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Warlord: The Political and Military Ambitions of Nazi Germany

By

William R. Underhill

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There are so many important stories to consider when thinking about World War II. It is easy to think about the popular aspects of the war: the causes, the major figures, the battles and of course, the lasting consequences. Yet there are other, lesser known storylines to consider, ones that have taken a backseat to the more popular narratives of the time. It is commonly understood that Nazi Germany was evil, and that they had nothing but ill intentions for the rest of Europe and the world. However, it is vital to understand that Germany's pre war intentions are notably different from the infamous events that we have come to know. To truly understand German ambitions in the mid-Twentieth Century, it is important to look back at the lasting consequences that Europe faced after the Great War. By studying the political and economic ambitions of Nazi Germany, we can begin to gain a better understanding of their wars of conquest and subsequent victories and defeats in World War II.

World War I had been terrible. Known as the Great War, it had exacted a massive toll on the nations of Europe. Millions of soldiers and civilians had died and the damage from four years of brutal fighting was widespread. The First World War, as it would come be known, represented the old world, as Europe had been divided based on old alliances and ideologies. The battles that ensued resulted in carnage on an unprecedented scale, as traditional armies comprised of infantry and cavalry were ripped apart by new, modern technology such as heavy artillery, machine guns, airplanes, tanks and chemical gas. As the war dragged on, discontent grew, and nations such as Russia withdrew entirely, undergoing a revolution that would have lasting consequences for the entire world. For Germany, defeat in the First World War was only the beginning of her problems. Following the Armistice in 1918, Germany was plunged into a severe economic depression. The German economy suffered from hyperinflation, as the value of its currency continued to decline rapidly. In addition, the Treaty of Versailles, which formally

ended the war, enforced German responsibility for the conflict and the damages it caused.¹ As a result, Germany was forced to pay back huge amounts of money, approximately 20 billion gold Marks, in reparations to both France and Britain, something it could barely manage with its faltering economy.

Germany, already suffering due to its unstable economic situation, had more hardships in store. Germany emerged as a unified nation in 1871, following the efforts of Otto Von Bismarck and, by the outbreak of World War I in 1914, had grown to be a sizeable power in Europe. In World War I, Germany had found a firm ally in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was comprised of several German speaking states. Following the defeat of the Central Powers in 1918, the Treaty of Versailles and the newly formed League of Nations set about rearranging Europe. The League of Nations, formed in an attempt to prevent future conflicts on such an enormous scale, decided that the era of European empires had come to an end, and that new nations should be established in an effort to reset the balance of power.

One of the League's first actions was to dissolve the Austro-Hungarian Empire, creating a host of new nations throughout Eastern Europe. Included were the new countries of Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and the Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. This realignment of power completely eliminated Germany's former ally and had greatly reduced Germany's overall size. Much of Germany's Eastern territory had been ceded to Poland, and a strip of land, known as the Danzig corridor, which now belonged to Poland, separated Germany from its territory in East Prussia. In addition, many of the newly created countries, such as Austria and Czechoslovakia had substantial German minorities, and their complete separation from Germany would come to breed resentment and discontent. The loss of so much territory, coupled with rising inflation, starvation and huge war reparations combined

¹ Evans, Richard. *The Coming of The Third Reich*. (New York, Penguin) 2004

to create a tense situation within Germany.² In the coming years, Germany would undergo its own transformation, beginning a series of events that would have drastic consequences for the rest of Europe, and the world.

Following the 1918 Armistice, Germany began to reorganize itself. In 1919, the old, German Empire was disbanded, as Kaiser Wilhelm II was forced to abdicate following Germany's defeat. Yet this was only the beginning of Germany's problems. Inspired by the ongoing Russian revolution, radical German citizens felt that Germany had been betrayed by her ineffective, imperial style leadership. In addition, the citizens felt that, as a result of this betrayal, Germany now faced national humiliation. To them, the massive war reparations and loss of territory represented a huge loss of national prestige, and they believed that Germany now looked weak to the rest of the world. For nearly a year, various revolutionary factions emerged and battled for their causes. Radical leftists and even a small faction of communists fought against government loyalists. In January, 1919, a convention gathered in an attempt to resolve the situation. What resulted, was the meeting of the Weimar National Assembly, who gathered in Weimar, in central Germany.

At the Weimar National Assembly, several important changes were brought up, changes that would have long lasting implications for Germany. Following the forceful abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II in November, 1918, the Assembly saw fit to form a new style of government. Instead of an emperor, the German government would now be run by a president, shifting the political system toward a democracy. In addition a new legislative body, the Reichstag, was created. With it came a new position; the Chancellor. The Chancellor was the head of the Reichstag, and reported directly to the President. Finally, the Assembly passed a new constitution, appropriately named the Weimar Constitution. This formally established Germany

² Tooze, Adam. *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of The Nazi Economy*. (New York, Penguin) 2006.

as a parliamentary republic, one that used a new legislative body based on representation which was run by a chancellor. With the state now run by a president, Germany had become a very different nation in just a few short years. Germany had entered into a new period of its history, an era that would come to be known as the Weimar Republic. With this new constitution and government, it appeared that Germany was on the path to reestablishment. Yet the coming year would prove to be increasingly harsh for both the new government and the German people.

In the early 1920s, Germany faced a crisis of extreme hyperinflation, as the value of its currency, the Mark, dropped rapidly. Rapid spending in foreign markets caused the value of the Mark to plummet, and by the mid 1920s, it was practically worthless as a currency both internationally and domestically. As a result, Germany found it increasingly difficult to purchase foreign goods and resources. Following World War I, Germany's industrial heartland, the Ruhr Valley, had been occupied to ensure that Germany could not rebuild its war economy and re-arm. With its industry under foreign occupation and its currency ever decreasing in value, Germany faced starvation. The situation worsened in 1929 when the stock market crashed and the Great Depression began. Throughout the world, the value of currencies rapidly declined, and foreign trade ground to a halt. Domestically, unemployment rose dramatically, as employers could not afford to pay their employees. In Germany, the Great Depression seemed disastrous. Germany had been relying on foreign loans to help combat its hyperinflation issue, but the beginning of the Depression meant that the loans had stopped coming. Many feared that the hyperinflation of the early 1920s would return, and that the entire country would bankrupt itself. In addition, the Germans were still responsible for the massive war reparations, of which they had so far paid little.³ The Weimar government seemed paralyzed; it refused to spend money, typically the cure for economic recession, fearing that too much rapid spending

³ Tooze, Adam. *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of The Nazi Economy*. (New York, Penguin) 2006.

would devalue the currency once again. Yet economics were to be the least of the Weimar Republic's woes, as a new, charismatic leader emerged to change Germany forever.

Adolf Hitler had been born in Austria in 1889, and moved to Germany in 1913. He had joined the German army and served with distinction in World War I. Following the war, Hitler had developed a deep sense of nationalism. To him, Germany was being unfairly punished, and the Treaty of Versailles sought only to further her humiliation. In the wake of the 1918-1919 revolutions in Germany, Hitler worked closely with other nationalists to create the German Worker's Party. With this new party, Hitler and his followers hoped to gain the support of other disgruntled citizens and turn them toward the political ideologies of the Worker's Party and away from the communist faction. Deeply attracted to the right wing views of the party, Hitler ensured that anti-semitism, racism, anti-capitalism and anti-Marxism became the backbones of the new party. After being discharged from the army in 1920, Hitler settled in Bavaria, in Southern Germany. He began to work for the party full time, which had been renamed the National Socialist German Worker's Party.

Hitler designed the Party's now infamous emblem, the swastika. Mounted on a red banner, the swastika became a symbol of strength and unity for the party, and later, the German people. The city of Munich, like much of Germany in the early 1920s, was engulfed in political turmoil and revolutionary upheaval. A fertile recruiting ground, Hitler and his new party began to inspire large crowds of citizens with his fiery speeches. His enthusiasm, bravado and incredible stage presence made him a powerful icon, and the face of seemingly inevitable change. To the citizens of Germany, already suffering under the conditions of the Versailles Treaty and the post war inflation, Hitler was a breath of fresh air. His rousing speeches offered a glimpse at a new life, a life where the old style governments of the past would be replaced with new, more appealing options. In one of his speeches, he boldly proclaimed that "The honor of the nation,

the honor of our Army, and the ideal of freedom-all must once more become sacred to the German Volk!"⁴ The citizens of Germany were largely destitute, and Hitler's promises of a new society appealed to them. For both the citizens and Hitler, change seemed like a tangible goal, as Germany's current sufferings could be blamed on the seemingly evil agendas of Britain and France, as well as certain groups of people who were considered detriments to the advancement of society. For Hitler, change was inevitable, and he was determined to take advantage of his recently acquired power.

