The Men Behind the Oath: A Profile of the German Officer Corps in the Interwar Period, 1919-1939

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THE MEN BEHIND THE OATH:

A PROFILE OF THE GERMAN OFFICER CORPS IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD,

1919-1939

by

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B.A. May 1994, James Madison University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

HISTORY

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ABSTRACT


Brian E. Crim
Old Dominion University, 1997
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The predominance of technocrats within the Reichswehr, the inability of the officer corps to reassert its elite status in the Weimar era, and the extensive interaction between the Reichswehr and a militaristic German society contributed to Hitler’s successful absorption of military authority in the 1930s. The social and political upheaval resulting in part from the First World War diffused military authority and diminished the role of the officer corps in German society. The corps struggled to maintain its historic level of corporateness and consistently failed to fulfill its responsibility to the Weimar Republic. The Reichswehr’s top officers worked to revitalize the armed forces with one eye on the past and the other on the future, but always they were aware of the intolerable present constructed by the Treaty of Versailles.

Interwar officer selection, training, and codes of conduct were designed to resurrect the values of the Imperial Army while also preparing for the new technological battlefield. The incompatibility of these two missions made it difficult for the officer corps to establish an institutional identity. Internal debates raged in the Reichswehr, but additional pressures came from a polarized Weimar society. Contrary to the traditional interpretation that the Reichswehr was a state within a state, evidence presented here suggests that the officer corps was not immune to the Weimar Republic’s cultural excesses. Under these circumstances the acceptance of the oath of allegiance to Hitler on
the part of the officer corps was fateful, but certainly not surprising. The 1934 oath was
dangerous because it resurrected the worst elements of the Prussian past and combined
them with the destructive impulses of the Third Reich. By deconstructing the existing
secondary literature and including other methodologies, such as film and literary
criticism, a more complex picture of the officer corps emerges. Primary sources include
military attache reports and German military journals.

Co-Directors of Advisory Committee: Dr. Craig M. Cameron
                                           Dr. Austin T. Jersild
TO THE GOOD GERMANS -- WOLFY, FRANZ, LEO, AND FRITZ
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the members of my committee for their assistance with this thesis. Professor Carl Boyd broadened my understanding of military history and has served as both a mentor and friend throughout my M.A. program. Professor Boyd extended to me the intellectual freedom to pursue my ideas as well as the needed direction for completing this thesis. Professor Craig M. Cameron also expanded my intellectual horizons by helping me understand the social and cultural aspects of civil-military relations. I would also like to thank Professor Austin T. Jersild for agreeing to be the third member of the committee. His insight was a welcome addition and our discussions motivated me to rethink chapter four. Research assistance was supplied by the staff of the U.S. Army Military History Institute, especially John Slonaker and the Historical Reference Branch. Friends Gregory Schuler and David Kohnen provided excellent resources and observations.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Paris, August 3, 1934

Hitler did what no one expected. He made himself both President and Chancellor. Any doubts about the loyalty of the army were done away with before the old Field Marshal’s body was hardly cold. Hitler had the army swear an oath of unconditional obedience to him personally. The man is resourceful.

William L. Shirer, Berlin Diary

No one doubts Shirer’s observation that Hitler was resourceful, or that the loyalty oath was an intelligent move, but what do we really know about the men who swore this fateful oath? The officers who pledged loyalty to Hitler spent their formative years in the Reichswehr, where they were obligated to serve the Weimar Republic. Historians tend to neglect these crucial years when discussing the background of the Wehrmacht’s most important officers, preferring to concentrate on officers’ careers during the Third Reich. Indeed, Jacques Benoist-Mechim, one of the first and most influential authors writing about the Reichswehr, called the Reichswehr “the foot-bridge thrown over the abyss which separates the Second Reich from the Third.” This “abyss” is in actuality fertile ground for the historian seeking trends and characteristics within the Reichswehr that

The journal consulted for this thesis was the Chicago Manual of Style.

1The Reichswehr became the Wehrmacht on March 16, 1935, the day Hitler overtly broke the restrictions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles (1919).

assisted National Socialism's consolidation of power in the 1930s.

The heart of any study of the Reichswehr is the officer corps. The men who entered the Reichswehr as officers made a life commitment to the profession of arms during a period of violent and intense transition. Disregarding the collective story of the officer corps during the interwar period gives one the impression that Reichswehr officers were either victims of National Socialism, criminal co-conspirators, or helpless onlookers watching their fate being decided without their input. These arguments are too categorical. The reasons for the officer corps’ unqualified acceptance of the oath of allegiance on August 2, 1934 are complex. The predominance of technocrats within the Reichswehr, the inability of the officer corps to reassert its elite status in the Weimar era, and the extensive interaction between the Reichswehr and a militaristic society contributed to Hitler's successful absorption of military authority in the late 1930s. A resourceful man, yes, but Hitler found in the officer corps a shattered, divided, and shallow institution with no prospects for the future other than what he could provide.

Most historians writing on the Reichswehr are more concerned with civil-military relations with the Weimar Republic, or the careers and actions of the highest ranking officers. The problem with concentrating on key personalities is that historians must

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believe, to an extent, that their subjects' actions matched their subjects' words. Even more difficult to determine is whether personalities' expressed policies were implemented with any effect. One confronts this issue when evaluating the first chief of staff of the *Reichswehr*, General Hans von Seeckt (1921-1926). The legacy of Seeckt is crucial for understanding the place of the *Reichswehr* in Weimar society, but historians invest Seeckt with enormous organizational, military, and political skill without evaluating whether these talents translated into an enduring reality.\(^4\) The real issue is whether the *Reichswehr* was Seeckt's creation, or was it dependent on social and political factors beyond the control of its highest leaders? This thesis invests Seeckt with enormous significance, but only because his agenda was impossible to implement in the postwar world. Seeckt's significance lies not in what he accomplished, but what he left unaccomplished.

One scholar who has taken a stand on the significance of Seeckt is James S. Corum. Corum maintains that Seeckt molded a professional army like no other and defends Seeckt's technically oriented officer training by noting the initial successes of the *Wehrmacht* at the outset of the Second World War. The second chapter of this thesis suggests that the technocratic training introduced at all levels of the *Reichswehr* not only hindered the officer corps' ability to devise realistic strategy, but also divorced it from the larger questions surrounding the use of armed force in a new and unprecedented international environment. Later in the second chapter of this thesis Corum's following assertion is challenged in full:

\(^4\)One explanation for the overwhelmingly positive portrayal of Seeckt is the importance of the biography written by Friedrich von Rabenau, Seeckt's chief adjutant and fellow *Reichswehr* architect: *Seeckt: Aus Seinem Leben* (Leipzig: Hase-Koehler Verlag, 1941).
The criticism that Reichswehr officers lacked education in strategy would be an attempt to explain, in hindsight, the poor strategic understanding of the Wehrmacht General Staff. The Reichswehr produced some highly competent strategists . . . but Hitler removed them. Perhaps a better explanation for the Army’s strategic incompetence in World War II lies with Hitler’s elimination of his military leaders from the realm of strategic decision making, not in any failure of Reichswehr training.5

It is disingenuous to ignore the continuity of strategic incompetence from the Reichswehr to the Wehrmacht. Where does Corum think the Wehrmacht General Staff received its training from the outset? The truth of the matter is that the Reichswehr, despite the intellectual prowess of Seeckt and others, never produced a coherent strategy. This was not Seeckt’s fault; indeed, to place blame on individuals for the Reichswehr’s monumental failure to come to grips with the military realities of the interwar period ignores the nature of the post-war world.

Michael Geyer’s model concerning the changing dynamics of war during the First World War and the implications for the postwar world is an excellent method for examining the officer corps in any industrial society, but especially interwar Germany.6 Once the domain of the military, war during and after the First World War became the domain of the public. The First World War altered the political and social fabric of Germany, and consequently, the role of the officer corps was forever changed. Geyer notes that the First World War forced the military to move from a “stable, self-contained,


6Geyer has published extensively, but the work most representative of his ideas is his essay “German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914-1945” in Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton University Press, 1986): 530-98.
and autonomous institution and from a profession with a strong and unequivocal sense of its own skills and of its identity to an ever more quickly changing organization of violence with rather indistinct boundaries and a rather vague collective identity.”

Geyer’s views on the importance of the First World War for postwar military organization are essential to this study. Geyer devotes considerable space to the role of the officer corps, but he is interested primarily in its function within postwar society. This thesis accepts Geyer’s assumptions as a basis for further analysis of the officer corps.

The third chapter of this thesis addresses the officer corps frantic search for its previous position and an institutional identity capable of confronting the precarious postwar world. The notion that interwar Germany was a society prepared for and excited by war, and therefore a society that revered its military, produced conflicting results for the officer corps. Geyer notes that the “declining fortunes of the military apparatus in twentieth century Germany . . . brought to the forefront, over time, a rising and eventually nationalized ‘cult of violence’”

This trend provided the desired revival of the military spirit necessary for the officer corps to achieve rearmament and thereby a revision of the Treaty of Versailles, but national involvement in military affairs meant the dissolution of the officer corps’ elite status. Geyer traces this phenomenon to the First World War:

“The control of warfare, not merely as a control of aristocratic soldiers but now also as the control of the nation at war . . . quite appropriately became the focal point of

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Another dynamic present in all postwar militaries, but especially pronounced in Germany, was the birth of a new technocratic elite. In many respects, the soldier/technician, because of the sheer complexity of his task, enjoyed the same privilege as the aristocratic soldier that preceded him. As the third chapter demonstrates, the officer corps of the Wilhelmine regime disintegrated early in the First World War. Under the Weimar Republic, the officer corps failed to recover its pre-First World War status.

The issue of professionalism is important for all chapters in this thesis. If one limits his or her definition of professionalism to the mastery of the technical aspects of a profession, then yes, the Reichswehr was an excellent model. However, the military profession involves much more than expertise. In the influential work by Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, Huntington identified three characteristics of the military profession -- expertise, responsibility, and corporateness. Expertise is the acquisition of technical knowledge and a successful program for continuing education. During the Reichswehr period this education was extremely narrow. Expertise alone produces technocrats, and expertise was the focal point of Reichswehr training. Despite a common training program, corporateness, that is the maintenance of an institutional identity, eluded the extremely selective and highly-educated 4,000-man officer corps. The Reichswehr was unable to overcome the results of the “democratization” of violence.

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originating with the First World War and continuing into the postwar period.

The military profession requires a strong moral and ethical foundation for the obvious reason that the military’s actions could conceivably destroy the society it serves, especially a young government like the Weimar Republic. Responsibility in the military profession is internal and external; officers are responsible to their specific institutional codes and traditions as well as to the government they serve, whether it is a monarchy or a constitutional republic. The Weimar Republic was unpopular with the masses as well as the Reichswehr. The Weimar Republic was notoriously unstable and constantly confronted questions regarding its legitimacy. Sociologist Stanislav Andreski identified a model that corresponds to the Weimar Republic’s position: “Military might is likely to be a decisive factor in politics in a society where there are no crystallized and universally accepted beliefs about the legitimacy of power, where there are doubts and disagreements about who should occupy the positions of command and what orders [officers] are entitled to give.”

Corum’s conclusion that the Reichswehr was a “superb cadre force with which to build a modern army” is valid only if one severely limits the criteria for professionalism. It is true that the Reichswehr was technically proficient, and that the infusion of recruits after the reintroduction of conscription was efficiently integrated, but the foundations of the military profession (aside from expertise) in postwar Germany were hollow.

Chapter four challenges the standard assumption that the Reichswehr was a “state

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within a state.”¹⁴ Historians assume that the highly-selective and miniscule officer corps sought isolation from society. This isolation supposedly provided cover for covert rearmament and intensive training with new but forbidden weapons. Beyond rearmament, the notion of the state within a state implies that the Reichswehr ran its own affairs without civilian interference. This was certainly a priority for Seeckt and other higher leaders in the Reichswehr, but the real threat to the Reichswehr’s isolation did not come from the outside -- it came from the very officers accused of building their state within a state. The fourth chapter demonstrates that diverse segments of the officer corps were actively involved in the zero-sum game that was Weimar politics. A significant number of officers had “careers” in the violent and sporadic Freikorps (Free Corps) that ravaged central Europe between 1919 and 1921, while some of the younger officers participated in one or more of the countless right-wing parties that dominated the Weimar landscape. Veterans groups, political parties, and paramilitary organizations had extensive ties to the Reichswehr. In its own way the Reichswehr was a state-builder, not armed hermits seeking the solace of their training fields and class rooms. Hardly a state within a state, the Reichswehr worked to create a sympathetic state in which it could reassert its elite status.

Chapter four also reveals the extent to which the militaristic Weimar culture penetrated the porous walls of the Reichswehr’s institutional culture. The literature

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produced by Freikorps veterans and the popularity of authors like Ernst Jünger and the
literary movement known as “Militant Nationalism” must enter the equation when
attempting to evaluate civil-military relations. Culture was a political battlefield in
Weimar Germany, and the Reichswehr fell solidly on the side of the right. Consequently,
scholars can gain insight into the personalities and values of organizations like the officer
corps by dissecting the culture of the right in the Weimar era. More popular than literature
in the Weimar Republic, and later Nazi Germany, was film. The public responded
favorably to film, and the Reichswehr apparently recognized film’s potential for
improving its image in a society reeling from the legacy of the last war. Hitler and his
well-orchestrated propaganda machine focused a significant amount of attention on the
shiny, new, rearmed, and photogenic Wehrmacht. In both the Weimar Republic and the
Third Reich the German military benefited from its representation in all forms of media.

Just as it is necessary to define professionalism before presenting the thesis in full,
it is also essential to understand the phenomenon of militarism in Germany, especially as
it relates to the fourth chapter. It is easy to suggest that the destructive militarism of the
Third Reich was a continuation of the sort of militarism found in the Prussia of the
seventeenth century. Anthropologist Emilio Willems observes three centuries of German
militarism. Willems states that German militarism is defined by (1) the use of war as a
means to solve international conflicts, (2) the political power of the military, (3) the
appropriation of state resources for the sustenance and development of the army, (4) the
boundless respect or reverence for military status symbols, and (5) the glorification of war
and the warrior in civilian society. This argument is familiar and valid, but one must take into account the dramatic changes Germany underwent during the First World War. Geyer demonstrates that the Third Reich benefited from the democratization of violence and the dissolution of Germany’s social fabric. Sweeping indictments of Germany’s three centuries of existence are at the very least imprecise, and at the worst, unhistorical. Willems’ criteria could apply to almost any European power since the development of centralized nation states, but Germany was a special case.

Suitably, Germany’s “special path,” or Sonderweg, is best evaluated by German historians. Alfred Vagts witnessed Germany’s descent into militarism firsthand as a Prussian officer in the First World War. After the war, Vagts lent his military talents to combat the proliferation of right-wing paramilitary groups. Hitler’s election forced Vagts to the United States, where he pursued an academic career reflecting on the century’s events. Vagts’ most relevant argument for this thesis is that “militarism flourishes more in peace time than in war.” Militarism is a civilian virtue that “displays the qualities of caste and cult, authority and belief.” Especially in the German case, militarism is always irrational and may be seen as a threat to the professional military. This tension between militaristic civilians and the professional military was played out after the consolidation of the Third Reich with disastrous consequences for the military.

Another notable historian of German militarism was Gerhard Ritter. Ritter’s four

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17 Ibid., 13.
volume study of German militarism covers the same period as Willems, but Ritter far surpasses Willems by paying careful attention to historical context. Ritter defines militarism as the “exaggeration and overestimation of the military estate, unbalancing the natural relation of statesmanship and war.” In this light, German militarism was not a continuous development, but rather, a creation of historical circumstance. Just because Frederick the Great resorted to war to achieve his ends did not make Prussia militaristic. In the eighteenth-century war was an accepted brand of statesmanship, and considering the historically precarious position of Prussia in relation to other European powers, successful limited wars were the only way to demonstrate Prussia’s legitimacy as a European power. Ritter distinguishes between the Prussia of Frederick the Great and the truly militaristic Germany of the late nineteenth century. After a massive population explosion and Germany’s rapid industrialization within a generation, the historic and valid insecurities of Prussia became menacing excuses for aggressive war. According to Ritter, the militaristic element of German society was not the nobility. The most militaristic segment of the population was the middle class born from industrialization. Given the large number of officers that derived from the upper middle class during the

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19 Carl von Clausewitz, the Prussian reformer and principal author read by subsequent German general staffs, built his theory of limited war around the figure of Frederick the Great. For Clausewitz, the author accused of harbinging total war, to recognize Germany’s period of limited war as the Fredrician era challenges the arguments of authors like Willems. See Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. and tr. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 179.

