Himmler talks with an American journalist

by Lothrop Stoddard (1940)

“THE PARTY.” That is the commonest phrase in Germany today. It denotes that all-powerful organization, NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers Party) which dominates, energizes, and directs the Third Reich.

Just what is the Party, and what are its relations with the Nation, the State Administration, and those numberless organizations characteristic of German life? That was one of the first questions I put when I got to Germany. Knowing as I did the range of official literature, I supposed I would be promptly handed a neat manual setting forth the whole subject in the meticulous Teutonic Way. What was my amazement when the Propaganda Ministry informed me that no such manual existed, the reason alleged being that the system was more or less fluid and that changes were continually taking place.

Accordingly, I had to piece the current picture together, bit by bit. You never can be sure, at first glance, what is “Party” and what isn’t. For instance, I at first took it for granted that all the Brown-Shirt SA and Black-uniformed SS men I saw were Party members. Presently I learned that this was not true; that many of them were candidates, qualifying themselves for membership by meritorious service. As for the organizations, some were “Party,” others “State,” still others are intermediate, while one or two, like the National Labor Service (Arbeitsdienst), were started by the Party but are now under State control. It was all very confusing. Indeed, I frankly admit that even now I haven’t got a wholly clear idea of the scheme in all its complex details.

The reason for this seeming confusion appears to be that National Socialism, though a revolutionary movement, evolved as a regular political party with a complete organization of its own, until, by the time it came to power, it had become virtually a State within a State. Instead of merging itself with the State, or vice versa, this separate organization has been maintained. Of course, all branches of the State are headed by prominent Party men, and their higher subordinates are usually Party members. Indeed, a man may simultaneously hold a State and a Party office. But, in such cases, both the offices and their functions are kept consciously distinct from each other.

When Nazis try to explain to you the interactions of State and Party, they usually say the Party is like an electric motor running a lot of machinery. This motor is the great energizer. It revolves very rapidly and tries to make the machine go at top speed. The machine, however, tends to run at a regulated tempo, toning down in practice the motor’s dynamic urge. The Party urges ever: “Faster! Faster!” The officials of the State Administration, however, charged as they are with actual responsibilities and faced with practical problems, act as a machine “governor,” keeping progress within realistic bounds.

Dr. Robert Ley, head of the Labor Front, occupies the post of Organization-Leader for the entire Party, and on this exalted phase of his activities his views were enlightening.

“Dr. Ley,” I asked him in an interview, “for a long time I’ve been studying the various organizations you direct. I think I’ve learned considerable about them, yet I know I haven’t got the whole picture. Will you explain to me briefly the basic principles underlying all of them? And will you also explain their relations to both the Party and the State?”

It was late afternoon. We were sitting in a cozy reception-room adjacent to the Doctor’s study, in the restful atmosphere of tea, cakes, and sandwiches. For some moments, Dr. Ley sipped his tea reflectively.

“Let’s see how I’d best put it,” he said finally. “As to our basic ideas, they are very simple. First of all, the principle of natural leadership. By this we mean the proved leader who by sheer merit has fought his way up from below to supreme command. This is best exemplified by Adolf Hitler, our Führer, whom we believe to be an inspired genius.”

By this time Dr. Ley had fairly warmed to his subject. His gray eyes shone with enthusiasm.

“Our second principle,” he went on, “is absolute loyalty and obedience. So long as a plan is under discussion, it is carefully weighed from every angle. Once debate is closed and a decision is made, everyone gets behind it one hundred percent. But behind both those principles is a third which is even more fundamental. This is what we call the Gemeinschaft – the organic unity of a people, founded on identity of blood. Germany is fortunate in being racially united. That is the ultimate secret of our harmonious strength.”

“Thanks for the explanation,” said I. “Now would you mind going on and telling me how, on those foundations, you have built up the various organizations you direct, and how they stand to the Party and to the State?”

“Before I do that,” Dr. Ley answered, “let me make clear what the Party and the State mean to each other. The National Socialist Party, as others have doubtless told you, may be likened to a motor which supplies the energy by which an elaborate machine is run. To change the simile, we may also compare the Party to the advance-guard of a column of marching troops. Its duty is to pioneer, investigate, make everything safe. The State, on the other hand, is the main body which occupies the ground won and puts everything in final order. One of the outstanding features of the Third Reich is that the Party can, and does, make all sorts of experiments which would be impossible for State officials, tied down as they are by legal regulations and red tape.”

