as Prussian War Minister was also dissolved and he became the first commander in chief of the Reichswehr. Reinhardt, like Seeckt and the majority of Reichsheer leaders, was a member of the Prussian elite and officer corps, and he upheld these traditions of soldierly excellence during his short tenure; these traditions of Prussian and German military excellence and triumph informed the Imperial German Army and survived its defeat to also inform the early Reichsheer. During his time as commander in chief, Reinhardt carried forward many of the aspects of Prussian military training; when Seeckt took over his command in the wake of the failed Kapp Putsch in 1920, he also carried forward many aspects of Prussian-style militarism. These continuities were necessary in preserving the skeletal structure of the Imperial Army that survived the Great War, and in facilitating the changes that would occur during Seeckt's tenure as commander.

The purpose of this thesis is to illuminate the ways in which officer training changed in the interwar years between the Weimar Republic and early Nazi period and argues that the key changes that occurred were all due to either post-war anxiety over failed strategies or the shifting

political environment that surrounded the German army. The thousands of volumes written on the Wehrmacht spend countless pages and millions of words highlighting the role the Wehrmacht played in the Holocaust and its role as an agent of National Socialism. However, the interwar years serve as a critical point of inquiry in understanding how the army was able to reevaluate itself in the aftermath of World War I and emerge so quickly after 1933 as a technologically advanced and highly trained fighting force. Further examination of the roles played by Walther Reinhardt, Hans von Seeckt, Kurt von Schleicher, and Werner von Blomberg provides a nuanced understanding of the pivotal ways in which their actions shaped officer training in the interwar years.

The study is divided into three chapters. The first deals with the German army under Generals Walther Reinhardt and Hans von Seeckt, both of whom propelled the early changes in the army's structure and doctrine. Seeckt, while a member of the army's clandestine general staff—the *Truppenamt*—under Reinhardt's tenure, created committees to examine every facet of military strategy and doctrine, weaponry, and technology and report back on ways in which these things could be improved through officer training. When Seeckt took over Reinhardt's position as commander in chief in 1920, he began publishing training manuals and overseeing the implementation of new infantry policies he believed would modernize the German army and provide a tactical advantage on the battlefield; this chapter explores these policies and the ways in which they influenced officer training in the 1920s. The second chapter focuses on the transitional phase from Seeckt to Werner von Fritsch and the conception of a new training course that incorporated National Socialist elements. Though several other commanders in chief served between Seeckt and Fritsch, it was under Fritsch's direction that the army came under the heel of the Nazi Party. During Fritsch's tenure, the army also began to draft and implement officer

training that incorporated Nazi ideology and worldviews; this training was meant to unify the ideals and political opinions of German officers under the banner of Nazism. Finally, the last chapter deals with officer training under the Nazi government, providing an in-depth case study of what officers experienced while in school during the 1930s, and further examines the threads of continuity and discontinuity that characterized the German Army's experiences in the interwar period.

Little attention has been paid to the shifts in officer training in the interwar period, and thus many questions remain unanswered. How and why did military training and the political education of the German Army change from the late Imperial Army to the Reichsheer to the early days of the Wehrmacht? In what ways were these changes the result of the political instability of the time? What part did cultural influences play in the education of German officers? In what ways did key commanders such as Hans von Seeckt and Werner von Blomberg impact the Reichswehr and Wehrmacht's entanglement in politics? Shedding light on these questions can offer a better understanding both of the Reichswehr and Wehrmacht's places in German politics and society.²

The result of both changes in tactical teachings and the instability of German politics from 1918 to 1938, the shift in the training of officers and its repercussions for the German Army deserves further attention from scholars. The officers and non-commissioned officers leading German troops in World War II were trained both in military and political matters to an extent not previously seen in the German or Prussian militaries. The militaristic nature of Nazism, and

² The term Reichswehr denotes the entirety of the German military from 1919 to 1935, which was comprised of the army—Reichsheer—and the navy—Reichsmarine. Throughout the study, both terms are used. When referring only to the army, I use Reichsheer; when referring to situations or policies that applied to both branches, I used Reichswehr in an attempt to accurately denote the scope of each policy.

its reliance on racist and warmongering propaganda, required military officers to embrace its political ideology and goals to an unprecedented extent.

Historiography

Histories of the Reichswehr often fall under the shadow of the monumental body of work on its successor, the Wehrmacht. However, many fail to fully acknowledge that the early officer corps of the Wehrmacht consisted primarily of officers trained in the 1920s and 1930s under Reichsheer and early Wehrmacht command. The training programs, doctrinal changes, and organizational structures of the Reichsheer were key foundations for the Wehrmacht's later successes and failures. The body of historical work focusing on the Reichswehr is limited in size, but succinctly deals with many of the major social, military, and political questions facing the Weimar Republic. F.L. Carsten's *The Reichswehr and Politics, 1918-1933* describes the Reichswehr's complex and often nebulous relationship with the Weimar government.³ Carsten emphasizes the government's failure to unite Germany in the immediate post-World War I years and the coups and putsches that resulted from this destabilization. He also described the political leanings of Reichswehr leaders and their influence on officer leadership, as well as explained the relationship between Reichswehr High Command and the Weimar government to further the argument that the Reichswehr was deeply entangled in politics during its brief lifetime.

S.J. Lewis, in his 1985 work *Forgotten Legions: German Army Infantry Policy, 1918-1940*, discussed the Reichswehr's technological improvements from the end of World War I to the early campaigns of World War II. As a push back against the popularity of studying panzer divisions due to the newness of the technology, Lewis rightfully placed primary importance on

³ F. L. Carsten. *The Reichswehr and Politics, 1918-1933*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

infantry policy, noting that “from 1900 to 1945 the majority of German Army field divisions consisted primarily of infantry.”⁴ Lewis’ primary interest within the infantry was its daily functions and its technological advancements.⁵ The characterization of the Reichsheer in the early 1920s as a military in a deep state of transition was one of Lewis’ strongest arguments, and he asserts that this transition was one that ultimately led to the Reichsheer’s complete recreation as a more technologically modern army. The most important—and indeed the most contentious—aspect of Lewis’ contribution to the field was his dismissal of Blitzkrieg as the gift the early Reichsheer gave the Wehrmacht when war once again broke out in 1939. Lewis argued that the idea of a “Blitzkrieg Era” was a mischaracterization of German infantry tactics, the word itself the invention of an American journalist; instead, he argued, the Reichsheer practiced only two forms of warfare: the war of movement (*Bewegungskrieg*) and positional warfare (*Stellungskrieg*). What was later classified as Blitzkrieg—the overwhelming use of tanks, motorized infantry, and relentless air support—were, according to Lewis, extensions of Seeckt’s conception of a war of movement and the culmination of nineteen years of new infantry tactics, not an altogether new tactic of its own.⁶ Though Lewis’ successors maintain that the Reichsheer’s changes were the foundations of tactics that would later come to be known as Blitzkrieg, Lewis dismissed this, arguing instead that the tactics of the early campaigns should be understood as further extensions of Seeckt’s war of movement doctrine.

James S. Corum’s *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* focused on Seeckt’s changes in doctrine, and his large scale reform of the army based on his belief that mobility would be the key to winning future wars and ensuring Germany’s ability to

⁴ S.J. Lewis. *Forgotten Legions: German Army Infantry Policy, 1918-1941*. (New York: Praeger, 1985), xiii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

defend itself from foreign aggression. Corum argued that the Reichsheer's most formative years were its years under Seeckt, in which "the most important decisions on tactical doctrine, military organization, and training were made."⁷ By the time Seeckt resigned from his position in 1926, the Reichsheer had reached its peak in terms of its extensive changes, and had standardized itself to such a degree that all commanders in chief after Seeckt maintained the status quo until Hitler took control of the army in 1935. Corum argued that "the tactics of the 1939 and 1940 campaigns were, for the most part, developed in the early 1920s."⁸ Many of the officers who led the German Army into Poland and France in 1939 and 1940, respectively, were trained under Seeckt or his immediate successors, giving some measure of credence to Corum's argument.

Robert Citino, a historian of the Wehrmacht, offered a comprehensive and fresh perspective on training during the interwar period with *The Path to Blitzkrieg: Doctrine and Training in the German Army, 1920-1939*. This slim volume detailed the changes in training for officers and enlisted men, emphasizing Seeckt's ideas concerning the mobility of infantry and artillery on the battlefield and his use of field maneuvers and wargames to train officers and enlisted men how to remain mobile during combat. Citino also focused on the development of tanks and tank warfare, framing later panzer success in the Wehrmacht as possible only through its clandestine development under the Reichswehr and the German desire for state of the art military technology. In this way, Citino engaged with previous debates put forth by Lewis that argued that emphasis on panzer success drew much deserved attention away from the ways in which the infantry and its place on the battlefield was revolutionized under Seeckt.

⁷ James S. Corum. *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), xii.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xii.

In *The Path to Blitzkrieg*, Citino also called for a historical reevaluation of Hans von Seeckt himself. He acknowledged that “the principal charge against” Seeckt over the last few decades has been his refusal “to accept the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic” and his disdain for the republican system.⁹ While these political complaints against Seeckt may be valid, Citino argued, they take focus away from Seeckt’s successful fulfilment of the “herculean task of restoring the German army after its collapse in 1918.”¹⁰ An incredibly detailed account of Seeckt’s changes from the top down followed this assertion, one focused on infantry and artillery doctrines meant to prevent the stalemates of positional warfare. Arguing that Seeckt’s desire for what he calls a “war of movement” was the most significant change for the Reichsheer’s doctrinal changes in the 1920s, Citino used Seeckt’s training manuals and wargames reports as evidence of the widespread effort to train officers and soldiers to remain highly mobile during battle.

In the midst of the German surrender in May of 1945, the Wehrmacht’s propaganda newspaper, the *Wehrmachtbericht*, released an issue that shaped Wehrmacht historiography for decades. It presented what became the myth of the “clean” Wehrmacht, one unencumbered by criminal responsibility for their actions during the war. As this myth pervaded scholarship for many years, many studies and monographs of the Wehrmacht perpetuated this myth. Indeed, German historian Wolfram Wette argued in *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality* that the Wehrmacht emerged with no “unified picture” of itself at the conclusion of the war, and it was the *Wehrmachtbericht*’s report, issued at the behest of Hitler’s successor Karl Dönitz, that began to form a picture of how the Wehrmacht would be remembered after its surrender.¹¹ How

⁹ Robert Citino. *The Path to Blitzkrieg: Doctrine and Training in the German Army, 1920-39*. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), 7.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Wolfram Wette. *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

political training in war schools affected this myth and its perpetuation has been addressed less frequently by historians, as many works focus instead on the implementation of political ideology on the battlefield and its repercussions in terms of casualties, loss of territory, and defeat in key battles, particularly on the Eastern Front. David Stahel's monographs on key battles in the East often include the influence of political ideology as a factor in large scale military losses.¹²

Sir John Wheeler-Bennett was one of the first historians to challenge the notion that the Wehrmacht was free from National Socialist influence with his 1953 work *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918-1945*. Wheeler-Bennett outlined the complexities of the army's relationship first to the plethora of short-lived Weimar governments and then to the Nazi Party as it rose through the political ranks to emerge as a totalitarian regime.¹³ The primary argument in this massive work centered on dispelling myths surrounding the political purity of the army; Wheeler-Bennett focused on the ways in which military leaders both colluded with the Nazi Party and later the Nazi government, as well as the ways in which the army was helpless to fend off the growing control of the Nazi regime. Rearmament and disregard for the Treaty of Versailles was important to military leaders who felt the constraints of the treaty were unfair and put Germany in a vulnerable position regarding national security; Hitler's assurances of rearmament certainly held allure for many German military officials in the early 1930s, as Wheeler-Bennett argues.

¹² See, David Stahel. *Kiev 1941: Hitler's Battle for Supremacy in the East*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). David Stahel. *Operation Typhoon: Hitler's March on Moscow, October 1941*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). David Stahel. *Battle for Moscow*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹³ Sir John Wheeler-Bennett. *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918-1945*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1953).

In the 1920s, many German military officials were divided over foreign policy regarding how Germany was perceived by foreign countries, and questions over restitution and blame for the Great War. As Wheeler-Bennett points out throughout *The Nemesis of Power*, Hitler's appointment as chancellor in 1933 alleviated many fears in the officer corps. Hitler's staunch anti-disarmament positions assuaged officers' fears that the German Army would never regain its military strength. Through this lens, Wheeler-Bennett lays the foundations of the political-military entanglement of the 1920s and 1930s.

Though focused mainly in the crisis of 1938, Harold C. Deutsch's *Hitler and His Generals* begins by tracing Hitler's relationship with the army from his appointment in 1933 to roughly 1936—what Deutsch calls the military's "honeymoon" phase with the newly appointed chancellor.¹⁴ Though Deutsch forgoes speculation of the army's contribution to Hitler's rise to power as questions still unanswered by historical intervention, he argues that the failures of the Weimar Republic to adequately obtain the sympathies and support of the Reichsheer contributed to the Republic's eventual collapse. Deutsch's work follows the career of Werner von Blomberg and his efforts to link the army with Hitler. One such example of Blomberg's efforts provided by Deutsch is the oath of loyalty, which he changed on August 2, 1934 to say:

I swear by God this sacred oath that I will render unconditional obedience to the Führer of the German Reich and people, Adolf Hitler, the commander in chief of the Wehrmacht, and, as a brave soldier, will be prepared at all times to stake my life for this oath.¹⁵

¹⁴ Harold C. Deutsch. *Hitler and His Generals: The Hidden Crisis, January-June 1938*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974).

¹⁵ Hermann Foertsch. *Schuld und Verhängnis: die Fritsch-Krise im Frühjahr 1938 als Wendepunkt in der Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Zeit*. (Berlin: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1951), 64.

As Deutsch argued, the “new oath violated law and precedent both by its ultra-personalized form and by being administered not only to newly enlisted soldiers but to the entire army.”¹⁶ The unprompted oath and its emphasis on Hitler was a key moment in military-political relations because it set the stage for the army’s complacency in the expansionist and genocidal plans of Hitler and the Nazi Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*, or NSDAP). Rolf-Dieter Müller, a German military historian, published *Hitler’s Wehrmacht, 1935-1945* in 2016. As his title suggests, Müller’s arguments centered on Hitler’s control of the Wehrmacht as an extension of his own power, and of Hitler’s use of the Wehrmacht as an agent of his own will and agenda. In this way, Müller presents his work as a scholarly reevaluation of Wehrmacht history after the 1995 exhibit by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research that presented photographic evidence of Wehrmacht complicity in war crimes in Eastern Europe. The debate sparked public controversy as it made its rounds through Germany, and Müller argued that a monographic reevaluation of the Wehrmacht as a military and Nazi organization was necessary.¹⁷

The seminal German language work on the Wehrmacht’s relationship to politics and its impact on officer training, Manfred Messerschmidt’s *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat: Zeit der Indoktrination*, was published in 1969.¹⁸ Messerschmidt paints a broad picture of how the Wehrmacht adapted to a Nazi worldview as a means of survival. Messerschmidt’s main goal in elucidating further detail on the civil-military relations of the early 20th century is effective in explaining the complex network of people, organizations, and ideologies that worked together to create the complicated position of the army in the 1930s. To a lesser extent, Messerschmidt also

¹⁶ Harold C. Deutsch. *Hitler and His Generals*, 20.

¹⁷ Rolf-Dieter Müller. *Hitler’s Wehrmacht, 1935-1945*. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2016).

¹⁸ Manfred Messerschmidt. *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat: Zeit der Indoktrination*. (Hamburg: R.v. Decker’s Verlag, 1969).

covers the influence of National Socialism into the army and how it affected training and the conception of warfare in the 1940s.

Klaus-Jürgen Müller's *The army, politics and society in Germany, 1933-45* details the *Truppenamt's* rise in 1933.¹⁹ Müller argues that in 1933, "the Reichswehr had a unique position and carried special weight" in the entente between "elements of the traditional elite and the leadership of the Hitler movement."²⁰ The foundation of Müller's work are three theses he proposed: that the military elite responded "to the secular challenge of war, defeat and the downfall of the monarchy by determinedly attempting to hold on to the basic elements of its historical past," that the Reichswehr had "a unique position" within the entente created by Hitler's government, and, finally, that "there were at the time no differences of opinion within the military leadership about the basic form the coalition with Hitler should take."²¹ These three theses serve to advance Müller's argument that the failures of military leadership "in the face of the challenge from Hitler can be blamed on the narrowly professional outlook which developed in the Wilhelmine Reich and reached its zenith in the Seeckt era of the Weimar Republic."²²

Klaus-Jürgen Müller's conclusions are often at odds with those of Jörg Muth's in *Command Culture*, a comparative analysis of the German and American officer corps before and during World War II. Muth examined the ideological training within both German and American officers' schools and argued that German officers enjoyed much more autonomy than generally accepted, yet it was this freedom of choice that was inherently problematic, as many officers' shared culpability precisely because their own ideological and war aims lined up neatly with

¹⁹ Klaus Jürgen Müller. *The army, politics and society in Germany, 1933-45: Studies in the army's relation to Nazism*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23-31.

