CHAPTER 22
THE END OF GERMANY

You can't wage war with Salvation Army methods.
—ADOLF HITLER

Back in March, when Hitler had marched on Prague, Neville Chamberlain set down his teacup and took notice. It was then, exchanging one of his carrots for a stick, he vowed that Britain would defend Poland if Hitler attacked it. That time had come. But Hitler couldn’t simply attack. He must first make it look like self-defense. So on August 22, he told his generals, “I shall give a propagandist reason for starting the war; never mind whether it is plausible or not. The victor will not be asked afterward whether he told the truth.”

The plan was for the SS, dressed in Polish uniforms, to attack a German radio station on the Polish border. To make the whole thing authentic, they would need German “casualties.” They decided to use concentration camp inmates, whom they vilely referred to as Konserve (canned goods). These victims of Germany would be dressed as German soldiers. In the end only one man was murdered for this purpose, via lethal injection, and afterward shot several times to give the appearance that he had been killed by Polish soldiers. The deliberate murder of a human being for the purposes of deceiving the world seems a perfectly fitting inaugural act for what was to follow. This took place on schedule, August 31.

In “retaliation,” German troops marched into Poland at dawn on September 1. Göring’s Luftwaffe rained hell from the skies, deliberately killing civilians. Civilians were murdered more carefully on the ground. It was a
coldly deliberate act of terror by intentional mass murder, never before seen in modern times, and it was the Poles’ first bitter taste of the Nazi ruthlessness they would come to know so well. The outside world would not hear details for some time. It knew only that German forces were cutting through Poland like the proverbial hot knife through butter as Panzer divisions neatly erased thirty and forty miles of Poland per day.

But Hitler gave a speech to the Reichstag, casting himself in the role of aggrieved victim. “You know the endless attempts I made for a peaceful clarification and understanding of the problem of Austria,” he said, “and later of the problem of the Sudetenland, Bohemia and Moravia. It was all in vain.” Poland had refused his gracious offers of peace and with a callousness not to be borne. The Poles rewarded his good faith with violence! “I am wrongly judged if my love of peace and patience are mistaken for weakness or even cowardice . . . I have therefore resolved to speak to Poland in the same language that Poland for months past has used toward us.” The long-suffering and peace-loving Führer could take it no more: “This night for the first time Polish regular soldiers fired on our own territory. Since 5:45 A.M. we have been returning the fire, and from now on bombs will be met with bombs.” Admiral Canaris, the head of the Abwehr, had long dreaded this hour. He was overcome with emotion at the implications of it all. Hans Bernd Gisevius, a diplomat whom Canaris had recruited to work with him in the Resistance, was at OKW headquarters that day. They ran into each other in a back stairway, and Canaris drew Gisevius aside. “This means the end of Germany,” he said.

It now only remained for Britain to declare war. But Hitler and von Ribbentrop doubted the British would do so. As with Austria and Czechoslovakia, they would probably prefer a “diplomatic” solution. Indeed, for two days the British engaged in diplomatic back and forth, but at some point someone lent Chamberlain a vertebra, for against Hitler’s calculations, on Sunday, Great Britain declared war.

That morning Dietrich and Karl-Friedrich were a few minutes from home, discussing the events of the last days. It was a warm, humid morning, with low-hanging cloud cover over the city. Suddenly there were sirens. It was noon. Dietrich quickly pedaled his bicycle back to the house on Marienburgerallee and waited for something to happen. But no planes flew over Berlin. There would be no immediate air retaliation. It was all a bit strange and anticlimactic. But World War II had begun.
September 1939

During the first weeks of the war, Bonhoeffer considered his situation. He had gotten a yearlong deferral from military service, and he was on friendly terms with the powers that be in Schlawe. But what would happen after his year was up? He considered a job as a military chaplain; he might even be assigned to a hospital. His mother met with her cousin Paul von Hase, the Berlin commandant, to discuss this possibility, and an application was filed. Bonhoeffer didn't hear back until February: the response was negative. Only those already on active duty were eligible for chaplaincy posts.

