

Werner von Fritsch Reflects on the Relationship between the SS and the Wehrmacht (February 1, 1938)

Abstract

When Hitler revealed his war plans at a secret conference with military leaders on November 5, 1937, at least three of those present were more concerned than enthusiastic. Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath, Army Commander-in-Chief Werner von Fritsch, and Minister of War Werner von Blomberg believed that Germany's war preparations were dangerously precipitous. Only a few weeks later, Hitler created an opportunity to rid himself of these conservative skeptics and, in doing so, took an important step toward establishing himself in a position of unlimited power for the purpose of preparing for war. The so-called Fritsch-Blomberg Affair, which led to the emasculation of the leadership of the German Wehrmacht in early 1938, was fueled above all by Himmler and Göring, who regarded the scandal as an opportunity to eliminate their most important rivals in the ranks of the military. In January 1938, Hitler used Blomberg's marriage to a former prostitute to strip him of his position. He then used (false) allegations of homosexuality to eliminate Fritsch as well. On February 4, 1938, during the last cabinet meeting of the Nazi regime, Hitler announced the resignation of Neurath and sixteen high-ranking officers as well as the transfer of 44 others. Moreover, he also announced his personal assumption of control over all military forces in the form of the new High Command of the Wehrmacht [*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* or OKW]. One of the greatest beneficiaries was Himmler and his so-called SS Special Assignment Troops [*Verfügungstruppen*], the precursor to the Waffen-SS. In the following account, the former commander-in-chief of the Army reflects, among other things, on the persistent conflict between the Wehrmacht and the SS.

Fritsch's reflections were originally published in 1949. They appeared in the book *Zwischen Wehrmacht und Hitler 1934–1938* [*Between the Wehrmacht and Hitler 1934–1938*], which was written by Friedrich Hossbach, Hitler's former military adjutant and the author of the Hossbach Protocol.

Source

[...]

On 3 January 1934, I was appointed Commander-in-Chief effective 1 February against the Führer's wishes, against Blomberg's wishes, but under the strongest pressure from Field-Marshal von Hindenburg.

I found a heap of ruins, in particular a severe crisis of confidence within the High Command.

Reichenau's and the Party's struggle against me began on the day of my appointment in so far as it had not already begun.

Reichenau's opposition is understandable, for he wanted to take over command of the Army and still does.

The Party sees in me not only the man who opposed the ambitions of the SA but also the man who tried to block the influx of party-political maxims into the Army.

Apart from the fact that the basis of our present Army is National Socialist and must be so, the infiltration of party-political influences into the Army cannot be tolerated since such influences can lead only to

fragmentation and dissolution.

The task given me by the Führer when I reported to him on 1 February 1934 was: "Create an army as strong and united as possible and with the best conceivable training." I have followed these instructions ever since.

Reichenau's machinations meant that my relationship with Blomberg was continually troubled. Throughout these years I have never succeeded in establishing a relationship with Blomberg based on trust as should have been the case. [...]

In the autumn of 1934, there was great agitation as a result of the machinations of the SS. The SS maintained the Army was preparing a *putsch*, and reports came in from all the military districts that the SS was planning a big coup. Then, the Führer decided to order the leading figures in the Party and many senior officers to a meeting in the Opera House. The Führer made a speech which was a clear statement of loyalty to the Army and its leader [i.e., Fritsch]. After the Führer's speech, the SS agitation decreased somewhat. But from the summer of 1935 it increased again. The behavior of the SS *Verfügungstruppen* at the military training establishment at Altengrabow, where for no reason at all they indulged in vicious abuse of the Army and myself, threw a significant light on the situation.

While during the subsequent phase, we managed to establish a good, in many cases intimate relationship with all Party agencies, this was not true of the SS. As far as our side was concerned, this may have derived from the fact that there was hardly a single senior officer who did not feel that the SS were spying on him. It is continually coming to light that, contrary to express instructions from the Führer's Deputy, SS people serving in the Army have received orders to provide reports on their superiors. Unfortunately, these matters come to my attention in such a form that I cannot pursue them.

Finally, the SS *Verfügungstruppe*, which is continually being expanded, must create conflict with the Army through its very existence. It is the living proof of mistrust towards the Army and its leadership.

Although the Army has a certain right to supervise the training of the SS *Verfügungstruppe*, this SS troop is developing completely separately and, as I see it, in conscious opposition to the Army. All units are unanimous in reporting that the relationship of the SS *Verfügungstruppe* to the Army is very cold if not hostile. One cannot avoid the impression that the negative attitude towards the Army in the SS *Verfügungstruppe* is positively encouraged. This attitude finds external expression in the fact that only very rarely does an SS man salute an officer.

[...]

Source of English translation: Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism, 1919–1945, Vol. 3: Foreign Policy, War and Racial Extermination*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001, pp. 37–38. Edited slightly by GHI staff. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.

Source of original German text: Friedrich Hossbach, *Zwischen Wehrmacht und Hitler 1934–1938*. (1949) 2nd edition. Göttingen, 1965, pp. 60–62.

Recommended Citation: Werner von Fritsch Reflects on the Relationship between the SS and the Wehrmacht (February 1, 1938), published in: German History in Documents and Images,

<<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:document-1541>> [May 16, 2024].