Introduction

Throughout the inter-war years the Norwegian defence leadership grappled with a fundamental challenge, and in the latter part of the 1930s the situation became almost desperate. On the one hand, Norway needed a defence organization that could endure periods of protracted neutrality as the country’s first line of defence in compliance with political guidelines and historical experience. Such an organization had proved imperative during the First World War. It meant a large establishment with lightly equipped army units covering a country approximately the size of Great Britain and with a scattered population of circa three million citizens, coastal artillery forts and controlled mine fields situated at the approaches to the major towns, aircraft for observation and interception and naval vessels and hired civilian patrol boats for the surveillance of the 2,600 kilometres of coastline. On the other hand, in accordance with the strategic understanding of the defence leadership, the country also needed modern units that could counter a limited great-power attack with the view of securing a naval base somewhere along the south-western coast, in the Narvik area or in the eastern part of Finnmark. This meant mobile, mechanized and concentrated forces at a relatively high level of readiness that at least had the capacity to delay or disrupt a great-power attack.

Striking a balance between these contradictory needs constituted a formidable task for a defence community that was simultaneously severely underfunded and notoriously politically overambitious. It added to the challenge that the entire defence organization was still, in the latter part of the 1930s, struggling to cope with the major reforms of 1927 and 1933 that were far from being brought to a conclusion, as we will see below. The lack of political support in the implementation
phase and the prevailing economic depression had resulted in an army and navy almost in a state of operational hibernation. The restructuring proved utterly unsuccessful when it came to establishing new capabilities. Acquisitions were almost non-existent, field exercises came to a halt, and the education of both army and navy officers was dramatically reduced. Moreover, Norwegian conscripts had by far the shortest training period in Europe – forty-eight days at the nadir, a little less than a hundred days at the apex. With the benefit of hindsight it might easily be claimed that it was impossible to combine the maintenance of a neutrality guard with a limited, modern war-fighting capacity given the political and economic circumstances of the inter-war period, and the geographical characteristics of the country. And, for a number of reasons, war fighting had to give way to other measures.

The situation, however, changed in 1937. The government, with broad parliamentary support, then embarked upon a rearmament programme unprecedented since after the First World War. Money was poured into the ministry of defence to such an extent that the authorities were not able to find sufficient suppliers of military materiel and other war provisions. The Norwegian arms and munitions industry had a very limited capacity, with one factory for munitions and another one for small arms. In addition, both the army and the navy had their own licensed production of aircraft and the naval shipyard was capable of building small naval vessels. All production facilities were located in the central part of southern Norway. The primary suppliers of war materials were the great powers, and it goes without saying that there were strings attached to weapons deals in this pre-war period which could easily jeopardize the security policies of non-aligned countries. This posed an insurmountable problem for Norway, which tried to reassume a traditional neutral posture in cooperation with the Oslo states after it had become apparent that collective security under the League of Nations was in a spiralling process of deterioration. The government soon experienced what an overwhelming task it was to revitalize a dormant military system even though the overall framework and core institutions had been maintained during the dire years of economic depression and irreconcilable disagreement over defence policy. Regardless of this geyser of revenues, the result was that at the time of the German attack a considerable part of the appropriations were still unspent – and Norway still militarily exceptionally weak and inefficient.

The main focus of this chapter is this rearmament period from 1937 to 1940. It might be asked whether there was a reasonable correlation