

The Second World War



THE
Gathering
Storm

Winston S. Churchill

*Published in association with
The Cooperation Publishing Company, Inc.*

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY BOSTON
The Riverside Press Cambridge

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Adolf Hitler

The Blinded Corporal — The Obscure Fuehrer — The Munich Putsch, 1923 — "Mein Kampf" — Hitler's Problems — Hitler and the Reichswehr — The Schleicher Intrigue — The Impact of the Economic Blizzard — Chancellor Bruening — A Constitutional Monarchy! — Equality of Armaments — Schleicher Intervenes — The Fall of Bruening.

IN OCTOBER, 1918, a German corporal had been temporarily blinded by chlorine gas in a British attack near Comines. While he lay in hospital in Pomerania, defeat and revolution swept over Germany. The son of an obscure Austrian customs official, he had nursed youthful dreams of becoming a great artist. Having failed to gain entry to the Academy of Art in Vienna, he had lived in poverty in that capital and later in Munich. Sometimes as a house-painter, often as a casual labourer, he suffered physical privations and bred a harsh though concealed resentment that the world had denied him success. These misfortunes did not lead him into Communist ranks. By an honourable inversion he cherished all the more an abnormal sense of racial loyalty and a fervent and mystic admiration for Germany and the German people. He sprang eagerly to arms at the outbreak of the war, and served for four years with a Bavarian regiment on the Western Front. Such were the early fortunes of Adolf Hitler.

As he lay sightless and helpless in hospital during the winter of 1918, his own personal failure seemed merged in the disaster of the whole German people. The shock of defeat, the collapse

of law and order, the triumph of the French, caused this convalescent regimental orderly an agony which consumed his being, and generated those portentous and measureless forces of the spirit which may spell the rescue or the doom of mankind. The downfall of Germany seemed to him inexplicable by ordinary processes. Somewhere there had been a gigantic and monstrous betrayal. Lonely and pent within himself, the little soldier pondered and speculated upon the possible causes of the catastrophe, guided only by his narrow personal experiences. He had mingled in Vienna with extreme German Nationalist groups, and here he had heard stories of sinister, undermining activities of another race, foes and exploiters of the Nordic world — the Jews. His patriotic anger fused with his envy of the rich and successful into one overpowering hate.

When at length, as an unnoted patient, he was released from hospital still wearing the uniform in which he had an almost schoolboyish pride, what scenes met his newly unscaled eyes? Fearful are the convulsions of defeat. Around him in the atmosphere of despair and frenzy glared the lineaments of Red Revolution. Armoured cars dashed through the streets of Munich scattering leaflets or bullets upon the fugitive wayfarers. His own comrades, with defiant red arm-bands on their uniforms, were shouting slogans of fury against all that he cared for on earth. As in a dream everything suddenly became clear. Germany had been stabbed in the back and clawed down by the Jews, by the profiteers and intriguers behind the front, by the accursed Bolsheviki in their international conspiracy of Jewish intellectuals. Shining before him he saw his duty, to save Germany from these plagues, to avenge her wrongs, and lead the master race to their long-decreed destiny.

The officers of his regiment, deeply alarmed by the seditious and revolutionary temper of their men, were very glad to find one, at any rate, who seemed to have the root of the matter in him. Corporal Hitler desired to remain mobilised, and found employment as a "political education officer" or agent. In this guise he gathered information about mutinous and subversive designs. Presently he was told by the security officer for whom

he worked to attend meetings of the local political parties of all complexions. One evening in September, 1919, the Corporal went to a rally of the German Workers' Party in a Munich brewery, and here he heard for the first time people talking in the style of his secret convictions against the Jews, the speculators, the "November criminals" who had brought Germany into the abyss. On September 16, he joined this party, and shortly afterwards, in harmony with his military work, undertook its propaganda. In February, 1920, the first mass meeting of the German Workers' Party was held in Munich, and here Adolf Hitler himself dominated the proceedings and in twenty-five points outlined the party programme. He had now become a politician. His campaign of national salvation had been opened. In April, he was demobilised, and the expansion of the party absorbed his whole life. By the middle of the following year, he had ousted the original leaders, and by his passion and genius forced upon the hypnotised company the acceptance of his personal control. Already he was "the Fuehrer." An unsuccessful newspaper, the *Voelkischer Beobachter*, was bought as the party organ.

