

*Preparing for the War of the Future in the Wake of Defeat:  
The Evolution of German Strategic Thought, 1919-1935*

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Germany's defeat in the First World War came as a profound shock. While the nation was stunned by the peace settlement that followed, the military was faced with the inescapable reality that their approach to fighting a prolonged industrialized conflict was flawed. The years following Germany's defeat found the army in search of reasons for its failure. The officer corps sought to analyze its experience with "total war" and to draw the correct lessons from it. In this way, the army could prepare for the war of the future, secure in the knowledge that any repetition of the First World War could be avoided. In short, the German armed forces began the detailed process of distilling relevant military lessons from the conflict and applying them to their perception of a future war. While many of the lessons learned and studied had to do with tactics and technology, it is the purpose of this analysis to examine the strategic debate that ensued. Regardless of how strategy would be formulated in the coming years, it maintained at its heart one simple objective that is best summarized in a conversation between General Walther Reinhardt and Colonel Albrecht von Thaer in January 1919. Thaer expressed his pessimism for the coming years but Reinhardt, a liberal officer who was about to assume command of the War Ministry disagreed. He openly stated that "the goal is and remains a free Germany, hopefully restored to its former borders, with [the]

strongest, most modern army with [the] newest weapons. One must not let this goal recede from view for even one moment." Rearmament and conscription would return, he declared, but when Thaer suggested this might be possible in the distant future, Reinhardt assured him that "We must and will be in position to do so in 15 years."<sup>1</sup> Clearly, planning for the next war began at the moment defeat in the First World War was realized.

But how could there even be a debate on strategy in the wake of defeat in the First World War? The army that had marched home in 1918 had virtually dissolved overnight while a civil war raged as Communists attempted to seize control on Berlin. Indeed, General Friedrich von Bernhardi noted in 1920 that "It would be sheer madness to think of preparing for war now, even if only in theory."<sup>2</sup> In the coming years, new ideas would emerge on the formulation of future strategy. They would not come from the leaders of the last war, but instead the leaders of the next war would formulate the strategy of the future. The captains and majors of the newly created *Reichswehr* would become the generals and planners in a future war. The solutions varied from the impractical to the unrealistic and were often confined to the realm of pure fantasy. Occasionally they were founded on sound and realistic notions, but in an ironic twist, it was these ideas that were often ignored completely. Nevertheless, this search for strategic ideas was largely undertaken in the formative years following defeat in the First World War when reality was too difficult to contemplate and the dream world of "what if" dominated the strategic conversation.

In the decade following the collapse of the German military and political systems in 1918, it proved impossible to formulate a coherent strategic policy. The newly created republic lacked the means to enforce domestic stability and the armed forces were paralysed through defeat and the outbreak of revolution. In this chaotic environment, the civil authorities never gained full power over their military and consequently could not completely control the volatile domestic situation. The military became a necessary but unreliable bulwark of the Republic. The army's ability to achieve domestic stability -- its fundamental role since before the Imperial period -- vanished as the revolution destroyed

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<sup>1</sup> Holger Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918* (New York: Arnold, 1997), p. 449.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich von Bernhardi, *The War of the Future: In the Light of the Lessons of the World War* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1920), p. 9.

the last remnants of national solidarity. Millions of soldiers returning from the front succumbed to the revolutionary atmosphere and war-weariness and rejected further service to the state. Even the government's first attempt to clear the Imperial Castle in Berlin of revolutionary guards on Christmas Eve 1918 failed completely, demonstrating the unreliable nature of the army.<sup>3</sup> The state, unable to trust its traditional instrument of force, had no choice but to turn to volunteer units in order to regain some measure of control. The reliance on organizations such as the Free Corps clearly demonstrated the military dilemma facing the fledgling republic; the only military forces available were of dubious loyalty. They performed well enough against the government's left-wing enemies but collapsed against conservative elements, such as those involved in the Kapp Putsch in March 1920.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, the Republic never maintained control over the troops on which it relied.

The military provisions of the Treaty of Versailles also served to impact the formulation of strategic planning. While it is not possible at this juncture to go over all the aspects of the Treaty itself (these are largely well-known), it is clear that the Treaty, which deprived Germany of territorial, economic, and especially military strength, frustrated the Republic's ability to formulate even the most rudimentary of strategies. Germany was forced to accept drastic restrictions on its sovereignty. Territory was surrendered in accordance with the wishes of the Allied governments, while sectors in Germany were to be demilitarized. By far, the most disheartening stipulation for the military, however, remained the forced reduction of the army from several million to 100,000 men. This force was denied modern weapons such as aircraft, tanks, and heavy artillery and could possess only fixed amounts of ammunition for the weaponry that did remain. Moreover, the elimination of universal military service rendered the nation completely defenceless against its largest neighbours France and Poland. Under these circumstances, the participation of the armed forces in the development of long-term strategies remained impossible, at least for the time being. Such was the strategic environment that the military found itself in.

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert Rosinski, *The German Army* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940), p. 169. For more on the state of German forces at the end of the First World War, see D. Scott Stephenson, *The Final Battle: Soldiers of the Western Front in the German Revolution of 1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> James M. Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics in Weimar Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 69.

As Germany recovered from the disaster of 1918 and the political chaos that followed, many members of the military began to examine their experiences during the First World War. Numerous theories would emerge on how the new German military should prepare and execute the plans for future wars. The first series of studies focused on the First World War and the lessons the new German army needed to take to heart. But modern industrialized warfare had demonstrated the folly in restricting the army's size to meet political necessity. Indeed, Stig Förster has argued that this had become such a fundamental issue before 1914 that the military clung desperately to the hope that it could resurrect nineteenth century cabinet warfare -- limited war for limited objectives -- in a time when such concepts were long obsolete.<sup>5</sup> They chose this because it was the only way they believed they could avoid radical social change and the 'watering down' of the officer corps. This paradox, which was aptly labelled "The Dynamics of Necessity" by Holger Herwig, meant that the reliance on preserving the integrity of the officer corps dictated that the German military was exceedingly reluctant to expand the size of its army to keep pace with its potential European enemies.<sup>6</sup> Although the Army High Command had recognized that warfare involved the mobilization of the nation's entire physical and spiritual forces, it had also realized that such a policy threatened the traditional Prusso-German social fabric. The military could not resolve this dilemma during the First World War, which ultimately led to the strategic vacuum that followed the unsuccessful implementation of the Schlieffen Plan in 1914.