Meanwhile, many men who had been part of Finkenwalde, Köslin, Schlawe, and Sigurdshof had already been called up. On the third day of fighting, one was killed. By war's end more than 80 of the 150 young men from Finkenwalde and the collective pastorates had been killed. Bonhoeffer wrote a circular letter to the brethren on September 20:

I have received the news, which I pass on to you today, that our dear brother Theodor Maass was killed in Poland on 3rd September. You will be as stunned by this news as I was. But I beg you, let us thank God in remembrance of him. He was a good brother, a quiet, faithful pastor of the Confessing Church, a man who lived from word and sacrament, whom God has also thought worthy to suffer for the Gospel. I am sure that he was prepared to go. Where God tears great gaps we should not try to fill them with human words. They should remain open. Our only comfort is the God of the resurrection, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who also was and is his God. In him we know our brothers and in him is the biding fellowship of those who have overcome and those who still await their hour. God be praised for our dead brother and be merciful to us all at our end.

The war put Bonhoeffer in a strange position. He had always been a man of seeming contradictions, and the war would magnify them. He knew he could not fight for Hitler's Germany, but he was extraordinarily supportive when it came to the young men who did not see things his way. He also knew he had options they did not. Albert Schönherr remembered the climate:
Through the Nazi propaganda and this whole blurring of the situation, we had the feeling, well, in the end we really must step in; the Fatherland must be defended. Not with a very good conscience, of course not. Above all not with enthusiasm. . . . After all, it was very clearly the case that whoever refused the draft in the case of war would be beheaded, would be executed. Was this the point at which we should give up our lives, and thereby also our care for our family, and everything which was important to us? Or was it not yet the point? Bonhoeffer did not say, you may not go. . . . If you see it from today's perspective you see it much more critically. Above all, because we now know everything which happened. But at that time we didn't perceive things with complete clarity. I know that Bonhoeffer himself was sad that he had supported a man who completely refused the draft and then was executed. It was a very strange situation in which we all stood.

Through the Looking Glass

In the middle of October, when the fighting in Poland ended, it seemed safe to resume the collective pastorates, at least the one in Sigurdshof. Eight ordinands arrived there, and Bonhoeffer picked up where he had left off. He alternated between the otherworldly fairyland idyll of the Pomeranian woods and the churning intrigue of über-present Berlin. That winter was one of the most severe on record, but it was a joy to escape to that primitive snowbound world, so far from the gritty concerns of the war.

And yet he could never escape it much. In Berlin he met with Dohnanyi, who told him everything, as he always had. But Bonhoeffer now heard things he had not heard before, things that would fundamentally alter his thinking. It was worse than anything he had dreamed. And what Bonhoeffer now knew would make him feel more alone than ever because many in the church and ecumenical world were expending great energies toward ending the war. But Bonhoeffer was not. He now believed that the principal goal was to remove Hitler from power. Only afterward could Germany negotiate for peace. Knowing what he knew, any peace with Hitler was no better than war. But he couldn't say such things, even in ecumenical circles. This was when he began to realize that he was already part of the conspiracy to remove Hitler. He couldn't even share what he knew with his best friends. It had become
too dangerous. More than ever now, he was alone with God, and he looked to God’s judgment upon his actions.

What did Bonhoeffer know?

Dohnanyi told him that now, under the dark cover of war, Hitler had unleashed horrors that beggared description, that made the usual horrors of war quaint things of the past. Reports from Poland indicated that the SS were committing unspeakable atrocities, things unheard of in civilized times. On September 10, a group of SS men had brutally overseen the forced labor of fifty Polish Jews, who spent the day repairing a bridge. When the work was completed, the SS herded the workers into a synagogue and murdered them. That was only one example. On a widespread systematic level, the Wehrmacht’s advances in Poland were accompanied by the intentional mass murder of civilians.