The Communists were not long in recognising their foe. They tried to break up Hitler's meetings, and in the closing days of 1921 he organised his first units of storm troopers. Up to this point all had moved in local circles in Bavaria. But in the tribulation of German life during these first post-war years, many began here and there throughout the Reich to listen to the new gospel. The fierce anger of all Germany at the French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 brought what was now called the National-Socialist Party a broad wave of adherents. The collapse of the mark destroyed the basis of the German middle class, of whom many in their despair became recruits of the new party and found relief from their misery in hatred, vengeance, and patriotic fervour.

At the beginning, Hitler had made clear that the path to power lay through aggression and violence against a Weimar Republic born from the shame of defeat. By November, 1923, "the Fuehrer" had a determined group around him, among

whom Goering, Hess, Rosenberg, and Roehm were prominent. These men of action decided that the moment had come to attempt the seizure of authority in the State of Bavaria. General von Ludendorff lent the military prestige of his name to the venture, and marched forward in the *Putsch*. It used to be said before the war: "In Germany there will be no revolution, because in Germany all revolutions are strictly forbidden." This precept was revived on this occasion by the local authorities in Munich. The police fired, carefully avoiding the General, who marched straight forward into their ranks and was received with respect. About twenty of the demonstrators were killed; Hitler threw himself upon the ground, and presently escaped with other leaders from the scene. In April, 1924, he was sentenced to four years' imprisonment.

Although the German authorities had maintained order, and the German court had inflicted punishment, the feeling was widespread throughout the land that they were striking at their own flesh and blood, and were playing the foreigners' game at the expense of Germany's most faithful sons. Hitler's sentence was reduced from four years to thirteen months. These months in the Landsberg fortress were, however, sufficient to enable him to complete in outline *Mein Kampf*, a treatise on his political philosophy inscribed to the dead of the recent *Putsch*. When eventually he came to power, there was no book which deserved more careful study from the rulers, political and military, of the Allied Powers. All was there — the programme of German resurrection; the technique of party propaganda; the plan for combating Marxism; the concept of a National-Socialist State; the rightful position of Germany at the summit of the world. Here was the new Koran of faith and war: turgid, verbose, shapeless, but pregnant with its message.

The main thesis of *Mein Kampf* is simple. Man is a fighting animal; therefore the nation, being a community of fighters, is a fighting unit. Any living organism which ceases to fight for its existence is doomed to extinction. A country or race which ceases to fight is equally doomed. The fighting capacity of a race depends on its purity. Hence the need for ridding it of

foreign defilements. The Jewish race, owing to its universality, is of necessity pacifist and internationalist. Pacifism is the deadliest sin; for it means the surrender of the race in the fight for existence. The first duty of every country is therefore to nationalise the masses; intelligence in the case of the individual is not of first importance; will and determination are the prime qualities. The individual who is born to command is more valuable than countless thousands of subordinate natures. Only brute force can ensure the survival of the race; hence the necessity for military forms. The race must fight; a race that rests must rust and perish. Had the German race been united in good time, it would have been already master of the globe. The new Reich must gather within its fold all the scattered German elements in Europe. A race which has suffered defeat can be rescued by restoring its self-confidence. Above all things the Army must be taught to believe in its own invincibility. To restore the German nation, the people must be convinced that the recovery of freedom by force of arms is possible. The aristocratic principle is fundamentally sound. Intellectualism is undesirable. The ultimate aim of education is to produce a German who can be converted with the minimum of training into a soldier. The greatest upheavals in history would have been unthinkable had it not been for the driving force of fanatical and hysterical passions. Nothing could have been effected by the bourgeois virtues of peace and order. The world is now moving towards such an upheaval, and the new German State must see to it that the race is ready for the last and greatest decisions on this earth.

Foreign policy may be unscrupulous. It is not the task of diplomacy to allow a nation to founder heroically, but rather to see that it can prosper and survive. England and Italy are the only two possible allies for Germany. No country will enter into an alliance with a cowardly pacifist state run by democrats and Marxists. So long as Germany does not fend for herself, nobody will fend for her. Her lost provinces cannot be regained by solemn appeals to Heaven or by pious hopes in the League of Nations, but only by force of arms. Germany

must not repeat the mistake of fighting all her enemies at once. She must single out the most dangerous and attack him with all her forces. The world will only cease to be anti-German when Germany recovers equality of rights and resumes her place in the sun. There must be no sentimentality about Germany's foreign policy. To attack France for purely sentimental reasons would be foolish. What Germany needs is increase of territory in Europe. Germany's pre-war colonial policy was a mistake and should be abandoned. Germany must look for expansion to Russia and especially to the Baltic States. No alliance with Russia can be tolerated. To wage war together with Russia against the West would be criminal, for the aim of the Soviets is the triumph of international Judaism.

Such were the "granite pillars" of his policy.