The collapse of the Schlieffen plan and the failure to obtain a quick, decisive victory had far-reaching repercussions for the German military. The army, in an attempt to restore its officer corps, conducted a wholesale replacement of many commanding generals. Thirty-three generals, including two army commanders, were relieved.<sup>7</sup> While these replacements were seen as essential, it did little to improve the creation of strategy in the ensuing months. In fact, the strategic realities of the First World War remained so new that Roger Chickering has described the strategic situation as one revolving around

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<sup>5</sup> See Stig Förster, "Facing 'People's War': Moltke the Elder and Germany's Military Options after 1871." *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 10 (1987): pp. 209-230.

<sup>6</sup> This is one of the central themes of Holger Herwig, "The Dynamics of Necessity: German Military Policy During the First World War." Allan Millet and Williamson Murray (eds.), *Military Effectiveness*, 3 vols. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1986), 1: pp. 81-86.

<sup>7</sup> Herwig, "Dynamics of Necessity," p. 94.

“Disorientation, uncertainty, and improvisation.”<sup>8</sup> Army and navy continued to pursue separate and mutually exclusive strategic goals and ultimately failed in achieving their aims. Even cooperation with its closest ally Austria-Hungary remained a struggle before and during the war. Helmuth von Moltke’s failure led to his replacement by Erich von Falkenhayn, whose strategy to ‘bleed the French white’ at Verdun also failed. Falkenhayn’s replacement by the Hindenburg-Ludendorff duo also failed to achieve any strategic goals. In fact, the offensives in 1918 were largely an abandonment of strategy in favour of operational considerations and tactics. In the end, the failure of Ludendorff’s political, economic, and military policies was a direct result of the German military’s ultimate inability to strategically adapt to modern industrial warfare.

Defeat in 1918 led many military experts in Germany to formulate ideas about a future conflict based on their experiences with total war. If the military was to be successful, they argued, it had to harness modern technology to the pursuit of a decisive and rapid victory and not become embroiled in a lengthy war of attrition.<sup>9</sup> Every writer remained fundamentally focused on finding the best way to reunify army and state, believed to be a vital prerequisite for future warfare. While many theories emerged, they differed only in their understandings of the dimensions of the next war.<sup>10</sup> Although the theories that emerged between 1920 and 1932 all assumed a rearmed Germany, many also postulated that modern war required the complete and unquestioning integration of the civilian and military sectors. This condition was the essential theme in the more radical proponents of strategy.

Before any theory could become a reality, however, a reliable and competent military force needed to be created. This task would fall to the newly appointed chief of the Army Command (*Heeresleitung*), General Hans von Seeckt. Seeckt believed that the army needed to plan for a time in which the 100,000 man *Reichswehr* would form the basis of a future, larger *Wehrmacht*, no longer subject to the limitations of the Treaty of

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<sup>8</sup> Roger Chickering, “World War I and the Theory of Total War,” in *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, ed., Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> Manfred Messerschmidt, “German Military Effectiveness between 1919 and 1939,” in *Military Effectiveness*, eds. Millet and Murray, 2: p. 227.

<sup>10</sup> Wilhelm Deist, “Die Reichswehr und der Krieg der Zukunft” *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen* 45 (1989): pp. 81-92.

Versailles.<sup>11</sup> The army was to become an elite military formation which would be both politically reliable and tactically proficient. To ensure that he created a modern and capable military force, the power of the office of *Heeresleitung* became enormous. Seeckt created a new staff, the *Truppenamt* (which was in fact the General Staff but, due to treaty restrictions, it was disguised), and took on vast political powers, even managing to block the appointment of a secretary of state for war.<sup>12</sup> Although such political machinations could only serve to undermine the political authority of the republic, it was of little consequence for Seeckt. In the words of political scientist Louis Snyder, "The Republic was naturally incapable of incorporating the Reichswehr ... It was unable either to control it or to win its unqualified allegiance."<sup>13</sup> Seeckt's chief of the Operations Section of the *Reichswehr*, Joachim von Stülpnagel, wrote to him in 1919 about just such a goal and went on to suggest "that within the foreseeable future the resurrection of the monarchy, a struggle with Poland and perhaps France too will be possible."<sup>14</sup> Under these guidelines, Seeckt would work with the future in mind. He believed, however, that it was not up to him to develop a strategy for the future, but merely an army for the future.

But what would this army look like? Seeckt's vision for was expressed in January 1921 when he addressed select officers of the *Reichswehr*. He appealed to the "old sense of honour" of the German officer, calling upon his "selfless obedience" during such trying times.<sup>15</sup> This reflected Seeckt's hope of resurrecting traditional Prussian virtues so that men of suitable morale and character might be found to staff the officer corps of the *Reichswehr*. While the aristocratic heritage was needed to produce officers of character and intelligence to handle the new technology of the day,<sup>16</sup> selecting officers solely on the basis of birth was impossible. Instead, Seeckt proposed the next best alternative. Every officer candidate of the new army would have to undergo a rigorous test of his abilities and

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<sup>11</sup> Wilhelm Deist, *The Wehrmacht and German Rearmament* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Messerschmidt, "German Military Effectiveness," p. 220.

<sup>13</sup> Louis L Snyder, *The Weimar Republic: A History of Germany from Ebert to Hitler* (London: Van Nostrand, 1966), p. 170.

<sup>14</sup> F. L. Carsten, *The Reichswehr and Politics, 1918-1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 30.

<sup>15</sup> "The Basis for the Training of the Army," in, *Seeckt*, Hans Meier-Welcker (Frankfurt: Bernard & Graefe, 1967), p. 307.

