

GERMANY, "DOMESTIC CRISIS" AND WAR IN 1939

[This is Tim Mason's contribution to a short debate on Richard Overy's article Germany, "Domestic Crisis" and War in 1939 which appeared in Past And Present #No. 116, Aug., 1987 The debate appeared in Past and Present, No. 122 (Feb., 1989)]

Richard Overy does not believe that there was a domestic crisis in Germany in 1938/9, and he therefore does not believe that Germany was in any way propelled into the war of 1939. He takes my own work as the main statement of the opposite case, a case to be disproved and dismantled.(1)

Had Overy proceeded in a more thorough and circumspect manner this could have had the makings of an interesting argument, for I have never regarded my own interpretation as comprehensive and definitive: I believe that Nazi Germany was always bent at some time upon a major war of expansion; I have tried to present a thesis which may explain an important part of the very specific reality of 1939, of developments, that is, which were disastrous for Hitler's schemes of conquest. It is difficult, however, to develop such a general argument in this response to Overy's essay because Overy's treatment of the evidence has thrown the argument back by over a decade. Basic facts have to be restated.

However, it is first necessary to make two background points of a historiographical nature. The general picture of the Third Reich which emerges from Overy's essay, likewise from his article on "Hitler's War and the German Economy", is that of a largely monolithic machine which proceeded relatively smoothly towards its terrible goals.(2) Explosive internal contradictions within the regime, Darwinistic struggles for power among its agencies, yawning discrepancies between means and ends and the marriage of blind political will with new technologies in order to overcome these discrepancies, sheer political confusion - none of these plays a significant role in Overy's general portrait. Such a monolithic presentation of the regime has been obsolete for over forty years, since Franz Neumann and Hannah Arendt published their first pioneering analyses. (3) All the more recent monographic literature, from David Schoenbaum's study onwards, has brought out ever more clearly the dynamic ambiguities and rivalries which lay in the foundations of the regime's structure and were accentuated by the proliferation of new centres of power within it. The disagreement which does exist concerning this "polycratic" character of the Third Reich has to do not with the existence of the internal contradictions and institutional incoherence, but with their relevance to the making of certain vital policy decisions. Even those historians who give pre-eminence to Hitler's seemingly consistent political choices do not present the Third Reich as a more or less adequately self-regulating monolith.(4) Overy does so, and in so doing he perpetrates a historiographical archaism which goes far beyond being an attack upon the particular position which I have elaborated. And he does not provide evidence which might restore some validity to this archaism. He seems to be going in for historical revisionism for its own sake.

The second background point is even more serious. In his essay Overy does not layout the credentials necessary to discuss the problem which he is ostensibly discussing: whether or not there was a general crisis in Germany in 1938/9. This can only be

discussed through extended reference to German archive sources - for the simple reason that the component issues of the crisis were fought over in secret at the highest political levels. Negative conclusions too ("no real signs of crisis ... ") can only be reached on the basis of extensive reading of the same evidence. Overy shows practically no familiarity at all with the large documentary collections which I worked through: the Reich Chancellery, the Ministries of Labour and Economics, the War Economy Staff of the General Staff; nor with others, which for reasons of time or because they were still unclassified, I was able to consult with less thoroughness, to say nothing of relevant Foreign Office, regional and industrial archives which have been researched by other scholars. In the course of a long article which overflows with references to secondary works, past and present, Overy makes seventeen citations from primary German sources, eight of which are taken from papers published shortly after the war in contexts of research which differ greatly from the questions raised by scholarly discussions in the 1970s and 1980s. (5) Five of the remainder are references to copies of German military documents held by the Imperial War Museum in London; three more citations are from a single file in the vast War Economy Staff collection at the Military Archive in Freiburg, and there is one from a United States microfilm of Finance Ministry papers. (6) As a documentary basis for an argument of this nature, this is surely unacceptable. Decisionmaking processes, which constitute the main issue at stake, can hardly be discussed at all on the basis of such random fragments. And Bank of England intelligence casts at best a secondary light upon developments within the German dictatorship. There is simply no substitute for the reading of long runs of consecutive papers from the Nazi files. Without such work there can be no serious debate about the problems of historical interpretation.

