CHAPTER XXVIII

The Nazi State to 1938. I, Political and Military

The years from mid-1934 to early 1938 are the years of the consolidation of the Nazi dictatorship. Narrative history almost ceases except in foreign affairs, and the historian must analyze the pattern as it develops in the various spheres of human activity. Gradually and sometimes unobtrusively the net tightened around the German people until by 1938 the total state had for all practical purposes been achieved.

An important key to understanding the political relationships is the position held by Adolf Hitler. He occupied three separate functions, that of chancellor, party leader, and president. After he inherited the presidential office, he never used the title; it smacked too much of republicanism. At first he was referred to as leader and national chancellor; after the war started, simply as leader (Führer). In fact, he was of greater significance than the combination of his three functions would suggest. He assumed a sort of magico-religious position. He embodied the collectivity of the racial Germanic urge for existence and power. He was the court of last resort. He was the law. Otherwise intelligent people, including foreigners, were held in thrall by his eyes, his personality. They would answer questions on some outrageous Nazi aberration with paragraphs beginning with the words, "Adolf Hitler has said..." That was the end of it. Humble Germans identified themselves with their leader, who incarnated what Plato might have called the archetype, or Rousseau, the general will.

Hitler's extraordinary position in the eyes of the faithful was partly rationalized by the "principle of leadership" (Führerprinzip). This principle established a hierarchy of command such that each person gave unconditional obedience to those above him and was entitled to the same from those below. No more elections were held in Germany. All officials
in every area of government and party life were appointed. At the apex of the pyramid was Hitler.

In fact Hitler was at the apex of several pyramids. The party and the state were not one, though they impinged and overlapped heavily upon each other. It is difficult for an Englishman or an American to grasp the concept of the totalitarian party because it is in no sense equivalent to the British or American political parties. In fact a sharper meaning is rendered by the word movement. Admission to the party was an invitation to exercise the vocation of leadership. The party members constituted a leaven in the dough of the society, an elite, a pattern for the led. At least until the war the party was kept relatively small so that the members could be highly qualified in Nazi terms. The party can be thought of as the dynamic or male force; the state, as the static or female constraint.

Immediately below Hitler on the party ladder came the Reichsleitung ("national leadership"). By the end of the war there were about forty Reichsleiter. Some of them held important state positions; others held none. A few did not even have a specific party position. Some of them were well known throughout the world: Goering, Himmler, Goebbels, etc.; others were little known even in Germany but commanded important spheres of influence, such as the party courts, its finances, or its studies of foreign affairs. In fact some of the Reichsleiter headed divisions which paralleled the work of state ministries. Neither the party nor the state was symmetrical or rationally organized; both were the result of a series of ad hoc creations, of which some were tailored simply for one man.

The next level below the national leadership was the provincial (Gau) leadership made up before the war of just over thirty Gauleiter. These men were often but not always identical with the Statthalter, who were of course in the state hierarchy. Some of them were well known, e.g., Goebbels, who was Gauleiter of Berlin; others were known only locally. It was their duty to receive orders from party headquarters in Munich or from the Führer in Berlin and see to it that they were enforced in their respective Gau. Beneath them were whole armies of district, municipal, local, and block leaders, who brought the gospel and commandments of Nazism to every individual in the nation.

The state hierarchy was of course not entirely the creation of the Nazis. Much of it carried over from the republic and indeed from the empire, and many of the bureaucrats had been civil servants for a long time. In fact, it is extraordinary how much continuity existed. If a man were not a Jew, a socialist, or an overt opponent of National Socialism, he had a good chance of keeping his job. An outstanding example of
this is the influential Erich Meissner, head of the presidential chancellery and thus immediately under Hitler, who had held the same position under both Ebert and Hindenburg.

At the top of the state ladder were the ministers. Naturally, many of them were Nazis, but the remarkable thing is that a considerable number (e.g., Papen, Neurath, Schwerin-Krosigk) were not. Hitler tended to think of them as technical experts in their departments and not as political advisers. Full cabinet meetings became rarer and rarer, until during the war they were hardly ever held. Hitler liked to make his decisions alone or with a small group of his intimates. He would usually hear advice or conflicting opinions, then retire by himself and announce the decision later; and that decision was binding.

There emerged from this system what is often called the dual state, a duality of state and party paralleling each other from the Führer at the summit down to the meanest functionary of either. However, no one should assume that it was a neat or even premeditated parallelism. The overlapping of nominal authority was hardly credible and became even more confusing during the war when economic controls constantly had to be tightened and when an empire all over Europe had to be governed. By 1945 it was almost impossible to locate authority, certainly not on a neat chart of organization. The answer was that authority lay with Hitler and with the men in whom he chose to repose it at any given moment. In spite of all the proliferation of organizations and officialdom, and all the lip service paid to the leadership principle and the united action of the people, Nazi Germany was one of the most intensely personal governments that the world has ever seen.

During this middle period of Hitler's rule the army was one institution in Nazi Germany which seemed to be sacrosanct. Hitler lived up to his statement after the purge of 1934 that the regular army would continue to control Germany's military force. He needed the army officers during these years more than they needed him. They were essential to create the great armed force which Hitler planned. Step by step, and rather more rapidly than some of the more conservative generals wanted, they were given ever-increasing latitude until by 1938 the German military establishment was well on its way to becoming the formidable instrument of the war years.

