

Rumsfeld Pentagon Purge Echoes Hitler's in 1938

by Steve Douglas

In his March 31 *New Yorker* article on the battle between Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and military officers, Seymour Hersh speaks of "Rumsfeld's personal contempt for many of the senior generals and admirals" and that he is "especially critical of the Army." Hersh reports that Rumsfeld has purged the Joint Staff, the operating arm of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, by replacing all those senior planners who challenged his view. He also writes that one senior military planner told him, "All the Joint Staff people now are hand-picked, and churn out products to make the Secretary of Defense happy. They don't make military judgments—they just respond to his snowflakes" (a derisive term the military has coined to describe Rumsfeld's off-the-cuff memoranda).

Rumsfeld's propensity for abusive and humiliating treatment of senior military officials, coupled with his purge of the Joint Staff, is reminiscent of Adolf Hitler's conduct toward the traditionalist leadership of the German Army in early 1938, at the point that he had decided to launch aggressive war against neighboring countries. In late January and early February 1938, Hitler reorganized the hierarchy of the German Armed Forces in general, and the German Army in particular. In one fell swoop, Hitler announced that:

- He was abolishing the post of War Minister;
- He was appointing himself as the Supreme Commander of all the Armed Forces of Germany;
- He was replacing Army Commander-in-Chief Werner von Fritsch (who disdained the Nazis) with (pliable and mediocre) Gen. Walther von Brauchitsch, whose domineering and ambitious wife was a "200% Nazi";
- He was relieving 16 anti-Nazi generals of their commands, by mandating their retirement;
- He was reassigning 44 other (suspect) senior Army Commanders;
- He was replacing the conservative Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath with the ardent pro-Nazi Joachim von Ribbentrop (ultimately sentenced to death at the Nuremberg Tribunal for conspiring to wage aggressive war);
- He was removing Ulrich von Hassell, the anti-Nazi German ambassador to Rome.

A "Führer's decree" was read on German radio at midnight on Feb. 3-4, 1938: "From henceforth I exercise personally the immediate command over the whole Armed Forces. The former Wehrmacht Office in the War Ministry becomes the High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW), and comes immediately under my command as my military staff. At the

head of the staff of the High Command stands the former chief of the Wehrmacht Office [Gen. Wilhelm Keitel]. He is accorded the rank equivalent to that of Reichs Minister. The High Command of the Armed Forces also takes over the functions of the War Ministry, and the Chief of the High Command exercises, as my deputy, the powers hitherto held by the Reich War Minister."

Gen. Franz Halder, the anti-Hitler Chief of the German Army General Staff from 1938 until 1942, later said, "Few realized at the time the complete break with the past that these events represented. The Army, quite unprepared, embarked on a new experience. It was not to be a happy one."

'No Resistance at the Top'

As Hitler sent Minister of War Werner von Blomberg packing, he asked him if he had any ideas as to who should head the new OKW which Hitler had just decreed into existence. When Blomberg could not come up with any suitable suggestions, Hitler asked him who headed his office staff. Blomberg replied that it was General Keitel, whom he characterized as "nothing but the man who runs my office," and a subservient person who had no independent ideas of his own. Blomberg had thereby sought to dismiss Keitel as a candidate for the head post in the new OKW. But Hitler shot back, "That's exactly the man I am looking for."

Indeed, Keitel and his ever-present associate, Gen. Alfred Jodl, fit the bill perfectly. Keitel was so slavishly obedient to the dictates of Hitler, that he quickly acquired the sobriquet "Lakaitel"—a pun that made the rounds in the upper echelons of the Army—which means "purely a lackey." As Keitel himself later noted, "For the execution of Hitler's plans, which were unknown to us, he needed impotent tools unable to inhibit him." And so it was that leading figures in the Army came to refer with disgust to the OKW not as "Oberkommando der Wehrmacht," but rather, "Oben Kein Widerstand"—"no resistance at the top."

By virtue of this sudden reorganization of the leadership of the Armed Forces, Hitler had massively downgraded the role of the Army in national life. The Army had always been the heart of the Armed Forces, because Germany was a land-based power in Central Europe. But with the creation of the OKW, Hitler changed all that. He reduced the Commander-in-Chief of the Army to the status of a service head who had to report to the OKW, along with the service heads of the Air Force and the Navy. Moreover, Hitler elevated his Nazi compatriot Hermann Göring to the rank of Field Marshal, as head of the new air force, the Luftwaffe. Göring's promotion made him the ranking figure of the Armed Forces; i.e., higher in rank than Colonel General Brauchitsch, the Army's new Commander-in-Chief.