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The ceaseless struggles and gradual emergence of Adolf Hitler as a national figure were little noticed by the victors, oppressed and harassed as they were by their own troubles and party strife. A long interval passed before National Socialism or the "Nazi Party," as it came to be called, gained so strong a hold of the masses of the German people, of the armed forces, of the machinery of the State, and among industrialists not unreasonably terrified of Communism, as to become a power in German life of which world-wide notice had to be taken. When Hitler was released from prison at the end of 1924, he said that it would take him five years to reorganise his movement.

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One of the democratic provisions of the Weimar Constitution prescribed biennial elections to the Reichstag. It was hoped by this provision to make sure that the masses of the German people should enjoy a complete and continuous control over their Parliament. In practice, of course, it only meant that they lived in a continual atmosphere of febrile political excitement and ceaseless electioneering. The progress of Hitler and his doctrines is thus registered with precision. In 1928, he

had but twelve seats in the Reichstag. In 1930, this became 107; in 1932, 230. By that time the whole structure of Germany had been permeated by the agencies and discipline of the National-Socialist Party, and intimidation of all kinds and insults and brutalities towards the Jews were rampant.

It is not necessary in this account to follow year by year this complex and formidable development with all its passions and villainies, and all its ups and downs. The pale sunlight of Locarno shone for a while upon the scene. The spending of the profuse American loans induced a sense of returning prosperity. Marshal Hindenburg presided over the German State; and Stresemann was his Foreign Minister. The stable, decent majority of the German people, responding to their ingrained love of massive and majestic authority, clung to him till his dying gasp. But other powerful factors were also active in the distracted nation to which the Weimar Republic could offer no sense of security and no satisfactions of national glory or revenge.

Behind the veneer of republican governments and democratic institutions, imposed by the victors and tainted with defeat, the real political power in Germany and the enduring structure of the nation in the post-war years had been the General Staff of the Reichswehr. They it was who made and unmade presidents and cabinets. They had found in Marshal Hindenburg a symbol of their power and an agent of their will. But Hindenburg in 1930 was eighty-three years of age. From this time his character and mental grasp steadily declined. He became increasingly prejudiced, arbitrary, and senile. An enormous image had been made of him in the war, and patriots could show their admiration by paying for a nail to drive into it. This illustrates effectively what he had now become — "The Wooden Titan." It had for some time been clear to the generals that a satisfactory successor to the aged Marshal would have to be found. The search for the new man was, however, overtaken by the vehement growth and force of the National-Socialist Movement. After the failure of the 1923 *Putsch* in Munich, Hitler had professed a programme of strict legality

within the framework of the Weimar Republic. Yet at the same time he had encouraged and planned the expansion of the military and para-military formations of the Nazi Party. From very small beginnings the S.A., the Storm Troops or "Brown Shirts," with their small disciplinary core, the S.S., grew in numbers and vigour to the point where the Reichswehr viewed their activities and potential strength with grave alarm.

At the head of the Storm Troops formations stood a German soldier of fortune, Ernst Roehm, the comrade, and hitherto the close friend of Hitler through all the years of struggle. Roehm, Chief of the Staff of the S.A., was a man of proved ability and courage, but dominated by personal ambition, and sexually perverted. His vices were no barrier to Hitler's collaboration with him along the hard and dangerous path to power. The Storm Troops had, as Bruening complains, absorbed most of the old German Nationalist formations, such as the Free Companies which had fought in the Baltic and Poland against the Bolsheviks in the nineteen-twenties, and also the Nationalist Veterans' Organisation of the Steel Helmets (*Stahlhelm*).

Pondering most carefully upon the tides that were flowing in the nation, the Reichswehr convinced themselves with much reluctance that as a military caste and organisation in opposition to the Nazi Movement, they could no longer maintain control of Germany. Both factions had in common the resolve to raise Germany from the abyss and avenge her defeat; but while the Reichswehr represented the ordered structure of the Kaiser's Empire, and gave shelter to the feudal, aristocratic, landowning and well-to-do classes in German society, the S.A. had become to a large extent a revolutionary movement fanned by the discontents of temperamental or embittered subversives and the desperation of ruined men. They differed from the Bolsheviks whom they denounced no more than the North Pole does from the South.