“Would you mind making that a bit more specific?” I ventured.

“All right,” he said. “Take me, for example. I’m not a State official. I’m purely a Party leader whose duty it is to prepare such experiments and set them going. Within my field, I have almost boundless freedom of action. For instance when the Führer ordered me to put through the People’s Automobile (Volkswagen) Plan, I got the large sums needed. Of course I am held rigidly responsible for results. If I botched a job, I’d immediately be called to account. But so long as things go right, I don’t have to waste my time explaining to all sorts of people just what I’m doing. With us, it’s efficiency that counts.”

“Do your experiments always succeed?” I asked.

“Not always,” Dr. Ley admitted. “And when, after a full and fair trial, they are found to be impracticable, we frankly give them up. Sometimes, again, we find an idea to be theoretically sound but, for one reason or another, premature. In that case we lay the idea aside, to be tried again under more favorable circumstances. But when an experiment has proved sound and workable, the Party presently hands it over to the State; which then, as it were, anchors it firmly into the national life by giving it permanent legal status, That’s what has actually happened with the institution we call Arbeitsdienst – the universal labor service required of young men and women. It started as a social experiment run by the Party. Now, having proved itself out, it is a regular state matter.”

“Which means,” I suggested, “that the party is thereby free to take up still other social experiments?”

“Exactly,” he nodded. “And we have so may measures, not merely for bettering life materially but for enriching it as well. We believe the more work we give men to do, the more enjoyment we must give them too. This applies to all grades of persons, with recreation furnished them according to their abilities and tastes. It is not a leveling process – rather is it a grading process, putting people in their right places.”

“To each man according to his abilities?” I remarked.

“Absolutely,” said Dr. Ley. “We are always on the lookout for ability; especially capacity for leadership (Leitungsfaehigkeit). That precious quality confers upon an individual the right to an agreeable life, a fine mansion, and many other good things. But the instant he shows himself unworthy of his position he loses them all and is cast aside. National Socialism plays no favorites. While princes and rich men have not been deprived of their titles and wealth, none of them have any prescriptive right to prominence in the Third Reich. If a prince in the Party (and we have them) shows capacity for leadership, he goes ahead. Otherwise, he stays in the background.”

So much for this exposition of Party principles, from its organizational director – to be taken with the usual grain of salt between theory and practice. Now a few words as to the growth and character of Party membership, as gathered from various official spokesmen.

Down to January 30, 1933, the lists were open to all persons who cared to join. Up to that time the Party was fighting for its very life and every recruit was welcome. On that epochal date, the triumph of National Socialism became virtually assured. At the moment, its membership totaled approximately 1,600,000. These veterans, who joined while success was still doubtful and helped put it across, still enjoy a certain prestige faintly reminiscent of the “Old Bolsheviks” in Soviet Russia. The Nazi “Old Guard” hold most of the leading posts and are generally regarded as most trustworthy. This explains why one sees relatively few aristocratic types in the upper ranks of the Party today, because not many joined up before 1933.

Although a rush to get on the band-wagon began at once, the Party welcomed new members until the following May, when its ranks had swelled to 3,200,000 – just 100 percent. The list were then closed to individual joiners, but were still held open to members of certain nationalistic organizations like the Stahlhelm [veterans association] until 1936, when the Party had 4,400,000 adherents. Thenceforth, accessions were rigidly scrutinized. In fact, applications were discouraged; the Party sought the man, rather than the man the Party. The rule now is that membership is earned only after two or three years’ faithful service in some form or other. It takes an outstanding act of merit in Party eyes for a man or woman to be admitted in lesser time. Much of the unpaid work of the country, such as volunteer service in the NSV [the national public welfare organization], Winter-Help drives, or food-card distribution, is done with this in mind. Exceptionally distinguished activity is required for such persons to rise high in the Party organization. Able technicians may soon land good jobs, but that is different from getting into the directing upper crust. I was told that less stringent rules had been in force for candidates from Sudetenland and Poland after the acquisition of those regions, and that the total membership now approximates 6,000,000. After all, that is not a very large figure in comparison with the 80,000,000 Germans who inhabit the Greater Reich. The Party is thus still fairly exclusive, though if we add the families of members, the Nazi bloc probably numbers close to 20,000,000.