<sup>16</sup> David N. Spires, *Image and Reality: The Making of the German Officer, 1921-1933* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 4.

intelligence. Seeckt demanded high standards of education, intelligence, and efficiency<sup>17</sup> in order to create an officer corps that would strengthen the coherence of the army, improve its intellectual and moral level, and preserve the traditional position of the officer corps in society. So thorough were his standards that Seeckt not only exceeded but shattered the pre-war aristocratic emphasis in the officer corps. In 1913, only twenty-five percent of regular officers came from families with an aristocratic heritage, but in 1930 no less than ninety-five per cent of the officer corps could boast that they possessed the requisite social standing for their sons to be eligible candidates for a commission.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond this, Seeckt sought to instil a high level of operational and tactical proficiency in the *Reichswehr*. Given its small size and limited capabilities, it had to function with maximum efficiency. The army emphasized tactics and combined arms operations above all else.<sup>19</sup> These lessons formed the principal teachings of the new field manual 'Leadership and Battle of Combined Arms' (*Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen*), issued in 1921.<sup>20</sup> The importance of this document lay primarily in the tactical realm, but it is interesting to note that in the introduction to this manual, Seeckt made it clear that "this regulation takes the strength, weaponry, and equipment of a modern military major power as the norm, not that of the Peace Treaty's specified 100,000-man army."<sup>21</sup>

With the creation of an elite military force, Seeckt established the foundation on which all future theories of warfare would rest. By emphasizing morale and character, he hoped to preserve the integrity of the officer corps and to preclude any repetition of November 1918. By concentrating on tactics rather than strategy, Seeckt made the most out of the small *Reichswehr*. The cadre for the future had been formed; it remained for the

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<sup>17</sup> Harold J. Gordon, *The Reichswehr and the German Republic, 1919-1926* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 190.

<sup>18</sup> David Stone, *Shattered Genius: The Decline and Fall of the German General Staff in World War II* (Havertown, PA, Casemate Publishers, 2012), p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> Spires, *Image and Reality*, p. 101.

<sup>20</sup> Jehuda Wallach, *The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct of Two World Wars* (Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1986), p. 216. The navy was also concerned with developing tactical and technical proficiency and emphasized both in the course of their respective training. See also Messerschmidt, "German Military Effectiveness," p. 248.

<sup>21</sup> James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* (Lawrence, Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 1992), p. 39.

military theorists to determine its function. James Corum's work on Hans von Seeckt recognizes the emergence of three distinct schools of thought in the early years of the Weimar Republic – the defensive school, the psychological school, and the people's war school.<sup>22</sup> One, the defensive school, was born out of the necessity of defeat, but the other two are worthy of more in-depth study.

The 'psychological school' of strategic thought was characterized by a view that the war of the future required particular attention to morale and the psychological aspects of warfare. These were not bound by any ideological or political conviction, but by the common goal of readying the nation mentally for the demands of total war. Although their theories shared many themes, each emphasized the need for a supreme commander who had control over both the political and military spheres.

In 1920, Friedrich von Bernhardi published a book, *The War of the Future*, that attempted to describe the next war in advance. Bernhardi's influence on German military thought was considerable and his earlier works went into multiple printings not only in German, but also in English, French, Italian, Spanish, and Danish. Bernhardi was thus an established and widely read military theorist whose impact on German strategy cannot be discounted. Although Bernhardi understood many of the tactical principles of warfare, he failed to mention economic and administrative factors. Instead, his goal was to "present [all officers] with a frame into which they could fit their special knowledge ... and to suggest the principles on which the future development of the Army should be based." Since this future war involved mass armies as well as movement and technology on an unprecedented scale, only specialists (*Sachverständige*) could control it. But given the close relationship between army and nation, Bernhardi queried, how could this specialist provide the moral resolution needed to ensure that the nation's armed forces could resist the "fluctuating elements" of society?<sup>23</sup> According to Bernhardi, the next war would be an offensive controlled by "specialists." "It is perfectly clear," he argued, "that such operations can be directed and carried out by experts only, that years of study are required to master the whole range of knowledge which is needed to conduct a modern

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<sup>22</sup> Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, p. 55. The 'defensive school' was largely based on the ideas of General Walther Reinhardt and focused on the creation of defensive works and large reserves of manpower. A repeat of German defensive tactics such as those practiced in 1917 on the Western Front might actually thwart an enemy invasion.

<sup>23</sup> Bernhardi, *The War of the Future*, pp. 179-81.



campaign.”<sup>24</sup> In order to maintain high morale and strict discipline, the army must resurrect many of the fundamental principles of Prussian discipline such as automatic obedience and unshakable confidence in superior officers. If these could operate like a “hypnotic suggestion,” a new *esprit de corps* could be forged within the army. Clearly, Bernhardt echoed some of the beliefs of Seeckt when he demanded men of character and training; the traits of strong and effective leaders. Thus the ‘leader of the future’ would be either a politician schooled in war or a soldier forged in politics, in effect combining the military and political offices into one in order to overcome the modern requirements of national institutionalized war.

Two years later, Kurt Hesse, a young *Reichswehr* officer, provided even more examination of the nature of leadership in his work *The Psychology of the Commander (Der Feldherr Psychologos)*. Hesse looked for a solution to Bernhardt’s problem of national motivation and discipline of the modern army. According to Hesse, who held a doctorate in psychology, Germany lost the First World War because it failed to understand the impact of mass psychology. A more thorough application of psychological principles in battle tactics, he argued, would be the key to victory in the next war.<sup>25</sup> Hesse based his conclusions on a detailed psychological and military analysis of the German defeat in the Battle of Gumbinnen on 20 August 1914. The German forces lost at Gumbinnen because they lacked the psychological makeup needed to win.<sup>26</sup> Hesse’s observations of the defeat led him to conclude that the morale of the army could not be considered in isolation. Bernhardt’s view of keeping the army apart from the home front was not practical. Instead, both army and home front needed to be united psychologically in order to ensure future victory. In one telling quote, Hesse noted that “The power of the race lies primarily in its spiritual health.”<sup>27</sup> Clearly, victory required the spiritual unity of a nation. But how could this unity be achieved and preserved?

