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Colonel H.D.G. Crerar's Visit To Nazi Germany, 1937

Following the Imperial Conference in London in May 1937, Mackenzie King, the Canadian Prime Minister, accepted Ribbentrop's invitation and visited Germany. He arrived in Berlin on 7 June. Colonel H.D.G. Crerar, the Canadian Army's Director of Military Operations and Intelligence, also took part in the Conference. He visited Germany at his own expense from 16 to 21 June to familiarize himself with the nature of the Nazi regime.

This document is the report that he wrote following his visit to Germany. It is interesting to note his personal impressions and observe the validity of his comments.

Captain Claude Beaugard

Report on Visit to Germany 16-21st June, 1937

1. Introductory

In order that my visit to Germany, following my attendance at the Imperial Conference, should provide no grounds for possible adverse public comment, all arrangements for the trip, including introductions to people in Germany, were carried out personally.

Through the kindness of Sir Edward Peacock of London, I was enabled to meet prominent Germans in Berlin and Hamburg and obtain many useful impressions. Sir Neville Henderson, the British Ambassador, was also advised of my arrival and he and his staff spared no pains to make my visit as interesting and instructive as possible. Finally, I should record a most helpful meeting with the Canadian Trade Commissioner (Mr. Macgillivray) at Hamburg.

I travelled to Berlin and returned to London via Hamburg by K.L.M. (Dutch) and Deutch Luft Hansa air lines, thus saving considerable time in transit as well as giving me some ideas on the organization and efficiency of these Continental airlines.

2. General Impressions

The general appearance of the people on the city streets contrasts markedly with what one

would observe in almost any North American or English centre. Women's clothes are dull, even "dowdy." Not only is it against Nazi principles to spend money on smart cut or attractive colour, but artificial aids to feminine beauty are definitely frowned upon. I do not think that I saw half a dozen women who could even be suspected of "assisting nature" during my four days in Berlin, and I saw none in Hamburg. On the other hand, I saw no ragged clothes on men or women, and street begging was not encountered.

In moving around Berlin one seemed to meet a personally (Nazi) conducted party of sightseers at every turn. Groups of small boys, or girls, or adults of both sexes, each with obvious guides were to be met at all times of the day. Instruction in Germany's past greatness, in its present emancipation and its future and inevitable expansion, seems to be organized from the cradle to the grave.

Hitler holds very definite ideas on the position and responsibilities of women. He is reported to hold similar definite views as to the position men should occupy in the eyes of those women. It is certainly noticeable that whereas the young male is encouraged to show a great deal of his physique, even on the city streets (i.e. very short "shorts"), the girls of the "Hitler Jugend" wear ample blue skirts and voluminous white blouses. Recently installed statuary indicates the same trend in typifying very nude males with physical proportions which merit the term "kolossal."

As is well known, family life in the usually accepted meaning is not possible in Germany today. Adults as well as children have their spare time so thoroughly organized that there seems some justification for the joke that the only time a good Nazi family ever meet collectively is at the Annual Party rally. I was told, however, that Hitler is the driving force behind this state or Party absorption of the individual spare time, thought and activities as he believes that Germans with unorganized "leisure" tend to indulge in dangerous thinking, with possible undesirable results.

I found that some, but not all, the educated Germans I met to be sceptical of the accuracy of the news provided in their closely controlled Press. But what is perhaps more serious, from the point of view of intelligent public opinion, is the extraordinary amount of news which Germans do not get at all, and as regards the existence of which they are quite unaware.

One further general impression, which to me became more marked with each succeeding day was the sense of nervous tension which seemed to be present everywhere. The nation is very definitely on the move, goaded by the Nazi organization, led by Hitler, who superintends the goading process. It is true that to the average German the marching song might well be "we don't know where we're going, but we're on our way" which would hardly seem an inspiring slogan. But in the vast majority of cases any doubts are satisfied by the reply "trust Hitler."

An Englishman said to me that a German, especially a Prussian, is never really contented unless someone is kicking his back-side, and he is kicking, similarly, the man in front of him. In any event that situation appears to obtain in Germany at the present time, and the idea of any widespread or organized discontent can be dismissed from the mind.

3. Some Aspects of National Socialism

As mentioned before, under the present regime the German people would seem to be pretty generally controlled as to thought and action from birth till death. Apart from rules, regulations and instructions which are enforced, the German mentality appears to be ceaselessly subjected to the influence of a vigorous propaganda.

