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Exploring Political–Military Relations: Nazi Germany

Gaines Post

I met Bob O'Neill at Oxford University in October 1961. We were lieutenants. He was on temporary leave from what he presumed would be a career in the Australian Army. I had just finished my tour of active duty in Germany with the US Army, delighted to return to civilian life shortly after the Berlin Crisis had threatened to ignite the Cold War and extend my service for at least another year. We were Rhodes scholars: he at Brasenose College, I at New College. And we were oarsmen, members of our colleges' first eights, mine bumping his during Eights Week in June 1962, the only bump in our long friendship.

For our generation, 'the war' meant the Second World War. We had memories of that war, and mentors who had fought in it, among them the Warden of Rhodes House, E. T. (Bill) Williams, Field Marshal Montgomery's Chief of Intelligence in North Africa and Europe. In my conversations with Bob about military history, the Second World War was usually the central reference point, and soon our scholarly interests converged on Germany before and during the conflict.

In the English-speaking world, anti-German sentiment had waned since Germany joined NATO in 1955, six years after the establishment of the German Federal Republic, 10 years after American occupation

forces posted signs in their sector of Germany saying, '*Ihr seid schuldig*' ('You are guilty'). In 1946, while the Nuremberg trials were under way, philosopher Karl Jaspers had written compellingly about individual and collective guilt (*Die Schuldfrage* — translated into English as *The Question of German Guilt*),¹ but more than a decade passed before West Germans began earnestly confronting their Nazi past. Two indicting novels published in 1959 were widely read: Heinrich Böll's *Billard um halbzehn* (*Billiards at Half-Past Nine*), and Günter Grass's *Die Blechtrommel* (*The Tin Drum*).² When the trial of Adolph Eichmann opened in Jerusalem in April 1961, West German television followed it, and the city of Frankfurt published a booklet refuting claims that most Germans knew nothing about Nazi brutality against the Jews. Later that year, large audiences watched the appallingly explicit television series *Das Dritte Reich*.

At the same time, postwar historiography had been shaped in part by authors who found the origins of Nazism in German autocracy, militarism, and anti-Semitism dating back to the Middle Ages and Reformation. William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*³ was a bestselling example of this 'Luther to Hitler' thesis, in which long distances of German history are marked by signposts of continuity and inevitability. This was a far cry from Alan Bullock's measured biography of Hitler as opportunist, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*.⁴ Many academic historians criticized Shirer, but even some of these applied inevitability to the fall of the Weimar Republic: it was doomed to fail by inherent flaws, irreparably wounded by the civil unrest and devastating inflation of the early 1920s, and (never mind the relatively stable years of 1924–1929) knocked off by Nazis and their sympathisers during the Great Depression.

For recent German military history, Oxford students in the early 1960s read B. H. Liddell Hart's *The German Generals Talk*, John Wheeler-Bennett's *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918–1945*, Gordon Craig's *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640–1945*, and, among the few German works in translation, Walter Görnitz's

1 Jaspers, Karl (1947) *Die Schuldfrage* [*The Question of German Guilt*], München: Verlag.

2 Böll, Heinrich (1959) *Billard um halbzehn* [*Billiards at Half-Past Nine*], München: Verlag; Grass, Günter (1959) *Die Blechtrommel* [*The Tin Drum*], München: Verlag.

3 Shirer, William L. (1960) *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

4 Bullock, Alan (1952) *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, London: Harper & Row.

History of the German General Staff.⁵ Liddell Hart had interviewed captured generals, among whom he found three types: old style Prussians, younger ‘blustering and boorish’ officers favoured by the regime, and, in the majority, ‘essentially technicians, intent on their professional job, and with little idea of things outside it’. There was broad consensus among Anglo-American historians on several themes regarding the army in the 1930s: the continuity of Prussian influence on the values of the officer corps (obedience, loyalty, duty, bravery); the broad support among officers for reviving Germany’s military power and regaining territories lost in the Treaty of Versailles; the overlapping jurisdictions of military and Nazi organisations; the High Command’s readiness for the armed forces to swear allegiance to Hitler (instead of the constitution) after the death of President von Hindenburg in August 1934; and the major changes in the High Command’s leadership and organisation in early 1938 that strengthened Hitler’s authority over military planning.