For Hesse, like Bernhardt, the answer to this problem could be found in the nature of national leadership. To ensure that the energies of the state were properly focused, a

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 269-70.

<sup>25</sup> Corum, *Roots of Blitzkrieg*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>26</sup> Kurt Hesse, *Der Feldherr Psychologos. Ein Suchen nach dem Führer der deutschen Zukunft* (Berlin, E.S. Mittler und Sohn, 1922), pp. 43-52. For an examination of the Battle of Gumbinnen see Dennis E. Showalter, *Tanneberg: Clash of Empires* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1991).

<sup>27</sup> Hesse, *Psychologos*, p. 180.

powerful leader must be found who could deliver the nation from itself. Hesse described this leader in Nietzschean terms as possessing an almost superhuman power over the German people. The war of the future would have to be led by “a very great man ... full of greatness of purpose.” This leader would have to be both “brutal” and “benevolent” and would inspire mass trust and support.<sup>28</sup> His solution had far more repercussions than that of Bernhardt. Hesse's *Feldherr* would almost transcend the physical universe, evoking celestial powers in his quest to control the nation. He would be a “ruler of men’s souls” and only this kind of power could overcome the gap between the military and the civilian sectors.

The theme of the *Feldherr* was also suggested by retired Lieutenant-General Max Schwarte in 1931. In *Der Krieg der Zukunft* (The War of the Future), Schwarte discussed the political consequences of a modern technological war featuring full mobilization and mechanization. In any future war, Schwarte argued, the nation must be completely mobilized for war, whether or not they believed it was essential. The “industrialization of the entire people forced on them by the army” was the recipe for victory in the next war, Schwarte argued.<sup>29</sup> In order to fight a total war, society needed to focus on the fields of science, technology, and economics during peacetime; in effect, the creation of a *Krieg im Frieden* (war during peace time).<sup>30</sup> Given the nature of industrialized war, Schwarte concluded that the industrial workers themselves were just as important as the soldiers who used them.<sup>31</sup> Preparing for the war of the future would thus require the full militarization of society, even involving the “education and the preparation of children” for battle. This training would focus on “obedience, fulfilment of duty, and willingness to sacrifice” and would be instrumental in achieving victory.<sup>32</sup> For Schwarte, a militarized *Volksgemeinschaft* was the only way to combat the nature of modern industrial war. In any

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<sup>28</sup> Hesse, *Psychologos*, pp. 206-207. Ironically, a similar observation on the essential characteristics needed by Germany’s leader of the future was made in 1922 by Rudolf Hess, a student of the geopolitician Klaus Haushofer. His observations outlined in “Wie wird der Mann beschaffen sein, der Deutschland wieder zur Höhe führt?” would later be published once the Nazis came to power in 1933. See Fritz Hirschner, *Rudolf Hess. Der Stellvertreter des Führers* (Berlin: Zeitgeschichte, 1933), pp. 9-15.

<sup>29</sup> Max Schwarte, *Der Krieg der Zukunft* (Leipzig: Philipp Reclam, 1931), p. 34.

<sup>30</sup> Deist, “Krieg der Zukunft,” *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen*, p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> Wilhelm Deist, “Road to Ideological War: Germany 1918-1945” in *The Making of Strategy: Rules, States and War*, eds. Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox and Alvin Bernstein (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 359.

<sup>32</sup> Schwarte, *Krieg der Zukunft*, p. 41.

event, Schwarte noticed that in a total war the state could no longer hope to ensure the complete safety of its citizens. The increasing range and destructive power of aircraft rendered this “holy principle” an impossible one.<sup>33</sup>

Like Hesse, Schwarte maintained that these forces could only be controlled by a strong leader with control over the nation. Unlike Hesse, he argued that this leader did not have to be a military one. It could be either a soldier with considerable political knowledge or a politician with the expertise of a soldier.<sup>34</sup> It was an astonishing conclusion. Schwarte was proposing to surrender military control over the prosecution of a future war to a political leader, so long as that leader demonstrated a military ability. Given that Schwarte’s conclusions were arrived at in 1931, it is clear that he foresaw some measure of political dominance over the military. This would ultimately be achieved by the National Socialists under Adolf Hitler not long after Schwarte’s conclusions.

The problem of overseeing the total mobilization of society which had plagued Germany’s military leadership in the First World War was circumvented by the ideas of Bernhardi, Hesse, and Schwarte through the supreme control of a political-military dictator; a *Feldherr* of almost unlimited powers. This concept would safely reunify the nation and the military, a necessary precondition for future “total” wars. Moreover, the need for a *Feldherr* would not occur until a rearmed and mighty Germany arose to reclaim its position among the European great powers.

The belief in the complete militarization of society was also found in the writings of Lieutenant-Colonel Joachim von Stülpnagel. His observations on the nature of the next war were made following the humiliating Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr in 1923. As head of the operations section of the disguised general staff, his ideas held considerable weight as this strategic debate unfolded. Moreover, the clear failure of the Reichswehr to respond to the crisis left many officers, especially in the *Truppenamt*, critical of Seeckt’s notion of preparing the army for the future. Some were willing to contemplate more immediate notions, thus providing Stülpnagel with a more receptive audience.

In February 1924, Stülpnagel gave a lecture to officers of the Reich Defense Ministry on the need to break with tradition. At the time, Stülpnagel was head of the army office

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 56.

