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Descent into anarchy : the German High Command, 1933 to 1943

Geoffrey P. Megargee
San Jose State University

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Descent into anarchy: The German high command, 1933 to 1943

Megargee, Geoffrey Preaut, M.A.

San Jose State University, 1991

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DESCENT INTO ANARCHY:
THE GERMAN HIGH COMMAND
1933 TO 1943

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Geoffrey P. Megargee
August, 1991

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Harry A. Gailey

Dr. Harry Gailey

Charles Burdick

Dr. Charles Burdick

Ursula Moessner

Prof. Ursula Moessner

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

Serena H. Stanford

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ABSTRACT

DESCENT INTO ANARCHY: THE GERMAN HIGH COMMAND, 1933 TO 1943

by Geoffrey P. Megargee

This thesis examines the development, organization, and functioning of the German High Command system before and during the Second World War. The study's aim is to analyze the decision-making structure within the High Command and how that structure affected the outcome of the war, focusing on those elements of the Command that directly controlled military operations on land.

The study argues that the organization of the High Command contributed to Germany's ultimate defeat. The Germans had, by the beginning of the 20th century, created perhaps the most professional and efficient staff system in the world. But the system contained flaws that made it vulnerable. Adolf Hitler manipulated and misused the system, until eventually the High Command was unable to perform effectively; this situation in turn hastened the defeat of the Third Reich.

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I would like to express my gratitude, first and foremost, for Dr. Charles Burdick's assistance. Dr. Burdick provided the inspiration for this study and guided each step in its completion, sharing his experience and philosophy as well as indicating source materials, shaping the structure, and editing the text.

I would also like to thank Prof. Irma Eichhorn, Dr. Harry Gailey, Prof. Ursula Moessner, and Dr. Stan Underdal for their contributions. Each has helped significantly with this work and with my scholastic endeavors in general.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Patty, for supporting me in my work and patiently helping me with my writing.

PREFACE

Many people believe that Adolf Hitler led a nearly perfect military machine to destruction. This idea is not far from the truth. However, Hitler was only a part--albeit the dominant part--of an organization that directed Germany's armed forces. Like any other organization, the German High Command contained formal and informal lines of authority and communication, operating procedures and governing principles, and a complement of people with their own strengths and weaknesses.¹ Unfortunately, historians have largely ignored the German command structure. Histories of the war, of the German Army, and even of the German General Staff have failed to focus on the High Command as an entity; the emphasis has always been on individual personalities and events.² Germany's initial successes and eventual defeat

¹The term "High Command," as used in this work, includes all those individuals and organizations responsible for defining military policy and directing the armed forces. In the case of the Third Reich this included--again for the purposes of this paper--Hitler and his closest advisors, the military staff of the Armed Forces High Command, and the High Command of the Army, especially the Army General Staff.

²Examples of the typical treatment of the German command structure can be found in Walter Goerlitz's History of the German General Staff, 1657 - 1945 (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1953); and Matthew Cooper's The

can be better understood if one knows how the command system developed and functioned. That system eventually failed just as surely as did Hitler's strategic judgment; its failure hastened the defeat of the forces of the Third Reich and affected the process of that defeat.

This study has benefitted from the wealth of primary and secondary sources that deal with the German army and its leaders in the Second World War. Of special significance is a series of studies written by former German General Staff officers for a U.S. Army historical team in the years following the war. There are dangers in using them, however. They provide a mixture of organizational detail and historical interpretation; the difficulty often lies in telling one from the other. Also, although they are often very detailed, they can in other respects be maddeningly general; the authors were untrained historians, with access to only limited materials. And finally, they were translated from German, with mixed and sometimes absurd results.³ But with care, they provide the basis for some sound conclusions. Combined with various war diaries, documents, and postwar

German Army, 1933 - 1945: Its Political and Military Failure (London: MacDonald & Jane's, 1978).

³As an example, by one account two of Hitler's top military advisors were once berated by a Lieutenant. This did not ring true, and it later turned out that the translator had apparently mistaken Lieutenant Colonel (Oberstleutnant) for First Lieutenant (Oberleutnant).

accounts, they have been the most important source of material for this work.

The translations of German documents and books used for this study are mine. There is one point regarding works already translated that is particularly important. The Germans standardized the designations of the parts of their High Command, but the translations of those designations have not been standardized. This has created problems; often one could not tell if one author's "office" was the same as or different from another's "department," for example. So for the purposes of this study, the following standard translations will apply:

Leitung = directorate
Abteilung = branch
Stab = staff
Gruppe = group
Amt = office
Referat = department
Sektion = section

The following rank equivalents have been used throughout the study:⁴

Generalfeldmarschall	Field Marshal
Generaloberst	General
General (der Inf., etc.)	Lieutenant General
Generalleutnant	Major General
Generalmajor	Brigadier General
Oberst	Colonel
Oberstleutnant	Lt. Colonel
Major	Major

⁴Telford Taylor, Sword and Swastika: Generals and Nazis in the Third Reich (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1952), 361.

Hauptmann or Rittmeister
Oberleutnant
Leutnant

Captain
First Lieutenant
Second Lieutenant

The emphasis of this study will be on analysis rather than chronology, and that within a fairly narrow realm. The aim is to provide some insight into the multiplicity of factors that affected the way in which decisions were reached within the High Command during the war, and how the resulting decisions in turn affected the outcome of military operations on land. The focus is on those elements of the Command that directly controlled those operations; subjects such as logistics, intelligence, and the naval and air campaigns are beyond the purview of the project.

The study will begin by examining, in a broad way, the foundations of the High Command, concentrating on those organizational and philosophical components that made the system unique and effective. Next the thesis will describe the growth of the High Command from the time Hitler took power in 1933 until the outbreak of the war. The war period is then covered in two parallel chapters. The first focuses on Hitler's influence and the problems within the top levels of the High Command. The second analyzes the struggle within the command system to keep some degree of rationality in the conduct of the war, in the face of increasing chaos at the top. My hope is that, by organizing the material in

this way, I can help the reader make some sense of a very complex topic.

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CHAPTER 1

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE HIGH COMMAND TO 1933

Even though they are outwardly the result of deliberate effort on someone's part, organizations do not simply appear; they evolve over time. The German High Command of 1939 - 1945 was the product of three hundred years of evolution, during which the German army developed a set of structures and procedures that became models for every modern army around the world. Ironically, though, the command system that Hitler inherited in 1933 was at best embryonic.¹

Frederick William, the "Great Elector" of Brandenburg (1640-88), created the first staff system in Germany, when he created what was called the Quartermaster General's Staff. This was a small group--ten people or so--that handled specific matters such as ordnance, engineering, food, shelter and routes of march, fortifications, and military law.

¹For this background chapter I have relied extensively on Walter Goerlitz's History of the German General Staff. Those having further interest in the subject should also consult J.D. Hittle, The Military Staff; Its History and Development (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: The Military Service Publishing Co., 1949) and Wiegand Schmidt-Richberg, Die Generalstäbe in Deutschland 1871 - 1945; Aufgaben in der Armee und Stellung im Staate (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1962).

Frederick William I of Prussia (1713-40) expanded his army significantly, and introduced the practice of leading it personally in the field. He and his army never saw combat, so his leadership was never tested except in maneuvers, but the innovation was still important. His patronage gave the army prestige, and attracted the nobility to serve as his officers. The nobles accepted absolute loyalty to the monarch as their guiding principle; they expressed this loyalty through obedience, tempered with sound judgement. The tradition of "Prussian obedience" had been born.

Frederick II ("the Great") (1740-86) kept the form of the staff the same: a small group of specialists, to be called up as needed. But, because military operations were becoming more dispersed, Frederick introduced two new types of staff officers. The first were the Brigade Majors, who rode about the battle area to gather information. The second were the Adjutants General, who functioned as his personal representatives with subordinate commanders on detached operations. On more than one occasion these Adjutants General exercised considerable powers of command on their own.

Frederick the Great's most important innovation in the art of command, however, was the Directive. Because he realized that he could not always be on the scene to command his forces personally, he gave orders to his subordinate

commanders in the form of Directives that defined the aim of the operation while allowing for some latitude in execution. The use of Directives encouraged independence of thought and individual competence rather than blind obedience, and laid the foundations for the further development and success of the Prussian army.

As the eighteenth century drew to a close, Frederick William II (1786-97) recognized that government and military affairs were becoming too complex for any one man to handle. In response, he created the Ober-Kriegs-Kollegium or Supreme War Council to handle all military matters.

Unfortunately for Prussia, at this stage the King, the members of the Supreme War Council, and nearly all the senior officers in the army were still mesmerized by the successes of their famous predecessor, Frederick the Great. They failed to understand the significance of the political and military revolution that was sweeping across Europe from France, and saw no reason to revamp the army's training or organization to adapt to the new circumstances.

Admittedly, the military changes wrought by the French Revolution were totally alien to Europe's generals, and those changes were intertwined with a political ideology that promised to completely subvert the old order. The mass army, organized into divisions and fighting with more spirit

than technique, was widely scorned at first by many besides the Prussians.²

However, the eventual success of the French armies, especially under the leadership of Napoleon Bonaparte, began to shake the foundations of many old regimes. Even in Prussia, Frederick William III (1797-1840) encouraged some reforms, at least within the military. In 1801, taking advantage of the new environment, two officers set out independently to reform the Prussian army. They were Colonel Christian von Massenbach and Lieutenant Colonel Gerhard Johann von Scharnhorst.

Colonel von Massenbach proposed in that year that a unitary General Staff organization be set up. This General Staff would not be dissolved at the end of each war, as had been done in the past. It would be responsible for developing war plans for every likely contingency. Member officers would alternate between line and staff positions to give them experience in all facets of military operations, and would participate in staff journeys at home and abroad to familiarize themselves with the terrain over which they would be likely to operate. The Chief of this new

²The division is the smallest military unit that normally combines elements from all the arms, i.e. infantry supported by artillery, cavalry, and engineers. Before the revolution, the different arms had moved and fought separately, being combined as needed on the battlefield.

organization was, according to von Massenbach's plan, to have the right of Immediatvortrag: immediate access to the King on all matters relating to war.

Most of the senior generals in the Prussian army opposed von Massenbach's ideas but, to his credit, Frederick William saw the need for them. In 1803 he ordered the reorganization of the Quartermaster General's Staff along the lines suggested by von Massenbach. The new staff's authority was not clearly defined--especially vis-a-vis the Supreme War Council--but this was a start.

In the same year that von Massenbach made his proposals, Scharnhorst--then a major in the Hanoverian army--asked to join the Prussian army, adding that he desired to be accepted at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, that he wanted to be raised to the nobility, and that he wished to reform the Prussian army. Apparently his application and reputation were impressive, for the Prussian King agreed to his requests.

Lieutenant Colonel von Scharnhorst joined the Quartermaster General's staff as the Director of the Militärakademie, the Staff College. He favored just the kind of reforms that von Massenbach was so eager to institute. He also pushed for the new divisional organization and tactics, and universal military service--along with the Liberalist political reforms this service would force on

Prussia. These were not ideas that were calculated to endear von Scharnhorst to all of the Prussian nobles with whom he served, but he did succeed in attracting a group of like-minded junior officers, such as August Neidhardt von Gneisenau and Carl von Clausewitz.

In August 1806 Prussia mobilized against Napoleon. The army reforms, including a divisional organization and a modern staff, had unfortunately not been in place long enough. Experience was lacking at all levels, and the Prussian generals, ignoring Scharnhorst's advice, bungled the campaign. On 13-14 October Napoleon overwhelmingly defeated the Prussian forces at the twin battles of Jena and Auerstädt. The French pursued and destroyed the Prussian armies and entered Berlin on 24 September.

Ironically, the thoroughness of their defeat at the hands of the French may have been just what the Prussians needed for their reforms. It spurred them into further changes that would eventually give them the finest military force in Europe.

In July 1807, Frederick William approved the formation of a Committee for Military Reorganization that included von Scharnhorst, von Massenbach, and von Gneisenau. This body set out on a thoroughgoing reform of the army, including its recruitment, training and command. Every officer voluntarily submitted his record for review; the officer corps purged

itself completely of all "unworthy elements." Scharnhorst also centralized military education.

The command structure that the Committee for Military Reorganization designed was more unified than any the Prussians had ever had before. Over the resistance of many senior officers, the Supreme War Council became the War Ministry, with two departments: the Department of War Economy, which handled administrative affairs, and the General War Department. The General War Department included a General Staff among its three "Divisions."

In 1813, following Napoleon's disastrous retreat from Moscow the year before, Prussia joined with Russia, England, and Sweden to fight the French. For the first time the General Staff functioned in its intended role. Scharnhorst and von Gneisenau wrote the war plans used by the Prussian forces that Spring, and they and their comrades also advised the army commanders in the field.³ In the midst of the campaign von Scharnhorst died of wounds he had received earlier, and von Gneisenau took over as Chief of the General Staff.

³The practice of using the General Staff officers both in a central high command and with the subordinate commanders became the norm as time went on, although the two kinds of duties were later performed by separate groups of officers. The General Staff was the central command agency; the officers with subordinate headquarters became known as the Truppengeneralstab.

Count August Neidhardt von Gneisenau was an even more dedicated Liberal than von Scharnhorst had been. He saw modern war as justifiable only if it led to freedom for the masses who were called upon to fight in the conflict. This put something of a strain on his relationship with Frederick William, but his military expertise made up for his political opinions. Working as Chief of Staff to General Gebhart von Blücher, he planned the Prussians' role in the final victory over Napoleon. He also developed many of the principles and practices by which the Prussian and later the German General Staffs operated.

Gneisenau expanded on Frederick the Great's use of Directives, insisting that all orders leave room for independent action and initiative. To his subordinates he emphasized the importance of flexibility combined with determination, and the need for clear, rapid, and accurate communication.

His most important contribution, however, may have been the so-called principle of joint responsibility. Loosely stated, this principle held that any Chief of Staff is equally responsible, along with his commander, for any order that is issued. Therefore the staff officer had a duty--not just an option--to voice any disagreement he had with his commander's plans, and insist that those objections be recorded in the unit's war diary. Furthermore, if that

staff officer voiced his objections and was still not satisfied, he had the right and obligation to communicate his objections to the next higher staff officer and, if necessary, up the staff chain to the Chief of the General Staff. As stated by Walter Goerlitz, von Gneisenau's goal was to "ensure the spiritual unity of the General Staff and enable it to assert its will as a unitary organism against army commanders who were refractory and difficult."⁴

This principle of joint responsibility was a boon to both the Prussian Army and the General Staff. The principle did not--by any stretch of the imagination--remove the duty of a staff officer to obey his superior. But it did create a mechanism whereby disagreements could be worked out in an orderly fashion, and it helped ensure that commanders would have access to alternative ideas. At the same time, the principle helped to bolster the power and independence of the General Staff, by giving it a voice of its own within the Army.

Over the next forty years, this power and independence grew. The General Staff remained in existence after the Napoleonic Wars ended, even though its sphere of authority remained unclear. Through the efforts of its Chiefs, it gradually moved from being a subordinate part of the War

⁴Goerlitz, German General Staff, 41.

Ministry to a position of equality with that ministry. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the General Staff competed with the War Ministry and one other agency, the Department of Personnel Affairs, for influence with the monarch in military matters.

In 1857, the man who would win this competition, Helmuth Karl von Moltke, took over as Chief of the Great General Staff. In the Wars of Unification--against Denmark in 1864, Austria in 1866, and France in 1870--von Moltke's expertise as a planner and commander were the keys to Germany's success. From a position as a virtually unknown planning agency, von Moltke brought the General Staff to a point where it exercised independent command of Germany's armies in wartime. For the first time the German public recognized the role played by the General Staff; General Staff officers became national heroes. The Chief of the General Staff gained the right of immediate access to the Emperor in peace or war, and the General Staff became the highest military planning authority in the nation.

As the General Staff gained in importance, so too did the selection and training of officers for the General Staff Corps. Candidates had to be recommended by their superiors. They had to attend the Kriegsakademie, which was now under the General Staff, and pass a comprehensive final exam. Then they spent two years on probation, working within the

General Staff, after which they had to pass yet another exam. An annual planning journey under von Moltke himself was the final test. Only a very small percentage of the original applicants actually made it into the Corps.

The increasing complexity of war led Moltke to reorganize the General Staff's internal structure. He had the Staff divided into three Branches, each of which was responsible for a different geographic area. The first handled Sweden, Russia, Turkey, and Austria. The second, the so-called "German Branch," handled Germany (for the purpose of planning deployments), Denmark, Italy and Switzerland. And the third wrote plans covering France, England, Belgium, Holland, Spain, and the United States.

Moltke also added a Railway Branch to the General Staff. His recognition of the military significance of the railroad was one of the reasons for Germany's astounding successes in the Wars of Unification; the lessons of the American Civil War had not escaped him, as they had so many others. For the first time, armies could move rapidly from all over Germany to concentrate at a decisive point. This being the case, the use of Directives became even more important, as von Moltke noted:

The advantage which a commander thinks he can attain through continued personal intervention is largely illusory. By engaging in it he assumes a task which really belongs to others, whose effectiveness he thus

destroys. He also multiplies his own tasks to a point where he can no longer fulfil the whole of them.⁵

The trends toward increasing size, complexity and specialization--within the General Staff and in warfare in general--continued during the service of von Moltke's successors as Chief of the General Staff, Field Marshall Alfred von Waldersee (1888-91), Count Alfred von Schlieffen (1891-05), and General Helmuth von Moltke (the Younger) (1905-14). By 1914 the General Staff had grown to nearly twenty branches. Some of these were under the direct supervision of the Chief of the General Staff, while others had been delegated to five Oberquartiermeister, or Assistant Chiefs of Staff, plus a Chief of Survey. Among them they performed functions as varied as operational planning, photographic reconnaissance, analyzing military history, and studying foreign fortresses (see Appendix 1).⁶

Unfortunately, the need for increasing specialization brought with it unforeseen consequences. A growing narrowness of vision became apparent in the thinking of the General Staff Corps. Expert within their field, they were less and less competent outside of it. Meanwhile, the senior members of the General Staff were called upon--or took it upon themselves--more regularly to become involved

⁵Ibid., 76.

⁶Schmidt-Richberg, Die Generalstäbe in Deutschland, 34.

in policy issues that were not strictly within the military sphere. Clausewitz's treatise On War, which was still regarded as the Bible of the German army, contained the oft-quoted maxim that "war is a continuation of policy by other means."⁷ By the turn of the century, the leaders of the General Staff were turning this maxim on its head; they began to regard war as the end of policy, and military policy considerations as preeminent over all others. The days of the great thinkers like von Scharnhorst and von Gneisenau were over; they had been replaced by a body of technocrats.

The Schlieffen Plan, by which Germany was to fight the opening engagements of the First World War, serves to illustrate the German military leaders' mental limitations. The plan itself was arguably as good as any military plan could be. But the assumptions upon which it was based were fatally flawed. The General Staff treated the prospect of a two-front war as a purely technical problem, albeit a tricky one. The broader diplomatic, political and social issues involved were beyond the General Staff's grasp; it either

⁷quoted in Goerlitz, German General Staff, 62.

did not understand grand strategy or thought grand strategy to be beyond its purview.⁸

Once the First World War became a stalemate, the General Staff was forced to broaden its authority, if not its view of the world. The demands of the war, combined with the political atmosphere within Germany, brought unheard-of power to the General Staff. The Emperor and the Chancellor quickly faded into the background, leaving the General Staff to take control by default.

In late September 1914, after the Allies stopped the German advance at the Marne, General Erich von Falkenhayn replaced von Moltke as Chief of the General Staff. Falkenhayn was already the Minister of War, but he did not relinquish that position. Instead, von Falkenhayn combined the War Ministry and the General Staff as the Supreme Command. Even when he was forced to separate the two offices a year later, the War Ministry remained under his control,

⁸B.H. Liddell Hart, in Strategy (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publishers, 1967), 335-36, defines grand strategy as the direction and coordination of "all the resources a nation, or band of nations, towards the attainment of the political object of the war--the goal defined by fundamental policy." It includes the utilization of personnel, economic and moral strength and the distribution of power among services and between the military and industry. Fighting power is only one facet; financial, commercial, and ethical pressure are also important. In contrast, strategy is the "art of distributing and applying military means to fulfil the ends of policy."

through his influence over the Minister, another General Staff officer.

The era of "War Socialism," as it was called, now began. In addition to the conduct of land campaigns, the General Staff also gained control of industrial and food production, raw materials allocation, labor, the press, films, and propaganda. In August 1916, General Paul von Hindenburg replaced von Falkenhayn as Chief of the General Staff, with General Erich Ludendorff as his Deputy. Ludendorff actually exercised control of all military and political policy, even though von Hindenburg was technically in charge. Ludendorff carried War Socialism to extremes, hatching plans to control the German birth rate, to place women in the factories, and to combat venereal disease, among other things.

In 1917 the political situation in Germany approached that of an open military dictatorship. In July Ludendorff succeeded in engineering the resignation of the Chancellor, Dr. Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, and his replacement by a man of Ludendorff's own choosing. The General Staff had reached the height of its power. Winning the war, however, was still beyond its grasp.

The end of the war in November 1918 and the revolution that followed did not at first appear to threaten the General Staff's position. Hindenburg and his new Deputy,

General Wilhelm Groener (Ludendorff had retired in October) kept the General Staff intact. Groener put together an alliance with the new republican government, with the assistance of a little-known political officer, Major Kurt von Schleicher. And, most significantly, von Hindenburg managed to dissociate the General Staff from the armistice and the Versailles Treaty.

It is not necessary to review in detail the events of the next fifteen years, but two elements do need to be closely examined. The first is the effect of the Versailles Treaty upon the development of the German army command structure, and the second is the place held by that structure within the German state.

The Treaty of Versailles stated that the German army was limited to 100,000 men, with no heavy artillery, tanks, or aircraft. In addition, the General Staff was to be abolished. At a stroke, the Treaty had drastically altered the form of the German military establishment.

Under the terms of the Treaty, one Defense Ministry controlled Directorates (Leitungen) for the Army and Navy, each with its own Chief. The Army Directorate consisted of five offices, including the Personnel Office, which handled officer assignments; the Administration Office, which dealt with finance and quartermaster matters; the Weapons Office; and the Defense Office, which oversaw other administrative

affairs. The fifth office was designated the Truppenamt, or Troops Office; this was, in reality, the General Staff in disguise.⁹ Major-General Hans von Seeckt assumed the leadership of the Truppenamt in October 1919; his goal was to preserve as much of the structure and spirit of the General Staff as he could.

Seeckt organized the Truppenamt into four branches. He combined the old General Staff Operations and Deployment branches into the T1, "Home Defense," branch. The T2 branch handled organization, T3 kept track of foreign armies, and the T4 branch handled training. The old Truppengeneralstab, i.e. those members of the General Staff Corps who served with subordinate units, stayed in existence, with many of the posts being duplicated to allow as many General Staff officers as possible to remain in the service. A great many General Staff Corps officers were persuaded to remain in the new Reichswehr.