When I left Oxford in the summer of 1963 to begin graduate studies under Gordon Craig at Stanford, Bob had received permission from the Australian Army to stay on for an advanced degree. Having observed his keen and resolute mind at work, I was certain he would find his own way. He did so, albeit with guidance from Williams, Liddell Hart, Wheeler-Bennett, and, above all, Norman Gibbs, who supervised the doctoral thesis that became *The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933–1939*.⁶ In his acknowledgments, Bob also thanked Michael Howard, Professor of War Studies (and founder of that department) at King’s College London. No one would have guessed the continuity imbedded in that roster: Howard succeeded Gibbs as Oxford’s Chichele Professor of the History of War in 1977, and O’Neill followed Howard in 1987.

Bob’s book was the first on this subject to be written by a member of our generation. It offered a fresh approach in several ways — sources, judgments, ambiguities. It remains a fine example of how skilled apprentices can equal or surpass distinguished masters. In this case, I’m certain that generation was decisive. Bob was old enough to

5 Hart, B. H. Liddell (1948) *The German Generals Talk*, New York: William Morrow; Wheeler-Bennett, John (1953) *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918–1945*, London: Macmillan; Craig, Gordon (1956) *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640–1945*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; Görlitz, Walter (1953) *History of the German General Staff*, London: Hollis and Carter.

6 O’Neill, Robert J. (1966) *The German Army and the Nazi Party, 1933–1939*, London: Cassell.

remember the Second World War, and to have chosen a military career before the Vietnam conflict eroded the ideals of patriotism and service that the 'last good war' had inspired. He was a young enough military professional, with enough self-confidence and ambition, to wonder how seasoned generals of any country (US intervention in South Vietnam had begun to escalate) could get themselves into a war they were likely to lose. Nazi Germany provided a test case, and Oxford preferred history to political science. Bob set out not to condemn or exonerate anyone, but to see whether new material would help him answer the question as objectively as possible.

He found a lot of new material, and he had good command of German after studying the language for six years in school. He relied heavily on documents, most of which had been seized by the Allies after the war and were later returned to West German authorities, housed at the Bundesarchiv in Koblenz, the Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt in Freiburg, the Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Munich, and the Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte in Stuttgart. He read published diaries and memoirs, and his list of secondary sources remains one of the best in the field.

A 'major piece of good fortune', as he now puts it, was his discovery in the Bundesarchiv of an account written after the war by General Freiherr Maximilian von Weichs. The Weichs paper, based on detailed notes he took at the meeting, documented Hitler's meeting with leaders of the armed forces and SA (*Sturmabteilung*) in late February 1934. It is one of several unpublished documents whose broader significance Bob was the first to reveal (more on this below). What made Bob's research unique, however, were his interviews with nearly 20 former generals and admirals of the Wehrmacht. These included Field-Marshal Erich von Manstein, Generals Franz Halder and Gotthard Heinrici, and Grand Admiral Karl Dönitz. Much less famous but far more instructive was General Hermann Flörke, to whom I introduced Bob by letter as he prepared to leave for Germany.

It was my good fortune to meet Flörke early in 1961 while I was stationed in Giessen, a small university city of little historical interest about 40 miles north of Frankfurt. Born in 1893 in Hanover, he served as a junior officer on the Western Front in the First World War and remained in the Reichswehr during the Weimar Republic. He fought on western and eastern fronts in the next war, rising to the rank

of lieutenant general and in command of a corps that resisted the American First Army as it pressed north eastward from the Remagen bridgehead in April 1945. Flörke considered himself ‘lucky to have surrendered to an American and a nice one too’. Released from detention in 1947, he soon became head of an organisation of German civilians who were employed by the American supply depot on the north east side of town. He had retired by the time I arrived in Giessen, but remained active in German–American organisations and was head of the local chapter of the *Verband deutscher Soldaten* (Association of German Soldiers).

