THE SEMI-SECRET BIRTH OF THE LUFTWAFFE

By John T. Correll

Germany was disarmed after World War I, but nevertheless found ways to rebuild its combat airpower.

German Chancellor Adolf Hitler (front, left) and Air Minister Hermann Goering (front, right) inspect a new squadron at Doeberitz in 1935. The pilots had trained earlier in civilian flying clubs.

Photo via Bettmann/Corbis

The terms of surrender at the end of World War I were hard on the German armed forces, especially on the Imperial German Air Service. The Treaty of Versailles in 1919 imposed a limit of 100,000 on Army strength and reduced the Navy to 36 ships.

The air force, however, was demobilized completely, stripped of its airplanes and forbidden to obtain or possess any more. Even the hangars were torn down. In 1922, Allied inspectors certified the German air force as disarmed. As late as 1932, Chancellor Heinrich Bruening complained that Germany was still defenseless in the air.

All the more wonder that when, in March 1935, Chancellor Adolf Hitler announced that Germany was rearming, he also revealed that a substantial "Reichsluftwaffe" already existed. (The first part of the new name did not last for long.)

Air Minister Hermann Goering boasted to the press that his Luftwaffe air fleet had parity with Britain's Royal Air Force. It wasn't so, but it upset the British. Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald said the air strength of the home force would be built up to the German level. As Goering spoke, 400 aircraft, including bombers and fighters, flew over the Air Ministry in central Berlin.

At the beginning of 1935, the Luftwaffe consisted of 20 staffeln (the approximate equivalent of squadrons) with 11,000 members and 1,800 aircraft (including 370 bombers, 250 fighters, and 590 reconnaissance aircraft). The numbers grew steadily.

From 1936 to 1939, the Luftwaffe was engaged in the Spanish Civil War, thinly disguised as the "Condor Legion" and flying such world-class combat aircraft as the Bf 109 fighter and the Ju 87 Stuka dive bomber. By 1939, the Luftwaffe was ready to lead the blitzkrieg that opened World War II.

Obviously, the disarmament of Germany and the abolition of the German air force had not worked out as expected by the Allies. Through a combination of deception, evasion, and enterprise, the Germans had laid the way to rearmament while the rest of the world looked on. Their adversaries in Europe were more shocked than they had any real right to be.

Versailles

In the fall of 1918, after four years of war, Germany's military position had become hopeless. The Kaiser was forced into exile and an interim parliamentary government asked for an armistice, which went into effect on Nov. 11. The victorious Allies dictated the terms, no questions permitted.

The armistice required the German army to retreat beyond the Rhine while the leaders of the Allied nations met in Paris to determine the details of the surrender. Curiously, the Germans were not disarmed right away. That did not begin until 1920. For more than a year, Germany continued to produce and export munitions and war materiel. Among its principal trading partners were the Netherlands and Russia.

The Paris Peace conference was dominated by the "Big Three"—French Premier Georges Clemenceau, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, and US President Woodrow Wilson—who decided personally on the terms to be imposed.

Twenty-seven nations sent delegates to Paris, but most of them only attended

US Signal Corps photo

The decisions at Versailles were made personally by the "big three"—British Prime MInister David Lloyd George (l); French Premier Georges Clemenceau (second from right) and US President Woodrow Wilson (r). Other Allied leaders also attended, such as Italian Premier Vittorio Orlando (second from left), but had little imput.

a weekly "plenary conference" that discussed the issues but made no decisions. Russia had dropped out of the war when the Bolsheviks made a separate peace with Germany after the 1917 revolution. Therefore, Russia was not a party to the conference in Paris.

The Treaty of Versailles was presented as an ultimatum and the Germans signed it with gritted teeth on June 28, 1919. Among other things, they were required to acknowledge "the responsibility of Germany and her Allies for causing all the loss and damage" of the war, which had been caused "by the aggression of Germany and her allies."

The "guilt clause" went down hard. Germans of every station believed that the treaty was unjustified and unfair, that the war had been forced upon them. Military leaders and hardliners cultivated the fable that Germany had not been truly defeated, that the army had been sold out by the parliamentary government. Prominent promoters of this fiction included Gen. Erich F. W. Ludendorff and later, Adolf Hitler.

Allied forces occupied all of the German territory west of the Rhine, plus several bridgeheads on the other side of the river. In addition, a demilitarized zone was established on the east bank of the Rhine, 30 miles deep and running from the Netherlands south to Switzerland.