Theoretically, any young man or woman of unmixed “Aryan” blood is eligible when they come of age, and it is from the ranks of youth that the Party strives to recruit its membership. However, even here candidates must have an unblemished record, from a party standpoint, in the Hitler Youth, and must be vouched for by their local Party Group. Formal admission takes the form of a solemn oath taken in front of the swastika flag, with the right arm upraised in the Nazi salute. The oath consists of a pledge of unconditional obedience to Adolf Hitler and the party, after which the neophyte subscribes to a long list of commandments, the first one being: The Führer is always right.

From the rising generation, the party thus selects for membership those young men and women best conditioned for its purposes, And from this already selected group is recruited the Schutz Staffeln (Defense Detachments), commonly known as the SS. This is the Party’s private army. Originally it was a relatively small elite section of the Brown-Shirt Storm Troopers. But after the Party assumed power the SA men were assigned mainly to routine patriotic duties such as collecting for the Winter-Help. The SS, on the contrary, became the party’s mainstay in upholding its all-pervading influence and authority. I was unable to learn its precise numbers, but I understand its present strength to be at least 200,000, organized into regiments, brigades, and divisions, just like the regular army itself.

Furthermore, the SS serves as a training school for both the ordinary police force (Schutz Polizei) and the Political Secret Police – the dread Gestapo. All three allied organizations are headed by Heinrich Himmler, who built them up to their present efficiency and thus wields a power in the Reich presumably second only to that of the Führer himself.

The typical SS man is tall and blond, young or in the prime of life, with fine physique enhanced by careful athletic training. As Nora Waln aptly puts it, he has “the daily-dozen-followed-by-a- cold-shower look.” As he strides along in his well-tailored black uniform with its symbolic death’s-head insignia, he is clearly cock-o’-the-walk – and he knows it. It is interesting to observe how civilians instinctively give him the right-of-way on the sidewalks or in subway trains.

These SS may in many ways be compared to the Janissary Corps of the Old Ottoman Empire. To begin with they are picked men – picked for fanatical loyalty to the Party, for health and strength, and for unmixed “Aryan” blood. Before attaining full membership in the corps they undergo rigorous training, Spartan in character, which is best characterized by Nietzsche’s famous dictum: Be hard! Well-poised hardness both to self and to others is their outstanding attitude. When discussing with foreign residents some harsh or ruthless aspect of the Nazi regime, they would often say: “That’s the SS mentality coming out.”

As might be expected, the SS have a strong esprit de corps. Their pride in themselves and their organization is unmistakable. Ever aspect of their private lives must conform to strict standards and is carefully supervised. For instance, when they marry (as they are supposed to do in conformity with the Nazi eugenic program), the bride must be equally “Aryan,” must pass exacting physical tests, and is expected to attend special courses in domestic and ideological training. The pair are thus deemed well-fitted to play the role required of them and to produce plenty of children for that biological aristocracy which is destined to be the natural rulers of the Third Reich. In return, SS families are well taken care of. Two of the best housing developments I was shown in the Berlin suburbs were for SS households.

I understand that the Gestapo, or Secret Police, are equally well disciplined and looked after, but of course they are invisible to ordinary view. I recall an amusing instance on this point. Some time after my arrival in Berlin I was chatting with a high Nazi acquaintance, who asked me casually; “By the way, how many Gestapos have you seen since you got here?”

“None – that I could recognize,” was my reply.

He laughed heartily. “A good answer,” he said. “And you never will – unless they want you to.”

Well, there was one Gestapo that I did want to see – the Big Chief of them all – Heinrich Himmler himself. But I was told that seeing him was almost as difficult as getting an audience with the Führer, because he systematically shuns publicity and is therefore journalistically one of Germany’s most inaccessible personalities. Naturally, that made me all the more eager to interview him. I finally did, the very day before I left Berlin. It was one of those by-products from my enhanced popularity which I encountered when I returned from Budapest, and which was undoubtedly due to my having strictly kept my word regarding the Hitler audience. Journalistically, this was a clear “scoop,” for I was told by the Propaganda Ministry that mine was the first interview Himmler had ever given a foreign correspondent.