Weimar era, the issue of militarism becomes crucial.

Another author who grappled with the issue of German militarism was none other than Hans von Seeckt:

I assert that militarism made first Prussia, then Germany great and strong; I can admit that militarism was uncongenial and inconvenient to many, yet I must maintain that it enabled us to resist a hostile world for four years and that it subsequently, by its inculcation of lessons in discipline, repelled the waves of Bolshevism, with the result that the Prussia and Germany of today owe their survival to the old militarism.²¹

Seeckt subscribed to the traditional definition of militarism, that is the formal dominance of the military over civilian society and not the notion of militarism as a civilian virtue.²²

In fact, Seeckt was a staunch opponent of involving civilians in military affairs.

Nonetheless, Seeckt’s comment is indicative of the Reichswehr’s attitude towards its recent past as well as its posture in the Weimar era.

The problem with existing literature is that it tends to accept sources at face value. For example, the Seeckt papers leave one with the impression that Seeckt’s initiatives were translated into policy. His agenda was clear, as were his countless written orders, but the internal, social, political, and foreign pressures were far too cumbersome for the Reichswehr leadership to overcome. Instead of relying on official papers and memoirs it is necessary to expand the methodology to include statistics as well as such devices as literary and film criticism. These historical tools produce a complicated, but more

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²²The debate and changing definitions of militarism, as well as the significance of the more industrial process of “militarization” is addressed in John R. Gillis’ introduction to his edited work: The Militarization of the Western World (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).
comprehensive picture than traditional methods.

This thesis demonstrates that the Reichswehr was not a collection of budding National Socialists nor was it an anachronistic cell of monarchists; the Reichswehr demonstrated a dynamic all its own. The only historian to study systematically the Reichswehr from within is David N. Spires. Spires waded through the records of the Seventh Military District (Wehrkreis) and pieced together a rare monograph concerning the institutional framework of a Reichswehr district. Spires' scholarship is enormously valuable for this thesis. Spires goal was to examine the Reichswehr from within, and consequently he was unconcerned with larger issues. For example, Spires delineates the Reichswehr's technocratic training without considering the future implications for such training. This is not an oversight so much as it is a deliberate omission. The weakness of Spires' work is that it is based on Bavaria only. This thesis will reveal the acute problem regionalism presented for the numerous efforts to standardize and integrate the officer corps. As useful as Spires findings are, the historian must consider that they are based on the experience of one military district.

The goal of this thesis is to present a profile of the officer corps that takes into consideration its precarious position within the Weimar Republic, and later the Third Reich. By combining the established work of traditionalists like Craig, Carsten, and Gordon with the sophisticated and provocative argument of Geyer, a more comprehensive portrayal of the officer corps emerges. The excellent research of historians like Corum

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and Spires is also valuable, but often unconcerned with the officer corps' place in society. The subject of the German officer corps is a familiar one, but too often the same ground is covered. Focusing on the aftermath of the First World War rather than the events of the 1930s raises a series of pertinent questions. Was Reichswehr training so narrowly focused as to preclude the development of strategic thought? Given the military missions the Reichswehr was forced to accept, could its training have been any different? Who were these officers? Where did they come from? What was their social, political, and educational background? How did the Reichswehr maintain an institutional identity in such an unprecedented social and political climate? Did the Reichswehr ever have a chance to construct this identity? What influence did the polarized Weimar culture have on the officer corps? In short, what trends made the officer corps' integration into the National Socialist machine less dependent on the dynamics of National Socialism and more a result of the internal weaknesses within the officer corps itself? These questions will undoubtedly persist despite this thesis' intention to provide answers. The point is that these questions are seldom asked in the first place.

The logical point of departure for this thesis is the collapse of the Second Reich during the final months of the First World War. In retrospect it is easy to see why the Weimar Republic was doomed. Gerhard Ritter never completed a fifth volume of The Sword and the Scepter, but he ended the fourth with an observation about the early days of the Weimar Republic that underscores the absolutely central position the tiny Reichswehr held in the Weimar Republic:
A new era was dawning, in which the relation of the sword and scepter, of politics and war, was to undergo a profound change . . . . From the first moment of their power, the social democratic men of the people, who were struggling in Berlin to create something akin to a new state authority that might reduce chaos to order, were dependent on the support of the army.  

The Reichswehr was powerless outside of its own borders and a veritable king-maker inside Germany. Every action undertaken by the Reichswehr was fraught with lasting consequences. Given this enormous power, a fresh profile of the officer corps is overdue.

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Ours is the first generation to begin to reconcile itself with the machine and see in it not only the useful, but the beautiful as well.

Ernst Jünger

Given the rapidity of the Second Reich’s collapse and the subsequent anarchy that swept over Germany after the news of Germany’s surrender, it is remarkable that an organized military establishment survived intact. The pressures and challenges facing the shattered German army were innumerable and unprecedented. The principal goal of the officer training programs of the Provisional Reichswehr (1919-21), the Reichswehr (1921-1935), and the Wehrmacht (1935-1945) was to come to grips with the technological battlefield by mastering new weapons and to employ these weapons with great efficiency. Leadership was crucial since the nature of technological war demanded a new breed of officer capable of acting swiftly and independently. These were the goals of every professional postwar military, but the German army was saddled with a bewildering array of internal and external restraints that made satisfying the most fundamental security objectives impossible. The multiple and elusive missions facing the Reichswehr, the severe restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles, and the resulting obsession with rearmament contributed to the technocratic flavor of German officer training.

The German officer trained constantly. As Stanislav Andreski notes, “by protracted and continuous training, military service tends to become professionalized.”1 Continuing

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1 Andreski, *Military Organization and Society*, 34.
education is a hallmark of the military profession, and the *Reichswehr* carried this
hundred year old tradition originating from the Prussian reforms of the early nineteenth
century into the beleaguered Weimar era.\(^2\) One of the few legacies that helped rather than
hindered the *Reichswehr* in its struggle to maintain a professional institution was the
Prussian reforms in the wake of the devastating defeats at Jena and Auerstadt (1806).
One hundred years later the German army was reeling from another tremendous defeat.
The difference, and it is a crucial one, was that Seeckt’s reforms instituted in the
*Reichswehr* were not part of a general reconstruction of Germany. Gerhard von
Scharnhorst, the principal reformer after the debacle in 1806, tied military reform to
social reform. Seeckt did not have this option.\(^3\) The early nineteenth century reformers,
among them Scharnhorst and his junior partner Carl von Clausewitz, concentrated their
efforts into education. The most important institution resulting from the reforms was the
War Academy (*Kriegsakademie*). The War Academy was unique in Europe because it
provided an intellectual basis for the profession of arms, and having learned the lessons
delivered by Napoleon, the focus of the academy’s training was to create leaders capable
of independent thought.\(^4\)

Napoleon shocked the armies of the ancien régime by arming his population.

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\(^2\) John Marsten, “Hallmarks of a Profession” in *Requirements of the Professional
Leader: Readings on Ethics and Professionalism* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College,
1984), 236.

\(^3\) Rosinski, *The German Army*, 195. The complete story of the Prussian reforms,
including the tactical, strategic, and social aspects, is discussed in Peter Paret, *Yorck and

\(^4\) Charles Edward White, “Prussian Military Professionalism: Scharnhorst and the
This changed everything from military tactics to the social order. The First World War shocked the European armies into the realization that technology was far more developed than their intellectual ability to utilize it. In this instance the death of millions of men was a shock to the social order. Technology expanded the size of the battlefield along with the destructiveness of war, but it did not provide decisive victory. Europe marched into the First World War with modern weapons and anachronistic tactics. Those armies that could adapt to the new levels of violence exhibited during the First World War would maintain the competitive edge. In the middle of the First World War the German army began a radical experiment born of desperation. This experiment signified the beginning of the German military’s preoccupation with technocratic training. The Reichswehr officer training program did not originate with Seeckt and his power base, the general staff, but rather, it began under the military “dictatorship” of Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg.

Understanding the powerful legacy of the First World War is the first step towards understanding why German officers were preoccupied with technocratic training during the interwar period. Within a few months of the beginning of the First World War the fighting stagnated. A war of material attrition, or Materialschlacht emerged. To break this stalemate, Ludendorff, the Quartermaster General, swept away the already crumbling traditional assumptions regarding military science and threw his weight behind complete innovation. Ludendorff was not the intellectual father of the storm troop tactics, which turned out to be the solution to overcoming trench warfare. Ludendorff’s contribution

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5 Tim Travers described the British army’s institutional inability to confront the modern battlefield in The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern Warfare, 1900-1918 (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987).
was representative of the sort of leadership the *Reichswehr* strove to instill in its officers.

Timothy Lupfer describes the reasons for the success of the German innovations in the First World War:

> The German tactical success was not the product of a single personality, but a *corporate* effort. This is not to say that personalities were not influential in the development of German tactical doctrine. The importance of Ludendorff’s personality, however, was that it fostered the corporate spirit, encouraging several German officers to participate in the collective effort and not allowing his own ego to interfere.⁶

As a result of this collective effort, storm troops were designed to infiltrate the fortified front lines by moving in small groups. Speed and mobility were reintroduced by bypassing strongholds that normally would require great numbers and firepower to overcome. Complementing these infantry “infiltration tactics” were new artillery tactics designed to shatter the front in unison with the storm troopers’ advance.

The enduring innovations were in leadership and training. The hierarchy of the officer corps was disrupted for the sake of efficient training. Suddenly the non-commissioned officer (NCO) acquired greater significance. A series of schools was established behind the lines to practice the new tactics under realistic conditions. Standardizing and reorganizing meant new equipment was essential. Junior officers with storm troop experience were promoted rapidly and were given the responsibility for training companies of other storm troops. Beginning in late 1916, each field army had a storm troop battalion employed in training prospective soldiers of all ranks. Lupfer reveals that “this instruction was so highly regarded that German units on the eastern

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front began sending officers and NCOs to the western front to attend storm unit training . . . .” By all accounts this devotion to training translated into superior execution. However, innovative tactics could not replenish German manpower or prevent starvation and political turmoil at home; Germany eventually succumbed to its fate after the Imperial Army’s impressive Spring 1918 offensive “Operation Michael.”

The experimentation and innovation between 1916 and 1918 were truly revolutionary, however the process of reform was more important than the goals of the reform because the objectives were unrealistic from the outset. The crisis atmosphere facilitated the complete dismantlement of the existing military hierarchy. This hierarchy threatened to change during industrialization and the inclusion of middle class officers, but the “bourgeois” officers preferred to adapt to the old order rather than create a new one. The First World War threatened Germany’s military class with extinction, so Ludendorff and others decided on a revolution from within. Michael Geyer notes that the last half of the First World War in Germany was a time when “discipline and military socialization were rebuilt around weapons skills and performance; when formal hierarchies were dissolved in favor of functional commands in the battle zone; and when captains wrote manuals for generals.”

German innovation produced immediate tactical results, but it also fostered a myopic view of strategy. If planning and training concentrates on maximizing technology, in times of war the tendency arises to believe that technology is an antidote for strategic impasses. The question asked is not “can we do it,” but “how much of it do we need?” Geyer suggests that German military training

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7Ibid., 43-44.

during the First World War created more problems than it solved: "Strategy turned from an operational calculus of limiting and concentrating the war effort into a rationale for expanding and escalating the use of force." The Reichswehr embarked on its ambitious officer training program by continuing methods developed during the First World War. Along with these fresh new ideas came the strategic ignorance preoccupation with technology brings.

More so than any series of conscious decisions, it was the Treaty of Versailles that determined the structure and mission of the Reichswehr. The military provisions of the treaty required Germany to reduce its army to 100,000 men and 4,000 officers by November 1921. Between 1919 and 1921 the German army had 200,000 men and 24,000 officers. Significantly, reserves were forbidden. The allies, as with most postwar issues, were divided over how to reconstruct the German military. The French preferred a "democratic" army based on conscription. France feared the ramifications of creating a closed caste similar to the Prussian army in the past. The British believed that a long-term professional army would be easier to control and would be more likely to integrate itself into a republican structure. The British model was finally accepted with the creation of the Provisional Reichswehr on February 25, 1919. The Reichswehr was established by the Military Law (Wehrgesetz) on March 23, 1921. The length of service for the Reichswehr soldier was twelve years, and for the officer, a staggering twenty-five year commitment.

The Treaty of Versailles dismantled Germany's sophisticated and proven system

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9Ibid., 548.

10Gordon, The Reichswehr and the German Republic, 149-51.
of military schools, forcing the shattered army to rebuild from scratch. This was a blessing in disguise for the formulaters of technocratic education, who were unrestrained by institutional restraints or tradition. The Provisional Reichswehr established four schools for officers designed for the transition to the Reichswehr. A secondary school specialized in advanced instruction in a particular field for officer candidates finishing basic training. Exceptional NCOs wishing to obtain an administrative post in the new government after their twelve year service could attend a candidate school. An upper primary school was created for NCOs wishing to remain in the Reichswehr as career soldiers, and if they were lucky, future commissioned officers. The school open to all privates was the technical finishing school, a weapons-based field school meant to update the soldier’s familiarity with new weapons.\(^{11}\) The obvious concentration on NCO and advanced basic training was the result of the extended time it would require to train an officer candidate from beginning to end. As chapter four demonstrates, the Provisional Reichswehr could not afford to take the time to train officers because the two years between the Second Reich and the Weimar Republic were dominated by civil war. However, the current chapter, for organizational purposes will concentrate primarily on the training of Reichswehr officer candidates from the date of commission to their first assignment as lieutenants.

The dramatic downsizing that accompanied the transition to the Reichswehr required that the 4,000 officers who survived the cut from 24,000 were exceptional. Of the 4,000, 400 were physicians or veterinarians and another 400 belonged to the

\(^{11}\)Benoist-Mechin, *History of the German Army*, vol. 1, 169.
nonexistent air force. The radical nature of these cuts is underscored by the fact that before the First World War German officers numbered 60,000. The level of education required of officers before entry into the Reichswehr helped determine training. Seeckt considered education to be the single most important factor in both officer selection and the decisive factor for what track officers were assigned for the duration of their career. Seeckt noted that "the position of the officer in the life of the people demands not only a good military education, but a sound general education as well." It is difficult to see where a Reichswehr officer could receive this "sound general education." Seeckt's social conservatism fueled his extremely high educational standards, as did his astute recognition of the centrality of the technological battlefield. He noted in 1919 that "the greater the advance of technical science, the more effectively can it devote its intentions and instruments to the service of the army and the higher demands it makes on the soldier who manipulates these technical aids . . ." Seeckt welcomed the idea of a small professional army. In his view, the officer corps was still an elite caste because education performed the same function as aristocratic pedigree, that is, an insurance of exclusive status.

Ideally, every officer candidate would enter the Reichswehr with an Abitur.

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13Corum, The Roots of Blitzkrieg, 94.


16An Abitur is a German degree roughly equivalent to the completion of two years in an American university. An Abitur was a professional and highly marketable
Attracting officer candidates with *Abitur*[s] was a problem in the early years of the *Reichswehr*, so Seeckt was required to include a “non-*Abitur*” track for special cases. This distressed Seeckt the perfectionist to no end, but non-*Abitur*[s] provided a valuable function. The education requirements were so high that during the first few years of the *Reichswehr*’s existence not enough qualified candidates were available, so exceptional NCOs were sought to fill the gap. Nonetheless, Seeckt did everything possible to eliminate unqualified non-*Abitur*[s], usually by means of constant surveillance. Seeckt ordered that “non-*Abitur*[s] must receive the most careful scrutiny. Not only must their military performance be judged excellent, but their personality on and off duty behavior must receive unconditional approval.”

Given the questionable behavior of numerous officers with and without *Abitur*[s], it appears that Seeckt’s demand for constant surveillance went unfulfilled.

It is difficult to discern for what exactly the *Reichswehr* was preparing. The missions changed with changes in leadership, and even within the tiny 4,000 man officer corps a heated debate raged between those officers intent on a war of liberation and those resigned to work within the constraints of the Treaty and Versailles and the Weimar Constitution. With a great unresolved debate like this, it made sense to concentrate efforts into technical training. Preparing for a future with no restrictions entailed a different training program than preparing for Germany’s immediate security. The degree originating in the Second Reich.