²² *Ibid.*, 17.

Hitler's.²³ As Muth noted, “faith in the Nazi regime was to rank higher than common sense. The infusion of highly ideologically charged content into rather technocratic minded cultural content became one of the reasons for the downfall of the German officer corps.”²⁴ Muth concluded that the ideological zeal of Nazism and its twist into the cultural instruction officers received during their educations contributed to the downfall of the officer corps, and, as a result, contributed in part to the eventual loss of the war.

In *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*, Aristotle Kallis discusses the role political propaganda played in how the army understood the war and its causes. As will be discussed later, the Wehrmacht's newspaper provided countless opportunities for high ranking Nazi officials to control the information reaching the troops and the home front. As Kallis argues, this played an important role in how enlisted soldiers conceptualized the war and contributed to how it was fought on an ideological basis.²⁵

This thesis will argue that post-war anxiety over failed strategies or the shifting political environment as well as a desire to preserve the army by cooperating with governments in power define the key motivations for how the army interacted with the Weimar and early Nazi governments and how it navigated restructuring itself and implementing massive doctrinal changes in its training programs.

²³ Jörg Muth. *Command Culture: Officer Education in the U.S. Army and the German Armed Forces, 1901-1940, and the Consequences for World War II*. (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2011).

²⁴ Ibid, 202-203.

²⁵ Aristotle A. Kallis. *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

CHAPTER ONE

“The form changes, the spirit remains the same,”²⁶

The Reichsheer under Walther Reinhardt and Hans von Seeckt, 1919-1926

A well-known British military aphorism states, “He who has not fought the Germans, does not know war.” The uniqueness of the German military establishment from its modernization under Frederick the Great that doubled the size of Prussia to its technological advancements in World War I centers on its scientific and strict methodological approaches to warfare and its devotion to professional elitism in its officer corps. While every military studies and learns from the successes and failures of its allies and enemies, the German military in the mid-20th century offers a particularly distinctive case study in how an army uses defeat to reevaluate its strategic and tactical doctrines and its methods of officer training. Such a reevaluation occurred in 1920; the German Army’s surprise defeat in the Great War compelled it to almost completely reinvent itself and its doctrines and reevaluate its officer training protocols and standards in the 1920s.

Before the German Army could recreate itself, its predecessor, the Imperial Army, had to be defeated. Germany’s defeat became inevitable in the fall of 1918 after withdrawal to the Hindenburg defensive line proved ineffective in salvaging the rapidly declining military situation; the resultant defeat was a shock for the army that only a few months earlier won the war on the eastern front. How had the German military, arguably the best in Europe, been

²⁶ Hans von Seeckt, as quoted in Oberst Christian O.E. Millotat. “The Prussian German General Staff System and its Impact on the General and Admiral Staff Officers of the Federal Armed Forces of Today.” *U.S. Army War College Publications*, 1991, 59.

defeated? How had the Kaiser's Army become a casualty of the war? With revolution on the home front and the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II creating a high-pressure political situation, the Imperial Army had died alongside its soldiers in the mud-soaked trenches along France's eastern border, a victim of its own failed strategies, dwindling resources, and the intensifying weariness of its soldiers. The question of why, and how to prevent another such defeat, would occupy the minds of German military leaders for the next twenty-seven years.²⁷ The war officially ended on November 11, 1918 with the signing of the armistice, but the repercussions of defeat would shape how the German military recreated itself in the following years.

In the aftermath of the armistice, the November Revolution further destabilized the nation as Germany's constitutional monarchy was replaced with a democratic parliamentary republic. The transitional government put in place upon Wilhelm II's abdication, led by Friedrich Ebert of the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, or SPD), allied itself with General Wilhelm Gröner as part of Ebert's plans to restore order within Germany. In the midst of inflation, contentious relationships with neighbors and the Great War's victorious Entente Powers, as well as problems caused by political extremism on the part of paramilitary groups, restoring order and peace in the new republic occupied much of Ebert's time and energies. To that end, Ebert created a pact with Gröner in November 1918; Gröner, then Quartermaster of the Army, promised Ebert full loyalty in exchange for retention of the army's "state within a state" position, as well as an assurance that the Weimar government would put down any leftist uprisings that threatened the military's authority. This pact allowed the military a high level of self-governance and freedom to redesign itself without excessive governmental oversight.

²⁷ F.L. Carsten. *The Reichswehr and Politics, 1918-1933*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

With the new pact in place, Gröner held up his end of the deal by using the military to suppress several bloody leftist uprisings throughout Germany while attempting to integrate the aristocratic officer corps into the new republic—a largely futile task, as the right-leaning, pro-monarchy officer corps generally did not recognize the legitimacy of the fledgling republic. The importance of Gröner in the early post-war years centered on his pact with Ebert and its lasting impacts: the German military, though reduced in size and capabilities, was an independent entity capable of implementing profound structural and doctrinal changes with little to no governmental intervention. Within this freedom, the German Army, now called the Reichsheer, would undergo a transformation that would engage in themes of transition and progress as technological modernization altered the way Germany conceived of and waged war. The radicalism of this transformation is debatable, as surviving structures allowed the army to retain much of its pre-war traditions; the threads of continuity within the Reichsheer are thus crucial in understanding the historical significance of the discontinuities. This chapter will analyze these themes of transition and progress as they were implemented in doctrinal changes and officer training during the period of Seeckt's tenure from 1920 to 1926 and further the argument that Seeckt's conceptions of warfare and infantry tactics were critical in how the German Army was restructured during this period.

Seeckt's conceptions of modern warfare, particularly his conceptions of infantry policy, formed the foundations of the German army's post-war transitional period. This transitional period can be divided into three phases: first, the post-Versailles phase under Walther Reinhardt from the implementation of Versailles in 1919 to the Kapp Putsch and Seeckt's appointment in 1920; second, the early Seeckt phase from 1921 to the political tensions and crises in 1923; and finally, the late Seeckt phase from 1924 to his resignation in 1926. These temporal delineations

serve to highlight key changes in the German military establishment that engage with the shifting focus of the German military in the post-war period and emphasize the ways in which discontinuities were developed in these phases.

Phase One: Post-Versailles and Walther Reinhardt, 1919-1920

The first transitional period began with the implementation of the Treaty of Versailles. A significant point of contention for many Germans, the treaty ended the Great War, further destabilized the German economy by requiring reparations, and crippled the military by restricting the size and power of the small standing army it allowed for national defense. As victors, the Entente Powers prohibited Germany's participation in the arms trade, prohibited the manufacture of armored cars and tanks, military aircraft, and chemical weapons, and limited the types of weapons it could manufacture.²⁸ The army itself was limited to 100,000 men, of which only 4,000 could serve as officers; the general staff was eliminated as well, though Seeckt circumvented this limitation by creating in 1920 the *Truppenamt*, the German General Staff's cover organization until its reinstatement. Overseeing the army at this point was General Walther Reinhardt, who served as the final Prussian Minister of War prior to becoming the first Commander in Chief of the Reichsheer.²⁹ Though he opposed Germany signing the Treaty of Versailles, he was tasked in the summer of 1919 with reducing the army's size to fit the 100,000 maximum allowed under the treaty.

²⁸ Treaty of Versailles, Articles 165, 170-172, 198.

²⁹ William Mulligan's monograph on Reinhardt is the most comprehensive work on Reinhardt and portrays him as a key figure in the early Reichsheer years. As he is less well known than his rival, Seeckt, Mulligan stresses Reinhardt's importance in political-military relations during his brief tenure. William Mulligan. *The Creation of the Modern German Army: General Walther Reinhardt and the Weimar Republic, 1914-1930*. (New York: Berghahn Book, 2004).

Reinhardt's tenure oversaw the first massive restructuring of the military's administration and command structures in the summer of 1919. A year prior, the SPD-led government decided against dissolving the military so that it could rely on the army to suppress the far left. Instead of dissolution, the army would be restructured to fit within the constraints of Versailles. From 1919 to 1921, the Reichstag—with a majority coalition of Social Democrats, Catholics, and liberals—passed several laws to establish the structural reorganization of the army.³⁰ These laws first established the German Army as a democratic organization, rather than an authoritarian one. In theory, the army would no longer be an agent of the Kaiser's will, but rather an organization meant to serve the will of its people and government; and yet, while the ideological and political soul of the Reichsheer can be seen as shifting in the early interwar years, the basic skeletal structures of the army's units remained very much the same. Its underlying structure, particularly its regimental traditions, were carried forward into the Reichsheer; these included the organizational construction of combat units, divisions, regiments, and corps, as well as a similar ranking system and similar uniform insignia. Though Versailles abolished the general staff, the *Truppenamt*, as a clandestine general staff, allowed Germany to rewrite and implement new strategic doctrines and maintain a familiar hierarchy of order and chain of command during the post-Versailles transitional period.³¹ Through Seeckt and the cooperation of those within the *Truppenamt*, the development of new strategies born out of the defeats of the Great War made their way into classrooms in officers' schools.

The skeletal structure remaining constant from the Imperial Army to the Reichsheer allowed generals in the interwar period to focus on areas of transition and discontinuity on a

³⁰ James S. Corum. *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, 35.

³¹ The use of the term "strategy" in the context of this thesis refers to the skillful deployment of military forces on a battlefield in order to efficiently reach an advantageous conclusion.

strategic level by reevaluating doctrine and identifying areas in which improvement and modernization were necessary. Seeckt, as a member of the *Truppenamt* under Reinhardt, spearheaded this effort by establishing several committees that were tasked with evaluating everything from weaponry and equipment to tactics and doctrine.³² The committees evaluated every aspect of each topic and reported back on the deficiencies and the ways in which they believed improvement could be made. Seeckt absorbed this information and would later incorporate it into the manuals he published in the early 1920s that outlined his plan for a “war of movement” that would prevent positional warfare from becoming the status quo, as it had become in the trenches during World War I.

Reinhardt’s approaches to military policy in 1919 and early 1920 were crippled by the Treaty of Versailles. Viewing the treating as undermining his ability to rebuild and restore his beloved Fatherland, Reinhardt focused on the formation of the Reichswehr Ministry, the *Reichswehrministerium*, in Berlin.³³ The goal was to centralize the Reichswehr’s command in Berlin so that it could work closely with the Minister of War and maintain close civil-military relations. The Reichswehr Ministry served as a distinct discontinuity under Reinhardt; prior to its formation, individual war ministries under the Imperial Army were located in Wurttemberg and Bavaria. The centralization of the Reichswehr’s ministry under the Weimar Republic can be seen as an effort to maintain constant contact with the government. Given the instability of the Republic’s government, the army’s interest in maintaining its autonomy was interconnected with its relationship with the government in power; it was extremely important to Reinhardt to

³² Bruce Condell, David Zabecki, eds. *On the German Art of War: Truppenführung; German Army Manual for Unit Command in World War II*. (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2009).

³³ William Mulligan. *The Creation of the Modern German Army*, 111.

maintain that autonomy so that the army did not come under the control of a single party, political faction, or government.

Reinhardt's tenure ended with the Kapp Putsch, an attempted coup instigated by General Walther von Lüttwitz and Wolfgang Kapp in the winter of 1920 in response to the Weimar government's attempts to demobilize two large Freikorps units. On February 29, 1920, Minister of Defense Gustav Noske ordered the dissolution of two Freikorps brigades to remain in compliance with the Treaty of Versailles.³⁴ Lüttwitz refused to comply with Noske's order and instead disinvited Noske from the Freikorps parade scheduled for the next day. Lüttwitz proclaimed at the parade that he would not dissolve the two Freikorps units; in response, Noske removed the units from Lüttwitz's command. Ten days later, Lüttwitz met with Noske and President Ebert and demanded the dissolution of the National Assembly, new Reichstag elections, the removal of Reinhardt, and Lüttwitz's appointment as supreme commander of the army; Noske refused and demanded Lüttwitz's resignation. The next day, Lüttwitz traveled to Döberitz, a town just east of Berlin, to meet Hermann Ehrhardt, a Freikorps commander with whom Lüttwitz planned to occupy Berlin using several Freikorps units. The government fled to Dresden and the putsch faced no resistance from the military; yet Lüttwitz and his coconspirators Wolfgang Kapp and General Erich Ludendorff were unable to govern and their short-lived rule collapsed on March 18. The failed coup served to shut down the extreme right's attempt to overthrow republican rule, and its failure to take hold can be seen as a triumph for the young

³⁴ The Freikorps were volunteer units that operated in Germany from the 18th to the early 20th century. In 1920, they were largely comprised of World War I veterans and were typically right-leaning dissenters who refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic. Noske's order to disband two large units would not have been well-received among the ranks. See Robert G. Waite. *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Post War Germany, 1918-1923*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1969).

republic. The government returned to Berlin on March 20, and in the aftermath, General Reinhardt resigned and Hans von Seeckt took over his duties.

The restructuring of the military that occurred during this phase was largely to comply with the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles, to align the military with the Weimar government so that it could retain enough autonomy to act freely, and to reorganize its ministry system. Though the general staff was abolished under Versailles, Seeckt and Reinhardt created a clandestine general staff, called the *Truppenamt*, which operated outside of the watchful gaze of the French and British treaty enforcers. These changes gave the military the freedom to restructure itself and its doctrines as it saw fit. As Seeckt took command in March 1920, his experiences in the *Truppenamt* prepared him to introduce new strategic doctrines and training.

Phase Two: The Early Seeckt Years, 1921-1923

For the military, the most important result of the Kapp Putsch was Seeckt's appointment as head of the Reichsheer. Seeckt's arrival marked both a new transitional period in the army and the end of the period in which the army generally adhered to the conditions of the Treaty of Versailles both publically and, to a lesser extent, out of the eye of the treaty's enforcers. After Seeckt took command, he prioritized acting cautiously to avoid further damage to the army's prestige and reputation in the wake of the Kapp Putsch. A conservative member of the Prussian elite and monarchist himself, Seeckt attempted to balance his desire to maintain many of the Imperial Army's traditions with the understanding that its tactics and strategies had contributed to Germany's losses; a comprehensive overhaul of the military establishment at all levels was a necessity if Germany was to ever defend itself against foreign and domestic aggression. As Seeckt took command, the newly restructured army was already in the process of rethinking its

tactics and doctrines, and began to involve itself in clandestine military building efforts. Over the course of his career as commander in chief, Seeckt established new doctrines and tactical manuals that trained Reichsheer soldiers and officers in new philosophies of warfare based on the tactical and technological innovations that Seeckt believed would revolutionize how the Germans waged war. With the losses of the Great War still fresh in his mind, Seeckt conceived of infantry policy in a different way, one that would prevent the stalemates of trench warfare and prepare the Reichsheer to one day wage a successful war or, at the very least, adequately defend itself from attacks from its neighbors.

German generals and military leaders after 1920 understood both the potential of another European war and the necessity of altering military structure and training to prevent another devastating military defeat. Limited by Versailles, however, the Reichsheer could not implement many of the modernizations available at the time, such as tank battalions, a new military technology introduced during World War I. At least, they could not implement them in ways that would draw attention from enforcers of Versailles. Instead, Seeckt spent much of his time focusing on the ways he could actively train German officers and soldiers. Though he maintained his own political opinions and was well known for refusing to legitimize the Weimar government, Seeckt's main focus was the training of officers and the education of soldiers in more modern methods of warfare in the hopes that modernizing the Reichswehr would pave the way for its comeback on the world stage.