It is vital to Overy's argument that there is no sound evidence for the development of a domestic crisis in Germany in 1938/9: "There is no evidence at government and ministerial level of a 'crisis' in the summer of 1939". (7) This is simply untrue. And again: "The bulk of the positive evidence for economic and domestic political crisis came from unsympathetic conservative circles within Germany, exiled opponents of Nazism or, significantly, from British pre-war assessments of the nature of the Nazi regime. The roots of the arguments about domestic pressures can be traced back to the critical discussions in British political and economic circles of the nature and prospects of Hitler's Germany". (8) I do not know at whose scholarly work these last critical remarks are directed, but they are almost completely irrelevant to the foundations of the case which I have put forward. This case rests upon German sources. In 1975 I published in Germany an unwieldy book of documents on the making and the consequences of Nazi labour and social policy between August 1936 and December 1939, from the Four Year Plan to the "phoney war". The authors of these documents were highly placed, loyal and increasingly bewildered servants of the Nazi regime: ministers, Reichkommissars, plenipotentiaries for this and that, state secretaries and departmental heads in various ministries, the heads of the regional field agencies of the Ministry of Labour, government statisticians, the odd captain of industry and military expert on the economics of rearmament. (9) Perhaps one or two of the authors of these documents did entertain a conservative antipathy to Nazism (General Thomas, State Secretary Syrup?). But this is certainly not what they had in common. Many of them served the regime right to the end, others (Syrup, Mansfeld) until they literally collapsed with fatigue under the burdens of their offices, but very few were shunted aside for political reasons after 1939. Rather, during the years in question, they shared

a deep and growing anxiety about their own ability to carry out the tasks assigned to them by the rearmament drive. From time to time they shared a common frustration about the failure (or delay) of the political leadership in giving them the executive and administrative powers which they needed in order to combat the increasing signs of confusion and crisis in the economy. They very much wanted to succeed in making their vital contribution to German military preparedness under Hitler. They came increasingly to doubt whether the regime had the political and administrative resources, whether the country had the human resources, necessary to achieve such a success. With few exceptions the authors of the some 250 documents which I published were ruthless technocrats, not timid, over-tidy bureaucrats. They wanted their Nazi dictatorship to be pragmatic and realistic in order that it should be powerful, and they did not believe that the massive armaments programmes of 1938/9 were either of these things. They presented a lot of evidence to their political and military chiefs to prove that they were correct, and at least some of this got through to Hitler. Goring summarized much of this evidence in a remarkable speech to the first meeting of the Reich Defence Council on 18 November 1938. (10) Overy makes no mention in his essay either of my book or of the bulk of this type of evidence. His argument is not the stronger for this omission.

I then went on to summarize in a brief form in an article and in the concluding chapter of a book (not to publish in extenso) the large quantities of evidence of a similar kind which suggest the development of crises in other sectors of public life at this time - in foreign trade, public finance and, especially, in agriculture.(11) The case for considering the situation critical in the latter sector is perhaps the strongest of all: structural and mounting labour shortages, declining productivity and declining production in many branches, a damaging price freeze and a paralysis of governmental will. Aside from an uninformed and trivializing remark about a "temporary shortage of farm-hands" (12) Overy makes no mention of the situation in agriculture. And yet the basic facts are easily available.(13) On the basis of similar German documentation, David Kaiser has come to the conclusion that the Third Reich's foreign trade position became critical in 1939, leaving the regime with a choice between military conquest and a curtailment of the rearmament drive. (14)

All of this bulky and high-quality evidence has been drawn from the intestines of the Nazi system. It has nothing to do with the fears or hopes of conservative opponents of Hitler or with the guesses of British diplomats and politicians. I have always been careful to assign to evidence of this kind a very marginal role in my account, precisely because it is not first hand and was in part inspired by wishful thinking or tactical considerations.(15) Given the *embarras de richesse* in the Nazi files, there is no need at all to resort to external sources. (16) In emphasizing the importance of such external sources for the view that Nazi Germany was in crisis in 1938/9, Overy is building up a straw man in order to knock him over. He does not have the liberty to pass over the German evidence almost in silence.

I write "almost" because Overy has constructed an escape-route for himself: "all industrial countries continually face the problems of distributing and balancing their resources"; Germany's acute domestic difficulties can thus be swiftly relegated to the status of "frictional problems", and to attach greater significance to them is to "misinterpret the nature of economic life" , (17) whatever that may be. These are

generalities, decked out in the garb of worldly wisdom. It is not remotely appropriate to describe as "frictional problems" any of the following difficulties, even if some of them subsequently became less acute as a result of the war: the half-hearted introduction of civil conscription and the struggle to regain control over the allocation of labour and over wages and earnings after June 1938; the partial decline in the productivity of industrial plant and of the industrial labour force; the extremes of competition for resources between the armed services on the basis of the unrealizable armaments plans of 1939; the decline of the dairy-farming sector and the permanent reopening of the price scissors between agriculture and industry; the acute uncertainty at the highest levels of government about how to go on financing the deficit in the winter of 1938/9; the passive resistance of the working class to the war economy measures of September 1939; the prolonged confusion over the mobilization of women for war industries.

