CHAPTER FOUR

THE GATHERING STORM: THE GERMAN ARMED FORCES IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

Introduction

When Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, its army numbered 2,758,000 men and was organised into 103 divisions, 53 of which, including 6 armoured divisions, had already belonged to the active peacetime army.¹ This strong army bore hardly any resemblance to the army of the Weimar Republic, which in 1933, according to the Chef des Truppenamtes, General Wilhelm Adam, would only have been able to withstand two weeks at most of any military conflict. Had it been invaded by France, all it would have been able to do was “inflict a few pinpricks here and there”.²

The weakness of the Reichswehr, as the army of the Weimar Republic was known, was due to the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles. Article 231, for example, stated that Germany and its allies were wholly responsible for the outbreak of the First World War. One of the consequences of this Kriegsschuldartikel was that a number of restrictions were imposed on the Weimar Republic in terms of the structure and size of its armed forces, with a view to preventing any more German military operations. Germany was, for instance, not permitted to have tanks or heavy guns, could not have an air force and the size of the German navy was severely restricted: large warships and submarines were forbidden and the personnel complement was not allowed to exceed 15,000.

There were also stringent restrictions on the number of personnel in the Reichswehr. It was not to exceed 100,000: 4,000 officers and 96,000 NCOs and other ranks, and Germany had to abolish its conscription legislation. The organisation of the Reichswehr was thus simple: under the

Between the autumn of 1934 and September 1939, the German army increased in number from some 250,000 to 2,758,000. Presentations of colours by Hitler himself served to enhance the bond between the Führer and the army. Photograph taken in autumn 1936.

Reichswehrminister and the Chef der Heeresleitung were two Reichswehrgruppenkommandos, one in Berlin and one in Kassel. These Kommandos contained the army’s seven infantry and three cavalry divisions. The task of these divisions was, according to Article 160 of the Treaty of Versailles, to “be devoted exclusively to the maintenance of order within the territory and to the control of the frontiers”. The Reichswehr had no general staff, nor a Kriegsakademie for training general staff officers. The allies would not allow Germany to have such an organisation, given the part that those particular officers had played in the First World War. The advanced training for officers was, therefore, decentralised and was provided by the Führergehilfelehrgänge in the Wehrkreise, into which the Reichswehrgruppenkommandos were divided. The idea was thus to prevent a situation in which training was given to an exclusive and homogenous corps of staff officers.

Because of the high levels of unemployment in Germany after 1918, a great many Germans aspired to a position of officer or lower rank in the