It is worthwhile noting here, in light of Rumsfeld's love affair with air power, that the most pro-Nazi of all the military services in Germany before and during World War II was the Luftwaffe. This was not simply because Hitler's right-hand man Göring headed it, but also because there was no Prussian

General Staff tradition of independent initiative and thinking within it. Advocates of the Luftwaffe were much disoriented by the Utopian air doctrines of their day, just as we see with fanatical air power advocates today. Hitler was so enamored of the Nazi zeal of the Luftwaffe, that, later, in 1941, he authorized the formation of more than 20 infantry divisions of the Luftwaffe, involving 240,000 troops, instead of having those troops mustered into the German Army, whose divisions had been depleted by heavy losses on the Russian Front! Field Marshal Fritz von Manstein, the most able of the German Army's commanders, observed that such a plan was "sheer lunacy." Manstein reported that he had been informed that, "Göring told Hitler that he could not hand over 'his' soldiers reared in the spirit of National Socialism, to an army which still had chaplains and was led by officers steeped in the tradition of the Kaiser," and that the paranoid Hitler had endorsed that absurd "reasoning."

Hitler then, with a special decree that he issued in the Autumn of 1938, repudiated the principles of independent thinking and *Auftragstaktik* ("mission" orders or orientation), which had represented the core of the Prussian/German military's excellence and accomplishment. In that system, an officer had the responsibility for making known, and acting upon, objections he had to orders that he believed to be misguided, or which had been superseded by conditions on the battlefield. An incident that occurred in the Franco-Prussian War, retold by Gen. Helmuth von Moltke, illustrates the principle: "One day during the war with France, during a visit to the headquarters of Prince Frederick Charles, the Prince was observed criticizing a Major. The Major attempted to defend his actions, by claiming that he was following orders, and that as a Prussian officer, he believed that an order from a superior was tantamount to an order from the King. At this, the Prince bristled and declared: 'His Majesty made you a Major, because he believed you would know when *not* to obey his orders.'"

Col. Gen. Heinz Guderian, the creator of the Panzerwaffe (armored or tank troops), noted the destructive effect of Hitler's special order: "There had existed within the Army a system by which the chiefs of staff, down to and including the chief of staff of an army corps, shared the responsibility for the decisions taken by their respective commanding generals. This system, which involved the forwarding of a report by the chief of staff should he disagree with his commander, was discontinued on Hitler's orders. . . . In accordance with the 'leader principle' which he propagated, Hitler now logically ordered that the man who was in command must bear the entire and undivided responsibility; by this decree he automatically abolished the joint responsibility of the Chief of the Army General Staff (and of the OKW, too) in relationship to himself in his capacity as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces."

General Jodl saw "the OKW not as containing officers and colleagues who had the right to think for themselves, to make suggestions and to advise, but as a machine for the

elaboration and issue of orders—orders that came from Hitler himself." The malleable Keitel was just what Hitler wanted. One observer of Hitler's circles noted that "Hitler said that he could not do without Keitel because the man was 'loyal as a dog' to him."

The Road to Czechoslovakia

Hitler rode roughshod over opposition to his making a military assault on Czechoslovakia. In March, a military tribunal revealed that General Fritsch had been cashiered in a massive frame-up, engineered by the highest levels of the SS and Gestapo. But this chain of events, which should have resulted in Fritsch's immediate reinstatement, was eclipsed by Hitler's *Anschluss* (annexation) of Austria, which happened at the same time. Hitler refused to reappoint Fritsch.

Army Chief of Staff Ludwig Beck wrote a series of memoranda warning of the horrifying consequences of Hitler's planned attack on Czechoslovakia. He said that such an assault would first lead to a European-wide war, and then to a world-wide war, which would result in the destruction of Germany and much of Europe. In early August, as Hitler's Oct. 1 deadline for an invasion of Czechoslovakia loomed, Beck attempted, in vain, to organize a mass resignation of the senior commanders of the Army, in protest.

To counter this unrest, Hitler summoned senior officers to his mountaintop retreat at the Berghof on Aug. 10. General Jodl recorded: "After dinner the Führer talked for nearly three hours explaining his line of thought on political questions. Thereafter certain of the generals tried to point out to the Führer that we were by no means ready. This was, to say the least, unfortunate. There are a number of reasons for this pusillanimous attitude which is unhappily fairly widespread in the Army General Staff. . . . [It] is obsessed with memories of the past, and, instead of doing what it is told and getting on with its military job, thinks it is responsible for political decisions. It does get on with its job with all its old devotion, but its heart is not in it, because in the last analysis, it does not believe in the genius of the Führer."

In one of his last memoranda as Army Chief of Staff, as he continued his desperate mobilization against the invasion of Czechoslovakia, Beck appealed to the military leadership to act with statesman-like responsibility, and think of their obligation for the welfare of the entire nation, and not just military affairs narrowly defined: "History will burden those military leaders with blood guilt who fail to act according to their professional knowledge and conscience. . . . There is a lack of stature and a failure to recognize one's mission when a soldier in highest position in such times conceives of his duties and problems solely within the restricted framework of his military assignments and in unawareness that his highest responsibilities are toward the entire nation. Abnormal times require deeds that are also out of the ordinary."

Beck submitted his resignation. Keitel, Jodl, and Göring were all convicted at Nuremberg of waging aggressive war, and sentenced to death.