These were acute and critical problems of a specific and unique period of transition, the transition from pre-war to war. There are five reasons why I believe that such symptoms of crisis were much more than "frictional". First, taken separately, the severity of the individual problems was much greater than that adjective implies (even if the problems of deficit finance were of short duration). Secondly, all of these problems came to a head simultaneously in 1938/9, giving rise to a general and dynamic over straining of the economy - each individual problem tended to make the others worse. Thirdly, the main thrust of government policy in these two years (aside from the interlude of thoughts about cutting arms expenditure) was to press ahead with the military build-up, with urban reconstruction, etc., - with policies, that is, which could only make the symptoms of the crisis more severe. Fourthly, and most importantly, is the amply documented reluctance of the government to implement comprehensive and effective counter-measures during peacetime: the failures in the co-ordination of public contracts and the direction of labour, the refusal to implement major tax increases, farm-price increases, petrol rationing, etc., make it plain that these problems together caused a crisis of political legitimacy. That is, the regime regained some of its power to confront these problems only in the context of a major war. Even then, many of its interventions were, in the view of the responsible administrators, half-baked. Finally, all of these problems came home to roost as dramatic military-political events of the first magnitude and at the highest level in October and November 1939, when the armed forces rejected Hitler's order to invade France before Christmas. They did so in large part because of the acute shortages of military supplies and trained manpower. Thus, in a substantial measure this violent conflict arose precisely out of the phenomenon of the general overheating of the economy - out of the huge disproportion between politico-military projects on the one hand, and resources and allocation measures on the other, which I have depicted in detail. (18) This was the essential economic and domestic political background to a direct crisis of the regime, which was without doubt the most serious such crisis between June 1934 and July 1944. Military leaders and conservative politicians were engaged in serious preparations to overthrow Hitler if he persisted with his order for the invasion of France. On the face of it, this looks like something more than a normal frictional problem of industrial societies.

None of this plays any part at all in Overy's discussion. There is no mention of the extreme shortages of munitions, fuel and bombs for the armed forces after the subjugation of Poland. (19) He confines himself to the bland assertion that "The

German economy did not collapse in 1939, nor was Hitler overthrown" (20) It is an elementary rule of historical enquiry that the significance of what actually happened can only be determined against the background of what the evidence shows might have happened or almost happened. This maxim holds good for any historical conjuncture, especially for turning-points of high drama. Anything less is hindsight wisdom, not history. In this case the evidence shows that Hitler was very far from pursuing a series of more or less rationally/instrumentally calculated and controlled goals; it shows that the Third Reich survived November 1939 only because Goring inveigled Hitler at the last minute into postponing the immediate invasion of France (fog over the Low Countries!) and because the government backed down on a series of repressive social and economic measures.

The attack on France in May 1940 was successful only because of the long respite which was conferred upon Germany by the entirely unforeseen "phoney war". This respite was used to replenish human and material resources (in part plundered from Poland), to reorganize military procurement and war industry, to reallocate manpower and to train troops, and to work out battle plans: by May 1940 there was a narrow margin of resources for conquest. This is the proper relationship between what did happen and what did not happen. Overy slides over all these issues and real events, compelling me not to revise my position, but to restate in summary form the reasons why I elaborated it in the first place.

