Joachim von Ribbentrop: His Struggle For Power, 1933-1936

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The rise of the Nazi Party and the creation of the Third *Reich* propelled to the forefront of German political life many improbable personalities, among them the future Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop. His rise to power underlines the political structure of the *Reich* after 1933 and sheds light on the policy-making process. This is a study of an *arriviste,* a careerist who took full advantage of the changing circumstances to work his way to the top of the Nazi hierarchy and into Adolf Hitler's circle of personal confidants.[1]

Ribbentrop's early life was to influence his struggle for power. Born in 1893 as the son of a retired Prussian military officer, in Wesel, a little town near the north Rhine, he was given the opportunity for an education in England and France.[2] His trip abroad before the War and his activities as a champagne salesman in the days of the Weimar Republic enabled Ribbentrop to acquire the cosmopolitan airs and fluency in both French and English that were to impress Hitler.[3] His personality, however, made him hated and despised by the Party hacks as well as by the old professional diplomats.[4] Though his manner was arrogant, he often displayed an amazing lack of intelligence; he was also vain and theatrical, spending hours before a mirror to perfect his unique salute to Hitler.[5] His haughtiness made him sensitive and quick to detect any slight to his authority, which he would repay with a vindictive spite.[6]

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1. Joachim von Ribbentrop held the following positions: Member of the NSDAP, 1932-1945; *Reichstag* member, 1933-1945; Foreign Policy Collaborator to the *Fuehrer*, 1933-1938; Special Delegate for Disarmament Questions, 1934-1935; Ambassador-at-Large, 1935-1936; Ambassador in London, 1936-1938; Organizer and Chief of the Ribbentrop Bureau; *Reichsminister* for Foreign Affairs, 1938-1945; General of the S.S. *(Obergruppenfuehrer)*, 1933-1945. Cf. *Trials of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal* (Nuremberg, 1947), XXXI, No. 2829-PS, 199.

2. Paul Seabury, *The Wilhelmstrasse* (Berkeley, 1954), 46-49; Erich Kordt, *Nicht Aus Den Akten* (Stuttgart, 1950), 94-96. Ribbentrop terminated his formal education at age sixteen.

3. T.R. Ybarra, "Hitler's Traveling Salesman," *Colliers*, XLVIII (September 19, 1936), 15.

4. W.D. Bayles, *Caesars in Goose Step* (New York, 1940), 132; Joachim C. Fest, *Das Gesicht Des Dritten Reiches* (Munich, 1963), 145-146.

5. Douglas M. Kelley, *22 Cells in Nuremberg* (New York, 1947), 98.

6. Joachim von Ribbentrop, *The Ribbentrop Memoirs,* intro. by Alan Bullock (London, 1953), xi.

By profession Ribbentrop was a wine salesman, not a diplomat. Lacking the proper political training and experience but aspiring to a diplomatic career, he hid his deficiencies by mouthing the policies of others. Since he was incapable of independent policy formulation, diplomacy became for Ribbentrop essentially a matter of influence, an attitude that was particularly appealing to Hitler as a man who resented any opposition to his own views.

Hitler first took an interest in Ribbentrop during the fall of 1932. At that time Ribbentrop was not yet a Party member, though his monarchist leanings were giving way to National Socialism. Impressed by the salesman's cosmopolitanism, in marked contrast to the provincialism of most Nazis, Hitler was anxious to learn about the world and pleased to find someone to translate his foreign newspapers. Ribbentrop was impressed by the views and powerful personality of the Nazi *Fuehrer*. A friendship soon developed. Ribbentrop agreed with Hitler on all matters of foreign policy; his wife Annelies, daughter of the rich wine producer Otto Henkel, taught Hitler the proper mannerisms and etiquette of a statesman.[7] A lasting bond was established between the two men, though Ribbentrop was obviously the junior partner in the relationship. It was this bond that provided the leverage which enabled a relative newcomer to the political scene to become Foreign Minister of the Third *Reich*.

