

# Himmler explains the War

*Excerpted from from V2, by Major-General Walter Dornberger, 1952*

Towards evening Himmler arrived at Peenemünde unaccompanied, driving his private little armoured car. After a modest evening meal with a few of my colleagues he dismissed the S.S. people from Stettin and we went to sit in the Hearth Room. Colonel Stegmaier, Ministerial Councillor Schubert, Professor von Braun, Rees, Steinhoff and a few senior members of the staff were present.

Conversation dragged at first. I was several times tempted to bring up Zanssen's name, but in the end postponed the idea until the following morning, when I hoped to have a chance of speaking to Himmler alone.

Von Braun told Himmler of our beginnings at Kummersdorf. He described our hopes and aims, and managed to convey that here at Peenemünde we were solidly united against any kind of obstacle. The talk then shifted to the subject of our worries. At that time Hitler's recognition of us was still in the balance. We mentioned how anxiously we were awaiting inclusion in the top priority group.

Everyone was soon taking part in the conversation and describing his own field of activity and his ambitions. The hours slipped by. We talked about the prospects of space travel and the steps towards its realization.

Himmler possessed the rare gift of attentive listening. Sitting back with legs crossed, he wore throughout the same amiable and interested expression. His questions showed that he unerringly grasped what the technicians told him out of the wealth of their knowledge. The talk turned to the war and the important questions in all our minds. He answered without hesitation, calmly and candidly. It was only at rare moments that, sitting with his elbows resting on the arms of the chair, he emphasized his words by tapping the tips of his fingers together. He was a man of quiet, unemotional gestures. A man without nerves. Himmler talked of high politics. He repeated the old phrases, so familiar on the radio and in the Press, which had been hammered into all our heads. For quite a time I only half listened. We engineers were not used to political talk and found it difficult. But since the subject had come up, and we had someone with us who must assuredly know all about it, I put the great, fundamental question to him: "Reichsführer, what are we really fighting for?"

Himmler replied without hesitation: "The Führer thinks and acts for the benefit of Europe. He regards himself as the last champion of the Western world and its culture. He is convinced that modern achievements in technology, especially rail, road and air transport, have made national boundaries unimportant and obsolete. Small nations not economically self-sufficient must join more powerful ones. In modern conditions only

economic units of great size can survive, those which are politically and productively strong enough to assert their independence.

“Europe, by reason of its history, its geographical position, its economic structure and its share of raw materials, is such a unit. The European area must form a group with the power that is economically and politically strongest as its nucleus. For their own benefit, the nations must voluntarily subordinate themselves to the leadership of this strongest state. If we are not to lose our European standards of living and our economic status, this large unit must come into being sooner or later. The only question is: which nation shall assume the leadership? The Führer believes that only a racially sound Germany, economically stable, patriotically united and politically strong, is pre-ordained to do so.”

I was familiar with this line of thought. However, I wanted to know more about it. “But surely,” I continued, “these considerations were bound to involve us in conflict with nations unwilling to resign their independence, and with the other Great Powers of the world?”

Himmler nodded. He resumed: “The Führer was aware from the beginning that the world would not tolerate a stronger Germany, much less a Europe under German leadership. Wealthy nations will always try to prevent the rise of a poor relation. That is only human nature. England, because of her geographical position, is exposed to great centrifugal forces, that is, her interests lie too much overseas for her ever to be able to assume the leadership. Despite this the Führer tried to come to an understanding with England. His desire was for a division of tasks between the two peoples. His efforts failed. Yet he has still not quite given up hope that the Anglo-Saxons will one day see reason, or see, rather, where their own advantage lies.”

He said this in June 1943!

“In the Führer’s view,” continued Himmler in his calm, even tones, “a European economic unit under Anglo-German leadership would not necessarily conflict with the interests of American economic policy.”

I mentioned Russia.

“Russia,” Himmler responded, “ought not to be considered in isolation. The other Slav peoples in Europe must be included. If Russia ever succeeds in welding together the Slav bloc of 300 million people, industrializing them and turning them into fanatics, it will be all over with Western predominance. This danger threatening the Western world and its culture from the east was one of the reasons for the war with Russia.”

I asked: “Is it your view, then, that the economic danger threatening us from the east is so formidable?”