Like so many of my experiences in Nazi Germany, the whole affair was quite different from what I had imagined. Off-hand, you would say that the redoubtable Himmler’s headquarters would have a mysterious or even a sinister atmosphere. But it didn’t. It is a stately old building, made over into offices. You need a special pass to enter, but I went with an official, so there was no delay. Ascending to the second story by a broad stone stairway, we were quickly shown the Chief’s quarters, and passed through a suite of offices, light, airy, and tastefully businesslike. There, young men and women were busy with typewriters and filing-cabinets. If the men had not been in uniform, I might have imagined myself about to meet a big corporation executive. Certainly, there was no “police” atmosphere about the place, secret or otherwise; no obvious plainclothes-men, gimlet-eyed sleuths, or other “properties” of a similar nature.

When I finally entered the inner sanctum I was met by a brisk-stepping individual of medium height who greeted me pleasantly and offered me a seat on a well-upholstered sofa. Heinrich Himmler is a South German type, with close-cut dark hair, a Bavarian accent, and dark blue eyes which look searchingly at you from behind rimless glasses. He is only forty years of age – extraordinarily young for the man who heads the whole police force of the Reich, commands the entire SS, and has charge of the vast resettlement program whereby hundreds of thousands of Germans from the Baltic states, Russia, and northern Italy are coming back willy-nilly to their racial an cultural Fatherland.

Those are certainly three big jobs for one individual. How he does it all is hard to understand. But you get at least an inkling when you meet and talk with him. The longer you are in his presence, the more you become conscious of dynamic energy – restrained and unspectacular, yet persistent and efficient to the last degree. Also you begin to glimpse what lies behind his matter-of-fact exterior. At first he impresses you as a rather strenuous bureaucrat. But as he discusses his police duties, you notice that his mouth sets in a thin line while his eyes take on a steely glint. Then you realize how formidable he must be professionally.

It was this aspect of this activities that I first broached. “I certainly am glad to meet one of whom I have heard so much,” was my opening remark. “Perhaps you know that, in America, we hear rather terrible things about the Gestapo. Indeed,” I added with a smile, “it is sometimes compared to the Russian Cheka, with you yourself, Excellency, as a second Dzerzhinsky!”

Himmler took this in good part. He laughed easily. “I’m sure our police organization isn’t half as black as it’s painted abroad,” was his reply. “We certainly do our best to combat crime of every sort, and our criminal statistics imply that we are fairly successful. Frankly, we believe that habitual offenders should not be at large to plague society, so we keep them locked up. Why, for instance, should a sex-offender who has been sentenced three of four times be again set free, to bring lasting sorrow to another decent home? We send all such persons to a detention-camp and keep them there. But I assure you that their surroundings aren’t bad. In fact, I know they are better fed, clothed, and lodged than the miners of South Wales. Ever seen one of our concentration-camps?”

“No,” I answered, “I wasn’t able to get permission.”

“Too bad I didn’t know about it,” said Himmler. “There you’d see the sort of social scum we have shut sway from society for its own good.”

That was all very fine, but I felt that Himmler was hedging a bit. So I proceeded: “You refer there to criminals in the general sense of the term. But how about political offenders – say, old-fashioned liberals? Is any political opposition tolerated?”

“What a person thinks is none of our concern,” shot back Himmler quickly. “But when he acts upon his thoughts, perhaps to the point of starting a conspiracy, then we take action. We believe in extinguishing a fire while it is still small. It saves trouble and averts much damage. Besides,” he continued, “there isn’t any need for political opposition with us. If a man sees something he thinks is wrong, let him come straight to us and talk the matter over. Let him even write me personally. Such letters always reach me. We welcome new ideas and are only too glad to correct mistakes. Let me give you an example. Suppose somebody sees traffic on a busy corner badly handled. In other countries he could write a scathing letter to the newspapers saying how stupidly and badly the police run things. A hundred thousand people who may never have even seen that corner might get all excited, and the prestige of both the police and the State itself might suffer in consequence. With us, all that man has to do is to write us, and I assure you the matter will be quickly righted.”