He reduces me to adopt a similar procedure in respect of two other categories of evidence. His table of statistics consists of aggregate annual averages drawn from disparate and not precisely identifiable sources(21) and it proves nothing at all. It is essential to disaggregate all these numbers as far as possible in order to establish their real contextual meaning. For wages and earnings I have published the official (then secret) figures, broken down for different trades and industries and by three-monthly periods, up to mid-1938, and some further statistics for later years. (22) They show, in substantial agreement with Bry's figures, markedly growing pressure on wages and earnings (overtime) in the pre-war years, especially in the producer-goods sector; and I have also published a mass of contemporary literary evidence, case reports, etc., which bears this out. As far as prices are concerned, it has long been clear that the official cost-of-living index understated price increases for consumer goods. Wholesale prices have to be disaggregated in the same way as the wage data and for the same reasons - there is, for example, an abundance of literary evidence that it was precisely the state and the armed forces which were bearing the brunt of very rapid price increases on public contracts, many of which were still being paid for on a costs-plus basis through 1939. All these materials point strongly towards the conclusion that some important earnings and prices were increasing more strongly than the aggregate figures suggest. (23) There is no justification whatever for writing that "policies were sufficiently successful to prevent any serious pressure on prices or wages". (24) The evidence is not perfect, but in outline all this has been clear for many years. Here too, Overy's intervention takes the argument back behind where it was a decade ago.

There is a further problem raised by Overy's discussion of sources.

His statement that "Though far from complete, there is a very great deal of evidence on what Nazi leaders were doing and thinking in 1939" (25) is very perplexing. If this were true, the argument about the role of domestic pressures in propelling Germany

into wars of conquest in 1939 could scarcely have arisen in the first place. The evidence concerning Hitler's thinking on all fronts, even for the diplomatic sphere, is in fact sparse, fragmentary and extremely difficult to interpret. This is in part a well-known and widely acknowledged outcome of his personal style of government, of his antipathy to paperwork. But military leaders who conversed daily with him during the war found it very difficult to understand how his mind worked, to comprehend the real meaning of what he said, to distinguish between his tactical rhetoric and his serious intentions small wonder that historians should find this treacherous terrain.(26) I do not now contend that documents which might demonstrate in an irrefutable manner Hitler's fears about a critical turn in domestic affairs in the years 1938/9 have been "lost or destroyed". (27) I do not think they ever existed, because these highly delicate and controversial matters were discussed with Hitler in private by Lammers, Goring, Keitel, Funk and whoever else could succeed in the labyrinthine struggles to gain access to his person. Records of these (not infrequent?) encounters were not kept. In order to reconstruct their nature and contents historians have to make do with tantalizing fragments of evidence such as the marginal notes by Lammers on memos from Darre, second hand accounts of Goring's nervous confusion after confrontations with Hitler over the country's preparedness for war, and secondhand recollections of what Funk said about why full economic mobilization was not ordered in 1939.(28) It is indeed all most unsatisfactory, just as it is unsatisfactory that the original order for the extermination of the European Jews has never been found.

Aside from the fact that it would be quite unreasonable to expect Hitler openly and explicitly to construct an aggressive strategy out of a clear diagnosis of domestic weakness, there are two grounds why the gaps in the hard evidence, together with the fragments of soft evidence, encourage me to speculate along the lines that I have chosen: that is, that the leaders of the Third Reich did feel that they confronted a critical domestic situation, and that their foreign policy decisions were influenced by this awareness. The first reason is that one such case of this precise connection in the winter and spring months of 1940 really is copiously documented. It demonstrates the regime "exporting" economic hardship on to the backs of still-to-beconquered French workers, rather than risk serious discontent at home and in the armed forces by conscripting German women into industrial labour. This was a straight and unambiguous choice, justified by Goring in unambiguous terms: the prospect of conquest was an alternative to highly unpopular domestic measures. It is quite improbable, given the regime's previous "guns-and-butter" policies, that this mode of thinking, this type of political logic, was invented on this occasion for the first time. On the contrary, the decision appears to be all of a piece with the government's previous refusal to raise food prices and income tax rates, its refusal to ration petrol and its failure to make full use after June 1938 of powers to conscript male workers and to cut earnings. Anyway, the debate about the conscription of women just prior to the conquest of France is one of the very few occasions when the records permit us to hear the leaders of the Third Reich thinking out loud about the links between domestic and foreign/military policies - and these records wholly sustain my interpretation.(29) Soft domestic options required either war or peace; they were not compatible with the enormous strains of continued rearmament for wars in an indefinite future - 1943/5, as Hitler often said.