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Reichswehr trained its officers and enlisted men to be an army of leaders (Führersheer) and the army of the future (Zukünftsheer). All training centered around the assumption that Versailles would either be altered diplomatically or completely abandoned. Consequently, every officer, and even more revolutionary, every soldier was trained to assume a leadership role.¹⁹ The idea, as expressed by Seeckt’s adjutant, Friedrich von Rabenau, was to create a structure where the army had the potential to become large in a very short time. Guiding the rapid expansion would be the technocratic elite represented by the officer corps and NCOs.²⁰ This plan placed weapons technology at the center of the Reichswehr’s agenda.

Technocratic training was dependent on rearmament, and rearmament was the issue that occupied the time and effort of the Reichswehr leadership from the first days of the Provisional Reichswehr. Officer training was intense, professional and thorough, but unfocused. Was the officer a leader trained to deal with present realities, or was it the future he was training for? How could the officer gain practical experience with the weapons of modern war when those weapons were at first unavailable, and when they were available, illegal? As with everything else in the Reichswehr, training at the lower levels, that is tactical, was impressive, but translating training into realistic goals was elusive.

One of the few consistencies of the Reichswehr was its officer training program.


²⁰ Corum, The Roots of Blitzkrieg, 60.
A solid system was in place by 1926 and remained relatively unchanged until 1935.\textsuperscript{21} The Treaty of Versailles limited the \textit{Reichswehr} to one advanced school for each of the four branches, the infantry, artillery, cavalry, and the general staff.\textsuperscript{22} Germany was divided into seven military districts and within each district officers were selected and trained at the regimental level. The two hundred candidates allowed each year by the Treaty of Versailles were required to take four years before becoming a lieutenant. This four-year period was spent learning the basics of every branch of the army to satisfy the \textit{Reichswehr}'s mission for creating future leaders.

Within a year after the creation of the \textit{Reichswehr} the goals and limits of its training was clear. In 1921 Seeckt introduced the training manual \textit{Leadership and Battle with Combined Operations}. This manual is representative of the fact that Seeckt and the \textit{Reichswehr} leadership trained for a future army, not the 100,000-man army thrust upon them.\textsuperscript{23} Seeckt admitted that "the manual takes as its basis the effectives, the armament and the equipment of a great modern military power and not merely the German army of 100,000 men established by the treaty of peace."\textsuperscript{24} Seeckt believed he could prepare for numerous missions by stressing technocratic training. Specialists will be necessary for the future army free from material restrictions, but they should also be able to train

\textsuperscript{21}Spires, \textit{The Career of the Reichswehr Officer}, 42.

\textsuperscript{22}The Treaty of Versailles dismantled the general staff, but it was transferred to the civilian war ministry and called \textit{Truppenamt}.

\textsuperscript{23}Geyer, "Professionals and Junkers," 98. Seeckt and the \textit{Truppenamt} planned for a 63 division field force when the Reichswehr only had 12.

citizens quickly. Seeckt conveyed this approach when stating that “the high aim which we have set for ourselves is not that of constituting a body of soldiers but of forming chiefs for the people in time of danger.” To Seeckt the modern army “is the fusion of cadres and technicians whose instruction is a long continuity with unskilled workmen whose training is brief.”

An examination of the subjects officer candidates were required to study reveals a diverse, but technocratic education. David Spires followed the career of some candidates from the Seventh Military District. The schedule reproduced in Table 1 is an example of the second year of instruction for officer candidates and is typical of the courses taught in other military districts. The courses were the same all four years, but the hours spent a week on each subject differed year to year.

Table 1

Eduord Zorn’s Infantry School Curriculum
(Second Year Course)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Average Number of Hours per Week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Theoretical (Scientific) Instruction</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactics and Terrain Study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military History</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Science</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering Service</td>
<td>(1/3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Defense</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge and Care of Field Equipment, Theory of Driving</td>
<td>(1/3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Affairs</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care of the Horse</td>
<td>(1/3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 23, 39.
Immediately apparent is the fact that over twice as many hours were spent on practical instruction than theoretical. This is a trend that did not change year to year. The only time a candidate took courses on civil-military relations was the first year, and then only two hours a week.\textsuperscript{26} Although not displayed in the second year curriculum, foreign language study took more instruction time than all the civilian subjects put together.\textsuperscript{27} If officer training is any indication, then the \textit{Reichswehr} wanted a technocrat devoted to his craft, but ignorant of how his craft related to the defense of his nation, or even how his nation's institutions operated.

The question as to whether \textit{Reichswehr} officer training was unique or not is an important one. After comparing the \textit{Reichswehr} officer schools with the military academies in the United States and Great Britain, it is clear that while the allies pursued greater diversity and emphasized liberal arts education, the \textit{Reichswehr} focused intensively on technocratic training. Both West Point and Sandhurst underwent extensive

\textsuperscript{26}Spires, \textit{The Career of the Reichswehr Officer}, 436.

\textsuperscript{27}Corum, \textit{The Roots of Blitzkrieg}, 92.
reforms after the First World War, but instead of concentrating on the technological battlefield, these academies expanded theoretical training. In 1920 West Point introduced classes in economics, public affairs, and international relations. A 1939 mission statement outlined the goal of West Point training since the conclusion of the First World War. Half of the officer candidates’ education involved: “A balanced and liberal education in the arts and sciences, embracing: knowledge of the social, economic and political history of mankind; basic principles and applications of mathematics and physical sciences; knowledge and the use of English and foreign languages, and appreciation of literature; fundamentals of law.”\(^{28}\) Sandhurst also reorganized its curriculum in 1920. Practical education along the lines of what constituted Eduard Zorn’s schedule comprised about one third of a candidates schedule at Sandhurst. Another third was devoted to history, current affairs, and economics.\(^{29}\) Without a doubt the United States and Great Britain incorporated weapons training and other technical subjects, but not to the extent that other subjects were neglected.

In Germany, the heavy concentration on practical experience with weapons reflected a change in the officer’s mentality from a generalist, the historic role of the German officer, to that of a military manager. Officers were trained to be professionals in the same manner as engineers or architects. Functional and work-oriented training led to the sort of intense specialization that precluded observance of old hierarchies.\(^{30}\)


Technocratic training continued after the establishment of the Third Reich, but the training accelerated and expanded. The only major substantitive difference in officer training under the Third Reich compared to the Weimar Republic was that finding the resources for training with live weapons was no longer a problem.

The best available insight into officer training in the Third Reich comes from American military attachés assigned to Germany. The first thing the Reichswehr did after National Socialism ended the civil-military conflict between the Reichswehr and the Reichstag over resources was to return to the Imperial Army’s education system. Rather than the four years it took a candidate to become a lieutenant during the Reichswehr period, it took only two years after 1935. This was mainly a product of the fact that officers were desperately needed to integrate new recruits, but it was also a function of the absence of restrictions on the number of promotions and dismissals. Truman Smith, the highest ranking American military attaché, noted that the new military academies, or Kriegesschule, were roughly equivalent to West Point. Smith was adamant, however, about not carrying the analogy too far: “Each is a purely military school. The course lasts only from 9½ months to 10 months. No general educational subjects are given except for a small amount of modern language.” The curriculum of the Wehrmacht’s military academies was the same as candidate Eduord Zorn’s second year at a Reichswehr academy.

Smith identified three phases of basic candidate training. The first phase was an

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32Ibid.
intensive psychological test \textit{(Pyschotechnische Prüfung)} begun in the \textit{Reichswehr} period and adopted by the \textit{Wehrmacht}. The test measured physical and mental endurance under extreme conditions. For whatever reason, the psychological test was supposed to measure character.\textsuperscript{33} The second phase was the actual basic infantry training. Smith was impressed with the quality of instruction as well as the extremely close relationship between the candidate and the instructor. Personal attention was paramount, as it was during the early years of the \textit{Reichswehr}. This sort of give and take exchange began during the First World War when the Germans experimented with storm troop tactics. Without leaders unable to mold and direct small groups the tactics were impossible to implement. Assistant attaché Harlan N. Hartness noted that the tactical instructors at the general staff school “can well be said to be the monarch[s] of their small domain.”\textsuperscript{34} The final phase of the two year program was the assignment to the candidate’s special branch.

Aside from the cadet academies, a new German Military Academy \textit{(Wehrmachtsakadamie)} was created in 1935. Assistant attaché James C. Crockett was assigned to inspect this advanced school. Crockett reported back that the college’s purpose was “(1) to provide a common educational institution for study of national defense problems by higher officers in all branches” and “(2) to study problems of the unity of Army and Nation in war.” The core curriculum revolved around theories of total mobilization.\textsuperscript{35} Such a school was absolutely forbidden during the \textit{Reichswehr} period for

\textsuperscript{33}Ibid., 2.

\textsuperscript{34}Harlan N. Hartness, “The German General Staff School,” Report Number 15,260, April 27, 1937.

the obvious reason that official preparation for war by higher officers threatened the allies. Even more revealing is the college’s emphasis on the problems of unifying the state with the army in a total war. The Reichswehr leadership abandoned all hopes of unity with the Weimar Republic from the outset. The Third Reich was far more reliable a partner; in fact, Hitler’s most appealing trait to the army was his promise to deliver a unified civil body responsive to the military’s material needs.

Considering that the general staff was historically the most important source for Germany’s strategists, and that Seeckt was assigned to the general staff for his entire career, an analysis of the training program general staff candidates underwent is essential. Without question the general staff was the most selective, but its training was no more progressive than the training for field officers. Independent action was still important, and theoretical training was expanded, but officer selection was designed to acquire officers with a demonstrated technical mentality.36 In 1926 an American observer of the second year general staff training class noted the narrow focus of the theoretical training:

The course in strategy is very weak and is really not strategy at all, but rather “grand tactics” and the subjects considered under this head are rather the tactical considerations connected with the movement of . . . armies in the theater of war rather than the underlying political, psychological, and economic grounds which must always be taken into account.37

This observation underscores the fact that the Reichswehr was grappling with multiple missions that contradicted each other. As Spires concludes, “the objectives of the elite,  


37A.L. Conger quoted in Ibid., 151.
mobile shock force are different from those of the cadre army."\(^{38}\) Rather than devote the
time and energy to formulating a rational strategy in a tumultuous and quickly changing
era, Seeckt and his successors concentrated on operational training. Considering the
threats from Poland in the east and France in the west, the Reichswehr was required to
devote its immediate attention to contemporary defense as well as future offensives.\(^{39}\) If a
100,000 man army was to have any chance at all it needed to confront numerous enemies
at once. The predilection towards technocratic training assisted National Socialism’s
penetration into the army. Michael Geyer detailed how ideology became a surrogate for
strategy.\(^{40}\) Technocrats provided no alternative to Hitler’s improvised “blitzkrieg”
diplomacy; what it could provide was valuable technical assistance to someone who
could provide a strategy, no matter how reckless.

Technocratic training was the principal focus in the Reichswehr, but the higher
leadership debated strategy. The reason such healthy debates were infrequent during the
Reichswehr period were the constant internal and external pressures facing the
Reichswehr. There was a brief period during the mid 1920s when Germany was gaining
acceptance in the international community. David Spires details the history of a
memorandum supposedly written on November 26, 1926 intended to address the
possibility of altering military planning according to the new international environment.
Wilhelm Heye, Seeckt’s successor, took advantage of Germany’s relative stability and

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 347.

\(^{39}\) Robert M. Citino, The Evolution of Blitzkrieg Tactics: German Defends Itself

\(^{40}\) Geyer, “German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare,” 572.
attempted to diversify, but not radically alter Reichswehr training. Spires is only partially aware of the memo's content, but it identified the period between 1919-26 as a time of transition. Now that stability has returned to Germany, the memo stated, it was time to reform training so that operational readiness and mastering new weapons were not the only goals of training. By the end of the decade, Kurt von Schleicher, chief of staff of the army in the late 1920s and later chancellor in 1931 until his assassination in 1932, stated that the Weimar Republic, along with relative stability, was here to stay. The Great Depression ended this experiment in Reichswehr strategic thinking.

The degree to which the Reichswehr was willing to overlook obvious conflicts of interest in exchange for greater opportunities to perfect technocratic training is best demonstrated by the extensive cooperation between the Reichswehr and the Red Army of the Soviet Union. James Corum calls the collaboration with the Soviets "a brilliant strategic move." The principal purpose of the Treaty of Rapallo (1922) for the Germans was to provide secret bases and factories where forbidden weapons could be developed and officers could train freely with new weapons.

The unrestrained hatred Seeckt and the Reichswehr had for communism did not change because of Rapallo. The secret military cooperation was mutually beneficial, and given the "pariah" status given to postwar Germany and Soviet Russia by the international community, Rapallo seems quite logical. What is most significant, and revealing, is that the Reichswehr did not act alone in establishing a relationship with the Soviet Union. Hans Gatzke, the first historian to have access to the bulk of documents

41Spires, The Career of the Reichswehr Officer, 319.

relating to the Rapallo agreements, notes that "the whole German government and not merely its military branch was actively involved in the collaboration with Russia." This has much to do with the fact that domestic threats to the Weimar Republic were more pronounced on the left than on the right. As chapter four demonstrates, the Weimar Republic could rely on the army to control the right, but needed the Reichswehr to combat the left. If the Reichswehr wanted collaboration with Russia then it expected and received the support of the government.

The obvious practical gains of cooperation with Russia can not be overstated for a material starved Reichswehr stressing technocratic training. There is a strong argument supporting Corum’s assertion that Rapallo was also a solid strategic move. During the First World War Seeckt was stationed first on the eastern front, where the Germans experienced tremendous success, and then the western front, where the bloody stalemate was responsible for Germany’s defeat. Seeckt did not fear the Soviet Union. For one, it was as isolated and threatened by the major powers as Germany, and secondly, Germany defeated Imperial and Soviet Russia once before. Seeckt’s major concern was France, and dividing the historic alliance between France and Russia was the key to liberating Germany from its historic strategic nightmare of encirclement. Seeckt expressed his hope for an alliance with Russia as early as 1919, when he was the head of a general staff without an army:

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Britain and France fear the combination of the two land powers and try to prevent it with all their means -- hence we have to seek it with all our strength . . . . Whether we like or dislike the new Russia and her internal structure is quite immaterial. Our policy would have to be the same towards a Tsarist Russia or towards a state under Kolchak or Denikin . . . . Now we have to come to terms with Soviet Russia -- we have no alternative.\textsuperscript{44}

Despite his hatred of communism, in this instance Seeckt proved himself to be an able strategist. As a result of the treaty not only was the Reichswehr training with real tanks on open country and its pilots were flying Russian and salvaged German planes free from prying eyes, the Reichswehr also neutralized one of Germany's greatest postwar threats. However, Germany's entry into the League of Nations in 1926 and the temporary necessity to abide by the standards of the international community unraveled a mutually beneficial relationship beyond repair.\textsuperscript{45}

The trend toward mechanization, which Rapallo facilitated, was obviously welcomed by the technologically sophisticated Seeckt even if the financial and legal resources were lacking. As early as 1921 Seeckt oversaw tank exercises performed in the Harz mountains of Germany.\textsuperscript{46} By 1929, the tank was the axis around which all modernization revolved.\textsuperscript{47} Reichswehr and Wehrmacht training was naturally predisposed

\textsuperscript{44}Hans von Seeckt quoted in Carsten, \textit{The Reichswehr and Politics}, 68. Kolchak and Denikin were former Russian Imperial army officers serving as generals for the White Armies. They were supported by the British and French during the Russian Civil War. See Albert and Jean Seaton, \textit{The Soviet Army: 1918 to the Present} (New York: Meridian, 1986), 27-56.

\textsuperscript{45}Ibid., 198.

\textsuperscript{46}Lewis, \textit{Forgotten Legions}, 18.

\textsuperscript{47}Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare," 558.
to independent mechanized units because of the army's experience with small unit tactics and the infiltration tactics of the First World War. Speed, mobility, and improvisation were the traits of what became known as "blitzkrieg" tactics. As stated above, German officers were encouraged to act independently, and this tradition easily transferred to the technological battlefield. Many successful tank officers, men like Heinz Guderian and Erwin Rommel, began their careers in the infantry. Infantry schools constantly prepared officers to deal with the unexpected. Truman Smith observed that infantry tactics were taught in units and not schools: "Courses seem to have been repeatedly and suddenly improvised to meet an emergency situation and then just as suddenly discontinued when the emergency passed." By resurrecting and supplementing storm troop tactics, Reichswehr training was designed to learn from the past and apply those lessons to the future. The problem was that legitimate security in the present was untenable, and by rearming to equal Germany's former enemies, legitimate security in the future was also jeopardized.