At the moment no pains or expense are being spared to impress upon all who live in, or visit, Germany the national improvement which has resulted from the first four years of Hitler's leadership.

I spent a good deal of one day at a "First Four Year" exhibition in Berlin - others are in progress in various places. The exhibition, which was in a very large building, was crowded. Organized parties of youth and adults formed a good proportion of the total. A sketchy idea of the exhibits and type of propaganda may be gained from the pictures shown below.

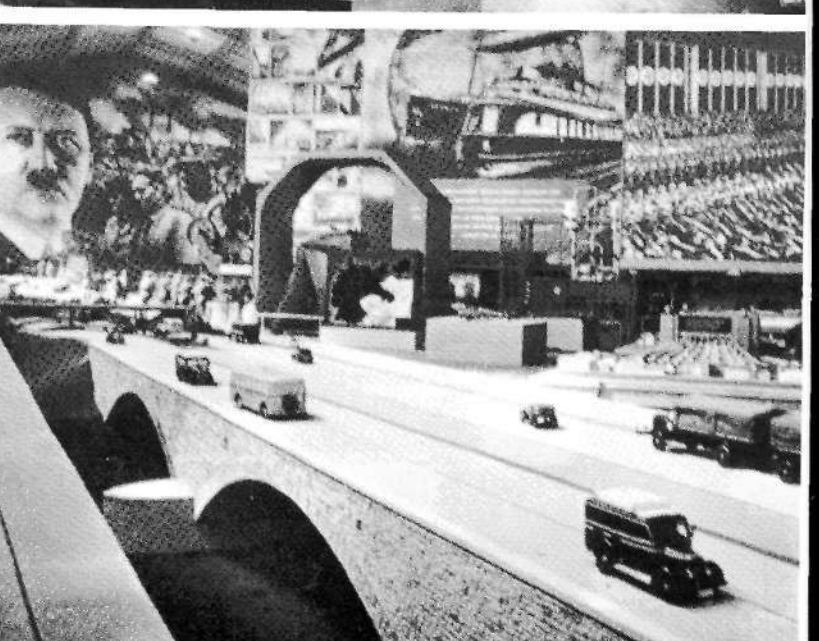
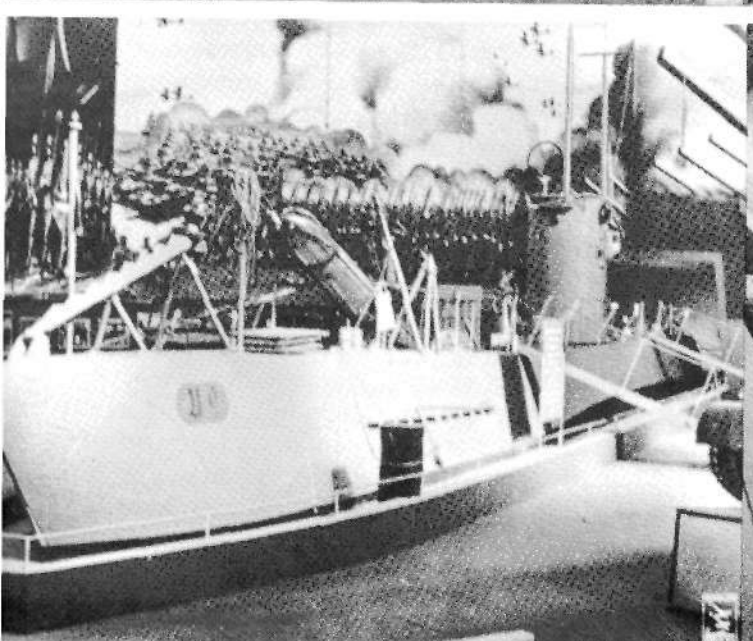
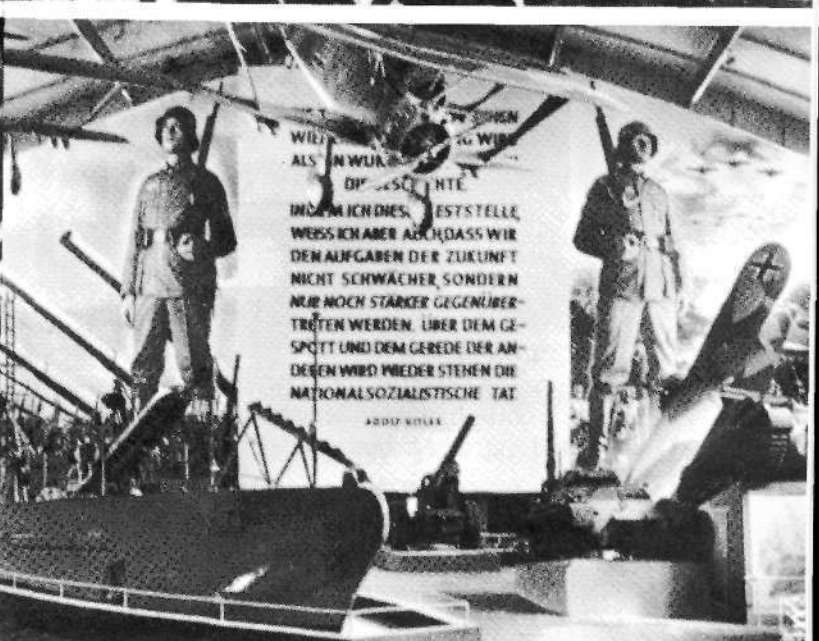
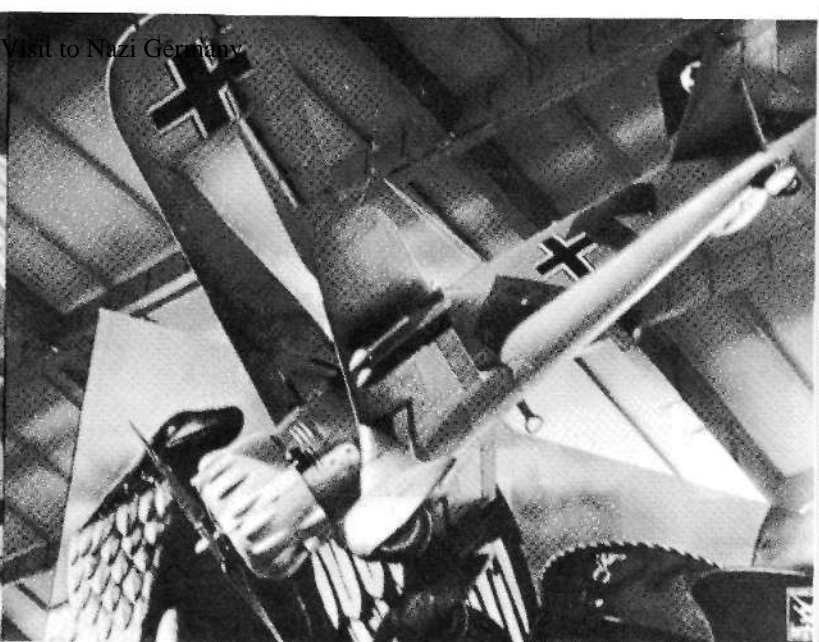
Apart from full scale exhibits of all kinds, a continuous cinema performance (no fee) composed of "shots" of all sorts of Nazi activities and accomplishments, liberally interspersed with showings and speeches of "Der Fuhrer," went on in a large hall seating between one and two thousand people.