From the earliest days of his political career Hitler had inveighed against the Treaty of Versailles. Now that he was in control, it was to be expected that he would try to implement his invective. Reparations were already a thing of the past; there was no possibility at the moment of risking war to restore the old frontiers; the military clauses seemed to be the one area in which repudiation was feasible.
The long-planned World Disarmament Conference had been sitting in Geneva since early 1932 without much achievement to its credit. The German delegation took the position that according to the treaty German disarmament was to be only a prelude to world disarmament. They insisted that since the rest of the nations had done nothing important about disarming, Germany was entitled to build up her forces to a level of equality with her peers. The other nations recognized that this argument had some force, and in December the conference admitted "in principle" Germany's right to equality.

This was not enough for Hitler; he was in a hurry. During the 1933 session the Germans insisted that the S.A. must not be counted as effectives in granting increased numbers to Germany; they also demanded that they should start right away to build up to equality. In June the conference adjourned for several months. In October Hitler took his first major step in foreign policy. On the fourteenth he withdrew his delegation from the conference and announced Germany's resignation from the League of Nations. It would be hard to think of a sharper reversal of the Stresemann policy. The following month, in the first of Hitler's plebiscites, the German people were asked whether they approved of these two steps; 93 per cent voted yes.

The year 1934 was devoted mainly to the quarrel between the army and the S.A. which culminated on June 30, but there can be no doubt that plans were being rushed for the expansion of the army and navy and the creation of an air force. The culmination of Hitler's attack on the military clauses of Versailles came on March 16, 1935, when he simply abrogated them unilaterally. On that date he returned to the old prewar policy of the conscription of all young men, who now had to spend a year in the armed forces. To show the change in spirit he even altered the name of the army from the Weimar word Reichswehr to the new Wehrmacht.

World opinion, not yet accustomed to Hitler's tactics, was appalled at this unquestionably illegal action. There is no doubt that Britain and France could have forced Hitler to withdraw from his new position if they had chosen. However, they did nothing except to protest and to start to negotiate with Germany on nonaggression pacts, limitations of armaments, etc. Nothing came of these discussions except a naval treaty with Great Britain.

The following months were hectic for the army high command. It is not an easy matter to transform an army from one hundred thousand to six hundred thousand men almost overnight. The logistic problem alone is a tremendous one, to say nothing of the problem of training so many raw recruits simultaneously. Although the Reichswehr had been
developed by Seeckt as a nucleus for eventual enlargement, it was a number of months before the army was actually admitting all the new personnel to which it was entitled. The munitions industry had started to increase its productivity even before 1935, but there were many problems here too in the acquisition of raw materials, retooling, and rapid expansion. However, the work went on without cease.

Almost exactly a year after the return of conscription Hitler took his next big military step. He took advantage of the fact that Europe was in the midst of a crisis in international affairs, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. On March 7, 1936, he repudiated another part of the Treaty of Versailles and the entire Locarno system by announcing the remilitarization of the Rhineland area to the Belgian and French frontiers. The Allies had ended their occupation of this territory in 1930. This was a very daring step; it touched France at her most sensitive spot. The Germans were aware of their daring, but received no French opposition. Once again Hitler had gambled and won.

Activity in the air paralleled activity on land. From the moment the Nazis took control, interest in aviation advanced by leaps and bounds. Boys were encouraged to study aeronautics, flying clubs were founded, glider races were frequent, and commercial aviation was expanded. Hermann Goering, the old war ace, was able to find time from his conquest of Prussia to look about for a future staff for the air arm and to cheer on air-minded youngsters. It was an open secret that Germany was going to establish a military air force. Britain and France seemed to accept the idea in advance. The official creation of the air force (Luftwaffe) occurred a few days before the announcement of conscription in 1935. Goering became commander in chief in addition to his other responsibilities. Within a year the air force was on a war footing and ready to make its first live experiments in Spain.

The navy was to an extent a stepchild in Nazi Germany; Hitler does not seem to have understood the principles and importance of naval warfare. However, it shared in the expansion. In fact, after the announcement of the abolition of the armament restrictions, incredible though it may seem, Great Britain made a naval treaty with Germany whereby Germany was entitled to a surface navy one-third as large as the British and to a submarine fleet equal to the British. Plans were immediately put into operation for two big battle cruisers (the eventual “Scharnhorst” and “Gneisenau”) and two super battleships (the eventual “Bismarck” and “Tirpitz”), as well as a respectable number of smaller surface vessels and submarines.

The regular armed forces were not the only reservoir of trained manpower. The S.A., tamed and shorn of its imperialistic ambitions, re-
mainly a force of about two million men under its new leader, Viktor Lutze. The S.S., now independent of the S.A., already had several armed battalions which were to grow into the redoubtable armed S.S. (*Waffen S.S.*) of the war. By 1936 Himmler, in addition to being leader of the S.S., became chief of the German police, another formidable armed group. In addition, there were the Labor Service (*Arbeitsdienst*) and other paramilitary organizations which, at need, could swell the *Wehrmacht*.

Hitler's birthday, April 20, 1936, was a happy day for the high-ranking officers. On that day the *Führer* promoted the minister of defense, General Blomberg, to the rank of field marshal, the first time that rank had been granted since the war. The three commanders in chief also received promotions, Fritsch and Goering to colonel general and Raeder to general admiral.

Germany was fast becoming an armed camp.