Taking advantage of the disarray in Germany in the early 1920s, Hitler and his National Socialist Party attempted to seize power in Munich through a force of arms. Attempting an armed coup, a violent clash broke out between the Nazi supporters and the Bavarian Weimar loyalists. A short, but intense exchange left several Nazi supporters dead, and several other wounded. While the coup, which would come to be known as the Beer Hall Putsch, failed in its main goal, it had inadvertently succeeded in several other areas. The event, and its ensuing violence, had quickly made headlines throughout the country, earning the Nazi Party some national recognition. Perhaps the most important consequence was Hitler's arrest. While seemingly a disaster for the party, having their leader arrested and sentenced would prove to be of priceless value. Following the putsch, Hitler was arrested, along with several other supporters, and sentenced to prison for treason. While in prison, Hitler created a series of important relationships with other Party supporters such as Rudolf Hess, who rallied around Hitler's anti semitic views. In prison, Hitler took advantage of his time and continued to work to improve his party. Having witnessed the disastrous effects of the Beer Hall Putsch, Hitler quickly surmised that armed revolution was not the most efficient way to secure power. He

⁴ *Speech on Enabling Act*. 1933. worldfuturefund.org

knew that politics and legitimacy were the way to the top, and he became determined to use them to full advantage.⁵

Prison also gave rise to Hitler's largest achievement so far, the writing of *Mein Kampf*, My Struggle. Within this book, Adolf Hitler laid out his personal plans to rebuild Germany. Within the pages of *Mein Kampf*, Hitler unapologetically blamed Germany's woes on Jews, Bolshevik Communists, and other people he believed to be undesirable. Here, Hitler called for a new, militaristic society that could combat what he believed to be the spread of a Jewish conspiracy which aimed to gain control of the world. He also saw the major issues in Germany and the world, such as social democracies, Marxism and capitalism as agents of Jewish takeover. In addition, he blamed many of Germany's issues on the failings of the Weimar Republic, claiming that the parliamentary system was secretly working to further Jewish interests. Hitler decided that the old system had to be wiped away completely, and that a new government was needed. With his political ambitions clearly stated, Hitler also had plans for continued German expansion, notably in the East. In an attempt to right the wrongs of the Weimar Republic, Hitler sought to expand Germany across Europe, creating the next German Reich, or realm. For this, he needed what he called Lebensraum, living space for the German people. Given that Bolsheviks were some of his most despised enemies, the vast territory of the Soviet Union seemed like an easy target. If Hitler could rebuild Germany and eliminate the Jews, Slavs and Communists of Eastern Europe, he could build the empire he so desired. In December of 1924, Adolf Hitler was released from prison, and he set about rebuilding the party.

Prison had been an important time for Hitler. Despite being removed from the public for nine months, he had earned some loyal allies and published his ideas on how to make Germany a world power once again. Hitler's prison sentence was a monumental shift in German history.

⁵ Evans, Richard. *The Coming of The Third Reich*. (New York, Penguin) 2004

Hitler had been smart enough to realize that politics were the way into power, not armed revolution. Now that he was a free man once more, he was ready to begin reforming the party into a legitimate political force. Germany was not the first of the far right leaning governments to emerge in Europe. To the South, in Italy, Benito Mussolini and his Fascist Party had successfully completed their so called March on Rome in 1922, overthrowing the government and installing Mussolini as the new national leader. In the following years, Mussolini secured himself as the head of the Fascist party and the state.⁶ Mussolini secured his power by making Italy a single party state, outlawing all other forms of government. He believed that he could recreate the Roman Empire by expanding Italy and her territories around the Mediterranean Sea. Much like in Germany, Italian fascism was driven by the desire to expand and resettle with ethnic Italians. To Germany, the successful rise of Italian fascism was of immense value. It showed that far right governments could succeed, and that the democracies of the West were stuck in the old world. The rebuilding of the National Socialist Party in Germany would show this in the coming years, to the dismay of Western Europe.

In Germany, President Paul von Hindenburg was growing old, and becoming increasingly weary from the strains of public office. By the time of Hitler's release from prison, he was 77 years old and he was then elected President in 1925. The 1920s would further Hindenburg's decline in health, as the economic damage of the Great Depression began to set in. As the people of Germany prepared for yet more economic hardship, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party prepared to take advantage of the situation. Following his release from prison in 1924, Hitler had been banned from public speaking until 1927, but he did not sit idly by. He spent the interim years recruiting powerful allies into his party. Men such as Hermann Göring, Rudolf Hess and Joseph Goebbels were all deeply committed Nazis, and shared in Hitler's

⁶ Knox, MacGregor. *Hitler's Italian Allies*. (UK, Cambridge University Press) 2000

views for a new Germany. Many, such as Heinrich Himmler, were staunch supporters of Hitler's anti semitic views and were drawn to the party based on their political beliefs regarding the Germanization of Europe. As the Depression continued to hammer the German economy, the new Nazi Party captivated the minds of the people with Hitler's rousing speeches. Hitler offered a way through the hardship, and often times, that was more than enough for the beleaguered people of Germany.

When Hitler's public speaking ban was lifted in 1927, he picked up where he had left off. Alongside new propaganda expert Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi party was able to reshape its image, transforming into a legitimate political party rather than the armed revolutionaries who took part in the Beer Hall Putsch of 1923. In addition, many of the leading party figures were still only in their mid-thirties. Hitler, in 1929, was the oldest at 40, but the age gap between the leaders of the Nazi party and the leaders of the Weimar Republic was clear. This helped make the new party more appealing to younger people, who undoubtedly had lost faith in the aging Weimar officials. As the effects of the Great Depression began to spread throughout the world, the Nazi party used it to their advantage.⁷ With Germany's industrial heartland, the Ruhr Valley, still occupied by the French following World War I, and the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles still in place, Germany felt powerless to save its economy. In their usual fashion however, Hitler and the Nazi Party began to condemn the Treaty of Versailles. However, the Dawes Plan, and later the Young Plan, were inadvertently already helping Germany. Arguing that the foreign occupation of the Ruhr valley was harming German national industrial production, the Dawes plan ordered the removal of the occupying forces in an attempt to resume industrial production. Passed in 1924, the Dawes plan had little effect, as the hyperinflation that plagued the country made paying the immense war reparations nearly

⁷ Evans, Richard. *The Coming of The Third Reich*. (New York, Penguin) 2004

impossible. In 1929 a new plan, known as the Young Plan was introduced. The Young Plan realized that Germany could never pay off its debts all at once, especially if it had just regained control over its industrial region. Instead, the Young Plan aimed to stagger the payment of the reparations. Most importantly, the Young plan also reduced the total amount that Germany had to repay, in an attempt to ease the financial strain on the country. The Young Plan simply gave way to the infamous Free Rider Problem. If Germany now faced reduced payments, they wondered why they should even pay at all. The Plan failed, as debates about payment plans ground any progress to a halt. In Germany, a series of major events was taking place which would have major consequences for the country.

By the early 1930s, the Nazi Party made up a substantial portion of the Reichstag, and had achieved its goal of becoming a legitimate political force. In an attempt to win over more voters and support, Hitler largely reversed his anti-capitalist stance, realizing that Germany would need the support of the industrial sector if it were ever to rebuild and rearm. Slowly, Hitler began to win their support and Nazi Party readied itself for the 1932 Presidential election. President Paul von Hindenburg, already 84 years old, reluctantly agreed to run for reelection. He was seen by the Weimar Republic supporters as the only candidate who stood a chance against Hitler. The Weimar loyalists were scared of Hitler's radical new ideas and political ambitions, and felt that it was better to preserve the old system. In 1932, the election took place, and Hindenburg narrowly won. Yet Hindenburg's remaining years were full of political turmoil, as infighting greatly reduced the power of the Weimar government. The Chancellor at the time was Franz von Papen, who was a serious opponent of Hindenburg. Hitler had begun to demand the position of Chancellor, as he still believed that he could win power through regular means. Hindenburg was firm in rejecting Hitler. In addition, in 1932, the Reichstag voted Franz von Papen out of office following a vote of no confidence. Papen then went behind

Hindenburg's back, believing that he could control Hitler as a puppet Chancellor. Papen agreed to support Hitler's request for the chancellery and pressured President Hindenburg relentlessly. Hindenburg was adamant that Hitler would not become Chancellor, but nearly a year of mounting political pressure took its toll. Old and weary, Hindenburg swore Hitler in as Chancellor on January 30, 1933.

