

Raymond Geist's Report on his Conversation with Franz Halder (April 13, 1939)

Abstract

Hitler's actions in 1938, especially his efforts to disempower the leadership of the Wehrmacht and his warmongering during the Sudeten crisis, had caused considerable concern among some circles of the German military. Their opposition was based above all on the fear that Hitler would bring about a European war that Germany was not yet prepared to win. Thus, Ludwig Beck (1880–1944), Chief of the Army General Staff, resigned his office in protest and then tried, together with his successor, General Franz Halder (1884–1972), to organize Hitler's removal from office in case of war. But the tentative behavior of military generals and Britain's policy of appeasement thwarted their plans for a coup, thus leaving Hitler free to aim his expansionary ambitions at Poland. In the following communication, Raymond Geist, the American consul in Berlin, reports on the mood of the Wehrmacht and describes the military's new, loyal attitude in the face of the increasingly tense diplomatic situation in 1939.

Source

From: Berlin
Dated April 13, 1939
Rec'd 2:25 p.m.

Secretary of State,
Washington.

247, April 13, 5 p.m.

Strictly Confidential

Last night privately at the house of a friend I had a conversation with the Chief of the German General Staff regarding the political situation in Europe.

I gave the General a clear and unequivocal exposition of our views on recent events in Europe. He appeared to be very much disturbed over the possibility of America, in case of war, throwing the weight of her resources and support on the side of Germany's potential enemies. He said that the German army was bound under all circumstances to support Hitler in his program of international action and negotiations no matter what course events took. The German military leaders, while pledged to do their duty, hoped that those statesmen politically responsible for Germany's future as well as foreign statesmen and diplomatists would be able to avoid an international conflict and settle all problems without bloodshed, as a general war, he feared, would destroy European civilization and the German army did not want war.

The General said that Hitler's mission was to procure for Germany sufficient room in which to live; that is, to put the country territorially on a self-sufficient basis with respect to raw materials and food. He said Hitler would not halt in his efforts to accomplish this program. He believed that when this was accomplished, it would be the end, in Germany, of Hitler and a National Socialist regime. He said Hitler had hoped that the western democracies would take a realistic view of Germany's fundamental position and not interfere in Germany's eastern aims, but since England and France are now making diplomatic moves to block Germany's eastern expansion, Hitler was looking again toward the West; inferring that

unless fewer obstacles were placed in the way of Germany's eastern expansion it would be necessary for Hitler to end the opposition which might happen in the West.

I obtained the conviction from the conversation that (1) the German army was entirely subordinate to the wishes of Germany's present political leaders under Hitler; that (2) the army, while well prepared, and probably so well prepared that Hitler would not hesitate to use it to force his will, is strongly opposed to war and that the military heads in Germany are apprehensive as to the course events may take.

The latest information from informed sources is that the Germans are becoming alarmed at the intense war talk abroad and that, in Governmental circles here, the word has gone out to make an effort to tone down the general strained international atmosphere.

GEIST

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