(*Heeresleitung*) T1 responsible for operational and strategic planning within the *Truppenamt*. From this key position, his ideas would reach an influential and receptive audience. The importance of this talk cannot be overemphasized.<sup>35</sup> Although Stülpnagel's discussion of "elitist" strategy remained confined to the officers of the Defence Ministry, its impact on future planning was profound. Stülpnagel lectured to the future generals and field marshals of the *Wehrmacht* on how to conduct a two-front war against France and Poland. Instead of focusing on a theoretical future war, his "Ideas on the War of the Future" concentrated on a possible and immediate scenario. Stülpnagel and his supporters, referred to as his 'young Turks' by Michael Geyer, would elect to raise radical and unorthodox views on how Germany could fight the next war.<sup>36</sup>

Stülpnagel focused on the central question of how Germany might fight (and win) a war with France and Poland. This future war, Stülpnagel argued, would have to be subject to certain national and international preconditions. In a war against the French, for example, the neutrality of Great Britain was considered essential. In any future conflict with Poland, Stülpnagel counted on the benevolent support of the Soviet Union.<sup>37</sup> While such expectations might have been considered by many to be somewhat unrealistic, it did give the army a scenario in which military action might be conducted with some hope of success.

In spite of this international optimism, Stülpnagel carefully laid out the internal political requirements for the conduct of the next war. Because a future war required "the employment of the entire energy of the people," the state and army could only reach these goals if they were in "harmony with the national will of the majority of the people," a conclusion based on the trauma of November 1918.<sup>38</sup> Stülpnagel believed that a "full transformation" of Germany's domestic situation was fundamental. In order to achieve harmony between the people and the army, the nation must become a highly nationalistic and militaristic regime.<sup>39</sup> Stülpnagel's goal was the methodical preparation for and

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<sup>35</sup> Matthias Strohn, *The German Army and the Defence of the Reich. Military Doctrine and the Conduct of the Defensive Battle, 1918-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 140-141.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914-1945," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 560.

<sup>37</sup> Joachim von Stülpnagel, "Gedanken über den Krieg der Zukunft," Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (BA-MA), Freiburg, Germany, N 5/10, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Deist, "Krieg der Zukunft," p. 85.

adoption of a war of liberation (*Befreiungskrieg*) as had been waged against the French in 1813. In order for the nation to fight this people's war, all aspects of society needed to be reorganized along military lines.<sup>40</sup> This was the underlying theme of Stülpnagel's concept.

Regardless of the domestic preparations taken, the stark reality of the situation was clear. Under no circumstances would Germany be able to launch any offensive action against France. Any hope for a pre-emptive attack against France was clearly hopeless given the numerical and equipment inferiority of the *Reichswehr*. Stülpnagel observed that the seven divisions of the *Reichswehr* possessed sufficient ammunition for exactly one hour of modern warfare.<sup>41</sup> If Germany was invaded by the armies of France and Poland in the future, however, Stülpnagel concluded that the invading armies should be "obstructed, harassed, and delayed" as much as possible in order to give the army, hopefully reinforced through the adoption of conscription, time to mobilize and counter-attack. If Germany could win "the battle against time," the annihilation of the enemy was a possible outcome. The creation of a frontier defence capable of delaying the enemy advance, the formation of a guerrilla organization to fight behind the lines, and the evacuation and contamination of all districts in the wake of the enemy advance were all central to his strategy.<sup>42</sup>

Stülpnagel's radicalization of the conduct of war was based on the idea that "a national hatred that is to grow to become extreme [must] not stop short of any instrument (or method) of sabotage, assassination, or contamination by poison gas." These measures, because of their unorthodox and violent nature, needed to be kept under strict military control so that the people's war did not deteriorate into "an unbridled movement of volunteer corps." For Stülpnagel, this control would have to come in the form of a military dictatorship. Only with complete military control could the population be adequately prepared in peacetime and organized during a war. In this way, his view on leadership was consistent with the ideas of Bernhardt, Hesse, and Schwarte.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Stülpnagel, "Krieg der Zukunft," p. 38.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> "Der Kampf um Zeitgewinn [muß] in den Kampf um die Vernichtung des Feindes übergeleitet werden." Stülpnagel, "Krieg der Zukunft," p. 28.

<sup>43</sup> Stülpnagel, "Krieg der Zukunft," pp. 20-39.

In spite of this, it was clear to Stülpnagel that if Germany entered into such a war in the near future, it would only amount to a “heroic gesture.”<sup>44</sup> He estimated that the time needed to complete the preparations for such a war would most likely be five years, if not ten. Even then, the situation would be “desperate.” It would be worthwhile, however, to find the means “which are born from desperation . . . and are from such elemental strength that they seem to guarantee our victory or our common destruction with the enemy.”<sup>45</sup> Stülpnagel advocated a national war of liberation which was organized down to the smallest details and demonstrated a realistic appreciation of the conditions of modern warfare. But such realism had its limits. Stülpnagel did not concern himself with limited political objectives. On the contrary, the war of the future was an all or nothing gamble with only two possible results, victory or defeat, and would in any case have a “heroic” ending. As such, “Ideas on the War of the Future” combined a realistic appraisal of Germany’s existing strategic situation with an irrational method for furthering German aims.

While Stülpnagel’s emphasis was on the army for the most part, the navy did have some who thought about strategy and the next war. Until rearmament, these strategic visions were largely put forward by Vice Admiral Wolfgang Wegener. The ideas of Wegener, like those of Stülpnagel, were marked by a similar mix of realism and irrationality. Wegener addressed Germany’s naval situation in 1929 with the publication of *The Naval Strategy of the World War*, which he distributed to influential men such as Generals Hans von Seeckt and Karl Haushofer, the famous geo-politician, as well as to Oswald Spengler.<sup>46</sup> Wegener’s realism stemmed from his outspoken criticism of Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, architect of Germany’s naval strategy in the First World War. Such pointed censure would lead to conflict with Admiral Erich Raeder in attempting to make the German battlefleet a world-power fleet (*Weltmachtflotte*).<sup>47</sup>

Wegener’s work was merely a reiteration of his famous June 1915 memorandum which concluded that naval operations during the First World War amounted to only a

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<sup>44</sup> Deist, “Krieg der Zukunft,” p. 86.

<sup>45</sup> Stülpnagel, “Krieg der Zukunft,” p. 39.