For Hitler, becoming Chancellor was one of his greatest achievements. He had been advocating radical change for Germany for quite some time, and now, as Chancellor, he could finally wield the political power that he had been chasing. As an added bonus, the Nazi party, which had successfully transformed itself into a legitimate political party, now controlled the majority of the seats within the Reichstag. For Hitler, his consolidation of power would come even earlier than he realized, as the Reichstag building became the target of a communist arson plot. On February 27th, 1933, a young Dutch communist started a fire within the Reichstag which quickly escalated, engulfing the entire building and causing immense damage. Marinus van der Lubbe was caught at the scene and later confessed to starting the fire. For Hitler and the Nazi Party, the fact that van der Lubbe was a communist was more than enough, and they quickly took drastic actions in the wake of the fire. Hitler pressured aging president Hindenburg for emergency powers so that he could root out the communists and others that he viewed as hostile to the Nazi Party. The ensuing Reichstag Fire Decree stated that it was "therefore permissible to restrict the rights of personal freedom, freedom of expression, including the freedom of the press" and the "freedom to organize and assemble". The decree also allowed for monitoring of postage and telephone communication and allowed for unwarranted house searches and property seizure⁸. This decree represented the first in a series of enabling acts

⁸ "Decree of the Reich President for the Protection of the People and State of 28. February 1933." In United States Chief Counsel for the Prosecution of Axis Criminality, *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, Volume III. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1946, Document 1390-PS, pp. 968-70. (Translation edited by GHI staff.)

that President Hindenburg would pass, allowing Hitler to quickly gain an incredible amount of power which he then utilized to devastating effect.

In addition to his growing political power, Hitler possessed additional support, needed to enact the stipulations of the Reichstag Fire Decree. Formed in the 1920s, the Sturmabteilung, or SA, acted as the enforcement arm of the party during its early years. Also known as the brownshirts, the SA was comprised of former soldiers, party members and social agitators. During the early years of the Nazi Party, while they were still in their revolutionary mindset, the SA were used extensively to harass and break up demonstrations and meetings of rival political factions, especially the communists. However, the SA had recently begun to fall out of favor with Hitler, who now preferred to use the Schutzstaffel (SS) and the newly formed Gestapo, the secret police, to carry out the party's deeds.

For Hitler and the Nazi Party, the consolidation of power came during the summer of 1934. In late June and early July, the Nazi Party began to purge its political opponents, regardless of party affiliation. Political opponents and others who were seen as a threat to Nazi political power were arrested, and in some cases, murdered. Hitler's long standing enemies, the social Democrats and communists made for easy targets, but he also turned his attention to the SA brownshirts. SA leader Ernst Röhm had worked closely with Hitler in the early years of the Nazi Party, using the brownshirts to rough up political opponents and intimidate others. Now however, his views differed from Hitler's. He believed that the Nazi Party had only achieved a fraction of its goals, and that continued revolution was needed in order to achieve the socialist aims of the party. Hitler and many of the high ranking Nazi officials disagreed, having seen political power as the true road to power following the failed Beer Hall Putsch.

Röhm instead remained steadfast in his belief that armed revolution was the only way forward. As a result, Röhm had inadvertently made himself an enemy of his own party.

The purge, which would come to be known as the Night of the Long Knives, began with arrests being made by both the Gestapo and the Schutzstaffel, as Hitler saw to reduce the power of the brownshirts. Among those arrested was Ernst Röhm. He envisioned the SA as the heart of the new German army and fought constantly with Hitler in an attempt to become the new Minister of Defence. The main blow to Röhm had come in February of 1934, when Hitler signed a document stating that the SA was to be subordinate to the army. This infuriated Röhm, and the relationship between the two only worsened over the following months. In addition, the army had always been a source of immense prestige, and many with Prussian backgrounds supported Hitler due to his plans to rebuild the German military. Conversely, the Prussian military class saw the SA as mere thugs, unprofessional rabble who incited violence and threatened the traditional military class.⁹ Röhm had also earned himself some serious opponents, as Goebbels, Hess and Goering, some of Hitler's closest supporters, developed anti-Röhm sentiments. During the night of the arrests, Röhm was captured and held in Stadelheim Prison in Munich. Here, Hitler decided that Röhm had to die. What followed served as a preview of the brutality and cruelty that the Nazi party would come to be known for. Röhm was offered a pistol and the opportunity to commit suicide. The guards told him that he had ten minutes, or else they would come back and execute him. When they returned, they found him standing bare chested, in a bizarre symbol of defiance. Without a word, the guards shot him dead.¹⁰ Ernst Röhm, leader of the SA and sworn Nazi, had been unceremoniously executed by his own party.

⁹ Wheeler-Bennett, John (2005). *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics 1918–1945* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁰ Evans, Richard. *The Third Reich in Power*. (New York, Penguin.) 2005

Following the purges of 1934, the Nazi party could now begin to enact some its long awaited policies. To begin, it had to put a positive spin on the Night of the Long Knives, a task well suited to Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels. While nearly one hundred people had been murdered during the purge, Goebbels and the Nazi managed to make it seem as if a treasonous plot had been uncovered and defeated. Hitler gave a rousing speech which declared that the greatest act of treachery had been averted and that law and order had been restored. Hitler also won increased support from the Prussian military class, who praised him for exposing and eliminating supposedly treacherous members of the army. Throughout Germany, people were sceptical of Goebbels propaganda, but many, such as Luise Solmitz, a teacher in Hamburg, felt that Hitler had shown great “decisiveness and effectiveness” and that people could now return to their daily lives.¹¹

Following the purges of 1934, Hitler and the Nazi Party could finally begin to make good on their promises of rebuilding Germany. The post war years had been tough for the country, as it faced economic depression, hyperinflation, starvation and teetered on the brink of all out revolution. The people had turned to Hitler following a massive loss of confidence in the Weimar government, and now, after failed revolutions, prison time and political purges, the Nazi Party seemed ready to begin its ambitious plan to restore Germany to her former glory. The first major step came on August 2nd, 1934, when President Paul von Hindenburg passed away. Just days before, eager to remove himself from the strains of public office, he had passed the "Law Concerning the Highest State Office of the Reich", which essentially merged the offices of President and Chancellor.¹² Hitler was now head of both the government and the state, and the merger of the two offices essentially made it impossible for him to be removed from government. As the leader of the nation, he was now commander in chief of the German armed forces, which

¹¹ Evans, Richard. *The Third Reich in Power*. (New York, Penguin.) 2005

¹² Overy, Richard (2005). *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia*. Penguin Books.

he began to change almost immediately. One of his first acts was to change the traditional army oath of loyalty. Where soldiers had traditionally sworn their loyalty to Germany and the constitution, Hitler altered it so that they would now swear allegiance “to the Leader of the German empire and people, Adolf Hitler, supreme commander of the armed forces” and that each soldier shall “shall render unconditional obedience”.¹³ Already, Hitler was creating a cult of personality, something that could only have dire consequences for the people of Germany.

Despite the violence that occurred during the Night of the Long Knives, the first few years of Hitler’s rule over Nazi Germany were relatively calm. With political power secured, the Nazi Party could now focus on the economic reforms that they had promised years earlier. Germany’s main economic goal at the time was to achieve economic independence and self sufficiency while reducing foreign imports. As such, Germany would need to revitalize her economy and put its citizens back to work in order to counter the devastating effects of the Great Depression. Personally, Hitler cared little for economics, seeing it as a plague that forced nations to focus blindly on materialism. Despite this, he realized that Germany’s economy needed serious work if the rampant unemployment issue was to be solved. As such, he recruited several economists and finance officials to help remedy the problem. The solution was to embark upon a massive work program, one that required large amounts of government spending. Traditionally the cure to economic hardship, government spending would help stimulate the economy while the public works program would help put an end to Germany’s unemployment issue. One of the most well known elements of the new works program was the construction of Germany’s famous Autobahn highway system. The thousands of miles of roadway provided construction jobs for German citizens while also providing a new, high speed road system for the nation. Finance ministers also nationalized certain industries, such as

¹³ Kershaw, Ian. *Hitler Hubris*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton. 1998

energy production, seeking to power Germany through the use of coal and synthetic oil, rather than purchasing imports from other nations. In addition, many of the national banks were privatized, along with the coal, steel and railway industries, as well as metal production and shipbuilding companies.

In early 1935, Hjalmar Schacht was appointed as Acting Economics Minister. Schacht already had a strong relationship with Hitler, as they both saw military rearmament as Germany's overriding priority, regardless of the current economic situation.¹⁴ To the world, Germany's impressive public works program seemed harmless. Hitler was working with the new government to get Germany back on track following the Great War and the Depression, there was little reason to think twice. But behind the scenes, Hitler, Schacht and the other high ranking Nazi officials were secretly preparing Germany for war. The massive government spending required to rebuild and rearm Germany's military, coupled with the massive public works program, would almost certainly put an end to Germany's economic and unemployment woes. The Versailles Treaty severely reduced the size of Germany's military, limiting it to 100,000 men. It also prohibited Germany to have any tanks, military airplanes and submarines. The navy was seriously reduced to a handful of early war ships and Germany was not allowed to have a stockpile of chemical weapons. In addition, Germany was not allowed to import new weapons or purchase new aircraft either. Germany possessed substantial heavy industry, especially in the Ruhr Valley region, yet it largely lacked the raw materials needed to begin rearmament. As a result Germany entered into trade agreements with several other nations, notably the Soviet Union, where Germany would exchange manufactured goods for raw materials such as coal, metals and, most importantly, oil. Germany quickly rekindled old

¹⁴ Evans, Richard. *The Third Reich in Power*. (New York, Penguin.) 2005

relationships with oil rich countries such as Hungary and Romania, traditional allies of Germany, to ensure that oil imports remained constant.