Himmler's reply was almost automatic. "The Western worker is highly qualified but he is exacting and, racially speaking, tired. He wants to get something out of life. At the end of his eight-hour working day he wants to enjoy his home, his family, his leisure and his garden. Wages are correspondingly high. To some extent he regards his job in the factory as only a means to an end, to be able to lead a carefree life after his work is over. He wants to share in the cultural achievements of his age.

"Not so the Russian worker. He is comparatively new to industrial work. He is fresh, enthusiastic, good with his hands, not worn out or spoiled by outside pleasures because his life apart from the factory can offer him nothing worth living for. With the Japanese worker he is the cheapest kind of labour a highly developed industry could wish for. The Russian Government has been very successful at teaching the Russian worker to enjoy industrial work. It offers him in the factories all the social and cultural advantages lacking in his home. It compels him, by keeping his domestic standard of living at a low level, to work harder of his own accord in the factory. The Russian worker loves his factory. The day is bound to come when Stalin, unless we stop him, will switch industry from armaments to consumer goods. In view of the complete nationalization of Russian industry he is free to take any line he pleases in this. Russia will then be able to flood world markets with extremely cheap goods. The world would have no answer to this, especially if it were backed by great military force. The consequence would be economic catastrophe in Western Europe and America, and the chief victims would be the workers."

I asked: "Then our war aims in Russia are economic rather than military or political, or, say, ideological?"

Himmler smiled ironically. "In the last analysis every war is a struggle for power. In modern ones all four factors are invariably involved."

Finally conversation turned to German post-war policy in the east, Poland under the 'General Government'. Himmler's glasses glittered. Was I mistaken, or had his imperturbable, impenetrable mask of amiability fallen a little? Could he feel certain reservations in my carefully phrased inquiries?

"What else could we have done?" he proceeded. "You must always remember that the thickly populated soil of Germany can support only about 60 per cent of its inhabitants. The resources required for maintaining the standard of living for all of us, and for supporting the balance of 40 per cent, must be imported. The Führer calculates that the population of Germany will be 100 millions in ten years. The problem of food supply urgently needs solution. The Führer regards himself as a Western European. He sees the danger as coming from the east. He has no desire to extend westwards. In order to preserve Western Europe he needs strong and civilized peoples behind him. The only

possible means of ensuring the support and settlement abroad of our overflowing population, particularly if the Western powers maintain their present economic policy, are to be found in the thinly populated lands to the east.”

I objected: “The lands to the east are certainly thinly populated at the moment. But do you believe that those lands, in view of their tremendous annual increase of population, could be settled permanently with Germans and preserved for the German people? The attempt to do so has already failed twice.”

Himmler’s answer was: “Obviously a fall in the birth-rate over there will have to be brought about in some way. I am myself in charge of planning for colonization. We have enough settlers. If the second and third sons of our landowners and farmers in the east are settled in groups at first to form a series of strong-points, and every official has to do a spell of duty in the east, we can expand from these strong-points and eventually secure the land permanently for Germany.”

My next question was: “Are you sure the German will be equal to the climate in the long run?”

Himmler’s finger-tips beat lightly against one another. “We shall arrange for the young German peasants to marry Ukrainian girls of good farming stock, and found a healthy new generation adapted to conditions out there.”

“Won’t other nations stigmatize this expansion eastwards as an injustice that cries to high heaven, and the subjugation of foreign peoples as a return to the age of slavery?” I dared to ask.

“If the war is won they will beware of doing so. Besides, our intention is at first to use no more force than we need to get a start. We must practise a rigid state-planned economy both with men and material throughout conquered territory. But the more it gets going, the more a certain stability is achieved, the more goods are produced and distributed, by so much more will the standard of living of the individual rise, especially that of the worker and the lower wage-earner in the countries of the European economic unit. I am convinced that a free plebiscite, taken after a few years, would register a hundred per cent agreement with German policy.”

I did not know whether the ideas expressed by Himmler were his own or whether he was merely repeating what he had heard. This unlimited supply of ideas, plans and projects, so monstrous to the ears of us laymen, this revolting policy of violence was so concisely, simply and naturally presented that it might well have originated with that great simplifier Hitler himself. I shuddered at the everyday manner in which the stuff was retailed. But even as I did so I admired Himmler’s gift for expounding difficult

problems in a few words which could be understood by anyone and went straight to the heart of the matter.