As for the workings of Hitler's own mind - and this is the second reason why it is necessary to speculate in as precise and disciplined a way as possible - far from there being "a very great deal of evidence", there is almost none that can be used as a firm basis for interpretation. His few recorded statements on policy-making during the period in question were mostly manipulative essays in persuasion in which substantive arguments and pseudo-arguments were deployed in a promiscuous manner to convince his various audiences. I combed through them and found half-a-dozen clear utterances in which Hitler seemed to be holding out war as the remedy for domestic constrictions or decline. There is no space to transcribe them all here, but it is perhaps worth quoting Hitler's delphic remark to military leaders on 23 November 1939: "Behind me stands the German people, its morale can only get worse". (30) I do not believe that these various statements about the role of domestic problems were casual. They are consistent with the picture of the domestic scene which I have elaborated and, more important perhaps, they are also consistent with a view of Hitler's personality which emphasizes his own claims to have possessed limitless defiance, an iron will, and to have been the ultimate gambler. Cornered, he would always make a violent effort to break out. I try to imagine him constantly being reminded by military and civilian leaders of the scarcity of resources, the inadequacies of organization, the lack of popular co-operation and enthusiasm, the regime's unpreparedness for war. And to imagine him (the sources permit no other procedure) responding by standing the arguments on their head: if the domestic situation is so serious then its chains must be broken, conquests will ease bottle-necks, a state of war will restore social and economic discipline and permit an intensification of the dictatorship within Germany. This is a hypothesis, restated here in skeletal form. I see no need to withdraw it in the light of Overy's attack.

I stress that it is a working hypothesis because Overy for his part seems confident that he really knows what was going on in Hitler's mind. "The acquisition of Poland was on the agenda long before" 1939, he writes.(31) This is simply mistaken. Up until the spring of that year, Hitler had cast Poland in the role of junior partner in a war for the partition of Russia. Why Nazi policy underwent so dynamic and violent a change at this time is a vital question to which there are no fully satisfactory answers. Then again, Overy is absolutely certain that Hitler "and Ribbentrop were convinced that the Polish war could be limited". (32) If this is true they were deceiving themselves very badly, suppressing obvious facts from their own perceptions. The historian has to ask: why did they deceive themselves, and persist in so doing even after the British confirmation of the guarantee to Poland? This was such a fundamental turning-point that it cannot be bracketed as a mere diplomatic miscalculation. The whole strategic design of *Mein Kampf* collapsed in ruins in August/September 1939 with the British declaration of war. One of the most fundamental studies of the Second World War is devoted to the consequences of this collapse for Hitler's strategy in the subsequent two years. (33) This calls for big explanations, not small ones like Hitler's contempt for the person of Chamberlain. (34) I have tried to furnish parts of a larger explanation, which strives to see the Third Reich as a whole.

Further, and in the same vein, Overy is sure that Hitler wanted "to build up huge military capability. There is little hint in German planning of limited rearmament - army motorization, a five-fold increase in air strength from 1938, a large battle fleet, strategic bombers, synthetic fuel and rubber production and explosives output greater

than the levels of the First World War"(35) before beginning a major European war. If Hitler had wanted the moon with cream cheese it would have been less dangerous, but just as interesting for the historian. For the historical analysis cannot be cut off short with the observation that this goal or that intention existed. The next step is to point out that Hitler's and the armed forces' programmes in this respect were all totally unrealistic. There was no possible way in which the armaments plans of 1939 could be even approximately fulfilled within Germany's boundaries of March 1939 and under the prevailing social and constitutional order. The analysis then has to proceed to unveil the consequences of the input of such unreal projects into the social, economic and political system. These consequences of Hitler's omnipotent and dilettantish desires - severe overstretching of resources, great production shortfalls in a war situation, and exacerbated rivalries, conflicts and confusions within the regime and the economy - became at least as important as the original desires themselves. And such sequences of unreal armaments or manpower demands, planning confusion and severe production shortfalls were repeated throughout the war. (36) I think that Hitler began to become aware of these internal consequences by 1939 (see above) (37) Overy cuts the analysis short, insists only upon the goals and desires, and then proceeds to another point. This borders upon obscurantism. So much for us having an abundant knowledge of what the Nazi leaders were thinking.