Feeling this traffic simile was a bit ingenuous, I tried to lead him back to the point he knew I had in mind. I nodded sympathetically and said, “That sounds reasonable. But how about a political matter? For instance, take a man like Pastor Niemoeller?”

I felt that ought to bring some reaction, because the Pastor is poison-ivy to most Nazis. Only a few days before, one fairly prominent member of the Party had grown red in the face at the mention of Niemoeller’s name and had hissed: “The dirty traitor! If I had my way, I’d order him put up against a wall and shot!”

Himmler took it more calmly. He merely raised a deprecating hand, replying: “Please understand, it was political controversy which got him into trouble. We never interfere with matters of religious dogma.” Then, after a moment’s pause, he added: “If foreign attacks upon us in this affair would cease, perhaps he could be more leniently dealt with.”

It was clear that Himmler didn’t wish to discuss the subject further. His eyes narrowed slightly and a frown appeared above the bridge of his nose. Seeing there was nothing more to be gained on that line, I took another tack.

“Tell me something about the basis of the SS organization?” was my next question.

“The Schutz-Staffel,” answered Himmler blandly, “represents the best and soundest young manhood of the race. It is founded on the ideals of self-sacrifice, loyalty, discipline, and all-round excellence. Besides being soldiers, the SS has many cultural sides. For instance, we have our own porcelain factory, make our own furniture, and do much scholarly research. When you leave me, I shall have you taken to the barracks of the Leibstandarte here in Berlin, the elite regiment which guards the Führer. There you will see the type of young manhood of which the SS is so justly proud.”

“And now, Excellency,” I went on, “a few words, if you will, about your resettlement policy?”

“That policy,” replied Himmler, “can best be expressed in the words of our Führer: ‘To give lasting peace to our eastern borders.’ For centuries, that region and others in eastern Europe have been chronically disturbed by jarring minorities hopelessly mixed up with one another. What we are now trying to do is to separate these quarreling elements in just, constructive fashion. We have voluntarily withdrawn our German minorities form places like the Baltic states, and we shall do the same in northern Italy. We are even marking out a place for the Jews where they may live quietly unto themselves. Between us and the Poles we seek to fashion a proper racial boundary. Of course, we are going about it slowly – you can’t move multitudes of people with their livestock and personal belongings like pawns on a chessboard. But that is the objective we ultimately hope to attain.”

Himmler talked further about his resettlement policies, carefully avoiding the tragic aspects that they involve. He then returned briefly to the subject of his SS. At that point, a smart young aide entered and saluted.

“The motor [car] is ready, sir,” he announced.

“To see the Life-Guards,” explained Himmler. “I certainly want you to get a glimpse of my men before you leave.”

So saying, the redoubtable head of the Gestapo gave me a muscular handshake and wished me a pleasant homeward journey.

It was a wretched day in late January, cold as Greenland and with swirling spits of snow to thicken the blanket already on the ground. As Himmler’s car reached the suburbs, it swerved and swayed ticklishly in hard-packed snow-ruts. However, the SS man at the wheel was a splendid driver and got us to our destination safely and with celerity.

Hitler’s Life-Guards occupy the former Prussian Military Cadet School. The buildings are old, though well kept up. The one exception is the swimming-hall, a magnificent new building with a pool so large that I judged nearly a thousand men could bathe together without too much crowding. The Commandant – a hard-bitten old soldier, small, wiry, and dark-complexioned, in striking contrast to his young subordinates who were all blonds of gigantic size – proudly told me how it happened to be built.

It seems that the Führer came out one day to see how his Life-Guards were housed. At that time, the swimming-hall was an old structure capable of accommodating only one company at a time. Hitler looked it over and frowned. “This is no fit place for my Leibstandarte to bathe,” he announced. “Bring me pencil and paper!” Then and there he sketched out his idea of what the new swimming-hall should be. And on those lines it was actually built.

Such is the “Party” and such are the men who control its destinies. What are we to think of this amazing organization and of its aggressively dynamic creed which so uncompromisingly challenges our world and its ideas?