<sup>46</sup> Wolfgang Wegener, *The Naval Strategy of the World War* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1989), translated by Holger H. Herwig, p. xxxvii.

<sup>47</sup> Kenneth P. Hansen, “Raeder Versus Wegener. Conflict in German Naval Strategy.” *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 58, no. 4 (2005): pp. 83-85.

“war of coastal defence.”<sup>48</sup> Victory in the next war, which for Wegener would certainly involve Great Britain, did not rest solely on a decisive battle in the North Sea as Tirpitz had claimed. Sea power, he maintained, consisted of two fundamental principles: a fleet and the geographical position to use it. For Germany to be successful in a future war at sea, the navy would have to ‘obtain’ a geographic position in order to “flank the great lanes that lead to England.” Wegener’s demand that Germany control key strategic points from which to conduct a naval war against England (the Danish and Norwegian coastlines, the Shetland and Faeroe Islands, and locations along the French Atlantic coast to Brest) was a strategic impossibility for Germany and was totally unrealistic.<sup>49</sup> For Wegener, possession of these regions remained a fundamental prerequisite for conducting future naval operations regardless of the practicality of obtaining them. Wegener’s strategic notions, while firmly based in an understanding of Mahan’s basic naval principles, was no more than a future ‘wish-list’ which encompassed a similar degree of wishful thinking as the theories of Stülpnagel. Given that Stülpnagel’s unrealistic call for a war of liberation against the French and Wegener’s geographic prerequisites for a war against Britain existed at a time when the Republic was concerned with acceptance to the League of Nations, it is interesting to note the degree of radicalism that future strategic thought was taking such high-ranking and influential men of the German military. This radical tendency regarding the strategic preparations needed for the war of the future would find its ultimate expression in the works of Erich Ludendorff.

Ludendorff’s analysis of the concept of total war did not stem from any assessment of military developments during the interwar period. Instead, they arose from his experiences during the First World War. In 1917, while essentially in charge of the German war effort, he attempted to restructure the nation to meet the demands of total war. Although Ludendorff was ultimately unsuccessful in bringing about the vital changes a modern industrial conflict required, primarily due to the tremendous opposition from Germany’s military elite, he understood that the nature of warfare had changed. Warfare was no longer restricted to the military realm alone, but rather involved whole nations. “The nature of totalitarian warfare,” Ludendorff wrote, “literally demands

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<sup>48</sup> “Reflections of Our Maritime Situation. First Squadron Memorandum, 1 February 1915,” in *Naval Strategy*, pp. 133-144.

<sup>49</sup> Deist, “Krieg der Zukunft,” pp. 87-88.

the entire strength of a nation, since such a war is directed against it.”<sup>50</sup> Ludendorff’s purpose, then, was to attempt to define the essential factors involved in modern total wars and to illustrate the necessary efforts to wage this war effectively.

Ludendorff viewed warfare in general as “the highest expression of the racial will to live.”<sup>51</sup> Given the importance of this statement, it was essential that the leader of the nation demand complete unity from the nation. Warfare remained ‘total’ on the basis of this symbiotic relationship between the armed forces and the state, for they both drew their strength and energy from the other. Ludendorff recognized that “a mobilization may organize the technical abilities of a man without penetrating to the core of his faith.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, it was the goal of the nation to bring about a military, physical, economic, and psychological unity for the sole aim of waging total war. The First World War had clearly demonstrated the need to complete this solidarity. When a nation lost its “spiritual solidarity and unity of the people,” its power of resistance was lost.<sup>53</sup> To achieve the unity of the nation and the obedience of the armed forces, Ludendorff called for the aggressive use of propaganda. He believed that a nation must present a clear picture of military operations at the front so as not to give “free reign to the ‘discontented’ and the rumour-mongers.” Ludendorff insisted that every German must be told daily exactly what a lost war would mean to the Fatherland. Through patriotic bombardment this message would help foster the type of internal unity that Ludendorff demanded.<sup>54</sup> All internal enemies of the state would need to be suppressed to achieve this domestic unity. For Ludendorff, this meant Jews, Socialists, and pacifists would have to be arrested to avoid any negative impact they might have on the nation.<sup>55</sup> A racial *Volksgemeinschaft* would be created which would provide Germany with the domestic unity it was seen to have lacked in the 1914-1918 war.

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<sup>50</sup> Erich Ludendorff, *The Nation at War* (London: Hutchinson & Company, Limited, 1935), p. 23.

<sup>51</sup> Jehuda Wallach, *The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation. The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct of Two World Wars* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1986), p. 242.

<sup>52</sup> Hans Speier, "Ludendorff: The German Concept of Total War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Edward Mead Earle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1943), p. 316.

<sup>53</sup> Ludendorff, *The Nation at War*, p. 32.

<sup>54</sup> Speier, "Ludendorff," p. 317.

<sup>55</sup> Wilhelm Deist, "Blitzkrieg or Total War? War Preparations in Nazi Germany" in *The Shadows of Total War. Europe, East Asia and the United States, 1919-1939*, eds., Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 173.



In order to integrate the many essential factors involved in total war, Ludendorff insisted that the nation must be controlled through the efforts of a supreme commander. This leader must have “complete power” and should be a “master the 'handicraft' that belongs to his art.” The burden of this “indescribable responsibility” would thus consign the possible choices for this position to only a select few whose most essential task would be to effect a national solidarity so that “totalitarian war becomes the common knowledge of the Government and of the State administration, nay, the nation itself.” Ludendorff's emphasis on the powers of the supreme commander no doubt stemmed from his failure to bring about the total mobilization of the German nation during the First World War. In a future war, with these valuable lessons absorbed, “the great general and the nation are one and indivisible.”<sup>56</sup>