For the Reichswehr to quarrel with the Nazi Party was to tear the defeated nation asunder. The Army chiefs in 1931 and 1932 felt they must, for their own sake and for that of the country, join forces with those to whom in domestic matters

they were opposed with all the rigidity and severeness of the German mind. Hitler, for his part, although prepared to use any battering-ram to break into the citadels of power, had always before his eyes the leadership of the great and glittering Germany which had commanded the admiration and loyalty of his youthful years. The conditions for a compact between him and the Reichswehr were therefore present and natural on both sides. The Army chiefs had gradually realised that the strength of the Nazi Party in the nation was such that Hitler was the only possible successor to Hindenburg as head of the German nation. Hitler on his side knew that to carry out his programme of German resurrection an alliance with the governing élite of the Reichswehr was indispensable. A bargain was struck, and the German Army leaders began to persuade Hindenburg to look upon Hitler as eventual Chancellor of the Reich. Thus, by agreeing to curtail the activities of the Brown Shirts, to subordinate them to the General Staff, and ultimately, if unavoidable, to liquidate them, Hitler gained the allegiance of the controlling forces in Germany, official executive dominance, and the apparent reversion of the headship of the German State. The Corporal had travelled far.

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There was, however, an inner and separate complication. If the key to any master-combination of German internal forces was the General Staff of the Army, several hands were grasping for that key. General Kurt von Schleicher at this time exercised a subtle and on occasions a decisive influence. He was the political mentor of the reserved and potentially dominating military circle. He was viewed with a measure of distrust by all sections and factions, and regarded as an adroit and useful political agent possessed of much knowledge outside the General Staff Manuals, and not usually accessible to soldiers. Schleicher had been long convinced of the significance of the Nazi Movement and of the need to stem and control it. On the other hand, he saw that in this terrific mob-thrust, with its ever-growing private army of S.A., there was a weapon which,

if properly handled by his comrades of the General Staff, might reassert the greatness of Germany, and perhaps even establish his own. In this intention during the course of 1931 Schleicher began to plot secretly with Roehm, Chief of the Staff of the Nazi Storm Troopers. There was thus a major double process at work: the General Staff making their arrangements with Hitler, and Schleicher in their midst pursuing his personal conspiracy with Hitler's principal lieutenant and would-be rival, Roehm. Schleicher's contacts with the revolutionary element of the Nazi Party, and particularly with Roehm, lasted until both he and Roehm were shot by Hitler's orders three years later. This certainly simplified the political situation; and also that of the survivors.

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Meanwhile, the economic blizzard smote Germany in her turn. The United States banks, faced with increasing commitments at home, refused to increase their improvident loans to Germany. This reaction led to the widespread closing of factories and the sudden ruin of many enterprises on which the peaceful revival of Germany was based. Unemployment in Germany rose to 2,300,000 in the winter of 1930. At the same time reparations entered a new phase. For the previous three years the American Commissioner, Mr. Young, had administered and controlled the German budgets and had collected the heavy payments demanded by the Allies, including the payments to Britain which I transmitted automatically to the United States Treasury. It was certain this system could not last. Already in the summer of 1929, Mr. Young had framed, proposed, and negotiated in Paris an important scheme of mitigation, which not only put a final limit to the period of reparation payments, but freed both the Reichsbank and the German railways from Allied control, and abolished the Reparations Commission in favour of the Bank for International Settlements. Hitler and his National-Socialist Movement joined forces with the business and commercial interests which were represented, and to some extent led, by the truculent and

transient figure of the commercial magnate, Hugenberg. A vain but savage campaign was launched against this far-reaching and benevolent easement proffered by the Allies. The German Government succeeded by a dead-lift effort in procuring the assent of the Reichstag to the "Young Plan" by no more than 224 votes to 206. Stresemann, the Foreign Minister, who was now a dying man, gained his last success in the agreement for the complete evacuation of the Rhineland by the Allied armies, long before the Treaty required.

But the German masses were largely indifferent to the remarkable concessions of the victors. Earlier, or in happier circumstances, these would have been acclaimed as long steps upon the path of reconciliation and a return to true peace. But now the ever-present overshadowing fear of the German masses was unemployment. The middle classes had already been ruined and driven into violent courses by the flight from the mark. Stresemann's internal political position was undermined by the international economic stresses, and the vehement assaults of Hitler's Nazis and Hugenberg's capitalist magnates led to his overthrow. On March 28, 1930, Bruening, the leader of the Catholic Centre Party, became Chancellor.

