

Kirstin A. Schäfer. *Werner von Blomberg: Hitlers erster Feldmarschall: Eine Biographie.* Paderborn: Schöningh, 2006. 291 pp. Illustrations. EUR 32.90, cloth, ISBN 978-3-506-71391-9.



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Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Kirstin Schäfer has written a fascinating biography of General Werner von Blomberg that is, at once, an embarrassment of riches and slightly unsatisfactory. In three substantial sections, the author diligently follows her subject's life from his earliest experiences to the pinnacles of his career as Adolf Hitler's minister of defense (as of 1935, minister of war) and commander-in-chief of the German army to his eventual dismissal from this position, "banishment," and death in March 1946.

Strengths of the book are found in the richness of the sources exploited and the author's ability to evaluate and contextualize them. Her first section focuses on Blomberg's strategic thinking and writing in historical context and in relationship to that of his contemporaries, rivals, and like-minded colleagues. Schäfer ably recreates the networks of military thought and planning and the personnel politics that defined the Weimar Republic. In the officers' corps, Blomberg belonged to the "young generation" of military thinkers and planners, who—after the nation's defeat and under the impact of the restrictions imposed by the Ver-

sailles Treaty—embraced a new military philosophy, defined more by Carl von Clausewitz than by Alfred von Schlieffen. Blomberg and others of his cohort envisioned the coming war as a "war of liberation," conducted by a people's army equipped with the most modern weaponry and led by a strong, psychologically influential leader. It is easy to see why Blomberg was comparatively open to National Socialism.

Blomberg achieved the first pinnacle of his career as the head of the Troop Office and de facto leader of the secret Great General Staff. In this capacity, one of Blomberg's main concerns was the modernization of the German military, the restrictions of the Versailles Treaty notwithstanding. In the 1920s, modernization of the German military meant cooperation with the Soviet Union and, interestingly enough, Blomberg, like other men of the "young generation," admired the Red Army for its unity and its role in educating the Soviet soldiers and "the socially completely integrated military, carried by the pride, enthusiasm, and willingness to sacrifice of an entire society" (p.

71). Blomberg's travels in the Soviet Union in 1928 made him into a Russophile for the rest of his life. His tenure as the head of the Troop Office and leader of the secret Great General Staff came to an end in 1929, when he collided with minister of defense Wilhelm Groener and the head of his office, General Kurt von Schleicher, over the role of the military in the Weimar Republic. Groener saw the military as an instrument of the political leadership that was to be restricted to realistic tasks; he also believed that any attack would come from the east (Poland). Blomberg disagreed and refused to back down. Eventually, Blomberg was "exiled" to East Prussia, where he was appointed commander of Military District I.

Schäfer sees Blomberg's time in East Prussia as the "incubation phase of his affinity to National Socialism," and she is undoubtedly correct in her assessment (p. 84). In East Prussia, Blomberg found an ideal location to realize his own vision of "defense," which involved elements germane to East Prussia, such as the compilation of lists of potential soldiers, warehousing of materiel, and registration of groups thought capable of military defense activity. In short, what made Blomberg a liability in Berlin, namely, his willingness to act against the Versailles Treaty and his penchant to plan for a *levée en masse*, made him an asset in "far away" East Prussia. It was also in East Prussia that Blomberg came into closer personal contact with men who were sympathetic to Hitler and National Socialism, such as Walter von Reichenau. His comparative isolation also allowed Blomberg to consider politics in depth. These were also the years, however, during which the Nazi Party began its rise on the national political scene. Schäfer aptly delineates how Blomberg could engage, if largely theoretically, with politics and remain, in his own mind, an apolitical soldier and how he could warm to the message, if not to all of its proponents.

Blomberg's East Prussian sojourn ended with his assignment to the Disarmament Conference in

Geneva in 1931, the penultimate step before his appointment as Hitler's minister of defense. It was during his time in Geneva, which Blomberg apparently loathed, that his first wife died, in May 1932. They had been married for twenty-eight years and were the parents of five children; by all accounts, Blomberg was depressed and his career appeared to be on its last legs.

Blomberg's appointment to Hitler's cabinet, unexpected as it was, lifted his spirits and was, by Schäfer's account, a compromise between Hitler and Paul von Hindenburg and not the result of prior contact between Blomberg and Hitler. Among the main goals of this appointment was the prevention of an "army revolt" against Hitler. In the following years, Blomberg delivered: initially the desired domestic stability and eventually the army as a whole, all the while energetically supporting Hitler's military plans, especially rearmament. Schäfer strongly objects to the traditional view that Reichenau, Blomberg's appointment as the head of the office of the Ministry of Defense, was the real force in the ministry; rather, she regards them as a team, as much as the military hierarchies allowed.