With Hitler's appointment to the Chancellorship on January 30, 1933, Ribbentrop had the opportunity to advance within the political establishment and the Party. The objective of the Nazi process of *Gleichschaltung,* or co-ordination, was the seizure of power, to make the state the instrument of Hitler's will.[8] Those state organs which limited the will of the *Fuehrer* had to be replaced, where possible, by newly created 'front organizations', thereby producing a fluid political system unregulated by conventional law but subject to the dictates of one man. This fluidity could easily be maintained by forging new organizations to alter the power base or radicalize policies.[9] With power concentrated at the top by the arbitrary will of the *Fuehrer,* the bureaucratic super-structure became meaningless. As sociologist Hans Gerth remarked in 1940: "The charismatic claim

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7. Ybarra, "Hitler's Traveling Salesman," 15; *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression* (Washington, 1946), II, 490.
8. Helmut Krausnick, "Stages of Co-ordination," *The Path to Dictatorship, 1918-1933,* Theodor Eschenburg *et. al.* (New York, 1961), 134.
9. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1958), 364-371.

to leadership which is totalitarian in nature, means that no status on the basis of specialized and technical achievement can be accorded unless it has the approval of the leader or those to whom he delegates power."[10]

This type of situation was particularly suited to Ribbentrop's abilities. With emphasis placed on loyalty to the *Fuehrer* instead of political and bureaucratic skills, he could bypass the establishment in his climb to power. His procedure was simple: he established his own organization as a rival to the *Wilhelmstrasse* and the *Aussenpolitische Amt der NSDAP* to challenge the prerogatives of the professional diplomats of the Weimar period and the Nazi aspirants. Then he lingered in Hitler's antechamber in the hope of learning the Chancellor's views on foreign policy so that he could later introduce them as his own.[11] Anyone who shared Hitler's ideas could not help but impress him; whenever he showed signs of doubt about his own policies, Ribbentrop would immediately reassure him by being more Hitlerian than Hitler.[12]

Ingratiating himself with the *Fuehrer,* however, was only the first step in Ribbentrop's struggle for power. He faced determined opposition from the career diplomats who regarded him as an upstart, and the Party bosses who felt entitled to the political spoils of victory. The German Foreign Office became a necessary part of the political process by providing the camouflage which allowed Hitler to consolidate his power away from the prying eyes of the Allies.[13] Relatively few personnel changes within the *Wilhelmstrasse* and Hitler's initial reluctance to move against the diplomats resulted in their remaining a powerful group to be reckoned with in the coming struggle.[14]

Among the Party hacks Ribbentrop met with strong resistance. Field-Marshal Hermann Goering, generally recognized as the number two man in the Party, resented this *arriviste's* intrusions into foreign affairs, an area which he considered his personal sphere of influence.[15] Baldur von Schirach, the leader of the Hitler Youth,

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10. Hans Gerth, "The Nazi Party: Its Leadership and Composition," *The American Journal of Sociology,* XLV (January, 1940), 519-520.

11. Kordt, *Nicht Aus Den Akten,* 69.

12. Ernst von Weizsaecker, *Memoirs of Ernst von Weizsaecker* (Chicago, 1951), 127.

13. Karl D. Bracher, *et. al., Die Nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung* (Cologne, 1960), 230; *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945* (Washington, 1957-1966), Minutes of the Conference of Ministers, March 7, 1933, C, I, 113-119.

14. Seabury, *The Wilhelmstrasse,* 30.

15. Robert Coulondre, *Von Moskau nach Berlin, 1936-1939,* trans. by S.L. Sigwart (Bonn. 1950), 183.

Alfred Rosenberg, who was the philosopher of the movement and head of the auxiliary Party foreign bureau, and *Gauleiter* Ernst Bohle, chief of the *Auslandsorganisation* (which organized Germans living abroad), all hoped to undermine Ribbentrop's power by discrediting him in Hitler's eyes.[16] His greatest rival, however, was Josef Goebbels, the ambitious chief of the *Propagandaministerium.* Goebbels' regard for the upstart was typical of the old guard: "He bought his name, married his money, and swindled his way into office." [17] Ribbentrop's only allies were Party secretary Rudolf Hess and Heinrich Himmler, Chief of the Police and *Reichsfuehrer S.S.,* through whom he received the initial funds to build his bureau.[18]

Ribbentrop had no claim to fame beyond his personal relationship to the *Fuehrer,* for he lacked ideological training, organizational skills, or a charismatic personality that could evoke fanatic loyalty from subordinates.[19] He was a newcomer to the Party, too recent an arrival to be considered an *alter kaempfer* by the bosses.[20] His only assets were that he had not been involved in any of the factional struggles within the Party, and that his opponents generally dismissed him as a second-rate competitor who would pose no threat to them. Fearing the loss of his influence if he angered the *Fuehrer,* Ribbentrop bowed to his master's every whim, virtually becoming Hitler's shadow.[21] It was through Hitler that this inexperienced *arriviste* came to power, and only by maintaining his close personal ties could he solidify and perpetuate it.