Inner turmoil within the army stemming from changes made in the political sphere also presented a stumbling block for Seeckt, who surely had in his mind the mutinies at the end of the Great War, particularly the Kiel mutiny instigated in November 1918 by German sailors, as well

as clashes between soldiers within units on political and ethnic issues.³⁵ A notable instance were clashes between Bavarian and Prussian soldiers shortly after Reinhardt resigned as commander in chief; the situation deteriorated so quickly that Reinhardt himself ordered a cease and desist to the brawling soldiers. The incident originated from growing tensions between Bavarian soldiers, whose nationalist sentiments were growing as Bavaria refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Weimar government, and soldiers in other parts of German who were operating under the command of Reinhardt and the Weimar Government. As Bavarian Colonel Franz Ritter von Epp reported in 1922, the political and nationalistic enthusiasm of his soldiers was growing steadily in numerous Bavarian infantry units.³⁶ These tensions culminated in a clash between Bavarian and Prussian soldiers at Döberitz shortly after Reinhardt's resignation. The situation escalated so quickly that Reinhardt was forced to intervene anyway, ordering all soldiers back to their barracks immediately.³⁷ He later wrote that the incident stemmed from soldiers blaming the Weimar government or "the people in power."³⁸

Seeckt, as the new commander in chief, would have learned quite a bit from this altercation and its aftermath. Though he could not solve the ethnic conflicts between soldiers of Prussian origins and those from Bavaria, he understood that unification of both under the auspices of *völkish* cooperation was necessary for cohesion among the troops. Doctrinal uniformity in education had the potential, Seeckt recognized, to temper the possibility of further mutinies and insurgencies within the military and bring together clashing factions through education that sought to unify all soldiers of Germany. However, despite the impact these clashes

³⁵ F.L. Carsten. *The Reichswehr and Politics*, 130-131.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Walther Reinhardt, as quoted in, F.L. Carsten. *The Reichswehr and Politics*, 131.

surely had on Seeckt's later measures to unify the army through training, he still took an obdurate antisemitic stance against Jewish soldiers in the Reichsheer.

Seeckt's stance on Jewish soldiers in the army represented a thread of continuity from the Imperial Army to the Reichsheer. Reinhardt had taken a hardline stance against antisemitism among his soldiers in 1919. While the blatant antisemitism in German society in the 20th century nurtured violent acts against Jews, Reinhardt believed that "whoever as a German Jew honestly feels and fights with us must be welcomed and respected."³⁹ This view was anathema to previous attitudes towards Jews in the army; the 1916 *Juden-zählung*, a census of Jewish soldiers taken at the order of the Prussian war ministry, was an antisemitic act meant to reinforce the myth that Jews were unpatriotic, unwilling to serve in the armed forces and defend Germany, and intentionally sabotaging the war effort. Though the census proved the claims were not supported by evidence, its results were not made public until they were edited to fit the antisemitic intent of its authors and published as a pamphlet. Though Jews attempted to refute the pamphlet's conclusions with overwhelming evidence to the contrary, they were blocked at every level by the government. The myth that Jews had stabbed Germany in the back by refusing to participate in the war effort was supported by high ranking generals in the Imperial Army, including Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg, who carried their antisemitic sentiments forward into the post-war years. Similarly to Ludendorff and Hindenburg, Seeckt did not share Reinhardt's view, and, with complete disregard to the Weimar Constitution, refused to allow Jewish officers to join the Reichsheer after 1920.⁴⁰

Seeckt also clashed with the Social Democrats, who fought for the disarmament of paramilitary organizations like the Freikorps. Though Seeckt stated his job was to defend the

³⁹ Walther Reinhardt, as quoted in, F.L. Carsten. *The Reichswehr and Politics*, 131.

⁴⁰ Wolfram Wette. *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 66-68.

Weimar Constitution he remained a monarchist and member of the Prussian aristocracy, and his battles with the SPD stemmed from his suspicion that they would render Germany completely defenseless both at home and abroad. In the end, Seeckt's loyalty was to the Reich rather than the Republic, and as Commander in Chief of the Army, he used the Reichsheer to facilitate these aims by suppressing political insurgencies that were anathema to the conservative values under which the Reichsheer operated.

Unique in that he attended a civilian gymnasium rather than cadet school before entering the service, Seeckt came to his position as Commander in Chief of the Germany Army with a different perspective on how to conduct warfare. As a veteran of the Schlieffen Plan, Seeckt saw firsthand how remaining mobile could save an army from the stagnation and losses dealt by the shortcomings of positional warfare. His ideas of modern warfare centered on a crucial aspect Seeckt dubbed the "war of movement" (*Bewegungskrieg*), which put the infantry at the forefront of the battlefield, capable of maneuvering in and out of the enemy's front lines to disorient and confuse them. Maneuver warfare similar to what Seeckt proposed in his war of movement thesis was not new; indeed, many aspects of maneuver warfare date back to the Second Punic War during Hannibal's battle with the Romans at Cannae in 216 BCE.⁴¹ However, Seeckt's concept of a war of movement encompassed both his understandings of why positional warfare had failed Germany in the Great War and his insistence that infantry and artillery remaining mobile was the key way to prevent another war fought from the trenches.

With his war of movement thesis fleshed out, Seeckt introduced new doctrines specifically aimed at infantry and artillery battalions. His doctrine focused on cooperation between units and a strong relationship between infantry and artillery units. Robert Citino calls

⁴¹ Adrian Goldsworthy. *Cannae*. (London: Cassell & Company, 2001), 161-162.

this “Seeckt’s belief in the importance of combined arms,” one that emphasized the symbiotic relationship between artillery and infantry units. The basis of this doctrine was the *Schwerpunkt*, a heuristic used to determine the decisive point of the battle in which an officer must recognize that all forces must be deployed to ensure a decisive success. Seeckt emphasized that all German officers had to be able to identify the *Schwerpunkt* and deploy all forces under his command accordingly and at a moment’s notice. The concept of the *Schwerpunkt* was laid out in the 1921 tactical manual called *Combined Arms Leadership and Battle* in which Seeckt outlined his ideas about a modern, mobile war in which the infantry was a skilled, highly mobile force that could maneuver to outflank or outmaneuver an enemy with ease. The limitations in manpower forced Seeckt and other Reichsheer generals to focus on in depth training so that the 100,000 soldiers in the Reichswehr would be highly trained and prepared for any combat situation.

Seeckt was not the only Reichsheer officer to understand that the challenges the Imperial German Army faced during World War I were rooted in operational deficiencies that needed repair if the German military was ever going to be successful again. Though Reinhardt also believed that a highly mobile army whose main focus was an organized assault was the solution to the stalemates of World War I, he differed from Seeckt in one key aspect, in that he believed “automatic weapons fire rather than maneuver would dominate the battlefield” in future wars.⁴² The large scale maneuvers characteristic of Seeckt’s idea of a successful battle plan did not sit well with Reinhardt, who thought that such a large commitment of forces and materials would inevitably lead to positional warfare. Similar to the operational thinking the French were working through at the time, Reinhardt advocated for revisions in German “tactical and operational ideas”

⁴² Gerhard Gross. *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare: Operational Thinking from Moltke the Elder to Heusinger*. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2018), 139.

even before Seeckt.⁴³ However, Reinhardt had no chance to implement his ideas before his resignation in March of 1920. While Reinhardt's ideas never came to fruition, his understanding that the German army was in desperate need of fundamental changes in its operational thinking demonstrates that the need was present from the very end of the war. It was Seeckt who would implement changes meant to correct these problems through new strategic doctrines.

Seeckt was a staunch opponent of positional warfare, which revolved around the use of permanent fortifications and defensive lines, such as trenches. The failures of the Great War soured Seeckt on positional warfare while other German leaders, most notably Walther Reinhardt, believed that with the technological progress of automatic weapons and a better tactical approach positional warfare could still be an effective way to wage war. Instead, Seeckt advocated for mobile warfare waged by a fast, highly-skilled army that could be deployed quickly and efficiently across entire battlefields and front lines.⁴⁴

Seeckt published a series of tactical manuals starting in September 1921 with each one focused on a different branch of service or doctrine, including manuals for infantry training regulations, artillery training, regulations on field fortifications, manuals for the signal service, and training manuals for rifle squads and light machine gun squads.⁴⁵ These manuals all stressed Seeckt's conception of tactics as mobile, rather than static, and the reliance on constant movement of units on the battlefield to utilize soldiers and technology to the fullest. Instead of serving as "merely rifle bearers," Seeckt conceived of the infantry as utilizing combined arms to allow for more dynamic battlefield movements which had, he believed, the potential to prevent positional warfare.⁴⁶ This required specialized light machine gun, grenade, and mortar training

⁴³ Gerhard Gross. *The Myth and Reality of German Warfare*, 140.

⁴⁴ James S. Corum. *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, 142.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Robert Citino. *The Path to Blitzkrieg*, 11-12.

for infantrymen; the emphasis on integrated training of infantry soldiers served as another point of discontinuity from the Imperial Army to the Reichsheer. For Seeckt, the infantry was to be a well-rounded fighting force that could quickly occupy almost any position with any type of weapon to ensure the battle was successful.

Implementing integrated training and battlefield maneuvers during peacetime presented a unique challenge as Seeckt navigated the limitations imposed by Versailles. The army was limited to field exercises and wargames to instruct young officer candidates on leadership and how to control a battlefield. Wargames and field exercises are common to all modern armies, but Robert Citino noted that “no army in the world had taken wargames, exercises, and maneuvers as seriously as the German army.”⁴⁷ This was especially true in the 1920s under Seeckt’s command, as wargames represented the only significant way the Germans could practice the new strategies and infantry tactics they were implementing; they also served to provide Seeckt with feedback on how these maneuvers looked on the field. Maneuvers during wargames also allowed the peacetime army to establish for young officers how movement on a battlefield worked and would look like, and gave them an opportunity to understand how a battle might be conducted. Of course, real battles are unpredictable and involve mitigating circumstances that no officer can anticipate, but the Reichsheer’s frequent maneuvers gave young officers a chance to understand the composition of the battlefield. It also gave officers the opportunity to establish an understanding of how newly designed, more mobile artillery could, and would, play an important factor in future warfare.⁴⁸

Most importantly, the maneuvers gave officers a taste of the kind of inter-unit and inter-battalion cooperation Seeckt viewed as absolutely necessary for modern, mobile warfare. Seeckt

⁴⁷ Robert Citino. *The Path to Blitzkrieg*, 105.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

believed a unit acting alone was merely fantasy that did not reflect real world conditions; the emphasis placed on cooperation among different units, particularly among infantry and artillery units, was heavily stressed in classroom training in officer schools in the 1920s, and was so reflected in maneuvers. Maneuvers utilized an “umpire,” an officer designated to oversee the maneuvers and report back to officers on their performance, as well as intervene during mock battles to declare units and individual soldiers wounded, dead, or captured. Umpires were made aware by commanding officers ahead of time the anticipated outcome of the designed battle, so that umpires could monitor young officers during the mock battle and make sure their strategic decisions were in line with their training. If carried out correctly, the officer candidate’s decisions would lead to the anticipated outcome.⁴⁹ Because the use of tanks and aircraft had been prohibited by the Treaty of Versailles, during maneuvers these technologies were represented by other means, such as wooden cutouts or colored markers. Though the Reichsheer maintained a clandestine tank school, the Kama Tank School, in Kazan, Soviet Union from 1929 to 1933, and a clandestine fighter pilot school in Lipetsk from 1925 to the 1930s, for the majority of the Reichsheer’s lifespan maneuvers had to be conducted with the limited resources and technologies available.⁵⁰ Despite these limitations, the Reichsheer was able to establish an experiential training system that successfully trained officers on how to conduct warfare,

⁴⁹ Robert Citino. *The Path to Blitzkrieg*, 106-109.

⁵⁰ Germany clandestinely operated specialized training schools outside German borders to circumvent Versailles’ requirements. The Kama tank school in Kazan and Lipetsk fighter pilot school, both located in the eastern reaches of the Soviet Union, allowed the Reichswehr to covertly train pilots and tank commanders without drawing attention to their efforts. Indeed, normalized international relations with the 1920s allowed the German military establishment to continue improving military technologies without arousing suspicion from the Entente Powers who were enforcing the treaty’s stipulations. Since many German military leaders saw their defeat in the Great War as primarily due to advancements in tank technology, working towards German proficiency in this technology was incredibly important in the interwar years. During war games, cardboard cutouts of tanks were created so that—publically, at least—German officers could get used to their use on the battlefield without actually having tanks on the field.

cooperate with adjacent units and unit commanders, and anticipate practical problems presented by the terrain.

The drafting and implementation of his training manuals during field maneuvers comprised the bulk of Seeckt's duties to the military in the early 1920s. The discontinuities from the Imperial Army to the Reichsheer can be seen in the manuals and their focus on finding improved ways of waging war. The continuities, on the other hand, can be seen in the continuation of wargames and mock battlefield maneuvers. Seeckt's importance in these years was evident in his creation of manuals that emphasized mobile warfare.

Phase Three: The Later Seeckt Years, 1924-1926

Under conditions stipulated by the Treaty of Versailles, the officer corps was drastically reduced in the postwar period, from 34,000 at the war's end in 1918, to just 4,000 by 1921.⁵¹ The German military establishment, in an attempt to account for these changes, increased the length of enlistment and academic standards for officers in the immediate post-war period, requiring a twenty-five year enlistment and more rigorous academic testing. With only a small officer corps allowed, Seeckt and others in the Reichsheer's *Truppenamt* wanted to maintain an elite, highly educated officer corps that far surpassed the Imperial Army's standards. In doing so, they hoped to secure Germany's borders through a strong, highly trained army. With such a small army left post-Versailles, Seeckt and other high ranking officers knew more emphasis on the elite training of soldiers could offer something in the way of compensation for such a small standing army and limited officer corps. Of course, the Reichsheer often found ways around the Treaty of

⁵¹ James S. Corum. *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, 78.

Versailles, whether through operating clandestine tank and pilot schools in the Soviet Union or masquerading general staff training schools as further education for combat officers.

In many ways, the training officer candidates received in the Reichsheer was almost identical to that experienced by Prussian and Austro-Hungarian officers in the 18th and 19th centuries. The *Studien-Plan für die K.K. Kriegsschule* detailed the education of Austro-Hungarian officers in the late nineteenth century. Functioning as an outline of officer education, the plan included brief descriptions of training in tactics, strategy, military geography, terrain studies, operational staff service, military exercises, weapons doctrine, fortification, natural science, international law, German literature, French language, and the cultural history of Germany and Europe.⁵² Requirements to enter the war school (*Kriegsschule*) were strict in the nineteenth century, with entrance requirements focusing on both service in the field and “at least three years as an officer directly with the troops or in positions which did not relieve him from continuing contact with the troops.”⁵³ The goal was to recruit officers with prior field experience who could incorporate firsthand knowledge of serving with the theoretical knowledge provided by training in tactics and strategy.

An officer candidate during this period was also required to submit proof of a “general education” that had to consist of, at the very least, “elementary mathematics, including spherical trigonometry and conic sections, practical geometry, mechanics, physics, chemistry, geography and general world history.”⁵⁴ For any candidate who could not produce proof of qualification in these topics, entrance exams could be taken prior to admittance to the war school. With these necessary prerequisites to enter the war school, the Prussian and Austro-Hungarian empires in

⁵² Austro-Hungarian Monarchy Heer. *Studienplan für die K.K. Kriegsschule*. (Berlin: L.W. Seidel & Sohn, 1873), 3-23.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 25.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

the nineteenth century were determined to maintain an officer corps of highly educated, elite officers who could lead effectively and competently in battle; the requirements for Reichsheer officers in terms of academic qualifications for entrance into war schools were almost identical to these nineteenth century requirements. Indeed, the skeletal structure and academic standards of the German Army in all its forms remained nearly identical from the Prussian and Austro-Hungarian Empires to the collapse of the Wehrmacht. While topics and emphasis on certain strategies over others naturally shifted as military technologies dictated, the idea that German officers were to be a highly educated and well-rounded elite endure today in the Bundeswehr. Educational requirements thus serve as a thread of continuity that connects the entirety of German military history; education was also a crucial part of the skeletal structure upon which changes in officer training could be built in the mid to late 1920s and early 1930s. Maintenance of these structures and requirements allowed Seeckt to focus on the areas in critical need of reevaluation, mainly strategic changes in training, rather than areas that worked well, such as educational requirements for officers.

After Seeckt took command in 1920, soldiers interested in becoming officers entered the Reichsheer as recruits, during which they spent six months in basic physical and military training before they became officer candidates. As new officer candidates, they experienced field maneuvers and training in the same manner as recruits or enlisted men to gain an idea of basic strategic and tactical maneuvers, how the army moved, especially with regards to mobile artillery, and other various field exercises. Only later, after experience on the mock battlefield as a recruit as well as classroom instruction, were officer candidates given the opportunity to lead mock battles themselves. The practical experience on the mock battlefield during field exercises would serve officer candidates well later on when discussing strategy and tactics in the

classroom. The emphasis on field experience was important for leaders like Seeckt, a combat veteran himself, who understood that an officer had to be able to survey the battlefield and calculate all possible scenarios in his head quickly if he was to be an effective leader.