It is remarkable, given the extreme nature of Ludendorff's theory of total war, how closely it resembled that of the National Socialist state. Alas, even Ludendorff did not see it this way. His *The Nation at War* was essentially a guide to the implementation of a technical dictatorship for the purposes of the conduct of mass warfare. Hitler, on the other hand, represented a political dictatorship which flourished on the social tensions of the mass society. The fundamental difference lay in the nature of the totalitarian leader. Ludendorff demanded that the supreme commander surface from the ranks of the military, whereas Hitler's regime was based on the political machinations of a mass popular movement.<sup>57</sup> The political conditions which Hitler introduced to prepare the nation for a total war also closely resembled Ludendorff's demands for spiritual unity. The indoctrination and inculcation of the population with the ideals of National Socialism went a long way in achieving this spiritual unity. Hitler recognized, however, that there were social limits which inhibited the National Socialist party from simply laying the burden of the war on the shoulders of the German people, for stability depended as much on public morale as on coercion.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the Nazi regime was able to achieve the

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<sup>56</sup> The discussion of a supreme commander with these traits dominates this section of his writing. Ludendorff, *The Nation at War*, pp. 180-189.

<sup>57</sup> Speier, "Ludendorff," p. 307.

<sup>58</sup> Jürgen E. Förster, "The Dynamics of *Volksgemeinschaft*: The Effectiveness of the German Military Establishment in the Second World War," in *Military Effectiveness. The Second World War*, Alan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, eds. (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1986), p. 183.

overwhelming support of the majority of the population while, at the same time, ruthlessly suppressing the rest.

It was a combination of Nazi propaganda and the threat of brutal force which achieved some measure of Ludendorff's spiritual unity. In spite of this definite radicalization of strategy, there remained one interesting, though brief, period of rational strategic formulation. The appointment of Wilhelm Groener as Defense Minister in January 1928 thus marked an important deviation in the development of strategy – a soldier was finally placed in charge of the Defense Ministry who fully understood the political, economic, and military problems which had confronted Germany during the First World War.<sup>59</sup> Groener recognized that the continuation and expansion of the cooperation between the military and the civilian leadership, begun by his predecessors, Generals Otto Gessler and Wilhelm Heye, was essential for the survival of the nation.

Early attempts to bring strategy in line with reality resulted in observations that maintained "the thought of a major war is out of the question."<sup>60</sup> Instead, Groener concentrated on more practical matters concerning strategy and defence. His memorandum, *Die Aufgaben der Wehrmacht* (The Tasks of the Armed Forces) of 16 April 1930, laid down the conditions under which the employment of military force by a "responsible political leadership" were considered possible.<sup>61</sup> From the very beginning, Groener declared that the employment of military force by the state must depend on "definite chances of success," and that "a responsible government might under certain circumstances decide against military resistance" to a foreign attack, instead making preparations for evacuations and demolition in the wake of an enemy advance. Potential instances where military action might be considered were restricted to just three conditions: in the case of internal unrest (designated Case "Pieck"); and in specifically defined cases of self-defence involving both irregular (Case "Korfanty") and regular (Case "Pilsudski") military units which threatened to create a "*fait accompli*."<sup>62</sup> The most significant component of these strategic options remained the prerequisite of a "favourable

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<sup>59</sup> Wilhelm Deist, Manfred Messerschmidt, Hans-Erich Volkmann, and Wolfram Wette, eds., *Germany and the Second World War. The Build-up of Aggression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 386.

<sup>60</sup> "Denkschrift über das 'Panzerschiff A'," BA-MA, N 46/147.

<sup>61</sup> BA-MA, RM 20/997, pp. 2-5.

<sup>62</sup> *Die Aufgaben der Wehrmacht*, BA-MA, RM 20/997; a draft of this memorandum can also be found in the Bredow Papers, BA-MA, N 97/9.

political situation." For Groener, a favourable situation in this case meant taking advantage of a group of belligerent nations if "pressure from a particular power constellation" were to present Germany with the chance of improving its military and political situation.

The "Tasks of the Armed Forces" outlined by Groener were simply to function as an instrument of the political leadership, something of an anomaly in German history. The realism of Groener's directive, judged against the theories proposed by Bernhardt, Hesse, Schwarte, and Stülpnagel, clearly demonstrates that Groener saw the use of military force as a political decision. As such, there was absolutely no room for grandiose concepts like a people's war. Instead, Groener was able to formulate strategic aims which were in harmony with Germany's international situation. The dilemma of reuniting army and state was to be achieved by Groener's insistence that military planning follow binding political rules. The defense of the nation should remain the responsibility of politics and not the reverse. This would bring about a return to classical Clausewitzian strategic thought with strong emphasis on political and military co-operation.

The significance of Groener's contribution to German strategic planning is clearly revealed if one considers the strategic proposals which existed before his appointment in 1928. German war planning, as it appeared in the operational studies conducted by General Werner von Blomberg in the winters of 1927-28 and 1928-29, reflected "an unmistakable urge to ignore depressing reality." Instead, planning returned to traditional views of large-scale warfare which were totally impractical for the army of the period. In the Winter study of 1927-28, Blomberg assessed Germany's chances against a Poland free to commit all of its military resources. The results were disheartening. It was determined that in this situation, Germany "could offer *somewhat promising resistance only for a short time and with the loss of further German territories*," despite setting the level of Germany's armament at 1 April 1933.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, Blomberg, in a memorandum dated 26 March 1929, concluded that the situation was "not as hopeless as might appear," placing his faith

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<sup>63</sup> Gaines Post, Jr., *The Civil-Military Fabric of Weimar Foreign Policy* (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 228-230.

in the conviction that "great States have never yet tolerated military violation without offering military resistance."<sup>64</sup>

