

The German Military and Hitler



Adolf Hitler addresses a rally of the Nazi paramilitary formation, the SA (*Sturmabteilung*), in 1933. By 1934, the SA had grown to nearly four million members, significantly outnumbering the 100,000 man professional army. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of William O. McWorkman*

The military played an important role in Germany. It was closely identified with the essence of the nation and operated largely independent of civilian control or politics. With the 1919 Treaty of Versailles after World War I, the victorious powers attempted to undercut the basis for German militarism by imposing restrictions on the German armed forces, including limiting the army to 100,000 men, curtailing the navy, eliminating the air force, and abolishing the military training academies and the General Staff (the elite German military planning institution).

On February 3, 1933, four days after being appointed chancellor, Adolf Hitler met with top military leaders to talk candidly about his plans to establish a dictatorship, rebuild the military, reclaim lost territories, and wage war. Although they shared many policy goals (including the cancellation of the Treaty of Versailles, the

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German Military Leadership and Hitler (continued)

expansion of the German armed forces, and the destruction of the perceived communist threat both at home and abroad), many among the military leadership did not fully trust Hitler because of his radicalism and populism. In the following years, however, Hitler gradually established full authority over the military. For example, the 1934 purge of the Nazi Party paramilitary formation, the SA (*Sturmabteilung*), helped solidify the military's position in the Third Reich and win the support of its leaders.



The Military Oath under the Weimar Republic (1919–1933)

“I swear loyalty to the Reich Constitution and vow that I will protect the German nation and its lawful establishment as a brave soldier at any time, and will obey the President and my superiors.”¹

The Military Oath as of August 1934

“I swear by God this sacred oath: I will render unconditional obedience to Adolf Hitler, the Führer of the German nation and people, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and will be ready as a brave soldier to risk my life at any time for this oath.”²

Hitler with the minister of war Werner von Blomberg and Werner von Fritsch, commander-in-chief of the army, during army maneuvers at the Munster training camp in 1935. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*

¹ Robert B. Kane, *Disobedience and Conspiracy in the German Army* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2002), 227.

² J. Noakes and G. Pridham, eds., “The Nazi Party, State and Society 1919–1939,” in *Nazism, 1919–1945: A History in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts*, vol. 1 (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 185–186.