Dohnanyi’s primary source was his boss, Admiral Canaris. It was so disturbing that Canaris insisted on a meeting with Wilhelm Keitel, the head of the German military. They met in Hitler’s private railroad train on September 12, and Canaris questioned the OKW chief about the heinous evils, which would destroy Germany. What Canaris could not have known at that civilized meeting was that it would continue and would get much worse. It would not only destroy Germany, but would do so more completely than he had ever dared to fear. The German culture and civilization that he, Dohnanyi, and Bonhoeffer knew and loved would be obliterated from history. Future generations would be convinced that nothing good could ever have existed in a country that produced such evil. They would think only of these evils. It would be as if these unleashed dark forces had grotesquely marched like devils on dead horses, backward through the gash in the present, and had destroyed the German past too.

Canaris and the others in the German military leadership thought that Hitler’s bestial nature was unfortunate, but they had no idea it was something that he cultivated and celebrated, that it was part of an ideology that had been waiting for this opportunity to leap at the throats of every Jew and Pole, priest and aristocrat, and tear them to pieces. The German generals had not seen the dark river of blood bubbling beneath the surface of the new Germany, but suddenly here it was, gushing like a geyser. Despite all the hints and warnings, it was too gruesome to be believed.

Hitler’s hour had arrived, and on the first of September, a brutal new
Darwinism broke over Europe: the Nietzschean triumph of the strong over the weak could at last begin. The weak who could be useful would be brutally enslaved; all others would be murdered. What seemed so offensive to the international community—that Hitler would take the territory of the Polish people by force—was nothing compared to what the Nazis were doing. Their racial ideologies demanded more than territory; Poland must become a giant slave labor camp. The Poles were to be treated as Untermenschen (sub-humans). Their lands would not merely be occupied; they themselves would be terrorized and broken into utter docility, would be dealt with as beasts. The Germans would not tolerate the possibility of failure or the slightest manifestation of mercy. Brutality and mercilessness would be aggressively cultivated as virtues.

In his diary Canaris wrote, “I pointed out to General Keitel that I knew that extensive executions were planned in Poland and that particularly the nobility and the clergy were to be exterminated.” Canaris was referring to the plan that the SS called the “housecleaning of Jews, intelligentsia, clergy and the nobility.” All Poles with leadership abilities were to be killed. Soon after his appointment as governor general of Poland, Hans Frank declared, “The Poles shall be the slaves of the German Reich.”

There had been warnings all along, the loudest being Hitler’s book, Mein Kampf. The entire Western world might have saved itself wondering what lay ahead. But who could believe it? On August 22, Hitler boldly told his generals that in the prosecution of the coming war, things would take place that were not to their liking. At other times he referred to the brutality ahead as “devil’s work.” He once declared, “You can’t wage war with Salvation Army methods.” He planned these things all along, and in that August 22 meeting, he warned the generals that they “should not interfere in such matters, but restrict themselves to their military duties.”

There was something in the German psyche that responded to this sort of suggestion too well. But there were some brave souls who did consider the larger picture. Niemöller was certainly one. Now Canaris was another. So he protested to Keitel. But in vain. Canaris didn’t understand that these brutalities were at the very core of the dark vision Hitler was now, at last, bringing into reality. Keitel did not concern himself with such things above his pay grade. He told Canaris: “The Führer has already decided on this matter.”
Since the SS perpetrated the most wicked acts, Hitler could keep the worst of it from his military leaders. But reports leaked out. Many generals were beside themselves. General Blaskowitz sent Hitler a memo describing the horrors he had seen. He was profoundly concerned about the effect on the German soldiers. If hardened military leaders were disturbed, one can imagine the effect these things would have on the young men who had never seen a battlefield. General Bock read Blaskowitz's memo and found its descriptions “hair-raising.” General Petzel and General Georg von Küchler opposed what they were seeing in the strongest terms possible. They demanded an end to the murder of civilians. General Ulex called the “ethnic policy” a “blot on the honor of the entire German people.” General Lemelsen had one SS leader arrested for ordering the shooting death of fifty Jews.