The major technical developments and tactical debates conducted both at home and abroad were the subject of much of Germany's military literature. As stated in the introduction of this thesis, continuing education is a hallmark of professionalism. The debates and topics covered in military journals is an example of continuing education. Although it is difficult to see a significant change in training between the Reichswehr era and the Wehrmacht, the tone and content of some of Germany's notable military journals changed dramatically. An examination of military journals throughout the interwar period suggests the persistence of technocratic training and a preoccupation with

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rearmament. This is hardly surprising given what we know about officer training after 1935, but what distinguishes journals published during the *Wehrmacht* period is the blatant infiltration of self-congratulatory National Socialist propaganda. After reading German military journals during the *Wehrmacht* period the readers are left with the impression that the future of the profession depended on the National Socialist leadership.

Given the importance of German military literature for the army, the integration of the historically significant journals into the National Socialist agenda is startling and revealing. Since the Prussian reforms of 1807-1815, military journals have been an important part of the officer corps' theoretical training. The *Reichswehr* period, since it followed a horrendous military defeat, was especially rich for military writers. Gunther Blumentritt, a German general during the Second World War, wrote that the period between 1919 and 1932 witnessed "more freedom, a super abundance of literature, but too extended and often of inferior quality." The oldest and most respected military journal was *Militär Wochenblatt* (Military Weekly). Ever since 1815 *Militär Wochenblatt* contained articles on personal training, minor tactics, training recruits, weapons developments, officer questions, and exercises designed to prepare officers for exams and promotion requirements. According to Blumentritt, *Militär Wochenblatt* managed to live up to its name as the Independent Newspaper for the German Armed Forces (*Unabhängige Zeitschrift für die Deutsche Wehrmacht*). However, the transition from the *Reichswehr* to the *Wehrmacht* was too much for the conservative journal to

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50 Ibid., 5.
ignore. Along with a host of other journals, *Militär Wochenblatt* succumbed to National Socialist influence.

Comparing issues of *Militär Wochenblatt* from 1931 and 1938 is startling. The different formats alone speak volumes. The cover of the October 4, 1931 issue, like decades of issues before it, is nothing but the title and the lead article. In this case the article addresses the expectations for casualties in future wars dominated by mechanized weapons. The belief was, as one would expect, that technology would greatly reduce future casualties.\(^5\) The rest of the journal contains the week’s exercises, answers to previous exercises, and other purely military subjects of interest to officers. Issues dating back to 1900 are virtually identical to this 1931 issue published near the end of the *Reichswehr* period.\(^2\)

In stark contrast is the April 15, 1938 issue of *Militär Wochenblatt*. The cover is a colorful red, black and white displaying the German Adler gripping the National Socialist swastika. The April 15th issue is a “special issue” because it was the week of Hitler’s birthday. The cover includes a photograph of Hitler, the Supreme Commander, Herman Göring, Commander-in-Chief of the Air Force, Werner von Fritsch, Commander-in-Chief of the Army, and Erich Raeder, Commander-in-Chief of the Navy leading a military inspection. The first article is a weekly update of the political situation around Europe and the world. Next, the editor in chief, D. Wetzell, offers congratulations to Hitler on the occasion of his birthday after describing all the wonderful things that have happened


\(^2\)The U.S. Army War College’s collection goes back to 1892.
to the army since Hitler's assumption of power.\textsuperscript{53} Politics was largely ignored in older issues of \textit{Militär Wochenblatt}, but the issues since roughly 1934 stressed political developments inside and outside of Germany. Whereas the 1931 issue features authors exclusively from the army, the 1938 issue has a third of its articles written by officers of the \textit{Schutzstaffeln (SS)}.\textsuperscript{54} Practice exercises and weapons systems figure prominently, but the 1938 issue goes into greater depth with new weapons. As Blumentritt noted about \textit{Militär Wochenblatt} during the \textit{Reichswehr} era "much was theory because the small army of 100,000 men with outdated weapons did not offer much."\textsuperscript{55} Consequently, the flashier format of the 1938 issue compared to the 1931 issue is matched by more intriguing content for officers seeking the inside look at the weapons they could utilize currently, and would be required to utilize in the future. In short, the technocratic flavor of \textit{Militär Wochenblatt} was a constant between the \textit{Reichswehr} era and the \textit{Wehrmacht}, but the \textit{Wehrmacht} issues allowed political and ideological material to permeate the journal. Ironically, \textit{Militär Wochenblatt} continued to refer to itself as an independent newspaper.

Further implications of the infiltration of National Socialist influence into once purely military arenas are discussed in chapters three and four, but let it be said here that technocratic training allowed National Socialism to flourish. Strategic thinking was virtually nonexistent within the \textit{Reichswehr} because the formulation of a rational strategy would require the \textit{Reichswehr} to acknowledge the permanence of the Treaty of Versailles

\textsuperscript{53}D. Wetzell, "Zum 20. April 1938," \textit{Militär Wochenblatt} 42 (April 15, 1938), iii.

\textsuperscript{54}SS authors are featured on pages 2688 and 2691 in ibid.

\textsuperscript{55}Blumentritt, "Military Literature," 5.
and the reality of the postwar international arena. These were sacrifices the Reichswehr's highest leadership was unable to make, so technocratic training was stressed for preparation for that day when the artificial restrictions of Versailles would be dismantled. Michael Geyer notes that “in all conflicts between Hitler and the general staff the struggle over ways and means was much more intense than struggle over goals.”$^{56}$ The Reichswehr was both unconcerned with goals and unprepared to debate them by virtue of its technocratic training. James Corum insists that “if the performance of the Wehrmacht in World War II is taken as a standard of military effectiveness, then Reichswehr officer training must be judged as first rate.”$^{57}$ This is a myopic view analogous to the mentality of the Reichswehr. Battlefield performance is not the measure of officer training. The circumstances that bring an army into battle in the first place are more relevant, and Reichswehr training created officers unable and unwilling to question Hitler’s disastrous drive toward a war Germany could never win. Seeckt embarked on a mission as great as Scharnhorst’s one hundred years earlier, but Seeckt and his successors forgot Scharnhorst’s warning that “study of detail must never be allowed to cloud the picture as a whole.”$^{58}$

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$^{57}$Corum, The Roots of Blitzkrieg, 84.

$^{58}$Gerhard von Scharnhorst quoted in Spires, The Career of the Reichswehr Officer, 150.
CHAPTER III

IN SEARCH OF AN IDENTITY: THE OFFICER CORPS FROM THE COLLAPSE IN

1918 TO THE THIRD REICH

What do we believe in? you ask. Nothing besides action. Nothing besides the possibility of action. Nothing besides the feasibility of action . . . . We are a band of fighters drunk with all the passions of the world; full of lust, exultant in action. What we wanted, we did not know; And what we knew, we did not want! War and adventure, excitement and destruction. An indefinable, surging force welled up from every part of our being and flayed us onward.

Ernst von Salomon,
Freikorps leader

The officers calling shall be that of a lifetime . . . . We shall see that it [the Reichswehr] shall not be a haven for questionable elements of the population . . . .

Wehrgesetz (Military Law)
March 23, 1921

The virtually complete annihilation of the German officer corps during the First World War coupled with the rapid promotion of junior officers and NCOs during the final stage of the war prevented the reestablishment of the officer corps’ institutional culture during the interwar period. Even before the war the officer corps was a far more heterogeneous group than one would think, although the powerful symbolism of the Prussian tradition and its unifying features were very strong until 1914. The officer corps, as detailed in the second chapter, threw itself into the business of modernization and technical education as a means of preparing for the technological battlefield.

Although this brand of training was unsuited for the minuscule Reichswehr, technocratic training did preclude grappling with the even more elusive goal of reestablishing an
identity. By examining officer selection, the attempted resurrection of the Prussian tradition, the extensive ties between the Reichswehr and paramilitary groups, and the dynamics of rearmament, it becomes clear that the Reichswehr's identity, like the republic it served, was constantly in flux. Only when National Socialism restored stability to Germany did the officer corps have a sense of its place in society. Unfortunately, this position was, on the outside very prominent, but within the context of the Third Reich the officer corps was a prominent cog in the National Socialist machine.

The greatest pillar of the officer corps' identity was its extensive links to the nobility. The suggestion that the officer corps was the rightful domain of the impoverished Prussian nobility, or the Junkers, is an enduring myth. Certainly in the eighteenth century, the age of Frederick the Great, officers were, if not Prussian nobles, nobles from other European families. Historically the nobility was the greatest threat to the monarch, so tying the nobility to royal service was an effective method for providing **internal** security. It was, in fact, a method of state building. The nobility was not so easily bought however; Frederick the Great devolved military authority to the officers so that each officer was responsible for his company. The officer was a military entrepreneur tied to the crown and financially dependent on the military profession. With industrialization the role of the officer-noble was solidified. Alfred Vagts notes that "the nobleman would be forced to behave himself because if he failed in the army, he could not take up other employments, like the bourgeois, or find refuge even in his father's house."1 Staving off the bourgeois tide was unrealistic, and by the time of unification in 1871, the bourgeois were the most patriotic elements in European society. Opening up

the officer corps to other classes did not correspond with a more responsible and integrated military. Sociologist Morris Janowitz noted the great irony in expanding the base of recruitment for officer corps: "On the basis of the European experiences, particularly in pre-Nazi Germany, there is reason to believe that ‘democratization’ of entrance into the military profession can carry with it potential tendencies to weaken the ‘democratization’ of outlook and behavior."² If we accept Ritter's supposition that militarism is a civilian virtue, then the inclusion of the middle class into the officer corps had a destabilizing effect.

Frederick inextricably linked the officer corps to the crown, and there it remained during the most challenging periods in German history. During the revolution of 1848 the officer corps proved itself not only loyal to the crown, but also effective in preventing social upheaval. As Germany diversified regionally, religiously, economically, and even politically, the officer corps remained the only consistent supporter of the crown. As Gordon Craig notes, officer selection in the Second Reich was “deliberately designed to withhold commissions from persons with unorthodox social and political ideals and to maintain the corps as a bulwark of royal absolutism.”³ At no time was the army more of a state within a state than during the late nineteenth century. The official countenance of the army, and the rhetoric found in the most important military journals reveals just how anachronistic the officer corps was in an increasingly cosmopolitan Germany. Referring to 1848, an 1882 issue of Militär Wochenblatt wrote that “whole masses had declared war


³Craig, The Politics of the Prussian Army, 218.
on God and King; that in these circumstances the army was the only fixed point in the whirlpool, the rock in the sea of revolution that threatens all sides, the talisman of loyalty and the palladium of the prince.  What is most surprising about this sort of rhetoric is that the constitution of the officer corps was far more diverse than the rhetoric would have one believe. The officer corps on the eve of the First World War was noble in attitude only; in terms of origins, education, and status, the officer corps succumbed to the bourgeois tide.

Although the officer corps identified strongly with the nobility, identifying what constituted nobility in Prussia and later Germany is problematic. Ulrich Trumpener reminds us of the difficulty in distinguishing between the historic Prussian nobility and those families granted noble status by the emperor. Trumpener notes that no fewer than 1500 families were ennobled between the late seventeenth century and 1918. These families were not the original Prussian noble families, but commoners by birth who acquired their status through service to the crown. In other words, bourgeois support for the crown was rewarded by noble status and the opportunities for social advancement noble status entails. In 1890, Emperor Wilhelm II wisely opened up the officer corps to the burgeoning middle classes with the following pronouncement:

\footnote{Militärische Wochenblatt quoted in Ibid., 236.}

The increased standards of education of our people make it possible to widen the circle of those who could be considered as recruits for our officer corps. The aristocracy of birth alone can no longer as it did before, claim privileges for itself in providing officers for the army. The aristocracy of character, which has always inspired the officer corps must be preserved unchanged within it. That is only possible when potential officers are drawn from circles where the aristocracy of character is to be found. I look for the men who will build the future of the army not only among the offspring of the aristocratic families of the country and the sons of my gallant officers and civil servants who traditionally have formed the keystone of the officer corps but also among the sons of bureaucratic bourgeois houses in which love for king and country and a heartiest devotion to the profession of arms and to Christian culture are planted and cherished.6

The Emperor’s stress on character was a concern of Hans von Seeckt’s as well. No longer able to rely on social homogeneity for stability, the Emperor, and later Seeckt were forced to rely on something as intangible as “character.” At no time does Seeckt or any other political and military leader define character other than suggesting that a solid education is an indication of a good one.

There is evidence to verify whether or not the Emperor’s intentions were sincere. An impressive statistic is that by 1913 73 percent of the junior ranks (captains, lieutenants, and subalterns) were bourgeois.7 Even more revealing are the dramatic increases made by the bourgeois within the higher ranks. Among the higher ranks (colonels and generals) the bourgeois constituted only 14 percent in 1860. By 1900 that


7Bourgeois is defined as anybody not aristocratic by birth or ennobled before entering the army.
figure jumped to 39 percent, and in 1913, 48 percent. These statistics verifying the increase in bourgeois influence probably have less to do with the Emperor's personal initiative than they do the rapid and dramatic changes in German society since unification in 1871. Emperor Wilhelm II was by no means a liberal; he required that non-aristocratic officers come from the upper middle class (executive level, civil service employees and wealthy landlords). Officer candidate schools in 1892 still maintained automatic commissions for sons of officers, especially ones who were killed in battle. Preferential treatment was also extended to the sons of NCOs and the sons of distinguished civil service servants. It is clear that the Emperor was interested in cultivating a system of rewards for loyalty, but the notion of sustaining military families and rewarding military service from talented NCOs is a Fredrician tradition. Despite whatever demographic changes that occurred within the officer corps, the fact remains that the attitude and institutional culture of the officer corps was very strong. The middle class may have been more aristocratic in attitude than the aristocrats themselves.

The First World War decimated the officer corps, in particular the Prussian segment. A 1921 report on the Reichswehr made note of the number of casualties suffered by each region in 1918. The statistics in Table 2 demonstrate the physical destruction of the Prussian tradition just before a new military structure was emplaced to

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9Detlef Bald, "The German Officer Corps: Caste or Class?" *Armed Forces and Society* 5, no. 4 (1979), 648.

oversee the transition from the Imperial Army to the Reichswehr.

Table 2

Total Losses of Officers in 1918

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prussian</td>
<td>46,815</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bavarian</td>
<td>6,148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Württemburg</td>
<td>2,452</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saxon</td>
<td>3,903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naval</td>
<td>1,783</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This physical decimation corresponded with the diffusion of military authority to previously excluded segments of the population discussed later in this thesis.

The overwhelming challenge facing the fledgling Reichswehr was how to recapture the character and social cohesion of the Imperial Army officer corps in a society without an emperor. After all, historically it was the emperor who set the military’s agenda. Emperor Wilhelm II told the officer corps that “for you there exists but one enemy, namely, my enemy.”" The Emperor’s abdication removed the strongest rallying point for the heterogeneous officer corps. Who or what could replace him? Without a unifying force the obvious divisions (region, class, age, education) became more pronounced.

The allegiance to the emperor was at the heart of the Prussian tradition. To obey the emperor was honorable, and having honor meant having a strong character, and

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having a strong character was a prerequisite for entering the *Reichswehr* as an officer candidate. Seeckt reaffirmed the Prussian tradition when announcing in 1923 that "a soldier's honor does not lie in knowing better or having better ideas, but in obeying."\(^{12}\) Karl Demeter observed the officer corps over the course of three centuries and concluded that "it was a disastrous stroke of fate that the concept of honor held by the Prussian corps of officers, and almost all others in Germany, was so intimately linked with the sovereigns and their service."\(^{13}\) It is unlikely that Seeckt viewed himself as a replacement for the emperor, but many officers considered him just that. Those officers nostalgic for the Imperial Army saw Seeckt's consistent defense of their interests as a continuation of the role the emperor played in the Second Reich, that of a shield for the officer corps against the outside world.\(^{14}\)

While the emperor was important to many, the diversification of the officer corps and its increasingly professional outlook left the new breed of officer ambivalent about the emperor. During the war, as Gerhard Ritter notes, "there was no anti-kaiser movement in either the army or the navy, but the average German soldier did not exactly ‘love’ or ‘venerate’ his sovereign -- he did not really know him."\(^{15}\) Hans Oster, a member of the plot to kill Hitler in July 1944, recalled that "during the monarchy it was really a sort of boyish enthusiasm for soldiering that sent us into the Army. It never crossed our minds that the whole regime might collapse one day. Politics meant nothing to us. We

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\(^{13}\)Ibid., 152.