The Versailles Treaty abolished the Kriegsakademie, but Seeckt developed an examination system for candidates that was, if anything, more rigorous than the old system, owing to the small number of vacancies. Candidates had to demonstrate knowledge not just of military science, but of languages, political science, history, railroads, and

⁹Albert Seaton, The German Army, 1939 - 45 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 34.

communications. The selection process was ruthless: of 164 candidates from one military district in 1922, only one made it into the Truppenamt three years later.¹⁰

Despite von Seeckt's efforts, though, there is no question that the Versailles Treaty and the Weimar Constitution had dealt a heavy blow to the position of the General Staff within the state hierarchy. The Chief of that much-reduced organization was now four levels down in the chain of command. The Chief of the Army Directorate, the Defense Minister, and the President were all superior to him, and the new Parliament exercised considerable influence over the whole organization. The Defense Minister and the Chief of the Army Directorate now held much of the power formerly wielded by the Chief of the General Staff, and that officer's right of immediate access to the Head of State was gone. From being a commander--and nearly a dictator--the Head of the Truppenamt was reduced to working strictly within a narrow military sphere.

The respective roles of the Defense Minister and the Chief of the Army Directorate had in fact never been thoroughly defined, and a power struggle ensued. Seeckt, who took over the latter position in 1920, regarded the Army as his domain. He also had no great love for the Republic. He

¹⁰Goerlitz, German General Staff, 227.

did his best to resist the efforts on the part of the Defense Minister, Otto Gessler, to exert more control over army affairs. In the early '20s, Seeckt encouraged a number of measures designed to secretly circumvent the terms of the Versailles Treaty, and Gessler was under pressure from the Reichstag to rein in his subordinate.¹¹

With that goal in mind, Gessler decided in 1926 to create his own staff to oversee the Army. Kurt von Schleicher, who had been running a political affairs office under von Seeckt, now switched alliances and took over leadership of Gessler's staff, which was later designated the Ministeramt, or Ministerial Office.¹² Schleicher proceeded to bypass the Army Directorate and establish communications directly with lower-level staffs, having them inform him of

¹¹For more information on this period, see Otto Gessler, Reichswehrpolitik in der Weimarer Zeit (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1958).

¹²This is the account of events as given by Goerlitz (248-49). Seaton (15) states that von Schleicher's office was ". . . moved from the Heeresleitung and made subordinate to the minister . . ." Unfortunately, Seaton does not indicate his sources or say who was responsible for "moving" the office; Goerlitz's account, at any rate, seems to show a better grasp of the intrigues going on at the time.

Schleicher went on from there to involve himself in nearly every major intrigue over the next seven years, culminating in his part in Hitler's rise to the Chancellorship. An excellent account of these machinations may be found in Alan Bullock, Hitler: A Study in Tyranny (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962), 181-250. Hitler had Schleicher assassinated along with the leaders of the SA and others on 30 June 1934.

any significant happenings of a political nature. Gessler probably thought he was making progress; actually, the power struggle at the top of the defense hierarchy was just beginning.

That struggle was an elemental aspect of the hierarchy that existed when Hitler took over the Chancellorship on 30 January 1933. Seeckt had gone to great lengths to see to it that the army stayed out of politics, but this was a fiction when it came to the senior army leadership. Like it or not, the army was one of the fundamental power bases for the state, and therefore there were bound to be battles for control within the defense establishment.

One of the keys to this struggle was the attitude of the army's officers. Most of the officers came straight out of the Imperial army. They tended to be monarchists, or at least absolutists. Many subscribed to the "Stab in the Back" theory, by which Germany could have won the Great War if only the Republican government had not sold out. They were disturbed at Germany's continuing weakness--dictated by the Treaty--and looked forward to the time when their country would once again take its rightful place among the nations of Europe. All in all, they were not what one would call avid supporters of the status quo. At the same time, they believed wholeheartedly in their own abilities and traditions.

These attitudes added up to an opportunity for anyone who could make the right promises, and the structure within which the officers worked heightened their vulnerability. If Germany was to rearm--and the officer corps saw that as a basic goal--the structure would have to change. The intellectual foundations and the professionalism were there. But the system lacked experience and manpower. And as an organization, it was not set up to control a modern armed force; there was no unitary mechanism to direct the services and control the state's resources in wartime. The person who could direct the creation of such a mechanism would have a unique chance to put his stamp upon the entire defense establishment, by dictating the spheres of authority within it and appointing the people who would work within those spheres.

CHAPTER 2

THE EVOLUTION OF THE COMMAND SYSTEM, 1933 TO 1939

On 30 January 1933, Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, and during the next six years, Germany undertook a massive rearmament program. As part of the program, the Reich's leaders created an expanded command system, built in part on the experiences of the previous three centuries. However, much more than tradition went into the evolution of the system, and the results were definitely less than might have been desired.

Almost from the day he assumed power, Hitler made his intentions quite plain to the generals: he intended to rebuild a standing army. He said as much during a dinner on 2 February at the home of the Chief of the Army Directorate, General Kurt von Hammerstein-Equord.¹ And on 7 February, Hitler repeated his promises in an address to the Reichsheer's commanders at the War Ministry.² Because the Versailles Treaty was still in effect and Germany still

¹Seaton, The German Army, 37; Taylor, Sword and Swastika, 79.

²Harold C. Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals: The Hidden Crisis, January - June 1938 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974), 14.

weak, the rearmament program had to be carried out in secret at first, but it was carried out nonetheless.

The military's leaders recognized that the existing command structure would not be sufficient to direct an expanded force. Three requirements would need to be met if the command system was to perform acceptably. The first had to do with personnel, the second and third with organization.

The first and most obvious need was to increase the size of the system, and therefore to train more General Staff officers. There simply were not enough qualified men to fill all the vacancies in the new High Command. Given the long training process for General Staff officers, bringing the system up to full strength was likely to take quite a while. The planners did not see that issue as too great a problem, since the expansion of the army would take time anyway. There would be time to train enough staff officers.³

The second and third requirements, based on the experiences of the last war, were to coordinate better the activities of the services and tie the direction of the

³For example, Major General Ludwig Beck, who assumed the post of Chief of the Truppenamt on 1 October 1933, expected that the army would not be ready for any major action before 1942 or 1943; Goerlitz, German General Staff, 299.

economy more closely to military needs. These were matters that might be solved relatively easily, simply by assigning responsibilities and designing the supporting staff agencies properly.

The Army Directorate set to work immediately to design this new system. Through most of the 1920s the army had simply not been large enough to require a large command structure. Also, the Versailles Treaty had laid down very specifically how the Germans were to organize and direct their armed forces. So the army had only some theoretical work--done between 1928 and 1932--on which to base their plans. This work in turn reflected the status quo as of 1918, as well as the Versailles Treaty limitations. From the army's point of view in mid-1933, the General Staff should be in charge of everything, as had nearly been the case in the First World War. The army would be the decisive arm in any war Germany was likely to fight, they reasoned. Therefore the Commander-in-Chief (CiC) of the Army and the Chief of the General Staff should be the senior military counselors to the Head of State. In addition, the army's leaders believed that the army's wishes should take precedence over those of the navy, and that the economy should come under the army's control. There would be no need for an independent air arm; the army and navy would each control

its own air service.⁴ The Army Directorate began to make its plans accordingly.

At this point a problem arose, though: not everyone agreed on the best way to build a modern command organization. While the Army Directorate got started on its design, officers in the Defense Ministry were working to implement their own ideas. And they had no intention of permitting the General Staff to rise to its old position of preeminence.

In January 1933, shortly before Hitler became Chancellor, President Paul von Hindenburg had chosen Major General Werner von Blomberg to be Defense Minister in the new Hitler-Papen cabinet. Blomberg appealed to the President because of his social graces and the recommendation of Franz von Papen, the soon-to-be Vice Chancellor. Hitler had been encouraged by von Blomberg's willingness to

⁴August Winter and others, "The German Armed Forces High Command, OKW [Oberkommando der Wehrmacht]: A Critical Historical Study of Its Development, Organization, Missions and Functioning from 1938 to 1945" (Manuscript #T-101), 1:10, 12-13, in World War II German Military Studies, A collection of 213 special reports on the Second World War prepared by former officers of the Wehrmacht for the United States Army, ed. Donald Detwiler, Charles B. Burdick, and Jürgen Rohwer (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1979), vol. 4; The pagination in the German Military Studies is complex. The whole of the work by Winter and others, entitled "The German Armed Forces High Command," is contained in volume 4 of the Studies. Within this document are "volumes," and in some cases "chapters" of volumes, which are separately paginated.

accept the National Socialists; von Blomberg had earlier tried to enlist Hitler's support for the use of the SA as an auxiliary defense force in East Prussia.⁵

Blomberg wanted the Defense Ministry to become the basis for a new High Command, with authority over the army and navy. But his ability to carry out his plans was limited, even after Hitler promoted him to General and made him the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces (Oberbefehlshaber der Wehrmacht) in the Fall of 1933. He had no real staff and no command authority over the services; he had to go through the Directorates to get anything done.⁶ That situation could not be corrected overnight, but gradually von Blomberg moved to consolidate his power.

Blomberg chose Colonel Walter von Reichenau to head the Ministerial Office (see Appendix 2). Reichenau, though he was a broadly educated man who saw many of the weaknesses in the National Socialist party, thought the Nazis to be an excellent vehicle for the rebuilding of Germany. His consuming interest in politics set him aside from many of his

⁵Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 9-10.

⁶Burkhart Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer 1939-1945; Entwicklung des organisatorischen Aufbaues (Darmstadt: E.S. Mittler, 1954-1969), 1:104; Seaton, German Army, 33-34.

compatriots, and he was in fact one of the first prominent army officers to come out openly in support of the Nazis.⁷

Reichenau had been von Blomberg's Chief of Staff when the former was the commander of the East Prussian military district. His influence had helped first to shape von Blomberg's attitude toward the National Socialists and then to gain von Blomberg the Minister's post.⁸ Now his position in the Ministerial Office gave him the chance to influence relations between the armed forces and the Party, as well as to help restructure the High Command.⁹

Reichenau shared von Blomberg's view of the proper structure and role of the High Command. He gradually set about organizing the Ministerial Office to become the coordinating staff that von Blomberg would need to exercise command of the services.¹⁰ At the same time, both men began to communicate directly with office and branch chiefs in the Army Directorate, bypassing its Chief, Hammerstein-Equord. The latter was dissatisfied with the state of affairs but discouraged and notoriously lazy, did nothing to

⁷Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 10-11; Taylor, Sword and Swastika, 77.

⁸Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 9.

⁹Taylor, Sword and Swastika, 78.

¹⁰Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 1:16-17.

protest against von Blomberg's and von Reichenau's activities.¹¹

The situation changed when, on 1 February 1934, von Hindenburg appointed Lt. General Freiherr Werner von Fritsch Chief of the Army Directorate to replace von Hammerstein-Equord, who was retiring. Fritsch can properly be termed one of the "old school." He was extremely energetic and disciplined, strongly religious, modest, and outwardly stiff and haughty. He had no interest in politics, and harbored no love for the Nazis; they and their leader offended his aristocratic sensibilities. Only the intercession of his old comrade von Seeckt persuaded him to take the post at all. At any rate, he was determined to preserve the independence of the army.¹² He immediately put himself at odds with von Blomberg and von Reichenau by forbidding his subordinates from reporting directly to the Ministry on military matters, and demanding copies of all political reports going from his Directorate to the War Ministry.¹³

Major General Ludwig Beck, who had assumed the post of Chief of the Truppenamt on 1 October 1933, supported von Fritsch in the latter's efforts to assert the army's

¹¹Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 24.

¹²Ibid., 25-29; Taylor, Sword and Swastika, 78.

¹³Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 24.

preeminence. Beck believed that only the General Staff had the personnel and experience to serve as the basis for a new High Command.¹⁴

The ironic thing about this developing controversy was that the protagonists had no disagreements over ends, but simply over means. No one was arguing against the need for a unified command; they fought over who would hold power within it.

This dispute was partly political, between those who represented the old officer corps and those who had hitched their wagons to the National Socialist star. It was also a personal conflict among the top three army figures. Blomberg's ambition--as it related to the army--was to exercise operational control of the field army in wartime; von Fritsch and Beck both threatened this ambition. Beck wanted to return the position of Chief of the General Staff to what it had been prior to the Versailles Treaty. And von Fritsch saw his authority being limited by von Blomberg above him and Beck below.¹⁵ The General Staff Corps tended to back von Fritsch and Beck over von Blomberg and von Reichenau. Within General Staff circles the latter two men were considered radical thinkers. Reichenau in particular

¹⁴Seaton, German Army, 42-43.

¹⁵Ibid., 75-76.

suffered from his reputation as a "Nazi" officer and one who did not respect the traditions of the General Staff Corps.¹⁶

Another key aspect of this dispute was that it was internal to the army. Both sides had been educated in the General Staff tradition. Both sides acknowledged by the nature of their struggle that they viewed the army's interests as preeminent. Neither side was fighting to put into power an officer from the navy, or from the fledgling air force, or--Heaven forbid--from Hitler's political strike force, the Sturmabteilung (SA). But although it was internal, and everyone concerned had the army's interests at heart, this dispute weakened the army officer corps as a whole, depriving it of the unity it needed.

The army needed to be unified because there were other contenders for military power in the Third Reich, and these contenders became more troublesome with each passing month. They were, in fact, the very agencies already mentioned: the navy, the air force and the SA. As von Blomberg attempted to exert his authority as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, the leaders of these three agencies--Admiral Erich Raeder, Hermann Göring, and Ernst Röhm, respectively--did their best to keep him from doing so.

¹⁶Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 10-12.

Admiral Raeder was, like many other officers, initially impressed with Hitler. Raeder admired Hitler's political skills, his command over people, his drive and intelligence. Raeder was an officer and a gentleman, and one of the foremost naval strategists of the day. He believed Hitler to have sound ideas regarding the navy's role.¹⁷ The two men quickly formed a strong rapport, and von Blomberg found himself at a disadvantage when trying to have a say in naval affairs, for Raeder was not prepared to hand over control of the navy to an army officer.

Blomberg encountered the same sort of obstacle when dealing with the leader of the air arm. Hermann Göring had been one of Hitler's original followers. Though he was very clever, he was also swaggering, loud, vain, inefficient, corrupt, and utterly without scruples. He lacked any experience as a senior commander, but he was not one to let such details keep him from acquiring power. Göring became increasingly jealous of von Blomberg's position as time went on, and used his influence with Hitler to circumvent the Wehrmacht Commander-in-Chief at every opportunity. In fact,

¹⁷Charles B. Burdick, Germany's Military Strategy and Spain in World War II (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1968), 13n; Taylor, Sword and Swastika, 81.

Göring wanted ultimately to take over von Blomberg's position himself.¹⁸

Ernst Röhm was by far the greatest threat, however. He was another of Hitler's long-time cronies. He was a soldier at heart, or so he claimed, but he combined his militarism with the socialist--and opportunist--elements of the Nazi program. Röhm's greatest wish was to turn his SA into a new "people's army," into which the old army would be incorporated. And Röhm, of course, would lead this new force, once he had become Defense Minister.¹⁹ Röhm's pretensions scared the military and the industrialists--two groups whose support Hitler could ill-afford to lose during the period of Gleichschaltung.²⁰

The tension became so great that Hitler finally felt compelled to eliminate Röhm entirely. In April 1934, Hitler observed naval maneuvers from on board the cruiser Deutschland, in the company of von Blomberg, von Fritsch, and Raeder. While on this cruise Hitler cut a deal with the

¹⁸Bullock, Hitler, 78, 659-60, 676; Taylor, Sword and Swastika, 130-32; Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 34.

¹⁹Bullock, Hitler, 288.

²⁰Gleichschaltung was the term used to describe the period, lasting eighteen months or so, after Hitler came to power, during which he consolidated his grip on Germany. Bullock translates the word as "coordination," however the literal translation--"a bringing or forcing into line"--is perhaps more illuminating.

military: he would eliminate the SA threat, and in return the military would allow him to succeed von Hindenburg. Less than three months later, on 30 June 1934, Hitler had Röhm and the other SA leaders killed. And at the same time, the Nazis also eliminated a number of other current or former enemies, including von Schleicher and other military men.²¹

The generals had not bargained on that brutal a purge, but they were nonetheless happy with the fate of the SA. There was some consternation at the murder of the officers, but nothing came of it. The whole affair sent ripples through the ranks of the army and a signal to Hitler. The message was clear: the National Socialists are in charge, and anyone who gets in their way risks more than a bureaucratic slap on the wrist.²²

Hitler's side of the bargain having been filled, the military now allowed him to further consolidate his power. On 2 August 1934 President von Hindenburg died. Hitler immediately combined the offices of President and Chancellor, naming himself Führer (Leader) of the German

²¹For more on the Röhm purge, see Bullock, Hitler, 284-309; and Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 13-19.

²²In the end the Röhm purge did the generals no good: shortly after the SA had been purged, Hitler declared the SS to be an independent arm of the Party. Heinrich Himmler and the SS came to rival the army in an even more ominous way than Röhm and the SA had threatened to.

Reich and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces (Oberster Befehlshaber der Wehrmacht). He also--at the suggestion of von Reichenau and von Blomberg--had the armed forces swear a new oath of allegiance to him personally.²³ The military had taken one more step down the road to complete subservience, but still the generals considered their position secure.

Hitler's next moves in the military arena were more to the military's liking. On 16 March 1935 he announced publicly that Germany was rearming, and reintroduced conscription. Two months later, on 21 May, he signed a secret Reich Defense Law. Under its provisions, the old professional army became a national service army. The Reichswehr of the Weimar Republic became officially the Wehrmacht; the Reich Defense Minister became the Reich War Minister, and exercised command of the Wehrmacht as the Commander-in-Chief, subordinate only to the Führer and Supreme Commander. The Army and Navy Directorates were redesignated the High Commands of the Army and Navy, and the Chiefs of those Directorates became Commanders-in-Chief (see Appendix 3).²⁴

²³Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 19-20.

²⁴Schmidt-Richberg, Die Generalstäbe, 73-74; Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 1:106, 180; the changes were effective 1 June 1935.

With the announcement of 16 March, the pace of rearmament quickened once again. The foundations had been laid in the 1920s, and Hitler's ascension to the Chancellorship had signaled the start of real expansion; now work could go on much more openly and rapidly. Between 1935 and 1938 the army grew from ten active divisions to forty, three of them armored.²⁵

For the most part, though, the structure of the top levels of the High Command was not affected by the Reich Defense Law. The impressive name changes did not translate into a reorganization. There were only two exceptions. First, Hitler did away with the Weimar constitution's requirement for the Defense Minister's countersignature on orders from the Supreme Commander. Second, Hitler created an independent Luftwaffe, and appointed Göring Reich Minister for Air and Commander-in-Chief of the Air Force.²⁶ In the latter role Göring was von Blomberg's subordinate, but as a Reich Minister Göring now equalled the Wehrmacht

²⁵Seaton, German Army, 4, 92.

²⁶Schmidt-Richberg, Die Generalstäbe, 74; a copy of the Reich Defense Law of 21 May 1935 can also be found as Document #2261-PS in International Military Tribunal, Trials of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, 14 November 1945 - 1 October 1946 (Nuremberg: The International Military Tribunal, 1947), vol. 29.

CiC in rank. Blomberg's influence over the Luftwaffe shrank accordingly, to near insignificance.

Blomberg had somewhat better luck with the army. Fritsch and Beck did not have the Führer's ear the way Göring and Raeder did, so they had a more difficult time resisting von Blomberg. The battles between the War Ministry and the army usually took the form of individual bureaucratic measures, with each side trying to limit the other's authority while expanding its own.²⁷ Because the War Ministry was the senior agency, it was often able to frustrate the army's plans.

One potential advantage the army had at this stage was that in order to expand, the War Ministry had to go to the army for General Staff officers. Thus the army could, in theory, gain power by placing allies in important positions. But despite the army leadership's efforts, they were seldom able to influence events in this way, because their nominees kept switching allegiances.

On 1 October 1935, for example, von Blomberg appointed Brigadier General Wilhelm Keitel to head the Wehrmachtamt or Armed Forces Office (the old Ministerial Office, renamed on 13 February 1934). Keitel, who had been a Branch Chief in the Truppenamt, was nominated by von Fritsch to replace von

²⁷Seaton, German Army, 77.

Reichenau, in the hope that once in place Keitel would defend the army's interests.²⁸ But it soon became clear that Keitel believed just as much in Nazism and the principle of Wehrmacht command as had von Reichenau. Blomberg was ultimately able to rely upon Keitel's loyalty in the fight against the traditionalists.

In an earlier and equally significant move, Beck sent Colonel Alfred Jodl to take charge of the National Defense Branch (Abteilung Landesverteidigung or Abt. L) in July 1935. Jodl was another veteran of the Truppenamt. But not only did he prove to be a faithful follower of Hitler, he also quickly set out to turn the National Defense Branch into an operations staff for the High Command. Other, younger General Staff officers, such as Lt. Colonel Bernhard von Lossberg, Lt. Colonel Kurt Zeitzler, and Colonel Walter Warlimont, followed his lead.²⁹

At the end of 1935 Beck made another attempt to clarify the lines of authority within the High Command to his and the General Staff's advantage. In a memorandum dated

²⁸Gustav-Adolf Caspar and Herbert Schottelius, "Die Organization des Heeres 1933-1939," 322-24, in Gerhard Papke and Wolfgang Petter, Handbuch zur deutschen Militärgeschichte 1648-1939 (München: Bernard & Graefe Verlag für Wehrwesen, 1978), Band 7, Lieferung 8, 289-400; Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 1:105, 180.

²⁹Caspar and Schottelius, "Organization des Heeres," 324-25; Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 2:15-16; Goerlitz, German General Staff, 297.

5 December, he recommended that in time of war, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army should be given complete independence. Likewise the Chief of the General Staff, he reasoned, should regain his old role as the principle advisor to the CiC, in fact exercising command.³⁰

Fritsch balked at giving the Chief of the General Staff that much power. Beck eventually compromised by giving up any hope for command authority, and von Fritsch then went forward with Beck's recommendations. Blomberg resisted, of course, but this time von Fritsch was able to get to Hitler and persuade him that the army CiC needed more independence. On 20 April 1936, Hitler, while celebrating his birthday, announced the promotion of von Fritsch to full General. Hitler also promoted von Blomberg to Field Marshal, but at the same time he signed an order giving von Fritsch and Raeder Ministerial rank. Now the commanders of the army and navy shared Göring's status. They were, as ministers, theoretically equal to von Blomberg, while he was simultaneously supposed to be their superior as the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. Blomberg had suffered another setback. Only the infrequency of Hitler's Cabinet meetings minimized von Fritsch's victory.³¹

³⁰Goerlitz, German General Staff, 297.

