INTRODUCTION

The Darker World

Imagine yourself as one of Hitler's diplomats. From the very beginning of Hitler's rule in 1933, you find yourself serving a violent regime. Each day you read or hear about mass arrests, beatings, and murders. Communists, Socialists, trade unionists, Catholics, Jews, and others are being persecuted by your government. SA thugs in uniforms roam the streets in paramilitary bands, picking fights with those who fail to salute them, beating and sometimes slaying their victims.

You try to convince yourself that you are safe, that you are not an "undesirable." You do not belong to any of the targeted groups. But you are also not a Nazi Party member. And your colleagues at the ministry, all aristocratic, 'old school' diplomats, are under increasing pressure from the newly formed state security services.

You can no longer speak freely on the telephone without fear that your line is tapped and your voice recorded. Conversations among colleagues and friends are charged with an undercurrent of tension. Your mail and telegrams are monitored, so you take greater care in choosing your words. The newspapers you read are censored or banned. And after two months of serving this new regime, parliamentary democracy disappears.

If this were not enough, your position and purview are threatened by Party interlopers. Your authority is challenged as rival institutions are charged with handling aspects of' foreign policy previously within your domain. And these ministries and their ministers are aggressively seeking control of the information they need to get ahead – and get you out.

And you face yet another dilemma. Your boss, the Führer, holds his cards so close to his chest

that you often don't know precisely what he wants. Wanting to serve your country and keep your job, you try to overcome this uncertainty by ascertaining the Chancellor's will however you can, even circumventing standard operating procedures, withholding and manipulating information, and spying when you must.

In the back of your mind you worry that the Party might one day turn against you. Then, in the summer of 1934, after eighteen months of mounting tension, you witness the end of the rule of law. As thousands are arrested and an unknown number murdered, you soon learn that conservatives of your ilk are among the victims. Of the three most recent chancellors, you hear that one was shot to death in his home along with his wife. Another is said to have had his staff members shot to death across their desks or sent to concentration camps while he was placed under house arrest. A third, you are told, fled into exile. And within your own ministry, colleagues are arrested and others are sent into hiding, fearing for their lives.

Then the situation worsens. Your government imposes racial purity laws, and some of your most trusted colleagues – the ones you counted on for information and support -- are forced to resign, some left to flee the country, others doomed to concentration camps. Gestapo and SS intimidation intensify. By the end of 1938, an extraordinary outburst of violence sweeps across your country leaving thousands of German Jews dead, wounded, or arrested, synagogues and businesses burned to the ground – all under your government's watchful eye. And with each passing day, your country marches ever closer to the abyss of total war.

For much of the 1930s, Hitler enjoyed immense popularity. Torchlight parades, symbols of strength and unity, the restoration of German power and pride, all held tremendous appeal, not simply

for the masses, but for the elites as well. Hitler's leading diplomats – the advisers he inherited from the Weimar regime and on whom he depended for continuity, intelligence, and knowledge of foreign capitols – shared many of the Fuhrer's broader political aims. They cheered the recapture of the Rhineland; they applauded the dismantling of Versailles. They welcomed a return of Germany's rightful place as a great power and basked in Hitler's torchlit glory. This was one world in which the diplomats existed. It was the outer world, the one they could safely share with others. But below the surface of Germany's foreign policy successes lay a darker world, cast in the shadow of torchlight parades. And its climate was one of tension, uncertainty, and fear.

What Hitler Knew examines how governmental officials reached decisions on foreign policy under the stresses and strains of a violent dictatorship. It considers both the regime's domestic political environment and its control of information. Both are critical to understanding why Hitler made some of the key diplomatic and military decisions that have preoccupied historians for more than fifty years. Why did Stalin sign the Nazi-Soviet pact if he knew Hitler planned to invade? Why did Hitler risk a war with France in 1936 when Germany was almost certain to lose? Did British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain actually seek a secret non-aggression pact with Hitler on the eve of war? As important as these questions are for an understanding of the period and the Cold War that followed, they are not the principal subjects of this book. Rather, they are the key moments through which decision-making in Nazi Germany is examined.

Wh*at Hitler Knew* asks upon what information Hitler's decisions were based. It attempts to determine what information his advisers brought him, and what they manipulated or withheld altogether. Given that Hitler was not the sole decision maker in his regime, it also focuses on the diplomats who influenced Germany's foreign policy. How Foreign Ministry personnel, from Neurath to Ribbentrop,

reached their own decisions is as much the subject of this study as is Hitler. Although at times it will be necessary to assess these men's own personal inclinations to determine how their respective ideologies and psychologies affected their behavior, the primary focus remains the manner in which they received, controlled, and forwarded information.