Germany, however, faced a major issue. Global prices for raw materials were rising, while the prices for manufactured goods, Germany's main bargaining chip, were falling. As a result, Hitler saw it as a necessity to transition from a free market economy into a an economic model focused on self-sufficiency.¹⁵ As a result, Germany limited its overall number of trade partners in an attempt to keep trade within Germany's regional sphere. With these new trade agreements in place, and new sources of oil and fuels secured, Germany could now begin to produce the equipment for its new army, the Wehrmacht. While some German citizens were busy building roadways and infrastructure, others were building tanks, fighter planes, bombers, submarines, and armored cars. Others produced new equipment and weapons for the infantry, while some produced bullets and shells. Germany's ultimate goal was to create an Autarky, to be completely free of all foreign dependence and achieve perfect self sufficiency. Unfortunately, Germany lacked the large reserves of raw materials, especially metals and grain, to achieve such an ambitious goal. For the time being, Germany planned to rebuild and rearm, and hopefully, win the resources it would need to flourish in a force of arms in the near future.

One of Hitler's most interesting supporters was Albert Speer. Speer had joined the Nazi Party in 1931 and quickly rose through the party's political ranks. Speer's success and legacy would not come from politics, but rather from his skills as an architect. He worked closely with Hitler to design and build some of the Reich's most famous structures such as the Nuremberg rally grounds, the new Reich Chancellery, the Cathedral of Light and various other building throughout Berlin. Speer and Hitler had imagined a redeveloped Berlin, complete with massive new buildings and a new transportation system. But Speer would later be known for his

¹⁵ Braun, Hans-Joachim (1990). *The German Economy in the Twentieth Century*. Routledge.

reorganization of armament production, allowing for much more efficient mass production. The rapid mass production of military supplies would, during the early war years, ensure that Germany was equipped with new military provisions, while many of Germany's early enemies were still using equipment which dated back to the Great War. Perhaps most importantly, Speer's building projects, both public works and the arms industry, provided jobs for German citizens at a time when unemployment was rampant. Speer's revolutionary mass production techniques ensured that Germany was fully geared up for war when hostilities officially began, much to the shock of the Western Allies.

In 1935, in a bold and blatant violation of the Versailles Treaty, Hitler unveiled the Luftwaffe, Germany's new air force. While this openly mocked the stipulations of the Versailles Treaty, Britain and France did little to protest. In addition, the Saarland region in Southwest Germany voted to return to German control, rather than remain under the League of Nations. Then, in March of 1935, German troops reoccupied and remilitarized the Rhineland region of Western Germany, a region that had largely been under French control due to the Versailles Treaty. Germany had brazenly flouted international law, but once again, Britain and France did little to counter the move. The balance of power in Western Europe had shifted firmly in Germany's favor. Nazi Germany truly arrived upon the world stage in the summer of 1936, when Berlin hosted the Olympic games. For Hitler, Goebbels and other high ranking party officials, the games provided a priceless opportunity for Germany to display its new identity. To the world, the Nazi government appeared to be firm, but ultimately fair. Hitler was seen as a shrewd and uncompromising leader, who had worked to take back what was rightfully Germany's. Up until the Olympics, there had been little reason to suspect that anything would change. The coming years however, would see Germany transform from rebuilders into aggressors and eventually, conquerors.

Despite the facade displayed at the 1936 Olympic games, there were troubling signs appearing within Germany which served as a precursor for what was to come. In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws were passed, the first step for the Nazi Party in achieving their racially driven views. The Nuremberg Laws essentially legitimized the National Socialist Program, also known as the twenty five point plan, that Hitler had proposed back in 1920. Formally announced at the 1935 Party rally in Nuremberg, the laws fell in line with the Party's racial and ethnic prejudices. While primarily targeted against Jews and those of Jewish ancestry, the laws also targeted people of African descent and Romani people. Jews were the primary target of the persecution, as they had their citizenship revoked, business licenses taken away and were often publicly harassed. Jewish stores were often vandalized and identified with graffiti or signs which designated them as Jewish-run. Heavy fines were levied against those who attempted to emigrate and deportations became common. Jewish citizens were frequently arrested and imprisoned and marriages were invalidated. The laws even went so far as to invalidate marriages that had been performed abroad. The laws also forbade Jews to marry the supposedly true German people and Hitler launched a national boycott of Jewish businesses, much to dismay of Hjalmar Schacht, Minister of Economics. So began the first steps of solving what Hitler and the Nazi Party believed to be the so called Jewish Problem.

The Party's ideals regarding race and ethnicity were heavily based on older writings regarding eugenics. The Nazi officials believed in an ongoing struggle between the German people and the Jews, whom they viewed as their mortal enemy. In addition, Hitler's most hated political enemy, the Communists, were believed to be of Jewish origin, and Hitler saw Bolshevism as a Jewish conspiracy which needed to be quelled. The idea of racial superiority, supposedly based in science, was deeply appealing to committed Nazis such as Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heydrich, both of whom played major roles in the organization of the

Holocaust. With racism and antisemitism now legally permitted, the Gestapo and SS were free to arrest and harass people at will. For now, the government enforcement was limited to arrests and deportation, but the coming years would see the situation escalate into full scale extermination. For now, however, Hitler and Germany had bold plans for national expansion.

As the 1930s progressed, Germany's main aims had become readily apparent. Rearming and rebuilding the military was the primary goal, followed by the racial purification of the German people. With the German economy and national industry focused on military production, Hitler turned his attention to a new set of political goals. Since joining the Party, Hitler had dreamed of one day reuniting the German people, reforming Germany as it had been during World War One. To accomplish this, he would need to appeal to the German citizens who lived outside of Germany. Hitler had stated in his book, *Mein Kampf*, that the German People would someday need to be reunited in order to create the next German Reich. The first opportunity for this came in 1938, as political upheaval in Austria provided easy grounds for annexation. Austria had only recently become its own nation following the breakup of Austria-Hungary after World War One. Austria was a German speaking nation, and Hitler had been born there. In addition, Austria had its own version of the Nazi Party, who strongly advocated for a return to Germany. Feeling intense pressure, Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg attempted to hold a referendum in an effort to preserve Austrian independence. Before the vote could take place, German military units, and Adolf Hitler himself, rolled over the Austrian border on March 12th, 1938. The German forces met no military resistance, instead they were greeted by huge crowds of cheering Austrian citizens. The following months would see the Nuremberg Laws applied to Austria, as Jewish business were vandalized and Jewish citizens were arrested. Politically, the annexation of Austria, known as the Anschluss, was an

overwhelming success for Germany. They took no military losses and were met by enthusiastic crowds. With Austria coming under German law, Hitler turned his attention elsewhere.

Following up on his success in Austria, Hitler looked to Czechoslovakia. The Western region of what is now the Czech Republic contained a significant German speaking population. Determined to incorporate them into the ever growing Reich, Hitler began making demands for the annexation of the territory. There were other motivations for annexing Czechoslovakia as well. The Eastern regions near the Polish border, notably Silesia, were rich in coal and minerals, materials the German economy needed. France and Britain, who had done little to prevent Austria's absorption, were determined to take action this time. As international tension mounted, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and diplomats from France and Italy met in Munich in September, 1938 to resolve the issue. Firmly grounded in the diplomatic policy of appeasement, Chamberlain yielded to Germany's demands, believing that it would result in the end of Germany's territorial ambitions. In addition, the Czech government was absent from the negotiations, and were given no say as their country was divided up. The Sudetenland, the German speaking border region, was given to Germany along with all of the border defenses and heavy industry located there. As Neville Chamberlain returned to Britain, proclaiming peace, Hitler prepared to take the rest of Czechoslovakia. In March 1939, one year after absorbing Austria, German troops marched over the border and annexed the rest of Czechoslovakia, openly flouting the Munich Agreement. Emboldened by his string of political and economic successes, Hitler now readied Germany for its greatest test yet, the invasion and conquest of Poland. Britain and France, Now determined to stop German expansion, guaranteed to secure Poland's independence should Germany attack. The stage had been set for the largest war in human history.