\(^{14}\)Craig, *The Prussian Army in Politics*, 249.

\(^{15}\)Ritter, *The Sword and the Scepter*, vol. 4, 370.
were in uniform and that was all that mattered.'\textsuperscript{16} Professionalism rendered the Prussian tradition anachronistic on one level, but such remnants as the oath of allegiance and the concept of honor remained intact. Marching bands were dispensed with, as was the annual \textit{Kaisermaneuver}. The pomp and circumstance associated with the \textit{Kaisermaneuver} was both forbidden by the new government and a welcome reprieve for the technocrats more concerned with skill and function than parades.\textsuperscript{17} Hitler would later pay respect to the Prussian tradition, but tradition was all that was left. In the final analysis Seeckt was not an emperor substitute, and neither was President Paul von Hindenburg (1921-26), although he enjoyed extraordinary powers granted to the office of the presidency by the Weimar Constitution.\textsuperscript{18}

With or without the Prussian tradition a new identity was required for the military in the postwar era. The military collapse in 1918 left the army completely shattered and divided into armed bands under the nominal control of the general staff.\textsuperscript{19} Significantly, Seeckt was a general staff officer and worked to establish first a Provisional \textit{Reichswehr} and second, to create a new officer corps constructed along modern principles. Without detailing the turbulent years between the collapse and the establishment of the \textit{Reichswehr} in March 1921, although these two years had enormous influence on the


\textsuperscript{17}Geyer, "Professionals and \textit{Junkers}, 90.

\textsuperscript{18}Article 48 gave the President of the Republic "emergency powers," including the ability to suspend of the \textit{Reichstag}. Emilio Willems states that Article 48 created an emperor substitute, but most officers did not invest Hindenburg with this much credit. Willems, \textit{A Way of Life and Death}, 116.

\textsuperscript{19}Geyer, \textit{Military Work}, 35.
Reichswehr's fourteen-year existence, officer candidate selection beginning in the Seeckt years reveals how Seeckt wanted to reestablish an identity. Officer candidates came from four major sources: the Imperial Army, long-service non-commissioned officers, enlisted men, and educated civilians. Seeckt, because he was creating a modern army capable of mastering the technological battlefield, insured that the majority of Reichswehr officers derived from educated civilians.20

The question of the degree of noble influence in the Reichswehr is complicated. First of all, one must be cognizant of who constitutes original nobility and whose family was recently ennobled. Unfortunately, the Rangliste, the source for the most basic statistics for German officers since the late nineteenth-century, does not make this distinction. What we do know, and it is not surprising, is that those groups historically connected to the army remained connected to the army during the Reichswehr period. Given the drastically reduced size of the army, one would expect the nobility, from either stock, to constitute a majority of the officer corps. This was not the case, primarily because there simply were not enough nobles in Germany. David Spires uses the statistic that nobles were 14 percent of the population and 21 percent of the officer corps between 1921 and 1932.21 In this light the officer corps was enormously influential, but this 21 percent was largely concentrated in only two specific branches of the army, the staffs and the cavalry. The noble influence, though still important, was sectoral. Nobles remained concentrated in the general staff during the Wehrmacht period as well, but the cavalry was irrelevant by the end of the Reichswehr. An analysis of Table 3 reveals that

20 Gordon, The Reichswehr and the German Republic, 193.

21 Spires, The Career of the Reichswehr Officer, 27.
in those units that would become most important for the **Wehrmacht** (mechanized troops, infantry, and newer units like communication troops) noble influence was inconsequential.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1920</th>
<th></th>
<th>1926</th>
<th></th>
<th>1930</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Noble</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Noble</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Noble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staffs</td>
<td>770</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
<td>767</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>722</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infantry</td>
<td>1692</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>1480</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>1481</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cavalry</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>50.4%</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
<td>613</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artillery</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>588</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pioneers</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motorized Units</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lines of Communications</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS</td>
<td>3971</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>3739</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>3800</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** Appendix 3 in Demeter, *The German Officer Corps*, 268.

Although the statistics reveal that the officer corps was not dominated by the nobility, it was clear to civilian observers of the **Reichswehr** that officer recruitment was not sufficiently “democratic” enough for a German democracy. The socialist weekly, *Die Weltbühne*, a perennial critic of the **Reichswehr**, challenged officer recruitment in 1926:
The new army is recruited overwhelmingly from the agricultural districts. Peasant boys, who are not eldest sons, go to the corps just as gladly today as they did in the imperial period. That this material cannot appreciably raise the intellectual level of the army and especially of the non-commissioned officer corps, is beyond doubt. The insufficient urban part of the recruitment shows an extremely small percentage of factory workers. Moreover, practically the whole of the recruit material comes from the national Verbände.

Die Weltbühne would probably be happy to know that most factory workers were unwilling to go into a profession that was, in the words of the Military Law, "for a lifetime." The combination of the high educational standards, which despite the assertions of Die Weltbühne, were strictly observed, and the general unpopularity of the officer in postwar German society severely limited sources for officer recruitment. A Reichswehr officer in charge of public relations stated that "the officers, up to then [First World War] the most respected class, fell lower in the public estimation than any paper on the exchange." It is not surprising then, that those groups historically linked to the army were the most fertile ground for officer recruitment while the rest of society was either reluctant or unqualified to serve.

Proof that only the most conservative, but educated social groups were attracted to the Reichswehr is confirmed by the important statistical work of Detlef Bald. Bald, by examining the occupation of the father for officer candidates between 1862 and 1967 (minus the Third Reich years) demonstrates that the Reichswehr had the highest

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22Die Weltbühne quoted in Craig, The Politics of the Prussian Army, 394. The Verbände were all the paramilitary groups that formed after the First World War. Many of them were veterans groups.

23Vagts, A History of Militarism, 411.
percentage of "inbred" officer candidates compared to the Imperial Army and the
Bundeswehr. This is impressive, but one must remember that the Imperial Army had
some 60,000 officers compared to only 4,000 in the Reichswehr. The table below is
taken from Bald's statistical work, but only the Reichswehr years are recreated.

Table 4

Origins of Officer Candidates, 1926-1930

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation of the Father</th>
<th>1926</th>
<th>1927</th>
<th>1930</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Officer</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
<td>54.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper civil servants</td>
<td>41.5%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gutsbesitzer (landlords)</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businessmen</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower civil service</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Based on the origins of officer candidates, one would assume that the identity of the
officer corps was fairly strong. Approximately 80 percent of the officer corps derived
from the professional classes, mostly from officer families. Table 4 tells us only that
officer origins meant little or nothing as far as corporateness was concerned. A major
threat to the officer corps' identity was not recruitment from numerous social classes, but
recruitment on a regional basis. Also important was the process of covert rearmament
and the debate over what purpose rearmament served. Perhaps the most striking aspect of
the officer corps in the interwar period is that, given its relative homogeneity, it never
established an identity.
The fact that officer candidate selection was a regimental responsibility, and therefore a regional matter, was a naturally divisive characteristic for the officer corps. After the First World War the nobility was concentrated in Westphalia, Pomerania, and East Prussia. Therefore, considering the regional nature of officer section one can assume that not only was noble influence sectoral, it was also regional. Regimental selection was a holdover from the Imperial Army, but the Imperial Army had thousands of cadets a year while the Reichswehr was reduced to only 200. Consequently, regionalism was more apparent than before the war. After the disastrous Kapp Putsch in 1921, where numerous senior officers and cadets from the Seventh Military District (Bavaria) participated in the uprising, Seeckt decided that scattering the Reichswehr as extensively as possible would prevent future troubles. As a result of this policy the 100,000 man Reichswehr was divided into 127 garrisons.

Regionalism was a preoccupation among senior leaders as evidenced by the amount of attention Günther Blumentritt devoted to the issue in his post-Second World War studies for the allies. Blumentritt rated Wehrmacht officers based on region, basing his observations on the transition years between the Reichswehr and the Wehrmacht. It is impossible to determine what criteria Blumentritt used to make his judgement, but he was obviously confident in the correctness of his assertions. Blumentritt considered the Prussians the best because the historical tradition associated with their training. The

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24Geyer, "Professionals and Junkers," 86.

25The Treaty of Versailles military articles stated that only 5 per cent of the German officer corps could change personnel every year.

26Spires, The Career of the Reichswehr Officer, 291.
Westfilians-Hannoverians “had to be led with a lighter hand” and with respect to their western principles. The Bavarians, always a problem for German military unity, “were rough, sometimes course, but on the whole good-natured people; they were apt to go from one extreme to another, from acts of violence to sentimentality.”\(^{27}\) Given the degree Bavarian participation in right-wing politics, especially among Bavarian officers and recruits, there may be something to Blumentritt’s haphazard judgments.

Regionalism also created greater opportunities for officers depending on where they were stationed. Education standards were extremely important for officer promotion and assignments, so those officers close to urban areas enjoyed the fruits of their assignment, namely access to universities. Hans Speidel, later to become Erwin Rommel’s chief of staff and eventually the first chief of staff of the *Bundeswehr*, notes that he was able to acquire his doctorate degree in 1923 only because he was stationed in Cologne.\(^{28}\) Seeckt’s successor, Wilhelm Heye established the short-lived “Reinhardt Course” (1928-31), where high-ranking *Reichswehr* officers were sent to the University of Berlin to study liberal arts. Seeckt also dabbled in outside education with his famous “Thursday lectures” from Berlin academics for senior officers interested in “social and political life.”\(^{29}\) There were no comparable opportunities for most of the other 127 garrison in Germany. Correlli Barnett concludes that because Germany was never able to develop a single national military academy capable of standardizing its officer corps

\(^{27}\) Blumentritt, “The Old German Army of 1914 and the New German Army of 1939,” 29-30.

\(^{28}\) Spires, *The Career of the Reichswehr Officer*, 337.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 336. Officers in Munich attended foreign policy lectures.
regionalism plagued the army more than most other European militaries. It is telling then, that one of the first policies implemented by the National Socialists regarding the reorganization of military schools was to require candidates from a particular region to train at a different region. Truman Smith observed that all Kriegschaule cadets from Munich were sent to northern Germany to train and vice versa.

It is important to state that regionalism was merely exacerbated during the Weimar period; historically the German army struggled to standardize its officer selection and training. American observers of German military schools in the late 1890's considered the fact that Bavaria and Saxony had separate War Academies from the Prussian academy to be inefficient and a threat to what one would call "corporateness." There is an indication that the more intellectual officers, usually assigned to administrative or staff positions in Berlin, and the technocratic officer assigned to units in the field held mutual contempt for one another. The average field officer had a limited view towards education. Alfred Vagts quotes a senior field officer who is clearly contemptuous of his Berlin counterparts: "School and the armed forces are interrelated: the general faculties of the good soldier, the physical, mental and moral ones, grow up under the severe discipline of the school. The intellectual type who haughtily smiles over


31Smith, "The Military Education of the German Officer Candidates," 5.


33Geyer, "Professionals and Junkers,"84.
his comrades exertion in gymnastics has no place any more in the school of the future."\(^{34}\)

The corrosive effects of regionalism were exacerbated by the selection process and the excessive influence of regimental commanders and local organizations. The initial application required by prospective applicants included the applicant’s date of birth, state affiliation, religious affiliation, level of education, professional status of father, and personal life history. The parents’ permission and two letters of recommendation attesting to the applicant’s strength of character were also required.\(^{35}\) It appears that much of the application process was a formality because the candidate was already known to the regiment by virtue of local and family connections. The influence of the regimental commander was obviously paramount, but also influential were the numerous veterans groups and patriotic organizations. After the First World War these organizations experienced a renaissance concerning their importance in German society. While much of the interaction between these groups and the Reichswehr will be explored in the fourth chapter, these groups threatened the officer corps identity as professionals by virtue of the groups radical political and social attitudes. The fact that veterans groups were instrumental in officer candidate selection during the Reichswehr period is a crucial, but relatively unexamined fact. How much of a state within a state could the Reichswehr be with connections to those groups that posed the most serious challenge to the Weimar Republic? Seeckt and his successors were in the uncomfortable position of loathing paramilitary groups, but because reserves were forbidden and rearmament was necessary, the Reichswehr was forced to rely on them for potential reserves during war and co-

\(^{34}\)Vagts, *A History of Militarism*, 438.

conspirators for the principal task of rearmament.

The most established and influential paramilitary groups during the interwar period were veterans groups. Since 1786, the year Frederick the Great died, the Kriegervereine, or veterans groups, were established to perpetuate the military past, provide comradeship, and work for collective economic security during trying times. By the time of unification, the Kriegervereine became politically active. As civilian publicists for all things military, the Kriegervereine opposed all Social Democratic initiatives, and on the eve of the First World War, the Kriegervereine were in direct cooperation with the army on the questions of pre-military training for youth and officer recruitment.36 After the war, not surprisingly, the Kriegervereine became increasingly more militant, but they still devoted themselves to their traditional activities of support and aid for fellow veterans. Never was there a time when the Kriegervereine were needed more than during the immediate postwar period. With some 2,250,000 disabled and economically dependent veterans, the Kriegervereine were overwhelmed.37 However, the Kriegervereine never stopped its effective political opposition to the Social Democrats. Indeed, during the war, as James Diehl notes, “the Kriegervereine and Social Democratic organizations faced one another like two hostile armies across an unbridgeable social and political chasm.”38 The Social Democrats, rather than working within the political system, established their own paramilitary groups loyal to the Weimar


37 Ibid., 113.

Republic. The most important of these was the *Reichsbanner, Schwarz, Rot und Gold*.

As chapter four demonstrates, paramilitary politics replaced traditional politics in Weimar Germany, even among those forces that supported the republic. Generally, the major difference between the paramilitary groups and the *Reichswehr* was that the *Reichswehr* found a place within the existing order and the paramilitarists did not.

During the interwar period membership in the *Kriegervereine* reached unprecedented numbers. The most important of these veterans groups was the *Stahlhelm*, or Steel Helmet. In 1922 the *Stahlhelm* had 2.2 million members. By 1930 the membership rose to 2.8 million. More striking than this dramatic increase is the proportion of veterans in the *Stahlhelm* compared to the total number of veterans in other organizations. C.J. Elliott estimates that there were between 3 and 3.5 million organized veterans in Germany out of a total German population of 65 million. Almost three million organized veterans belonged to the *Stahlhelm*. Created on December 25, 1918, the *Stahlhelm* announced to the world that “we hate from the depth of our souls the present state structure, for it blocks the prospect of liberating our enslaved fatherland, of clearing the German nation of the lie of war-guilt, and of gaining the necessary living space in the East.”

Given the influence of the *Stahlhelm* over officer candidate selection at the local level, it is clear that in order for the candidates to be acceptable to the *Reichswehr*, they must also be acceptable to the *Stahlhelm*.

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39Elliott, “The *Kriegervereine* and the Weimar Republic,” 118.


41Carsten, *The Reichswehr and Politics*, 264. Carsten states that the *Stahlhelm* made recommendations to the local regiment concerning officer candidates that were taken very seriously. The system was analogous to an “old boy’s network.”
The most astounding statistic presented in this thesis is that during the interwar period 50 percent of all stockpiles in weapons and ammunition in Germany were owned, or seized by paramilitary groups.\textsuperscript{42} The diffusion of military authority from the elite and exclusive officer corps of the Second Reich to the numerous armed bands of veterans and political activists on the left and the right that dominated the Weimar landscape posed the greatest threat to the Reichswehr’s corporateness. It was the National Socialist’s promise to the Reichswehr that under the Third Reich the Reichswehr would reclaim its exclusive status as sole bearers of arms. This promise attracted the Reichswehr leadership to the National Socialists.\textsuperscript{43}

Since the Reichswehr was forbidden to have any reserves, in the event of war, it would have no chance of waging anything but the swiftest of campaigns. This fact weighed heavily on the leadership and influenced the decision to transform the Reichswehr into a Führersheer, or an army of leaders. The training goal of insuring that NCOs and even the rank and file could quickly assume leadership positions in times of crisis was a unifying program helpful to the establishment of an identity. American observers noted that “company commanders sought every opportunity to be with their NCOs when off duty as it was considered important for officers to become thoroughly acquainted with their NCOs.”\textsuperscript{44} This close working relationship was an indication of the

\textsuperscript{42}Geyer, “Professionals and Junkers,” 99.