Despite this, the Allies had been careless in drawing up the treaty and the clamps on Germany were not as tight as they looked. Except for occupation of the Rhineland, there were no effective means to enforce compliance. There was no occupation of Germany at large. The Allied inspection teams monitoring the disarmament were small and limited in their authority. The Germans evaded them with ease.

The Allies differed greatly in their postwar priorities for Europe. The French wanted to keep the Germans as militarily weak as possible. The British, interested in maintaining a balance of power, did not want the French to become too dominant. The main issue for the United States—or for Woodrow Wilson, anyway—was creating the League of Nations.

Woodrow Wilson's Obsession

At Wilson's insistence, the very first thing in the Treaty of Versailles—ahead of the surrender terms—was the "Covenant of the League of Nations." In somewhat awkward language, Article 10 of the treaty vested the League with the decision on when and how to respond to international aggression.

Wilson was playing a lone hand. He had not consulted Congress about the negotiations in Paris and he ignored the advice of his own secretary of state. He expected Congress to ratify the treaty without argument.

Also at Wilson's instigation, the military provisions of the treaty led off with a statement of general disarmament: "In order to render possible the initiation of a general limitation of the armaments of all nations, Germany undertakes strictly to observe the military, naval, and air clauses which follow."

Wilson crafted this astounding passage as a gesture to make the treaty more amenable to Germany. However, it also reflected his famous "Fourteen Points," proclaimed in 1918. Point No. 4 had called for "national armaments reduced to the lowest point consistent with domestic safety," and the closing lines after the numbered points said that, "We have no jealousy of German greatness. ... We do not wish to injure her or to block in any way her legitimate influence or power. ... We wish her only to accept a place among the peoples of the world—the world in which we now live—instead of a place of mastery."

Wilson disclosed the provisions of the treaty to the press before discussing them with congressional leaders and then, to Wilson's surprise, Congress refused to ratify the treaty. The primary objection was the League of Nations committing US forces to war without a vote by the US Congress. However, Wilson's arrogant style was a factor as well.

The United States withdrew its members from the Allied inspection teams and had no further part in overseeing the disarmament. However, the notions and statements Wilson had embedded in the Treaty of Versailles would loom large in Germany's declared justification for rearmament.

The Allies Bamboozled

The US departure left enforcement of the treaty essentially up to the British and the French. Anxious to address long-neglected domestic problems at home, they put only limited effort into monitoring German disarmament. There were three "control commissions" with 1,200 inspectors for land forces, 450 for air forces, and 200 for naval forces. The aeronautical commission went out of business in 1922, certifying that disarmament of the German air force was complete.

The land force inspectors, poorly supported by their governments, were hampered by German obstructionism and refusal to cooperate. Physical attacks on the inspectors led to nothing more severe than a demand for apology and fines for those guilty of the assault. The Japanese naval air attaché in Berlin warned the Germans when a plant inspection was scheduled. In 1925, the Allies gave up altogether on inspections and turned responsibility for violations of the Versailles Treaty over to the toothless League of Nations. Allied occupation forces withdrew from the Rhineland in 1930, ahead of schedule.

Germany had entered World War I with a large military reserve, built up by the regular infusion of draftees who remained in the mobilization base after completing their initial training and service. To prevent this happening again, the treaty set the minimum period of enlistment for privates and NCOs at 12 years. Officers had to "undertake" to serve at least 25 years.

Maj. Gen. Hans von Seeckt, commander of the Reichswehr ("State Security"), managed to use this restriction and the army strength limit of 100,000 to his advantage. He weeded out all except the best qualified, who became the cadre for a larger force. Each man was ready to assume the duties of higher grades whenever the opportunity came for the force to expand. Von Seeckt called it a "fuhrerheer" or an "army of leaders." Training standards were the toughest in the world.

In signing the force disbandment order in 1920, Von Seeckt vowed, "We shall not abandon hope one day of seeing the flying corps come to life again." Over the objection of the personnel office, he kept 180 former flying officers in his officer corps of 4,000. He also assigned an air officer "special duty consultant" to each of the seven infantry divisions.

