

Drums of the Birkenhead is 'n publikasie wat sterk aanbeveel kan word.

— Jan Ploeger.

RAINER WOHLFEIL/HANS DOLLINGER: Die deutsche Reichswehr, Bilder, Dokumente, Texte Zur Geschichte des Hunderttausend — Mann Heeres 1919-1933. Bernard und Graefe Verlag — Frankfurt am Main, 1972, pp. 258 (with fig(s)).

This authoritative, conveniently arranged and particularly detailed military historical publication, stems in the first place from the question which continues to attract the attention of German historians, namely how it could possibly happen that during the period of the Weimar Republic, the democratic parliamentary system could evolve into that of an absolute dictatorship under Adolf Hitler.

It is well-known that as far as loyalty to the Weimar Republic is concerned, there was some discord among the members of the German armed forces [D.: Reichswehr].

Based on this fact, Professor Rainer Wohlfeil has in the past done research and published his findings in the **Handbuch zur deutsche Militärgeschichte 1648-1939** [Freiburg im Breisgau].

The work with which we are here concerned, is the abridged, but richly illustrated reproduction of the aforementioned study by Prof. Wohlfeil.

The first part of this publication deals with the struggle which took place in Germany at the time of, and after the November collapse in 1918 and during the following year, to establish a new armed force on democratic lines known as the "Provisional Armed Force". The fact that this could take place, can be attributed to the military-political co-operation between the Quartermaster-General of the Imperial Armed Forces, Lieutenant-General Groener, and the subsequent President Ebert. The military leaders were striving for political influence, the soldiers were war weary and the subsequent struggle was mainly a straight fight between the politicians and the officers. The old leading combatants who participated in the struggle,

either assisted the Provisional Government to remain in power or combined forces to oust the Socialist Administration (Ehrhardt Brigade *et al*).

The Government, the Prussian Department of Defence and the Central Council of the Labour and Military Boards in turn combined forces to repel attacks such as those conducted by means of hostile free corps, riots and coups d'état [**Spartakus** Revolt, **Kapp Putsch**].

The Socialist Administration triumphed over its communistic, monarchistic and other competitors and during the second half of 1919 the establishment of the Provisional Imperial Force followed. Originally this consisted of an armed force comprising 300 000 men, but in terms of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany could only have at its disposal a maximum force of 100 000 men as at 1 January 1921.

Was the spirit of this force, which is described in detail in Chapter 2, in accord with the ideals which the Republican Administration cherished? The members of the youthful force were prohibited from political activities. General Hans von Seeckt, the head of the **Reichsheer** [Army] at that time admittedly declared that the armed forces serve the state because they comprise the state [p. 94] but the German Army leaders already saw as their prime objective, the abrogation of the Treaty of Versailles and the restoration of the ability of the armed forces to defend an independent German Realm. From the German Government's viewpoint the integration of the armed forces as a serving organisation of the German Republic was seen as the accepted ideal.

There were thus deep-seated differences of opinion between the German political and military leaders. The Socialist majority in the Cabinet had a peace-loving aim in regard to the armed forces, and this consequently also applied to the Army. The Communists detested both a "civilian" government and a "civilian" armed force. Later Hitler, as the representative of the extremist right wing, asserted that the armed forces had earlier carried the monarchy and thereafter became the mouthpiece of the democracy, pacifism and internationalism [p. 109].

The German Army leaders clashed in this way with both the strongest ruling party and

the extremist left and right wings in the internal German political upheaval.

Another important difference of opinion resulted from General von Seeckt's idea of making the German Army tradition conscious. Traditions are based on the past and in this instance it meant the traditions of the armed forces of the German Imperial Realm. It stands to reason that this aspiration could not rely on the support of the Government. But even this tradition suffered genuine and serious harm, both through the press and the written word in general by the "dagger-stab" fabrication, namely that Germany had not been conquered militarily in 1918, but had suffered defeat rather as a result of a series of political events.

The "dagger-stab" fable had at that time already become a legend and occasioned much dispute and dissension.

In the midst of these differences of opinion General von Seeckt continued to wander along the path of his choosing. It is true that between himself and the authorities this did not amount to a breach of faith, but the existing relationships were certainly not conducive to unity between the German Government and the German Army. What further weakened the position of the Government, was General von Seeckt's pronouncement that fidelity and loyalty of the officers in their military leadership was more important than faith in the ideals of the Weimar Republic.