³¹Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 1:112; Goerlitz, German General Staff, 298; Taylor, Sword and Swastika, 119.

Through the rest of 1936 and 1937 the struggles continued and even intensified. Three interrelated factors contributed to the conflict. The first was that the basic issues had clearly not been settled to anyone's satisfaction; the lines of authority were, if anything, more muddled than before. The second was that the pace of expansion within the army as a whole was proceeding far too fast for most senior officers' tastes. They believed that the quality of the instrument would suffer from expanding at such a breakneck pace. And third, the political reality of Hitler's success dictated that Germany's war plans be updated, and men such as Beck and von Fritsch did not like the aggressive direction those plans were taking--especially given the inadequate state of the army. The traditions of the General Staff and the backgrounds of its leaders led those leaders to approach foreign policy issues very conservatively. Hitler, on the other hand, was determined to press on, and the officers in the War Ministry tended to acquiesce.

On 24 June 1937 von Blomberg issued a "Directive on Unified War Preparation of the Wehrmacht" that produced howls of protest from the Army.³² Fritsch countered with his own memorandum in August. In it von Fritsch laid out

³²Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 56-57.

exactly why he believed that the army was the most important branch, and why "a strategic Armed Forces High Command independent of an Army Command is unthinkable."³³ He went on to suggest that the best solution to the problem of unifying the commands would be to form an Armed Forces Operations Group out of the Armed Forces Office; this Group would be attached to the Army General Staff. The Army General Staff would actually run the war, using the Armed Forces Operations Group to coordinate with the other services.³⁴ Blomberg turned Fritsch's proposals down, saying only that he would ". . . do the natural thing: that is to include him, the Army Commander, in my [Blomberg's] command and operational procedure by referring to him and not going over his head."³⁵ Fritsch threatened to resign if his memo was not passed on to Hitler. In turn, von Blomberg said he would resign if it was. Fritsch finally backed down, knowing that Hitler would certainly let him go rather than lose von Blomberg.³⁶ In fact, though, neither von Blomberg nor von Fritsch had long to remain in office.

³³"Memorandum of Colonel General von FRITSCH presented to General Field Marschall von BLOMBERG in August 1937," 24, in German Military Studies, 5:Annex 1a.

³⁴Ibid., 28-29.

³⁵Ibid., 31.

³⁶Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 57.

Hitler called a meeting for 5 November 1937 with von Blomberg, von Fritsch, Göring, Raeder, and the Foreign Minister, Baron Konstantin von Neurath. Blomberg had requested the meeting so that he and the three arms chiefs could discuss resource allocation, a problem that the muddled command structure had accentuated. But Hitler launched into a monologue on his plans for the domination of Europe and the acquisition of Lebensraum for Germany. On this issue his military leaders were united: they judged Hitler's plans far too risky.

Hitler was already displeased with the generals, especially von Fritsch, over what Hitler considered the slow pace of rearmament. The reactions he received to his foreign policy plans convinced him that von Blomberg and von Fritsch would never give him their wholehearted support. He began to look for a way to get rid of them.³⁷

Göring and Himmler gave Hitler his opportunity in January 1938. Blomberg had made the mistake of marrying a woman with "a past," as he put it. Hitler was a witness at the wedding. Frau von Blomberg's past turned out to include activities of a morally questionable nature, to put the issue mildly. When Göring brought this information to

³⁷The following account is drawn from Harold Deutsch's book, which provides the best examination of the removal of von Blomberg and von Fritsch and its consequences.

Hitler's attention, the Führer forced von Blomberg to resign. Fritsch proved more difficult. The SS put together a packet of false information accusing von Fritsch of having had a homosexual liaison; Göring and Himmler hoped to dispose of him along with von Blomberg. A court martial subsequently proved von Fritsch's innocence, but by then Hitler had already pressured him into resigning his post.

By this double coup Hitler was able to consolidate his hold over the Army. Empathy within that institution for von Blomberg was limited; his offense against the officer corps' sensibilities was real.³⁸ But von Fritsch was railroaded, and enough officers knew the circumstances that, had they been willing, they could have threatened Hitler's support within the army, and perhaps even overthrown him. When the generals failed to take any action, Hitler knew he had them in the palm of his hand. And as was the case after the Röhm purge, the lesson was not lost on the junior members of the officer corps; many of them accepted their leaders' silence as approval.³⁹

³⁸The German army was very conservative in this regard. Officers in the Reichsheer had had to obtain approval before marrying; hence the resentment against von Blomberg.

³⁹Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 421; Heinz Guderian, "General Critique of MSS# P-041a - P-041hh and a Report on the June 1944 - March 1945 Period" (MS #P-041jj) (1953), 4, in The German Army High Command, 1938 - 1945 (Arlington, VA: University Publications of America, n.d., microfilm); The documents within The German Army High Com-

With von Blomberg out of the way, Göring was hoping to take over as War Minister and Wehrmacht CiC himself. Hitler had no intention of appointing Göring; he knew Göring was totally unfit for the post, and probably saw some danger in giving him too much power. But Hitler was unable at first to decide on anyone else to fill the position. Then von Blomberg, almost literally on his way out the door, offered an idea which would have far-reaching consequences: he suggested to Hitler that the Führer take over command of the Wehrmacht personally.⁴⁰

The resulting Führer Decree of February 4, 1938 contained the following provisions:

Command authority over the entire Armed Forces is from now on exercised directly by me personally.

The Armed Forces Department [Office] in the Reich War Ministry with its functions becomes the High Command of the Armed Forces and comes directly under my command as my military staff.

The head of the Staff of the High Command of the Armed Forces is the Chief of the former Armed Forces Department [Office], with the title of Chief of the

mand are separately paginated; there are no master page numbers for the collection; The removal of von Fritsch actually brought the different elements of the German Resistance together for the first time, but through a combination of bad luck and lack of will, the officers of the Resistance never succeeded in removing Hitler. At any rate the reader should understand that the Resistance was always quite small. Most officers were simply not prepared to resist Hitler in any meaningful way; a combination of ambition, nationalism, and duty kept them loyal.

⁴⁰Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 116-19.

High Command of the Armed Forces. His status is equal to that of a Reich Minister.⁴¹

This came as a tremendous shock to the military establishment. Nowhere in any of the plans or debates to this point had there been any thought of the Head of State taking over personal command of the Wehrmacht. The army was quick to react. The new Commander-in-Chief, Lt. General Walther von Brauchitsch, sent a memorandum to the Armed Forces High Command (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht or OKW) on 7 March. Building on the earlier Fritsch Memorandum, von Brauchitsch tried once again to promote the idea that the army should have authority over the other services.⁴²

Keitel, now the Chief of the OKW, responded with his own memorandum on 19 April. He defended the structure created by the Führer Decree, saying that the command of the Wehrmacht must be centralized, and that "The war of the future does not allow for purely military strategy."⁴³ He went on to voice the opinion that the Army CiC could never be in a position superior to the other services, because he would become too detached from his own service, and moreover

⁴¹International Military Tribunal, Trial of the Major War Criminals, 4:395.

⁴²"Memorandum of 7 March 1938 submitted by BRAUCHITSCH, Commander-in-Chief of the Army. [sic] to the Armed Forces High Command," in German Military Studies, 5:Annex 1b.

⁴³"Keitel Memorandum," 4, in German Military Studies, 5:Annex 1c.

that his decisions would always be biased in favor of the army. He assured von Brauchitsch, though, that ". . . a uniform command of the Armed Forces in wartime would in no way interfere with the individual commands of the three branches of the service"44 The structure would stand (see Appendix 4).

As envisioned in 1938, the military mission of the OKW was to issue broad directives to the services, giving them strategic and operational guidance for large-scale undertakings.⁴⁵ Due to the limited nature of this mission, the OKW devoted a much smaller portion of its assets to operations, as compared with the OKH (Oberkommando des Heeres, the Army High Command).

The topmost operational element within the OKW was the Armed Forces Operations Office (Wehrmachtführungsamt or WFA). The WFA was created on 1 March 1938 as a mobilization measure for the takeover of Austria. It combined the Armed Forces Signal Communications Branch, the Armed Forces Propaganda Branch, and the National Defense Branch, and its mission was to advise the Wehrmacht CiC on all problems relating to the conduct of military operations. At first

⁴⁴Ibid., 7.

⁴⁵Heinz von Glydenfeldt, "Army High Commander and Adjutant Division" (MS #P-041c) (1952), 12, in The German Army High Command.

this office was headed by a general officer, Major General Max von Viebahn. But after about six weeks Keitel relieved him and Jodl took his place.⁴⁶

The National Defense Branch was the military planning staff for the Armed Forces Operations Office. Its Basic Directive gave it two missions: to elaborate all of Hitler's directives relating to the conduct of warfare and to keep the Chief of the OKW and the Führer informed on all military matters.⁴⁷ The Branch included Operations Groups for the Army, Navy, and Air Force. Colonel Walter Warlimont headed the National Defense Branch after Jodl took over the Armed Forces Operations Office.

What had developed was for all practical purposes a compromise between the wishes of the Army General Staff and those of the officers in the War Ministry. The OKW was in place, commanded by a Wehrmacht Commander-in-Chief. But it

⁴⁶Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 2:12; Schmidt-Richberg, Die Generalstäbe, 77 and note; Taylor, Sword and Swastika, 165; The Armed Forces Operations Office was redesignated the Armed Forces Operations Staff (Wehrmachtführungsstab or WFSt) on 8 August 1940; historians often use the latter designation generically. It is not clear who was responsible for creating the WFA. Information on the development of the structure of the OKW is difficult to find. Many of the sources are vague as to exactly when specific elements were created and what their duties were. What specific information exists often differs from one source to another. For these reasons--and to the extent possible--every effort has been made to verify the structural information in the body of the paper.

⁴⁷Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 2:18.

was a small body, in no way comparable to the "Armed Forces General Staff" that von Blomberg and von Reichenau had originally envisioned. It was not adequate to direct the operations of the field army, as von Blomberg had wanted. The CiCs of the three services were seemingly left with considerable power; the military's leaders assumed at this point that Hitler, as Wehrmacht CiC, would never actually interfere in operations.⁴⁸ The Army Commander-in-Chief's position still appeared strong at the end of 1938, since the Army General Staff was the only organization capable of managing war on land.

The General Staff had been struggling to manage the rapid expansion of the army while all the bureaucratic battles were going on above its head. The General Staff Corps still suffered from the aftereffects of the Versailles Treaty, in that there were not enough qualified officers to fill all the new vacancies. In that sense the rearmament program had outstripped the Corps' ability to cope. But aside from that, the expansion of the General Staff organization went smoothly.

When Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, the nature of the army's command structure and its place in the defense establishment had not changed significantly from what they

⁴⁸Ibid., 1:18.

had been in 1920 (see Appendix 2). The Army and Navy had their separate directorates, completely independent of one another. In the Army Directorate, four of the five offices handled administrative or logistical duties; the Truppenamt did the operational planning.⁴⁹

Hitler's rise to power had spurred the army to update its plans for internal reorganization so that it would be able to manage an expanded force. The T2 or Organization Branch of the Truppenamt was responsible for designing the structure of the future Army High Command. In doing so it had to plan for both peacetime and war establishments, but the initial priority was placed on creating the peacetime system.⁵⁰ The Versailles Treaty limitations made it impossible to make any major changes at first. Once the Treaty had been abrogated, however, the expansion proceeded apace. In its basic form the structure that evolved would have been recognizable to a General Staff officer of twenty years before; one can assume that the designers reintroduced old structures that had worked satisfactorily. However, the system now grew to be much larger and more complex than it

⁴⁹The German General Staff Corps (Washington, D.C.: Adjutant General's Office, 1946), 8, 163.

⁵⁰Burkhardt Müller-Hillebrand, "The Organizational Problems of the German High Command and their Solutions: 1939 - 1945" (MS #P-041f) (1953), 11, 15, in The German Army High Command.

had been in 1933. (See Appendix 5 for the structure as it existed in 1938.)

At the head of the hierarchy was the Commander-in-Chief (CiC) of the Army. The Commander-in-Chief's duties in peacetime were to oversee the training of the army, to promote good discipline and morale, and to maintain the army's readiness. He was responsible to the Defense Minister--simultaneously the Commander-in-Chief of the Wehrmacht--until Hitler effectively abolished the position on 4 February 1938. Thereafter, the Army CiC reported directly to the Head of State, Hitler, in the latter's capacity as Supreme Commander of the Wehrmacht.⁵¹ (Compare Appendices 3 and 4 to see this change.)

The OKH was the executive agency of the Commander-in-Chief. Its most important missions were to organize and command the army, to train the troops and their officers, and to procure everything needed to maintain the army at its required strength.⁵² There were six offices within the OKH, each with its own Chief: the General Army Office, the Army Ordinance Office, the Army Administration Office, the Inspectorate of Arms and Services, the Army Personnel

⁵¹Glydenfeldt, "Army High Commander," 1, 5.

⁵²Burkhart Müller-Hillebrand, "The German Army High Command" (MS #P-041a) (1952?), 7, in The German Army High Command.

Office, and the General Staff of the Army.⁵³ The General Staff was the element responsible for operational planning.

The Chief of the Army General Staff reported to the Commander-in-Chief and was his representative when the CiC was absent from the headquarters. His mission was to make all necessary suggestions to the CiC regarding operations, to gain execution of the CiC's decisions and orders insofar as they were within the sphere of the General Staff, and to train and supervise the members of the General Staff Corps in their duties. Officially, he was not allowed to issue commands on his own authority: he planned and executed operations in the name of the Commander-in-Chief but did not bear final responsibility for them.⁵⁴ In practice, though, the CiC usually allowed the Chief considerable freedom of action.

Within the OKH, the Chief of the General Staff was first among equals. Because of the importance of his role, his wishes took precedence over those of the chiefs of all the other OKH offices; they all had to keep him informed and to support his requirements, even though they were not officially subordinate to him.⁵⁵

⁵³Glydenfeldt, "Army High Commander," 2.

⁵⁴Ibid., 2, 21.

⁵⁵Müller-Hillebrand, "Army High Command," 31.

The Army General Staff supported its Chief in much the same way that the whole of the OKH supported the CIG. During peacetime, the General Staff was responsible for preparing plans, under the direction of the Chief, for any operations that the army might be called upon to undertake.⁵⁶ Its structure changed repeatedly from 1935 on, in response to the requirements being placed upon it.

The old Truppenamt became the General Staff of the Army on 1 June 1935, under the terms of the secret Reich Defense Law of 21 May.⁵⁷ In accordance with the Organization Branch's plans, four new branches (Transportation, Supply, Military Science and Technical Developments) were added to the four original ones (Operations, Organization, Foreign Armies and Training). This--like most of the structural changes that eventually occurred--did not represent the addition of new responsibilities so much as the reappportioning of old ones.⁵⁸

The process of expanding and reorganizing the General Staff went on continuously right through the years of rearmament. By 1938 there were fourteen branches within the

⁵⁶Ibid., 31.

⁵⁷Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 1:107, 180; Seaton, German Army, 78.

⁵⁸Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 1:111.

General Staff, each with its own branch chief and area of responsibility.⁵⁹ The branches carried out their duties independently, in accordance with the service regulations. Each branch chief was responsible for the organization of his own branch.⁶⁰ The branch chiefs could report directly to the Chief of the Army General Staff and then to the Commander-in-Chief if circumstances required it. Moreover, if a branch chief needed a decision from the Commander-in-Chief immediately, he could bypass the Chief of the General Staff and inform him of the CiC's decision later.⁶¹

As might be expected, the preeminent branch within the Army General Staff was the one directly responsible for operational matters: the Operations Branch. In the pre-war years it had three sections. Section I drafted the basic orders and instructions for the operational use of all German ground forces for national defense in times of peace, crisis, or war. Section II did special studies on specific operational problems and set up exercises for the training of staff officers. Section III kept the Chief of the Operations Branch informed on the readiness of the army and

⁵⁹Franz Halder, "The Chief of the Army General Staff" (MS #P-041d) (1952), 2, in The German Army High Command.

⁶⁰Alfred Zerbel, "Organization of the Army Quartermaster" (MS #P-041b) (1952?), 2, in The German Army High Command.

⁶¹Glydenfeldt, "Army High Commander," 23-24.

coordinated with the other branches of the Army General Staff on projects requiring their support.⁶²

At the same time that the General Staff was first being enlarged, the position of Assistant Chief of Staff (Oberquartiermeister or OQu)--which had been unnecessary in the smaller Truppenamt--was reintroduced.⁶³ Despite the use of the title "Quartermaster," these officers had nothing in common with the logistical officers at other levels of the command system. The role of each Oberquartiermeister was to coordinate the activities of related branches within the Army General Staff under the direction of its Chief. In this way the Assistant Chiefs relieved the Chief of some of his workload.⁶⁴ By 1938 there were five of these officers, in charge respectively of Operations, Training, Organization, Intelligence, and Military Science.⁶⁵

The Oberquartiermeister system was flexible. The Chief of the General Staff could permanently or temporarily

⁶²Hans von Greiffenberg, "Operations Branch of the Army General Staff" (MS #P-041e) (1952), 2-5, in The German Army High Command.

⁶³Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 1:112.

⁶⁴Günther Blumentritt and Alfred Zerbel, "Top Level Agencies of the Army General Staff: The Chiefs of Operations, Training, and Organization" (MS #P-041d) (1952), 1, in The German Army High Command; Note: this manuscript was given the same number as Halder, "Chief of the Army General Staff."

⁶⁵Halder, "The Chief," 2.

assign branches to any particular Assistant Chief of Staff according to the requirements of the moment. For example, the Assistant Chief of Staff for Training (OQu II) was at one point responsible for supervising the Training, Officer Training, and Military Science branches; later the Military Science branch was put under its own Assistant Chief (OQu V).⁶⁶

The Assistant Chiefs of Staff could not make major decisions independently, and the basic responsibilities of the branch chiefs did not change; the adjustments were in the General Staff's internal working procedures.⁶⁷ Selected branch chiefs now reported to Assistant Chiefs of Staff, who coordinated the activities of the branches for which they were responsible and in turn reported to the Chief of the General Staff.⁶⁸

The structure of the Army High Command reflected one of the governing principles behind German staff organization: define spheres of activity clearly and rationally, delegating authority to the lowest possible level. The degree to which the OKH--and the High Command as a whole--functioned smoothly was largely due to the application of

⁶⁶Ibid., 3.

⁶⁷Müller-Hillebrand, "Army High Command," 33.

⁶⁸Zerbel, "Army Quartermaster," 3.

that principle, combined with the professionalism and efficiency of the General Staff Corps.

Professionalism and efficiency were also present in the Wehrmacht High Command, especially among the more junior members of that staff. The OKW staff did what it could to fulfil its role, loosely defined though that role was, and to work with the OKH. Staff officers prepared synopses on important issues so that their superiors could deal with those issues efficiently.⁶⁹ Regular daily briefings kept everyone fully informed.⁷⁰ And numerous "back-channel" relationships developed. For example, General Franz Halder, the Chief of the Army General Staff from September 1938 to September 1942, testified at Nuremberg that ". . . [General Walter] Warlimont [Chief of the National Defense Branch] was in contact with Oberquartiermeister I of the General Staff, General [Heinrich] von Stülpnagel, in order to be advised by him or to exchange ideas and opinions."⁷¹ The goal of the General Staff Corps in the years immediately before the war

⁶⁹International Military Tribunal, Major War Criminals, 10:313-14.

⁷⁰Helmuth Greiner, "OKW, World War II" (MS #C-065b), 11-12, in German Military Studies, vol. 7.

⁷¹Testimony of Gen. Halder, in Trials of the War Criminals before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals Under Control Council Law No. 10. Nuernberg, October 1946 - April 1949 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1949-1953), 10:560; (referred to in the future as Trials of the [minor] War Criminals).

broke out was to make the system work, and they were quite successful, for the most part. The portents, however, were not good. These revolved mainly around the man at the top of the military hierarchy: Adolf Hitler.

To most casual observers Hitler had, by the end of 1938, worked something of a miracle in Germany. Unemployment had dropped to negligible levels, the Reich government functioned smoothly, the infrastructure had been modernized, labor and political unrest had been eliminated, and Germany had begun to regain her pride and her rightful place among the nations of Europe. But beneath the surface, serious flaws existed in the government of the Third Reich. With hindsight, there were obviously problems with both Hitler's ends and his means.

The historian Alan Bullock wrote that "Hitler was not interested in administration, or carrying out a program of reform--he was interested in power."⁷² Hitler also did not have the background or training to be an administrator. His strengths matched his interests to a great extent: he possessed remarkable political instincts, skill at manipulating people, and utter unscrupulousness. He also held stubbornly to his decisions. So by inclination and ability,

⁷²Bullock, Hitler, 313.

Hitler was unable to run the government rationally and unwilling to give authority to those who could.

Granted, Hitler had at first kept his hands off the military. The Röhm purge and rearmament eliminated the army as an early threat to his authority, and he had other aspects of Gleichschaltung to worry about. From 1934 to 1938, Hitler let the military go about its business very much on its own. When Major Friedrich Hossbach, the Wehrmacht Adjutant, submitted documents for him to sign, he usually did so without even reading them. He did not even attempt to control major appointments.⁷³

But as the pace of rearmament quickened in 1936 and 1937, Hitler began to hear grumbling from his senior officers. The army's leadership was concerned that quality was being sacrificed for quantity. The furor increased as the generals began to get wind of Hitler's foreign policy plans. Beck--who had initially supported Hitler--became especially outspoken, but he was not the only one; von Fritsch echoed his arguments that a major war could only end in Germany's destruction. And Colonel Georg Thomas, the Wehrmacht's expert on the coordination of the military and the economy, also warned that Germany was not economically prepared for a long war. Germany's leading economists,

⁷³Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 22-23; Seaton, German Army, 55, 80.

Hjalmar Schacht and Carl Goerdeler, added their voices to Thomas'.⁷⁴

The 5 November 1937 meeting--at which Hitler made his intentions clear, if only in a general way--marked a turning point in Hitler's relationship with the military. Realizing in the aftermath of that meeting that he could not trust most of the generals to carry out his plans, he now set out to control the military more closely. The Blomberg/Fritsch affair provided him with his first opportunity to expand his authority. Not only was he able to dispose of some officers he did not trust and take over command of the Wehrmacht personally, but he also made several other important changes.