Officer candidates also received rigorous training in “tactics, weaponry, military administration, a study of the other army branches, and horsemanship” during their first year as officer candidates.⁵⁵ Horsemanship and the use of cavalry in the Reichswehr was a matter of intense debate among high ranking officers. The use of cavalry units was mandated under the Treaty of Versailles, but the rapid rise of other forms of military technology, particularly other means of troop transport, rendered the cavalry somewhat outdated. Seeckt himself believed the cavalry could be part of a modern army with the proper training and understanding of their place on the battlefield, but he still favored the much faster and more efficient motorized infantry divisions. While motorized infantry proved a more powerful and reliable alternative to horsepower, the problems posed by requiring a constant supply of fuel often hindered the arguments for motorized infantry over cavalries. Blitzkrieg tactics in the Soviet Union left huge gaps in the fuel supply lines, necessitating horses to provide provisions and ammunition to soldiers on the Eastern Front. Despite these issues, the cavalry was still an integral part of Reichswehr training exercises and were retained on a very limited scale in the Wehrmacht. During this year, the candidate served “as a junior NCO section leader” to gain a more comprehensive experiential understanding of leading large groups of soldiers.⁵⁶ After the eighteen months of enlisted and officer training, officer candidates were promoted to corporal and were then known as an ensign.⁵⁷ The ensign stayed with his assigned regiment for three

⁵⁵ James S. Corum. *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, 81.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

more months after this promotion in order to gain more field experience; after these three months, the ensign was then promoted to sergeant and sent to a branch school. Branch schools, also known as war schools or *Kriegsschulen*, were specialized military schools designed to further train officer candidates for their selected branch of service. The infantry branch school in Dresden was one of the largest in Germany in the interwar period, and the officer candidates there studied a wide variety of subjects Seeckt and other leaders thought necessary for their performance as officers in the field. The branch school ran similarly to universities and other academic institutions in Germany such as the gymnasium, and included classes in foreign language (French was standard, Russian and English appeared occasionally), “tactics, aerial warfare, signaling, motor technology, mapping, camouflage, riding, civics,” and numerous others.⁵⁸ At the end of their two years in the branch school, officer candidates were commissioned as officers in the Reichsheer, and most went on to combat careers after war broke out again in 1939.⁵⁹ Even after graduation, officers still often participated in field exercises and war games to maintain proficiency in their understanding of how to employ specific tactics on a variety of different terrains. Officers in the Reichsheer era spent longer in the branch school than their predecessors, and its physical and intellectual demands were more rigorous than anything the Germans had previously devised.⁶⁰ Thus, while its existence and basic educational standards remained the same, German officers in the 1920s had a far different experience in the branch school than Prussian and Austro-Hungarian officer candidates.

⁵⁸ James S. Corum. *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, 81. Civics consisted primarily of both the history of Germany and Prussia and topics related to the Weimar constitution.

⁵⁹ Officer candidates that preferred to enter the General Staff were required to undergo four more years of training, three of which took place in the classroom and one on the field gaining practical experience. Since the General Staff had been prohibited under the Treaty of Versailles, the General Staff and its training programs operated clandestinely under the esoteric name of “leader’s assistants,” though Corum points out that this term was often disregarded in Reichswehr correspondence. James S. Corum. *The Path to Blitzkrieg*, pp. 89-91.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

The amount of political training officer candidates received while in the branch schools from 1924 to 1926 was minimal to nonexistent; the officer corps retained from the Great War and prior were all, for the most part, members of the Prussian nobility and were monarchists opposed to republicanism of the Weimar government. In the interwar period, especially the 1920s, the army was too sharply focused on overhauling its doctrines and training to focus on the politics of the Weimar government to any such extent that would have made it into the classroom. For most German officers, the army was supposed to be above politics, just as the Kaiser had once been, and the inclusion of training related to a specific political party would have been unthinkable. Though the extent to which the Reichsheer as an organization was involved in politics during the Weimar era is debated among historians, the overall conservative nature of the Reichsheer and an overwhelming interest in rebuilding the German army after the defeat of World War I left officer candidates little time to become too deeply involved in political matters outside of the Reichsheer.⁶¹ While each individual officer candidate surely held personal political beliefs, indoctrination or group instruction in political matters was not widespread. Instead, the politicization of the Reichswehr came from external sources forcing the Reichsheer's hand.

In 1924, under Seeckt's tenure, a coalition of Social Democrats, Centre Party members, and the German Democratic Party created the *Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold*; the goal of this paramilitary force was enforcing the legitimacy of the Republic and defending it against

⁶¹ Scholars that engage in this debate are: F.L. Carsten in *The Reichswehr and Politics*, as he argues the Reichswehr was deeply connected to the political establishments in the 1920s and 1930s. Sir John Wheeler-Bennett in *The Nemesis of Power* takes a less hardline stance, instead choosing to explore the complexities of the issue and the discrepancies in interconnectedness between the military establishment and the plethora of Weimar governments. To a lesser extent, James Corum engages with this topic in his works *The Roots of Blitzkrieg* and *The Luftwaffe: Creating the Operational Air War, 1918-1940*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997). Wolfram Wette also engages in this debate in *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality*. Daniel Siemens engages with debate as it relates to the army's and the political establishment's relationship both to each other and to the SA in *Stormtroopers: A New History*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

potential sabotage from the extreme left and right.⁶² Other paramilitary organizations created in the 1920s such the Black Reichswehr also challenged the political existence of the army.⁶³ The Black Reichswehr was an illegal paramilitary organization during the Weimar Republic that gained support from the Reichswehr as a way to circumvent the limitations from the Treaty of Versailles. The Black Reichswehr operated from 1919 until it was dissolved in 1923 after the Kùstrin Putsch, which was eventually suppressed by the Reichsheer.⁶⁴ The Reichswehr's involvement in politics included violently subduing putsches such as the infamous Beer Hall Putsch, the Kùstrin Putsch, clashes with Bavarian nationalists, and other hostile political situations. Many of these occurred in 1923, the year Carsten dubbed the "Year of Crisis" for Weimar Republic and the Reichswehr.⁶⁵ The presence of paramilitary organizations created tensions concerning the role of the Reichswehr in German politics. Traditionally, the German army attempted to remain above politics, suppressing violence only on the orders of the Kaiser or governmental leaders; yet, as paramilitary organizations created and suppressed violence of their own, the army's position as apolitical began to shift.

As the political situation began to further destabilize in Germany, officer candidates were also facing curriculum changes at their branch schools. Over the course of two years at the branch school, an officer candidate was exposed to the latest and most modernized officer training Germany could produce at the time given its limitations. With advancements in military technology such as armored troop transportation, light machine guns, fighter aircraft, and tanks,

⁶² Pamela E. Swett. *Neighbors and Enemies: The Culture of Radicalism in Berlin, 1929-1933*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁶³ The Black Reichswehr also encompassed other paramilitary organizations such as *Stahlhelm, Bund der Frontsoldaten* (often referred to by its short form name, *Der Stahlhelm*), which was connected to the conservative German National People's Party and advocated for revanchism and the restoration of Germany's honor in the wake of the loss of World War I and the unfair stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles.

⁶⁴ William L. Shirer. *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 65-66.

⁶⁵ F.L. Carsten. *The Reichswehr and Politics*, pp. 153-195.

Reichsheer officer candidates became familiar with all forms of new and developing military technology. An insistence on the most modern tactics and technology available at the time forced branch schools to shorten and eliminate other topics. While national and military history were present in the early years of the Reichswehr's branch schools, as time went on and the emphasis on technology became more important, the branch school curriculum naturally changed to incorporate more class time on these technologies and their implementation on the battlefield. As James Corum points out, by 1926, classes on Clausewitz, Frederick the Great, and Napoleon were cut in favor of classes on "company and battalion tactics."⁶⁶ This was primarily due to the trend in prioritizing new ideas, as it was widely viewed that old strategies were outdated and had contributed to the losses during the Great War. Though still present and popular before 1926, military history classes focusing on the classical examples of military power—Clausewitz, Frederick the Great, and Napoleon were the primary examples—were replaced in favor of newly published books on the Great War.⁶⁷ As a point of discontinuity, the emphasis on new ideas and strategies intertwined with changing ideas on the types of knowledge combat officers needed. Officers headed to careers with the general staff or high command needed backgrounds in grand strategy or detailed understandings of Clausewitz's theories or Napoleon's tactics in Russia in 1812, but commissioned officers who would lead in combat, it was viewed, generally did not need these classes.

As Seeckt's changes took root in officers' schools through the implementation of his strategic thinking and manuals, Seeckt made a mistake that cost him his career. Seeckt's departure from the Reichsheer was not a military decision, but rather a political one. Though his contributions were enormous, Seeckt was forced to resign in October 1926 after he invited

⁶⁶ James S. Corum. *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, p. 84.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Prince Wilhelm, grandson of Kaiser Wilhelm II, to an army maneuver. Prince Wilhelm arrived wearing an Imperial Army uniform; Seeckt did not seek approval for this decision from the government. The resulting publicity from the press put Seeckt and the government, led by President Paul von Hindenburg, in a difficult position. The Minister of War, then Otto Gessler, informed Hindenburg that due to the backlash, someone had to resign, either Gessler himself or Seeckt. In an effort to maintain his government, Hindenburg requested Seeckt's resignation; in his conversation with Seeckt concerning his resignation, Hindenburg informed Seeckt that his decision to request Seeckt's resignation stemmed from his need to keep his government from resigning, not from Seeckt inviting Prince Wilhelm to a maneuver.⁶⁸

Seeckt acted as the primary instigator of change within the Reichsheer from 1919 to 1926 though the publication of his strategic and educational manuals and his emphasis on fighting a war of movement rather than one of position. His importance in the history of the German Army in the 1920s can thus be measured by the changes he implemented and the profound impacts those changes had during the 1930s and 1940s. Seeckt was responsible for many of the discontinuities from the Imperial Army to the Reichsheer; his efforts repaired numerous fractures in German military thinking that had crippled Germany's efforts in the Great War. Emphasis on novel technologies and strategies, as well as on the war of movement thesis allowed Seeckt to use continuities from the Imperial Army as the foundation upon which he built the Reichsheer.

Conclusion

Historians tend to explain changes in Reichswehr doctrine specifically within the context of how these changes eventually led to the infamous tactics used in the beginning of World War

⁶⁸ Andreas Dorpalen. *Hindenburg and the Weimar Republic*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 110–112.

II. While the undeniable link between changes in German military training in the early 1920s and later tactics used in the 1930s and 40s must be acknowledged, it is a huge disservice to the changes themselves to simply cast them in the light of the impact they had on later battles. One must examine them within their own context and within the context of continuity and discontinuity as well in order to better understand the changes and their importance for both German officers at the time and officers fighting during World War II. The officers trained during the Weimar period were the first officers to march into Poland, France, and the Soviet Union. Their training influenced their decisions in how to lead their men and conceptualize the battlefield. However, their training was also a major shift for the German military as a whole in terms of how radically different it was from previous forms of war. The emphasis on a war of movement over positional warfare was an important shift, given the challenges positional warfare posed for the German Army during World War I. Seeckt's influence in championing a mobile army both revolutionized the Reichsheer and paved the way for more nuanced forms of this idea of a successful war as fundamentally about infantry movement.

In the end, the "War to End All Wars" only succeeded in fueling another, more disastrous, more deadly, and more ideologically contentious war. The tactics with which this second war was fought were forged in the politically contentious age of the Weimar Republic, its officers trained under Reinhardt and Seeckt, as well as their successors: Heye, Hammerstein-Equord, and Fritsch. The officers it trained were part of a long tradition of Prussian and German military excellence, its soldiers trained in practical matters as well as in the honor of being a German soldier. Though the Reichsheer fought no wars, it succeeded in reinventing itself, and in producing new doctrines, strategies, and military technologies.

CHAPTER TWO

The Beginnings of Ideological Training, 1933-1934

At 10:30am on June 30, 1934, a car pulled up in front of the residence of General Kurt von Schleicher. Two men, wearing trench coats and fedoras, walked up to Schleicher's door and knocked; Schleicher, who had been on the phone with a friend, put down the phone as the two men came into his study. As soon as Schleicher confirmed his identity—his last words, as heard on the phone by his friend, were "*Jawohl, ich bin General von Schleicher*"—he was shot twice at point blank range.⁶⁹ Schleicher's murder was not a singular event; it was part of the Night of the Long Knives, a political purge carried out by the Nazis to consolidate their political power in Germany in the summer of 1934. Just a year earlier, Hitler was appointed chancellor by President Hindenburg; the Nazis acted quickly in consolidating power around Hitler. Schleicher, who served briefly as chancellor of Germany himself, was deemed an enemy of the Party. His status as a *persona non grata* came in part because of his feud with Defense Minister Werner von Blomberg and in part because Hitler believed Schleicher was involved in a plot to overthrow his government.⁷⁰ Schleicher's murder—as well as the other murders that occurred during the purge—were part of a larger story of Nazi power consolidation that began in the political sphere and quickly moved towards the military.

The move to bring the military under the control of National Socialism was first attempted over the course of the winter of 1933-34 with the development of a new training

⁶⁹ Sir John Wheeler-Bennett. *The Nemesis of Power*, 323.

⁷⁰ William Patch. *Heinrich Brüning and the Dissolution of the Weimar Republic*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 50-51.

program for Reichsheer officers, which began with the conception and implementation of new course materials that included National Socialist ideology. This chapter outlines what the training program included and how it affected the military establishment, and ultimately argues that the program was a political effort to subsume the army under NSDAP control at a critical moment when the army was in a precarious political position. In the winter of 1933, Hitler had been in power for less than a year but was quickly consolidating power in the government. Legislative victories in 1930, 1931, and 1932 put the Nazi Party on the rise in the Reichstag and signaled to other political parties and to the military that developing a relationship with the Nazis would be inevitable. The army's position within Germany became more precarious as a result, since the army had generally enjoyed a high level of autonomy under the numerous Weimar governments and army leaders were unsure of the Nazi Party's intentions regarding the army.

Already a critical year for German politics due to the dissolution of the Weimar Republic and establishment of the Nazi regime, 1933 marked the beginning of a series of changes that would render the German Army a stark ideological contrast to its predecessors. Prior to 1933, army officers had frowned upon the spread of National Socialist ideas among their ranks. Two officers, Richard Scheringer and Hans Ludin, were notably arrested and charged with spreading Nazi propaganda within their garrison at Ulm in March of 1930.⁷¹ The question of the army's political loyalties was one that would be settled in the winter of 1933-34 with the implementation of new training practices rooted in National Socialist ideologies; this training, while serving multiple political and military purposes, was an extension of Hitler's consolidation of power and

⁷¹ Sir John Wheeler-Bennett. *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918-1945*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 213-217. Nicholas Reynolds also provides an incredibly detailed account of this incident in *Treason Was No Crime: Ludwig Beck, Chief of the German General Staff*. (London: William Kimber, 1976), 36-39.

his attempt to produce an officer corps—indeed, an entire army—ideologically devoted to the Nazi cause.

The ideological training course drafted in 1933 and implemented in 1934 was not entirely new, but rather a second attempt at something that had been tried before and failed. General Erich Ludendorff, a general during the Great War and Hitler’s comrade in the failed 1923 coup attempt in Bavaria, had sought to boost the waning morale of his men in July 1917 by introducing “regular hours of political instruction” by *Aufklärungsoffiziers*, or education officers.⁷² Ludendorff’s efforts failed and were ridiculed by his soldiers, yet his efforts serve as a precursor to political training under the Nazi regime.⁷³ Soldiers in 1917 were instructed with patriotic propaganda and lectures on the *Burgfriede*, or castle truce, which explained that all internal conflict in Germany had to be put on hold while the country dealt with the unjust war foisted upon it by Germany’s enemies. These measures were meant to unify Germans under the common banner of the war effort, but these lectures were not administered uniformly among all units and generally did not produce the desired results as the war waged on and morale disappeared as Germany’s grip on victory began to slip.

