CHAPTER NINE

THE GERMAN ARMY IN THE INTERWAR YEARS

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For the military historian the inter-war years are probably one of the most fascinating periods of the twentieth century, despite the fact that it was a comparatively peaceful time for most of the European powers. The lessons of the First World War and the occurrence of new weapons, such as the tank, had to be incorporated into military thought and doctrine. Accordingly, the inter-war period was a time of intense and heated debate for all the armed forces in Europe and the US. Historiography of the German army in this period has very much concentrated on the development of the so-called ‘Blitzkrieg’ as a prerequisite for the German successes in the first half of the Second World War. However, the view that a ‘Blitzkrieg’ concept had been lurking in the minds of the German military and that it only took Hitler and rearmament to turn these ideas into practice reduces the inter-war period to a mere time of transition. It obscures the fact that only a few years before the outbreak of the Second World War the total German armed forces consisted of an army of 100,000 men and a navy of 15,000 men, and that the Versailles Treaty had degraded Germany to a third-rate military power. This small army would not be strong enough to repel an invader, and, accordingly, for the Reichswehr and the Wehrmacht in the early stages of its existence, the core business was to find an answer to the question of how the fatherland could be defended against superior enemies. At the same time there is no doubt that the status of small power never was seen as anything more than a temporary situation, which was not to affect the nation’s identity and fundamental strategy.

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1 Exemplary for this view is the view of Robert O’Neill, the later Chichele Professor of War at Oxford University, who stated that when it came to doctrine and training of the German army in the inter-war period, there was ‘one thing that makes this story worth telling…. the Blitzkrieg’; see R. J. O’Neill, “Doctrine and Training in the German Army 1919–1939,” in The Theory and Practice of War: Essays Presented to Captain B. H. Liddell Hart, ed. M. Howard (London: Cassell, 1965), pp. 143–166, here p. 143.
On 11 November 1918, the Germans surrendered and the First World War came to an end. The months between this date and the signing of the peace treaty on 28 June 1919 were turbulent times for Germany. The British blockade was still being upheld, and in the west the enemies stood ready to march into the Reich. In the east, Germany was threatened by Polish risings, and the terms of the treaty, handed to the German delegation at Versailles on 7 May 1919, caused consternation among practically all social and political groups in Germany. Especially the so-called ‘war guilt clause’ 231, which stated that Germany had to accept sole responsibility for the war, caused an outcry in Germany. Hans von Seeckt, the general staff representative in Versailles and later Chef der Heeresleitung, stated in a letter to his wife that his worst expectations had been met.2

Militarily, the treaty degraded Germany to a third-rank power, not only inferior to the strong Entente powers, but also to Poland and Czechoslovakia. Conscription was abolished and the army was restricted to 100,000 men organised in seven infantry and three cavalry divisions.3 The divisions’ armaments were limited, and the army was not allowed to sustain a tank force or to make use of heavy artillery. The heaviest artillery piece permitted was the 10.5 cm howitzer, of which each infantry division was allowed to keep twelve; that is eighty-four in total for the entire army. Moreover, the treaty prohibited poisonous or other gases. The general staff was abolished, as were the military academies and schools. In the west, the left bank of the Rhine was occupied by Entente troops with the French occupation force alone consisting of some 90,000 men. Moreover, a disarmed zone had to be created stretching fifty kilometres to the east of the Rhine. Within this zone, all fortifications had to be dismantled and no German troops were to be deployed in this area. To oversee the execution of the treaty’s

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