Prior to the German invasion, Hitler had been working to try and recover the last of what he perceived to be Germany's rightful territory. When Germany was broken up following the end of The Great War, Poland had been given large amounts of Germany's Eastern territory, notably a region called the Danzig Corridor. This region connected the main portion of Germany to the German controlled region of East Prussia. Now however, with Poland controlling the Corridor, the land route to East Prussia had been cut. Hitler would not see East Prussia abandoned, so he began to demand the return of the Corridor and the major port city of Danzig. Hitler had reason to believe in negotiation. In both Austria and Czechoslovakia, he had acquired large amounts of land without having to use military force. Germany had deployed troops in both occasions, yet neither instance had resulted in war, and the international response from Britain and France had been feeble. This time was different, as Poland remained defiant. Moreover, both Britain and France promised to protect Polish independence by threatening to declare war should Germany turn hostile. As the summer of 1939 progressed, the political situation became even more complicated as Germany shocked the world once again. In August, Germany and the Soviet Union signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, more commonly known as the Nazi-Soviet Pact. The pact enforced neutrality between the two powers. Along with non-aggression, the pact contained a secret protocol which marked each nation's respective zones of influence throughout Europe. The Soviet Union was to be allowed to annex regions of Eastern Europe, notably the Baltic States and Northern Romania, while Germany would be allowed to annex Western Poland. Nazi Germany, whose government was centered on a hatred of Slavs and Communists, had just signed a major pact with the largest Communist country in the world.

On September first, 1939, the armies of the Third Reich stormed across the border regions and into Poland. Hitler personally watched as the divisions of men, horses, tanks and

other assorted vehicles crossed the German-Polish frontier, and Joseph Goebbels' film crews captured much of the footage for use in valuable propaganda movies. This was the moment that Germany had been waiting for, as negotiations had gradually broken down over the preceding months. Now, Germany had the opportunity to flaunt its newly reformed armed forces. While Hitler had openly disregarded the Versailles Treaty in the past, now he was taking full unilateral action. The German Army rolled into Poland in motorized divisions and on horses, alongside brand new Panzer divisions consisting of roughly 300 tanks each. Overhead, the Luftwaffe dominated the skies with 897 bombers and nearly 500 fighters.¹⁶ This was an undeniable display of military might, as film crews recorded the now famous images of German soldiers dismantling the border checkpoints. World War II in Europe had, at long last, begun.

For Germany, the invasion of Poland represented not only a great military opportunity, it was also a representation of German economic and political power. The Wehrmacht had been equipped with new weapons and equipment and the mighty new panzer divisions, roughly 1,500 tanks in total, demonstrated Germany's ability to mass produce heavy weapons. The same was true for the Luftwaffe, as they now possessed large numbers of both fighters, dive bombers and heavy bombers. Most importantly, all of Germany's military equipment was brand new; modern weapons for a modern war. The same could not be said for Poland's armed forces. While Poland maintained a sizable military, it was not nearly large enough to handle the combined military forces of both Germany and the Soviet Union. Most of Poland's military equipment was outdated and thus, unable to cope with the tanks and motorized vehicles of the German forces. In addition, Poland still maintained large brigades of cavalry, which would have limited success. Finally, Poland's air force was much smaller than the Luftwaffe, mostly consisting of handfuls of older, largely obsolete planes. Poland's defensive plan was to defend the border regions,

¹⁶ Evans, Richard. *The Third Reich At War*. (Penguin, New York). 2008.

however this left the Polish forces thinly spread along vast areas of frontier, making for easy German victories. An American correspondent, William L. Shirer, accompanying the German forces described a battle during the invasion in vivid detail. "The Germans were using everything in the way of weapons, big guns, small guns, tanks and airplanes. The Poles had nothing but rifles, machine guns and two anti-aircraft pieces...Finally, a squadron of Nazi bombers arrived. It was a hopeless situation for the Poles".¹⁷ Within a week of the initial German invasion, the bulk of the Polish forces were retreating toward Warsaw. On September 17th, the situation worsened, as the Soviet Red Army, having received assurances of non-aggression from Japan, invaded from the East, overwhelming what remained of the Polish military.

The battle for Poland lasted just over one month, as Germany and the Soviet Union annihilated the Polish defenses and bombed Warsaw into ruin. Following Poland's capitulation, the two powers set about dividing the country. The Soviet Union was given the Eastern half, along with the Baltic States and the Southwest regions of Poland and Northern Romania. Germany annexed the Western half, and perhaps most importantly, the Danzig Corridor and the city of Danzig. Hitler had used military force for the first time, resorting to a force of arms after negotiation had failed. Germany had openly challenged the threats of the Western powers, notably Britain and France, and won. While both Britain and France subsequently declared war on Germany, Poland's geographical location made immediate military intervention difficult. For now, Germany and Hitler were elated. They had engaged in their first military test and come away with a crushing victory, utilizing the new military doctrine of Blitzkrieg, lightning war, to secure a complete victory. In addition, they had a non aggression pact with the Soviet Union, ensuring that Germany would have access to oil and raw materials for the foreseeable future.

¹⁷ Evans, Richard. *The Third Reich At War*. (Penguin, New York). 2008

Hitler had achieved his pre-war aims. He had re-united Germany with Austria, re-claimed the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia and re-connected Germany to East Prussia, while also securing a solution, if only temporary, to Germany's oil and raw material shortages. The German military, having gained valuable battlefield experience, now prepared to re-arm and turn West, to deal with both Britain and France.

While preparations for a massive German offensive in the West began, there was still much activity in Poland. After the defeat of the Polish military and the capitulation of the Polish government, German occupation forces began the first stages of their grand political ambitions. Since his rise to power, Hitler's political platform had been built on a strong hatred of Jews and other Eastern Europeans. Now that Poland had fallen, Germany could begin to implement the first stages of what is now known as the Final Solution, the eradication of European Judaism and other so-called undesirables. In Poland, notably in Warsaw, SS units known as Einsatzgruppen began moving into the cities, rounding up Jews and others that were believed to be inferior. In some cases, the SS simply executed people in the streets, others were arrested or rounded up and forced into ghettos throughout the city where they were to be slowly starved to death. Poland provided a grim preview of the atrocities that would be carried out all over Europe, notably in the East, as Germany's political plan of ruthless Germanization came into practice.

Back in Germany, encouraged by his success in Poland, Hitler prepared for Germany's next campaign of conquest. While Britain and France had declared war on Germany following the invasion and conquest of Poland, Hitler had his eyes fixed on another, far more important target. To the North lay the vast, cold expanses of Scandinavia. Strategically, Scandinavia was vital to the German war effort. Although Sweden was technically a neutral power, it possessed large reserves of iron ore, necessary for the production of nearly all war time equipment.

Further, the large shipments of iron were exported to mainland Europe through ports in Norway, notably at Narvik. The Allies were quick to realize the importance of the Norwegian ports and prepared to launch their own campaign in an attempt to cut off the flow of iron ore to Germany. The ensuing battles saw Germany deploy forces to both Norway and Denmark, utilizing air, sea and land invasion tactics to overwhelm the defenders. In Denmark, the German army rapidly overwhelmed the small Danish contingent, seizing the country in just a few hours on April 9th, 1940. The following month would see the Germans battle the armies of France, Britain and Norway, ultimately securing victory after prolonged resistance.

The victories in Denmark and Norway, although not as glamorous or crushing as the conquest of Poland, had ultimately succeeded, delivering valuable strategic benefits for Germany. With the defeat and occupation of Denmark, Germany's Northern border was secured, while also providing bases for naval operation in the Baltic Sea. The capture of Norway ensured that the port city of Narvik remained operational, meaning Germany would continue to receive deliveries of iron ore for the foreseeable future. In addition, the capture of Bergen and Trondheim on the Norwegian coast provided Germany with valuable ports and naval bases for further naval operations in both the Baltic and the North Sea. For the Kriegsmarine, the German navy, this was of tremendous importance, as it provided them with additional bases for their submarines, from which they could prey on allied shipping throughout the Atlantic. Control of the Baltic and North Sea coastline would prove to be of great significance in the coming months of the war, as Germany began to build up its submarine program. Finally, the victories in Scandinavia once again demonstrated to Hitler that the German army was able to defeat the forces of the Allies, as they had fended off the armies of four different nations in a single campaign. Despite the logistical difficulties and the hardships of fighting in the rugged Norwegian terrain, Germany had triumphed once again, utilizing a bold

strategy that involved the combined elements of air, sea and land invasion. This kind of forward thinking and bold military strategy would have grave consequences for the Allies in the following months.¹⁸

For the Western Allies, the hammer would fall even earlier than expected. April 1940 saw the German military conclude its campaign in Norway, freeing it up for action in a new theater. On May 10th, 1940, Germany launched its long awaited Western offensive against France and the Low Countries. Code named Case Yellow, the invasion of France was, to this point, Germany's largest undertaking of the war. The German army was to engage and eliminate the military forces of not just France, but also the British Expeditionary Force and the armies of the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. Already victorious in Poland and Scandinavia, Germany would now be combatting forces largely equal to their own in terms of equipment and manpower. Despite the string of German victories so far, victory against the Western Allies was by no means assured. France maintained a large standing army, and much of the Franco-German border was defended with the Maginot Line, a sprawling string of defenses and forts. In addition, Britain had deployed an Expeditionary Force to France, consisting of large formations of infantry, vehicles and heavy guns. Despite their small size, both the Netherlands and Belgium also possessed formidable militaries, as well as heavily fortified areas, notably the Belgian fortress of Eben Emael. To counter these defenses, Hitler worked closely with his generals to devise a bold invasion plan.