In time, Flörke, his wife and step-daughter invited me to their apartment on Sundays, and conversation easily turned to history, usually with Schubert in the background and Mosel in the glass. The general always wore a bow tie and prefaced many of his remarks with ‘one must consider’ and ‘one should not forget’. There was nothing militaristic about the man, whose modesty understated the distinguished record that I gradually pieced together with help from his family, from men who had fought under his command, and, during my own research a few years later, from German archives. He had received one of Germany’s highest decorations, the *Ritterkreuz mit Eichenlaub* (Knight’s Cross with Oak Leaves), awarded to him personally by Hitler in August 1944 for exceptional valour during the unrelenting Soviet offensive of that summer. He had allowed his officers and men more initiative in combat than was the norm, and had shown them more respect as individuals. Among superiors and subordinates, he was known as a fine commander who cared for his men, and they remembered him with affection.

Widely read in military history, Flörke could sketch Lee’s gamble at Gettysburg and Grant’s subsequent strategy of attrition. He reminded me that Germany and Europe had much longer histories with powerful symbols. ‘One should not forget’, he said about Germany’s strategic position in the centre of Europe, that the Romans configured their line of fortifications (*Limes Germanicus*) so as to guard against a ‘barbarian’ invasion of their empire through the ‘Fulda Gap’ (where my artillery battalion would try to block the most likely route of a Warsaw Pact offensive into West Germany), or that Louis XIV burned Heidelberg.

We talked about the Weimar Republic, anti-Semitism, Hitler's popularity, genocide, and resistance. Flörke defined *Freiheit* (freedom) and *Geltung* (worth) as political assets that Germany lacked during the Weimar period. He justified Nazi foreign policy up to the invasion of Poland, which, he warned his battalion officers, marked the beginning of a long war that Germany would surely lose. We began disagreeing over topics that we would debate until his death in 1979. He emphasised a nation's freedom from international pressures, claimed that his units in Poland and Russia had no connection with the Final Solution, blamed Hitler for bad military decisions, and reproached the opposition movement for betraying the state while it was at war. I dwelt on personal freedoms, indirect connections, military advisers, and higher moral laws of insubordination.

Compassionate, cultivated, principled, and a gentleman in every sense of the word, General Flörke led me to reconsider the German Army as if I were serving under him. I would have respected and trusted him as my commander. In him I saw an example of loyalty and courage that did not suggest arrogance, blind obedience, or apolitical indifference. I could not have learned this from books.

Flörke had much the same effect on Bob. Bill Williams had told Bob that his wartime experience in intelligence taught him to be sceptical toward generalisations about the Wehrmacht. Flörke reinforced the point in his own way. In doing so, and in lending stature to Bob's inquiries, the German general enabled the Australian lieutenant to maximise the usefulness of his interviews.

While preparing to write this chapter, I interviewed Bob. He recalled being determined not to appear naïve or hostile, as had many Anglo-American interrogators since the war. 'Being a German-speaking Australian — not British — army officer helped a great deal', he added. He carefully prepared for each interview and began the conversation by putting the subject at ease. For example, he asked Manstein how he had managed to persuade Hitler to replace the High Command's plan for invading France and the Low Countries in 1940 (Operation Yellow) with his own 'sickle-slice' strategy of pushing through the Ardennes. Manstein happily obliged, Bob soon manoeuvred to the 1930s, and the interview lasted three hours.

Thanks to meeting Flörke shortly after arriving in Germany, Bob knew there must have been other ‘relatively liberal and sensible’ men who defied the stereotype of the German general. In the course of his interviews, he found some of them and evidence of others who, in the 1930s, were in the ‘mid-level military class’ — colonels and (brigadier) generals who had served in the Great War, many of them later hand-picked for the small officer corps of the Weimar Republic. Among these were sons of educated families in the middle or upper-middle class. Bob and I agreed that such officers fit none of Liddell Hart’s three types, but constituted a fourth that Liddell Hart had either not found or wrongly included among ‘essentially technicians’. Bob’s interviews helped him augment documentary material while sharpening his eye for signs of this fourth type.