II

It was in May, 1933, that Ribbentrop made his first move in the long climb to power. He took full advantage of Rosenberg's fiasco in London to promote his own candidacy for the position of foreign policy advisor. Originally subordinated to Rosenberg in the *Aussenpolitische Amt der NSDAP,* he had been secretly preparing an organization of his own to discredit his rival. Ribbentrop realized Hitler's need for an independent bureau which could perform the

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16. Wallace R. Deuel, *People Under Hitler* (New York, 1942), 113-117.
17. Gordon Craig, *From Bismarck to Adenauer: Aspects of German Statecraft* (rev. ed.; New York, 1965), 89.
18. Heinz Hoehne, *Der Orden Unter Dem Totenkopf. Die Geschichte Der S.S.* (Guetersloh, 1967), 256-258.
19. Seabury, "Ribbentrop and the German Foreign Office," *Political Science Quarterly,* LXVI (December, 1951), 536.
20. Fest, *Das Gesicht Des Dritten Reiches,* 246.
21. *Trials of the Major War Criminals,* X, 187. The testimony of Ribbentrop's secretary, Miss Blank.

distasteful task of a reliable intelligence department as well as provide character studies of Germany's leading diplomatic opponents. Hitler was receptive to the idea, and the *Buero* or *Dienststelle Ribbentrop* was founded.

Ribbentrop was given the necessary time to build his organization when Party opposition weakened. Rosenberg had been eliminated by his outlandish behavior while on diplomatic mission in London;[22] the other two serious competitors were soon preoccupied with other interests. Goering devoted his attention to the air force and economic policies, while Goebbels' physical appearance precluded his aims of becoming Foreign Minister.[23] Through his connections with Hess, Ribbentrop received the necessary protection and financial aid to organize his bureau into the breeding ground for future Nazi diplomats.[24]

The *Dienststelle* was housed opposite the Foreign Office in the old Bismarckian palace at 70 Wilhelmstrasse. From its initial staff of two men it grew steadily until 1936, when it numbered about three hundred, composed mostly of ex-journalists, ruined businessmen and younger men out of the *Hitlerjugend* who were eager to follow a rising personality. Until Ribbentrop began to hire older, experienced civil servants to strengthen the organization, he kept complete control over all Bureau activity.[25]

The organization soon rivalled the *Wilhelmstrasse* in size, scope of operations, and resources. Several departments were created, each dealing with a prominent country and each having its own technicians and archives.[26] The *Buero* received the archives, library and part of the personnel of the once reputable *Hamburg Institut fuer Auswaertige Politik,* and established close working relations with the *Institut fuer Weltwirtschaft an der Universitaet Kiel,* the research department of the Berlin *Hochschule fuer Politik* and several other specialized agencies, which enabled Ribbentrop to free himself from

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22. In London, in the summer of 1933, Rosenberg's arrogant and insulting behavior had only alienated the English ruling class, instead of winning it over to the Nazi cause. It was obvious that he was too tactless to make a good foreign minister.

23. There is a dispute whether Goebbels had a clubfoot, or a stunted left leg due to infantile paralysis. Regardless, his limp and frail appearance (he weighed just over one hundred pounds), made him unsuitable in Hitler's eyes as foreign minister of an Aryan race. Cf. Ernst Hanfstaengl, *Unheard Witness* (New York, 1957), 239.

24. Seabury, *The Wilhelmstrasse,* 52.

25. Kordt, *Nicht Aus Den Akten,* 125.

26. Paul Schwarz, *This Man Ribbentrop: His Life and Times* (New York, 1943), 89.

dependence on the Foreign Office.[27] The most important connections, however, were to be established with Professor Karl Haushofer's *Geopolitische Institut,* which had extensive material on every major country. Its founder, the philosopher of geopolitics and *Lebensraum,* contributed to the ideological development of Nazism through his pupil Rudolf Hess.[28] At Nuremberg, Haushofer testified that he was frequently consulted by Ribbentrop on Japanese affairs; later he was entrusted with the task of preparing the groundwork for the 1940 tripartite alliance among Germany, Italy and Japan.[29] Albrecht Haushofer, his son, made fact-finding trips to England and Japan for the *Dienststelle.*[30]