I was reminded of a well-known remark of Hitler's to a Lieutenant-Colonel of the Army Weapons Department on his first visit to Kummersdorf in October, 1933. The colonel had been explaining some problem with very long-winded erudition.

Hitler interrupted him. "I will now tell you in a few words what you've been trying to say all this time." And he did so.

We hardly ever discussed politics at Peenemünde. We were out of the world. Whenever two people met in the canteen or mess, their conversation would turn within five minutes to valves, relay contacts, mixers, supplementary resistance quantities or some other technical detail that was giving us trouble. If directors were gathered together over drinks or skittles it was worse still. If you talk shop in an officers' mess the steward is normally told to bring a pair of fatigue-dress trousers and hang them up over the table. By the same token we ought to have had a riveting hammer or electrical servomotor as a permanent feature. Almost all our daily lives, our thoughts and aspirations had been revolving for years about the development of our A4. Our work had made us sober realists. We knew how dangerous it was to let ideas and plans run too far into the future. I now put the question which had been exercising me. "Does the Führer believe that we have enough men and material to carry out such a tremendous task, now that we are up against the armament potential of the entire world?"

Himmler seemed to have been expecting this question. "As I told you, the Führer regards himself as the champion of Europe against the danger from the east. Because of this he is convinced that Europe, while perhaps leaving the Germans to fight alone, must at least help them economically. In his view large parts of Europe have not seen the immediate danger and therefore oppose him. We must bear in mind the greatness of our mission and simply force people to accept their good fortune. European industry must work for the great cause. The whole wealth of labour we now control must be enlisted in the life and death struggle."

A monstrous demand! How could it possibly be realized? "Reichsführer, I have never yet employed foreign labour for my work on security grounds. I cannot think that our industry would gain much by using it on a big scale. In the Berlin underground nowadays you hear practically nothing but French or some Eastern language. The danger of sabotage and spying in armament factories seems to me immense."

Himmler's permanent smile seemed to deepen.

"Sabotage can be eliminated by employing German overseers. Spying can be reduced to a minimum by close supervision and severe punishments. The call for mobilization of

European labour for Europe's life and death struggle against the barbarism of the Asiatic steppes has already persuaded a great mass of people to work for us voluntarily. In my view the prospect of high wages and good food in Germany, or in foreign industry under German control, will induce even more Europeans to join in the work. The Führer is of the opinion that as a result the economic potential of Germany combined with European industry will balance the enemy's."

Hours and hours had passed. The topic now became the great men of history. Tired as I was, my interest revived when Himmler told us that Hitler considered Stalin to be his only really great adversary. Great? What did that mean? Himmler gave the word equal significance in connection with the negative, destructive and ruinous. He recalled Genghis Khan, who had certainly been the most feared and abominated man of his time, yet history had not denied his qualities as a great general and statesman. Despite his failure to consolidate Mongol predominance in Asia beyond his own lifetime, his unique and meteoric career, the ruthlessness of his politics and the ferocity of his armies had left his mark for centuries on the face of the Asiatic world and much of Europe. In this connection Himmler enlarged on the modern rulers of Russia, in whom he claimed to find undoubted traces of the old Mongol warriors. He reminded us that descendants of the Golden Horde are still to be found in Central Russia. The characteristic features of Russian psychology, he maintained, come from that source: sophisticated cunning, amazing physical toughness, incomprehensible cruelty, the wildest fanaticism, contempt of death, indifference to hardship and disaster, and resignation in the face of conditions which to us appear subhuman. Himmler thought that only Asiatic methods would make any impression on such a mentality, utterly opposed as it was to that of the Western European. A different attitude would not be understood by a Russian.

Towards four o'clock in the morning I finally pleaded for a break-up of the meeting. Despite the late hour I lay awake for a long time pondering over what I had heard. All those ideas never thought out to their logical conclusion, all those apparently reasonable theories created to justify an inhuman policy of force, troubled me exceedingly. Out of all I had heard during those long hours how much was honest conviction, how much propaganda and how much true?