Ludendorff’s political instruction failed, and yet the political training course of 1933-34 did not. The susceptibility of the German Army to political education was, therefore, an indication of the larger political climate in which it operated and the result of its ties to that political climate. The political situation in July 1917, when success in the Great War still seemed possible, was tremendously different from the political situation in 1933, as the Weimar system crumbled and National Socialists gained even more power. While war waged in France in 1917,

⁷² “The National Socialist Indoctrination Officer in the German Armed Forces.” Record Group 242: National Archives Collection of Foreign Records Seized, 1675 – 1958. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, 4.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

politicians back in Berlin were calling for “parliamentarization,” an action that would give German politicians more control over the prosecution of the war by transferring power from the Kaiser to parliamentary authority.⁷⁴ The Imperial Army and its leaders in 1917 thus championed more political involvement that could be implemented in their favor to bring a conclusion to the war quickly. In 1933, the army was not fighting a war, but was instead navigating murky waters as the Weimar government collapsed and the Nazi regime began to take hold. The introduction of a new training course, and indeed the army’s general relationship to the Nazi government, represents a significant shift in the nature of intellectual training and political involvement in the German Army that was unprecedented in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The army’s relationship with the Nazi government represented a significant thread of discontinuity from the Weimar years to the early Nazi years. Under Walther Reinhardt and Hans von Seeckt, the army enjoyed a high level of autonomy that allowed them to draft and implement training courses without governmental oversight. Under the Nazis, the army’s high command began to see that autonomy slip as Nazi ideology began to spread in German society and within the military itself.

In a broad sense, ideology is a collection of beliefs that guides a social group, religion, political group, or other group of people unified by shared beliefs. Within the context of National Socialism, ideology refers to a set of beliefs accepted and propagated by the Nazi Party. These include ideas of nationalism, antisemitism, irredentism, anti-communism, anti-capitalism, racial exclusion, militarism, and adherence to a racial hierarchy that placed Germanic peoples on top. George Mosse notably characterized German ideology and culture as less an intellectual endeavor and more of an expression of its *Völkish* ideals of unified society founded on a shared

⁷⁴ Marcus Kreuzer. “Parliamentarization and the Question of German Exceptionalism: 1867-1918.” *Central European History*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2003, 327-357.

“essence.”⁷⁵ Early National Socialists attempted to form an ideology that capitalized on this notion of a shared essence to unify Germany during the politically contentious 1920s, when the Weimar government endured a period of political turmoil caused by significant radical left- and right-wing political agitators. Additionally, in German, the word “political” had become intertwined with the word “ideology,” and separating the two in this context would remove an important layer of meaning in how Germans understood the importance of politics to ideology, and vice versa. The army had traditionally considered itself above politics and the various ideologies espoused by political parties in Germany. In this chapter, ideology will refer to the collection of social and political ideals that represent National Socialism, particularly the emphasis on ethnic purity, irredentism, and expansionism that were used to justify war in the east.

The new training course for the German Army centered on training soldiers in “national political issues” facing the German nation within the lens of the National Socialist worldview and its goals for the future of Germany.⁷⁶ These goals, at least for the training course, emphasized an antisemitic understanding of German politics that highlighted the perceived disruption and corruption Jews represented in German society. In order to understand the antisemitism, meritocratic officer selection, and politics of the new training course, one must first understand the months leading up to the winter of 1933-34 that fueled the creation of a new training course. The Scheringer-Ludin affair, as well as a growing interest in Nazi politics among the officer corps, facilitated the creation of a new training course based on National Socialist

⁷⁵ George L. Mosse. *The Crisis of German Ideology: The Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*. (New York: Howard Fertig, 1998), 4. *Volk*, perhaps one of the terms most associated with German intellectual and political thought in the 20th century, is often translated into English as “people” or “nation,” though the essence of the scope intended by the term often escapes proper translation into English. “Nation” is perhaps the closest translation, as it attempts to capture the idea of *Volk* as an uncountable representation of a nation unite under a shared sense of ethnic identity.

⁷⁶ Wolfram Wette. *The Wehrmacht*, 85.

ideology. In this sense, the idea of political education in the 1930s was a simultaneous top-down and bottom-up effort on the part of generals and enlisted soldiers. Not all generals or soldiers supported the Nazi Party in 1933, and many, especially those supporting Schleicher, were opposed to bringing Nazi ideology into the army. Schleicher had been a critical player in replacing Social Democrat Herman Müller with Centre Party member Heinrich Brüning as chancellor. Angered at the Social Democrats for their anti-militarism and pacifism, which he viewed as disqualifying, Schleicher moved towards authoritarian government as a more viable option for Germany. Schleicher did not trust the Social Democrats, and, in the aftermath of the 1928 elections in which the Social Democrats won a majority, he allied himself with General Wilhelm Gröner, who similarly believed that the Social Democrats were unfit to hold power.

As National Socialists gained more power in the Reichstag and in society, the changing understanding of the role the army would play in society, as well as a growing emphasis on meritocratic officer selection contributed to the abrupt about-face the traditionally conservative officer corps experienced in accepting and propagating National Socialism's ideology in the mid-1930s. Threads of continuity were breaking in favor of more discontinuities between the Imperial Army and early Reichsheer to the late Reichsheer under Hitler's government. Hans von Seeckt's statement in 1919 that "the form changes, the spirit remains the same," was no longer true. The discontinuities in training in 1933-1934 were discontinuities in the spirit of the army and in its assertion that it was above politics, which were breaking under pressures from both the changing politics of its high command and from the Nazi Party itself.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Hans von Seeckt, as quoted in Oberst Christian O.E. Millotat. "The Prussian German General Staff System and its Impact on the General and Admiral Staff Officers of the Federal Armed Forces of Today." *U.S. Army War College Publications*, 1991, 59.

National Socialism's Early Relationship with the Reichsheer

Schleicher, Hitler's predecessor as chancellor of Germany, served as a protégé to Hans von Seeckt.⁷⁸ As a soldier who served on the general staff during the Great War, Schleicher's post-war career began as Wilhelm Gröner's assistant, during which he established himself as a critical intermediary between the Weimar government and the Reichsheer high command. After leaking Seeckt's invitation to Crown Prince Wilhelm to participate in military maneuvers in an Imperial uniform and thus forcing Seeckt's resignation in 1926, Schleicher became the de facto head of the Reichswehr, taking on a larger role within the army following the hyperinflation crisis of 1923. John Wheeler-Bennett has argued that this series of events in Schleicher's career, which successively gave him more power, left him hungry for more.⁷⁹ Schleicher also maintained a close relationship with newly elected president Paul von Hindenburg, serving as one of Hindenburg's closest advisors and eventually becoming Reichswehr Minister in Hindenburg's cabinet. Hindenburg in return allowed Schleicher a high level of freedom in Schleicher's political activities.

In 1928, crushed by what he viewed as the disastrous results of the Reichstag election that gave an advantage to the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Schleicher came to adopt the idea that democracy was no longer the best option for Germany. Put off by the SPD's pacifist stance, Schleicher and Gröner, who was by this time Defense Minister, agreed that an alternative form

⁷⁸ Schleicher was also involved in *Sondergruppe R*, a clandestine taskforce working jointly with the Soviet Red Army to combat the unfairness of the Treaty of Versailles; he also perjured himself with testimony that the Reichswehr was not in any way involved in the murders committed by the "Black Reichswehr." The Black Reichswehr—which Seeckt later admitted was operating under the orders of the Reichswehr—was directly responsible for the murders of Germans suspected of being informants to the Allied Control Commission, which regulated Germany's adherence to the Treaty of Versailles. See Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power*, 93-94, 194-195.

⁷⁹ Sir John Wheeler-Bennett. *The Nemesis of Power*, 182-187.

of government was necessary.⁸⁰ Schleicher declared at a dinner in Berlin in 1932 that “what Germany needs is a strong man,” while gesturing toward himself.⁸¹ An authoritarian regime with himself at the top—this was Schleicher’s vision for Germany, not necessarily National Socialism, which was not their first choice as an alternative; Gröner in particular was distrustful of National Socialism, cautioning the army in 1930 against the dangers and pitfalls of party politics. Gröner’s views did not track with many Reichsheer leaders; indeed, the Scheringer-Ludin trial of 1930 proved to be one of the final political stressors within the Reichsheer that would eventually rupture—with National Socialists emerging at the top.

By 1929, while still not fully committed to National Socialism, Schleicher began to create a policy known as *Grenzschutz*, or “frontier defense,” that allowed the Reichswehr to stockpile weapons in defiance of Versailles. The policy also allowed military training for volunteers who were not officially part of the Reichsheer. *Grenzschutz* was focused on eastern parts of Germany near Poland; the reason for this was twofold: Schleicher did not wish to agitate France with blatant disregard for Versailles, and Schleicher knew Poland was a probable location for another war. Interestingly, when Gröner found out about the stockpiles and training, he went to Schleicher for answers; Schleicher blamed *Truppenamt* chief Werner von Blomberg. This resulted in Blomberg’s demotion.⁸² This demotion began a period of distrust and animosity between Schleicher and Blomberg that would eventually contribute to Schleicher’s assassination in 1934.

⁸⁰ Edgar Feuchtwanger. *From Weimar to Hitler: Germany, 1918-33*. (London: Macmillan, 1993), 205, 304. This sentiment was also echoed in the complicated relationship Gröner had to the Reichswehr in the late 1920s.

⁸¹ Kurt von Schleicher, as quoted in Sir John Wheeler-Bennett. *The Nemesis of Power*, 238.

⁸² William Patch. *Heinrich Brüning and the Dissolution of the Weimar Republic*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 50-52.

On March 6, 1930, two young lieutenants named Scheringer and Ludin were arrested on the order of the Ministry of Defense for distributing NSDAP propaganda to other soldiers at their artillery garrison in Ulm. Speculation over why 26 year old Richard Scheringer and 25 year old Hans Ludin were interested in Nazi politics generally yields only speculative answers—John Wheeler-Bennett argued for the possibility that these two men, with an above average interest in politics, could simply have been either “genuinely concerned for the welfare of their country... or perhaps in desperation—believing that in the realization of Nazi doctrines lay the sole means of German salvation.”⁸³ Scheringer and Ludin were opponents of the Republic and in favor of a national revolution that would dismantle it, and saw the rise of the Nazi Party as a window of opportunity that had the potential to destroy the republic for good.⁸⁴ Scheringer and Ludin went out of their way to volunteer themselves as intermediaries between the local NSDAP organization and the garrison at Ulm. Still, their arrests drew attention not only throughout the Reichsheer, but throughout Germany as well. An unrepentant Ludin testified at trial that their goal was, in the best-case scenario, political conversion of the entire officer corps, and, at the least, convincing as many officers as possible to “refuse to fire in the event of an attempted revolution from the Right.”⁸⁵ Both men were eventually charged with high treason in what came to be known, rather infamously in Nazi circles, as the Leipzig Reichswehr Trial, which took place in September of 1930. Defended by Hans Frank, and with Hitler himself as a key witness, Scheringer and Ludin were eventually given mild sentences, but the damage had been done.⁸⁶ Attempts were made to cover up the presence of treason in the officer corps, but the seeds of

⁸³ Sir John Wheeler-Bennett. *The Nemesis of Power*, 214.

⁸⁴ F.L. Carsten. *The Reichswehr and Politics*, 315.

⁸⁵ Sir John Wheeler-Bennett. *The Nemesis of Power*, 215.

⁸⁶ Hitler notably used the trial as a forum to meditate on Nazi politics and its relationship with the public. He assured the court that the Nazi Party had the upmost respect for the autonomy of the armed forces, an assurance he would disregard in later years.

discord had been publically sown.⁸⁷ The affair forced the Reichsheer's hand insofar that it demanded that the army take a stand on the presence of political propaganda and treason among its ranks.

Though the arrest and trial of Scheringer and Ludin are indicative of the hardline stance the army took in 1930, it placed the army in a difficult position with regards to how it would respond to the growing presence of political propaganda in the officer corps. As the Nazis continued to gain votes in the Reichstag, the army was forced to back down from issuing verdicts such as Scheringer and Ludin's. In the 1930 Reichstag elections, Nazis gained 95 seats, jumping from 12 seats before 1930 to 95 seats.⁸⁸ Two years later, in the 1932 federal elections in July, the Nazis gained an even wider margin of victory: 123 more seats and over 13.7 million votes. With 230 seats under their control, the Nazis had a majority, followed by the Social Democrats under Otto Wels with 133 seats. With Nazis now controlling the Reichstag, the army backed down from issuing verdicts against the spread of Nazi ideology in an effort to not offend the growing party.

The Scheringer-Ludin affair demonstrated a theme that was quickly becoming common among both officers and enlisted men—an exploration into NSDAP politics was fusing into something larger. The appeal of National Socialism was spreading not only through the Reichstag as evidenced by the stream of legislative victories from 1923 to 1932, but also through the army, despite what many leaders such as Gröner and Schleicher wanted. During the trial, Scheringer and Ludin's commanding officer, Ludwig Beck, testified that since the Nazi Party was a force for good, Reichsheer soldier should not be barred from Party membership.⁸⁹ The trial

⁸⁷ Sir John Wheeler-Bennett. *The Nemesis of Power*, 215.

⁸⁸ Dieter Nohlen and Philip Stöver, eds. *Elections in Europe: A Data Handbook*. (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 2010), 790.

⁸⁹ Sir John Wheeler-Bennett. *The Nemesis of Power*, 217.

became a sensation, with Hitler himself testifying in defense of Scheringer and Ludin. Historian John Wheeler-Bennett noted that the trial, despite its verdict, resulted in a rise in NSDAP interest and involvement by Reichsheer soldiers.⁹⁰ The affair also served as a turning point for party politics in the Reichsheer due to the rise in interest in the Nazi Party in created within the ranks. The Reichsheer's precarious position in German politics was shifting as the solid ground beneath it crumbled with the Weimar government; the army, scrambling for purchase in a tumultuous political environment, was susceptible to political propaganda internally through its own soldiers and officers.

The Schleicher era, from his appointment as Minister of Defense in 1932 to his brief tenure as chancellor in December 1932 to his assassination in 1934, was one marked by contentious change among Reichsheer leadership. The Scheringer-Ludin affair demonstrated the presence of treason among the officer corps, a headache for Reichsheer leaders opposed to the rapidly spreading support of National Socialism in the army. Some Reichsheer leaders—including Schleicher by the early 1930s—were coming around to National Socialism and becoming more accepting of its place in German politics, including military-political relations. In January 1931, Schleicher altered Defense Ministry protocol so that NSDAP party members could be employed in army garrisons and depots.⁹¹ Schleicher's concession to the Nazis served as an appeasement that facilitated a relationship between the Reichsheer and the NSDAP, one that would steadily increase during the 1930s, but would not subsume the army under the political regime until 1934. In 1932, Gröner was pushed out of the Weimar government in favor of his former assistant; Schleicher took over as chancellor after Franz von Papen's brief tenure until he too was removed in favor of Hitler in January 1933. By the time Hitler assumed the role of

⁹⁰ Sir John Wheeler-Bennett. *The Nemesis of Power*, 220-221.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 226-227.

chancellor, the German army had undergone several years of debate over how the army would interact with party politics, especially National Socialist politics, which were slowly infiltrating the ranks of the Reichsheer.

The rise of Nazism's popularity among ranks in the army was closely linked to President Hindenburg's decision to appoint Hitler chancellor in January 1933. By early 1933, many military leaders had turned against Schleicher as chancellor. Schleicher was losing his grip on his government, and the only way he could maintain power was to implement martial law and use the army to violently suppress opposition in order to maintain a military state. Unamenable to this route, the army saw Hitler as capable of creating a national consensus among Germans that a military state was the right choice for Germany.⁹²

Nazi infiltration reached its peak in the winter of 1933. Hitler's consolidation of power began almost immediately with the Enabling Act of 1933; this effectively amended the Weimar constitution to allow the German Cabinet to enact or change laws without Reichstag involvement or approval. From this a policy of *Gleichschaltung* began to slowly exert Nazi control over all aspects of public life in Germany. The army was not immune from the grip of the NSDAP's totalitarian intentions, and, towards the end of 1933, the idea for a new training course that would teach officers and soldiers about National Socialism began to take root. Prussian military traditions that survived through World War I and the Weimar Era maintained the notion that the officer corps was meant for aristocracy and the economic and political elite; the army under Nazi control began to accept the notion that the officer corps should function on a more meritocratic basis that was also rooted in a greater emphasis on racial purity. The officer corps, as envisioned under Nazi control, would be formed by a racial and intellectual elite that operated under the

⁹² Michael Geyer. "Etudes in Political History: Reichswehr, NSDAP and the Seizure of Power." In *The Nazi Machtergreifung*. (London: Allen & Unwin), 122.

auspices of Nazi ideology, rather than one steeped deeply in the traditions of the Prussian officer corps. As Hitler envisioned it, “[a]nyone could now become an officer provided that his two years’ service in the ranks had shown him to possess outstanding qualities of leadership and the mental and social standards usually associated with an officers’ mess.”⁹³ Instead of maintaining the entire body of Prussian standards, only vague traditions and notions of honor and comradeship among soldiers would withstand the onslaught of changes that began in late 1933.⁹⁴ These traditions centered on the idea that service and even death were the duty of a good German soldier, and to do anything to jeopardize a soldier’s ability to perform his duty, or to commit any crime or action that would shame his family, was dishonorable and a worse fate than death.⁹⁵ These ideas helped form the basis of meritocratic officer selection—officers were chosen based on their intellectual and physical skill rather than their socioeconomic status.