\textsuperscript{43}The infamous “Night of the Long Knives” in June 1934, where the National Socialists purged the military branch of the arm, the Sturmabteilung (SA) was initiated partly to convince the army of its future status in the Third Reich.

internal cohesion of the *Reichswehr* in the field of operational training only. The reason NCOs were trained so thoroughly in the first place was to mobilize the millions of already armed Germans who may be sympathetic to the army if not the Weimar Republic.

Paramilitary activity, in James Diehl’s estimation, “became a surrogate for the unresolved civil war that had followed the incomplete revolution of 1918.”

Most members of paramilitary groups were those officers and NCOs unable to remain in the military due to Versailles restrictions. It was the paramilitary groups, usually the remnants of *Freikorps*, that constituted the unofficial civilian army known as the “Black *Reichswehr.*”

The Black *Reichswehr* was sympathetic to the army only because it wanted to see the army overcome the Treaty of Versailles and merge the Black *Reichswehr* with the legitimate *Reichswehr*. The problem was that although rearmament was a common goal for both *Reichswehrs*, Seeckt and his successors were unwilling to grant the paramilitary groups influence in any aspect of *Reichswehr* affairs. Rearmament was illegal, so why not utilize those segments of the population sympathetic to the army for handling the delicate process of deceiving the allies? There were limits to this cooperation. The *Reichswehr* leadership was extremely protective of their professional military establishment, and tainting the officer corps with the likes of Ernst von Salomon, or Ernst Rohm, the SA leader, was not an option. If anything unified the disparate elements within the officer corps during the interwar period it was rearmament. The *Reichswehr* became a savvy interest group, both capable and willing to navigate itself through the

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46 Ibid., 51.
choppy waters of democratic politics if it could win larger budgets and political support for what amounted to illegal activities. Rearmament did provide unity to the Reichswehr, but it also opened the door to the National Socialists, who by virtue of making the conditions for unrestricted rearmament possible, won the loyalty of the Reichswehr.

Rearmament consisted of numerous contradictions that precluded officer corps unity. By breaking the Treaty of Versailles and pursuing parity with the major powers Germany could possibly achieve military security. However, by breaking the treaty Germany would provoke the major powers, who were several years ahead of Germany technologically and numerically. Rearmament intensified in the mid 1920s when Germany appeared to gain acceptance into the international arena, and with that legitimacy, a possible diplomatic solution to the Treaty of Versailles seemed tenable. Michael Geyer described the contradictory attitudes within the Reichswehr regarding rearmament as follows: "The leading officers were extremely afraid of potential wars. While they never hesitated to demand parity for rearmament considerations officers coveted diplomatic advice while rejecting it as soon as 'military necessity' was touched. They were unable to close the gap." Rearmament was unquestionably a priority for every faction in the Reichswehr. There were those officers that supported Seeckt's "army of leaders" approach and those that followed the provocative "nation in arms" school of Joachim von Stulpnagel. Stulpnagel, chief of personnel under Heye's successor, Kurt von Hammerstein-Equord, outlined a guerrilla strategy involving the whole nation in

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times of war.⁴⁸ In either scenario rearmament was a prerequisite, but the purpose for a refurbished army was a contested issue. A familiar pattern emerged in Reichswehr affairs; there was widespread cooperation and unity on technical matters, but when strategy was involved the differences were unmanageable.

Geyer describes the third, and probably the only realistic school within the Reichswehr. Led by Reichswehr general and later Minister of Defense Wilhelm Groener and Kurt von Schleicher, also a Minister of Defense and eventually chancellor, this school called for the integration of military planning and diplomacy.⁴⁹ Presenting their policies in the late 1920s, before the Great Depression and soon after the Locarno Pact (1925) and Germany’s entry into the League of Nations (1926), Groener and Schleicher saw that it was possible for Germany to achieve security within an international context. It was not just the Great Depression that shattered this moderate course, however, it was the fact that the Reichswehr, from its inception, embarked on a massive and illegal (in terms of international convention) plan for rearmament. The existence of radically different strategies underscores the absence of an identity in the Reichswehr.

There were four phases of German rearmament during the interwar period. The first phase began immediately after the military collapse in 1918 and ended in 1920. In this phase the dispersed army worked to hide weapons stockpiles and heavy weapons, especially aircraft, from the allies. A Central Intelligence Agency study notes that “militarily this was insignificant; politically and organizationally it was important because


⁴⁹Ibid.
it signaled the willing collusion among key politicians, soldiers, and industrialists and their subordinates." In the second phase, between 1920 and 1926, the *Reichswehr* continued to dodge the sluggish Inter-Allied Control Commission (ICC). This period was the most dangerous, but the ICC was unwilling to confront the *Reichswehr* over violations of a treaty many ICC members believed to be unfair to Germany in the first place. The third phase was between 1927 and 1935, when the *Reichswehr* was free from the ICC and merely had to fulfill its obligations to the Treaty of Versailles. The last phase, 1935-39, was Hitler’s blatant violations of Versailles and a period of overt, and one should say, exaggerated rearmament. Rather than hide rearmament Hitler preferred to glorify it as a means to celebrate his own regime. Hitler preferred to ignore the extensive gains made during covert rearmament because it seemed more impressive to suggest that the *Wehrmacht* was the product of a few short years under National Socialism and not two decades of intense *Reichswehr* activity.

Rearmament depended on a willing civilian population. The Black *Reichswehr* comprised the disbanded Freikorps as well as various "work groups," or *Arbeitgemeinschaften*. The principal task of the work groups, in exchange for training, was to hide arms. It is perhaps no surprise that Bavaria was where most cooperation

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51 Ibid., 5.

between the Reichswehr and militarized civilians occurred. As early as 1921 the Reichswehr covertly trained members of the Freikorps and work groups. Not every region turned a blind eye to the patently illegal cooperation between the Reichswehr and paramilitary groups. East Prussia, the most loyal state to the Weimar Republic, consistently and effectively crushed the secret mobilization plans for paramilitary groups. A 1926 report from the Minister of Interior Grzeswinski concluded that “the organization in practice amounts to a cooperation of the Reichswehr and the paramilitary Verbände of the right, the negative, if not openly hostile attitude towards the republic is well known.” Numerous other examples like this, and there was constant interaction between the Reichswehr and the paramilitary groups, challenges the notion that the Reichswehr was politically isolated.

In the view of the top leadership the threat to the Reichswehr’s internal cohesion appeared less important than rearmament. The career officer frowned upon the paramilitary groups because they were a constant reminder that the Reichswehr was not the exclusive caste of arms bearers that the army was supposed to be in Germany. Francis Carsten observes that “to the Reichswehr officers . . . the Free Corps men were political adventurers and semi-bolsheviks, who had not existence and no future.”

54Ibid., 229.
55In G.W. Nusser von Horst’s Konservative Wehrverbände in Bayern, Prüszen und Österreich, 1918-1933 (Munich: Nusser Verlag, 1973), Horst meticulously notes the links between the Reichswehr and the dozens of paramilitary groups in Germany and Austria. Bavaria was the site of most activity because local politicians relied on paramilitary groups for support, but the activity was just as extensive in Prussia.
56Carsten, The Reichswehr and Politics, 169.
Reichswehr integrated itself into democratic politics because it was necessary to play politics in order to acquire large budgets and political support for rearmament.\textsuperscript{57} In the end not only did the Reichswehr have to cooperate with the "semi-bolsheviks" constituting the paramilitary groups, but the price for rearmament during the Third Reich was the integration of the paramilitary groups into the shiny new Wehrmacht.

National Socialism did nothing to foster an identity for the officer corps; in fact, it thrived on the absence of a strong identity. The interaction between National Socialism and the army began soon after the military collapse. The drastic reduction of the army from a veritable "nation in arms" to the select 100,000 left a huge population of veteran officers and soldiers bitter and resentful towards the Weimar Republic, and even the Reichswehr. Some of these veterans drifted into the paramilitary branch of the National Socialist Party, the SA. Ernst Röhm expressed the mentality of his comrades after hearing news of the armistice in 1918: "I herewith state that I no longer belong to this nation. I only remember that I once belonged to the German army."\textsuperscript{58} The culture of men like Ernst Röhm and is the subject of chapter four, along with the pervasive infiltration of National Socialist propaganda into the officer corps. There were a myriad of uncontrollable factors that prevented the establishment of an identity. Regionalism prevented cohesion, and rearmament transformed the officer corps into an interest group with little on its agenda other than technical proficiency. The Prussian tradition, minus an emperor, had limited utility, and the diversity of the officer corps was such that the Prussian tradition would have little influence. The officer corps was not looking for

\textsuperscript{57}Maier, "The Vulnerabilities of Interwar Germany," 99.

\textsuperscript{58}Ernst Röhm quoted in Fried, The Guilt of the German Army, 72.
Hitler, but it was looking for an end to the domestic turmoil that prevented the conditions for rearmament.
CHAPTER IV

A STATE WITHIN A STATE?

THE OFFICER CORPS AND GERMAN SOCIETY

What demand do I make of the state? Love of the army.

Hans von Seeckt, 1930

What the German people owes to the army can be briefly summed up in a single word: everything.

Adolf Hitler, 1923

It is perfectly logical to expect that an officer corps as technocratic and exclusive as the German officer corps during the interwar period would act as a state within a state, seeking isolation from the messy democratic politics of the Weimar Republic. To an extent, the Reichswehr was apolitical in that it chose not to involve itself in Reichstag affairs, except during the brief tenure of Kurt von Schleicher in the last two years of the Weimar Republic. The interaction between the Reichswehr and German society was significant in the realm of high politics because the Reichswehr hid its affairs, but by virtue of the Reichswehr’s connections to paramilitary groups, the Reichswehr directly contributed to the disturbed political culture of the Weimar Republic. Examining the army’s representation in Weimar culture is valuable for understanding the degree to which militarism infected a large number of Germans. Mainstream culture revered Germany’s military past, and as National Socialism consolidated its hold over German society, the army grew in stature. All of this was welcomed, and on some occasions facilitated by the army. On the eve of the Second World War the officer corps may not have consolidated an identity, but it did have a purpose, and this was readily accepted as a
As stated in the introduction, the Weimar Republic owed its existence during those first tenuous years to an alliance with the army. From the outset the army was, as it had always been, a pillar of the state. In 1919, Friedrich Ebert, the Social Democrat President of the Weimar Republic, found that the greatest threat to his socialist government came from the left and not the right. The German communist party saw the military collapse as its chance to bring the Bolshevik Revolution to Germany.\(^1\) Wilhelm Groener, a member of the general staff and a protégé of Erich Ludendorff, approached Ebert about the future of the army in the new state. Ebert, desperate to conserve his government, made a pact with Groener; if the army would suppress the communists then Ebert would insure that the army would be allowed to not only survive, but thrive under the new republic.\(^2\)

The decisions made by the remnants of the army’s leadership during the first few months after the military collapse in 1918 were crucial for the future position of the Reichswehr in German society. Groener had to accept the reality that the army was negotiating from a weak position by virtue of its defeat and the inevitable oversight of the allies once the peace was signed. The army would have to integrate itself into the republic even if the majority of returning soldiers was far from sympathetic to the new political situation. Paul von Hindenburg, the originator of the “stab in the back” legend,

\(^1\)Leaders of the Spartacus Revolt of November 1918 stated that now was the time when history vindicated Marx and Germany was ripe for revolution. See the “Spartacus Manifesto” in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, eds. *The Weimar Republic Source Book* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 37-38.

\(^2\)Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army*, 348.
or Dolchstoss, had harsh words for Groener during his feverish negotiations with the Ebert government. Upon hearing that the army would have to be completely reorganized to comply with the responsibilities and limitations of an army in a democracy, Hindenburg snapped, “What do these people ask? That I should tear off my insignia that I have worn since my youth? That I should surrender my sword that has served my king and Fatherland through three wars? Tell Herr Ebert that I do not recognize the decision of the Congress . . . [and that] I will fight it to the last ditch.” The fact that Groener was able to conclude an alliance given Hindenburg’s initial response is a testament to his personal skill, but it would take nearly four years before the army was capable of being identified as a single entity. In August of 1919, the Provisional Reichswehr, and later the Reichswehr, swore the following oath: “I promise to behave as a brave and honorable soldier, to consecrate all my strength at every moment and in every place to the defense of the German Reich, to protect the government established by the people, and to obey my superiors.” This oath, unlike the ones that preceded it, and certainly unlike the one that came after it, was ignored completely by the bulk of the officer corps.

After the military collapse in 1918, the army was nothing more than a collection of armed groups under the nominal direction of the general staff. With the Freikorps

3Paul von Hindenburg quoted in Robert G.L. Waite, Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany, 1918-1923 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 9. The “stab in the back” legend was born when Hindenburg testified to the Reichstag on November 18, 1919 that the German army was not to blame for defeat; it was the socialist government. See “The Stab in the Back” in Kaes, The Weimar Republic Source Book, 15-16.


5Geyer, Military Work, 35.
embroiled in military adventures abroad, semi-organized veterans groups bitter and resentful towards the republic, and local politics, especially Bavarian, threatening to overwhelm the Berlin leadership, the atmosphere was ripe for rightist revolution. It was during the most crucial moments of the Weimar Republic’s early existence that Hans von Seeckt and the general staff emerged as the moderate force in the army, unwilling to commit treason, but unwilling to obey its republican masters. Seeckt’s actions during the early Weimar years, specifically the Kapp putsch in 1920, were calculated and designed to preserve the unity of the army. The fate of the republic was secondary; if it was worth preserving it was only because it served the army’s interests. Without getting bogged down in the chaotic events of the early 1920s, for the purposes of this thesis it is useful to dissect Seeckt’s decisions and evaluate his instructions to the Reichswehr officer corps.

Seeckt saw the Kapp putsch as the opportunity to consolidate the army into a single entity under his direction. To achieve this, Seeckt played politics by guaranteeing to the weak republic that his officer corps would stay out of politics.

The various putsches that plagued Germany were conducted by right-wing groups with ill-defined agendas revolving around a “people’s war” against France and Bavarian particularism. A putsch is a specific type of revolution. Raffael Sheck defines the putsch as “the overthrow of a legitimate government by a small and usually armed group from the outside as opposed to a coup d’etat, which is carried out by the government elite.”

The Kapp putsch was a combination of an anti-republican revolt and a Bavarian populist uprising. The local flavor of the putsch, however, was born out by the actions of the

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Provisional *Reichswehr*. Where the population supported the republic, like Prussia for example, the *Reichswehr* was loyal, but in Bavaria, where the republic was universally despised, the *Reichswehr* was sympathetic to the putschists. Seeckt was appalled by reports from the Seventh Military District, known then as the Bavarian *Reichswehr*, that officers and cadets took part in the putsch. This event convinced Seeckt that *Reichswehr* training was a complete failure. It was the legacy of the Kapp putsch that motivated Seeckt to institutionalize “character” in officer candidate training so that loyalty would be insured.

Seeckt may have been appalled by the putsch but his own actions were far from decisive. Preserving the *Reichswehr* meant more to him than preserving the fledgling Ebert government. At a pivotal moment, when *Reichswehr* units were marching on Berlin, Seeckt refused to act. Seeckt told the Minister of Defense Gustav Noske that “troops do not fire on troops. Do you perhaps intend, Herr Minister, that a battle be fought before the Brandenburg Gate between troops who have fought side by side against the common enemy? When *Reichswehr* fires on *Reichswehr*, then all comradeship within the officer corps has vanished.” Seeckt was aware that the army was forever, when chances are that this republic was doomed, but maybe not.

Seeckt was a complicated person, and his idea of what constituted “unpolitical” reveals his complexity. Seeckt spelled out his policy of *überparteilichkeit*, or “above party politics” in his memoir: “The army should be ‘political’ in the sense in which I

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7Gordon, *The Reichswehr and the German Republic*, 139-40.


understand the word . . . it should grasp the conception of the ‘state,’ but it certainly
must not be ‘political’ in the party sense. ‘Hands off the army!’ is my cry to all parties.
The army serves the state and the state alone, for it is the state.”

The state was an ideal to Seeckt, not something transitory. Seeckt often cautioned that “the mistake of all those
who organize armies is to mistake the momentary for the permanent state.” The
momentary state did not impress Seeckt, but he was unwilling to act decisively against it.
Seeckt needed stability, and having his officers carousing with the likes of Hitler and
other rightist brigands in Bavaria was unacceptable.