In *The German Army and the Nazi Party*, Bob describes three stages in which the small Reichswehr, which could hardly defend the Weimar Republic, was transformed into a large modernised force intended for conquest by the Third Reich: Hitler’s immediate and positive impression on the entire army; the Nazi Party’s skilful intervention in military affairs to increase the army’s obedience to Hitler; and the High Command’s eventual willingness to wage a war of aggression. Bob’s research increased our understanding of these stages.

On 28 February 1934, 13 months after the Nazis seized power, Hitler called a conference of leaders of the army, SA, and SS (*Schutzstaffeln*). Everyone there knew that Hitler would address the conflict between army and SA over control of the ‘people’s army’ that he would raise for national defence. To the relief of the officers, he announced that the army would exercise command, that the militia proposed by Ernst Röhm would be insufficient, that the Wehrmacht was the sole bearer of arms for national policy, and that the SA would be restricted to ‘internal political tasks’, although it could be used for pre-military training and protecting borders during the rearmament period. According to the account of General von Weichs, however, and corroborated by Manstein and Heinrici in interviews, Hitler unexpectedly ‘set forth his complete foreign policy programme and ... intimated the probability of aggressive war’. In about eight years, in order to counteract economic recession, Germany would need to create additional living space, ‘the Western Powers would not let us do this’, and thus ‘short, decisive blows to the West and then to the East could be necessary’. Looking back after the war, Weichs regretted

that the army's representatives 'did not take at face value these warlike prophecies ... The soldier was accustomed never to take the words of politicians too seriously.'

As Bob points out, Hitler had alluded to *Mein Kampf* and the need for living space when he met with army leaders only a few days after taking power. Since then, however, Hitler's successes had given the High Command more reason to take him at his word. Indeed, they did so when he said the SA would be limited to political tasks. In Bob's view, this would have been an opportune time for the generals to ask Hitler hard questions about long-term aims. Instead, they remained silent, thus postponing a reckoning over the mission of the armed forces. At that moment, they were gratified by Hitler's determination to rearm, and confident they had achieved victory against the SA. If any of them thought they could ward off Nazi ideology, they were deluding themselves.

Bob was one of the first historians (another was Wolfgang Sauer) to examine German Army–Nazi Party relations at the local level. He sifted the records of military districts (*Wehrkreise*) into which Germany was divided, and again interviews provided anecdotal substantiation. Nazi propaganda spread steadily into military commands and communities, from top down and bottom up. At the highest level were pro-Nazi generals such as Werner von Blomberg (Defence Minister 1933–1935, War Minister 1935–1938), Walther von Brauchitsch, and Wilhelm Keitel. Speeches and directives from the High Command to military districts contained this sort of language: since the 'Seizure of Power', it is clear that 'the change concerns not only [a new] political arrangement, but a fundamental transformation of the mind and will of the entire people, and the realization of a new philosophy';⁷ National Socialism 'embraces the idea of the fellowship of blood ... and anyone today who does not completely adopt the idea of national partnership, excludes himself';⁸ 'I make it the urgent duty of all Commanders to ensure, by example and by education, that the conduct of every single officer, in every case becomes positively National-Socialist'.⁹

7 Werner von Blomberg, September 1933.

8 Werner von Blomberg, May 1934.

9 General Friedrich Dollmann, Commander of the Ninth Military District, January 1936.

Political indoctrination steadily increased through officer training and unit instruction. Moreover, the High Command accepted the encroachment of Nazism at all levels of military life, affecting families and social relations through ideological materials in post reading rooms; prohibitions against shopping in stores owned by Jews; warnings to Christian churches not to appear disloyal to the state or the Nazi Party; requirements to invite local party leaders to dances and other social functions; and affirmations of the government's dividing Germany into 'Blocks' in which party officials could spread doctrine and ensure loyalty among neighbourhoods and households.