For the invasion of France, many of the German generals proposed an invasion through Belgium, striking quickly toward Paris. This plan was very similar in nature to the German invasion in 1914 and, as a result, it was quickly dismissed by Hitler. Having witnessed the horrors of trench warfare, Hitler was concerned that an invasion through Belgium would lead to

¹⁸ Evans, Richard. *The Third Reich At War*. (Penguin, New York). 2008

the static warfare that had dominated the Great War. Instead, Hitler proposed a new plan in which the German armies would be split into separate groups. The Northernmost group, Army Group B, would engage the armies of the Netherlands and Belgium, sweeping West and then South toward the Somme River in France. Army Group C, in the South, was to engage the defenses of the Maginot Line, holding them in place and preventing a French breakout. The key to Case Yellow would be Army Group A in the center. Here, Army Group A was to advance through the Ardennes forest, driving a wedge between the allied forces. The plan was incredibly bold, requiring the German armies in the center to advance rapidly over rough terrain. However, this boldness appealed greatly to Hitler, as he felt that Case Yellow could deliver a decisive victory over the Western Allies.

On May 10th, 1940, the German armies deployed from their staging areas and swept into France and the Low Countries. Utilizing paratroopers, Germany swiftly deployed large numbers of troops into both the Netherlands and Belgium. Supported from the air by the Luftwaffe, the Germans were able to destroy large numbers of allied planes before they could get off the ground. Five days after the start of the invasion, the small Dutch army surrendered following a massive bombing raid on Rotterdam¹⁹. German paratroopers would prove to be one of the Wehrmacht's greatest assets, as they seized bridges and roadways into Belgium. The Belgian forces were met with a similar fate. Fort Eben Emael, the linchpin to the allied defensive line in the Low Countries, was stormed by German paratroopers, capitulating on the first day of the invasion. Meanwhile, the forces of Army Group A advanced in motorized divisions through the Ardennes, moving rapidly through the forest and into France and Southern Belgium. France and the Western allies had deemed the Ardennes impassible for vehicles, choosing to leave it largely undefended. This mistake was now costing them dearly, as panzer

¹⁹ Evans, Richard. *The Third Reich At War*. (Penguin, New York). 2008

and other motorized divisions raced across the French countryside, brushing away what scattered resistance they encountered. France, paralyzed by the sudden onset of the German attack, could do little to rally its forces into effective defensive formations. An over reliance on fixed defenses was proving to be ineffective, as German tanks either destroyed them quickly or simply bypassed them, leaving them for the infantry to mop up. More seriously, the rapid collapse of the Dutch and Belgian armies, along with the loss of fort Eben Emael meant that the allied armies in the North were already retreating back to France. When attempting to form counterattacks, the allies continued to think in terms of infantry pace, rather than motorized pace, resulting in counter attacks that were either too slow or totally ineffective. On May 28th, the situation worsened, as Belgium officially surrendered.

By May 30th, the British Expeditionary Force was retreating back across the English Channel from the port city of Dunkirk, leaving France to its fate. In their haste to retreat, the British army abandoned nearly all of its vehicles and heavy equipment of the beaches at Dunkirk. German general Fedor von Bock noted that “the English line of retreat presents an indescribable appearance. Quantities of vehicles, artillery pieces, armored cars and military equipment beyond estimation are piled up and driven into each other in the smallest possible space. The English have tried to burn everything, but in their haste have only succeeded here and there.”²⁰ For the Allies, the battle of France had been a disaster. The armies of the Netherlands, Belgium and France had been destroyed, with many of their major cities being bombed into ruin. The British Expeditionary Force had been routed, retreating back to England and abandoning much of its equipment. In addition, the retreat back to England greatly strained Anglo-French relations, as the French felt that their primary ally had abandoned them. For Germany, the battle had not only been a great military victory, it had also delivered a crushing

²⁰ Evans, Richard. *The Third Reich At War*. (Penguin, New York). 2008

blow to Germany's strongest enemies. Britain and France had been amongst the earliest to denounce Hitler's Germany, and now they had been badly beaten. The battle had also been a demonstration of German might and industrial capacity, as Germany was able to deploy forces on a massive scale. The Wehrmacht was able to amass nearly 2,500 tanks, 7,400 artillery pieces, and 93 infantry divisions. In addition, the Luftwaffe added 3,500 planes. While these numbers were not as large as the allied armies, the German forces were used with a greater degree of skill, in an attempt to keep casualties to a minimum and ensure that the factories of the Reich did not waste their stocks of metals and resources. The battle of France had clearly demonstrated to the allies and to the world that Germany was prepared for war, and that it possessed the industrial capacity to provide its forces with new, modern equipment. Finally, the battle had been a great political victory for Hitler, the German military and the German people. Hitler had captured Paris, the prize which had eluded the Kaiser in 1914. As Hitler rode into Paris in his personal car, Swastika flags adorned the streets and German troops paraded triumphantly. Hitler had one last humiliation in store for the French, as he forced them to sign their surrender documents inside the very same train car in which the Germans had surrendered in 1918.²¹ Germany's defeat in the Great War had been avenged. So complete was the German victory in France and the Low Countries that four years would pass before the allies could again challenge the Germans in Western Europe.

With the majority of mainland Europe now either directly or indirectly under Axis control, Hitler was faced with the issue of what to do next. His armies were exhausted from their campaigns in Scandinavia and Western Europe and needed time to consolidate and rearm. His grandest ambition was to invade and conquer the Soviet Union, his most despised enemy, however there was a major obstacle still in his way. Britain, despite being driven from France,

²¹ Evans, Richard. *The Third Reich At War*. (Penguin, New York). 2008

remained defiant. Britain's armies had been seriously weakened and lacked the majority of their heavy equipment, but they still posed a threat to Germany. More troubling was Britain's new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. Churchill was adamant that Britain would never negotiate or surrender, forcing Hitler to adopt a new strategy with which to defeat Britain. Britain, being an island, was in a precarious position, as it depended nearly entirely on imports from its colonies and other nations. Hitler intended to take full advantage of this, launching a new style of warfare, not on the great European battlefields, but in the Atlantic Ocean. The German victories in Norway and France had won for Germany valuable ports and shipyards on the coasts of both the Baltic Sea and the Atlantic. From these, Germany would launch its deadly U-boats, prosecuting a long naval battle in an attempt to starve Britain into submission.

In the summer of 1940, following the capitulation of France, Germany turned its attention away from the fight on mainland Europe, toward the Atlantic Ocean. In July of 1940, Hitler and his generals began to devise an invasion of the British Isles, codenamed Operation Sealion. In Operation Sealion, approximately 2,000 boats and barges would be assembled in French ports along the English Channel. From there, they would embark on a channel crossing, establishing beachheads in Southern England, allowing for a broad front to advance Northward, threatening London with encirclement. The sheer boldness of the plan appealed greatly to Hitler, who approved its implementation. However, there were two major issues that needed to be addressed. First, the quantity of shipping would take a significant amount of time to assemble, and second, the boats that Germany intended to use for the crossing were largely unsuitable. In an effort to reduce losses at sea, the German high command agreed that Britain's air defences needed to be destroyed.²² The German command believed that the destruction of the

²² Evans, Richard. *The Third Reich At War*. (Penguin, New York). 2008

British Royal Air Force, coupled with the ongoing attacks against the British Merchant Fleet and Royal Navy would quickly lead to Britain's surrender.

The ensuing battles in the seas and in the skies around Britain were unique in that they were fought not by armies of millions, but by highly trained and specialized groups of men utilizing some of the most advanced technology of the war. New and revolutionary machinery such as fighter planes, long range bombers, radar, sonar, advanced U-boats and heavy battleships all saw action during the latter half of 1940. These battles, more so than any battle in the war up to this point, were based heavily around economic warfare and starving the enemy into submission, while simultaneously producing more units than the enemy could destroy. For the Kriegsmarine, the German navy, this meant a very calculated battle plan, requiring the surface fleet and U-Boats to sink a specific amount of British shipping, approximately 750,000 tons of shipping each month, in order to starve Britain into submission. This meant laying dense sea minefields around the British Isles, as well as deploying a fleet of U-Boats to act as a naval blockade, while the battleships and cruisers of the surface fleet attacked the vulnerable international shipping lanes. The pilots of the Luftwaffe would be tasked with supporting the Kriegsmarine by bombing British ports, cities, dockyards and shipbuilding facilities, along with airfields, supply depots and even civilian targets. It was hoped that cutting the flow of supplies to Britain, coupled with the draining effects of constant bombing would force Britain to sue for peace.