Hitler's choice for a new Commander-in-Chief of the Army gave him a tangible measure of additional control. Walther von Brauchitsch was a capable officer, whose views of military affairs were not significantly different from those of his peers. But, like von Blomberg before him, von Brauchitsch had marriage difficulties. Hitler helped him to sort these out so that von Brauchitsch would be able to take the post of CiC. So from the moment he took command, von Brauchitsch was aware of the debt he owed Hitler. He also could not have missed the significance of von Blomberg's

⁷⁴Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 35-39; Seaton, German Army, 42.

removal under circumstances similar to his own; it was obvious that Hitler would not fail to ruin von Brauchitsch if the situation warranted such a maneuver. The meaning of this for the army was obvious from the beginning: in order to be given the post, von Brauchitsch had to promise to bring the army closer to National Socialism, to support Hitler as the new Wehrmacht commander and, if necessary, to replace Beck as Chief of the Army General Staff.⁷⁵

Hitler's other major appointment at that time was the Chief of the OKW, Wilhelm Keitel, formerly the Chief of the Armed Forces Office. The manner by which Keitel was chosen is significant. During von Blomberg's "exit interview" on 27 January 1938, after von Blomberg suggested that Hitler take command of the Wehrmacht, Hitler asked about someone to do all the staff work that would be required. "Who is that general you have had at your side up to now?" "Oh, Keitel," von Blomberg replied, "he would not come into consideration. He is nothing more than my chef de bureau [office manager]." "That is exactly the kind of man I am looking for," said Hitler.⁷⁶

Blomberg's summation of Keitel's abilities was accurate. Keitel was an able administrator, but thoroughly

⁷⁵Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 220-30.

⁷⁶Ibid., 119.

unequipped to be a Chief of Staff in the manner of a von Gneisenau or a von Moltke. He was convinced of Hitler's superior strategic insight and quickly became merely a speaking tube for the Führer.⁷⁷

These two key appointments gave Hitler much of the leverage he was looking for, but Hitler took one more step to solidify his control. On 4 February 1938, during the speech to the senior army commanders at which he addressed the Blomberg/Fritsch affair and announced the new command structure, Hitler stated that he would make all the important appointments from that moment forward.⁷⁸ To help him in this task he replaced the Chief of the OKH's Personnel Office with Keitel's brother, Bodewin.⁷⁹ Hitler also dismissed the Wehrmacht Adjutant, Colonel Hossbach.⁸⁰ This

⁷⁷One can get a good idea of Keitel's nature from a story he relates in his memoirs. On 11 March 1938, the night before German forces were to move into Austria, Keitel received a number of calls from officers on the General Staff, urging him to appeal to Hitler to call the operation off. Keitel later returned their calls and told them that the Führer had refused--when in fact Keitel had never spoken with Hitler at all. For more on Keitel, see Wilhelm Keitel, The Memoirs of Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel (New York: Stein & Day, 1966), and also his testimony at the Nuremberg trials.

⁷⁸Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 265.

⁷⁹Seaton, German Army, 83.

⁸⁰Hossbach was promoted to Lt. Colonel in August 1934, and to Colonel in October 1937; For more information on Hossbach and the Blomberg/Fritsch affair, see Friedrich Hossbach, Zwischen Wehrmacht und Hitler, 1934 - 1938

allowed Hitler to take advantage of a peculiarity in the structure of the High Command.

In July 1935, the Army Personnel Office's P3 Group had been converted into the Central Branch of the Army General Staff; it handled General Staff officer assignments and records, dictated procedures to be used within the Staff, and prepared the mobilization plans for the OKH, this last in conjunction with the Organization Branch. The Chief of the Central Branch, who was immediately subordinate to the Chief of the General Staff, was also the Wehrmacht Adjutant to Hitler. This gave the army a direct link to the Head of State. The fact that Hossbach was a supporter of von Fritsch and Beck made this position doubly important.⁸¹

Hossbach's replacement as Wehrmacht Adjutant, Major Rudolf Schmundt, soon proved himself thoroughly subservient to Hitler. The link between the adjutant's office and the Central Branch of the General Staff was now a problem for the army rather than an asset, and the appointment of a new army representative to the adjutant's office did little to change the situation. With control of the Central Branch

(Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965).

⁸¹Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 1:111; Seaton, German Army, 100; Taylor, Sword and Swastika, 106.

and the Personnel Office, Hitler was able to ensure that only cooperative generals received promotions.⁸²

The importance of Hitler's new position vis-a-vis the military leadership soon became clear. He could now set about more freely to implement his foreign policy goals. In addition, the Führer also took the first steps toward control of operations. He insisted on being a part of the military planning process, and soon a set of procedures and ad-hoc relationships developed that remained in place through the opening campaigns of the war. First Hitler would issue broad instructions personally to the services through their CiCs. Sometimes he had the OKW staff prepare a background study first, but often not. The services' headquarters staffs would create draft operational plans based on Hitler's instructions, which the CiCs would then present to Hitler verbally. Hitler would make his decisions based on the services' plans and information prepared for him by the Armed Forces Operations Office. Then the Armed Forces Operations Office--actually the National Defense Branch--would prepare and issue a written directive, incorporating the services' plans in some detail. With this directive, the services' staffs would prepare their own

⁸²Deutsch, Hitler and His Generals, 131, 171-73, 274-75, 389-90; Taylor, Sword and Swastika, 157-58; Seaton, German Army, 86, 100.

operational instructions. The services maintained close contact during this process to ensure that their orders did not conflict with one another. Finally, the CiCs would submit their orders to Hitler for final approval. At this time Hitler would resolve any remaining differences among the services.⁸³

Two aspects of this process need to be emphasized. First, the OKW did not have any command authority of its own; all it did was issue directives in Hitler's name, just as the Army General Staff issued orders in the name of the Army Commander-in-Chief.⁸⁴ Second, the inclusion of operational details in Hitler's directives was not, at this time, the result of the OKW's efforts or Hitler's meddling. Those details were the result of work done by the services--usually the Army General Staff--and were simply included to keep everyone informed.⁸⁵ In all of the operations planned or carried out up to the start of the war, the Army

⁸³Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3:Chapter B, 11, 15-16.

⁸⁴International Military Tribunal, Major War Criminals, 10:473.

⁸⁵Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3:Chapter B, 9. This is not to say that Hitler never meddled in operational matters. The briefings he received were quite detailed, and he sometimes--as in the planning for Case Green (the invasion of Czechoslovakia)--altered the disposition of forces. But for the most part, his was not the dominant role; he did not yet have that much confidence.

Commander-in-Chief and the General Staff remained dominant. In other words, Hitler's role in the direction of the armed forces was limited; the army's leaders apparently saw little danger that Hitler would be able to overcome their authority.

The effectiveness of the High Command depended upon the accuracy of the generals' foresight. As it existed at the beginning of 1939, the High Command was organized in such a way that it could, theoretically, carry out its missions. The OKW had the right mix of assets to advise the Wehrmacht CiC on matters of defense policy and grand strategy. The OKH showed every sign of being an effective instrument for the direction of the field army. The General Staff was disappointed that it did not have direct authority over the navy and air force, but the Staff appeared to have retained firm control of its own arm. The most significant organizational flaw was the combination of the offices of Head of State and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, but even this could be overcome if the man in that position used his assets intelligently.

Unfortunately, the man in that position had never shown any inclination to use his assets intelligently. That was why the internecine struggles over the structure of the High Command had gone on for so long. Had he been interested in doing so, Hitler could have settled the disputes in

any number of ways. But that point is moot. For whatever reasons--and there are many theories on this--Hitler kept lines of authority muddled and in flux, played one subordinate off against another, and kept his plans mostly to himself. As a result, the development of the armed forces command system was not an orderly process; it was affected by the circumstances of the moment, by the threat of war, and by the personalities of Hitler and those around him.

The willingness of the senior officers to squabble among themselves only exacerbated the problems and gave Hitler opportunities for control. In addition, their lack of recent practical experience in building a joint command system may have left them open to political influences.⁸⁶ But the fact remains that Hitler was primarily responsible for the way in which the High Command evolved. And barring a change in Hitler's leadership style, the High Command could easily find its effectiveness slipping away.

⁸⁶Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 1:4-6.

CHAPTER 3
CRISIS AT THE CENTER: HITLER AND THE OKW
1939 - 1943

On 1 September 1939 the Wehrmacht launched its attack into Poland. Many of the Wehrmacht's leaders considered their forces unready for the task; training was incomplete, weapon and ammunition stocks were low, and replacements were lacking. The generals wondered what the French and the English would do, knowing that Germany could not hold out for long in the West against a strong Allied attack. But Hitler was determined to see the attack go forward. When the Allies did nothing and the Polish army collapsed in less than three weeks, the Führer's judgment appeared to have been right again, just as it had in the occupations of the Rhineland, Austria and Czechoslovakia. Hitler's sure touch in geopolitics seemed to carry over into the military realm. So began one of the most important and controversial military careers in history. In its successes and failures, that career governed the fortunes of the entire command system.

The structure of the High Command at the beginning of the war was a compromise. As such, it contained flaws. These flaws could have been overcome, either by carefully

reorganizing the system or simply by using it properly. Hitler refused to do the former, but at first his role was such that the system worked tolerably well, despite its weaknesses.

However, Hitler's role changed as the war went on. He interfered in the operational sphere, becoming increasingly confident of his own abilities at the same time that he grew more and more distrustful of the General Staff.¹ He also played havoc with the structure of the command system, reassigning responsibilities as he saw fit or simply ignoring the procedures by which the system was supposed to function. By his actions Hitler exacerbated the weaknesses with which the High Command had entered the war, and introduced new ones as well. The roles of the OKW and the OKH changed to their mutual disadvantage and that of the German war effort.²

One does not need a blow-by-blow account of the war in order to recognize the crucial niche Hitler occupied within the command structure. However, the style and substance of

¹The terms "operational" and "operations" refer here to those activities connected with the direction of combat forces.

²The term "OKW" as applied in this paper refers only to those elements of the OKW that were responsible for operational matters: the Armed Forces Operations Office (later the Armed Forces Operations Staff) and within it the National Defense Branch.

Hitler's military decisions do need to be reviewed, for they reveal much about his style of command and the relationship that developed between him and his principle advisors.³

Hitler was no more qualified to be a strategist than he was to be an administrator. He did have military experience; he had distinguished himself as a regimental runner on the Western Front in the First World War, earning an Iron Cross, First Class. That war shaped his attitudes toward the military, as it did those of so many other thousands of young Germans. But Hitler never rose above the rank of corporal, nor did he serve in a position that would have been likely to give him any understanding of strategy or staff work.⁴

Nonetheless, Hitler displayed a strong interest in the details of military operations well before the Second World War began. On the night of 9 - 10 September 1938, for example, Lt. General Franz Halder, Chief of the General Staff, briefed Hitler on the plans for the invasion of Czechoslovakia, codenamed "Case Green". When Halder was finished, Hitler said, "We should not plan the action on the operations as we desire them, but take into consideration

³For an overview of Germany's part in the Second World War, see B.H. Liddell Hart, History of the Second World War (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), and Albert Seaton, The German Army 1933-45.

⁴Bullock, Hitler, 52-53.

the probable course of action pursued by the enemy." He then went on to offer detailed guidance on the direction and constitution of the offensive thrusts.⁵ How the plan would have developed and the extent to which Hitler would have interfered can only be guessed; the Munich agreement robbed him of his opportunity to try his hand at directing the army. But there is no doubt that he already considered himself more than a merely titular commander.

On 3 April 1939 the Führer issued his "Directive for the Armed Forces 1939 - 1940," which included an annex on the invasion of Poland (codenamed "Case White"). The contents of this annex were quite broad; the most specific operational instructions to the Wehrmacht were to aim for the destruction of the Polish armed forces, starting with ". . . heavy, sudden blows. . . ." ⁶ For the most part Hitler was willing to let the services do the planning. But as had been the case with "Case Green," he did require a strict review process; the directive stipulated that the services had to submit their plans to the OKW for inclusion

⁵From Schmundt's notes of the conference, in Trials of the [minor] War Criminals, 10:608-09.

⁶International Military Tribunal, Major War Criminals, 4:423-24.

in a master timetable, which Hitler would approve.⁷ During the review process, moreover, he changed the army's plan, giving one of the armies a completely different mission. He also closely supervised the planning for certain special operations.⁸

Once the Polish campaign opened, Hitler spent a good deal of time handling diplomatic affairs with the British, French, and Russians.⁹ The offensive was over so quickly that he barely had time to involve himself in operations. Still, he reserved all of the political and strategic decisions to himself, and also did not hesitate to intervene in the direction of the combat forces whenever he deemed it necessary. In one case he went so far as to interfere in operations at the Corps level.¹⁰

⁷Peter De Mendelssohn, Design for Aggression; the Inside Story of Hitler's War Plans (New York: Harper, 1947), 81; Trials of the [minor] War Criminals, 10:683-84; August Winter and others, "The Progress of Preparations for Case 'White'" (MS #T-101 Annex 8), 5, in German Military Studies, vol. 5.

⁸Keitel, Memoirs, 94; Franz Halder, The Private War Journal of Generaloberst Franz Halder, 14 August 1939 to 24 September 1942 (Printed by the Adjutant General, European Command; Reserve Book Room, Locked Case, San Jose State University, n.d.), 1:6-12; Helmuth Greiner, "Poland 1939" (MS #C-065c), 21-22, in German Military Studies, v. 7.

⁹Keitel, Memoirs, 92.

¹⁰Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, ed., Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht 1940-1941 (München: Bernard & Graefe Verlag, 1982), 1:174E-75E; Greiner, "Poland," 22; Keitel, Memoirs, 94; Halder, Journal, 1:49; The four levels

Hitler's subordinate commanders were chagrined with his increasing involvement in what they believed was their exclusive realm. They considered him a neophyte, and they were right. But Hitler's strategic judgment in the Polish campaign often proved to be as good as or better than that of his subordinates, despite all their training. Hitler was understandably buoyed by this fact, and so determined to take an even greater role in the direction of the war from that point on. The generals found themselves less able, and to some extent less inclined, to resist him. Aside from political realities--significant though they were--no one found it easy to argue with success.

Brauchitsch and Halder were both very pleased at the end of the Polish operation: Poland had succumbed easily, and the French and English had refrained from attacking. Now they could concentrate on shifting the army to the West and preparing for a long period of "position warfare," as they had ruled out an attack against the French army. The Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations in the Army General Staff, Major General Heinrich von Stülpnagel, prepared a

of field command below the OKH were, in descending order: Army Group, Army, Corps, and Division.

memorandum on 24 September, stating that an attack in the West was impossible before 1942.¹¹

Hitler had other ideas, however; he informed the Commanders-in-Chief of the three services on 27 September that he intended to launch the attack in the West just as soon as possible--definitely before the year was out--and moreover that the attack would have to go through Holland and Belgium.¹²

Brauchitsch and Halder mustered all their arguments against such a move. In his private journal, Halder wrote down his objections, including "Techniques of Polish campaign no recipe for the West. No good against a well-knit Army."¹³ But Hitler was not impressed; in the end only bad weather kept the Führer from ordering the offensive in the autumn or early winter.¹⁴

Between October 1939 and May 1940 Hitler revealed, through a series of conferences and directives, the extent to which he now intended to intervene in the conduct of the

¹¹Halder, Journal, 1:61; Charles Burdick, "German Military Planning for the War in the West, 1935-1940" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1955), 115.

¹²Helmuth Greiner, "The Campaigns in Western and Northern Europe, 1940," (MS #C-065d), 1, in German Military Studies, v. 7.

¹³Halder, Journal, 2:18.

¹⁴Ibid., 2:31, 45, and in general, entries for 26 Sep 39 - 10 Jan 40.

war. As in the past, he dictated the time and place of the offensive in general terms. He was also instrumental in designating the avenues of attack and the structure of the attacking forces; he was the driving force behind the plan to drive through the Ardennes. Beyond that, Hitler involved himself in special operations and even lectured his generals on the need to conserve ammunition and keep armored units away from cities.¹⁵

At the end of November the Russians attacked Finland, and Hitler became concerned that the English might try to occupy Norway, thus threatening Germany's supply of Swedish iron ore. On 13 December he told Jodl to prepare a small study on the idea of occupying Norway before the English could get there.¹⁶ In January 1940 the OKW set up a small working staff to continue the study; then on 21 February Hitler appointed General Nikolaus von Falkenhorst commander for the operation, now codenamed "Weserübung."¹⁷ Hitler's

¹⁵H.R. Trevor-Roper, ed., Hitler's War Directives 1939-1945 (London: Pan Books, 1964), 49-56; Halder, Journal, 2:25-27, 48, 3:35-37, 80-83.

¹⁶Walter Warlimont, Inside Hitler's Headquarters, trans. R. H. Barry (New York: F. A. Praeger, Publishers, 1964), 70.

¹⁷Order on preparations for Weserübung, dated Jan. 27, 1940, in Office of United States Chief of Council for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), vol. VI, 883; Gen. Jodl's diary entries for 18 & 21 Feb. 1940, in Office of United States Chief of Council, Nazi Conspiracy,

directive for the operation, issued on 1 March, stipulated that the forces for "Weserübung" would be under a "special command," and would not be available for other theaters.¹⁸

Hitler gave several reasons for putting "Weserübung" in the hands of the OKW: it was too big an operation for one service to direct, it required close consultation with the Foreign Affairs Ministry, and it would distract the army from its preparations for the invasion of France.¹⁹ These arguments appear to be specious. Warlimont points out, for example, that the OKW's staff was far too small to plan and direct an operation on this level, and that the OKH had to make up the difference.²⁰ Whatever the truth, Hitler obviously intended to exercise command directly, and by whatever means he chose. As with the preparations for the western campaign, Hitler involved himself in all the details of force structure and strategy.²¹

vol. IV, 385.

¹⁸OKW WFA/Abt. L Nr. 22070/40 1 Mar 1940 Directive for Operation "Weserübung," in Item OKW 1611a,b, translations of "Führer Directives and other top-level directives of the German armed forces, 1939-1945," National Archives Microfilm Publication T77, Roll 774, frames 5500097-98.

¹⁹Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 24-25.

²⁰Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 73.

²¹Halder, Journal, 3:105.

Germany invaded Norway on 9 April 1940. Hitler maintained close control of the operation himself, and displayed a startling lack of nerve. As the battle developed he became increasingly agitated over events and began issuing detailed and often contradictory orders. At one point, when English forces threatened the German units in Narvik, Hitler even had Keitel draft an order for their evacuation into neutral Sweden.²² In this case Hitler's panic attack did not prevent success, but the whole affair sent ripples of anxiety through the High Command. Brauchitsch asked Lt. Colonel Bernhard von Lossberg, head of the Army Operations Group in the National Defense Branch (Abt. I), "caustically and rhetorically, how they were going to manage in the coming offensive in the west if the Führer was already losing his nerve and going to pieces in front of Narvik."²³

Brauchitsch's question was a good one. On 10 May the offensive into France and the Low Countries began, and within a week Hitler was showing signs of strain. Having been one of the main proponents of a bold armored thrust, he now became nervous about its progress. On 17 May Halder wrote:

Rather unpleasant day. The Führer is terribly nervous. Frightened by his own success, he is afraid to take any

²²Greiner, "Campaigns in the West," 24-25.

²³Seaton, German Army, 133.

chance and so would rather pull the reins on us. Puts forward the excuse that it is all because of his concern for the left flank! Keitel's telephone calls to AGps [Army Groups], on behalf of Führer, and Führer's visit to AGp. B have caused only bewilderment and doubts.²⁴

And again on 18 May:

[Hitler] rages and screams that we are on the best way to ruin the whole campaign and that we are leading up to a defeat. . . . This is the subject of a most unpleasant discussion between the Führer on one side, and ObdH [von Brauchitsch] and myself on the other.²⁵

Then on 24 May Hitler made the first of his great strategic blunders. He allowed Army Group A's armored spearhead to be halted just as it was closing in on Dunkirk, threatening to cut off the Allies' only route of withdrawal. Hitler's motives are unclear; he later cited tactical considerations, and some historians have theorized that he wanted to let the British off lightly so that they would negotiate for peace. Whatever the reasons, the result was disastrous for the Germans: for two entire days the tanks sat in place while the English consolidated their defenses. By the time Hitler changed his mind on 26 May and ordered the attack reopened, it was too late for his forces to make an easy entry into Dunkirk. Over the course of the next ten days most of the English army escaped the trap.

²⁴Halder, Journal, 4:17.

²⁵Ibid., 4:18.

If Hitler ever felt any discomfort over the Dunkirk debacle, he soon consoled himself with the rapidity of Germany's victory over France. As far as he was concerned, it was his victory. Laying aside his own nervousness, mistakes, and lack of military education, Hitler was by now convinced that his strategic judgment was better than his generals'. His distrust of the General Staff Corps, founded upon political and class differences, now took on a military relevance. The fact that Hitler's decisions had often proved correct blinded him to the possibility that he could ever be in error.

The campaigns in Norway and France set the tone for the next year of the war. In the second half of 1940 and the first months of 1941 Hitler tried to put together an invasion of England (codenamed "Seelöwe"), an operation to take Gibraltar ("Felix"), and contingency plans to occupy Vichy France or Spain and Portugal ("Attila" and "Isabella"). He also directed that preparations begin for invasions of Greece ("Marita") and Russia ("Barbarossa"), and sent help to the Italians in North Africa ("Sonnenblume"). He even sent a special staff ("Sonderstab F") to aid the Iraqis in a revolt against the English. In every case Hitler insisted on being involved in many of the details and making all the key decisions.

All the while, though, Hitler's lack of experience and ability as a strategist and grand strategist was becoming clearer. He did not know how to proceed against England after the fall of France; his confusion is reflected in the multiplicity of options he considered. Finally, reasoning that English resistance depended upon the hope of Russian assistance, he decided to leave England intact in his rear while he dealt with the Soviets.²⁶ That decision made, he was unable to define clear goals for the attack on Russia. His initial guidance to von Brauchitsch was to

crush [the] Russian Army or slice as much Russian territory as is necessary to bar enemy air raids on Berlin and [the] Silesian industries. It is desirable to penetrate far enough to enable our air force to smash Russia's strategic areas.²⁷

And yet from those vague beginnings Hitler went on to radically alter the plans that the army presented to him.²⁸

Mussolini's ill-fated invasion of Greece and the English response forced Hitler to clear up the situation in the Balkans before he could move against Russia. On 3 April 1941 he issued his Directive No. 26, "Cooperation with our allies in the Balkans," which reserved for himself "the

²⁶Ibid., 4:126; for more on Hitler's strategic dilemma in 1940, see Charles Burdick, Germany's Military Strategy and Spain in World War II.

²⁷Halder, Journal, 4:128; Seaton, German Army, 163.

²⁸Seaton, German Army, 163-66.

coordinated command of this campaign, in so far as the operational aims of the Italian and Hungarian forces . . . is concerned."²⁹ This was really nothing new; Hitler intervened in the planning and execution of the Balkan campaign in much the same way as he did the French campaign.