But no one would get in any trouble. Hitler saw to it that a blanket amnesty was declared on all such men arrested. But because reports of these monstrous acts began to circulate and be verified, many in the military leadership were finally willing to take a stand and join a coup against Hitler.

Some generals, however—Brauchitsch was one—were less bothered. In January 1940, Blaskowitz wrote another memo and sent it to Brauchitsch; he described the attitude in the army toward the SS as alternating “between abhorrence and hatred,” and said “every soldier feels sickened and repelled by the crimes committed in Poland by agents of the Reich and government representatives.” Brauchitsch only shrugged. He didn't want the army sullied with these evildoings, but if the SS was doing most of the dirty work, he wouldn't make a fuss.

The nobler-minded generals would, and did, but they came to realize that making a fuss was not succeeding. More Jews and Poles were being butchered every day. They must plan another coup. Many of them were Christians and had no qualms about calling what they saw evil, and felt a duty to stop it at all costs. Many felt that to be good Germans and faithful Christians at that time meant turning against the man leading their country.

They knew that if they weren't careful to plan other details of the coup, the death of Adolf Hitler might bring worse things. Two things were vital. First, they must communicate with British officials to guarantee that they, the conspirators, would be recognized as separate from Hitler and the Nazis. If the death of Hitler only emboldened the British to destroy Germany, little
would be gained. Second, they must get enough of the army leaders on their side to pull it off in toto. If they succeeded only in killing Adolf Hitler, other Nazis would likely seize control and continue his work.

The Nazi Worldview at Home

Just as Hitler had been planning for years to enslave the Poles and kill the Jews, he had been planning to murder every German with a disability. Now he could do just that. As early as 1929 he had publicly proposed that 700,000 of the “weakest” Germans be “removed” per year. Before the war, the outcry over such actions would have been deafening. But now, with everyone’s attention on the war, this domestic nightmare could begin, the fog of war would cover a multitude of sins at home too.

Preparations for the T-4 euthanasia program had been under way for years. Now they hit the ground running. In August 1939 every doctor and midwife in the country was notified that they must register all children born with genetic defects, retroactive to 1936. In September, when the war began, the killing of these “defectives” began. In the next few years five thousand small children were killed. It wasn’t until later that fall that attention was formally focused on the other “incurables.” In her excellent book, For the Soul of the People, Victoria Barnett tells the story:

It is unlikely that the first institutions to receive the forms were aware of their purpose. For each patient, a form was to be filled out giving in detail the nature of the patient’s illness, the length of time already spent in institutions, and the patient’s racial status. The cover letter told institutions’ directors that filling out the forms was a necessary statistical measure and that a mass transfer of certain patients to other institutions might be necessary because of wartime demand for medical facilities. Three state-appointed experts would review the completed forms, select those patients to be “transferred,” and provide for their removal from the home institution.

As soon as the Polish campaign was under way, a number of adult patients deemed the least “fit” were put on buses for these “transfers.” The places to which these poor souls were transferred would murder them. At
first the method was via injection, and later on via carbon monoxide gas. The parents or relatives of these patients had no idea of these goings-on until they received a letter in the mail, informing them of the death of their loved one, who had already been cremated. The cause of death was usually given as pneumonia or a similarly common ailment, and the ashes of their loved one’s remains arrived shortly thereafter.

Hitler’s memo on this subject was postdated September 1, to coincide with the beginning of the war. The rationale given for the killings was that the patients were taking up medical facilities and beds that should be used by soldiers wounded while fighting for the fatherland. When the Third Reich was straining to battle its enemies, the cost of caring for the “incurables” was prohibitive. They must “give their lives” for the greater cause just as everyone else, and just as the parents of soldiers must “make the ultimate sacrifice” of their sons for the war effort, so too must the parents of these patients. The T-4 program was run by Hitler’s personal physician, Karl Brandt, the man Erwin Sutz had met while hiking in the Alps.