Publications dealing with the progress and accomplishments of the nation under Hitler's leadership (or control?) are numerous.

I also visited an exhibition commemorating the Nazi rise to power and which was composed almost entirely of somewhat gruesome souvenirs of Communist "atrocities" and Nazi "martyrs." Photographs of street riots, wax figures (not complimentary) of Red "terrorists," samples of Communist weapons, were all displayed with explanatory placards contrasting the terrible days of earlier years with the law, order and good government of the present day.

I heard a good deal about the "Strength through Joy" organization of the Party, and attended an Operetta (The Count of Luxemburg, Lehar) which was on at the Peoples Theatre - one of those owned or operated by that organization. Members of the "Strength through Joy" organization, especially if they are good Nazis, appear to be offered all sorts of facilities for spare time amusement, including holiday trips, at little or no cash outlay to the individual. It is supported by party funds, though facilities for its members appear to be sometimes obtained by methods which, in this country, would be considered coercive. Needless to add, the various forms of "Joy," so cheaply provided, are thoroughly exploited for Nazi ends.

Opposite: Scenes from the "First Four Year" exhibition in Berlin.



At the "Four-Year" Exhibition models were shown of the three "Leader" schools which are in process of completion in different parts of Germany. The purpose of these schools is to produce future leaders of the Nazi party from amongst those younger adults who show indications of possessing the desired characteristics. I understood that the accommodation at each school is for about 100 students and the course one of a year. Married candidates are preferred, although wives and families do not accompany the husbands. Judging from the models, the management of Jasper Lodge or the C.P.R. hotel at Banff might well pick up some useful ideas by visiting the institutions. Swimming pools, sports grounds, as well as most attractive buildings, educational, administrative and living quarters, appear to be provided. A happy, if busy, time seems to be what is planned. The whole conception is on the grand scale and certainly illustrates the intention that "National Socialism" shall not be allowed to wither or die.

4. Building Construction

Arriving in Berlin by air, a striking impression of German planning and execution is obtained by glancing down at the tremendous extension, now in course of completion, to the Tempelhofer air field, hanger accommodation and buildings.

The Tempelhofer aerodrome of the near future will make Croydon look like an emergency landing ground. The tremendous new extension is fenced off, and as would be expected, is guarded by military police at all gates. At the same time, from the air, and from the nearby main road, a good idea of the development can be obtained.

Apart from the area of the future landing field which, when completed, would appear to be two to three times its present size, the tremendous hangar and the size of the offices (or barracks), which lie behind the hangar strike one most forcibly. The hangar, as an estimate, has a frontage of 1/3 of a mile or more. The vertical clearance of its roof would permit accommodation of aircraft having a vertical structural height of at least one hundred feet, and the hangar depth seemed to be well over one hundred yards. A railway runs along the back of the hangar and behind this rise a series of large buildings, each one about the size of the Confederation Building on Wellington Street.

I was informed by people who should know that the speed of building construction in Germany is now most marked. Large barracks, of which there are a number to be seen in the vicinity of Berlin, have been fully occupied in less than a year from the breaking of the ground. Incidentally, the layout, construction and accommodation of these new German barracks puts anything we have in this country, with the possible exception of the new barracks at Calgary, into third class.

The Air Ministry building *on* the Wilhelmstrasse, Berlin, makes one think. Information from two different sources gives the number of rooms (offices) it contains as from 2500 to 3000. An idea of the size of the Air Ministry staff can thus be obtained.

One item worthy of note is the evident efforts to eliminate, so far as possible, the use of iron and steel in the construction of new buildings. The demands of the German armament programme are the frankly stated reason for this technique.

5. Transportation

An impressive sight from the air (I had no chance to travel on them) is the network of the State motor roads now being rapidly constructed and over 1,000 miles of which are already completed. These roads may have important commercial uses. They most certainly have strategical and tactical values of the greatest significance.

I was told that they are capable of handling (as one-way roads) six lines of traffic without limitations as to speed. Coupled with this road construction should be noted the increasing number of German Divisions which it is known are being equipped as mobile, mechanized formations. From the point of view of military planning, I should say that the completion of the German State motor roads in the next year or two, as planned, will be quite as significant as was the opening of the deepened Kiel Canal in 1914.

Gasoline is, of course, comparatively very expensive. At the same time, definite and forceful encouragement is given to the manufacture and purchase of home produced motor cars. For example, the license tax of a motor car increases with its age, and I was informed that a car five years old is too expensive on that account to

maintain. I was also informed, on the best of authority, that all commercial chassis must be approved by the War Ministry before manufacture can commence.

6. Business Conditions

From various informants I heard of the difficulties of the ordinary business man or manufacturer under this highly bureaucratized regime. Loans, raw materials, even the discharge of unrequired workmen, require the filling up of many forms and the permission of several, or many, government bureaus.

Armament manufacture and the export business are the favoured activities. Those engaged in other branches of trade and commerce must take back seats. The distribution of iron and steel and all imported raw materials appears to be stringently controlled, but from what I learned the control machinery is complicated and by no means as efficient as one might imagine.

I was informed, semi-jokingly, in Hamburg, that most of the heads of firms concerned in the export trade, of which there are many, went to Berlin every morning by the "Flyer" returning at night to Hamburg - the statement being intended to illustrate the difficulties in the way State controlled trade. External loans are, of course, strictly subject to Government permission.

Profits, and big ones, are being made by business firms. But from various statements it seemed clear that such profits rarely accrue to individuals - they are required to be turned back into business extension (if it is of an approved nature), or pressure to invest in Government short term loans is successfully applied.

Nor can profits be concealed. As one business man said to me, he dared not even trust his confidential secretary in matters such as these. Information to the "Party" on all things of importance to the State is held to be a primary duty of its members, and these are to be found in every office and workshop, no matter where, or how small.