Ostensibly the purpose of the Bureau was to collect and analyze foreign intelligence, but in fact it was aimed at supplanting the Foreign Office. Members of the *Wilhelmstrasse* complained that the negative attitude of the diplomats toward Ribbentrop and his organization only encouraged him to bypass the official channels.[31] Foreign Minister Constantin von Neurath, for example, failed to appreciate the threat posed by the *Buero*: "They [the *Buero*] had nothing to do with the Foreign Office. It was more or less a private bureau of Ribbentrop, paid by Hitler." [32] The most powerful man in the Foreign Office, State Secretary Bernhard von Buelow, was somewhat more concerned and was able to attach career diplomat Erich Kordt to Ribbentrop's staff as an observer.[33] Ribbentrop was undoubtedly aware of Buelow's machinations, but it seems that he accepted Kordt's presence, and regarded the situation as the best means of appeasing the Foreign Office.

Ribbentrop claimed that his organization only promoted international good will and contributed to a *rapprochement* among the French, British and Germans.[34] The Bureau did sponsor Sir Thomas Beecham at a concert in Berlin attended by the *Fuehrer,* as well as arranging for the Dresden Opera Company to appear in Covent Garden. More important, however, were the useful contacts that

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27. *Ibid.,* 89-90.
28. Edmund A. Walsh, *Total Power* (New York, 1948), 8.
29. *Ibid.,* 9.
30. Walter Stubbe, "In Memoriam Albrecht Haushofer," *Vierteljahrshefte fuer Zeitgeschichte* (July, 1954), 236-256.
31. Herbert von Dirksen, *Moscow, Tokyo, London* (London, 1951), 118-119; Kordt, *Nicht Aus Den Akten,* 126.
32. *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression,* Supplement B, 1491.
33. Erich Kordt became Ribbentrop's chief of the new Foreign Ministry Secretariat, known as the *Buero Reichsaussenminister,* or *Buero RAM,* in 1938.
34. Ribbentrop, *Memoirs,* 69.

were made to provide Ribbentrop with information; foreign journalists, bankers and industrialists arriving in Berlin were visited by *Buero* representatives who asked for news on foreign developments and, where possible, arranged for interviews with Hitler. The Foreign Office was never capable of competing with such colorful people.[35] It seemed that the sensationalism of amateurs had more appeal to Hitler than the conservatism and sense of responsibility of the professional diplomats. The Bureau could, therefore, effectively use its information to cast doubt upon official interpretations.

On assignment from Hitler, Ribbentrop's staff dealt increasingly with matters pertaining to the corruption of foreign officials and the bribery of journalists. Otto Abetz, a member of Hess' liaison staff and leading figure in the Hitler Youth, acted as Ribbentrop's confidant in France.[36] All political intelligence not handled by the army was given to the Bureau; the industrialist Krupp was approached for a list of all his foreign contacts.[37] The supplementary character sketches that Ribbentrop provided were used by Hitler to overcome many of Neurath's objections to new policy approaches. The influence of the *Dienststelle* was making itself felt.

Despite the increasing activities of Ribbentrop's Bureau, the role of the professional diplomats, who had largely controlled German foreign policy in the past, was still substantial in 1933. There were few complaints about being reduced to the status of a technical apparatus. Hitler's first diplomatic ventures, withdrawals from the League of Nations and the Disarmament Conference in October, met with the general approval of the diplomats. But as the tempo of internal political radicalism accelerated, the diplomats began to look to Neurath, who had been made Foreign Minister in Hitler's cabinet by President Hindenburg, as a conservative bulwark against Nazi extremism. Neurath's power diminished steadily, however, due to Hitler's mistrust of the professional bureaucrats. Unfortunately, Neurath lacked the moral courage and energy to use his position to uphold peaceful revision of Germany's frontier claims. It is also important to note the Foreign Minister's frequent absence from Berlin. Hitler tended to act on impulse, so that the greatest

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35. Franz von Papen, *Memoirs*, trans. by Brian Connell (New York, 1953), 374.

36. *The Brown Network* (New York, 1936), 130, 132. In England, Ribbentrop co-operated with Habersberg, leader of the foreign department of the Hitler Youth.