Hitler assigned the planning and execution of Operation "Merkur," the invasion of Crete in May 1941, to the Luftwaffe, even though the operation clearly called for the cooperation of all three services. The Luftwaffe, lacking experience in naval and land operations, failed to make a good reconnaissance of the island or coordinate the air and naval landings properly. The result was a tactical victory but a strategic defeat; the losses to the airborne forces were so high that Hitler refused to consider further airborne operations until the war was nearly over.³⁰

Hitler's interference gradually became more serious after the start of the Russian campaign on 22 June 1941. Three days into the offensive he was already nervous that the armored forces were operating too far in depth; "the old refrain!" Halder wrote.³¹ The army was able to maintain

²⁹Trevor-Roper, ed., Hitler's Directives, 112.

³⁰Halder, Journal, 6:136; Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 28; The Germans' efforts were not helped by the fact that the British knew their entire plan, down to the hour.

³¹Halder, Journal, 6:172.

some latitude on that issue, but a more serious conflict arose in mid-July, when Hitler split Army Group Center in order to support operations in the north and south. This effectively halted the drive on Moscow, which the General Staff considered to be the primary objective. Hitler finally ordered the resumption of the drive on Moscow on 6 September, but the onset of winter and stiff Russian resistance kept the Germans from capturing the city.

Hitler meddled more and more as the situation deteriorated. On 7 December 1941 Halder recorded,

ObdH [von Brauchitsch] is now no more than a messenger boy, if that much. The Führer, over the head of ObdH, gets in direct touch with the commanders of army groups. . . . and indulges in paltry patchwork where only big decisions could help.³²

An example of the kind of "paltry patchwork" to which Halder referred took place on 30 November, when the First Panzer Army under Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South was about to be enveloped by strong Russian forces. Rundstedt asked for permission to withdraw to better defensive positions, but Hitler forbade him to retreat under any circumstances. This type of order was to become Hitler's trademark in the years ahead. Eventually circumstances forced Hitler to allow the First Panzer to

³²Ibid., 7:206.

retreat--but not until after he had relieved von Rundstedt and the First Panzer had taken substantial casualties.³³

By the beginning of December the strain was too much for von Brauchitsch; on the 7th he tendered his resignation. This time Hitler did not need a von Blomberg to clarify his options for him; he took over command of the army himself on 19 December.³⁴ As he told Halder:

Anyone can do the little job of directing operations in war. The task of the Commander-in-Chief is to educate the Army to be National-Socialist. I do not know any Army general who can do this as I want it done. I have therefore decided to take over command of the Army myself.³⁵

To Hitler, this move meant that he could now do what he had been doing since 1940--the "little job of directing operations"--but with less resistance from the army.

By now Hitler was losing touch with the realities of the military situation. "He cannot be bothered with strength ratios," Halder had noted on 6 December.³⁶ Halder was better equipped psychologically and in a better position to resist Hitler than von Brauchitsch had been, but it was far too late for Halder to make much difference. Once the

³³Ibid., 7:193-96.

³⁴Ibid., 7:233; Seaton, German Army, 182.

³⁵quoted in Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 214; Warlimont states that it comes from Halder's memoirs, but there is no specific citation.

³⁶Halder, Journal, 7:205.

Russian winter offensive had been contained, Hitler decided on a new attack in 1942. His Directive No. 41, dated 5 April 1942, included as its goals the capture of Leningrad and Sevastopol, a thrust into the Crimea to take the oil fields there, and a link-up of forces "in the Stalingrad area."³⁷ The directive also shows Hitler's abandonment of the tactics that had produced so many victories for Germany:

It must not happen that, by advancing too quickly and too far, armored and motorized formations lose connection with the infantry following them; or that they lose the opportunity of supporting the hard-pressed, forward-fighting infantry by direct attacks on the rear of the encircled Russian armies.³⁸

The results of the 1942 campaign are well known, and do not need to be reviewed in any detail. Hitler maintained ever closer control of the battle, even taking personal command of an Army Group at one point. He did not, however, develop any greater understanding of warfare. Halder's diary again provides us with a window into the situation:

In consequence of the concentration of army [sic] ordered by the Führer on 17 July over my opposition, and the diversion of 24th Armored Division to Sixth Army, directed by him on 21 July, it is becoming obvious to the layman [Hitler] that the Rostov area is crammed with armor which has nothing to do, while the critical outer wing at Tsimlyanskaya is starving for it. I warned emphatically against both these developments.

³⁷Trevor-Roper, ed., Hitler's Directives, 181.

³⁸Ibid., 180.

Now that the result is so palpable, he explodes in a fit of insane rage and hurls the gravest reproaches against the General Staff.

This chronic tendency to underrate enemy capabilities is gradually assuming grotesque proportions and develops into a positive danger. The situation is getting more and more intolerable. There is no room for any serious work. This so-called leadership is characterized by a pathological reacting to the impressions of the moment and a total lack of any understanding of the command machinery and its possibilities.³⁹

Despite the difficulties, Halder persisted in trying to get the Führer to see reason. But Hitler dismissed any information that did not match his views. A "sharp clash," as Halder termed it, occurred on 24 August, in which Halder angrily berated Hitler: ". . . out there brave men and young officers are falling in thousands simply because their commanders are not allowed to make the only reasonable decision and have their hands tied behind their backs." Hitler shot back, "Colonel-General Halder, how dare you use language like that to me! . . . I won't stand for that! It's outrageous!" A month later Hitler finally dismissed the Chief of the General Staff.⁴⁰

³⁹Halder, Journal, 7:358; for more detailed information on the Russian campaigns, see Earl F. Ziemke and Magna E. Bauer, Moscow to Stalingrad: Decision in the East (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1987) and Earl F. Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, United States Army, 1968).

⁴⁰Ibid., 7:382; Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 252, 258.

From this point forward any vestiges of the General Staff's independence disappeared. Hitler chose as Halder's replacement Major General Kurt Zeitzler, and promoted him directly to full General. Zeitzler appeared to be the exact opposite of Halder: he seemed bold and dynamic where Halder was aloof, aristocratic, and cautious.⁴¹ Hitler doubtless thought he was ridding himself of the "pessimistic" influence of the General Staff Corps at last. At any rate the appointment was rather unimportant; Hitler would not let any Chief of Staff run his war for him. Hitler's megalomania and his distrust of the General Staff had reached their zenith. His was to be the only mind directing German operations for the remainder of the war. For the next two and a half years he dominated the High Command completely, at times issuing orders down to battalion and even company level.⁴²

Hitler obviously lacked the training, experience and personal qualities to direct operations--and had from the beginning. The results of his decisions bear this out. But there was more to Hitler's role than the specifics of the operational decisions he made. There is significance in the very fact that he made them at all. In doing so he usurped

⁴¹Goerlitz, German General Staff, 419.

⁴²Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 214-15.

the authority of the legitimate military leaders and destroyed the command system's coherence. From his point of view, however, he was simply performing the role that destiny had set aside for him, and any steps he took to accomplish his goals were therefore justified. His willingness to interfere in operations, to do whatever he thought appropriate according to his own standards, was completely typical of him.

That fact took on special significance for the structure and functioning of the High Command because Hitler did not restrict himself to making operational decisions. Hitler also dominated the High Command in an organizational sense. He influenced the physical layout and manning of his headquarters, as well as the working methods used within it. He made concrete changes in the structure of the command system. And perhaps most fundamentally, his leadership philosophy permeated the High Command. Hitler's operational decisions were but one manifestation of that philosophy; it eventually affected every aspect of the war effort.

Hitler organized the National Socialist State according to the Führerprinzip or "leader principle." Simply put, this principle obliged every person in the state hierarchy to give unconditional obedience to those above him. There was no room for the kind of dissent that, in Hitler's view, so weakened democratic systems. The Führer stood, of

course, at the top of the hierarchy; his will was quite literally law.⁴³

Applied within the military sphere, the Führerprinzip directly challenged the traditions and practices of the General Staff Corps. The General Staff officer was trained to voice his opinions even if--or especially if--they conflicted with those of his commander. The goals in this regard were to decentralize authority and give subordinates as much latitude as possible. The development of the Führerprinzip meant the eclipse of these goals; as early as 1939 the right of a Chief of Staff to record a dissenting opinion and forward it to his superiors was removed from the General Staff handbook.⁴⁴ Adolf Heusinger once paraphrased Hitler as saying to Schmundt, "I will clearly emphasize again that the commander has sole responsibility and power of decision. The General Staff officer is his specially trained assistant, no more. That is the way I want it, and no other way."⁴⁵

⁴³Bullock, Hitler, 403-05.

⁴⁴Seaton, German Army, 100; Goerlitz, German General Staff, 342.

⁴⁵Adolf Heusinger, Befehl im Widerstreit; Schicksalsstunden der deutschen Armee, 1923-1945, (Tübingen & Stuttgart: Rainer Wunderlich Verlag Hermann Leins, 1950), 165-66.

Moreover--as was clear from the nature of his operational interference--Hitler only paid attention to those "specially trained experts" when it suited him to do so. He believed in his own mental abilities, intuition and will above those of anyone else. His confidence was complemented by a distrust of the General Staff Corps that went back years. To an increasing extent as the war went on, Hitler neither asked for nor accepted independent thinking. And he made it a point to surround himself with people such as Keitel, Schmundt, Jodl and Göring, whom he could dominate and who shared or accepted his ideas on the nature of command.

General Jodl, who as Chief of the Armed Forces Operations Office (see Appendix 4) became Hitler's foremost military advisor early in the war, was an early proponent of the Führerprinzip.⁴⁶ Lt. Colonel von Lossberg recorded Jodl's attitude:

Jodl was taciturn by nature and did not hold with long discussions. He seldom accepted anyone else's advice. He would give his staff under Warlimont [Chief of the National Defense Branch] clearly defined jobs; even Warlimont was in his eyes merely a subordinate who had

⁴⁶Keitel had little to do with operations; he restricted himself to administrative issues early in the war. See Keitel, Memoirs, 110-11; also Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 18.

no authority to act on his own, as officers of a high level staff would normally expect.⁴⁷

Thus Jodl imitated Hitler's dictatorial methods instead of using the procedures that generations of General Staff officers had used so effectively and in which Jodl himself had been trained.⁴⁸

The National Defense Branch tried to work around this problem. For a time in 1941, for example, the Army Operations Group in the Abt. L forwarded memoranda to Jodl and Hitler that included information on strategic developments and pointed out issues on which decisions were needed, as well as making recommendations on those issues. The Operations Section had two goals in mind: to bring the issues up for discussion, and to get Hitler and Jodl to use the staff correctly. The memos failed on both counts; Hitler ignored

⁴⁷Bernhard von Lossberg, Im Wehrmachtführungsstab: Bericht eines Generalstabsoffiziers, (Hamburg: H.H. Nölke Verlag, 1950), 22.

⁴⁸Jodl is a difficult man to assess. He was very competent technically, and very ambitious. He challenged Hitler's decisions on several occasions, but was more likely to acquiesce; like many people, he was vulnerable to Hitler's persuasive powers. His (and his brother officers') military heritage is important, because of its emphasis on obedience and duty. Warlimont's comments about him are extremely harsh, but should be taken with a grain of salt. On the whole, Jodl certainly appears to share the blame for the problems within the command system, but perhaps not as much as many postwar accounts would indicate.

them, and subsequently Jodl told Warlimont not to submit them.⁴⁹

Staff liaison visits to subordinate headquarters could have been useful to the Supreme Commander; such visits had been standard practice in the past and had provided invaluable information for the direction of operations. But Hitler and Jodl discouraged members of the OKW staff from making liaison visits. The new leaders had no use for General Staff officers' assessments, and ignored any that were presented to them.⁵⁰ What Hitler did instead, on many occasions, was send out an emissary of his own to size up a situation or see that an order was carried out. These emissaries were usually ambitious SS or Luftwaffe officers who not only were unqualified to assess operations but who knew they could gain favor by presenting the army's actions in the worst possible light, reality notwithstanding.⁵¹

⁴⁹Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 175-76; Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter Bla, 33.

⁵⁰Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 92; Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter Bla, 57.

⁵¹Kurt Zeitzler, "German Army High Command. General Critique of MS# P-041a - MS# P-04111 and a Report on the September 1942 - June 1944 Period," (MS #P-041ii), 16, in The German Army High Command; Observers who returned with reports that conflicted with the Führer's views could find themselves in difficulties. Even Jodl was vulnerable; on 6 September 1942 he reported to Hitler his appreciation of the situation at Field Marshal List's Army Group A. The report--which agreed with List's views but differed from Hitler's--so enraged the Führer that he refused for some

Hitler and Jodl had thus cut themselves off from sources of accurate information and professional advice. And the information flow from the top down was no better than from the bottom up. Just as the Führer and his chief advisor saw no need to be apprised of their staffs' ideas, they also thought it unnecessary to inform the staffs or subordinate commanders of their intentions.

Hitler had a mania for secrecy. He rarely entrusted anyone with his plans, and he transplanted his paranoia into the Wehrmacht, especially after 10 January 1940. On that day a German plane went down in Belgium, carrying important parts of the plan for the western campaign. From that date forward Hitler resolved that as few people as possible would be told of operational plans, and each would be allowed to know only as much as necessary to do his specific task. No one other than Hitler was to learn enough to develop a broad view of the situation.⁵²

In accordance with this policy--formalized in "Fundamental Order No. 1," dated 11 January 1940--Hitler often kept his plans a secret from agencies whose views or

time to allow Jodl to dine with him, or even to shake his hand. Hitler also relieved List and took command of Army Group A himself.

⁵²Halder, Journal, 4:36.

assistance would have been valuable or even crucial.⁵³

General Halder had cause to complain on several occasions about the difficulty of planning without adequate information. A diary entry of his from 24 November 1940 is illustrative:

Again liaison between OKW and us is deficient, this time relative to the Balkan question. The matter seems to be developing further, i.e., in the direction of a possible German attack on Turkey. This, of course, radically changes the picture. . . . we have based all our planning on the assumption that our political leadership is doing its utmost to avoid a conflict with Turkey at this time. . . .⁵⁴

On another level, the National Defense Branch also got too little information too late, further hindering the branch's efforts to plan and coordinate operations.⁵⁵ Hitler likewise left his Army and Army Group commanders in the dark as to the overall situation.⁵⁶ In the later years of the war they were often not even told of developments in sectors adjoining theirs.

The poor information flow often created serious problems. When Hitler released the directive for "Weserübung" on 1 March 1940, the army raised howls of protest over the

⁵³Jacobsen, ed., OKW Kriegstagebuch, 2:1156; Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter Bla, 46-47.

⁵⁴Halder, Journal, 5:34.

⁵⁵Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 47-48.

⁵⁶Zeitzler, "General Critique," 15.

forces that Hitler had allocated for the operation; many were already slated for France. The debate raged for a week, and the directive finally had to be changed and reissued, even though the Führer had already signed the original document.⁵⁷ With the planning process for the invasion of France in full swing, this time could well have been put to better use. The preparations for Operation "Merkur," the invasion of Crete, provide another example. When the OKW directed that the 22d Air Landing Division be transported to Greece for the operation, Halder replied that such a move was impossible; the needed transport was not available. Then Warlimont and several of his staff members had to confer before Warlimont could issue a telex correcting the error.⁵⁸ All this could have been avoided, and the staffs' time put to better use, if Hitler and Jodl had kept all concerned informed of their decisions and let the system work.

Thus one significant disadvantage of Hitler's command style was that it impeded the flow of important information.

⁵⁷Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 74-75.

⁵⁸Halder, Journal, 6:87; Fernschreiben OKW/WFSt/Abt. L (I Op.) Nr. 00 785/41 29.4.41 [to] OKH Op.Abt., Ob.d.L. Lw.Fu.Ia, and Wehrmacht-Transport-Chef, in Item OKW/1817, National Archive Microfilm Publication T77, Roll 1429, frame 842; Vertragsnotiz! Abt. Landesverteidigung Nr. 44 618/41 28 Apr. 1941 "Betr: Bereitstellung der Kräfte für Unternehmen 'Merkur'," in Item OKW/1817, frames 843-47.

In effect, Hitler and the men around him worked in self-imposed isolation, having largely cut themselves off from the support structure that could have made their work easier and more effective. This was a physical as well as a philosophical and bureaucratic problem: it carried over to the layout of Hitler's headquarters.

At the opening of hostilities in Poland in 1939, Hitler went to a location near the front in a special headquarters train, despite the protestations of many civil and military agencies that he ought to remain in Berlin. He did this for two reasons: to show that he was determined to take charge of the campaign, and because the move had good propaganda value.⁵⁹ With Hitler went his personal entourage, including the chiefs of the OKW and the Armed Forces Operations Office--Generals Keitel and Jodl--as well as Hitler's Wehrmacht adjutant, Colonel Schmundt, the adjutants from the three services, and various government and Party officials. This group, with its supporting staff and security personnel, constituted Hitler's headquarters: the Führerhauptquartier.⁶⁰ The majority of the OKW staff,

⁵⁹Gerhard Engel, "Effect of the Composition and Movement of Hitler's Field Headquarters on the Conduct of the War," (MS #T-101 Annex 16), 3, in German Military Studies, vol. 5.

⁶⁰Ibid., 2; The Führerhauptquartier should not be confused with the "field headquarters," which contained other elements besides Hitler's command post.

including all of the National Defense Branch, remained in Berlin.⁶¹

General Jodl realized in the middle of the Polish campaign that the Führer's train "Amerika" was inadequate as a headquarters; the train was not large enough. Jodl had been accompanied by only two officer assistants; he needed a larger working staff. In addition, the communications network needed to be upgraded. Jodl obtained Hitler's authorization to make some improvements and sent Colonel Warlimont to find a permanent site in west central Germany, since the headquarters Jodl had in mind would simply not fit onto a train.⁶²

Hitler's interest in upgrading the headquarters probably did not match Jodl's bureaucratic needs. According to Warlimont, Hitler was apparently satisfied with the way the invasion of Poland had been handled and, moreover, he was not familiar with the needs of a modern headquarters.⁶³ All the same, Hitler liked to put his mark upon everything, and so he made a key decision in the matter. He insisted

⁶¹Greiner, "OKW," 3-4; Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 32-33.

⁶²Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 41; for more information on the Führer's train and his headquarters' layout, see Peter Hoffmann, Hitler's Personal Security (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1979).

⁶³Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 41.

that the headquarters remain mobile, i.e. small enough to be transported by train.⁶⁴

After Poland had been conquered, the Führerhauptquartier moved to Berlin, to the old Reichs Chancellery building. Then when the campaign in the West began, Hitler and his entourage moved to the new field headquarters near the town of Münstereifel, about thirty-five miles southwest of Cologne, arriving on the morning of 11 May 1940.⁶⁵

The field echelon of the National Defense Branch was now on hand to provide support, although it was located some distance from Hitler's headquarters. This new entity included the Operations Groups for the Army, Navy and Air Force, as well as the Quartermaster and Communications sections and liaison officers from other branches of the Armed Forces Operations Office and the OKW. The field echelon numbered roughly fifteen officers plus supporting enlisted clerks, draftsmen, drivers, radio operators, and other specialists. The whole of the Organization Group and several officers from each of the other elements of Abt. L remained in Berlin.⁶⁶

⁶⁴Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 29-30.

⁶⁵Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 86.

⁶⁶Helmuth Greiner, "Records of situation conferences of the Defense Branch, 8 Aug 40 - 25 Jun 41," (MS #C-0651), 1-2, in German Military Studies, vol. 8.

The Führerhauptquartier continued to follow the battlefront as the war progressed. Over the next year it occupied sites in France, in the Black Forest, and at Wiener-Neustadt, south of Vienna. Hitler also spent time at his retreat at Berchtesgaden. After another brief stay in Berlin from May until 21 June 1941, Hitler's headquarters moved to Rastenburg in East Prussia. The field headquarters remained there or at Winniza in the Ukraine almost constantly until November 1944, when the Russian advance forced it back to Berlin.

The field headquarters expanded considerably in the first two years of the war; by the opening of the Russian campaign in 1941 the Führerhauptquartier command post was surrounded by compounds for the Armed Forces Operations Staff,⁶⁷ the Army and Air Force High Commands, and the field offices for various governmental agencies. There were still, however, insufficient facilities to accommodate any of these agencies in their entirety; Hitler still insisted that the headquarters remain "mobile."⁶⁸

The field headquarters' limited size and continued separation from Berlin added considerably to the difficulties of running a unified command, not to mention a

⁶⁷The Armed Forces Operations Office became the Armed Forces Operations Staff on 8 August 1940.

⁶⁸Engel, "Hitler's HQ," 5-9.

government. Keitel complained in his memoirs that when Hitler went to Berchtesgaden early in the war, the lack of facilities there meant that the OKW was cut off from the "people who mattered" and the "real governmental nerve centers."⁶⁹ Later, as the field headquarters grew, significant parts of the OKW still had to remain in Berlin, along with most of the Reich's administrative apparatus. A constant stream of officers and civil officials had therefore to travel back and forth by plane and train in order to conduct important business, accompanied by bags of internal correspondence.⁷⁰ This arrangement necessarily engendered delays; in the Spring of 1941, for example, when the German ambassador to Turkey arrived in Berlin with important reports he was rerouted to Wiener-Neustadt, using up an entire extra day.⁷¹ Internal headquarters operations were affected as well, because the staff had to work without many of the assets normally available in the capital. The Armed Forces Operations Staff, for instance, had no map service or print shop available; all its maps and charts had to be hand drawn by a few individual draftsmen.⁷² And finally, having

⁶⁹Keitel, Memoirs, 85.

⁷⁰Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 176.

⁷¹Engel, "Hitler's HQ," 6.

⁷²Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 60.

to function without Berlin's excellent communications net made coordination and direction of the armies in the field more difficult. All of this was particularly ironic, considering that Hitler had established the field headquarters because he wanted to maintain close personal control of operations.

Actual physical barriers within the field headquarters added to the Führerhauptquartier's isolation. Hitler and his Inner Circle of advisors were separated from all the other elements of the field headquarters by barbed wire and guard posts. No one outside of Hitler's immediate entourage was allowed access on a regular basis. Jodl described the atmosphere as "a mixture of cloister and concentration camp." As the military situation deteriorated in the last years of the war, Hitler developed a true "bunker mentality," emerging only rarely from his spartan, bomb-proof command post.⁷³ Altogether, the Führer's physical isolation, combined with his misuse of his staff assets, made impossible the free flow of information and ideas that is one of the hallmarks of good staff work.

Within the isolated world of the Führerhauptquartier, the work routine took on its own significance. The schedule in the headquarters revolved around Hitler's daily

⁷³Bullock, Hitler, 719.

briefings, held in the early afternoon and again at midnight every day. The midnight briefing was the longer of the two, especially as the war went on, for Hitler liked to work into the early morning hours and then sleep until nearly lunch-time.