Following the outbreak of war in 1939, the Kriegsmarine was quick to begin its attacks against the Royal Navy. By establishing a screen of U-Boats in the Western Approaches, the Germans were in a prime position to attack the ships of the Royal Navy. However, on September 1st, 1939, German U-Boat U-30 sank the civilian passenger ship Athenia, killing 128. Joseph Goebbels and the ministry of propaganda were hard pressed to put a positive spin

on the sinking, choosing to deny the attack instead. However, the following weeks would see some of the most successful U-Boat attacks of the war, as U-29 sank the aircraft carrier HMS Courageous off the Southern coast of Ireland. The Kriegsmarine followed this up with an attack on the British home fleet, anchored at Scapa Flow in Scotland. U-47 succeeded in sinking the British battleship HMS Royal Oak, an event that did much to bolster German morale while also sapping that of the Royal Navy. These successes were hoped, by Germany, to be the first of many, as the Kriegsmarine was undergoing a massive building program. In 1935, long before the outbreak of war, the German navy had embarked upon a building program that would eventually create a fleet comprising of 13 battleships, 33 cruisers, 4 aircraft carriers and 250 submarines. More importantly, unlike the fleets of Great Britain, all of Germany's ships would be brand new and highly modern.²³ With the outbreak of war in 1939, the building program was not yet completed, and was not expected to be finished until 1945 at the earliest. As such, the Kriegsmarine decided to utilize what resources it had in the most efficient manner possible, forming a naval blockade around the British Isles in an effort to cut off British imports and prevent American aid from reaching its destination.

In addition to the planned blockade of the British Isles, Germany was also planning an invasion of the British mainland, confident that the Wehrmacht could defeat what remained of the British army if given the opportunity. Germany was immediately faced with the issue of crossing the English Channel as well as providing safe passage for the invasion force. This would mean relocating the bulk of the Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe to Western Europe so that they could be used in a support role. However, losses in battle had begun to drain the power of both the Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe. The Kriegsmarine had been badly mauled during the

²³ Battlefield: The Battle of The Atlantic. Andy Aitken, Dave Flitton, James Wignall. PolyGram Video International. 1994. Film.

operations in Norway, losing ten destroyers and two modern battleships to the Royal Navy.²⁴ Additionally, the Luftwaffe had sustained serious casualties during the battle for Western Europe, reducing its overall effectiveness, although by no means eliminating it as a major force. During the summer of 1940, Germany was forced to alter its invasion strategy, opting to postpone the invasion of the British Isles until the Royal Air Force could be eliminated, while also waiting until the Kriegsmarine could build up an escort force sufficient for the channel crossing. In the meantime, Germany would continue to develop and expand its U-Boat building program, inflicting as much economic damage as possible upon the British until the invasion was ready.

For the Reich's economy, the U-Boat program seemed to be the right course of action. A U-Boat cost, at most, 4 million Marks, as opposed to the rampant costs of the new Bismarck class of battleships which ran at over 200 million Marks each. However, there were quite a few major issues regarding the U-Boat building program. U-Boat production required large amounts of rubber and copper, and Germany was in short supply of both, having allocated much of its rubber usage for vehicle production for the Wehrmacht. Additionally, the infrastructure needed for such a massive building program was largely unavailable, as Germany would need massive ports, shipyards and submarine pens for construction to take place. Labor shortage was also a big concern, only 20 new U-Boats had been produced between 1939 and 1940, and Germany was planning on constructing over 300 new ships in the following years. Finally, the German high command had serious trouble looking toward the long term goals of the German naval campaign against Britain, instead preferring to focus on the immediate needs of the Wehrmacht.

²⁴ Tooze, Adam. *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of The Nazi Economy*. (New York, Penguin) 2006.

As a result, the German U-Boat force operating in the Atlantic actually decreased throughout 1940 and even into 1941 as a result of poor production rates and losses to the Royal Navy.²⁵

Despite losses at sea and a slow production rate, the U-Boats deployed in the Atlantic had found success that was disproportionate to their numbers. In the Spring of 1940, only 25 U-Boats were present in the Atlantic, yet they had managed to sink 680,000 tons of British merchant shipping. While the losses for Britain were, at this point, minor, they showed that U-Boats were extremely efficient hunters, even in small numbers. As a result of this success, Hitler returned production priority to the Kriegsmarine and especially, the U-Boat department. Tens of thousands of tons of steel were taken from the army and reallocated to U-Boat production, hoping that a massive increase in production would lead to a rapid victory over Britain at sea. Although this proved to be untrue, the U-Boat arm had been growing in other ways. U-Boats were captained by men with great levels of experience, and even the regular crewmen had to undergo long and rigorous training programs to become a part of the U-Boat department. As such, the men that served on the U-Boats understandably felt that they were elite. This was reinforced by the fact that they were the only members of the German military allowed to grow beards. This served as both a practical measure for saving fresh water on the boats, but it also identified the U-Boat sailors and added to their elevated status amongst the German servicemen. The idea of being a part of one of the most dangerous and highly trained branches of the German military was very appealing to dedicated Nazis. As a result, many young and committed Nazis joined the U-Boat department and it became one of the most publicized departments of the entire German military. Upon their return to Germany following their first deployments against the British in the spring of 1940, many of the U-Boat crews were

²⁵ Tooze, Adam. *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of The Nazi Economy*. (New York, Penguin) 2006.

taken to Berlin to meet personally with Adolf Hitler, who was delighted with their run of success²⁶. For Hitler, the success of the submariners justified not only his faith in the Kriegsmarine, but in his plan that Britain could be brought to terms.

By March, 1941, Germany had managed to sink over 2 million tons of British shipping, however, submarine production was still relatively low, and Germany could still only deploy small numbers of U-Boats to the Atlantic. Worse yet, the Allies had decrypted the Enigma code machine, allowing them to intercept German communications and avoid or intercept U-Boat patrols. As a result, German success plummeted, sinking fewer than 100,000 per month in the summer of 1941. This gave rise to the greatest problem of all; time. With only limited success against the merchant fleets, there was now no possibility of an immediate invasion of Britain. At the beginning of the naval campaign, German Admiral Karl Dönitz believed that with the full fleet of modern submarines, Germany could “bring Britain to its knees”, or at least achieve complete isolation by the fall of 1941. Now however, Britain was receiving large amounts of aid from the United States, who were technically a neutral power. This presented a massive problem for the Kriegsmarine and Hitler. Germany had to find a way to quickly force Britain to capitulate without rousing the United States and bringing the full weight of American arms and industry into the war.²⁷ The solution, Hitler felt, was not in the sea, but in the air.

Hitler believed that the Luftwaffe was now the key to bringing about a rapid victory over Britain without drawing in the United States. In addition to continuing the naval blockade around the British Isles, Germany would begin to prosecute an air war over the skies of Britain, destroying the Royal Air Force while systematically bombing cities and ports. It was believed that this would demoralize the British civilian population, encouraging them to ask their leaders

²⁶ Battlefield: The Battle of The Atlantic. Andy Aitken, Dave Flitton, James Wignall. PolyGram Video International. 1994. Film.

²⁷ Tooze, Adam. *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of The Nazi Economy*. (New York, Penguin) 2006.

to sue for peace. While Winston Churchill had boasted that Britain would never surrender and never negotiate, Hitler was still hoping that Germany could mount an invasion of Britain following the destruction of the Royal Air Force. The bombing and air attacks would, at the very least, weaken British morale. Following the fall of France in June, 1940, the majority of the remainder of the year was spent battling for the skies over Britain and the English Channel in what would come to be known as the battle of Britain.

From June to October, 1940, the battle of Britain raged between the Royal Air Force and the Luftwaffe. The Germans were understandably confident. They had defeated the British army and inflicted decent losses upon the Royal Air Force during the battle for France and the Kriegsmarine was enjoying success, albeit on a limited scale, in the Atlantic. Hitler and the high command justifiably believed that one last massive push against Britain would take them out of the war. For the British military and people, there was grim determination. They remained steadfast, bolstered by the words of Winston Churchill. Although the British forces had been defeated in France, their amazing retreat from the port of Dunkirk had inspired the military, reenergizing their fighting spirit. They were fully aware of the odds stacked against them, however this only strengthened the resolve of the British armed forces. By the time the battle began in earnest in the summer of 1940, Britain was already more than prepared to meet the German threat.