37. *Trials of the Major War Criminals*, XXXV, Krupp Document No. D-206, 49.

influence was exerted by those present at the time. This increasingly came to be Ribbentrop instead of Neurath.[38]

Ribbentrop's initial successes that led to his rise to power can, therefore, be attributed to the shortsightedness of men like Neurath. During 1933, the Foreign Office continued to be an important factor in German affairs, and this blinded the diplomats to the encroachments of unscrupulous careerists. Buelow was too convinced that Nazism was only a temporary phenomenon to concern himself with the machinations of Ribbentrop.[39] In the opinion of the professionals, this upstart's "official reports to Hitler . . . were monuments of stylistic and substantive turgidity"; such a man could never succeed in the diplomatic game.[40] The result was that the Foreign Office lost its opportunity to check Ribbentrop before he consolidated his position within the Party and with Hitler. Subsequent efforts by Neurath to circumscribe this traveling salesman's influence proved extremely difficult. Even threats of resignation lost their effectiveness.[41] The growing rivalry between the two men gave rise to premature predictions of Neurath's fall.[42]

A noticeable decline in the morale of the diplomats was evident by the beginning of 1934. The friction with Austria, the Allied reaction to Hitler's withdrawal from the League, and the new Eastern orientation of foreign policy slowly led to Germany's isolation. Though Hitler was unsure of himself at this time, he instinctively rejected the cautious advice of the *Wilhelmstrasse* in favor of Ribbentrop's optimistic analyses. This amateur was convinced that there was no threat of foreign intervention, and he was proved right.

III

The situation by 1934, with the diplomats generally inactive and pessimistic, enabled Ribbentrop to display his abilities to the *Fuehrer*. In the wake of Germany's withdrawal from the League and the Disarmament Conference, he independently attempted to obtain a *rapprochement* with the Allies. His technique was quite unsophisticated: he visited influential French businessmen and through them managed to be introduced into official circles, thereby avoiding the German embassy. These visits, ten in all during the period from late 1933 to early 1934, were not unknown to the Foreign Office.[43]

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38. Weizsaecker, *Memoirs*, 109.
39. Dirksen, *Moscow, Tokyo, London*, 181; Buelow to Dirksen, Berlin, February 6, 1933, *German Documents*, C, I, No. 10, 21-22.
40. Seabury, *The Wilhelmstrasse*, 51.
41. *Trials of the Major War Criminals*, XVI, 638.
42. Martha Dodd, *Through Embassy Eyes* (New York, 1939), 244.
43. Schwarz, *This Man Ribbentrop*, 100.

Their import was discounted by the officials, as indicated in the exchange of messages between Buelow and Ambassador Roland Koester in Paris.[44]

Ribbentrop's first official mission for the German Government came as a result of the Barthou note of early 1934, which threatened to resume disarmament talks and presented Germany with the possibility of Allied reprisals. Taking advantage of the situation, Ribbentrop offered to make a whirlwind tour of the major European capitals in an effort to postpone the talks. Hitler, anxious to avoid a showdown at this time, accepted the offer; he was touched by Ribbentrop's proposal to assume full responsibility for any failure and willingness to accept government disavowal if necessary.[45] Despite opposition from Hindenburg,[46] Hitler succeeded in having Ribbentrop appointed as Special Commissioner for Disarmament Questions on April 23, 1934, thereby enabling him to act in an official capacity on the tour. Ribbentrop's major effort was in London, where he engaged in high-level talks with Foreign Secretary Sir John Simon as well as with the Permanent State Under-Secretaries. The trip met with failure because Ribbentrop had nothing to offer the Allies in return for a postponement, but the subsequent inability of the talks to initiate action against Germany convinced Hitler that Ribbentrop had been successful.[47]

Ribbentrop's position as Disarmament Commissioner had more

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44. Koester to Buelow, Paris, March 7, 1934, *German Documents*, C, II, No. 301, 562-565. Buelow Memorandum, Berlin, March 10, 1934, *German Documents*, C, II, No. 314, 584-585: "Herr von Ribbentrop, who is an old member of the NSDAP and is especially trusted by the Chancellor, has numerous personal connections in France and England. At the instructions of the Reich Chancellor and with the knowledge of the Foreign Ministry, he has often been in Paris and London in order to enlist his connections in the service of enlightenment regarding the political aims of the Reich Government. . . . Such agents have often been active in the past . . . their success and hence their usefulness are generally slight. In particular, it has been shown by experience that their connections are quite quickly used up."

45. Kordt, *Nicht Aus Den Akten*, 69.

46. Sir E. Phipps, Ambassador in Berlin, to Foreign Minister Sir J. Simon, Berlin, April 25, 1934, *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939*, ed. E.L. Woodward & R. Butler (Second Series; London, 1957), VI, No. 406, 657-658. It seems that not only President Hindenburg objected, but also the Foreign Office, which preferred the appointment of a Herr von Rheinhaben, who had experience at the League and was a specialist on disarmament questions. The Nazis opposed the appointment because the post was going to an outsider. The German newspapers voiced their objection by quoting the organs of the British press to show how the British had received the news with astonishment.

47. Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert (eds.), *The Diplomats, 1919-1939* (New York, 1965), II, 421.

than prestige value; it signified a turning point in his career. He was given the right, by order of the *Fuehrer,* to see all *Wilhelmstrasse* documents relating to disarmament, and shortly thereafter, all diplomatic correspondence not directly addressed "For the Foreign Minister" or "For the Secretary of State." [48] This permitted him to interfere effectively in traditional Foreign Office spheres of activity, especially since he could argue that financial and economic matters were relevant to the disarmament question. The diplomats protested vociferously, but to no avail. They realized that he would interfere with the activities of the *Wilhelmstrasse.* He spent a great deal of his time in the *Reich* Chancellery, receiving telegrams from the Foreign Office and writing daily summaries of them addressed to the *Fuehrer.*

Friction mounted significantly when Ribbentrop failed to keep the embassies informed of the progress of his negotiations but began to instruct the ambassadors in their duties. In a memorandum of July 5, 1934, Buelow referred to a telephone conversation with Leopold von Hoesch, Ambassador in London, who had complained about the new Commissioner's interference. "I told Herr von Hoesch that the sense of my instructions was . . . that he received his instructions only from the Foreign Ministry and not from Herr von Ribbentrop as well." [49] Neurath was even forced into the position of altering Ribbentrop's orders to the foreign missions.[50]

The enlarged scope of Ribbentrop's activities was accompanied by a noticeable change in his relationship with the *Fuehrer.* On his return from the European tour in early May, Hitler immediately called him into the *Reichskanzlei* for talks without the customary antechamber waiting period. Hitler was impressed by his Commissioner's distorted report of British support for Germany's political and diplomatic aims. This report was, unfortunately, based only on the attitudes of the upper class, in particular Germanophiles like Lord Lothian, Lord Londonderry and Lord Rothermere, whose importance in government circles was exaggerated. Nevertheless, Hitler and Ribbentrop immediately began preparing plans for a possible Anglo-German alliance.

About the middle of 1934, Ribbentrop also began to seek higher office in the *Reich.* Franz von Papen, an early acquaintance of Ribbentrop, and by that time Special Ambassador to Austria, claimed

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48. *Ibid.,* 422.
49. Buelow Memorandum, Berlin, July 5, 1934, *German Documents,* C, III, No. 60, 129-130.
50. Neurath to Hoesch, Berlin, July 5, 1934, *German Documents,* 133-134.

that the Commissioner approached him with the suggestion that the diplomats support him, as confidant of the *Fuehrer,* in obtaining the position of State Secretary of the Foreign Office.[51] Finding no accommodation with Papen or Neurath, Ribbentrop occupied himself even more with his *Buero,* and sought to advance himself through closer co-operation with Hitler. Aware of Hitler's disinterest in any further disarmament talks and his eagerness for an alliance with Britain, Ribbentrop quickly shifted his Bureau's orientation; the elasticity and *avant-garde* outlook of the organization facilitated this shift more easily than could be accomplished by the tradition-bound *Wilhelmstrasse.* Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg, the German military attaché in London, noticed a definite expansion of *Buero* activity and influence in Britain after 1934.[52]

Ribbentrop's climb to power began here in 1934, but he had not yet attained the stature and security he was to acquire by 1936. He was not yet a leading figure in Germany. It seems that Hitler had not informed him beforehand of the Austrian *Putsch* or the June 30 blood purge. Only after the purge did Ribbentrop appear in the uniform of an *S.S.-Standartenfuehrer,* aware that it was now expedient to belong to this powerful organization. In order to avoid the suspicion of collaborating with reactionaries and anti-Nazis, his visits to the Foreign Office became infrequent.[53] He also moved his quarters to 64 Wilhelmstrasse to be closer to the protective influence of his *Fuehrer.*

It was in 1934 that Kordt claims the Foreign Office degenerated into nothing more than a technical apparatus, employed not to advise and direct foreign policy, but to perform the menial task of proofreading documents.[54] It has been argued, however, that as long as Hitler did not initiate a more aggressive policy, the Foreign Office still continued to have considerable influence.[55] Some historians have dated its decline as late as the outbreak of the Second World War, based on the specious argument that the para-diplomatic agencies could not make the necessary diplomatic preparations for such plans as the remilitarization of the Rhineland, the *Anschluss,* and the Munich Pact.[56] Yet it should be noted that by the end of 1934 Hitler's

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51. Papen, *Memoirs,* 373.

52. Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg, *Erinnerungen Eines Militaerattaches: London 1933-1937* (Stuttgart, 1949), 114.

53. Kordt, *Nicht Aus Den Akten,* 78-79.

54. *Ibid.,* 88; Seabury, *The Wilhelmstrasse,* 52.

55. Bracher, *Die Nationalsozialistische Machtergreifung,* 236.

56. Donald C. Watt, "The German Diplomats and the Nazi Leaders," *Journal of Central European Affairs,* XV (July, 1955), 149-153; Leonidas E. Hill, "The Wilhelmstrasse in the Nazi Era," *Political Science Quarterly,* LXXXII (December, 1967), 569.

dependence on the Foreign Office was clearly being challenged by the *Dienststelle,* with its increasing number of experts and technical aids.

Thus the question of Ribbentrop's power vis-à-vis the *Wilhelmstrasse* and the Nazi party bosses will remain an open one. In this area of investigation, foreign sources are generally less than helpful. Frederick L. Schuman, writing in November, 1934, for the American Academy of Political and Social Science, was surprisingly misinformed. "It can be said . . . that the A.P.A. [*Aussenpolitische Amt der NSDAP*] now shares with the A.A. [Foreign Office] the responsibility for formulating foreign policy. The head of the A.P.A., Alfred Rosenberg, might be designated as the unofficial Foreign Minister of the Third Reich." [57] Another source in mid-1935 ranked Rosenberg as the number one and Ribbentrop as the number two man.[58] The London *Times* overestimated Ribbentrop's influence, referring to him as Hitler's close advisor on foreign policy before 1933.[59] These estimates are understandable, given the nature of the German political system, which obscured the true power centers in an intricate network of front organizations. Rosenberg, for instance, seems to have been a very important figure in the early months of the Nazi regime, but his influence had faded quickly by the end of 1934. Not all foreign sources were misinformed, however. In a letter of February, 1934, to Sir John Simon, British Ambassador Sir E. Phipps referred to Ribbentrop as a friend of Hitler but by no means a powerful influence on German developments.[60]

Nevertheless, there is little doubt that Ribbentrop had increased his influence in 1934, and that he had completed his apprenticeship. The Nazi opposition had become less vociferous and several influential figures now supported him at the time when the *Wilhelmstrasse's* influence was on the wane. In the meantime, Ribbentrop had established his own organization and had withstood the test of his first diplomatic assignment. When new opportunities presented themselves, he was in a position to exploit them and to strengthen his relationship with Hitler.

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57. Frederick L. Schuman, "The Conduct of German Foreign Affairs," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* CLXXXVI (November, 1934), 214.

58. Cedric Fowler, "Men Who Keep the Peace," *New Outlook,* CLXV (June, 1935), 32-33.

59. London *Times* (August 12, 1936), 10.

60. Sir E. Phipps to Sir John Simon, Berlin, February 1934, *British Documents,* VI, No. 262, 391-393: "Herr von Ribbentrop is, I gather, a friend of Hitler's but does not by any means exercise the influence over the Chancellor that he would have us all believe. In fact, both he and his wife are, I fancy, rather intriguing busybodies."

IV

The years 1935 and 1936 saw an even closer friendship develop between Hitler and his Commissioner, largely resulting from Ribbentrop's sensational coup, the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of June 18, 1935.[61] It was a period of consolidation for Ribbentrop within the Nazi hierarchy that assured him a prominent place among the elite.

He had accelerated his activities in search of an Anglo-German *rapprochement* by accepting an invitation from Lord Rothermere in November, 1934, to visit London. Hitler was in constant touch with his confidant and was encouraged by the favorable reports. As a result, he ordered a general diplomatic offensive. Convinced that Ribbentrop was the right man for the assignment, the *Dienststelle* was strengthened with additional funds in early 1935; reportedly twenty million *Reichsmark* were issued to Ribbentrop from the *Adolf-Hitler-Spende*. This money provided the Commissioner with a private plane, and enabled him to expand his organization from fifty to three hundred men.[62] With these resources, Ribbentrop was finally released from his dependence on the Foreign Office.