Because of a gaping loophole in the treaty, Germany was not forbidden to produce war materiel outside of Germany. Krupp, Heinkel, Junkers, Dornier, and other firms soon set up factories and subsidiaries abroad in Sweden, Finland, the Netherlands, and Russia. Inside Germany, Krupp made "agricultural tractors," which in actuality were experimental tanks.

Germany was allowed to manufacture civilian aircraft after 1922, but with tight constraints on size, speed, and payload. These limits were rescinded in 1926 after the Germans, invoking a clause of the agreement that imposed the same standards on all aircraft operating in the country, threatened to apply the rule to British and French airliners. Germany's own airline, Lufthansa, established in 1926, effectively operated as a full partner of the Reichswehr.

Airpower in the Shadows

In 1924, the Germans opened a secret air base in Russia at Lipetsk, some 300 miles southeast of Moscow. The Russians, shut out of the Treaty of Versailles, felt no obligation to their former Allies in the West who now treated them as hostile. Besides, Russia needed the technical and financial aid that Germany offered.

Fifty Dutch-built Fokker D.XIII fighters, bought by the German army on an order routed through Argentina, were based at Lipetsk. The German airmen received their mail by way of a postal box in Berlin and got their supplies in unmarked containers. Eventually some 150 fighter pilots were trained at Lipetsk. The Germans also tested prototypes and conducted tactical experiments at the base, which remained in operation until 1933.

The Germans were permitted to build and fly gliders. Sports flying was also allowed after 1923. The Reichswehr promptly funded the first 10 sports flying schools from its secret budget and enthusiastic young Germans flocked to join private paramilitary flying clubs. There were 300 such clubs with 30,000 members in 1935 when Goering merged them into the German Air Sports Association with himself as chairman.

Glider flying, ostensibly a sport, "sharpened German thinking in aerodynamics, structural design, and meteorology," said historian Edward L. Homze. Willy Messerschmitt began by building gliders and sailplanes and moved up to sports planes. He worked out the key elements of his fabled Bf 109 fighter in the earlier Bf 108 sports and touring aircraft.

The Germans grew steadily bolder. By 1929, eight aircraft plants were operating in the country. There were plenty of customers. Heinkel, for example, sold floatplanes in Japan and the United States. Based on specifications from the Reichswehr Ordnance office, Heinkel, Dornier, and other companies were developing bomber and fighter prototypes and testing them at Lipetsk and at a remote World War I airfield in Mecklenburg in northern Germany.

By 1932, the German air force in the shadows had 550 pilots and 228 airplanes, of which 36 could be classified as military aircraft. Its first fighter, the He 51, appeared in 1932. It was an open-cockpit biplane, supposedly a trainer, but it was used effectively for ground attack in the Spanish civil war.

Demand for Rearmament

Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, 78, chief of the general staff during World War I, was elected president of Germany's Weimar Republic in 1925. Hindenburg pointed to Wilson's Fourteen Points and to the general disarmament clause in the Treaty of Versailles and complained that none except Germany had given up their arms.

The German public, resenting the restrictions imposed at Versailles, supported the ongoing but illegal rearmament. The 10th anniversary of the treaty in 1929 was observed as a national "Day of Mourning," with protests against the "untruths" of German guilt and calls for an end to the penalties.

In September 1930, Nazi leader Adolf Hitler predicted that his party would gain a majority of the vote in three or four years and would then tear up the Versailles Treaty. The German press said that Germany had been misled into signing the treaty by Woodrow Wilson and his Fourteen Points.

Chancellor Heinrich Bruening asserted in 1932 that disarmament had led to an "impossible situation," leaving Germany defenseless. "Heavily armed nations" had the advantage, he said "especially in air arms."

Maj. Gen. Hans von Seeckt (front) converted restrictions into advantages, using the personnel ceiling to weed out all but the best performers and building a strong cadre from which the force could expand.

Designer Willy Messerschmitt began with gliders, sailplanes, and sports planes. He worked out key details for his Bf 109 fighters in the earlier Bf 108 "sports and touring" aircraft, such as the one shown here after making a belly landing in Czechoslovakia in 1941.

Germany sent an "Arms Equality Memorandum" to France, declaring that "all categories of arms which are not generally banned through convention must be permitted for Germany, too."

Western animosity diminished with the passage of time. It became popular to believe the war had been caused by a convergence of complex international conditions and that no nation should have been singled out for blame. Germany's desire for the capability to defend itself seemed reasonable.