For the first two years of the war Jodl briefed Hitler personally. If von Brauchitsch and Halder were present the latter would brief Hitler on the army's situation, but the two senior army leaders seldom visited the Führerhauptquartier. Jodl's influence with Hitler grew accordingly. Jodl did not in fact think it necessary for any army representative to be present at the briefings, and before long he had arranged for the army liaison officer to be excluded. Jodl did not even allow his own subordinate, Colonel Warlimont, to attend.⁷⁴

After Hitler took command of the army in December 1941, the Chief of the General Staff had to report in person on all army activities on the eastern front, while Jodl briefed Hitler on the overall situation and operations in other theaters.⁷⁵ Jodl was still the more influential of the two, however, because of Hitler's poor relationship with the General Staff.

⁷⁴Keitel, Memoirs, 146; Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 44-45.

⁷⁵Keitel, Memoirs, 146.

Jodl briefed Hitler using situation reports provided by the three Operations Groups of the National Defense Branch each morning and evening. The Operations Groups based their reports--which together often ran to thirty pages--on reports received from the services and the commanders of separate theaters. The National Defense Branch forwarded the completed report to Jodl one hour before Hitler's briefing, along with updated situation maps and supplemental reports on items of special interest to the Führer, such as order of battle, equipment status, and construction of coastal fortifications. The supplements had to be meticulously accurate, for Hitler had an amazing memory for technical detail, and would become "greatly annoyed" at any discrepancies.⁷⁶

One fundamental point about these situation reports is that they were entirely focused on the events of that day.⁷⁷ They did not include any staff appreciation of the overall situation or address any long-term issues. Hitler had no interest in long-range assessments; hence the elimination of the Army Operations Group's strategic forecasts. Thus Hitler received incomplete information, and tended

⁷⁶Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 42-43; Greiner, "OKW," 8-9; Keitel, Memoirs, 110-111.

⁷⁷Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 45.

therefore to make decisions that were inappropriate over the long term.

When Hitler had a question concerning some detail of the situation report, Jodl or one of his assistants would telephone the agency or headquarters concerned and get the answer while the briefing was still in session, if possible. This was a source of considerable extra work for the OKH and other subordinate headquarters, which had to drop everything and gather the information Hitler wanted, no matter how trivial.⁷⁸

Hitler made decisions on the spot, either during his briefings or in separate meetings on special military problems, and gave corresponding verbal instructions. In the first few weeks of the war his instructions were often rather vague; different listeners interpreted them in different ways--usually to their own advantage. In addition, Hitler frequently gave specific missions to various specialists, without coordinating with the agencies into whose spheres of authority the specialists would be intruding. The results were often chaotic, as competing agencies and

⁷⁸Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 43.

individuals attempted to sort out what the Führer had really meant.⁷⁹

Hitler tightened up on the procedure for issuing orders in November 1939, after a serious clash with von Brauchitsch. The army CiC met with Hitler on 5 November to try to convince him that an attack in the West that autumn was impossible. Hitler flew into a rage, refused to accept what von Brauchitsch was saying, and from that point on insisted that all orders to the OKH be issued in writing.⁸⁰

Keitel or Jodl usually telephoned Hitler's decisions, which he made on the spot during the briefings, direct to the subordinate agencies concerned. Written directives followed later. Jodl often drafted the directives himself in an adjoining room immediately after the briefings, then got Hitler's approval of them and sent them to Colonel Warlimont for elaboration and transmission by the National Defense Branch. Sometimes Jodl abbreviated this procedure

⁷⁹Gerhard Engel, "Adolf Hitler as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces," (MS #T-101 Annex 15), 7, in German Military Studies, vol. 5.

⁸⁰Helmuth Greiner, "OKW War Diary Sheets of 25 & 27 Sep. 39, 8 Nov. 39, and 27 Jul. 41 (on orders from Gen. Warlimont suppressed but not destroyed)," (MS #C-065m), 5-7, in German Military Studies, vol. 9 [these sheets were suppressed because they contained information at which the Führer might take offense]; Keitel, Memoirs, 103; Brauchitsch believed that the army could not be made ready for an early offensive. He noted problems with morale, training, and command channels.

even further, writing the complete directive himself and sending it direct to the commanders in the field, using the National Defense Branch purely as a registry or secretariat.⁸¹

The gradual deterioration in the military situation and in Hitler's mental state after 1941 contributed to a corresponding breakdown in the working procedures within the Führerhauptquartier. The briefings--especially the one at midnight--lasted longer and longer, with Hitler discussing the smallest details. He often ordered commanders of tactical units to attend so that he could give them orders personally.⁸² Members of the SS or the Luftwaffe or even political advisors gave Hitler suggestions on the military situation that he frequently accepted over the advice of General Staff officers.⁸³ Sometimes Hitler expected orders to be prepared from brief phrases in his monologues; at

⁸¹Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 43-44, 47, 592; International Military Tribunal, Major War Criminals, 15:296; Note that the use of the term "directive" by the OKW does not mean that these documents performed the same function as in the past. They contained specific orders, not general guidance.; As Warlimont himself points out, Jodl's use of the National Defense Branch as a secretariat means that historians must exercise caution when working with documents that show the designation "Abt. I" in their headings; these were not necessarily written by the staff of the Branch.

⁸²Engel, "Hitler as Supreme Commander," 9; Zeitzler, "General Critique," 17.

⁸³Engel, "Hitler as Supreme Commander," 10.

other times he drafted orders himself or dictated them to clerks.⁸⁴ These orders, made on the spur of the moment with inadequate information and covering every imaginable detail, focused more and more on whatever crisis was immediately at hand. The briefings became more an obstacle to progress than an opportunity for meaningful work.⁸⁵

Thus the process by which Hitler directed the war effort became less and less coherent as the war went on. His leadership style and those of the men with whom he surrounded himself, the physical layout of his headquarters, and his work routine all subtracted from the High Command's effectiveness instead of adding to it. And in addition to these problems, the Führer nearly crippled the command system by personally altering its structure.

At the start of the war the organization of the High Command was reasonably sound. The Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, assisted by a small but competent staff in the OKW, could in theory have directed grand strategy, approved strategic plans and resolved conflicts among the services.

⁸⁴Zeitler, "General Critique," 18, 20.

⁸⁵For a fuller understanding of just how absurd Hitler's conferences became, see Helmut Heiber, Hitlers Lagebesprechungen; Die Protokollfragmente seine militärischen Konferenzen 1942-1945 (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1962); a more limited version is available in English in Felix Gilbert, ed., Hitler Directs His War; The Secret Records of His Daily Military Conferences (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950).

The three services could have planned strategy and directed operations, coordinating closely with one another to ensure that each fulfilled its proper role and that conflicts were kept to a minimum. Before long, though, it became clear that Hitler did not intend to let the system function that way.

The problems began in the very first months of the war, when from the beginning Hitler created something of a credibility problem for his OKW staff. He did not allow the OKW to become a Wehrmacht General Staff; on the contrary, Hitler simply used it as his "speaking tube."⁸⁶ True, the OKW's directives gradually became more detailed and intrusive, but it was obvious that the OKW staff was simply plagiarizing, not acting on its own. Just as had been the case before the war, the information in the directives was product of work done by the services, especially the Army General Staff.⁸⁷ On 6 June 1940 Halder recorded, ". . . we can be pretty sure that before thirty-six or forty-eight hours are over, the ideas proposed by us today will be served right back to us in the form of a top-level directive."⁸⁸ He also summed up the army's resentment at this

⁸⁶Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 49.

⁸⁷Ibid., 51-52.

⁸⁸Halder, Journal, 4:55.

arrangement, in reference to the operations in France: "So the right thing is being done after all, but in an atmosphere of bad feeling and in a form calculated to give the outside world the impression that it is a plan conceived by OKW."⁸⁹

The OKW was, like any staff, not a part of the chain of command; technically, the Chiefs of the OKW and the Armed Forces Operations Branch could not issue orders on their own authority. And whereas the Commander-in-Chief of the Army allowed the Chief of the Army General Staff to act independently, that was not the case at the OKW. Hitler insisted on making all the important decisions himself, allowing Keitel and Jodl no authority of their own. So the OKW was never able to build up the kind of separate command authority possessed by the OKH.

The OKW staff's difficulties showed up in a slightly different way during the planning for Operation "Seelöwe"--the invasion of England--in the summer and fall of 1940. The OKH and the High Command of the Navy worked on the operation separately and came up with entirely different and contradictory plans, which they then proceeded to debate. Their wrangling was all but uninterrupted by any effort from the OKW to coordinate or direct the planning process.

⁸⁹Ibid., 4:19.

Halder wrote, "We have here the paradoxical situation where . . . OKW, which for once has a real combined forces' operation to direct, plays dead."⁹⁰

Hitler thus used his "speaking tube" to infringe upon the responsibilities of the General Staff when he saw fit to do so, and otherwise let the services struggle on their own. The General Staff Corps resented this practice; Hitler had no business trying to direct a war on a strategic level, as far as they were concerned, and the same applied to his staff in the OKW. But while the OKH could not resist Hitler's authority directly, the generals felt no compunction about bypassing the OKW or ignoring it entirely when the circumstances allowed. The case of "Seelöwe" is again illustrative. By October 1940 the failure of the Luftwaffe to subdue the Royal Air Force and open the way for an invasion was obvious. Hitler directed that preparations for the invasion continue, but his attention had already wandered eastward, toward Russia. As a result, the OKW found itself unable to obtain the necessary cooperation from the services, which knew that Hitler was no longer behind the project.⁹¹

The OKW's structure contributed to its difficulties: it simply was not equipped to perform the functions Hitler

⁹⁰Ibid., 4:152.

⁹¹Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 27.

assigned to it. The Armed Forces Operations Office and the National Defense Branch were staffed appropriately for assisting the Wehrmacht Commander-in-Chief with the broad direction of the war. They did not have enough of the right kinds of personnel to take over detailed operational planning or command responsibilities. Unfortunately that was just what Hitler was asking the OKW to do. In the operations against Poland, France, and England he expected the OKW to coordinate the plans and operations of the three services, and it was barely capable of that. Worse yet, the Führer also began to assign whole theaters to the OKW, within which it was to be responsible for actually directing operations.

This first happened in connection with Operation "Weserübung," the invasion of Norway. The special planning group that Jodl attached to the National Defense Branch in January 1940 was inadequate for all but the most basic planning. When General von Falkenhorst took over command of the operation on February 21, he found that there were not even any maps of Norway available; he had to buy tourist guides from a local bookstore in order to prepare his plan.⁹² Falkenhorst brought with him a Corps headquarters to help plan the operation, into which he incorporated the

⁹²Seaton, German Army, 131; Bullock, Hitler, 577.

old planning staff, but his assets were still insufficient. The General Staff had to get involved; its Supply, Transportation and Intelligence Branches took over parts of the operation, and the demands on them were that much greater from having to work for two sets of superiors at once.

The army was chagrined at these developments; Hitler had usurped the proper role of the OKH. When General Halder found out on February 21--through army channels--that von Falkenhorst had been called upon to plan the invasion, he wrote in his diary, "Not a single word has passed between the Führer and ObdH [von Brauchitsch] on this matter; this must be put on record for the history of the war."⁹³ Unfortunately, putting the matter on record was about all Halder could do.

In March 1941 Finland also came under the control of the OKW. The OKW, without consulting with the OKH, ordered a division from Norway into Finland for the upcoming invasion of Russia, Operation "Barbarossa." Piqued at this intrusion into the OKH's authority as well as at the creation of the original "OKW theater" in Norway, Field Marshal von Brauchitsch insisted that the OKW take over responsibil-

⁹³Halder, Journal, 3:88-89.

ity for Finland altogether.⁹⁴ So in this case the army was responsible for abandoning its own sphere of control.

Hitler created the rest of the so-called OKW theaters, which eventually encompassed the Balkans, the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the occupied territories in the West, as well as Norway and Finland. In the case of the Balkans he changed the command structure at one stroke when, in June 1941, he made Field Marshal Wilhelm List Commander-in-Chief Southeast under the direct command of the OKW.⁹⁵ However, in most cases Hitler did not take such concrete steps.

Hitler never issued definitive orders creating the OKW theaters. He changed the command system simply by ignoring it: he bypassed the OKH and issued orders through the OKW to the local theater commanders, thus effectively switching authority to his staff. This process was very gradual, and for most of the period in question--late 1940 and 1941--the eastern front was the scene of the only major operations.⁹⁶

⁹⁴Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 142; Jacobsen, ed., OKW Kriegstagebuch, 1:362; Brauchitsch was promoted to Field Marshal along with Keitel and several other generals on 19 July 1940.

⁹⁵Greiner, "Records of conferences," 252; OKW WFSt/Abt. L (I Op - IV/Qu) Nr. 44 900/41 9 June 1941 "Directive No. 31," in Item OKW/1611a,b, frame 5500192; Greiner's notes show List as a full General when he was given this command, but he was actually one of the generals promoted to Field Marshal on 19 July 1940.

⁹⁶North Africa was the exception; it was under the operational control of the OKW from the start.

So it was easy enough for the OKH to concentrate solely on the east, while Hitler slowly subverted the army's authority elsewhere. By the end of 1941 the OKH had been effectively relieved of operational control in all but the eastern theater, and eventually the OKW took over military tasks in the rear areas there as well.⁹⁷

With the completion of this process the OKW's responsibilities and work load had expanded tremendously. By late 1941 the OKW staff was responsible for briefing Hitler on operations in all theaters, strategic planning and issuance of directives for all theaters, operational command in the OKW theaters, coordination with allies and satellites, and handling whatever projects--such as coast defense, long-range weapons, and guerilla warfare, to name a few--in which Hitler had an interest.⁹⁸

⁹⁷Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 196-98, 216; Seaton, German Army, 183; Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter 11a, 26, 29; Keitel, Memoirs, 154; Müller-Hillebrand, "Organizational Problems," 58; Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 3:36; This is a subject that merits further research. Most sources--primary and secondary--agree that the transfer was complete by the start of the Russian campaign. But Halder's journal makes no mention of a concrete change in responsibilities, as it almost certainly would. What is more, it shows that he still monitored events outside of the Russian theater after the eastern campaign began. I suspect therefore that the change was gradual and informal, but nonetheless real.

⁹⁸Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter 11a, 31-32; Greiner, "OKW," 8; Keitel, Memoirs, 129, 141, 146.

The OKW staff was just not capable of handling all these missions simultaneously. As had been the case during "Weserübung" in 1940, the OKW continued to depend on the OKH for support. For instance, the OKW's operational missions could not be carried out without an Intelligence section, but no one created such a section; the OKW had to go to the OKH for intelligence. Similarly, the OKH remained directly responsible for the organization, training, administration, and supply of the forces in the OKW theaters.⁹⁹

This is not to say that the organization of the OKW remained static; it did not. Hitler allowed some changes to be made. However, those changes were mainly cosmetic. On August 8, 1940, for example, the Armed Forces Operations Office (Wehrmachtführungsamt or WFA) was redesignated the Armed Forces Operations Staff (Wehrmachtführungsstab or WFSt).¹⁰⁰ This change was important for symbolic reasons. It reflected the growing importance of this element in the

⁹⁹Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 37, 47, 59; Müller-Hillebrand, "Army High Command," 13; Müller-Hillebrand, "Organizational Problems," 61; Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 3:36.

¹⁰⁰Greiner, "Records of conferences," 4; OKW WFA/Abt. L 1 Nr. 33189/40 1 Aug. 1940 Re: Operation "Seelöwe," and OKW WFSt/Abt. L Nr. 33229/40 16 Aug. 1940 Re: Operation "Seelöwe," in Item OKW/1611a,b, translations of "Führer Directives and other top-level directives of the German armed forces, 1939-1945," National Archives Microfilm Publication T77, Roll 774, frame 5500121; the entry in Greiner gives the specific date, which is verified by the change in designation (WFA to WFSt) on the directives.

conduct of the war; Jodl's and Hitler's egos probably played a role in the redesignation. But all that had really changed was the name: the Operations Staff's capabilities were no greater than those of the earlier Office structure.

General Warlimont initiated a similar change that took effect on 1 January 1942. He took on the title of "Deputy Chief of the Armed Forces Operations Staff"; the National Defense Branch as such was abolished (its former elements were known collectively and informally from then on as the "Central Operations Branch"), and the Groups within the old organization now became Branches (Abteilungen) of the Armed Forces Operations Staff. Again, this did not represent any change in the duties or standing of the staff. Warlimont himself admitted that he made the changes purely to give the Colonels under him positions commensurate with their rank.¹⁰¹ By this time the overload on the OKW's operational staff was becoming acute, but Hitler still refused to allow any real expansion or reorganization of the OKW's operational elements.¹⁰²

In a wider sense, the creation of the OKW theaters introduced two serious flaws into the command system. Both

¹⁰¹Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 217; Greiner, "OKW," 13.

¹⁰²Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 199; Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 32.

of these flaws were reflections of Hitler's continuing quest for personal power. They were also influenced by the non-stop internecine bickering among the members of his Inner Circle; little had changed in that realm from the days of the Blomberg/Fritsch Affair. Göring of the Air Force, Heinrich Himmler of the SS, and to some extent Raeder and later Admiral Karl Dönitz of the Navy all fought to defend their places within the military hierarchy, regardless of the effect on the command system.

The first of the two flaws was the lack of centralized authority at the theater level. The Commander-in-Chief West, for example, did not command the Navy or Air Force units within his theater. In fact the OKW theaters really did not apply to the Air Force or Navy at all; their High Commands continued to direct their operations in all theaters.¹⁰³ So if an army theater commander had a conflict with an air force or navy unit, he had to go to the OKW to get it resolved. This really amounted to an appeal to Hitler, since Keitel and Jodl did not have any authority over Göring or Raeder. In many respects--as in matters of supply, replacements, and especially discipline--the same held true with regard to the SS units operating under army

¹⁰³Seaton, German Army, 183; Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 3:36.

operational control.¹⁰⁴ Hitler thus became the final arbiter of all inter-service disputes, and his inclination was to side with the air force, navy, and SS against the army.

The second major problem centered on the lack of an adequate headquarters to control the entire war. The OKH could have done so, but it was restricted to conducting operations in the east. At the same time the OKW was trying to manage its own theaters, and was forced to rely upon the OKH for help. Serious problems began to develop from this arrangement. For instance, the Chief of the Organization Branch of the Army General Staff was responsible for arming the troops in the east, and reported to the Chief of the General Staff in that capacity. But he was also responsible to the Chief of the OKW for arming the troops in the OKW theaters.¹⁰⁵ Since the Chief of the Army General Staff was not technically subordinate to the Chief of the OKW, any conflict they could not resolve had to be referred to Hitler, the only man with authority over both headquarters. Again the Führer was the final arbiter.

The creation of the OKW theaters thus led to a situation in which Hitler gained even more power (see Appendix 7). This was much to his liking. He had no master plan by

¹⁰⁴Müller-Hillebrand, "Army High Command," 13.

¹⁰⁵Müller-Hillebrand, "Organizational Problems," 61.

which he systematically reorganized the High Command; he was not interested in creating an efficient apparatus according to accepted standards. Convinced he was the world's greatest military leader, Hitler simply wanted control. He saw no reason why he should not command in whatever way he saw fit. He knew, though, that he might run into opposition over some of his plans, and so on occasions when that seemed likely he simply sent out his orders through whatever staff would give him the least trouble. Thus, rearranging his staffs' responsibilities gave him a way to bypass obstacles to his authority, obstacles such as the perennially bothersome officers of the General Staff Corps. Such maneuvers also allowed him to keep his opponents off-balance and confused.

Of course, given the opportunity, Hitler preferred to eliminate obstacles entirely, rather than have to confront them on a regular basis. That is what he had done in 1938 when von Blomberg and von Fritsch had proved troublesome. By the end of 1941 the Führer was ready to act as he had in 1938. He got his chance in December, when Field Marshal von Brauchitsch resigned as Commander-in-Chief of the Army. Hitler's arrogation of that position was a completely positive move as far as he was concerned. For the High Command system, however, this was a giant step in the wrong direction.

First of all, Hitler's assumption of command further exacerbated the system's weaknesses; it meant shifting even more responsibilities from the OKH, which could handle them, to the OKW, which could not. Hitler had no intention of taking over all the duties previously performed by von Brauchitsch. He was only interested in exercising operational control, and so he transferred most of the CiC's other duties, such as organization, administration, supply and replacements, to Field Marshal Keitel, whom he named Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Army.¹⁰⁶ Keitel was an efficient administrator, but he already had a full plate, and the new responsibilities threatened to overwhelm him.

The most detrimental aspect of the command arrangements after 1941, however, was the fact that Hitler was officially occupying so many positions. He was simultaneously Head of State, CiC of the Wehrmacht, and CiC of the Army. No human being could hope to juggle all the different duties associated with those positions, even if he delegated away almost all of his authority--which Hitler was not willing to do, at least officially.

Unofficially, Hitler was in fact forfeiting control by attempting to keep so much of it. While he was busying himself with the tactical details of operations, meddling in

¹⁰⁶Halder, Journal, 7:233; Keitel, Memoirs, 164; Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 3:37.

the design of new weapons, and otherwise involving himself in trivia, vast portions of his bureaucracy were becoming essentially autonomous. But because the command structure was so chaotic, autonomy often meant competition rather than coordination and efficiency.

The army was the biggest loser in this competition. The Navy, the Air Force, the SS, and the governmental agencies had their individual champions, who would defend their interests. The army lacked such a person; instead it fell victim to the whims of all those other personalities with access to the Führer. The army offices that now came under Keitel in his role as Deputy CiC were especially vulnerable to uninformed interference.¹⁰⁷

The inadequacy of this command system became more and more obvious from 1942 on, as the situation in the east worsened and the apparent threat to the western theaters grew, as resources became scarce, and as Hitler gradually succumbed to the pressures of his office. He was under tremendous pressure from all sides because of the authority he had usurped; he was the only person with the final say on any important issue. All parties presented their conflicting needs to Hitler, who made decisions on the spot or, to an increasing extent, put the decisions off entirely. Often

¹⁰⁷Glydenfeldt, "Army High Commander," 38-39.

the decision rested on who could get to Hitler first and, once made, the decision was usually final.¹⁰⁸

By 1943 the structure of the High Command had taken on its final form (see Appendix 7); from that point on the system continued to degenerate, but mostly as a function of the Führer's declining mental state. Hitler controlled the top three levels of the political/military hierarchy officially, and interfered increasingly at levels far below those. Few of the men in his immediate entourage were willing to challenge him, and those who did failed to achieve anything of any importance. The leaders of the OKW and the OKH had become competitors for operational control as well as resources, while the staffs beneath them fought a losing battle against organizational paralysis. Every facet of the war effort suffered as a result.