By 1938, the army had become enmeshed in the Nazi state, adapting to its structure, ideology, and rearmament for war. The SS had gained enormous political clout, expanding the Gestapo and political police, and forming its own volunteer fighting units, a threat to the army's role as sole bearer of arms. In February 1938, Hitler ordered major changes in the High Command, arrogating to himself the duties of War Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Wehrmacht, establishing the Armed Forces High Command or OKW (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*) as his own staff for military planning, and appointing as its chief the pliable and sycophantic General Keitel. Any faint remaining chance of limiting or postponing war until Germany had completely rearmed was lost when General Ludwig Beck resigned as Chief of the General Staff in August 1938. Beck argued that using force against Czechoslovakia would lead to a European war that Germany was not strong enough to win. He also had this to say about the responsibilities of the army's leaders (taken from his notes for talks with Brauchitsch, Army Commander-in-Chief since February):

Their military obedience has a limit where their knowledge, their conscience and their sense of responsibility forbid the execution of a command. If their warnings and counsel receive no hearing in such a situation, then they have the right and the duty to resign from their offices. If they all act with resolution, the execution of a policy of war is impossible.

They did not so act, as Beck had hoped some would when he resigned. Why not? For any historian, especially one who has served in uniform, that question lies at the heart of political–military relations. Friction is inevitable between professional soldiers, who have their particular goals, and politicians, who have theirs. Both camps must decide where and when to compromise. Bob recounts the accelerating

preponderance of the political over the military in a particular case: during peacetime, in a one-party dictatorial state whose leader and ideology envisaged an offensive war of expansion. The German Army was neither totally subservient nor willing to stop the momentum. In the High Command and military district commands, old-school and largely apolitical conservatives welcomed the end of Germany's instability and military weakness, yet they also resented the increasing sway of pro-Nazi generals at the very top. We shall never know how many of these officers, or divisional and regimental commanders, actually skirted directives from Blomberg, nor how many might have been heartened by stronger examples of professional leadership when Hitler repeatedly defied the army's advice on the pace and purpose of rearmament. There were certainly more than Wheeler-Bennett or Craig surmised, perhaps more than Bob might have estimated from his interviews. On the other hand, military expansion brought in large numbers of junior officers and enlisted men whose views had been shaped by the Hitler Youth and Nazi propaganda. In February 1934, before the still small army had sworn allegiance to Hitler, its leaders were impressed by Hitler's resolve to rearm. In August 1938, with rearmament in full swing, the army acquiescent to Nazi propaganda, and war on the horizon, it was too late for all but Beck to act with resolution of their own before Hitler's stunning triumph at the Munich Conference in September.

Bob's book is still praised for its thorough research, detailed appendices, cogent personality sketches, and fair judgments of competing theses about the German Army. Although he did not overturn the established interpretation of a conservative military elite, he complicated it by finding a prudent and thoughtful type of officer, especially at the middle professional level, that Wheeler-Bennett and others had missed. Bob's work weathered the *Historikerstreit* (historians' quarrel) of the 1980s between those German scholars who believed the Third Reich was uniquely German and incomparably evil, and those who considered it but one — perhaps not even the worst — example of a dictatorship that committed mass murder. He is cited in both intentionalist and structuralist explanations of Hitler's preparations for war and genocide. *The German Army and the Nazi Party* remains an exemplar in the field, and its analytical framework of political-military friction, compromise, and imbalance provides a model for both history and political science. I would expand Bob's

notion of ‘political–military’ so as to include career civil servants and heads of government departments, who can affect the balance of national policy one way or another, even in a dictatorship. Still, his general model certainly applies, with eerie echoes, to the ‘revolt of the generals’ in the spring of 2006, when six retired American generals publicly criticised Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld for mishandling the Iraq War. A few of the six held that the war was unnecessary in the first place, and that the Joint Chiefs of Staff should have warned forcefully against undertaking it.