Gen. Douglas A. MacArthur, US Army Chief of Staff, was not alone in his opinion in 1934 that the Versailles Treaty was a "gross injustice" and that Germany had the right to rebuild its military force.

Breakout

Rearmament shifted into high gear in January 1933 when Hitler was appointed chancellor by Hindenburg. Hitler named a German war hero, Hermann Goering, as Reich commissioner of aviation. As a World War I aviator with 22 aerial victories, Goering won both the Iron Cross First Class and Prussia's highest military decoration, the "Blue Max." In the final months of the war, he succeeded the "Red Baron," Manfred von Richthofen, as commander of Jagdgeschwader 1, the "Flying Circus."

In March 1935, Hitler announced that Germany was rearming, with "sufficient instruments of power not only to maintain the integrity of the German Reich but also to command international respect and value as co-guarantor of general peace." He said that Germany had "grounded arms" unilaterally in 1918 because of a treaty that was "one-sidedly imposed and executed." He also cited misplaced trust in the promises of Woodrow Wilson.

The Reichswehr was redesignated the Wehrmacht. The German army would have 36 divisions—about 500,000 men—making it the fourth largest in the world.

Hitler confirmed the existence of the Luftwaffe, revealed as an independent air arm on a par with the German army and navy. He told English visitors that the Luftwaffe was already the size of the RAF, but he was counting unarmed trainers as combat aircraft. The propaganda ministry proclaimed that the Luftwaffe would put "a steel roof over Germany" that would "darken the sun." At the beginning of 1935, it had about 1,800 aircraft in service. The Luftwaffe was emerging as an air force of significance, but it was not yet the powerhouse the Nazis claimed.

Goering was promoted to Reich air minister and commander of the Luftwaffe. "The Luftwaffe was favored at its birth by the fact that its patron and first leader, Hermann Goering, was Hitler's right-hand man," said historian Williamson Murray.

German aircraft production soared from a total of 36 in 1932 to 5,606 in 1937.

The output included modern combat aircraft: The He 111 medium bomber had been disguised as an airliner when it was designed in the early 1930s; the Messerschmitt Bf 109 was the world's most advanced fighter when it first flew in 1935; the fearsome Ju 87 Stuka dive bomber also made its debut in 1935.

When Germany reoccupied the Rhineland—which had been demilitarized by the Versailles Treaty—in 1936, the Luftwaffe sent two squadrons of He 51 fighters. They flew from airfield to airfield, changing their markings at each stop, to give impression of greater numbers. Hitler used the perception of a large and indomitable Luftwaffe to intimidate the rest of Europe into giving him the concessions he wanted.

Climb to Power

American aviator Charles A. Lindbergh, who had visited Luftwaffe bases several times, reported in 1938 that "without doubt the German air fleet is now stronger than that of any other country in the world." It was also unmatched in the depth of its combat experience.

In July 1936, Hitler sent military help to Gen. Francisco Franco, leader of the fascist revolutionaries in Spain. Twenty Lufthansa Ju 52 airliners, repainted to conceal their origin, airlifted Franco's forces from north Africa to the fighting front in Spain. The Ju 52s were then reconfigured as bombers.

The Germans soon upgraded their involvement to the "Condor Legion," which consisted primarily of aircraft, aircrews, and ground crews from the Luftwaffe. Over the next three years, about 19,000 German military members saw duty in Spain, serving one-year rotational tours. They wore khaki-brown uniforms with Spanish rank insignia, which fooled nobody.

Spain was the combat debut for three aircraft—the Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighter, the He 111 medium bomber, and the Ju 87 Stuka dive bomber—which would later play important roles in World War II. For the Luftwaffe, it was a dress rehearsal for a larger war.

By 1939, the Luftwaffe had about 3,500 aircraft and 20,000 flying personnel. It was especially strong in fighters and its main weakness was the lack of long-range heavy bombers.

The Condor Legion returned from Spain May 28, 1939, and was reviewed by Hitler in a massive victory parade in Berlin June 6. Four months later, on Sept. 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland to begin World War II. The invasion, which introduced the operational concept of blitzkrieg or "lightning war," was led by waves of Luftwaffe Ju 87 Stukas.

As the Battle of Britain in 1940 and subsequent conflict over the European continent demonstrated, the invincibility of the Luftwaffe was exaggerated. Nevertheless, it was a powerful force, built up in amazing time and under difficult circumstances. ■

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