Seeckt’s non-committal stance was a manifestation of his attitude toward the role
of the army in the state. It was dangerous to take sides because of the unstable nature of
German politics, but it was also ignoble for the army to play politics. Those officers who
dirtied themselves with Weimar politics were a threat to Seeckt’s carefully crafted path
for the Reichswehr. Seeckt acted quickly in the wake of the Kapp putsch to purge all
idealologies from the Reichswehr’s ranks. This “house cleaning” marks the end of the
Provisional Reichswehr and the birth of the professional Reichswehr undergirded by the
Military Law passed in March 1921. It is no coincidence that the Military Law assures
that the Reichswehr is to be free from “questionable elements of the population.”

In a speech delivered to officer candidates in Munich, Seeckt announced a zero-tolerance
policy for political activity from officers:

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10 Seeckt, Thoughts of a Soldier, 80. Emphasis in the original.


Political quarrels within the Reichswehr are incompatible with both the spirit of comradeship and with discipline and can only be harmful to military training. We do not ask the individual for his political creed, but we must assume that everyone who serves in the Reichswehr from now on will take his oath seriously. Those who do not condemn the unfortunate attempt made during the month of March at overthrowing the government, and those who still believe that a repetition would end in anything but new misfortune for our people and for the Reichswehr should decide on their own that the Reichswehr is not for them.\(^\text{13}\)

On the question of obeying the Treaty of Versailles, publicly Seeckt stated to his angry officers, "you must view the situation with clear eyes. There can be no one who feels it more painfully than I; but it must be, we must bear it."\(^\text{14}\) Of course, and it was well-known inside and outside of the Reichswehr, "bearing it" meant a massive program for clandestine rearmament. Time and time again Seeckt's words do not correspond with his actions, or more precisely, he was so careful in choosing his words that almost any action taken is explainable. The political activism within the Reichswehr was thwarted, but given the powerful legacy of the Freikorps movement and the fact that many such units became the cadre for future Reichswehr units, the sympathy for rightist movements and their paramilitary branches was never completely extinguished.\(^\text{15}\)

The culture of the men who comprised the Freikorps was shaped entirely by the First World War, specifically the experience of the trenches. Most of the charismatic officers who formed Freikorps were storm troops whose understanding about life was

\(^\text{13}\)Hans von Seeckt quoted in Craig, The Politics of the Prussian Army, 386.

\(^\text{14}\)Ibid., 392.

\(^\text{15}\)Harold Gordon traces the growth and fate of every Freikorps in Germany in the appendix to The Reichswehr and Politics. Practically all of them were integrated into Reichswehr regiments.
limited to the war and all of its horror. These men were not disillusioned by war, but rather, they were the breed of soldier who embraced it. The Freikorps soldier missed war because it formed his character and gave him a purpose. The Weimar Republic, in contrast, was a foreign country. The memoirs and ramblings of First World War veterans and Freikorps members alike paint a disturbing portrait of the type of individual who joined the myriad of paramilitary groups in Weimar Germany. Significantly, the literature of the Freikorps found an influential audience in the National Socialists. To an extent, the Freikorps culture was an integral part of Weimar culture. According to numerous contemporary commentators, the militarism found in so many books and films was the heart of mainstream Weimar culture.

Perhaps the most eloquent and prolific storm troop veteran writing in interwar Germany was Ernst Jünger. Jünger gave a voice to Germany’s “Lost Generation” far different that other European post-war writings. Jünger exemplified the literary movement known as “Militant Nationalism.” The major characteristics of this movement were the personal experiences of the First World War, the glorification of war, unrestrained nationalism, and a call for renewed imperialism. The characters, real and imagined, fought for the battle, not for victory. Jünger welcomed the destruction of the old world, even when nothing seemed able to replace it. This sort of attitude was obviously threatening to a Reichswehr desperately trying to reclaim the position it once enjoyed in the old world. There is no shortage of passages demonstrating Jüger’s

16Wolfram Wette, “From Kellog to Hitler (1928-1933): German Public Opinion Concerning the Rejection or Glorification of War” in Deist, 83.

dangerous mentality. The following short selection from Jünger’s 1922 short story “Fire” includes most of the themes of Militant Nationalism:

Far behind the gigantic cities, the hosts of machines, the empires, whose inner bonds have been rent in the storm, await the new men, the running, battle-tested men who are ruthless toward themselves and others. This war [First World War] is not the end but the prelude to violence. It is the forge in which the new world will be hammered into new borders and new communities. New forms want to be filled with blood, and power will be wielded with a hard fist. The war is a great school, and the new man will bear our stamp . . . . The festival is about to begin, and we are its princes.18

Jünger concludes the story with the pithy comment that “essential is not what we are fighting for, but how we fight.”19 The question remains, what is to happen to the old princes, the historic German officer corps?

War in Jünger’s literature is the “father of all things,” and violence is a primal urge in all human beings.20 In The Struggle as Inner Experience (1922), Jünger unifies his love of technology with faith in the animal instincts of man. He reconciles the two, and this proved to be most valuable for the National Socialists. One National Socialist commentator stated that Jünger had “liberated us from a nightmare.”21 Jünger writes: “For technology is machine, is accident, the projectile blind and without will. But man is driven to kill by the storm of explosives, iron and steel, and when two people clash in the whirl of a fight, then two beings meet, only one of whom can survive. For these two

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19Ibid., 20.
20Ernst Jünger quoted in Waite, Vanguard of Nazism, 22.
beings put themselves in a primitive relationship with one another, in the struggle for survival in its most naked form." While not a member of a paramilitary group or the founder of a Freikorps, Jünger was the intellectual voice of an unruly population of veterans unsatisfied with the republican status quo, and by default, the tamed Reichswehr in the status quo's service.

The Freikorps soldier displayed thinly veiled disgust for the officer corps. Helmut Franke, a Freikorps member who was able to enter the Reichswehr as an officer, observed about the mentality of the Reichswehr that "we have returned to all the traits of Prussian militarism... but also to its mistakes: its spiritual rigidity, its sobriety, its lack of magnanimity, its incapacity to take revolutionary action." Another Freikorps member turned Reichswehr officer decried the official apolitical line required by Seeckt:

The soldier has the courage to act, but he lacks the political instinct. The politician has the instinct, but he lacks the courage and the willingness to put his life on the line. We must enter politics and try to create a new generation of leaders who unite the courage to act, the character, the firmness and snake-like cunning of the politician. This is the task of the generation of the trenches. In the army this was not to be carried out: we want to try outside... to prepare the way for the National Dictatorship!"

Clearly this sort of sentiment was exactly what Seeckt tried to eradicate after the Kapp putsch. The "generation of the trenches" was so massive that it entered the dozens of paramilitary groups, and a fortunate few entered the Reichswehr. The Reichswehr's


23 Helmut Franke quoted in Carsten, The Reichswehr and Politics, 76.

24 Anonymous officer quoted in Diehl, 94.
selection process was imperfect to say the least, and it is difficult to accept the “state within a state” argument given the fact that so many future officers in the Reichswehr were associated with the Freikorps. As one might expect, most officers with Freikorps pasts came from Bavaria.²⁵

The most interesting scholarship regarding the Freikorps movement comes from Klaus Theweleit. Utilizing approximately 250 memoirs, Theweleit deconstructs Freikorps literature and psychoanalyzes the memoirs to conclude that these bands of adventurers were so completely in love with war and a world filled with violence that nothing else seemed to matter. The Freikorps, often times called the “First Soldiers of the Third Reich” by Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, came from the highest social strata in Germany.²⁶ Theweleit notes that in Freikorps literature the love of women and the love for Germany were incompatible, and all things relating to the masses or the Weimar Republic were characterized in feminine terms.²⁷ The hero in Freikorps literature is a political soldier, much like the anonymous Reichswehr officer quoted above. Theweleit is successful in demonstrating a degree of continuity between the culture of the Freikorps and the overt militarism of the Third Reich. On the military level, for example, the Freikorps commander was often called the “Führer.”²⁸ Kurt von Schleicher, the Reichswehr general assigned to integrate qualified veterans into the

²⁵ Waite, Vanguard of Nazism, 48.


²⁷ Ibid., 30.

²⁸ Waite, Vanguard of Nazism, 50.
Reichswehr in the late 1920s, explained that the success of the Freikorps and other paramilitary groups was due to the joy young men received from physical and military training as well as the alleviation of economic hardship. The significance of the Freikorps movement is underestimated when analyzing the Reichswehr officer corps. While the more flamboyant Freikorps commanders remained on society’s fringes, many of the rank and file remained in the Reichswehr, and although making precise comments regarding this relationship is challenging at this juncture, it certainly must be taken into consideration.

More important to this thesis than the intricacies of the Freikorps movement is the public response to the literature produced by Jünger and others. To what extent did German society accept this extremist point of view? Famous socialist journalist Kurt Tucholsky wrote a 1924 piece in Die Weltbühne entitled “The Spirit of 1914” that captures the essence of German militarism in the interwar period. Tucholsky wrote: “The wave of drunkenness which overtook the country ten years ago has left many hung-over people who know no other cure for their hangover than to become drunk again. They have learned nothing.” Wolfram Wette conducted a statistical analysis of German

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30 One of the most fascinating figures of interwar Germany, and one whose paramilitary career spans decades was Gerhard Rossbach. His memoir, *Mein Weg durch die Zeit: Erinnerungen und Bekenntnisse* (Weilburg-Lahn: Vereinigte Weilburger Buchdruckereien, 1950), is excellent proof for Theweleit’s thesis. Rossbach details his cooperation with the Reichswehr in concealing rearmament in *Mein Weg durch die Zeit*, 74-75. A prominent Reichswehr, and especially Wehrmacht figure actively involved in the Freikorps was armor enthusiast, Heinz Guderian.

literature between 1925 and 1935 and discovered that the period witnessed an increase in books with a militaristic theme and a simultaneous decline in books with a pacifist point of view. In 1926 200 books addressing the First World War were published. In 1930 that number doubled to 400. In 1929 there were only 35 books published that could be regarded as pacifist. By 1933 there were only 10. The popularity of All Quiet on the Western Front (1929) was an isolated success.

What is most striking about the popularity of militaristic literature is that it appears to have grown in popularity over time. During those years when the Weimar Republic was supposed to be the most stable is exactly the period when Militant Nationalism was most successful as a marketable literary movement. An interesting case study is Ernst Jünger’s In Stahlgewittern (Storm of Steel), originally published in 1920. In Stahlgewittern was Jünger’s memoir about the First World War. As Table 5 reveals, the peak years of the book’s success were between 1936 and 1940.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Copies Sold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1921-25</td>
<td>18,240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926-30</td>
<td>13,310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931-35</td>
<td>16,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936-40</td>
<td>60,400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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32 Wette, “From Kellog to Hitler,” 89-90.

33 Ibid., 88-89.
A book written about the First World War is three times more popular fifteen years after the war than it was three years after the war. This increase is probably due to the National Socialists’ endorsement of Jünger’s work. After comparing the number of copies sold of other non-fiction books compared to *In Stahlgewittern*, it appears that Jünger’s work had more than a respectable audience.

Literature was popular, but film was the most popular medium in Germany.\(^{34}\) German films were among the most experimental in the world, but the types of films that filled the movie houses were either romantic adventures or historical sagas with militaristic overtones. Known as the “theater of war” by foreign observers, German cinema portrayed the rebel, the war hero, and the dynamic leader as subjects worth revering.\(^{35}\) The most important films for describing the militaristic state of German society and its love of all things military were a series of films about Frederick the Great. Siegfried Kracauer, an expert on German film in the Weimar years, believed that studying the topics and style of German cinema before the Third Reich is a useful tool for understanding why the German people were receptive to National Socialism.

Significantly, Kracauer notes that the military films were the most popular. The 1922 film *Fridericus Rex*, according to Kracauer, was “pure propaganda for the restoration of the monarchy.” Regarding the whole series of films, Kracauer concludes that “these films presented the rebel as the pupa of the dictator, and approved of anarchy inasmuch as it made authority desirable . . . . The moral of the *Fridericus* films was to submit

\(^{34}\)Barry A. Fulks, “Walter Ruttenau: The Avante-Garde Film and Nazi Modernism” *Film and History* 14, no.2 (1984), 22.

\(^{35}\)Wette, “From Kellog to Hitler,” 91.
unconditionally to absolute authority.”

Contemporary observers agreed with Kracauer. The influential socialist weekly, Die Weltbühne, reviewed Fridericus Rex and was most interested in the audience reaction:

The attraction for the public is three fold: the splendor of the military past; the analogy to the present; and the appearance of the great king who is the primal image of the strong man for whom so many long today.

This weakness for the splendor of weapons, for military spectacles, and for the inflammatory marches must be in the people's blood.

The film offers a substitute, and due to its daily repetition, works its effect on substantially broader masses. As soon as Frederick the Great's helmeted battalions march in behind their waving flags, applause breaks out which is otherwise rare in the cinema.

The public indulges an orgy of excitation. It thinks; ah, could we too not do this again, and finally take revenge?

What can we learn from all this? How deeply rooted in the people is the feeling for the military, for glorious history, and for heroes. How dangerous these instincts are, and how ineradicable.

What would surprise the editors of Die Weltbühne, if they did not know already, was that the Reichswehr assisted in the production of Fridericus Rex by providing troops to act as extras as well as other unnamed services. Any cursory examination of the script would have convinced the Reichswehr that making this film would do wonders for its ailing public image. The more German society was excited by war the more it would revere its

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38 Craig, The Politics of the Prussian Army, 121.
warriors, from whatever age. Carl von Ossietzky, the founder of Die Weltbühne, wrote in 1926 that “military uniforms still have their magical effect on the people.”39 No more obvious was this than the popularity of militaristic films. How could the Reichswehr exist as a state within a state even if it wanted to isolate itself given the militarism that infected the German population? Also, why would an organization seeking isolation assist in the production of a movie meant for the masses with an overtly political message? These questions constantly arise after examining the interaction between the army and German society.

The history of the interaction between the army and the National Socialist party did not begin in 1933. The exact point at which National Socialism significantly infected the Reichswehr is difficult to determine only because the interaction between the two began almost immediately after the First World War. Rather than assuming that, by virtue of its elite origins, the officer corps disregarded the National Socialist movement, it appears that the Reichswehr was sympathetic to National Socialism’s social agenda even if the party’s membership was undesirable. Between 1919 and 1921 the Bavarian Reichswehr, separate from the Provisional Reichswehr, was the site of extensive reactionary activity. For example, the Bavarian Reichswehr employed Adolf Hitler to provide political instruction to cadets.40 This startling connection between what would become the Seventh Military District of the Reichswehr and the leader of the National Socialists may be explained away given the chaotic situation of the early years, but it is a


significant occurrence. Hitler experimented with and developed his extremist views under the direction and employment of the Bavarian Reichswehr. Historians identified Hitler's first anti-semitic writing as a report written on September 16, 1919 for a class sponsored by the Bavarian Reichswehr. In this writing, Hitler spelled out an "anti-semitism based on reason" that involved systematic legal discrimination. Why the Bavarian Reichswehr was in the business of employing and legitimizing the likes of Hitler is debatable, but it appears to be a matter of assisting veterans in the postwar world by providing them brief periods of employment when possible.

Hitler's influence was apparently still strong in 1923 when he attempted his own putsch in Munich. On October 30, 1923, Hitler exhorted cadets from the Seventh Military District military academy to take up arms against the government. Not only were the cadets excited; higher officers were also involved. Hitler told the cadets that "the first obligation of your oath, gentlemen, is to break it." His views towards oaths changed over time. Seeckt, for the second time, was forced to clean house in Bavaria. He made it clear to his civilian superiors that "the behavior of the infantry school on 8 and 9 November 1923 is a stain on the honor of the young army." Seeckt quickly moved the academy to the country, and dispersed the rest of the Reichswehr garrisons as much as possible. Distance, however, was not sufficient enough to prevent National Socialism from infecting younger officers in the Reichswehr.