The most significant effect was that Germany became essentially leaderless. No one could or would direct the forces of the nation on the highest planes. As far as the top levels of the High Command were concerned, the rational direction of grand strategy essentially disappeared in 1940. Strategy went by the boards the following year. Hitler was neither qualified nor inclined to make the necessary

¹⁰⁸Seaton, German Army, 189, 199-200; Müller-Hillebrand, "Army High Command," 10-11; Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 63-64.

decisions, and yet he did not give any person or organization below him the opportunity to do so. And so Germany embarked upon a series of military campaigns without any coherent plan for final success, and carried out those campaigns in ways that precluded military victory. The problem showed up clearly as early as the summer and fall of 1940, when Hitler cast about blindly for a way to carry on the war, considering operations from England to Spain to Iraq, and finally settled on "Barbarossa."

To add to the difficulties, organizational chaos became the norm outside the military hierarchy as well as within it. All of the Third Reich's governmental bureaucracy labored under the same handicaps as the military. Ill-defined spheres of authority and battles for bureaucratic power impeded the management of transportation, labor, industrial production, scientific research, and resource development, and all of these directly affected the military's ability to carry on the war.

Thus, by the middle of the war, the destructive forces in the German High Command manifested themselves in a number of ways, most of them emanating from the Führer. Hitler's operational meddling was the most obvious problem, but it was only one facet of a deeply flawed structure. At the heart of that structure lay Hitler's leadership philosophy and arrogant self-confidence. These affected every part and

activity of the High Command: the layout of the Field Headquarters, the procedures used by Hitler and his closest advisors, the relationships among subordinate officers, and the organization of the command system itself.

At the start of the war the High Command's organizational flaws had been relatively minor. But they eventually expanded and combined synergistically to derail the decision-making process. The system became its own worst enemy. In the end, delays, confusion and dilettantism replaced efficiency, order, and competence at the top of the High Command system. Only the efforts of hundreds of commanders and junior staff members, their professionalism and training intact, allowed the system to function at all.

CHAPTER 4

THE FIGHT FOR ORDER: 1939 - 1943

By 1939 the modern German command system had been evolving for nearly three hundred years; a set of traditions, principles, and practices had developed that had made that system one of the best in the world. The General Staff Corps had become in many Germans' eyes the embodiment of order, rationality, and efficiency. But in the Nazi regime the Corps and everything it represented came under siege. The political, military, and organizational ideas of one man threatened to disrupt the system that had proven so effective. Through the whole of the Second World War the two ideologies struggled against each other. The outcome of this struggle determined the effectiveness of the command system and, in turn, affected the outcome of the war.

When the Second World War began, the internal battle lines were already drawn. Hitler led the forces of change within the High Command. A few other key figures--Keitel, Jodl, Schmundt, Göring, and Himmler, among others--either actively supported Hitler or were willing to acquiesce to his direction. On the other side, the staff of the National Defense Branch, the Army Commander-in-Chief and the members

of the OKH stood on the side of traditional army preeminence and methodology.

Hitler held the high ground; he had supreme authority, and his Inner Circle, because they had his ear, could use some of that authority. His opponents also continued to suffer to some extent from careerism, ambition, and an ingrained sense of duty, all of which made their opposition fragmented and ineffectual. Nevertheless, the General Staff fought against Hitler's authority, in two main ways. First, it attempted to maintain contact and influence with the Führer, to convince him to act in accordance with accepted practice. And second, the General Staff Corps maintained its own traditions and practices, in a behind-the-scenes effort to counteract the Nazis' destructive policies. The keys to that effort were the staffs' organization, working methods, and personal professionalism, and these factors remained fairly constant throughout the war.

Both the National Defense Branch (Abt. L) and the OKH were organized according to simple principles. The staff elements were kept as small as possible. Authority was delegated as far down in every organization as practicable. Spheres of authority were clearly defined, and related activities were grouped together. The General Staff Corps also prided itself on organizational flexibility. Unfortunately, the National Defense Branch was unable to take

advantage of this last principle; its structure was fixed, even though its mission expanded as the war went on. The OKH operated under no such disability, and as a result was able to reassign responsibilities and rearrange its structure as the needs of the moment required.

The organization of the Army High Command had been adequate for peacetime. However, changes needed to be made before the OKH would be ready to conduct a war, when operational concerns would be of paramount importance. Some of its structure was devoted to activities--such as military history--which did not need to be part of an operational headquarters. In addition, there were too many levels of responsibility to allow for the quick responses needed in wartime. So, with the order to mobilize in August 1939, the mobilization plan created by the Organization Branch of the Army General Staff went into effect. This plan modified the structure of the army's command system to facilitate the direction of combat operations (see Appendix 8).

The modifications started at the top. The Commander-in-Chief, General von Brauchitsch, took over command of the Field Army, the part of the army that would do the actual fighting. General Fritz Fromm took up the newly-created post of Chief of Army Equipment and Commander of the Replacement Training Army. He was directly subordinate to the CiC, and ran a Rear Headquarters in Berlin in which he

supervised those elements of the OKH not immediately connected with directing the Field Army.¹ The elements of the OKH concerned with operations meanwhile formed a field headquarters (Hq OKH).² The CiC had a small office there, but the Chief of the Army General Staff was actually responsible for running the headquarters.³

Regulations required that the Chief of the General Staff provide the CiC with information and suggestions on all matters connected with operations. The Chief was also allowed to offer suggestions in other fields as well, which the CiC would then pass on as orders to the Commander of the Replacement Training Army. In reality, though, this does not do justice to the role of the Chief of the General Staff. He did more than make suggestions. In accordance with long-standing practice, he actually directed the war, going to the CiC only to resolve fundamental issues of strategy or military policy.⁴

The organization of the Army General Staff also went through major changes upon mobilization. The Army General Staff assumed responsibility for the direction of the Field

¹Glydenfeldt, "Army High Commander," 3-4; Seaton, The German Army, 103.

²Müller-Hillebrand, "Army High Command," 18.

³Zerbel, "Army Quartermaster," 1.

⁴Halder, "The Chief," 5-6.

Army, as well as for supply, intelligence evaluation and dissemination, and other important support functions.⁵ Those branches not connected with operations broke off and stayed in the Rear Headquarters, under the supervision of the Oberquartiermeister V (OQuV), the Assistant Chief of Staff for Military Science. The Assistant Chiefs of Staff for Training and Organization were eliminated, and the branches they supervised came under the direct supervision of the Chief of the General Staff.⁶ The Chief of the General Staff played a central role in these changes, in partnership with the Chief of the Organization Branch. The branch chiefs were responsible for the internal organization of their branches, but here too the Chief of the General Staff usually approved any changes.⁷

The Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations (OQuI) was relieved of any direct supervisory responsibilities for specific branches. Instead, he now became the permanent deputy of the Chief of the General Staff, assisting him with whatever projects he deemed important. In this capacity the OQuI brought branches together into various informal working groups. For example, in 1944 the OQuI supervised a "Command

⁵Müller-Hillebrand, "Army High Command," 32.

⁶Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 1:117-18.

⁷For example, see Halder, Journal, 1:26, 53, 4:107.

Group" within the General Staff, which consisted of the Operations, Organization, and Foreign Armies East branches.⁸

The OQuI worked not only with any relevant branches of the General Staff, but also with subordinate units and other agencies within the OKH and the Reich administration.⁹

General Halder's diary entry for 20 May, 1940 illustrates the kind of assignment the OQuI might be given:

Analysis of the operational drafts of AGp. C for an offensive on the Upper Rhine front plainly shows that von Leeb is unable to free himself from the concepts of position warfare in 1918. Accordingly, von Stülpnagel [author's emph.] is given instructions to see to it that von Leeb and the men around him assimilate the lessons of the drive across the Meuse.¹⁰

Additionally, the Chief of the General Staff called upon the OQuI for such diverse duties as ensuring that information on ground combat got from the front to the Commander of the Replacement Training Army for inclusion in training manuals, designating personnel and equipment for planned operations, and visiting the front as the Chief's representative. The

⁸Walter Gündell, "Headquarters Commandant, Army High Command (1941-45)," (MS #P-041aa), 20, in The German Army High Command; Waldemar Erfurth, Die Geschichte des deutschen Generalstabes von 1918 bis 1945 (Frankfurt a.M.: Musterschmidt-Verlag, 1957), 216; the position of OQuI was eliminated in October 1942 and reintroduced in autumn 1944.

⁹Blumentritt and Zerbel, "Top Level Agencies," 2.

¹⁰Halder, Journal, 4:21; This is an interesting comment for Halder to make, considering his attitude the previous autumn!

OQuI's role often called for special tact and initiative, since many of the people whose cooperation he had to gain were senior to him in rank.¹¹

Because the OQuI worked on special projects, responsibility for purely operational matters devolved upon the Operations Branch chief.¹² The Chief of the Operations Branch, instead of reporting to the OQuI, now reported directly to the Chief of the General Staff; he was, however, still required to keep the OQuI informed and to act in accordance with his instructions.¹³

The structure of the Operations Branch also changed to match the needs of wartime. The Chief of Section I took control of all the elements involved in the actual conduct of ground operations, becoming in effect the Branch Chief's deputy. Sections II and III at first performed various functions in support of Section I, such as liaison with intelligence agencies, collecting and preparing reports, map production, and keeping the war diary. In addition, liaison officers from the Chief of Transportation, the Air Force,

¹¹Blumentritt and Zerbel, "Top Level Agencies," 6, 11-12, 13.

¹²For example, see references to Stülpnagel in Halder, Journal, 3:183-88, 193, 4:20.

¹³Greiffenberg, "Operations Branch," 1.

and the Navy formed a section to better coordinate operations involving their particular specialties.¹⁴

The Chief of the Operations Branch organized Section I into subsections, to each of which he assigned a specific geographic area of responsibility. Within its area, each subsection was responsible for collecting reports and collating and analyzing the material from them, drafting plans and orders, and preparing studies. This system greatly facilitated the work of the branch.

The subsections' responsibilities changed along with the overall military situation. For example, from autumn 1940 until early summer 1941, Section I operated with three subsections, I(N), I(M), and I(S). Subsection I(N) supervised Army Group North in the planning stages of Operation "Barbarossa"; I(M) did the same for Army Groups Center and South. Subsection I(S) handled the preparations for and execution of the operations in the Balkans and reported on Italian operations there. Meanwhile, Section II monitored activities in North Africa and Norway and also reported on the affairs of the German-French Armistice Commission. Once the operations in Russia began, subsection I(S) took over control of Army Group South, while Section II continued to

¹⁴Ibid., 5-6, 18.

monitor other theaters.¹⁵ (See Appendices 8 - 10 for an overview of the changes in the Operations Branch from 1940 to 1944.)

Carefully thought out working procedures enhanced the effects of the organizational improvements. Both the National Defense Branch and the Army General Staff developed efficient and effective procedures to handle the tremendous volume of work involved in directing Germany's forces. Through daily briefings, informal coordination, and special conferences, the staff officers of the High Command monitored events and did their best to conduct the war according to accepted principles.

The National Defense Branch held a briefing at 1100 hours daily, after the situation reports had been put together for General Jodl to use in Hitler's briefing. Each of the Group Chiefs and liaison officers attended, as did the Chief of Abt. L. These briefings covered friendly and enemy military developments (land, naval and air, with more detail on the OKW theaters once they had been created), foreign affairs, and economics. A staff conference followed in

¹⁵Ibid., 11, 19-20.

which the Chief of Abt. I and selected staff officers discussed the Führer's intentions and prepared plans.¹⁶

Of course, because of the role forced upon it by Hitler and Jodl, Abt. I was never able to realize its full potential as a planning staff. But by keeping up with events on its own and operating behind the scenes to some extent, it was able to make some difference in the conduct of operations. Colonel (later General) Warlimont made an effort to keep in touch personally with the General Staff and the front line commanders, although Hitler's and Jodl's opposition and the distances involved--especially in the eastern theater--made this increasingly difficult.¹⁷

The Commander-in-Chief of the Army, General (later Field Marshal) von Brauchitsch, took on a role that allowed him to be available if he was needed for a major decision but otherwise left the staff in the Field Headquarters alone to handle things. He spent much of his time visiting subordinate commanders, so that he could gain an appreciation for the way the situation was developing at the front.¹⁸ He

¹⁶Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 175; Greiner, "Records of Conferences," 1-3; the subjects covered in the conferences were derived from an examination of the whole of Greiner's "Records"

¹⁷Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 91, 174; for examples of Warlimont's contacts with Halder, see Halder, Journal, 4:69, 72-73.

¹⁸Glydenfeldt, "Army High Commander," 32.

also interposed himself between Hitler and Halder, leaving the latter free to concentrate on operations instead of politics.¹⁹

Within the Army General Staff, the Operations Branch provided the other branches with a uniform situation report in a daily briefing, much as in the National Defense Branch. The chiefs of the most important branches also attended regularly scheduled meetings with the Chief of the General Staff, at which they submitted verbal reports and received instructions.²⁰ The OQuI was responsible for briefing any branch chief who could not attend. Based on the instructions they received, the branch chiefs created orders, submitted them for approval, and supervised their execution, working in this last regard directly with subordinate headquarters.²¹ Close coordination among the branch chiefs and the other members of the staff was the norm, and this coordination was done verbally as much as possible. Overall, the work was highly structured, and everyone made an effort to keep paperwork to a minimum.²²

¹⁹Ibid., 32.

²⁰Zerbel, "Army Quartermaster," 2.

²¹Halder, "The Chief," 8; Zerbel, "Army Quartermaster," 2.

²²Zerbel, "Army Quartermaster," 2, 3.

The Operations Branch made special efforts to maintain a detailed awareness of events at the front. They received much of their information in the form of reports from subordinate headquarters. To supplement this source, the Ops Branch sent out liaison teams to the front-line units. These teams sent back their own independent reports, taking care to keep the local commander informed so as to avoid bad feelings. The Ops Branch also controlled its own aerial reconnaissance unit and radio intercept equipment for keeping track of the situation at the front. All of the data thus obtained they used to update the situation map from which the rest of the staff got its information.²³

Through the early years of the war the Army General Staff continued to keep tabs on the situation on all the major battle fronts, whether or not these were included in its sphere of responsibility. The Operations Branch War Diary shows, for example, that the Ops Branch was still monitoring events in Libya and the West in September 1941, well after these had become OKW theaters.²⁴ In fact, the

²³Greiffenberg, "Operations Branch," 7; Copies of OKH Planning and Situation Maps were used in the creation of maps for this work.

²⁴Entries for OKW theaters show up as late as 1 September 1941 in Item H 22/10a, b, Kriegstagebuch der Oberkommando des Heeres, Generalstab des Heeres, Operationsabteilung/Ia (entries for 27 May to 4 Sep 1941), National Archives Microfilm Publication T78, Roll 306, frame 6257227.

Ops Branch set up a special communications service to watch events in the OKW theaters, and also set up special "Study Groups" to examine specific strategic problems within the different theaters in light of past operations.²⁵ And General Halder continued to keep abreast of foreign affairs and significant events in the OKW theaters, although his diary does indicate that he focused more and more on the eastern theater as time went on.²⁶ The army had not lost sight of its responsibility to balance the needs of the different theaters.

All of the staffs' structures and work routines reflected the traditions of the General Staff Corps. What at first appears to be a confusing web of reporting channels and responsibilities, of coordination and liaison, in fact ensured that decisions were based on the broadest possible understanding of events and widest variety of opinions. In this way the command system supported the obligation of every General Staff officer to communicate his opinions to his superiors, and promoted flexibility, initiative, efficiency, and responsibility.

²⁵Greiffenberg, "Operations Branch," 10-11.

²⁶Halder, Journal, v. 7: in the last month before Hitler took command of the Army, Halder's journal shows entries on foreign affairs (206-07, 216), the naval war (190), and OKW theaters (179, 180, 204, 208, 223).

Conversely, the traditions of the General Staff Corps also supported the structure and allowed it to function as it had been designed to do. No system operates independently of the people who man it. The officers of the General Staff provided the integrity, technical competence, and initiative to drive the system. Indeed, these qualities had been emphasized throughout the officers' selection and training. And so General Zeitzler was able to write after the war that

certain basic principles had become so thoroughly ingrained in all of the older General Staff Corps officers that they were unaffected by the many reorganizations which took place in the course of the war and remained fundamentally intact despite all the limitations imposed on the Army General Staff and all opposition to the General Staff Corps by the 'top' level.²⁷

Thus the Army General Staff and the National Defense Branch were able to maintain a high degree of effectiveness throughout the war, limited only by the restrictions placed upon their spheres of authority. Another overview of the war, this time from the staffs' perspective, demonstrates just how well the High Command functioned when it was allowed to do so--and how it nevertheless lost control of the war.

²⁷Heinz Guderian and Kurt Zeitzler, "German Army High Command: Comments on MSS# P-041a - P-041hh," (MS #P-04111), 8, in The German Army High Command.

The system's first real test came with the invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939. The situation was especially tense for both the Wehrmacht and Army High Commands, since they did not consider the Wehrmacht ready for a major war. Germany could not have fought on more than one front, or for more than a few weeks, because of shortages of men, equipment, and munitions.²⁸ Therefore the staffs' work would have to make up for a lot.

The wartime role of the OKH was to direct the operations of the entire army, so it left the details of the Polish invasion to its subordinate commands while it maintained a broad view of developments. Lt. General Halder's diary entry for 24 August 1939, for example, describes a briefing by the OQuI covering developments in Poland, France, and the Low Countries, as well as the overall status of the army's preparations for war.²⁹ Much of the OKH's effort, once the broad intent of the operation had been passed on to the Army Group headquarters, was dedicated to allocating forces for the offensive and drafting operational orders.³⁰

²⁸Müller-Hillebrand, "Organizational Problems," 1-3.

²⁹Halder, Journal, 1:25.

³⁰Testimony of Gen. Halder, Trials of the [minor] War Criminals, 10:561-62.

The plan created by the OKH and its subordinate commands depended for its success on the speed of the army's advance and its ability to nullify the Polish army's reactions. The plan was a simple and direct means to achieve the aim set forth in Hitler's directive: the destruction of the Polish army. Five Armies would advance into Poland from East Prussia, Germany proper, and Czechoslovakia (see map, next page). The Poles, for patriotic, geographic, and economic reasons, felt compelled to defend the entire length of their border; the Germans planned to bypass, surround, and crush them.³¹

Once battle was joined, the OKH's new wartime organization allowed it to monitor special operations and keep track of the general situation down to division level.³² But monitoring the situation and interfering in it are two different acts; the OKH did not intercede unnecessarily in the operations of the headquarters below it. The OKH's orders concerned the disposition of the Army Groups and the direction of broad offensive thrusts. At the same time the OKH maintained a broad view of the war, as its decisions demonstrate.

³¹Robert M. Kennedy, The German Campaign in Poland, 1939 (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1956), 59.

³²For example, see Halder's entries for 1 September 1939: Halder, Journal, 1:42-46.

Two series of events in the Polish campaign illustrate the OKH's operational methods. The first related to the disposition of forces in eastern Poland in the first week of the campaign. The second concerned the junction of the two Army Groups in the vicinity of Warsaw and the destruction of the Polish forces trapped there.³³

The Third and Fourth Armies met in the corridor between Germany and East Prussia on 3 September. At this point General Fedor von Bock, commander of Army Group North, wanted to move the Fourth Army to strengthen his eastern flank for a drive around Warsaw to the east. He argued that this move would prevent the Poles from retreating and regrouping in that area (this was before he knew of Russian plans to intervene). The OKH refused, citing the weakness of the forces guarding Germany's western frontier and the need to keep the forces in Poland as far west as possible to counter the threat of Anglo-French intervention.³⁴ This

³³Conclusions about staff effectiveness are drawn from an examination of the events of the campaign combined with an analysis of the staff structure. No day-by-day accounts of the workings of the General Staff exist, outside of Halder's journal. The traditions of the General Staff militated against officers taking credit for their work. The emphasis in record-keeping was on the events of the battle, and in any case the workload would not have permitted the keeping of activities records. Records of structural changes in the command system are subject to the same limitations.

³⁴Kennedy, Campaign in Poland, 92-93.

decision shows that the system was working: the OKH considered the views of a subordinate commander, kept the general situation in mind, and acted promptly within its proper sphere of authority.

That sphere can be perceived even more clearly in the events of 10-12 September (see map, next page). At this point the Germans were closing in on Warsaw: the Third Army from the north and the Eighth Army from the southwest. The Poles' Poznan Army had retreated into the area between the Bzura and the Vistula rivers, around the city of Kutno. On 10 September this force launched a counterattack southward against the northern flank of the Eighth Army that threatened the 30th Infantry Division. This was the strongest counterattack the Poles made during the entire campaign, but Eighth Army headquarters handled it without assistance.³⁵ The OKH did not interfere; it left the decisions, quite properly, to the Eighth Army commander. However, out of this event grew a situation that forced the OKH to act. Army Groups North and South were now converging on the trapped Poznan Army as well as on the city of Warsaw further east. The OKH had to coordinate their advances; otherwise their forces might not be used effectively, or might even

³⁵Ibid., 101.

clash with one another inadvertently. Accordingly, once the OKH understood the situation, it gave control of the attack against the encircled Poles--as well as some of Army Group North's units--to Eighth Army and established a new boundary between the Army Groups.³⁶ Again the command system had functioned as it should; the OKH made a sound decision rapidly, and the Germans destroyed a third of the Polish Army around Kutno.

Hitler did not interfere in the Polish campaign on any consistent basis, but his willingness to interfere at all was cause for concern among the army's leaders. Their concern heightened when Hitler dictated an early attack in the West. Now the struggle for power intensified, as the General Staff began to resist Hitler's attempts to exercise operational command. This resistance took several forms over the course of the war.

General von Brauchitsch first tried confronting Hitler directly. The climactic meeting on the subject of the Western offensive occurred on 8 November 1939. Unfortunately von Brauchitsch had never had the strength of will to stand up to Hitler, and so his efforts proved futile. The result was anything but positive; von Brauchitsch's relationship with Hitler took a decided turn for the worse, and

³⁶Ibid., 102.

Hitler was just as committed as ever to an autumn offensive. So much for the direct approach.

This sort of incident encouraged more and more of the professional, old-fashioned German generals to avoid contact with Hitler as much as they could.³⁷ They knew how little there was to be accomplished by visiting the Führer. Instead they made their opinions or requests known to Keitel or Jodl--and later complained if their views were not accepted at the top. Some also used avoidance as a form of gentlemanly protest. Shortly before his 8 November conference with Hitler, for example, von Brauchitsch had left it to Keitel to present the Army's initial plan for the attack in the West; this measure was von Brauchitsch's way of expressing displeasure with the idea.³⁸ Not everyone agreed with this tactic. The officers in the Armed Forces Operations Office (WFA), for instance, believed that greater involvement by the CiCs and the commanders in the field would strengthen the WFA's views and help to introduce some reason into Hitler's direction of the war.³⁹

³⁷Other generals, more ambitious and/or politically inclined, such as Rommel, used their access to Hitler to get what they wanted.

³⁸Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 51.

³⁹Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 54.