Behind these disagreements about the existence and significance of different types of evidence lie at least two deep divergences of historical perspective. The first concerns the salient characteristics of the Second World War. My picture of the transition to war grows in part out of the sense that, on the Nazi side, the war itself was to a high degree a war of plunder and destruction; a war, that is, in which the means (military conquest) and the ends ("living space") became totally muddled up with each other on account of the Third Reich's need to live from hand to mouth in its social and economic policies after 1939. Ends became frantically telescoped into means in a manner which could only be self-destructive of the system as a whole, and which marked the actual lived experience of the vast majority of the populations subjected to Nazi rule. There was a straight line from the so-called "temporary shortage of farm-hands" to the enslavement and killing of millions of foreign labourers and prisoners of war after 1939 (38) a straight line from the bottle-necks of 1938/9 to the crude plunder of the occupied territories; a straight line from the "gunsand-butter" policies of the 1930s to the only partial mobilization of German resources for war before 1944 and to the export of the worst sacrifices on to the backs of conquered peoples. Lebensraum was originally a design for a timeless barbaric empire, not the less realistic for being barbaric; it was transformed by Nazi practice into the wartime political economy of hit and run, of living off the land, of nihilism. (39) Why did this change take place? Nazi ideological hatred and contempt for the Slav and Russian peoples is clearly part of the answer, but it is not a full explanation. This question is one of the main historiographical questions which I have tried to pose in my work - maybe not explicitly enough. Perhaps in social and economic terms the Nazi war was an end in itself. I believe that any crosssectional analysis (here, of the position in 1939) needs to offer a perspective upon what went before and what came afterwards. I do not understand what kind of a perspective on the regime Overy is offering in this sense.

A second fundamental point of non-contact, or disagreement, is posed by Overy's insistence that the German economic recovery "was steady" (40) With respect to the

war economy after 1938, he has developed this view of a steady, ever more thorough mobilization more fully in his article in the *Economic History Review* (41) This picture of a deliberate controlled advance towards a military command economy is a hallucination based upon annual aggregated statistics. It is not a piece of history, but simply hindsight. In fact the Third Reich prepared itself for war through a series of violent and more or less desperate lurches in economic and foreign/military policy, lurches which were punctuated by periods of troubled hesitation and uncertainty. This pattern was characteristic of all of the regime's policymaking in all spheres, from the Reichstag Fire onwards. In economic policy the first lurch, the New Plan of 1934, was swiftly superseded by the Four Year Plan of 1936, a "plan" which was saved from immediate bankruptcy by the totally unexpected upturn in international trade during 1937. The next lurches comprised the annexations of 1938/9 and the half-hearted efforts to discipline an overfull employment economy. Then came the utopian armaments programmes of 1939. War in 1939 was supposed to permit (and require) a tightening of economic discipline, and to make possible a lurch in the direction of Polish resources and manpower. This pattern of smash-and-grab, and delay or retreat, persisted into the era of the Speer-Sauckel regime of the defensive war, 1942-5. Policies for the recruitment of foreign labour, for example, veered wildly from one pole to another. (42) "Steady" is the last word in the world which is appropriate, either to the realities of Nazi policy-making or to the real processes of change in the economic sphere. The bland economic statistics reveal only the aggregate consequences of an explosive combination of irrational ambitions and structural strengths and weaknesses.

I have not insisted upon a structural approach in my analysis of Nazism out of mere methodological hubris, but rather because I believe it is the only way to get to grips with specific historical events and decisions. Structural analysis is not a substitute for detailed investigation of policy-making, but is in fact its pre-condition - it enables one to identify the relevant constraints and acts of omission, as well as motives and acts of commission on the part of those in power. In this spirit I have subjected some aspects of Nazi policymaking after 1936 to the most detailed examination of which I was then capable; I concentrated especially upon the events of September-November 1939, which represent a very special conjuncture, different from that of 1936 and from that of 1941 and 1942. Overy does not examine anything in detail. His generalizations and his theses are based upon a radically selective reading and presentation of the sources.

My own interpretation is not beyond criticism. Arthur Schweitzer, pioneer scholar of the Nazi economy, responded to my book with a single line of comment: in 1939 Hitler was engaged in "securing the home front, and not in a flight forwards (Flucht nach vorn). That is an alternative interpretation which could be discussed at length; it suggests that Hitler's foreign policy before the invasion of Poland was indeed foreign policy, largely independent of domestic pressures. I do not believe that foreign policy can be isolated in this way. Jost Dulffer has persuaded me that the dynamics of the international arms race played an independent role in determining the outbreak of European war in 1939, rather than later, though I still believe that he underestimates the domestic restrictions on continued German rearmament. (43) Ludolf Herbst has argued at length that the documents on the social and political crisis which I have presented must be read in a different manner, and do not justify the use of the term "crisis"; I disagree with him, but at least these differences have the makings of a solid debate. (44) It might have been more interesting to pursue such contrasting

interpretations in these pages, now, but in the light of Overy's essay it seemed more urgent to try to summarize and justify my original argument about domestic crisis and the outbreak of war, and to re-present the relevant evidence.