Information control exists in every regime, and in most bureaucracies information really does equal power. But in Hitler's Reich the near obsessive control of information held consequences for war and peace. Between 1933 and 1939, there was a gradual breakdown of traditional decision-making processes, yet this never reduced the advisers' influence. In fact, it increased it. Through to the outbreak of war in 1939, with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact and the secret Anglo-German negotiations, Hitler's advisers manipulated policy by limiting what Hitler knew.

Ironically, Hitler's power to make informed decisions was limited by the very system he created. By rarely confiding in his advisers and by pitting each against the other, he produced a constant sense of uncertainty within the regime. Uncertainty grew to a climate of fear as state-sponsored violence and intimidation affected even the leading decision makers. Yet instead of making his advisers more cautious, the frenzied environment fostered greater risk. They tightened their grip on information and advocated more dangerous policies.

The reasons why Hitler's advisers exerted unusually strong control over the "information arsenal" (the cache of intelligence reports, sensitive diplomatic traffic, and other vital sources of information), are numerous. Sometimes they reacted to political rivalries, seeking to gain favor with the Fuhrer and outshine their colleagues. Sometimes they wanted to affect policy outcomes more in line with their individual world views. And sometimes they reacted out of fear. Whatever their motivations, they rose or fell in Hitler's Reich depending on how well they could wield the only weapon at their

command – the knowledge they gathered from the documents that crossed their desks.

If the dictum ‘knowledge is power’ contains any truth, then it must be equally true that lack of knowledge limits power. This is a book about power and its limitations. It is a study of how the control of knowledge – or information – affected decision making in Nazi Germany. And it is a portrait of how a dictator’s seeming strength can actually be his weakest link.

The common perception of a dictator is of a man who rules with an iron fist. He decides independently what course he will take, outlines policy, and his orders are obeyed. The actual power of a dictator, of course, is far more limited -- limited in part by the information at his disposal. Once a leader ceases to make rational decisions, as was increasingly the case with Hitler during the war, the flow of information becomes far less relevant. So long as a leader operates with a semblance of rational thinking, as Hitler indeed did from 1933 to 1939, he remains constrained in part by what he knows. This is not to suggest that the more information an individual possesses, the better his decisions will necessarily be. However, the less he receives vital information, the more his options will be limited.

The book proceeds chronologically, exploring most of Hitler's major foreign policy decisions from the seizure of power to the outbreak of war. It investigates the background and motivations behind the alignment with Germany's sworn enemy Poland, the brazen and bloodless recapture of the Rhineland, the removal of Neurath and rise of Ribbentrop, the secret Anglo-German non-aggression pact talks, and the internal intrigues behind the Nazi-Soviet pact. Each case study highlights the role of information flow and the domestic political environment for their impact on each decision's outcome. The book draws on a range of sources from several countries and languages, including newly available KGB archives and records from the former East Germany.

One of the challenges for any study of Nazi Germany is to explain why, given the Third Reich’s

brutal nature, the non-Nazi diplomats continued to serve? It is impossible to reconstitute all the influences that affected decision makers. How can the historian know of the important telephone call about which Neurath made no record but which shaped his position on a particular issue, or of the hushed conversation made in ministry corridors which no one chose to record, or of the incriminating document which someone deliberately destroyed? Undoubtedly, some continued to serve because they agreed with Hitler's general aims: revision of Versailles, reduction of Poland, and the restoration of German power, But even given their general agreement, their continued support seems odd in light of state-sponsored terror, and especially after the murder and arrest of many of their own colleagues during the "Night of the Long Knives" in 1934. Some surely believed that they could act as brakes on the regime's excesses or could steer it in the proper direction. This they could only do from within the government, since opposition from without appeared futile. Some must have felt beholden to principles of duty and service to the Fatherland and believed that resignation would be a betrayal of this sacred oath. Or is that how they rationalized their inability to resign in protest? Still others came gradually, and far more gradually than one might expect, to sabotage the regime, and some of these men paid with their lives.

But what of the others, those who neither condoned Nazi brutality nor tried to sabotage it? What kept them on? The first chapter asks how Germany came to form an agreement with its hated rival, Poland, and why the men in the Foreign Ministry supported it. As events with Poland and Soviet Russia unfolded, Hitler's advisers were acting under an expanding cloud of violence, intimidation, and fear. To understand why they acted as they did, you must now place yourself within Hitler's darker world.