General von Seeckt was also imbued with other ideals. As already stated, Germany possessed an Army of 100 000 men. An Allied military control council exercised the strictest vigilance to ensure that this provision was not exceeded. General von Seeckt and his co-workers undoubtedly built up a strong corps of officers, but the tide was not in their favour. Not only did the aforementioned control council diligently watch the situation, but the League of Nations simultaneously pleaded for disarmament. Notwithstanding this state of affairs, provision was nevertheless made in secret for a strengthened German Army in the mobilisation plans [1927], while the establishment of semi-military organisations was promoted and the production of war materials commenced. At the

same time, also in secret, co-operation on military matters ensued with Russia.

These occurrences stemmed partially from the existence of strong neighbouring states like France, Czechoslovakia and Poland and the query as to the capabilities of the German Army in the event of war.

The abovementioned aspects are clearly set out in Chapter 3, while the last chapter [No. 4] describes, under the title of the "Armed Forces between Democracy and Dictatorship" ["Die bewaffnete Macht zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur"] [pp. 188-248], the occurrences from, as a starting point, the Kapp-Lüttwitz-Putsch, i.e. the abortive leftist coup d'état of 1920, to the assumption of power by Adolph Hitler.

At the time of General von Seeckt's discharge from office [1926] the "Berliner Volkszeitung" declared that it did not matter whether he was succeeded by an outstanding military leader, but rather that his successor should be a truly reliable republican who could provide a guarantee that the armed forces would also become republican [p. 229]. Although mutual efforts were made both on the part of the Government and the military leaders to come to a better understanding, these efforts produced no results. On the other hand defence matters such as a relationship in regard to the Red Army and the partial rejection of the defence budget for 1930, did not promote this striving for co-operation, which, in actual fact, existed in small pockets.

At this time the Government had to exercise great care to remain in power in the midst of the electric tension existing between the extremist right group [the National Socialists] and the extremist left group [the Communists].

Under the Imperial Chancellor Dr. Heinrich Brüning, Germany was ruled by means of emergency proclamations because the Parliament was too divided to produce any useful creative work. In March 1930 a new Government was formed and from this time onwards a senior officer of the Department of Defence, Major-General Kurt von Schleicher began thinking of withdrawal of all the powers of the parliamentary system and in so doing eliminating the Socialists. His thoughts fur-

thermore extended in the direction of a military dictatorship under civilian guidance.

With a view to the continually increasing authority and influence of Hitler, Schleicher reckoned that to attain his ideal he would have to do everything in his power to hold the National Socialists under close rein and guide them in the direction he had in mind. These tactics failed because the National Socialists would not allow themselves to be tamed.

In May 1932 Dr. Brüning resigned as Chancellor. In actual fact the parliamentary system of this period ceased to exist in Germany under his successor, Frans von Papen [1932]. The last mentioned Imperial Chancellor was succeeded in December 1932 by Major-General Kurt von Schleicher [— 28 January, 1933]. But even before von Schleicher became the Imperial Chancellor, Hitler had promised him his support in attaining this post.

Since the State President [General/Field-Marshal von Hindenburg] could not agree with von Schleicher — he wanted no party in power which was biased against those holding opposing opinions and could not forgive himself for having insisted upon the resignation of von Papen — with the result that Major-General von Schleicher resigned on 28 January 1933 as Imperial Chancellor and Minister of Defence.

In regard to these developments the author states that they were tragic as both von Schleicher and the military leaders fully realised the dangers posed by Hitler and the National Socialists [p. 246]. In addition, he asserts that during this critical period there was a serious dearth of plans which — with the assistance of the armed forces — could have brought about a political settlement [p. 247]. Admittedly there was some consul-

tation in this regard, but the new Minister of Defence, Lieutenant-General Werner von Blomberg, a favourite of the President, was instructed to ensure that the German armed forces refrained from all participation in any political discussions and ceased to implement von Schleicher's methods [p. 246]. Perhaps the armed forces could have resisted this new development.

In view of the fact that the armed forces were precluded from political participation, it remains a question as to what the results of such resistance might have been. In the conclusion to this work the reader is confronted with a hypothesis and the question is put, namely where, politically speaking, the feelings of the armed forces lay just prior to the assumption of power by Hitler.

This question remains unanswered, but it is clear that practically from the beginning of the period in question, the majority of the government and the military leaders held diametrically opposed views. It is just as clear that from the commencement, the military leaders who had grown up under the pre-1918 military traditions, were more conservative than the majority of the successive governments. Experts have pointed out that, in the nineteen-thirties, a cleavage, founded on opposed military traditions, also existed between the older and younger members of the German corps of officers.

How strong or how weak these two groups were in the late nineteen-thirties, does not fall within the scope of this outstanding publication. But the lesson which can be learnt from this informative work, is the essential requirement that a nation and its armed forces must be imbued with the same principles and ideals.

— Jan Ploeger.