The training course was situated within a larger overhaul of educational activity within the Reichswehr. Manfred Messerschmidt noted in *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat* that one of the key objectives consisted of teaching National Socialism “not as a political program, but a world-view,” and worked to redefine the meanings of “old-fashioned” concepts such as “state, church, people, culture, and justice.”⁹⁶ The Nazis would not have necessarily seen the program as political, as it engaged with themes the Nazis saw as crucial to Germany’s survival and rebirth as

⁹³ “Supply and Training of officers in the German Army.” Record Group 242: National Archives Collection of Foreign Records Seized, 1675 – 1958, Box 12 Folder 31. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, 2.

⁹⁴ The notions of honor and comradeship among German soldiers has a long history. Thomas Kühne discusses the concepts of comradeship and honor in *The Rise and Fall of Comradeship: Hitler’s Soldiers, Male Bonding and Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 147, 239.

⁹⁵ Honor came to be tied to Nazi ideology as well. A notable example of Nazi ideological law that impacted soldiers were the antisemitic Nuremberg Laws, established in 1935, which were meant to protect the purity of the German race by prohibiting mixed German-Jewish marriages or relationships. Indeed, soldiers accused of breaking these codes during the war were hanged, a much harsher punishment than the public humiliation suffered by German civilians. See Richard Evans. *The Third Reich at War: How the Nazis Led Germany From Conquest to Disaster*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 354-355.

⁹⁶ Manfred Messerschmidt. *Die Wehrmacht Im NS-Staat: Zeit der Indoktrination*. (Hamburg: R.v. Decker’s Verlag, 1969), 38-39.

a world power. The program was not political, but rather an education in the Nazi worldview so that soldiers who were taught under the educational changes would emerge with an understanding of Nazism as not just a political ideology, but a full worldview that should inform their ways of thinking on every topic. These redefinitions placed primacy on Nazi interpretations of these concepts, particularly those of state, culture, and justice, whose definitions were tremendously altered by Nazi propaganda.⁹⁷ The idea of people, or *Volk*, had several meanings, but the key phrases it was used in during this period—*Volk ohne Raum; Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer; Volksgemeinschaft; and Herrenvolk*—all demonstrated the primacy Nazi propaganda and the training course placed on the unification and expansion of the German nation. The antisemitic component of the training course, though present from the very beginning, did not reach its height until February 1939, when manuals defending the notion that “Jews have no share in Germany’s great and unique history.”⁹⁸ A half dozen manuals attempting to indoctrinate German officers in an antisemitic version of German history were released in an attempt to create ideological uniformity within the army. In this sense, the drafting of training courses focused not on military matters exclusively, but also on racial elements that centered on the promotion of Aryanism as the master race and disparaging Jews as inferior. The training course, which would teach officer candidates about the many facets of National Socialism as a worldview rather than political ideology, maintained “the basis of Reichswehr ideology, the Idea of the Fatherland,” but also incorporated the new *Weltanschauung* of National Socialism.⁹⁹ The goal of the training program was to create the notion that National Socialism and soldiering

⁹⁷ National Socialist understandings and interpretations of these concepts could fill libraries; however, the army’s understanding of these concepts centers around ideas of *Heimat*, national defense, and expansionism.

⁹⁸ C.A. Hoberg, as quoted in Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 85-86.

⁹⁹ Manfred Messerschmidt. *Die Wehrmacht Im NS-Staat*, 39.

shared a “common intellectual homeland” that would bridge any gaps that separated a soldier’s task in waging war and the ideological work of National Socialism.¹⁰⁰ The weekly newspaper of German military affairs, the *Militär-Wochenblatt*, published an article on August 18, 1933 titled “The Soldier and the National Revolution” to demonstrate the “coming reality” of National Socialism within the army and its resultant “spiritual revolution full of boundless intolerance.”¹⁰¹ Since National Socialism and soldiering were being taught as extensions of one another, the affirmation of this revolution had developed a strong community in the officer corps already by August 1933.¹⁰²

The training course’s conception and primary goals highlighted the mentality Nazi leaders wanted army officers to understand, one rooted in heroism and devotion to the Fatherland. In a speech given by General Brauchitsch to the Tannenberg *Kriegsschulen* on July 20, 1939, the long-term goals of the training course were fully realized:

Prussia—German country! A slogan for the Tannenberg-run war schools in 1939! But it is also an answer to those who now want to establish alleged rights to this ancient ground, which has been connected to German nature and history in a thousand-year tradition, and to believe that the power to assert it is no longer the old one! A mistake that a soldier does not like disproving! I need only to look at you ensigns of the course of 1939 to know: you personify the same soldierhood, which was here fought so bravely, which put his opponent down in number, and still won! You would, like your fathers, also give your best and your blood for countrymen and leaders! We do not seek battle, but we fear it even less...¹⁰³

These ideas expressed the intended goal of the training course—to weld together traditional conceptions of German patriotism and soldierhood with National Socialist teachings, including

¹⁰⁰ Manfred Messerschmidt. *Die Wehrmacht Im NS-Staat*, 38.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 39. The *Militär-Wochenblatt* was a weekly military journal based in Berlin published from 1816 to 1942.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ “Auszug aus der Ansprache des Oberbefehlshabers des Heeres, Generaloberst von Brauchtisch, vor der Kriegsschulen des Heeres im Reichsehrenmal Tannenberg am 20. Juli 1939.” Record Group 242: National Archives Collection of Foreign Records Seized, 1675 – 1958. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

plans of irredentism aimed at Poland and the inherent superiority of the German race. The expansionist sentiments that helped justify the invasion of Poland are evident in this speech by Brauchitsch before graduating officers in the summer of 1939, as well as the emphasis on the Fatherland as in need of defense. The sentiments Brauchitsch echoed in his speech are also deeply rooted in the idea that the officers of the 1939 graduating class, trained in the ways of the 1933-34 training course, would be the leaders that conquered Europe in the name of Hitler's Thousand Year Reich.

By the end of 1933, the debate—both internal within the army and in German society as a whole—over the extent to which National Socialism would infiltrate every aspect of life in German had been answered. The military had supported Hindenburg's decision to replace Schleicher with Hitler as chancellor; many military leaders believed Hitler would allow the army to retain its "state within a state" status. Tensions grew, however, as the original paramilitary organization of the Nazi Party, the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), grew more powerful and its leader, Ernst Röhm, expressed his desire to absorb the Reichsheer into the SA to create a larger military organization devoted to Nazism. Hindenburg pressured Hitler to dissuade Röhm, telling Hitler that if Röhm did not back down, Hindenburg would have to declare martial law and suppress the SA.¹⁰⁴ The new training course—still being drafted as 1933 came to a close—was indicative of a larger political climate that was quickly accepting National Socialist teachings and ideology as truth. Thus, the army remained in a precarious political position in 1933 as Nazi power grew and its inclusion of the army within its agenda became more apparent. The army's leaders, whose position had been precarious in 1933 as it navigated several chancellors and a crumbling government, had yet to fall victim to the oratorical power and allure of Adolf Hitler; yet it could

¹⁰⁴ Sir John Wheeler-Bennett. *The Nemesis of Power*, 320.

not withstand the infiltration of NSDAP propaganda from its own soldiers, as the Scheringer-Ludin affair demonstrated in 1930. As German society began to accept and embrace National Socialist ideology, its soldiers followed suit, and thus the army could not prevent the diffusion of political propaganda into its ranks. As 1933 ended and the New Year arrived, the Reichsheer would lose its grip on its autonomy, sliding towards an envelopment by the National Socialists.

1934: The Reichsheer and the Röhm Purge

A veteran of the Great War, alumni of the Prussian Military Academy, and member of the general staff since 1911, Werner von Fritsch was well-versed in the politics of both the Imperial German Army and the Reichsheer. He had gained his reputation among the General Staff during the years immediately before the Great War, during which he spent much of his post-officer school career “in a succession of Staff duties of increasing importance.”¹⁰⁵ While serving in the officer corps, Fritsch worked under Hans von Seeckt, kindling a close professional relationship that, upon Seeckt’s resignation, left Fritsch with the notion that he was the “chosen guardian of the ‘Seeckt Tradition.’”¹⁰⁶ This sentiment also shared by Kurt von Schleicher. Both men understood the lasting impact Seeckt had on the German army and were eager to be seen as his successor. Fritsch’s claim as Seeckt’s successor over Schleicher is interesting, as Fritsch’s first encounters with Seeckt were less than amicable. Fritsch notably clashed with Seeckt as early as 1924 over Seeckt allowing the Reichsheer to cooperate with the Weimar government rather than organize a coup that could potentially dismantle the democratic government and create a military dictatorship. Though both Seeckt and Fritsch were antisemitic and distrustful of democrats, they

¹⁰⁵ Fritsch entered the Prussian Military Academy in 1907 at only 27 years old, and attended with other notable military leaders such as von Hammerstein, von Willisen, and von Schleicher. He was appointed directly into the General Staff Corps in 1911. See Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power*, 301.

¹⁰⁶ Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power*, 302.

differed in their beliefs over what constituted the best way to protect and preserve the German nation, especially as it pertained to the military's role in political matters, and vice versa. While Seeckt was not a democrat and contemptuous of the Weimar government, he recognized that the army was not powerful enough to survive as an entirely lone entity. Fritsch's relationship to the officer corps was a tumultuous one; his alliance to Nazism often took precedence over his alliance to the army, and yet he also opposed the creation and deployment of paramilitary extensions of the Nazi Party that could potentially wield more power than the army; this was especially true of the SA.¹⁰⁷

The army was, in early 1934, dwarfed by the immensity of SA membership, then boasting over 2 million members. The SA, founded in 1921, posed a significant threat to the Reichsheer as the National Socialists gained more ground in the Reichstag and in German society. The political training course posed several problems within the context of the SA and how National Socialism was seizing control of Germany. The SA, as a paramilitary extension of the Nazi Party, was already ideologically committed to the Nazi cause and significantly larger than the regular army. The Brownshirts of the SA, as they were called, were already veterans of sorts, having fought on German streets in the early 1920s, waging a war for political survival and success that they had soundly won. The Reichsheer, born out of defeat, could not say the same, and this created tension between leaders of the SA and the army.

SA co-founder Ernst Röhm, originally a friend of Hitler's who was executed in the Night of the Long Knives purge in 1934 after being seen as a potential political rival to Hitler, favored

¹⁰⁷ American journalist William Shirer, who worked and lived in Berlin in the 1930s and witnessed firsthand the early rise of Nazism, notably recorded that Fritsch was deeply antagonistic to the SS in particular, often making snide and sarcastic comments about the SS. By the time Fritsch took command in 1934, Hitler was becoming progressively more wary of *Sturmabteilung* leader Ernst Röhm. See William Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960), 200.

absorbing the Reichsheer into the SA, as the Reichsheer was still, in 1934, crippled by the stipulations of Versailles and too small to be of any success if Germany were to wage a war of aggression. The Reichsheer's inability to provide deployable troops limited its ability to defend itself from threatening rhetoric that it could possibly be subsumed under the SA's power.¹⁰⁸ The notion that the Reichswehr, inherently weak because of its Versailles limitations, created the rhetoric within the SA that it was incapable of defending the Reich and should be absorbed into the SA. It was Röhm's idea to absorb the Reichswehr into the SA to create a National Socialist people's army. Röhm also had the idea of a "people's army" based on meritocratic principles of officer promotion, but Hitler was strongly opposed to this idea; instead, he wanted to maintain the Reichswehr, but rearm it and mold it into a larger, stronger fighting force that shared an ideological foundation with the SA. The army was naturally opposed to this idea, and so was Hitler, who eventually came to see Röhm and his attempts to subvert the army under SA control as a threat to his power. However, Hitler "sought to benefit from the SA's pressure on the regular army" to accept and conform to the tenets of National Socialism.¹⁰⁹ In this sense, the SA did not form a new basis for the Reichsheer, or the later Wehrmacht, but rather formed the idea of what militarism would look like in Hitler's Germany. The SA, as well as the SS (*Schutzstaffel*), helped radicalize German society by facilitating the rise of ultra-nationalist and pro-militaristic sentiment that would promote widespread support for the rapid growth of the army and its later annexes and invasions. The Reichsheer, despite its nebulous political ties at the time, was still

¹⁰⁸ The Reichsheer's relationship to the SA was complicated and did involve some access to weapons. However, the Reichsheer did not provide weapons to the SA on a regular basis; a Reichsheer commander in Munich, General Otto von Lossow, notably provided the SA with small arms to prevent an SPD-led disruption of the social order in Munich on May 1, 1923. See Daniel Siemens. *Stormtroopers: A New History of Hitler's Brownshirts*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 21-22.

¹⁰⁹ Hitler initially encouraged a spirit of cooperation between the Reichswehr and the SA with the intention that the organizations would work together for "border protection and pre-military training of German youth." Daniel Siemens. *Stormtroopers*, 159.

deeply influenced by national politics. The army's precarious position as a pawn for political purposes left it vulnerable to such pressures, especially as high command retained mixed opinions on National Socialism's place in the army. In this sense, it is possible to see the training program rooted in Nazi propaganda as turning point for politics in the army, as the course presented appeasement to the Nazis and acceptance of National Socialism's undeniable future in German politics.

By late 1933, Hitler came to realize Röhm's desire to maintain the SA as the primary paramilitary force of the Nazi Party was becoming unnecessary, especially when understood within the context of the Scheringer-Ludin affair and the growing support for National Socialism within the regular army. The SA's original intention—to protect National Socialist agitators in conflicts on the streets—was no longer necessary now that the Nazis had control of the German government. Despite appointing Röhm to his cabinet and attempting to maintain a professional relationship with him, tensions and fears of political rivalry took over, and Röhm, under the pretense that he and other SA leadership were planning a coup, was arrested in Munich and eventually executed in the aftermath of the Night of the Long Knives.¹¹⁰ With Röhm out of the picture, the SA's role in German politics began to diminish, leaving the Reichsheer safe from being absorbed into the political paramilitary organization. Schleicher also fell victim to the purge; he was shot in June at his home along with his wife. Schleicher's assassination was the result of both his feud with Blomberg and Hitler's insistence that Schleicher was involved in a plot to overthrow the Nazi government.

¹¹⁰ Daniel Siemens. *Stormtroopers*, 164-172. Kurt von Schleicher, by then an anti-Nazi and deemed irrelevant to Nazi high command, was also murdered during the Night of the Long Knives (also known as the Röhm Purge). Schleicher had received a tip from a friend that his life was in danger and to flee the country, but Schleicher dismissed it as a practical joke. See Sir John Wheeler-Bennett. *The Nemesis of Power*, 317.

On June 25, 1934, just prior to the purge, Fritsch placed the Reichswehr on alert, cancelling all leave and urging commanders to prepare in the event that the purge would require support from the army.¹¹¹ Four days later, Werner von Blomberg announced in the NSDAP's newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, that "the army stood resolutely behind the *Führer*."¹¹² For the next 48 hours "bloody murder stalked through the Reich," and the Reichswehr's position as a supporter of the *Führer* was cemented into place.¹¹³ Though NSDAP propaganda had breached the ranks of the army much earlier, the winter of 1933-34 proved to be the moment when the army began to devise a training program that would incorporate Nazi teachings into its officer training. This program was essentially an act of self-preservation for the army. The crumbling Weimar government, growing power and pressure of the SA, and rapidly increasing popularity of National Socialism all combined to place the army in a precarious position that left it with few choices if it wanted to retain its autonomy and leadership. However, the extent to which the Reichsheer, as it stood in the summer of 1934 before the Night of the Long Knives, was a Nazi organization was still minimal at best. The training program served as a jumping off point for the army as it spent the winter of 1933 and spring of 1934 navigating the precarious political situation; the Reichsheer was still operating and acting as its own entity, it was not until Blomberg's public pronouncement of the army's support of Hitler that its alliance with the Nazi Party was cemented in a way that would be made clearer in the coming years.

¹¹¹ Sir John Wheeler-Bennett. *The Nemesis of Power*, 321.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 322.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 321.