The Southern and Eastern coasts of Britain were lined with radar stations, allowing British fighter command to accurately locate enemy formations long before they reached their targets. In addition, the large concentrations of German bombers meant that large wings of fighters were needed for escort protection. These large, lumbering formations were easily detected by the British radar stations and were quickly intercepted by the faster, far more maneuverable British fighters. Britain, having engaged in a rapid rebuilding program, was able

to deploy two of the fastest fighters of the entire war; the Hurricane and the Spitfire. In Poland, the Luftwaffe had managed to destroy large portions of the Polish air force while their planes were still on the ground. Now, with the use of radar, Britain was able to scramble their fighters before the Germans came close to the airfields, ensuring that all their fighters were airborne.²⁸ For Germany, the battle of Britain would prove to be their first major reversal. The Luftwaffe ultimately failed to destroy the Royal Air Force, and the relentless bombing of British ports and cities failed to break the will of the British people. In addition, the failure of the Kriegsmarine to completely halt the flow of imports to the British Isles meant that Britain was able to continue her resistance. The arrival of foreign aid, coupled with signing of the American Lend Lease Act allowed Britain to not only continue the fight, but also rapidly expand her navy in exchange for leases on British owned Caribbean naval bases. For Germany, the United States' status as a neutral power was incredibly frustrating, as Germany was well aware of the vast shipments of American aid, yet could do nothing to stop them. Additionally, by September 1940, it had become apparently clear that the planes of the Luftwaffe were simply inadequate for the task of defeating Britain. The Junkers 88, the mainstay of the German bomber force was slow, lacked a heavy payload and was not maneuverable enough to ward off the British air defences. Worse, the main bomber force consisted largely of older, less effective planes that were slowly being replaced with Junkers 88s, despite their shortcomings. This, coupled with losses of planes and pilots, meant that Hitler had to postpone the invasion of the British Isles indefinitely²⁹. Ultimately, the mounting losses in the sea and in the air proved to be crippling for Germany. While the airplanes, submarines and surface ships could eventually be replaced, the highly trained pilots and sailors could not be.

²⁸ Evans, Richard. *The Third Reich At War*. (Penguin, New York). 2008

²⁹ Evans, Richard. *The Third Reich At War*. (Penguin, New York). 2008

By the beginning of 1941, the war had largely stagnated. Since the lightning conquests of Poland, Scandinavia, the Low Countries and France, Germany had largely become bogged down in a grinding battle of attrition with Britain. Despite this, Hitler was already contemplating his largest and most daring campaign yet; the invasion and conquest of the Soviet Union. Perhaps the most grand of all of Germany's pre war ambitions, the conquest of the Soviet Union presented Hitler with the unique opportunity to vanquish his racial and ideological enemies in one fell swoop. The Soviet Union was also Germany's greatest economic objective, as its vast stores of natural resources would allow Germany to prosper for generations to come. The Ukraine, rich in grain, would become the breadbasket for the Reich, while the oil reserves in the Caucasus and the vast mines and industry throughout Russia would bolster Germany's economy and allow her to wage war indefinitely. However, there were several major issues facing Germany during the lead up to the invasion. First, while Germany had been fighting in France and Western Europe, Stalin had been expanding the Soviet Union's borders. He had added the Baltic States and large portions of Finland, greatly threatening German trade routes in the Baltic Sea. He had also taken Eastern Poland, as a part of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939. In the South, the Soviets had gained Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina in the Northern parts of Romania, greatly threatening Germany's largest sources of oil. In addition to these territorial expansions, the Red Army was also in the process of rebuilding and expanding, following its dismal performance against the Finnish army in the Winter War of 1939/40. As a result, Hitler declared that the invasion must be accomplished both quickly and efficiently, in order to avoid both the harsh Russian winter and the possibility of losing the arms race to the Soviets.

In early 1941, Hitler and the German high command had decided to invade and conquer the Soviet Union. The offensive, codenamed Operation Barbarossa, would take the form of a three pronged attack, as the German Armies would thrust Eastward, through the Baltic States

towards Leningrad, through the center toward Moscow, and in the South, through the Ukraine toward the Caucasus. The plan to conquer the Soviet Union and repopulate its Western settlements with ethnic Germans had been laid out in the 1920s in Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*. Now, with the German armies at the peak of their strength, he could finally attempt to make his visions a reality. By now, Hitler had added the role of Commander in Chief to his array of titles and responsibilities. This was a position of immense power, unfettered by considerations of moral accountability. Yet, in the East, his plans and perceptions were colored by cruel prejudices and pathological hatreds. In them, lay the seeds of disaster.³⁰ The plans of ruthless Germanization in the East were deeply appealing to many of the fervent Nazis, especially those in the SS. For them, as well as Hitler, Operation Barbarossa was the opportunity for Germany to achieve the last of its pre war military and political ambitions, winning for Germany a vast, resource rich, Eastern empire which would one day be populated by ethnic Germans. However, events regarding Germany's ally, Italy, would soon force the postponement of Operation Barbarossa, something that would have dire consequences for the Reich.

In October, 1940, Italy had invaded Greece as a part of Mussolini's plan to rebuild the Roman Empire. To the surprise of the world, the Greeks succeeded in pushing the Italians back to Albania. Hitler, hoping to support his ally, had deployed troops to the region, yet a coup in Yugoslavia in March, 1941 installed a pro-British government, greatly threatening Axis power in the Balkans. As such, Germany was forced to postpone the beginning of Operation Barbarossa in order to conquer Yugoslavia. By the end of April, German and Italy had occupied all of Yugoslavia, Greece and the island of Crete, completely expelling the British Expeditionary Force from the region. While the conquest of the Balkans had been a quick campaign, it had delayed the start of Barbarossa until June 22nd. It also meant that all of the German forces sent to the

³⁰ Battlefield: The Battle of Stalingrad. Andy Aitken, Dave Flitton, James Wignall. PolyGram Video International. 1994. Film.

Balkans had to be redeployed to their original staging areas in Poland, Romania and East Prussia, costing valuable time and consuming large quantities of fuel. Nonetheless, Once the build up for the operation was complete, Germany began the largest offensive in history, spanning nearly 2,000 miles, stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Carpathian Mountains in Romania. The offensive consisted of over 3.5 million Axis troops, supported by 3,600 tanks, 600,000 motorized vehicles, 700,000 artillery pieces and thousands of mixed aircraft. The aim of the initial invasion was to encircle and destroy large swaths of the Red Army and its equipment in Western Russia and the Ukraine, thus clearing the way to Moscow.³¹

The German campaign against the Soviet Union was to be the turning point of World War II in Europe. In the Soviet Union, the Wehrmacht and SS showed their true colors, as the widespread slaughter and starvation of Soviet soldiers and citizens became commonplace. Soviet prisoners were handed over to the SS Einsatzgruppen, the so called special actions groups, for immediate execution. Those who survived were forced to endure levels of barbarism previously unknown, as they were marched off to concentrations camps where they were slowly starved to death as part of the Hunger Plan. One journalist remarked that the vast columns of Soviet prisoners “all looked like skeletons, just like shadows of human beings, barely moving. I have never in my life seen anything like this... They looked like starved animals, not like people... This unbelievable treatment of human beings is only possible under German ethics”.³² The Eastern Front would be the source of some of the largest battles and many of the worst atrocities of the war, as the shooting of prisoners and wounded became common practice on both sides. Mass executions and starvation programs, along with impossibly long marches to captivity resulted in death on an unprecedented scale. The Eastern Front is where the German army, particularly the units of the Waffen SS, would earn its horrendous reputation, as

³¹ Evans, Richard. *The Third Reich At War*. (Penguin, New York). 2008

³² Evans, Richard. *The Third Reich At War*. (Penguin, New York). 2008

they attempted to enact Hitler's vision of Germanization. In the East, the Germans would stoop to levels of barbarism that the soldiers of only a generation earlier would have found unthinkable. The war with the Soviet Union would ultimately prove to be disastrous for Germany, as the vast expanses of land, the seemingly inexhaustible supply of Soviet manpower, and the immense industrial capacity of the Soviet Union, coupled with several major defeats and mishandlings, proved to be too much for the German forces to handle. The war in the East would greatly over extend the German military, as well as those of her allies, notably Romania, Hungary and Italy. Germany's allies would suffer immense losses fighting in the Soviet Union, causing many of them to pull their support for the war. In the closing years of the war, Germany would find itself fighting increasingly alone, as her allies fell one by one. Perhaps worst of all, Japan's surprise attack against the United States in December of 1941 caused Hitler to almost spontaneously declare war on the United States. Nothing could now change the fate to which Germany was condemned. In the winter of 1941/42, Germany faced a war on two fronts against the alliance of Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union, an alliance that Germany's slender resources could never hope to defeat. In just a few short years, Hitler's wars of conquest and plans for European domination had devolved into a bitter battle for survival.

World War II was the largest and most destructive conflict in human history. The actions of a few led to the deaths of millions. In the years following the outbreak of the war, Europe would be fundamentally transformed, as it was divided based on ethnicity, government, religion and political policy. While World War II has become one of the most studied events in history, and there are elements that are often overlooked in favor of the major events. While the now famous people, battles and places are certainly important, it is equally important to study the lesser known aspects. It has become common knowledge that Nazi Germany was one of the most horrific states to exist, but it did not begin that way. Studying the course of Nazi

Germany's history helps to explain some of their decisions, and the ensuing consequences, which allows us to continue to expand our insight into World War II.

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