It is well known, although rarely delineated in such detail, how Blomberg delivered the German military to Hitler, by integrating it into the new state, through its politicization or indoctrination, via the creation of images that came to define the new times, and by using it to support actively the measures against Ernst Röhm. Schäfer argues that Blomberg came to regard Hitler as the charismatic leader for whom he and the nation had waited, even though Blomberg rejected some of the Nazi Party's policies and regarded with contempt the "brown capitanos." Yet Blomberg believed in Hitler--and apparently cherished his relationship with the *Führer*. One imagines Ian Kershaw smiling at this confirmation of his research. [1]

Despite his nervousness about Hitler's foreign policy, Blomberg was supportive of it, even

though he was seen abroad as a "war-unwilling war minister" (p. 160). Hitler fostered this image, as it served him well, especially in Blomberg's travels abroad. Schäfer portrays the relationship between Hitler and Blomberg as largely void of conflict. In that context, Schäfer downplays the relevance of the November 1937 meeting of Germany's highest military leaders, for which Friedrich Hoßbach produced the minutes. The traditional interpretation maintains that this meeting, and Blomberg's hesitance towards war, led to his eventual dismissal from his position as minister. Rather, Schäfer argues, Blomberg was not really opposed to Hitler when it came to a possible war, even though differences on timing and technical feasibilities existed. Schäfer also suggests that Blomberg did not share Hitler's ideological obsessions, in particular when it came to racial war in the East, but opines that Blomberg chose to ignore that part of the equation. Largely, Blomberg saw himself as Hitler's "responsible advisor" (p. 172). Schäfer maintains that, in early 1938, Blomberg was at the pinnacle of his career--not a minister serving on borrowed time.

As a war minister Blomberg also enjoyed a lively social life. He eventually met and married the much younger Margarethe Gruhn, much to the consternation of his colleagues, associates, and adult children. As is now well known, Gruhn had a police record and the outrage over this scandalous marriage was fanned by Hermann Göring and others. Eventually, Hitler dismissed Blomberg. Schäfer argues convincingly that the dismissal was not the result of an intrigue against Blomberg--"if Hitler wanted to get rid of his truest admirer, he simply could have asked him to step down"--but rather states that Hitler was shocked by the dalliance and regarded the dismissal as a necessity (p. 185). Even so, Blomberg's dismissal also opened up opportunities for Hitler, as the subsequent round of appointments clearly indicates. For Blomberg, the personal and professional repercussions were tremendous. For all intents and purposes, Blomberg was shunned, and Hitler

never made good on his purported promise to call Blomberg back to service. Blomberg spent his last years in personal and professional isolation, even when interned after the war. He died in allied detention in March 1946. Making reference to Robert Musil, Schäfer regards Blomberg as a "general without characteristics," describing him as "vague, hard to pin down, and contradictory," in a way that was "typical for his time" (p. 218). Yet, for a "man without characteristics," he certainly held strong opinions and considerable influence.

Schäfer's study is detail-soaked and based on much archival research. Unfortunately, the sources simply do not address the vexing question of why Blomberg decided to marry a much younger woman he had known for only a short time, or whether he was aware of her police record. In 1932, Gruhn was accused of having posed for photos that were considered pornographic; her partner (the photographer) was also accused. It appears that the incident was settled with a minor fine. A police file from 1934 indicates that Gruhn, who was accused of theft but never prosecuted for it, was at one point registered as a prostitute. But Blomberg did marry her and, based on circumstantial evidence, Schäfer suggests that he was well aware of his bride's past, but did not expect to suffer such stark professional consequences. This assessment certainly opens an interesting perspective on Blomberg's own view of his position and relationship with Hitler.

Blomberg's second wife, who stayed with her husband until shortly before his death and then attempted, interrupted by the occasional newspaper article, to lead a quiet life in postwar West Berlin, remains an enigma. She never spoke to journalists and did not leave any documents of value to historians. Reasonable people can disagree: whereas Schäfer seems to be taken aback by Frau Blomberg's unwillingness to contribute to the historical record, I see a woman who was fiercely protective of her own privacy and of her

late husband. After all, she had been dragged through the mud once already. In that context, I found the author's decision to refer to Margarethe Gruhn by her first name just as problematic as her unqualified usage of late Weimar police reports. Based on the notation that at one point, Gruhn had had a "yellow card" registering her as a sex worker, Schäfer refers to her with the contemporaneous pejorative term *Strassendirne* and notes that Gruhn cohabitated with a "Czech Jew." Schäfer also provides a veiled, yet salacious discussion of the "pornographic images" for which Gruhn posed and makes much of her naïveté in dealing with the police. Whatever one may think of Gruhn's choices, the late Weimar years, with their burgeoning economic and political crisis, were difficult on many young women of modest means and even more modest opportunities. Historical context matters.

These slight criticisms aside, however, Kerstin Schäfer has written an interesting, detail-drenched biography of one of the more enigmatic and more relevant character of the first half of the Third Reich, a work made particularly valuable by her successful integration of Blomberg and his thinking into the military discourse of the time, her tremendous research, and her lively engagement with the existing historiography.

Note

[1]. Ian Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth: Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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