One thing seems certain: The National Socialist upheaval that has created the Third Reich goes far deeper than the Fascist regime in Italy, and is perhaps a more defiant breach with the historic past than even the Communism of Soviet Russia. This the Nazis themselves claim with no uncertain voice. Listen to what Otto Dietrich, one of their outstanding spokesmen, has to say on this point:

“The Nationalist Socialist revolution is a totalitarian revolution … It embraces and revolutionizes not only our culture but our whole thought and the concepts underlying it – in other words, our very manner of thinking. Hence it becomes the starting point, the condition, and the impelling force of all our actions … We are crossing the threshold of a new era. National Socialism is more than a renascence. It does not signify the return to an old and antiquated world. On the contrary, it constitutes the bridge to a new world!”

Outside of Germany, most persons seem inclined to think that the “new world” envisioned by the Nazis would not be a very desirable abode. However, that does not alter the fact that we are here confronted by a revolution of the most radical kind, and that its leaders are revolutionists from the ground up. Furthermore, though most of them are still relatively young in years, they are all veterans hardened by prolonged adversity and scarred from many battles. They are the logical outcome of the quarter-century of hectic national life which we have already discussed. In my opinion, therefore, both they and their movement may be deemed normal by-products of an abnormal situation.

To give one instance of the grim school wherein they were fashioned, let me cite an episode from my own experience. In mid-summer of the year 1923, I sat in my room at the Hotel Adlon, discussing with a German the deplorable position to which his country had then been reduced. I had just come to Berlin from a trip through the Rhineland and the Ruhr, where I had watched the passive-resistance campaign against the French invaders, seen the black troops, and studied other aspects of that tragic affair. Now, largely in consequence of that desperate maneuver, the Mark was slipping fast to perdition, national bankruptcy was at hand, and utter ruin loomed in the offing.

As my guest discussed the seemingly hopeless situation, he was visibly in agony. Sweat stood out on his forehead. Suddenly, his mood changed utterly. Flinging back his head, he burst into truly blood-curdling laughter, best described by the German phrase galgenhumor – gallows-humor. Still shaking with his macabre mirth, he leaned forward and tapped me on the knee.

“Millions of us have already died, on the battlefield and from the British hunger blockade,” he chuckled. “Perhaps millions more of us will perish, and we shall surely be ruined. No one can tell what trials await us, and the world will do little to assuage our agony. But, no matter what happens, it will be mainly the weak and soft who will perish. Soon, the good-natured, easy-going, pot-bellied German will be no more. Dr. Stoddard, let me make you a prophecy. If this goes on, in about fifteen years you will see a New Germany, so lean, so hard, so ruthless, that she can take on all comers – and beat them!”

The desperate spirit of the cornered man I talked to on a long-gone summer day typifies merely one phase of the bitter schooling which made Germany’s present rulers what they are. In post-war Britain, a phrase was coined to depict their English counterparts. That phrase was: The Lost Generation. But if that were true of the war-scarred youth of Britain, how infinitely truer was it of German youth! Well, those war-youngsters are now in the saddle. So what we see in Germany is – the lost generation come to power.

From the moment I first looked at those rulers of the Third Reich, I felt there was something about them which, from my American viewpoint, was queer. As I analyzed them, I realized that it was a sort of twisted cynicism combined with a hard ruthlessness. And when I listened to their life-stories, I saw it could scarcely be otherwise. Most of them had entered the war as volunteers when they were mere boys. One, I recall, was only fifteen at the time; others were not much older. These burningly patriotic lads went through the hell of a losing war, culminating in crushing defeat. Then their abased spirits were given a savage tonic by joining the Free Corps formed to combat the attempt at a “Spartakist” [Communist] revolution. Joyously, they killed Communists for a while. After that, some of them tried to go to college or into business; but few of them could adapt themselves to the life of the Weimar republic which they hated and despised. Some of them went abroad, adventuring; the rest sulked and brooded until their ears heard a sudden trumpet-call. It is Nazidom’s brazen clarion: Deutschland, Erwache! “Germany, Awake!” They listened to Adolf Hitler’s oratory which stressed all the longings of their embittered hearts and they fell under his hypnotic spell. Into the ranks of the Storm-Troops they went, with additional years of fighting as they killed more Communists and “mastered the streets.” Then, at last, victory – and undisputed power.