One can claim that studying the German Army in peacetime spared Bob’s having to grapple with military complicity in the Final Solution, which later scholarship has shown to have been more widespread than he or I guessed, or with how wartime virtually sanctifies the soldier’s duty to obey orders. I would argue that there is much to be gained by concentrating on what, in retrospect, are considered interludes or calms before storms. Such periods give us a chance to suspend our knowledge of their futures, to recognise anomalies, admit ambiguities, and consider alternative outcomes. They enable us to ask ‘what if?’ right up to the brink of what historians later mark as both an end and a beginning.

That is one reason why I became interested in the Weimar Republic. Certain that it was not doomed to fail, I devoted one book¹⁰ and countless lectures to showing why, always subconsciously hoping that this time it would not collapse. I argued that, in its calmest years, 1924–1929, Weimar Germany combined democracy with authoritarian tendencies that might have endured even without the Great Depression and the rise of Hitler. The republic also mixed international cooperation with the pursuit of national objectives — particularly rearmament and recovery of territories lost to Poland and Czechoslovakia at Versailles — that would have shaken the European status quo, through war if peaceful means failed, as soon as the government deemed the strategic situation favourable. This was a Germany poised somewhere between the inevitability of Nazism and the likelihood of democracy and peace over the long term.

10 Post, Gaines (1973) *The Civil-Military Fabric of Weimar Foreign Policy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

I described to my students the thrill of archival treasure hunts, on one of which I had found military documents that had neither been confiscated by the Allies nor cited by other historians. I told them about General Flörke, and about my correspondence and interviews — inspired by Bob's interviews that took place two years earlier — with other Wehrmacht generals and admirals who had served in the Reichswehr during the Weimar Republic. I had used chronological and factual filters to determine the accuracy of oral testimony. Although I trusted documents more than memories, I soon found the latter valuable for recapturing attitudes and weighing possibilities. I encouraged students to put themselves in other shoes: how could members of the Reichswehr, Defence Ministry, Foreign Office, Reichstag, and president's staff have collaborated so as to save the republic, with all of its ambiguities? In the conclusion to his book, Bob implicitly raises a similar counterfactual question: how could officers such as Flörke and Beck have restrained their superiors? Bob and I can imagine what we might have done in their place. But imagination can lead anywhere, and interviews can shock.

The reminiscences I heard sometimes drifted from Weimar into the Third Reich, testing my diplomatic skills. Heinrich Hausser, who joined the Waffen-SS in the 1930s and commanded one of its divisions during the war tested me the most. Toward the end of our conversation in his drab apartment in Ludwigsburg in May 1966, Hausser denied that the Waffen-SS was a racial elite: 'If you take the cream of the volunteers, you are bound to get many tall, fair men.' I held my tongue. Even taller than the men in his division, he continued as we stood up before I took my leave, were those in General Josef ('Sepp') Dietrich's *Leibstandarte* Adolf Hitler. (This unit had begun as a small bodyguard for the Führer in 1933, and during the war it became the most decorated division — and Dietrich the most popular commander — in the Waffen-SS. Dietrich died in Ludwigsburg a few weeks before my interview with Hausser, and around 7,000 Waffen-SS veterans attended the funeral.) Looking me up and down and nodding approvingly, Hausser said, 'Herr Post, you could have been in Sepp Dietrich's division'. That casual recruitment so rattled my nerves that, on the way back to my lodgings in Stuttgart, I stopped my VW and took a long walk.

I still look at German history through subjective and subjunctive lenses. So does Bob, although he left the field for a varied career that required detachment and pragmatism. As combat officer, scholar,

teacher, and policy wonk, Bob has been at home in the expanding realm of university departments, research institutes, think tanks, and media panels dealing with political–military relations and strategy. Grounded in history, he can wrestle with causes and consequences. He can visualise Flörke and other generals at work. He can recognise a brink when he sees one. *The German Army and the Nazi Party* was a prelude.

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