Reason, however, was one thing that would remain conspicuously absent from the Führer's operational repertoire. As a result his subordinates occasionally resorted to passive resistance, whereby they delayed action on some of his more outlandish orders if they could, in hopes of changing Hitler's mind or at least lessening the effect of his decisions. Even General Jodl applied this measure, as he testified at the Nuremberg trials. Occasionally he also withheld information from Hitler, if Jodl thought the information would lead Hitler to make a bad decision.⁴⁰

The operations around Narvik during Operation "Weserübung" provided the first opportunity for such a maneuver. On 18 April 1940, in a fit of nervousness, Hitler had Keitel draft an order to withdraw the troops from Narvik, who were threatened by British forces. When Lt. Colonel von Lossberg, the Chief of the Army Operations Group in the National Defense Branch (he was filling in for Colonel Warlimont, who was ill) received the order, he immediately went to see Keitel and Jodl. He protested strongly to them about the order and the way the men at the top were directing the campaign. Keitel immediately left the room; presumably he was not inclined to be lectured to by a Lieutenant Colonel. Jodl heard von Lossberg out--they

⁴⁰International Military Tribunal, Major War Criminals, 15:297-98.

were good friends--but explained that he could not countermand the Führer's personal order. In the end, though, Jodl did delay the order temporarily. Then von Lossberg arranged with von Brauchitsch for a congratulatory telegram to go out to the German commander in Narvik. Jodl was thus able to go to Hitler the next day and explain that they could not very well order the withdrawal of forces the Commander-in-Chief had just congratulated!⁴¹

Usually, however, it was not that easy to resist the Führer's orders. Going head-to-head with him yielded nothing positive, and delaying action on his orders was not something anyone could get away with frequently. So Hitler was able to encroach more and more on the General Staff's strategic prerogatives over the course of the next year. In France, in the Balkans, and especially in Russia Hitler began to dictate in some detail how the ground forces were to operate. Meanwhile, his timidity again came to the fore. The bold strategist of Warsaw gave way to the nervous neophyte of Dunkirk. Soon the army chain of command began to show the effects of Hitler's uneven leadership.

The first cracks had already appeared during the French campaign. Halder's diary shows the following entry on 28 May 1940: "Lengthy conference with ObdH [von

⁴¹Lossberg, Im Wehrmachtsführungsstab, 67-69.

Brauchitsch], who is rather restless for want of something to keep him busy."⁴² This brief comment is significant. It is true that the Commander-in-Chief of an army should not be bothering with the day-to-day details of operations. But that does not mean he should be idle, not when there are other enemies to be conquered. At the end of May 1940 France was teetering; von Brauchitsch could safely leave the planning for the coup de grace to Halder. England, however, remained a potent enemy. The fact that von Brauchitsch was not already involved in plans to deal with England indicates not only Hitler's strategic confusion, but von Brauchitsch's impotence within the command structure. He was already lost without instructions from the Führer.

Brauchitsch's position only worsened as time went on. As Halder pointed out, in the opening months of the Russian campaign he became little more than a messenger boy. Moreover, Halder was certainly not the only person to pick up on this. Brauchitsch was losing the confidence of his subordinates. He still visited their headquarters frequently, or conferred with them by telephone, to make sure he understood their situation. And he was usually in complete agreement with them on the measures that needed to be taken at any particular time. But the Army Group and Army commanders

⁴²Halder, Journal, 4:39.

realized eventually that he had no real authority; Hitler was the man who made the decisions, and von Brauchitsch did not have Hitler's ear. Morale--and performance--began to suffer as a result.⁴³

General Halder noted another growing problem with the command system on 28 June 1941:

At the morning conference, ObdH shows irritation because various movements in the army group sectors did not come off as agreed upon yesterday between ObdH and the commanders of [Army Groups] South and Center. This is the natural consequence of interference in the command of army groups and armies. Back here we cannot have a clearly detailed picture and so should confine ourselves to assigning broad missions and try not to direct the movements of individual corps or even divisions.⁴⁴

Hitler's command style was evidently beginning to filter down through the chain of command. The war diary of the Operations Branch confirms that the OKH was now dictating not just the direction of broad thrusts, but sometimes the specific objectives of units down to Corps level and below.⁴⁵ But there is no indication that, as of 1941, this practice was creating any serious problems. With their common General Staff training, the staff officers at the

⁴³Glydenfeldt, "Army High Commander," 31-37.

⁴⁴Halder, Journal, 6:176.

⁴⁵For examples, see Item H 22/10a, b, frames 6257096 and 6257100.

different headquarters were apparently able to iron out any difficulties without much friction.

In fact, the OKH's operational role and working methods remained largely unaffected by the changes in the Wehrmacht command system before the end of 1941. The organization remained sound and the same professionalism was evident; thus the OKH was able to keep up with the rapid pace of modern motorized operations. On 25 May 1940, for example, in the middle of the uproar over Hitler's halt order at Dunkirk, Halder and his staff were already deciding how to regroup for the second phase of the Battle of France. The necessary realignments began even before the defeat of the enemy forces at Dunkirk, and despite some disagreements with Hitler over the plan, the new offensive opened a mere three days after Dunkirk fell.⁴⁶ And in perhaps the most dramatic example of the staff's effectiveness, the army opened the invasion of Yugoslavia on 5 April 1941--a week after Hitler approved the plan and only ten days after the OKH received the mission.⁴⁷

The OKH displayed the same level of competence while actually directing combat operations. Army Group Center's

⁴⁶Halder, Journal, 4:35-52.

⁴⁷Helmuth Greiner, "The Balkans, 1941," (MS #C-065g), 32-34, in The German Army High Command; Halder, Journal, 6:37-55; Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 12-13.

battles of encirclement west of Minsk in the opening days of Operation "Barbarossa" are fairly typical, and illustrate several facets of the OKH's role.⁴⁸

The battle opened on 22 June 1941, with eastward drives by the two wings of the Army Group. The northern wing, attacking from East Prussia, consisted of the Third Panzer Army and the Ninth Army. The southern wing, consisting of the Fourth Army and the Second Panzer Army, attacked from Poland opposite Brest Litovsk. The Army Group's first major objective was Minsk, approximately 175 miles to the east (see map, next page).

The northern wing quickly seized crossings over the Njemen river and achieved a complete breakthrough. In the south, after meeting stiff resistance initially, the Second Panzer reached the Brest Litovsk - Minsk highway and began to drive up it to the northeast. The battle was progressing well so far; on the evening of 22 June Halder wrote, "The army groups are pursuing their original objectives. Nor is there any reason for a change. OKH has no occasion to issue any orders."⁴⁹

⁴⁸The overview of this battle is drawn from Halder, Journal, 6:162-181, and from Item H 22/10a, b, frames 6257085-103.

⁴⁹Halder, Journal, 6:163.

MAP 3: THE BIALYSTOK ENCIRCLEMENT
22 - 28 JUNE 1941

On 23 June problems arose. The Second Panzer Army was still meeting strong opposition from Russian forces attacking the Germans from the east and northeast, whereas the Third Panzer Army had made significant progress. Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, commander of Army Group Center, argued strongly that the Third should drive farther north, to Polotsk on the Dvina river. But the OKH insisted on the original plan, arguing that von Bock's change would allow Russian forces to escape from the Bialystok pocket, put the two panzer armies in a poor position to take Smolensk later on, and leave them vulnerable to Russian counterstrokes. The OKH ordered von Bock on 24 June to continue to drive on Minsk, and to have the Ninth and Fourth armies cut inward to form an inner ring around Bialystok. Additionally, after long discussions among von Brauchitsch, Halder and others on the General Staff, the OKH ordered the headquarters of the Second Army--until now the Army Group Reserve in Posen--to take control of the inner encirclement. And on 25 June, the OKH placed the 900th Brigade in the growing gap between Army Groups North and Center to guard against a Russian counter-attack in that area.

By 28 June the Ninth and Fourth Armies had closed the ring around Bialystok and were holding against violent but uncoordinated Russian attempts to break free to the northeast, east, and south. Within four days the pocket had been

eliminated, and the battle for Minsk was nearly complete; preparations for the drive on the next objective, Smolensk, had already begun. In the form of its orders the OKH had acted appropriately throughout these first ten days, dictating objectives for the army groups, providing reinforcements, and restructuring major command relationships.

The authority of the General Staff and its Chief, as separate from that of the Commander-in-Chief, shows up very clearly in the Bialystok operation. One of General Halder's journal entries for 25 June is particularly revealing:

1800. General von Greiffenberg [Chief of Staff, Army Group Center] reports on the execution of my order given to von Tresckow [Operations Officer, Army Group Center] [my emphasis]. . . . It is characteristic that Field Marshal von Bock expressly demands a written order, and he does not agree with us.⁵⁰

Halder was obviously exercising personal control of the battle. In general, Halder's journal shows that he consulted with von Brauchitsch fairly frequently to gain agreement on broad measures, but actually ran much of the battle on his own. Moreover, as the incident described above reveals, the old "General Staff special communications channel" was still very much in existence. Halder issued instructions directly to the Army Group's Operations Officer, and received information from the Chief of Staff.

⁵⁰Ibid., 6:171.

In this way he was able to a certain extent to bypass a troublesome commander, von Bock.

In the meantime, Hitler was pressing his own views on the army more regularly. Brauchitsch and Halder continued to try to influence him personally, with no greater success than before. The splitting of Army Group Center in July 1941 and the "no retreat" doctrine that took shape that November reflected Hitler's stubborn belief in his own superiority as a strategist and his determination to prevail over the opinions of his subordinates.

Brauchitsch and Halder began in the early days of Operation "Barbarossa" to counter Hitler's influence by hiding their intentions from him. When Hitler, on 25 June 41, expressed his concern that the armored forces were operating too far ahead of the infantry, Halder made note of it, but commented, ". . . that is not going to change anything in our plans."⁵¹ The CiC and his Chief of Staff put the Führer off with explanations that the armored forces were not really advancing as far as they appeared to be, but only performing reconnaissance. When Hitler finally told von Brauchitsch not to order any further advance, Halder wrote,

Let us hope that the CGs [Commanding Generals] of corps and armies will do the right thing even without express

⁵¹Ibid., 6:172.

orders, which we are not allowed to issue because of the Führer's instruction to ObdH.⁵²

The National Defense Branch took similar measures. Recognizing that Hitler's orders often made no sense, the staff of Abt. I tried to "take the edge off them." One way to do so was to communicate by telephone with a subordinate commander or his chief of staff, the purpose being to explain the trend of Hitler's thinking and emphasize any existing alternatives.⁵³ Another way was to use care in writing the order itself, as Warlimont described:

In other less pressing situations there were still on occasion limited possibilities of 'interpretation,' designed either to tone down the contents and form of an order issuing from the headquarters, or to adapt it more closely to the actual situation.⁵⁴

Subordinate commands came to refer to these as "rubber orders." The practice was strictly outside of the traditional methods of the General Staff, but it nevertheless proved very useful.⁵⁵

The army's leaders were obviously going to great lengths to circumvent Hitler's orders. Hitler was doubtless aware of these machinations on the part of his subordinates,

⁵²Ibid., 6:182.

⁵³Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 56.

⁵⁴Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 91.

⁵⁵Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 56.

and tended therefore to make his orders increasingly detailed. In addition, the situation probably fueled his decision to take personal command of the army in December 1941.

When Hitler took command, the army's position became much worse. Any protection afforded the army by having a Commander-in-Chief in place between Hitler and the field commands was gone; Hitler's influence on ground operations--and that of the men in his Inner Circle--grew even stronger. The influence of the General Staff grew correspondingly weaker. Also, with von Brauchitsch gone the division of the war into OKH and OKW theaters became more significant; Keitel and Jodl had more power relative to the Chief of the General Staff than they had had relative to the army's Commander-in-Chief. And finally, since Halder now had to report personally to the Führer every day on operations in the East, he had less time to devote to his regular duties.

For the first time, Hitler's whims also began to affect the organization of the OKH. Hitler gave all of von Brauchitsch's non-operational responsibilities to Keitel, splitting the OKH. The operational headquarters--the General Staff--remained under Halder's control. All of the OKH's other subordinate headquarters and offices, such as the Chief of Army Equipment and Commander of the Replacement Training Army, the Army Personnel Office, and the Army

Ordinance Office, now came under the control of Keitel and the OKW.⁵⁶ The direct effect on operations was minimal, but the indirect effects were significant. The General Staff had formerly been "first among equals" in its relationship with the other elements of the Army High Command. Now the General Staff found its influence considerably diminished. It no longer had a prominent voice in policy decisions governing issues such as replacements, organization, and weapons procurement.

The deterioration of the operational command system took one final step in the autumn of 1942. On 24 September Hitler dismissed Halder and replaced him as the Chief of the Army General Staff with General Kurt Zeitzler. A whole series of changes (none of them for the better) accompanied this move. The High Command's problems with structure, personnel, and leadership now began to seriously affect its performance.

When Hitler chose a new Chief of the General Staff, he also moved to consolidate his control of the personnel functions. First he relieved the Chief of the Army General Staff of responsibility for the selection, training, and supervision of General Staff officers. Hitler transferred those parts of the Army General Staff's Central Branch that

⁵⁶Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 3:37.

handled General Staff Corps matters to the Army Personnel Office. From then on the Chief of the General Staff was only able to assist in the appointment of General Staff officers.⁵⁷

On 1 October 1942 Hitler took the further step of making his adjutant, Brigadier General Schmundt, the Chief of the Personnel Office, replacing Keitel's younger brother Bodewin. Schmundt meanwhile held on to his position as Hitler's adjutant. Now Hitler was able to personally ensure that all important appointments would henceforth be filled by men who were loyal to him, or at least gave the appearance of loyalty.⁵⁸

Hitler needed to simplify the personnel function in this way because of his relationship with the officer corps. Officers fell into two groups, according to whether or not Hitler liked them. The commanders Hitler did not like--for whatever reason--he distrusted, spoke ill of behind their backs, and frequently relieved of their commands. Those in his good graces enjoyed Hitler's trust, important assignments, and early promotions. But they were small and

⁵⁷Ibid., 3:91; Müller-Hillebrand, "Army High Command," 30; Zeitzler, "General Critique," 30.

⁵⁸Dermot Bradley und Richard Schulze-Kossens, Hrsg., Tätigkeitsbericht des Chefs des Heerespersonalamtes General der Infanterie Rudolf Schmundt, 1.10.1942-29.10.1944 (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1984), 2; Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 3:38.

changeable group; they had to tread carefully to maintain their positions, for Hitler was easily slighted by any hint of disagreement with his decisions.⁵⁹ Very few commanders avoided being relieved at one time or another. Rundstedt, for example, who was one of the best German generals but who persisted in referring to Hitler as "that Bohemian corporal," was relieved and recalled several times. Thus Hitler required that the Personnel Office be literally at his fingertips so that he could have quick access to a pool of replacements.

As a result of Hitler's command and personnel policies, the Führerprinzip permeated the chain of command. Commanders interfered more and more in every detail of their subordinates' operations. Consequently, commanders at lower levels became less and less willing to show any initiative; every order had to be approved from above. Army Group commanders called Hitler directly for decisions that should have been made by men several levels lower in the hierarchy. As a result of the delay this practice entailed, the Germans missed many strategic and tactical opportunities.⁶⁰

An atmosphere of fear and intimidation had already begun to spread downward through the army. A growing number

⁵⁹Zeitler, "General Critique," 26-27.

⁶⁰Ibid., 28.

of generals reported their subordinates' "transgressions" to the Führer, in an effort to avoid blame themselves. In December 1941, for example, Field Marshal Gunther von Kluge reported General Erich Hoepfner to Hitler because Hoepfner had made an unauthorized withdrawal; Hitler had Hoepfner cashiered.⁶¹ Such behavior hardly contributed to feelings of trust between officers.

To add to these difficulties, the General Staff was by this time experiencing severe manpower shortages. The General Staff Corps had not expanded at the same rate as the rest of the army before the war, and now the staffs were feeling the pinch. Every individual staff officer came under extreme pressure because of the growing demands of the war. At the same time, the selection criteria had to be lowered and the training program for new officers had to be abbreviated.⁶²

Personnel shortages may have been behind Zeitzler's decision to eliminate the positions of Oberquartiermeister I and IV shortly after he took over as Chief of the General Staff. Zeitzler later wrote that he did this because of "the dire need for good General Staff officers at the front." He also averred that this loss was affordable

⁶¹Seaton, The German Army, 182-83; Warlimont, In Hitler's HQ, 223.

⁶²Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 2:103.

because the staff was only responsible for the eastern front.⁶³

At this point in the war Zeitzler and Jodl, working at cross purposes, solidified the division of the war into OKW and OKH theaters. According to Warlimont, Zeitzler wanted to unify the command system and do away with the OKW theaters but, when this proved impossible, he worked to exclude the OKW from all decisions concerning the East. Jodl, Warlimont stated, failed to resist Zeitzler even though Jodl knew that the OKW's proper role was to direct the overall strategy of the war.⁶⁴ Other senior officers in the OKW have also related that Zeitzler kept the OKW at arms' length.⁶⁵ For his part, Zeitzler has stated that Keitel and Jodl were "blind tools of Hitler," and that he (Zeitzler) found himself isolated when he tried to resist the Führer.⁶⁶

Whoever was to blame, the fact remains that the split in the command system now became a serious problem. The

⁶³Zeitzler, "General Critique," 30; Erfurth, Geschichte des Generalstabes, 219-20.

⁶⁴Warlimont, Inside Hitler's HQ, 261-62; Warlimont, "Commentary on T101," (MS #T-101 K1), 83, 87, in German Military Studies, vol. 6.

⁶⁵Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 49.

⁶⁶Zeitzler, "General Critique," 47-48.

Armed Forces Operations Staff (WFSt) became in all but name a second General Staff for operations in the OKW theaters--but still without any significant reorganization or addition of personnel. At the same time relations between the chiefs of the WFSt and the Army General Staff declined because of their competing interests. There simply were not enough resources to go around, and neither officer was in a position to properly evaluate priorities. Zeitzler and Jodl often argued for days before they could agree on the allocation of even so much as a division to one theater or another; Hitler frequently had to decide the issue himself.⁶⁷ Operations suffered more and more from this persistent bottleneck at the top of the command structure.

Hitler continued to reject all suggestions for reorganizing the High Command. Neither Zeitzler nor his successor, General Heinz Guderian (Chief of the General Staff from July 1944 to March 1945), was able to make any progress. The best that anyone could do was to resist Hitler by the same means that had been adopted before. But there were fewer people willing to do so and, given Hitler's style of command in the last years of the war, fewer opportunities for any resistance at all. His instructions became so detailed that, short of outright insubordination, there

⁶⁷Ibid., 33-34; Müller-Hillebrand, Das Heer, 3:157.

was no way to do anything other than what the Führer desired.

The General Staff Corps continued to be the only real source of coherency in the High Command. Zeitzler has written that

the General Staff in World War II exercised less influence on strategic decisions, . . . than on the careful and skillful implementation of such decisions. Many seemingly impossible tasks were made possible; wrong measures were at least ameliorated for the benefit of the troops and unnecessary losses were prevented.⁶⁸

For the most part, especially at the lower levels, the General Staff and the Armed Forces Operations Staff still functioned efficiently in the last years of the war. Cooperation between the two agencies was often quite good. The more junior members of both staffs, such as the branch chiefs and specialists, tried their best to overcome the system's flaws.⁶⁹

The fundamental problem with the High Command, though, was not that the staffs failed to function efficiently within their spheres of authority, but that those spheres were so limited, the overall structure so chaotic. The internal struggles were themselves a drain. The elements of the command system spent too much time fighting with each

⁶⁸Zeitzler, "General Critique," 44.

⁶⁹Ibid., 49-53; Winter and others, "Armed Forces High Command," 3: Chapter B1a, 47, 49.

other, or just trying to accomplish what was needed within a maze of overlapping agencies, and not enough time fighting the enemy. The lack of a unified command system combined with the Führer's operational interference to produce a worsening military situation, which in turn put more pressure on the command system--a vicious circle. By mid-1943, no amount of efficiency on the part of any individual or organization could stop the rush toward defeat; all the staffs' efforts merely delayed the end.

This outcome was, if not inevitable, at least logical, given the dominant trends within the German High Command over the preceding decades. On the one hand, the General Staff Corps had evolved into perhaps the most efficient body of military men on earth. On the other hand, since the middle of the 19th century the General Staff Corps had become increasingly specialized while it also maintained strongly conservative attitudes.⁷⁰ This trend was the natural byproduct of the growing complexity of warfare and was in fact present in every modern state. Had the political circumstances in Germany been different, this would perhaps have presented no problem. But political realities

⁷⁰The term "conservative" is used here to refer to an entire range of attitudes: political, military, sociological, and institutional.

within the German state made the General Staff Corps vulnerable.

The basic problem for the German army's leadership was that it had not lost status as it had lost breadth of vision. Hitler rightly recognized the army as a "pillar of the state" early in his political career. The army's leadership was, however, unprepared to exercise the power they had inherited; their strength lay in the strategic and operational spheres. And so they fell victim--in part through their own ambitions--to a demagogue.

Once Hitler was in power, the General Staff Corps' strengths became Germany's Achilles heel. Their organizational abilities, their sense of duty, and their military know-how gave Hitler a superb military vehicle with which to start Germany on the road into the abyss. And once on that road, the Corps found itself all but powerless to control its own destiny. Eventually the High Command became an organizational nightmare, its flaws mirroring and accentuating the weaknesses in Hitler's military direction. In 1939 the structure of the High Command had helped guarantee victory; by 1943 it was helping to ensure defeat.

APPENDIX 1: THE GENERAL STAFF IN 1914

APPENDIX 2: THE HIGH COMMAND, 1920 - 1934

* Created in 1926; redesignated Armed Forces Office, 13 February 1934.
 ** Redesignated National Defense Branch, 13 February 1934.

APPENDIX 3: THE HIGH COMMAND, JUNE 1935 - FEBRUARY 1938

**APPENDIX 4: THE HIGH COMMAND AFTER THE FÜHRER DECREE OF
4 FEBRUARY 1938**

APPENDIX 5: THE ARMY HIGH COMMAND IN 1938

APPENDIX 6: THE ARMY HIGH COMMAND AFTER MOBILIZATION

APPENDIX 7: THE REICH GOVERNMENT AND HIGH COMMAND, 1942*

* Note: For clarity's sake, this is a greatly simplified diagram.

**APPENDIX 8: ORGANIZATION OF THE OPERATIONS BRANCH OF THE
ARMY GENERAL STAFF DURING THE FRENCH CAMPAIGN**

* GSC = General Staff Corps

**APPENDIX 9: ORGANIZATION OF THE OPERATIONS BRANCH OF THE
ARMY GENERAL STAFF, AUTUMN 1940 - SUMMER
1941.**

**APPENDIX 10: ORGANIZATION OF THE OPERATIONS BRANCH OF THE
ARMY GENERAL STAFF, SUMMER 1941 - SUMMER 1944**

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