Last but not least as an element in the debate there is the military factor. Overy states that "The economy and political system of the Third Reich were only brought to collapse by the combined efforts of America, Russia and Britain after four years of total war". (45) The main reason for this, I would now argue, lay not in the strength of the Nazi social and economic system, which was often judged by its own leaders to be less flexible and less resilient than those of the U. K. and the U. S .A., but in the battlefield superiority of the German forces over all the forces which they encountered before El Alamein and Stalingrad (and over many of the forces which they encountered subsequently). This was the essential pillar of the Third Reich's strength, and it is likely that social and economic historians, also general historians of Nazism, have persistently underestimated the importance of this fact. Military successes, or the prospect of them, had profound domestic repercussions (and not only of an economic kind), as the briefest of comparisons with fascist Italy shows. My own work has been lacking in this respect; military history is too important to be left to the military historians. If the battles for Norway, France, the Balkans and western Russia had been longdrawn-out and messy affairs, historians today would be faced with a completely different set of questions about the Third Reich. It was the strategic and tactical superiority of the German armed forces which gave the Third Reich its brief and terrible lease of life. To the "autonomy of politics" needs to be added a discussion of the "autonomy of the military".

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Notes

- 1 See R. J. Overy, "Germany, 'Domestic Crisis' and War in 1939", *Past and Present*, no. 116 (Aug. 1987).
- 2 The latter article is subtitled "HA Reinterpretation": *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xxxv (1982), pp. 272 ff.
- 3 I refer to *Behemoth* and to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published respectively in 1942 and 1951.
- 4 See, for example, K. D. Bracher, *The German Dictatorship* (New York, 1970).
- 5 These eight quotations are from the papers of the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, and from the Documents on German Foreign Policy. The former publication does not place documents in their original political context; the latter, understandably, excludes materials on domestic affairs which are not directly relevant to foreign policy. There is now a better source for one of Overy's quotations from the International Military Tribunal: see n. 10 below.
- 6 Readers will note by contrast that Overy twice (at n. 5 and on p. 158) quotes from an unpublished conference paper abstract of mine. The full text of the paper has long been published. This is not untypical of his mode of argument: cf. n. 15 below.
- 7 Overy, "Germany, 'Domestic Crisis' and War", p. 158. 8 *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- 9 See *Arbeiterklasse und Volksgemeinschaft*, ed. and introd. T. W. Mason (Opladen, 1975), pp. lxiii, 1299. Overy makes no reference at all in his essay to this book.

10 Ibid., doe. no. 152. Overy (n. 26) cites only the brief Nuremberg Trial version of this text. I published a stenographic record of large parts of the speech.

11 Ibid., Introduction, ch. 6. See also T. W. Mason, *Sozialpolitik im Dritten Reich* (Opladen, 1977), ch. 6; and T. W. Mason, "Innere Krise und Angriffskrieg", in F. Forstmeier and H.-E. Volkmann (eds.), *Wirtschaft und Rüstung am Vorabend des Zweiten Weltkrieges* (Dusseldorf, 1975).

12 Overy, "Germany, 'Domestic Crisis' and War", p. 153.

13 See the works cited in n. 11 above; also I. Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich* (Oxford, 1983), chs. 1,7. For the way in which German agriculture was literally rescued by Polish and French labour in 1939/40, see Ulrich Herbert, *Fremdarbeiter: Politik und Praxis des "Ausländer-Einsatzes" in der Kriegswirtschaft des Dritten Reiches* (Berlin and Bonn, 1985), pp. 11, 36, 67 f. For a definitive study of the failure of Nazi agricultural policies by 1939, see the book by the Italian historian Gustavo Corni (forthcoming, 1989).

14 David Kaiser, *Economic Diplomacy and the Origins of the Second World War* (Princeton, 1980), esp. pp. 268, 282.

15 Again it is typical of Overy's mode of argument that he should quote (in his n. 25) one single sentence in which I refer to foreign judgements of the crisis in Germany, without ever mentioning the mass of internal documentation which I have presented.

16 In order to make *Arbeiterklasse und Volksgemeinschaft* at least partly homogeneous, I excluded much relevant similar material to be found in the files of the War Economy Staff of the General Staff. Much of this is in the public domain in the summary form of General Georg Thomas's book, *Geschichte der deutschen Wehr- und Rüstungswirtschaft*, with appendices, ed. Wolfgang Birkenfeld (Boppard, 1966). Overy makes no mention of this work either.