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Bruening was a Catholic from Westphalia and a patriot, seeking to re-create the former Germany in modern democratic guise. He pursued continuously the scheme of factory preparation for war which had been devised by Herr Rathenau before his murder. He had also to struggle towards financial stability amid mounting chaos. His programme of economy and reduction of civil service numbers and salaries was not popular. The tides of hatred flowed ever more turbulently. Supported by President Hindenburg, Bruening dissolved a hostile Reichstag, and the election of 1930 left him with a majority. He now made the last recognisable effort to rally what remained of the old Germany against the resurgent, violent, and debased nationalist agitation. For this purpose he had first to secure the re-election of Hindenburg as President,

Chancellor Bruening looked to a new but obvious solution. He saw the peace, safety, and glory of Germany only in the restoration of an emperor. Could he then induce the aged Marshal Hindenburg, if and when re-elected, to act for his last term of office as regent for a restored monarchy to come into effect upon his death? This policy, if achieved, would have filled the void at the summit of the German nation towards which Hitler was now evidently making his way. In all the circumstances this was the right course. But how could Bruening lead Germany to it? The conservative element, which was drifting to Hitler, might have been recalled by the restoration of Kaiser Wilhelm; but neither the Social Democrats nor the trade-union forces would tolerate the restoration of the old Kaiser or the Crown Prince. Bruening's plan was not to re-create a Second Reich. He desired a constitutional monarchy on English lines. He hoped that one of the sons of the Crown Prince might be a suitable candidate.

In November, 1931, he confided his plans to Hindenburg, on whom all depended. The aged Marshal's reaction was at once vehement and peculiar. He was astonished and hostile. He said that he regarded himself solely as trustee of the Kaiser. Any other solution was an insult to his military honour. The monarchical conception, to which he was devoted, could not be reconciled with picking and choosing among royal princes. Legitimacy must not be violated. Meanwhile, as Germany would not accept the return of the Kaiser, there was nothing left but he, himself, Hindenburg. On this he rested. No compromise for him! "*J'y suis, j'y reste.*" Bruening argued vehemently and perhaps over-long with the old veteran. The Chancellor had a strong case. Unless Hindenburg would accept this monarchical solution, albeit unorthodox, there must be a revolutionary Nazi dictatorship. No agreement was reached. But whether or not Bruening could convert Hindenburg, it was imperative to get him re-elected as President, in order at least to stave off an immediate political collapse of the German State. In its first stage Bruening's plan was successful. At the Presidential elections held in March, 1932, Hindenburg was

returned, after a second ballot, by a majority over his rivals, Hitler and the Communist Thaelmann. Both the economic position in Germany and her relations with Europe had now to be faced. The Disarmament Conference was sitting in Geneva, and Hitler threw upon a roaring campaign against the humiliations of Germany under Versailles.

In careful meditation Bruening drafted a far-reaching plan of Treaty revision; and in April, 1932, he went to Geneva and found an unexpectedly favourable reception. In conversations between him and MacDonald, Stimson, and Norman Davis, it seemed that agreement could be reached. The extraordinary basis of this was the principle, subject to various reserved interpretations, of "equality of armaments" between Germany and France. It is indeed surprising, as future chapters will explain, that anyone in his senses should have imagined that peace could be built on such foundations. If this vital point were conceded by the victors, it might well pull Bruening out of his plight; and then the next step — and this one wise — would be the cancelling of reparations for the sake of European revival. Such a settlement would, of course, have raised Bruening's personal position to one of triumph.

Norman Davis, the American Ambassador-at-Large, telephoned to the French Premier, Tardieu, to come immediately from Paris to Geneva. But unfortunately for Bruening, Tardieu had other news. Schleicher had been busy in Berlin, and had just warned the French Ambassador not to negotiate with Bruening because his fall was imminent. It may well be also that Tardieu was concerned with the military position of France on the formula of "equality of armaments." At any rate Tardieu did not come to Geneva, and on May 1 Bruening returned to Berlin. To arrive there empty-handed at such a moment was fatal to him. Drastic and even desperate measures were required to cope with the threatened economic collapse inside Germany. For these measures Bruening's unpopular Government had not the necessary strength. He struggled on through May, and meanwhile Tardieu, in the kaleidoscope of French parliamentary politics, was replaced by M. Herriot.

The new French Premier declared himself ready to discuss the formulas reached in the Geneva conversations. Mr. Norman Davis was instructed to urge the German Chancellor to go to Geneva without a moment's delay. This message was received by Bruening early on May 30. But meanwhile Schleicher's influence had prevailed. Hindenburg had already been persuaded to dismiss the Chancellor. In the course of that very morning, after the American invitation, with all its hope and imprudence, had reached Bruening, he learned that his fate was settled, and by midday he resigned to avoid actual dismissal. So ended the last Government in post-war Germany which might have led the German people into the enjoyment of a stable and civilised constitution, and opened peaceful channels of intercourse with their neighbours. The offers which the Allies had made to Bruening would, but for Schleicher's intrigue and Tardieu's delay, certainly have saved him. These offers had presently to be discussed with a different system and a different man.