43Ibid., 185.
The most infamous stain on the older army occurred on the eve of the National Socialists first significant electoral gains in 1930. The "Leipzig Trial" of two young lieutenants from Bavaria in September and October of 1930 revealed the extent to which National Socialism infiltrated the ranks. Lieutenants Scheringer and Ludin were tried and convicted for treason after it was discovered that they frequented the National Socialist Party headquarters in Munich. Scheringer and Ludin accepted literature and told Pfeffer von Salomon, a former Freikorps leader and administrator at party headquarters, that "we are determined to revolutionize the officer corps in so far as it is not yet senile, even if we are sent to prison . . ."44 The lieutenants' sentence was light, but the reaction from Minister of War Groener was one of outrage: "It is incompatible with the oath, which the members of the Reichswehr have sworn to the Constitution, if they sympathize with a party which aims at the destruction of this Constitution. For such soldiers there is no room in the ranks of the Wehrmacht!"45 Unfortunately for Groener, there appeared to be plenty of room for "such soldiers." The reaction from the officer corps represented the persistence of the Seeckt tradition: the officer corps was appalled by the audacity of the lieutenants, but it was also sympathetic with young officers' frustration with Reichswehr leadership.46

The attraction National Socialism and other right wing groups held for junior officers represented a constant problem for the Weimar Republic. In 1931 Dr. Julius Leber, a Social Democrat, was alarmed at what he perceived to be extensive National

44Lieutenant Ludin quoted in Ibid., 316.
45Wilhelm Groener quoted in Ibid., 317.
46Ibid., 319.
Socialist influence in the army: “Why has the National Socialist movement been able to find support in the army? Because it has been intelligent enough to offer the young men substitutes for the things the Republic has not been able to offer.” What Leber was referring to was not ideological; only a small minority clung to ideology. Instead, the officer corps was frustrated with limited opportunities for promotion in a 4,000-man officer corps and resentful towards the draconian system of officer dismissal necessary for promotions to occur.

Examining the Reichswehr’s promotion and dismissal policies allows one to conclude that although the Reichswehr attempted to govern its own affairs, the harsh realities for the military profession under the Weimar Republic meant that the officer corps appreciated outside agitation. The Reichswehr’s promotion system was nominally based on seniority, but the leadership wanted to promote qualified younger officers as rapidly as possible. An average officer could expect to wait a very long time between promotions. The most difficult hurdle was the promotion from captain to major. The number of captains in the Reichswehr was 1,098 while majors constituted only 372 positions. The branch with the most promotions were the technical branches while the cavalry had the fewest. It is difficult to see just how unified the officer corps could be given the competition for promotion. On another level, however, the frustration of younger officers assisted the Reichswehr leadership in its illegal activities. Heinz Guderian recalled that “one put up with the slow rate of promotion in view of the generally distressed economic conditions of Germany. Above all, one knew that not the

47Dr. Julius Leber quoted in Demeter, The German Officer Corps, 196.
48Spires, The Career of the Reichswehr Officer, 212.
German government or the high command was at fault, but the Versailles dictate."^49

The dismissal program, or *Verabschiedung*, was the principal object of officers' anger and the best resource for assisting National Socialist agitation. With only 200 positions open a year, 200 dismissals were required, whether the officers terminated were substandard or not. The highly professional and elite officer corps that James Corum and others admire was the result of programs that devastated morale. The National Socialists reveled in castigating Joachim von Stulpnagel, the chief of the personnel office in the late 1920s and early 30s, by giving him the nickname *Der Henker*, or hangman.^[50] A rearmed Germany free from the shackles of Versailles may have pleased the officer corps on a political level, but it meant a great deal more on a professional and financial level.

The *Reichswehr* was fighting a losing battle against the militaristic German society, and in many instances it participated in this militarism. After the transition period from the Provisional *Reichswehr* to the *Reichswehr*, the leadership was aware of its integral position in the state and grew increasingly more confident in asserting its demands regarding rearmament and domestic stability. Michael Geyer notes that in the years leading up to the Great Depression and the political crisis in Germany "it was not any long standing ideological commitment but rather perseverance with these particular goals [rearmament and domestic stability], to which the whole military machinery was geared and which held the military together as a professional body, that led to the radicalization of the military."^[51] Recounting the political events that assisted National

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[^50]: Spires, *The Career of the Reichswehr Officer*, 93.

[^51]: Geyer, "Professionals and Junkers, 112.
Socialism’s rise and consolidation is not the purpose of this thesis, but it is useful to examine what success National Socialism had in integrating the officer corps into the machinery of the Third Reich.

While it is true that Hitler had to win the army’s trust, his strategy for overcoming any opposition from the officer corps was giving them exactly what they wanted -- conscription. Hitler had such faith in National Socialism and its acceptance among the general population that, he believed, by simply flooding the ranks with ideologically charged recruits and promoting the existing officers to the positions they found so elusive under the Weimar Republic, he could insure the army’s loyalty. Hitler recalled in 1941: “Once that [conscription] was accomplished, the influx into the Wehrmacht of the masses of the people, together with the spirit of National Socialism and with the ever growing power of the National Socialist movement, would, I was sure, allow me to overcome all opposition among the army forces, and particular in the corps of officers.”

The generation gap that existed between officers commissioned during the imperial and early Reichswehr period and officers commissioned by the end of the Weimar Republic disappeared. Between 1928 and 1930 a number of older Reichswehr officers, many of them veterans of the First World War, retired. As Michael Geyer reveals, what was left was an officer corps “remarkably young, remarkably bourgeois, and upwardly mobile.” By mid-1934 25,000 new officers entered the Reichswehr, nearly six

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times as many officers allowed by the Treaty of Versailles. In exchange for acceptance of Hitler’s power the Reichswehr leadership, headed by Minister of War Werner von Blomberg, fought for the elusive exclusive status as “sole bearers of arms.” On May 21, 1935, Hitler passed the Basic Military Act, which stated simply: “The Wehrmacht is the bearer of arms, and the military training school of the German people.” The officer corps was given what had eluded it for seventeen years.

What Hitler accomplished was domestic tranquility that allowed the officer corps to rearm without having to fear political repercussions at home and abroad. The SA, the army’s rival, was liquidated in 1934 and the SS, at this time, was limited to domestic policing duties. The technocrats within the German officer corps were now its rising stars. By September 1, 1939 Heinz Guderian was the 25th highest ranking officer in the Wehrmacht. In a list of the top 50 German officers between 1924 and 1938 compiled by Telford Taylor, Guderian is no where to be found. Erwin Rommel, one of Hitler’s favorite generals and the youngest Field Marshal in the Wehrmacht, was not even on the 1939 list. The meteoric rise of technocratic officers like Guderian and Rommel are evidence of Hitler’s designs for the army of the Third Reich. It was a tool, and shaping that tool required neither a purge, except a small minority still wedded to rational strategy, nor an intensive selection process. By forging a domestic order geared towards rearmament, the officer corps in the 1930s busied itself with consolidating its gains and

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54 Willems, A Way of Life and Death, 131-32.
55 Fried, The Guilt of the German Army, 293.
56 Telford Taylor, Sword and Swastika: Generals and Nazism in the Third Reich (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1952), 384.
absorbing the wave of new recruits and officer candidates. David Schoenbaum, author of an impressive statistical and social analysis of the Third Reich, wrote that “what held things together was a combination of ideology and social dynamics on a foundation of charisma and terror. As time went on, even ideology became increasingly unnecessary, particularly for a younger generation of true believers. Behind the system was an apparently total lack of alternatives.” The Reichswehr, a product of technocratic training and motivated by the possibility for rearmament, never constructed a viable strategy for the postwar world. The Reichswehr had no alternative to Hitler’s grand designs.

It seems fitting to end this chapter with a glimpse into the army’s representation in Germany after the Third Reich was established. On March 16, 1935 Leni Riefenstahl, the master film maker, brought her cameras to the Nuremberg party rally to film Hitler’s presentation of the Wehrmacht to the German people. The name of her film was Tag der Freiheit -- Unsere Wehrmacht (Day of Freedom -- Our Armed Forces). The day of freedom refers to the official renunciation of the Treaty of Versailles the rally was designed to celebrate, although Versailles was long since abandoned by 1935. Hitler wanted the film to be a public relations victory for both himself and the army. David Culbert and Martin Loiperdinger rediscovered Riefenstahl’s lost film and concluded that “it makes the case for armed strength as the guarantor of peace, presenting an understated message for both career military and skeptical citizens as to the proper role of the armed forces in Hitler’s Germany.” The film visually suggests that “the future, we are assured,

\[57\text{David Schoenbaum, } \text{Hitler's Social Revolution: Class and Status in Nazi Germany, 1933-1939 (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 296.}\]
will be a time of rapid conquest by machines." The fruits of rearmament are celebrated in this film, but the respect Hitler gives his refurbished army provides the frustrated officer corps of the Weimar era what they needed most -- not an identity, but a purpose, a function no one else could serve:

Close-up of Hitler. Lowers his arm, seemingly raised for Hitler salute
"You comrades, carry in your weapons and on your helmet an unprecedented inheritance. You are not . . ."
Medium close-up of cavalry; camera pans to right.
Swastika flags in background.
"something artificially created . . .”
Medium close-up, again from behind.
"which has no past . . .”
Medium close-up, front, of two cavalry men.
"Whatever exists in the German citizen, takes a back seat to the tradition . . .”
Medium long shot of assembled soldiers, profile to the right.
"of what you must embody and can embody in that tradition.”
Close-up of Hitler
“When you stand here, armed with steel and iron, it is because we consider it necessary to rebuild the honor of the German people.”
Hitler thrusts his chin forward, pauses, regains his previous position.
“To the extent that this honor has been in the hands of our soldiers no one in this world has ever managed to take it from us.”
Hitler again thrusts his chin forward.
Applause

Hitler’s rhetoric could not have been more appropriate. By paying respect to the Reichswehr and highlighting the continuity of the German military tradition and the enduring service the army rendered to the state, even when it was unappreciated, Hitler firmly aligned himself with the military. Was this new Wehrmacht to act as a state within

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59 Ibid., 20-21.
a state? Hitler, at least rhetorically, placed the army at the center of the state. This time Seeckt's cautious observation that the momentary state should not be mistaken for the ideal state was ignored by the officer corps. For one glorious moment the army basked in the admiration Hitler and the German people bestowed upon it.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

History will burden these leaders [top German officers] with
blood-guilt if they do not act in accordance with their professional
and political knowledge and conscience . . . . It shows a lack of
greatness and of understanding of his task when a soldier of the
highest rank in times like these sees his duty and task only in the
restricted area of his military assignment, without taking note of
his overriding responsibility to his whole people.

Ludwig Beck
Chief of General Staff, 1935-38

In many respects very little changed for the German officer corps after Hitler
reintroduced conscription and expedited rearmament in March 1935. Only after Hitler’s
"blitzkrieg" diplomacy matured did officers like Beck take decisive action against the
regime and resign. Beck’s noble words are certainly an appropriate evaluation of his
colleagues’ collective stance regarding their support of Hitler. However, one must first
question why Beck waited so long to express his strong opinions, and second, why he was
virtually alone in doing so. Hitler’s strategic removal of the nominally independent
thinking Werner von Blomberg as Minister of War and Werner von Fritsch as
Commander in Chief of the Army in early 1938 is usually seen as a watershed event in
Hitler’s consolidation of authority over the armed forces, but this thesis questions the
significance of any particular event or personality over the trends and developments
evident since the conclusion of the First World War.1 The reasons for Hitler’s relatively
easy absorption of the armed forces into the National Socialist state are a technocratic and

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1Harold C. Deutsch was one of the few historians to place the Blomberg-Fritsch
affair in its proper context. See Hitler and His Generals: The Hidden Crisis, January-
June 1938 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974).
strategically inept officer corps, an officer corps without a recognizable identity and its extensive interaction with a militaristic society during the interwar period. National Socialism was the culmination of this militaristic society and the army's attraction to the material and professional benefits National Socialism promised was perfectly logical.

One indication of National Socialism's infiltration into the officer corps is the inclusion of an officer candidate's birth certificates for parents and grandparents as part of the candidates' application. The purpose of these official documents was to prove the Aryan descent of the candidate. Günther Blumentritt recalled how several officers produced a petition to protest the dismissal of a popular general with Jewish blood after the passage of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935. Blumentritt used this event to conclude that "this example and many others reveal the state of mind prevalent in the officer corps, and that it took a stand against these racial questions, which, in consequence of its own development were alien to its nature." In another isolated instance of inconsequential rebellion, Klaus von Stauffenburg, the officer who tried to kill Hitler in July 1944, stood up in class at the War Academy and demanded an explanation for the dismissals of Blomberg and Fritsch. Reactions to the more egregious intrusions of National Socialism were infrequent, but well-documented. In sum, however, they meant nothing.

This thesis delineates the education, origins, and civil-military relations perspective of the officer corps during the interwar period. Omer Bartov analyzed similar

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2Crockett, "The New German Wehrmachtsakadamie (Military Academy), 5.


trends for the officers and soldiers in the Wehrmacht, Germany’s post-1935 army. His conclusions are startling, and for the purposes of this thesis, instructive. Bartov notes that the Wehrmacht was engaged in a cruel and bitter war on the eastern front which witnessed an unprecedented level of barbarism on the part of the German invaders. The combination of the harsh environment, heavy casualties within the German ranks, and the success of National Socialist indoctrination as a substitute for an institutional identity grounded in the military facilitated the implementation of the National Socialist atrocities against the Russian people. The officer corps of this criminal army was not the result of eight years under National Socialism, but rather, a result of two decades of technocratic training and uncritical thinking regarding the issues of strategy and civil-military relations. National Socialism was the final step in a long journey for the officer corps of the interwar period. Unable to construct a role for itself, and unwilling to accept the one it was legally bound to accept, the Reichswehr found a purpose, if not status, under National Socialism.

Bartov’s analysis of the officers assigned to the three divisions he uses as a sample reveals just how different the origins of the Wehrmacht officers were compared to the members of the Reichswehr officer corps. With a sample of 531 officers, Bartov notes that only 7 percent came from officer families while in 1930 54 percent of

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5Bartov discusses his approach to German history in “Indoctrination and Motivation in the Wehrmacht: The Importance of the Unquantifiable” Journal of Strategic Studies 9, no.3 (1986): 16-34. Bartov notes that statistics are useful, but one must also enter the world of ideas. Literary analysis of letters and propaganda, film criticism, and a creative theoretical approach are equally important as hard data.

Reichswehr officers came from officer families. In the Wehrmacht, the middle class was the largest portion of the officer corps, with 24 percent deriving from the lower middle class. The number of officers who were members of the National Socialist party was extremely high, constituting 29 percent. Significantly, the party members were the most educated. The overall decreased education standards can be explained by the demands of rearment and conscription. The new elites of this officer corps, with only tangential links to the historic German officer corps, were the political officers, the party members with a sound ideological education. As the war progressed, it became clear that the real elites were the SS, and that the army slowly lost its value even as a functional tool.

The officer corps of the Wehrmacht lacked an identity because the nature of the war prevented the maintenance of a sufficient number of officers capable of cultivating an identity. The constant destruction of these “primary groups” as Bartov calls them, helps explain the value of ideology in motivating the junior officers and soldiers to fight with the fanaticism and cruelty witnessed on the eastern front. The Reichswehr did not have war as an excuse for its lack of an identity. The Reichswehr officer corps was overwhelmed by the crushing realities of the Weimar era, namely a vicious security dilemma and an unpopular but necessary alliance with the multitude of paramilitary groups. The only unifying factors within the Reichswehr were the emphasis on technocratic training, and closely related to this training, a common desire for the expensive and illegal weapons necessary to make technocratic training relevant. National Socialism solved the security dilemma by transferring the problem of strategy away from

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7Ibid., 40.

8Ibid., 49-50.
the military to the Reich Chancellery, granted the officer corps exclusive status by eliminating the most influential paramilitary group, the SA, and completed rearmament by providing unlimited funding for weapons. All the while, the National Socialists urged the continuation of the type of training officers had undergone since roughly 1916.

Little has been said about the August 2, 1934 oath of allegiance because, like the Blomberg-Fritsch affair of 1938, the oath was just another check point on the road to disaster. The men behind the oath, the officer corps, were a work in progress spanning two decades. Long before 1934 the officer corps closed its eyes and proceeded with its narrow agenda with little regard for the consequences. Blumentritt’s excuse for the army’s capitulation to National Socialism was that “every army is but a part of its own people.” Blomberg was exasperated by the notion that the army could have acted differently. The masses loved Hitler and “how could we soldiers, who had continuously to deal with the masses, think otherwise?” Stated after the Second World War, these excuses are revealing and beg the question; was the army ever a state within a state? Maybe it would have been better off if it were, but Blumentritt was right, and the Reichswehr was no exception. The officer corps embarked on a course after the collapse in 1918 that made it a significant player in the new republic, and its choices had a lasting effect. The officer corps was neither a victim, a criminal, nor a dispassionate observer; it was the architect of its own destiny.

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VITA

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