In order to justify his strategy, Blomberg declared that shortly before the German side collapsed from lack of ammunition, the League of Nations would intervene to force Poland and Germany to conclude an armistice. Poland was then invaded by the Soviet Union which eagerly offered an alliance, enabling the German army to launch large-scale attacks which successfully ended the conflict.<sup>65</sup> The operational study of 1928-29 fared no better. Using the pretext of a surprise French attack on Germany, the *Truppenamt* concluded that "a military victory in the west cannot be contemplated. The objective of military action can be, to begin with, *not decisive battles but only slowing down the enemy's advance and weakening him.*"<sup>66</sup> Even though the army had provided for a realistic evaluation of military possibilities, it remained bound by fits of "wishful thinking." Historian Michael Geyer put it another way, arguing that "Blomberg turned from professional military analysis to ideology, because he took the problem of German security very seriously ... but was unable to solve the problem within the context of professional military thinking."<sup>67</sup> Despite acknowledging that the conditions of warfare had changed since the Imperial period, Geyer maintained that "military nostalgia [again] replaced realistic efforts to come to grips with the postwar situation."<sup>68</sup>

Groener's attempt to define a "new look" for German strategy largely remained an isolated episode. The military, who were as yet unprepared to share military control, remained critical of Groener and instead opted for the preservation of their traditional role in society. The German military embraced rearmament as the driving element for war, having come to the conclusion that rearmament and not any detailed strategic plan was the only way in which wars could be fought again. Groener's successor as *Reichswehrminister*, General Kurt von Schleicher, although intent on pursuing many of the former's political and military aims, was forced to walk a tightrope between the policies of Groener, whom he had ardently supported for years, and the militant conservatives.

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<sup>64</sup> "Folgerungen aus den Studien des T.A. im Winter 27/28 und 28/29," BA-MA, RH 2/384, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> Deist, Messerschmidt, Volkman, and Wette, eds., *Germany and the Second World War*, p. 389.

<sup>66</sup> BA-MA, RM 2/384, p. 2. See also Post, *Civil-Military Fabric*, p. 229.

<sup>67</sup> Michael Geyer, "The Dynamics of Military Revisionism in the Interwar Years. Military Politics between Rearmament and Diplomacy," in *The German Military in the Age of Total War*, ed., Wilhelm Deist (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1983), p. 108.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare," p. 564.

Through Schleicher's efforts, the German military was willing to accept the basic components of a compromise strategy, and Schleicher introduced many programmes which were completely in line with the concept of a future war rooted in Germany's experience during the First World War. Unfortunately for Schleicher, the limited degree of support he enjoyed for his policies disappeared with his increasingly frequent use of the military for political tasks. Combined with the overwhelming national support for Adolf Hitler in the 1932 elections, Schleicher's policy of balancing the basic strategic goals of General Groener with the demands of the conservative armed forces had failed, and by the beginning of 1933 an entirely new phase of German military policy had arisen.<sup>69</sup> This time, however, there was no longer any room for moderate strategic proposals.

The appointment of General von Blomberg as Defense Minister on 30 January 1933 in advance of the rest of Hitler's cabinet signalled the increased importance the Führer had given the armed forces in the new Germany. It also marked the final break with Groener's strategic aims. One of the first actions taken by Blomberg was to renounce the traditional role of the armed forces in ensuring order in domestic affairs. Blomberg's statement was greeted enthusiastically by Hitler for it would enable the National Socialists to carry out the wide range of domestic revisions demanded by the Nazi ideology. In return, Hitler was willing to recognize the *Reichswehr* as the "most important institution of the state."<sup>70</sup> The arrangement, known as the Hitler-Blomberg alliance, established the vital prerequisites for the restructuring of the German nation.

Hitler, in order to illustrate the extension of the Prusso-German system, announced that the new *Reich* rested upon "twin pillars," the armed forces and the National Socialist party, and as historian Klaus-Jürgen Müller states, this "had a considerable psychological impact, both within the army and outside it." Not only did it imply that the military might again become an autonomous institution, free from the tribulations of politics, but it also appeared to guarantee that Hitler was willing to bring about the "nationalist integration of the overwhelming majority of the nation and the suppression of the rest."<sup>71</sup> At long last, the proponents of a total war strategy possessed the requisite political leadership to bring

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<sup>69</sup> Wilhelm Deist, *The Wehrmacht and German Rearmament* (London: The MacMillan Press, Ltd., 1981), pp. 19-20.

<sup>70</sup> Deist, et al., *Germany and the Second World War*, p. 401.

<sup>71</sup> Klaus-Jürgen Müller, *The Army, Politics, and Society in Germany, 1933-1945* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p. 30.

about realistic total war planning. It was, according to Blomberg, "the realization of what many of the best of us have desired for years," and allowed for the "militarization of the nation as a whole."<sup>72</sup>

Throughout the Weimar period, German strategy, except for a brief four-year period, remained focused on re-unifying the military and the nation through the mobilization of society for war. The theories of Bernhardt, Hesse, and Schwarte all recognized that Germany needed a leader who combined both political knowledge and military ability. The concept of the *Feldherr* remained a popular response to the experience of November 1918. For Stülpnagel and the "Young Turks" in the *Reichswehr*, futuristic concepts were of little use in the present. What they advocated was a national people's war which relied on the complete militarization of society. Although these notions addressed realistic strategic issues, they remained clouded by irrational and unrealistic themes.

The only attempt to bridge the gap between ends and means found little acceptance among the German military. Groener's "Tasks of the Armed Forces" may have represented a return to realism in strategic planning, but they were unpopular among the services for which they were intended. By relying on the close co-operation between the civilian leadership and the *Reichswehr*, Groener maintained that the military's deployment remained dependent on its "reasonable chances for success."

The military, on the other hand, found that the offers from the National Socialists -- tighter authoritarian controls and a remilitarization of the nation -- were too enticing to refuse. The long-awaited creation of a *Volkgemeinschaft* (national community) was at last possible. It was in this environment of rearmament and remilitarization that a complete and racial guide for the conduct of total war emerged. Erich Ludendorff had again returned to the forefront of German strategy. Army and state would be integrated by the National Socialists with Adolf Hitler acting as *Feldherr*. The opportunity to re-think the mistakes of 1914 was never fully exploited and, as a result, an even greater disaster loomed on the horizon.

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<sup>72</sup> Deist, Messerschmidt, Volkmann, and Wette, eds., *Germany and the Second World War*, pp. 387.