Conclusion

In defending his own actions and attempting to explain the rise of Nazism in Germany during his post-war interrogations, Field Marshal Brauchitsch observed that “Hitler was the fate of Germany and this fate could not be stayed.”¹¹⁴ This must certainly have seemed true in July of 1934 as the army found itself standing behind Hitler in the midst of a bloody political purge. The events over the winter of 1933-34 demonstrated a remarkable shift in how the Reichsheer reacted to Nazi propaganda. Prior to 1933, the army still prosecuted soldiers and officers found disseminating Nazi ideology within their ranks, as the Scheringer-Ludin affair demonstrated. Yet the affair also demonstrated a shift within the officer corps, one shifting towards an acceptance and strong belief in the tenets of National Socialism to save Germany. Three years after the Scheringer-Ludin trial, the beginnings of a new training course steeped in the politics of National Socialism began to pave the way for an army conceived under political auspices. The training course marked the first instance of army-supported political education within its ranks, and would remain one of the biggest changes in officer instruction in NSDAP politics until 1942, when the structure and level of political education would intensify in the face of a rapidly changing military situation.¹¹⁵

Though Hitler did not take full control of the army until 1935 with his proclamation of German military sovereignty and his rapid foray into rearmament, the German army became firmly entangled in National Socialism almost a full year earlier, in July 1934 as the Röhm purge crippled the SA and left the army standing behind Hitler. While questions over the army’s loyalties to the Nazi Party still linger, the army’s critical position in 1933-34 left it unable to

¹¹⁴ Field Marshal Brauchitsch, as quoted in Major General John Strawson. *If By Chance: Military Turning Points that Changed History*. (London: Macmillan, 2003), 235.

¹¹⁵ “Political Indoctrination and Morale Building in the German Army.” Record Group 242: National Archives Collection of Foreign Records Seized, 1675 – 1958. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

choose a path other than to align with Hitler. With the pressure exerted from the SA's desire to absorb the Reichsheer into its own ranks and the presence of Nazi propaganda within its officer corps, the Reichsheer was forced into making a critical decision. Political and military leaders such as Schleicher, Blomberg, and Fritsch all navigated political-military relations at a crucial moment in German politics. The Reichsheer, in the early months of 1933 after Hitler's appointment to the chancellorship, had yet to take an official stance on its relationship to Nazism. Yet the events of the winter of 1933 demonstrate a shift in this stance, as the political atmosphere of the time left little room for the army to operate within without taking a political stance. The training course for officers served as an effort to subsume the army under Nazi control at a moment of critical weakness as the army navigated the murky waters of a post-Weimar Germany.

CHAPTER THREE

The Political Education of the German Army under Hitler

In May 1934, Defense Minister Werner von Blomberg issued an order requiring the Reichswehr to adopt a new insignia on their uniforms: the classic imperial German eagle clutching a swastika.¹¹⁶ The symbolism of the act represented a culmination of the years leading up to it, as the German army more closely aligned with the Nazi Party. The original belief of many Reichsheer leaders—that it could administer itself beyond the control of the new Nazi leadership—had been eclipsed by the encroachment of the Nazi Party’s controlling grip on all state affairs, including the military. A month later, Blomberg would enforce a new oath of loyalty that all soldiers and officers would have to swear not only to the German state, but also to Hitler personally, an unprecedented display of allegiance to a particular government and ideology.

While the previous chapter explained how the Nazi Party obtained control of officer training through new officer courses, this chapter details the nature of that training in the years prior to World War II. It argues that the mid-1930s presented sharper discontinuities from the 1920s due to increased interaction and intervention in military affairs on the part of the Nazi government, and that these discontinuities all fell along political lines. The discontinuities from the Reichsheer of the 1920s to the fledgling Wehrmacht of the mid-1930s were sharply focused on a single goal—instilling young officer candidates with the political ideology of the Nazi regime—yet also aimed to shape how young officers understood and conceptualized modern

¹¹⁶ Sir John Wheeler-Bennett. *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918-1945*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1953), 312.

warfare. This chapter will also pose questions on the efficacy of this training. What was the nature of NSDAP political training during this period? Was officer training part of a spectrum of continuity or discontinuity over the period from the early 1920s to the mid-1930s? Officer training in the 1930s highlights threads of discontinuity between the tenures of Reinhardt and Seeckt in the early 1920s and that of Fritsch and Blomberg in the 1930s.

Historians have addressed questions of continuity and discontinuity through arguments concerning the changes made in the German army in the interwar years. The German's army's evolution from a defeated force limited to 100,000 men to the technological marvel that marched into Poland in September 1939 has fascinated scholars ever since, and the arguments surrounding the possibilities and realities of such a transformation cast wide nets on subject matter and interpretation. These arguments are often found couched within broader historical questions over the significance of political involvement in military affairs in the early years of the Nazi regime, questions over tactical changes such as Blitzkrieg, and other military affairs relating to expansionist plans for the East.¹¹⁷ Within military training, the continuity between Prussian, Imperial, Reichsheer, and Wehrmacht training were strongly rooted in a German tradition of producing high quality officers capable of understanding and handling any tactical problem placed in front of them. As the Nazis took control of Germany and began to make political changes, the army as an institution was grafted with National Socialist conceptions of warfare—but how different were these conceptions and their implementation?

¹¹⁷ See, Alexander B. Rossino. *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology, and Atrocity*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003). Omer Bartov. *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Jeff Rutherford. *Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front: The German Infantry's War, 1941-1944*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). David Stahel. *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

Cadet Schools

“You are here to learn how to die,” was a common greeting in the early 20th century to young officer aspirants as they arrived at German cadet schools (*Kadettenschulen*), military boarding schools that taught boys as young as ten.¹¹⁸ The greeting for the young peacetime officer aspirants demonstrated the mental attitude with which the young officer hopefuls were to be instilled: that to give their lives for the German cause would be the highest honor, and one for which they must be educated in how to do properly. These cadet school taught a mix of traditional academics like math, history, literature, and foreign languages, while also providing instruction in military topics such as marching, small arms training, tactics, and map reading. Graduates of the schools were not required to go on to further training with units and then to war schools (*Kriegsschulen*), and, as Jörg Muth notes, many did not pursue further careers with the officer corps.¹¹⁹ Upon graduation from the academies, students received their *Abitur*, the same degree received by German high school students in the non-military *Gymnasium*, which served as an entryway into a university. Cadet schools were for high school aged boys who were interested in pursuing careers in the German officer corps, but service was not a requirement for entrance into the cadet schools. Students could choose to enlist or to move on to a university upon graduation. However, the cadet schools were popular for young men that would go on to become officers in the Reichsheer and Wehrmacht.

The cadets that graduated and chose to join to army rather than enroll at a university typically came from the highest German social classes and were generally committed to remaining in the officer corps as career officers. The early education that intertwined militaristic principles of strict discipline and personal integrity with traditional educations provided a strong

¹¹⁸ Jörg Muth. *Command Culture*, 85.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 109.

foundation on which an officer's further education could be built. As the officer corps transitioned in the 1930s from an aristocratic officer corps to one based more on meritocratic and technocratic principles, the men trained and educated in cadet schools often displayed the most aptitude in officer selection processes. After the Nazi seizure of power, admission into the officer corps shifted from being typically class-based to meritocratic.

The most successful cadets went on to attend not the war schools, which were for combat officers, but to the War Academy in Berlin (the *Kriegsakademie*), which trained staff officers for the German military's high command. Notable graduates had included Carl von Clausewitz and Helmuth von Moltke, the Prussian Army's chief of staff for thirty years. The *Kriegsakademie* was unique, as it did not heed Defense Minister Werner von Blomberg's 1936 decree that all officers schools had to include instruction that dealt with "the interrelationships between people, State and [the Nazi] movement."¹²⁰ No evidence exists that the *Kriegsakademie* incorporated political instruction within its coursework or in lectures by civilians in the afternoons. The continuity between the *Kriegsakademie* under Prussian control, Weimar, and early Nazi control thus remains the strongest in terms of how little National Socialist influence was able to influence curriculum and officer instruction. Indeed, the evidence suggests the war schools, as training ground for officers most likely to lead in combat, faced the most National Socialist influence in its curriculum.

Germans who wished to join the war schools had to provide proof of German nationality, have a clean police record, be unmarried, provide proof of Aryan ancestry (from 1935 onward),

¹²⁰ Werner von Blomberg, as quoted in Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds. *Nazism, 1919-1945, Vol. 3: Foreign Policy, War and Racial Extermination*. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001), 33.

be physically fit, have completed their Reich Labor Service term, and possess an *Abitur*.¹²¹ The candidate submitted to psychological testing by a board of officers, who determined the candidate's mental fortitude as well as moral qualities and character. Upon passing these examinations, the candidate, under the new title of cadet, would be attached to a unit for one year, during which he trained, lived, and learned among the enlisted recruits.¹²² The goal of this year within the enlisted ranks was to imbue a deeply felt understanding of the mentalities, attitudes, and problems faced by enlisted soldiers, as well as to acquaint the officer cadets with the knowledge of the physical and mental demands military life would require. Since many officer cadets would eventually return to the very units with which they spent their first year of service, officer cadets also got to know the soldiers they were likely to command.

During that first year among enlisted soldiers, officer cadets received separate instruction in the following subjects: "professional duties of the German soldier, professional and social duties of the German officer, organization of the soldier's own unit, executive chain of command, military terms, military written communications (sketches, reports, epistolary style)."¹²³ These classes were meant to familiarize officer candidates with the military jargon they would be using to communicate with their chain of command in the future, as well as to introduce them to their future duties as responsibilities as officers commanding soldiers on the frontlines.

¹²¹ "The Supply, selection and training of Officers in German Army." Record Group 242: National Archives Collection of Foreign Records Seized, 1675 – 1958, Box 12 Folder 30. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, 1.

¹²² Primary sources originating from American intelligence during World War II sometimes note that officer candidates spent two years among the ranks before moving to a war school; however, all German sources and sources from former German officers describe being among the ranks for a year before transfer to a war school. See, *The Supply, selection and training of Officers in the German Army*, 1.

¹²³ *The Supply, selection and training of Officers in the German Army*, 4.

Upon conclusion of this year of training in the field, officer candidates were sent to a war school for nine months of coursework, which was identical for all service branches and consisted of classes in the fundamentals of military theory.¹²⁴ Coursework also included the field exercises established under Hans von Seeckt in the 1920s. After the implementation of an additional National Socialist curriculum in 1934, the coursework remained the same throughout the decade. The post-1934 National Socialist inflections to the coursework included occasional lectures in the afternoons, typically delivered by civilians, about political matters such as *Lebensraum*, the question of Danzig, antisemitic lectures, and altered histories that presented Germany as the victim of Allied aggression and taken advantage of by the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles.

For an officer candidate at a war school the day began at 0600 hours with a wakeup call, formation, and breakfast. Classes started at 0800 hours and continued to 1500 hours, with one break for lunch. The faculty at each war school taught all classes related to the military discipline, from army organization to marksmanship.¹²⁵ As classes ended at 1500 hours, officer candidates had their afternoons free; during this time, when there were no political lectures, officer candidates were evaluated based on their personal characteristics. Candidates with penchants for drinking, gambling, picking fights, instigating romantic relationships, or otherwise engaging in behavior unbecoming a young officer were punished. The shift from aristocratic to a meritocratic officer selection is especially evident in these requirements, as they prioritized officers with impeccable moral characters in addition to those with the strong intellectual capabilities required of officer candidates. However, intellectual curiosity that led officer candidates towards politics not related to National Socialism were often punished. Attending

¹²⁴ United States War Department. *German Military Training*. Washington, DC, September 17, 1942. (From U.S. Army Military History Institute), 14.

¹²⁵ Jörg Muth, *Command Culture*, 105.

political rallies was a punishable offense during the 1920s and the early 1930s.¹²⁶ As the notable case of young lieutenants Hans Ludin and Richard Scheringer who were arrested for distributing NSDAP propaganda at their artillery garrison in Ulm in March 1930 demonstrated, political involvement was frowned upon by officers' schools. After 1934, when new political courses began to be introduced, this rule became less likely to be enforced, especially in regard to Nazi rallies, and attendance at rallies promoting monarchism, republicanism, or non-Nazi politics were strictly prohibited.

In war schools, all officers learned the basics of being an officer together regardless of their intended branch of service; this served to create a baseline of education on which branch schools could build on with specific knowledge for their branch or area of specialty. After finishing nine months of coursework, officer candidates went to weapons schools whose curriculum centered on the candidate's intended branch of service. Through all of this education, one thread of continuity remained the belief that officers had to understand new infantry policy standards, as well as life from the perspective of an enlisted man. Siegfried Knappe, a young officer cadet from Brunsbüttel who entered an artillery school in October of 1936, emphasized the importance German military command placed on its officer candidates understanding life from an enlisted man's perspective. Training for artillery officer candidates began with six weeks of infantry training to enforce the ideals handed down from Seeckt that a well-mobilized and well-trained infantry was the key to a modern army's success. Knappe recalled:

During this infantry-training period, we would get up at five o'clock, perform stable duty [caring for the artillery company's horses], have breakfast, fall out, and begin a very full day that ended only when we fell into bed, exhausted, at ten o'clock. The training was interesting, well planned, and well organized. Lunch was our main meal of the day.... After lunch, we would get fifteen minutes or so of rest, then we would typically change

¹²⁶ Jörg Muth, *Command Culture*, 105.

uniforms (the clothing was prescribed for different activities) and get a lecture on espionage or German national history.¹²⁷

After a year of training with his artillery regiment in Jena, Knappe was given a ten day furlough before reporting to *Kriegsschule Potsdam* in October 1937. In 1937, Germany had only four war schools in Potsdam, Hannover, Dresden, and Munich; a third war school in the Austrian city of Wiener-Neustadt was appropriated for Wehrmacht use later. Each school had approximately one thousand students.¹²⁸ Since the cadets who made it to the war schools were all gymnasium or *Kadettenschule* graduates and had experienced a year of duty in a regiment and a year of military coursework already, their classroom training consisted primarily of tactics, topography and map reading, engineering, basic artillery, horseback riding, parade drilling with rifles, “cooperation with the Luftwaffe,” and physical education.¹²⁹ Candidates typically spent six to seven hours in the classroom and three in the field each day.

Coursework was important, but the tradition of field exercises handed down from Seeckt’s tenure were also an important part of life at war schools. Hans von Seeckt’s influence remained in early Wehrmacht training; field exercises and war games were a staple of officer candidate training in the mid to late 1930s. As Knappe remembered,

We got homework every second or third weekend. In an attempt to put us under stress similar to a combat situation, they gave us very little time to do the assignment. They would give us a situation in which we were a battalion commander. Our battalion was given a certain goal for the day and we were marching to meet that goal. Suddenly we would receive a message that the enemy had been spotted. Then we might get a contradictory message. Then we would encounter something else that would alter the situation. The problem was written out and we would read it as if we were seeing it. From all the information given us, we had to make our decision. Three or four possibilities might be equally correct. We had to judge the situation and make a decision on the basis

¹²⁷ Siegfried Knappe and Ted Brusaw. *Soldat: Reflections of a German Soldier, 1936-1949*. (New York: Random House, 1992), 104.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 117-118.

of what we knew. We had to write the orders we would give to implement that decision. We had to explain why we made the decision; it was not so much that we had to make a patent decision as how we came to it, how we defended it, and how we executed it.¹³⁰

The presence of Seeckt's field exercise training from the 1920s in Knappe's experience at the *Kriegsschule Potsdam* is evidence of a basic thread of continuity between the Weimar and early Nazi periods. Indeed, many of the basic structures of military training remained intact during these two tumultuous periods. Seeckt's emphasis on a modernized infantry capable of moving rapidly across a battlefield, as well as his field exercises, were evident in Knappe's generation as they passed through *Kriegsschule Potsdam* in 1937.

Present in Knappe's training, as in training for all officer cadets, was the twisted implementation of the proverb *Wissen ist Macht* ("knowledge is power"). Good officers, by German standards, could "be developed for the lower commands by careful training, for leadership [was] not confined to a few individuals gifted with superior qualities."¹³¹ This belief was an extension of the meritocratic officer corps base; officers and the power they wielded on the battlefield were not natural talents in most cases, but rather the result of hard work and knowledge. An unnamed German officer later noted that the success of German officer training concerning leadership depended "upon the selection of officers of proved character and skill, and upon our system of learning each required task and maneuver to perfection by repeated practice. One can only learn by doing. The proverb *Wissen ist Macht* is in truth not accurate. Knowledge becomes power only when it is being successfully applied in the gaining of an objective."¹³² The twist in the understanding of the proverb for German officers was that knowledge was useless as a mechanism for exerting power unless it was successfully being applied to gain a particular

¹³⁰ Siegfried Knappe. *Soldat*, 118.

