CHAPTER X

The Third Reich: War

(i) THE EARLY TRIUMPHS

The German conquest of Poland was accomplished in four weeks, but the decisive blows all fell within a matter of days. Taken by surprise, with their mobilisation incomplete, and faced by an enemy superior in every department of war except courage, the Polish armies were rapidly outmanoeuvred, surrounded and overwhelmed. The Germans struck from three directions: East Prussia in the north, Pomerania and Silesia in the west, and Slovakia in the south. The Polish air force was eliminated during the first forty-eight hours when its machines were destroyed on the ground, and Polish cavalry proved helpless against armoured divisions backed by fast-moving heavy artillery, bombers and dive bombers. The Polish infantry lacked the mobility needed to counter penetration in depth. Poland's western allies had expected her to hold out through the winter, and they might conceivably have done so had the French, as the Poles expected, attacked the thinly held German line in the west. The Russians were also taken aback by the speed of the German onslaught, and on 17 September the Red Army, in accordance with the secret protocol of 23 August, marched into the eastern Polish provinces. This was the final blow to the Polish hopes of further resistance, and unexpected by the local population, who imagined that the Russians had come to help them against the Germans. Hitler had urged Stalin to intervene without delay in order to shorten the campaign, and Stalin did so with alacrity from fear that the Germans, who were already over a hundred miles east of the agreed partition line in places, might stay where they were. On 28 September, the day when Warsaw surrendered after a savage bombardment from the air, Ribbentrop was again in Moscow, where a further treaty, signed by him and Molotov, made certain territorial changes in the secret protocol: most of Lithuania was now allocated to the Russian sphere of influence, and Germany in return received a larger share of central Poland, including the province of Lublin. The revised frontier coincided to some extent with the Curzon Line of 1920, but with modifications in

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favour of Russia, which thus acquired a large slice of ethnic Polish territory. Of Poland’s 36 million inhabitants, 24 were now on the German side, 12 on the Russian. The German area was sub-divided into two: a western half, including but exceeding the territory that had been German before 1914, was annexed to the Reich, while the rest was treated as a colony to be exploited under a German governor. It was known as the Government General. With Russian encouragement, the Germans thus abandoned their earlier idea of leaving a small, nominally independent rump Poland which would have been a magnet for Polish nationalism. The provinces occupied by the Red Army were simply annexed to the soviet republics of White Russia and the Ukraine respectively, except for the Vilna district which reverted to Lithuania. The new order in Poland was a pointer to Hitler’s general plans and purposes, and its implications were of wider significance.

First, there were the military lessons of the campaign. The success of the German High Command showed that a strategic revolution had taken place since the First World War, though the beginnings of the change could be traced back to Ludendorff’s surprise tactics in March 1918. Mobility had overcome attrition. Tanks moving at high speed and supported by mechanised infantry and aircraft were able to make penetrations in depth that rendered obsolete the 1914–18 conception of trench warfare. Obvious though this was in retrospect, it made little impression at the time on the Allied generals, who clung to the argument that the Germans would not be able to use in the west the tactics they had employed with such effect in Poland. Nor was much attention paid to the German use of fifth columnists drawn from the million or so Volksdeutsche in Poland. Thus the shattering experience of the Poles did nothing to shake the complacency of the French and British leaders, while it gave Hitler’s newly blooded but half-trained troops much needed confidence.

Secondly, the Polish campaign exposed the half-heartedness with which the French conducted a war on which they had embarked with obvious reluctance. Gamelin, the French Commander-in-Chief, had promised his Polish opposite number to take the offensive within fifteen days of a German attack on Poland. When hostilities started, the Germans had only eight active and twenty-six reserve divisions on the whole of the western front from Aachen to Basle. The troops were untrained and unready for battle, and had no tanks and very little ammunition. The defence line, known as the West Wall or Siegfried Line, had been hastily improvised and was far from impregnable. Facing it were between sixty and seventy French divisions with a huge preponderance of artillery, so that a determined French attack could have broken through and reached the Rhine in a fort-