17 Overy, "Germany, 'Domestic Crisis' and War", p. 148.

18 The lack of operational plans for an invasion of France was an additional factor in this conflict.

19 For a summary statement of the weakness of the German forces at this time, see A. Hillgruber, *Hitlers Strategie: Politik und Kriegführung, 1940-1941* (Frankfurt-on-Main, 1965), pp. 34-8.

20 Overy, "Germany, 'Domestic Crisis' and War", p. 144.

21 Ibid., p. 150

22 *Arbeiterklasse und Volksgemeinschaft*, ed. Mason, doe. nos. 15,31,43, 50, 110, 132, and Appendix 11.

23 On all these questions, see the conceptually lucid and highly differentiated article by Arthur Schweitzer, "Plans and Markets: Nazi Style", *Kyklos: Internat. Rev. for Social Sciences*, xxx (1977), fasc. 1, pp. 88 ff. I think Schweitzer probably exaggerates the degree to which the regime regained control over markets in the course of 1939.

24 Overy, "Germany, 'Domestic Crisis' and War", p. 149. On p. 157 Overy even refers to "cuts in living standards". I would be interested to know what evidence there is for this in 1936-9.

25 Ibid., p. 141.

26 See Hillgruber, *Hitlers Strategie*, p. 24.

27 Overy, "Germany, 'Domestic Crisis' and War", p. 141. Some of the later reports from the statisticians and the Trustees of Labour have indeed been lost or destroyed for some months of 1938 and 1939, but my argument does not depend in any way upon the fact that they are missing. They can be supplemented in part by other materials; and later documents make it clear that the situation had not improved in the

intervening months.

28 See Bundesarchiv, Koblenz, R 4311, vol. 213b. Further Fritz Wiedemann, *Der Mann, der Feldherr werden wollte* (Velbert and Kettwig, 1964), esp. pp. 127 f., also pp. 114, 179, 182, 191, 197; Thomas, *Geschichte der deutschen Wehr- und Rüstungswirtschaft*, pp. II ff., 508 ff.; *Arbeiterklasse und Volksgemeinschaft*, ed. Mason, pp. 546 f.

29 See T. W. Mason, "Women in Germany: Family, Welfare and Work", *History Workshop* II., no. 2 (1976), p. 20. For later use of the same logic, see Herbert, *Fremdarbeiter*, pp. 142, 175, on the decision to draft Russian workers in Germany.

30 For the full quotations, see *Arbeiterklasse und Volksgemeinschaft*, ed. Mason, pp. 163 ff.; and Mason, *Sozialpolitik im Dritten Reich*, pp. 308 ff.

31 Overy, "Germany, 'Domestic Crisis' and War", p. 167 . .3

32 *Ibid.*, p. 164 .

33 Hillgruber, *Hitler's Strategie*.

34 Overy, "Germany, 'Domestic Crisis' and War", p. 165.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

36 See Hillgruber, *Hitlers Strategie*, pp. 48, 162, 260, 271 f. For totally unreal manpower demands, see Herbert, *Fremdarbeiter*, pp. 254 f., 261.

37 Hitler's most comprehensive and sensitive biographer, [Joachim C. Fest, also believes that Hitler was aware of all the strains, problems and risks in 1939: see Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler* (Frankfurt-on-Main, Berlin and Vienna, 1973), p. 841.

38 Herben's detailed study of these questions is a major contribution to the history of the Second World War and to the history of Nazism.

39 See the recent study of the German conduct of the war in Russia by O. Banov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-5: German Troops and the Barbarization of Warfare* (London, 1985).

40 Overy, "Germany, 'Domestic Crisis' and War", p. 148.

41 Overy, "Hitler's 'War and the German Economy'".

42 See the excellent synthesis by Herbert , *Fremdarbeiter*, pp. 346-53.

43 See. Diilffer, "Der Beginn des Krieges 1939: Hitler, die innere Krise und das Machtesystem", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*; ii (1976).

44 See L. Herbst, "Die Krise des nationalsozialistischen Regimes am Vorabend des Zweiten Weltkrieges und die forcierte Aufrüstung", *Vierteljahrsheft für Zeitgeschichte*, xxvi (1978). I am at a loss to understand why Overy makes no reference to this big and densely argued article, which is directly relevant to the issues which he tries to discuss,

45 Overy, "Germany, 'Domestic Crisis' and War", p. 168.