¹³¹ United States War Department, *German Military Training*, 20.

¹³² Unknown German officer, as quoted in, United States War Department. *German Military Training*, 20-21.

objective. Knowledge for its own sake was not as important as knowledge that lead to a particular desired result or reaction.

Knappe also studied military history though a particularly nationalistic lens, as he noted the course material centered on “Prussian battles from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and battles from the great World War,” as well as how “tactics and strategy were used in the battles.”¹³³ The lens was meant to highlight Prussian and, later, German achievements on the battlefield to demonstrate to German officer candidates their inherent superiority within their German ancestry and within the long history of German military excellence. Officer candidates at *Kriegsschule Potsdam* also studied the tactics of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, the Battle of Hastings, and Roman and Greek battles, spending entire afternoons discussing “why things went right and why things went wrong.”¹³⁴ Though Siegfried Knappe was not more specific regarding the nature of his coursework other than vague terms like “espionage” and “German national history,” the contents of the courses likely reflected the sentiment espoused by Werner von Blomberg earlier that year, with his decree that the “officer corps of the Wehrmacht can only fulfill its task of leadership in the nation and State if it adopts the National Socialist ideology which gives direction to the life of the German nation and State and appropriates it intellectually totally and with conviction.”¹³⁵ Knappe’s coursework, conceived under the auspices of the 1933 training course, was cemented as fact by Blomberg’s decree that war schools of all branches must allow at least two hours per month for “political instruction within the context of the part of the course dealing with defense organization,” and that “every opportunity which occurs in the course of duty or instruction must be seized to deal with the

¹³³ Siegfried Knappe. *Soldat*, 119.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Werner von Blomberg, as quoted in Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds. *Nazism, 1919-1945, Vol. 3: Foreign Policy, War and Racial Extermination*, 33.

interrelationships between people, State, and [the National Socialist] movement.”¹³⁶ As Blomberg’s words indicate, two hours was the bare minimum he encouraged when it came to political education; indeed, many war schools spent much more than two hours per month on political instruction.¹³⁷ With this new emphasis on political instruction, Blomberg ordered “officers detailed to carry out political instruction” to be sent to schools to teach courses; the Wehrmacht also supplemented instruction with “special political lectures by outside personalities” during training at war schools.¹³⁸

Thus, officers experienced a wide range of both military and political training they were expected to carry forward into their roles as commanders of combat units. The training, in regards to its military aspects, remained largely the same from the Weimar to early Nazi years, making allowances for advancements in weapons technologies and updated tactical measures. The threads of discontinuity were present in the influence of political training, introduced after the winter of 1933-1934, after which officers received training in the political and ideological issues facing the Reich.

Into the Ranks: The “Morale Officer”

The idea of adding propagandists to the ranks was something the NSDAP and military had begun to consider in in the mid-1930s.¹³⁹ The Nazi Party and the highest ranks of the military leadership discussed the idea of “providing a framework for the effective execution of

¹³⁶ Werner von Blomberg, as quoted in Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds. *Nazism, 1919-1945, Vol. 3: Foreign Policy, War and Racial Extermination*, 33.

¹³⁷ “Political Indoctrination and Morale Building in the German Army.” Record Group 242: National Archives Collection of Foreign Records Seized, 1675 – 1958. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹³⁸ “Political Indoctrination and Morale Building in the German Army.” Record Group 242: National Archives Collection of Foreign Records Seized, 1675 – 1958. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

¹³⁹ Aristotle Kallis. *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*, 56.

‘propaganda’ activities within the Wehrmacht in the event of war.”¹⁴⁰ The reasons behind the presence of this idea was twofold: first, many attributed the defeat in 1918, in part, to “a wider failure in the propaganda domain.”¹⁴¹ Secondly, the need to maintain a cohesive ideological worldview among the enlisted soldiers was deemed necessary in the 1930s in the context of the ideologically driven motives for aggressive expansionism and the annihilation of Europe’s Jewish population.

By 1937, the army was deep into rearmament, the Nuremburg Laws of 1935 had facilitated the second class status of German Jews, and propaganda declared the German need to obtain land to the east. With a second war on the horizon, Hitler and Wehrmacht high command believed one of the keys to success would be the complete devotion of the army to the Nazi cause. The question of whether or not the Final Solution as it was implemented in the 1940s was in the works from the beginnings of Hitler’s plans to invade Poland are still widely debated among historians of Germany and the Holocaust.¹⁴² However, it is not unreasonable to assume that Hitler and Wehrmacht generals understood that the war would depend largely on ideology that espoused the inferiority of Jewish and Slavic people. Thus, the understanding that the Wehrmacht would operate more efficiently if a unifying ideology was accepted by most soldiers. Creating a framework for effectively distributing propaganda into the ranks was achieved through the creation and implementation of propaganda companies that would be comprised of soldiers who possessed some level of technical and propagandistic expertise. These soldiers

¹⁴⁰ Aristotle Kallis. *Nazi Propaganda and the Second World War*, 56.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² See, Christopher Browning. “The Nazi Decision to Commit Mass Murder: Three Interpretations: The Euphoria of Victory and the Final Solution: Summer-Fall 1941.” *German Studies Review* Vol. 17, No. 3 (1994), pp. 473-481. Ian Kershaw. *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

would report directly to their command units. The propaganda soldiers were known as morale officers, and were embedded with units to maintain a level of ideological cohesion.¹⁴³

Political training was tied closely with morale building and discipline in the Wehrmacht; National Socialist propaganda aimed at military officers prioritized notions of loyalty to the Reich, to Hitler, and to the *Volk*, as vessels through which victory could be more easily achieved. Prior to the implementation of political officers in 1943, the task of maintaining morale and keeping enlisted men up to date with National Socialist propaganda fell to morale officers (*Betreuungsoffiziere*). These officers, as an extension of the intelligence sections of Wehrmacht divisions, were responsible for holding lectures and discussions among enlisted soldiers. Topics included updates on the “general situation,” which could mean topics ranging from the military situation, political, ideological, or economic topics, questions of governmental policy, debunking enemy propaganda, “and every day personal problems of the soldiers.”¹⁴⁴ Morale officers were also responsible for obtaining items meant to boost morale—“reading material, radio sets, games, and musical instruments”—and supervising leisure time activities.¹⁴⁵ The intention with these officers was to maintain a level of optimism among troops that facilitated the belief that National Socialism was correct, Hitler infallible, and Germany indestructible.

The role of the morale officer was not simply to maintain ideological devotion to the cause, but also to help enlisted soldiers keep in touch with their families back home through assistance in obtaining furlough, receipt of letters and other mail, and help solving personal

¹⁴³ It is important to note these morale officers were different from the political officers introduced into the ranks in 1943, whose job was to more forcefully maintain ideological cohesion among soldiers as the war rapidly became unwinnable. Pre-1943 morale officers were tasked both with maintaining ideological cohesion and with making sure the emotional and mental wellbeing of soldiers on the front was being addressed. Post-1943 political officers only had one goal: to make sure all Wehrmacht soldiers believed firmly that the war was winnable and the Reich unbreakable.

¹⁴⁴ “Political Indoctrination and Morale Building in the German Army.” Record Group 242: National Archives Collection of Foreign Records Seized, 1675 – 1958. National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD, 7.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

problems.¹⁴⁶ In this sense, the shared camaraderie of soldiers on the front blended with the duties of the morale officer to create the perception among the ranks that the morale officer was there to take care of all a soldier's needs and problems and keep them updated about the political atmosphere on the home front. The political education officers received at the war schools carried forward into the ranks by morale officers and regular officers and passed on to enlisted soldiers who did not experience intensive political training in their own military training. Unit cohesion could thus also be maintained on political and ideological levels through the extension of political training into the ranks by morale officers and commanding officers of each unit.

The morale officer became an ersatz extension of the political training officers experienced in war schools, and this training and education was spread among the enlisted ranks as well. The morale officer could deliver the ideas and propaganda from Wehrmacht high command in a way that regular command officers could not, and it was through this ability, coupled with the morale officer's infiltration into almost every aspect of an enlisted soldier's life on the front lines and even at home, that the army could maintain a high level of ideological devotion to the cause and to the *Endsieg* ("final victory"). As the *Endsieg* became less of a reality and more of a twisted dream, the necessity of political officers deepened as a means of maintaining morale.

The use of morale officers was, ostensibly, for reasons of both political education and maintaining the wellbeing of soldiers in their units. However, officers we trained and "expected to give attention to the mental outlook of their men, and this includes giving them frequent talks on the war. The soldier must know that the war is his personal affair, and he must be instructed on its causes, meaning, and progress."¹⁴⁷ With regular officers trained to maintain these aspects

¹⁴⁶ "Political Indoctrination and Morale Building in the German Army," 8.

¹⁴⁷ US War Department. *German Military Training*, 24.

of their soldiers' mentality, what, then was the purpose of introducing morale officers? Their existence can therefore be interpreted as primarily political, as their responsibilities in educating soldiers on political matters and make sure units maintained a working level of ideological cohesion and understanding. Thus, the role of the morale officer was rooted in the spread of ideology and its maintenance, while regular combat officers were primarily concerned with the wellbeing of their soldiers.

The discontinuities from the 1920s to the early years of the Wehrmacht can be best understood through the implementation of morale officers. The goal of morale officers was to maintain ideological cohesion among soldiers as completely as possible; in this sense, morale officers offer a picture of the goal of National Socialist influence in the army as a whole. Morale officers thus represent the largest thread of discontinuity in the interwar years as they represent the strongest effort to normalize and universalize National Socialist thinking within both the officer corps and the enlisted ranks.

Repercussions

Much has been written on the Wehrmacht's military decisions that increasingly made little to no sense as the war waged on, particularly on the Eastern Front, where the fighting was inflected with sharply realized ideological motivations.¹⁴⁸ Long threads of continuity are evident in this aspect, as traditions dating back to Prussian and Imperial armies played an important role in how political training shaped officers' understanding of the war they were fighting. Given the political education officers experienced that highlighted important parts of National Socialism,

¹⁴⁸ See, David Stahel. *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's Defeat in the East*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Indeed, operational histories of Wehrmacht campaigns and the Wehrmacht itself as an organization such as Stahel's often indirectly engage with the concept of ideology within the Wehrmacht.

such as its antisemitism, its prioritization of the Aryan race, and preoccupations with vaguely identified concepts such as Germany's new destiny as a Thousand Year Reich.

David Stahel argued that “National Socialist military thinking cannot be understood outside the Prussian/ German military tradition, because one builds upon the other.”¹⁴⁹ Under the auspices of tradition, in this way, National Socialism could propose to be a radical new way of understanding warfare, but maintain preexisting military concepts. As Stahel puts it—concepts “energized by National Socialism, but not created by it.”¹⁵⁰ With this understanding, was the political indoctrination in war schools useful for the Nazi Party in creating officers ideologically devoted to the Nazi cause? Stahel recognized seven “basic properties of National Socialist military thinking” that impacted officer training as it was subsumed under Nazi control. These include the prioritization of individual will; normalization of risk in military planning; “routine acceptance of extraordinary casualties” without regard for the cost/ benefit ratio of the casualties; “a diffusion of responsibility for operational failure;” an acceptance that any individual labeled an enemy, whether they were soldier or civilian, could, “and indeed must, be annihilated;” and an “inability to identify faults in the system,” especially within the German system, which categorized the questioning of orders as evidence of disloyalty or a faltering of commitment to the cause.¹⁵¹ These tenets of National Socialist military thinking capitalized on the continuities in German military training in the interwar years by using the stability the continuity provided to, in Stahel's words, energize the army with the aggressive expansionist goals of National Socialism.

Many of these aspects of military thinking were not unique to the National Socialist conception of warfare, and many predate the Nazi regime. Accounting for this fact poses

¹⁴⁹ David Stahel. “The Wehrmacht and National Socialist Military Thinking.” *War in History*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2017, 339.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

problems, as National Socialists were able to inject their own ideological world views and politics into these ways of thinking in the 1930s as a means to express the unity of the German army with National Socialism.

Conclusion

Over the course of the mid-1930s, the Wehrmacht experienced a shift in officer training that incorporated political training in concepts approved and supported by the Nazi Party. The debate over the extent to which this training impacted the officers themselves and how they conducted war during World War II is ongoing. Arguments made by historians often wrestle with questions of continuity and discontinuity of training between the Imperial Army, the Reichswehr, and the early Wehrmacht. Indeed, the evidence suggests a striking amount of continuity, especially structure and educational requirements for those wishing to become officers. Indeed, the critical points of disconnect fall along political and strategic lines, as the major discontinuities all deal with matters of politics or strategy.

The introduction of morale officers represents a significant effort to maintain a level of ideological cohesion among troops. Prior to their introduction, any level of political instruction, such as the instruction implemented by Ludendorff in 1917, were small scale efforts that ultimately failed. The efforts of the morale officers were not failures, and ensured a high level of cohesion for much of the war. The argument that these officers were strictly for enforcement of political ideology is supported by the fact that regular combat officers were trained and expected to provide for their soldiers' mental and physical wellbeing; the fact that morale officers operated under these pretenses served to obscure their goals of ideological uniformity among the troops.

CONCLUSION

Historians often identify a decline in the German General Staff after Moltke the Elder retired.¹⁵² Moltke's successors could not emulate him in "their basic tasks—to provide leadership, strategic planning skills, and sound advice for the head of state."¹⁵³ After the General Staff collapsed after the disastrous conclusion to World War I, rebuilding it from the skeletal remains left postwar involved keeping many aspects of training the same for the sake of continuity and survival during the army's rocky relationship to the unstable Weimar government. These continuations remained similar into the early Nazi period as well. The training from the Weimar to early Nazi periods was primarily continuous in its conception and implementation. However, critical points of discontinuity served to present drastic changes in the conception of the officer corps as it shifted from primarily aristocratic to primarily meritocratic and technocratic and incorporated the politics of the Nazi Party.

The discontinuities in officer training from 1919 to 1938 are evident in the changes in the makeup of its officer corps—from aristocratic to technocratic—and in the nature of the army's relationship to the governments in power, as well as in its strategic preferences. Under Walther Reinhardt and Hans von Seeckt, the army in the early years of the Republic aligned itself as best it could with the unsteady transitional Weimar government of Friedrich Ebert, making a pact of loyalty to retain its autonomy. During the period from 1919 to 1926, though the economic and political situation in Germany was fraught with problems, the army maintained a relatively calm period of reconstruction and reinvention as it was made smaller by the stipulations of the Treaty

¹⁵² Jörg Muth. *Command Culture*, 181.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 181-182.

of Versailles. With only 100,000 men allowed in the post-war Reichswehr, the military as a whole could be more selective in choosing recruits and officers; in this way, the army of Reinhardt and Seeckt was a small but elite fighting force. The reevaluations of infantry policy towards more mobile forms of warfare were the key points of discontinuity in the 1920s.

In the 1930s, the image of the Kaiser as head of Germany and above the influence of political parties was fading, and the army was no longer above politics, but rather deeply absorbed within it. Hitler's appointment as chancellor in January of 1933 and the subsequent drafting of a pro-Nazi training course in the winter of 1933-1934 served as one of the largest points of disconnect in German officer training. The army was, by late 1933, no longer above politics; the training course, which drew on Nazi propaganda and presented Nazism as a worldview rather than a political ideology, disconnected the army from its former iterations and presented it as one controlled by the Nazi Party.

Similarly, in the late 1930s, the introduction of morale officers served as another critical point of disconnect. The morale officers were introduced into units under the guise of taking care of soldiers' mental wellbeing despite the fact that combat officers were trained in this matter already. Instead, the morale officers' jobs of instilling National Socialist beliefs in soldiers was the primary function of morale officers. The role of morale officers was founded in intertwining the political objectives of the Nazi Party with the military objectives of the Wehrmacht.

Officer training changed in three key ways during the interwar years: first, postwar disappointments over the failures of positional warfare led to largescale changes in strategic doctrines. Secondly, after 1933, training courses for officers in war schools introduced topics directly related to National Socialism. Thirdly, the introduction of morale officers served to solidify the political education of officers and soldiers by embedding officers into units for the

specific purpose of maintaining ideological devotion to the Nazi Party. These changes represent the most important places of disconnect between the Imperial Army of 1918 and the Wehrmacht of 1945. The continuities, which focused on educational requirements for entrance into war schools, organizational structure, and ranking systems created a foundation of stability upon which the points of disconnect could be created.

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