There is to be noticed on the outskirts of Berlin a group in bronze of four very nude and very massive young men in the pose of runners. The statuary was installed, I understand, to commemorate the Olympic games held last year in that city. I was told by a German, however, that this group is generally, if not very publically, referred to as the statuary of "The Four Last



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Taxpayers fleeing from Berlin." The story certainly reflects the views of the German employer or capitalist.

7. German External Policies

There is no doubt that the German has some claim to be regarded as a highly efficient organizer. It would be unwise to assume, however, that the present organization of the "Dritte Reich" is anything to fall down before and worship. At the same time, even though there would appear to be, at present, indications of overlapping and of too much "organization," I was several times reminded that it would be unreasonable to expect perfection in the plan and operation of government at this comparatively early stage in Nazi history.

A particular example of over-organization, or rather, of too many parallel government organizations, was indicated to me in respect to external affairs. I was told that apart from the "official" Foreign Office under Von Neurath, there exists three other accepted organizations which are very much concerned, and which actually

function, in respect to these activities. There is a bureau in Berlin of some two or three hundred secretaries and officials under Von Ribbentrop, which deals with many aspects of external affairs; the Minister of Finance, Schacht, carries out extensive foreign policies on behalf of his particular responsibility and, finally, there is the "Party" Foreign Department under Rosenberg, which is by no means idle. I gathered that there was little co-operation and much jealousy between these four organizations and that between crises (when Hitler, himself, lays down what course is to be followed) there was considerable confusion from this separate pursuit of somewhat conflicting external objectives.

I am convinced that Hitler will not deliberately risk his actions being the cause of a major European war at the present time. From what I saw and heard I should judge that it will be one, or perhaps, two years before the military organization of the country will be sufficiently ready for such a tremendous strain, a limiting factor which Hitler certainly appreciates. At the same time, not even the "Leader" is infallible and in his aggressive pursuit of external objectives, which appear to him obtainable by the means at his disposal, he may miscalculate. The step from international blackmail to international bloodshed is all too easily accomplished.

I met no German who regarded the "Rome-Berlin axis" as being other than an artificial, distasteful and temporary creation. The idea of mutual trust and understanding between the two countries is being actively advertised for external purposes, but there are fundamental political and racial antipathies between Germans and Italians which no amount of propaganda can really dissipate. The situation was described to me as "a marriage of necessity and as durable as any such marriage when the woman (Italy) is constitutionally incapable of fidelity."

From various conversations I judged that the absorption of Austria by Germany, in one way or another, is regarded as a closely approaching event. It would seem that the more deeply Mussolini entangles himself in Spain, the sooner will Hitler obtain as payment for continued support, a clear release from the former in respect to his interest in Austrian independence. Certainly, if Germany, Italy and Austria agree to this course, it is difficult to conceive sufficient concerted and forceful action on the part of other interested States to prevent its accomplishment.

I heard much more about the need for German colonies in Hamburg than I did in Berlin which, under the circumstances, was natural enough. In both places I received confirmation of reports previously obtained to the effect that until Stalin's recent Army "purge" there had been increasing liaison between important groups in Russia and Germany. Stalin's action had, however, put a very decided check to this particular political development, though whether such "liquidation" of Army chiefs was more due to a decision as to external policy than from fear of an internal situation was not made clear.

8. Conclusion

I went to Germany to obtain impressions, for, without a background such as these afford, a reasonable understanding of the day-to-day events which leave their scene or inspiration in Central Europe is not, I think, really possible. I deliberately took no notes, as a suitcase in a hotel bedroom does not provide safe custody in Germany of today. As a result, what I have recorded above lacks statistical detail and firm authority. However, even though of a general nature, these views and statements seemed to me worth placing on paper for I gained them mainly while in the company of persons capable of interpreting the facts.

I have remarked upon the nervous strain under which people in Germany appear to be living. I drove back to my hotel, one night, after a very interesting evening, when a German business man of standing, loosened up by a good dinner, had been rather free in his criticism of the present regime. During the short motor trip he asked me several times not only to forget what he had said but to forget also that I had even met him. Under such conditions nervous tension is understandable.

To sum up, the over-riding impression which I took away with me on leaving the air-field at Hamburg was that of a highly dynamic nation, determined before long to break its present bounds, and, consequently, increasingly dangerous to European and, indeed, to world peace. There may be nothing original in this conclusion, but it may serve to confirm similar views held by others.

H.D.G. Crerar
Colonel, D.M.O. and I.
12.7.37.