The methods of killing used at these euthanasia centers and the methods of cremation were the first attempts by the Nazis to undertake mass killings. The lessons learned in murdering these helpless patients helped the Nazis streamline their killing and cremation methods, which would culminate in the death camps, where hundreds of thousands and then millions of innocents were killed.

**Putsch Plans Renewed**

Toward the end of September, everyone in Germany was sure that peace was at hand. Hitler had gotten what he wanted—Poland—and that would be that. But on September 27, the day of Warsaw’s surrender, Hitler convened his generals and announced plans to make war on the western frontier too. He would attack Belgium and Holland! And then France and England. And Denmark and Norway. Again, the generals were thunderstruck by what they heard, and plans to do away with this madman were now dusted off and updated.

Beck also told Dohnanyi to update his Chronicle of Shame, for which they would one day hang. To that end, Dohnanyi obtained actual film footage of many SS atrocities in Poland. To avoid another Dolchstoss (stab-in-the-back) legend from arising when Hitler was killed and Germany “defeated”
by the Allies, it was vital to have proof of the Nazi atrocities. There were more conversations and meetings, and Bonhoeffer was at the center of many of them.

But as the military geared up for more war—and as the conspirators geared up for a new coup attempt—a fresh surprise stopped everyone in his tracks. Behold, that unpredictable magus, Adolf Hitler, would now with a flourish produce from his hindquarters a withered olive branch and wave it before the goggling world. In a speech to the Reichstag on October 6, he again struck a pose of profound magnanimity, and with a face so straight that the rest of the world seemed askew, Hitler proposed peace: “My chief endeavor has been to rid our relations with France of all trace of ill will and render them tolerable for both nations. . . . Germany has no further claims against France. . . . I have devoted no less effort to the achievement of Anglo-German understanding, nay, more than that, of an Anglo-German friendship.”

It was a performance. Of course the unspoken terms of his absurd Diktat were that no one mention the blood-soaked piece of German-occupied territory formerly known as Poland. Nor the place once upon a time known as Czechoslovakia. If no one was foolish enough to bring them up, peace was in the offing. But Chamberlain, like a woman scorned, would hear no more sweet talk. If Hitler wished to be believed, he said, “acts—not words alone—must be forthcoming.” Chamberlain rejected Hitler’s proposal on October 13.

Meanwhile the generals realized they must act quickly. The putsch must happen before Hitler attacked the West. Once German armies marched on Belgium and Holland, it would be harder than ever to get Britain to take the conspirators seriously, especially since many of them had been in charge of the bloody juggernaut across Poland. And Hitler was not about to sit on his heels. If he couldn’t convince Britain to give him the peace terms he liked, he would take them by force. In his typically gentlemanly way, he said to General Halder: “[The] British will be ready to talk only after a beating.” Military plans were being made to march westward as soon as possible. And the conspirators rushed to pull together their own plans.

But these plans consisted of far more than figuring out how to squeeze off a clean shot at Herr Hitler. First, the conspirators must make sure that Britain and other powers knew of their existence and were willing to support them when they made their fateful move. They didn’t want Britain and
France to simply take advantage of Hitler's sudden demise to mete out their own harsh justice on Germany. They needed peace assurances from these countries. And they couldn't take their eyes off Russia in the east. Stalin was always waiting for any moment of weakness when he might pounce and tear away another piece of Europe at bargain basement prices. For the conspirators, cultivating friendly foreign contacts, and convincing them that the conspiracy was credible, was a vital part of the whole.

This was where Dietrich Bonhoeffer would come in. His role in reaching out to the British would be a crucial one over the next few years. His connections with Bishop Bell and others—and Bell's connections with top men in the British government—were significant. Bonhoeffer also had connections in Norway and America. But would this pastor really take that last step beyond providing emotional and intellectual support for others and actively participate along with them? That remained to be seen.