The special assignment Hitler had in mind was the negotiation of an Anglo-German military agreement, with the intention of breaking Germany's encirclement. Buelow began the diplomatic offensive by negotiating with the British over such obscure issues as air bombardment, not even considering a naval agreement within the realm of the possible. Ribbentrop, on the other hand, persuaded Hitler that he could succeed in obtaining such an agreement along the suggested 100:35 ratio, despite the pessimistic verdict of the diplomats. When Neurath conveyed Hoesch's negative appraisal, Hitler furiously shouted, "If you and von Hoesch do not believe in the feasability of such an agreement, I know one who does—Ribbentrop!" [63]

On May 31, 1935, Ribbentrop was made Ambassador-at-Large in order to negotiate the naval agreement. The appointment revived rumors of possible changes in the Foreign Ministry; this time Rib-

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61. For the years 1935 and 1936 Erich Kordt's memoirs, *Nicht Aus Den Akten*, are the only substantial source for Ribbentrop's activities. Although there was some animosity between the two men, the book is largely reliable, reinforced in its interpretations intermittently by Hitler's interpreter Paul Schmidt and by Paul Schwarz. Kordt's comments after Ribbentrop came to power are less reliable, since they tend to absolve the diplomats from responsibility for the Nazi crimes, but this does not affect the credibility of the pre-1938 information when the diplomats had little to hide.

62. Seabury, *The Wilhelmstrasse*, 52; Kordt, *Nicht Aus Den Akten*, 88.

63. Schwarz, *This Man Ribbentrop*, 119.

bentrop was supposed to replace Buelow and Hitler was personally to assume the portfolio of Foreign Minister.[64] All the instructions Ribbentrop received, prior to and during the negotiations, came directly from Hitler, though Neurath was kept informed of developments. Hoesch, however, was neither consulted nor permitted to participate in any phase of the negotiations.[65] To everyone's surprise, the negotiations proceeded rapidly, largely due to Ribbentrop's unorthodox style. He wasted no time on preliminaries: "If the British Government does not immediately accept this condition," he exclaimed, "there is no point at all in continuing these negotiations." [66] Sir John Simon was taken aback by this approach, but instead of ending the talks, seemed so convinced of the German Government's seriousness, that after a short break to confer with his cabinet colleagues, he brought the discussions to a swift conclusion.

The Pact not only made Ribbentrop an international figure; it also increased his reputation and influence at home, especially with Hitler. The success should not be minimized—Ribbentrop accomplished what the professionals had claimed to be impossible. It was largely his persistence that caused Britain to break the newly formed Stresa front and sanction Germany's violation of the Versailles Treaty, only two months after she had condemned Hitler's rearmament policy. The Naval Pact was a milestone in Ribbentrop's political career:

> From the day Ribbentrop returned to Berlin, Monday, June 24, 1935, he became a *Vertrauer des Fuehrers,* a confidant, a friend, an associate in the more intimate schemes, ideas and plans. It was after Ribbentrop's return from the naval pact conversations that Hitler spoke of Ribbentrop to men like General Werner von Blomberg, as 'a man of Bismarckian gifts'. Now the Fuehrer decided to groom Joachim for the place of chief of the German Reich's new foreign policy.[67]

By 1936 the *Wilhelmstrasse* was clearly losing its hold on policy formulation and began to sink inexorably to the level of a technical apparatus. Ambassador Dirksen gave three reasons for this decline:

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64. London *Times* (June 1, 1935), 14.
65. *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression,* Supplement B, 1212-1213.
66. Paul Schmidt, *Hitler's Interpreter* (New York, 1951), 33.
67. Schwarz, *This Man Ribbentrop,* 139; Otto Meissner, *Staatssekretaer. Unter Ebert-Hindenberg-Hitler* (Mannheim, 1950), 407. Meissner discounts Ribbentrop's contribution to the Pact, but concurs with Schwarz that it made Ribbentrop a close friend and advisor of Hitler.

first, the Ribbentrop *Buero* was an important component of Hitler's strategy of playing off the various agencies against one another; secondly, Neurath and Buelow hurt their cause by refusing to fight Ribbentrop on his own terms; and finally, the persistent refusal of the diplomats to regard National Socialism as a permanent phenomenon.[68] The professional diplomats lost their influence on the Nazi leadership. Decisions were now more often based on amateur reports or the deliberately distorted advice of the *Dienststelle*.[69] Ribbentrop was soon in a position to control all personnel movement in the Foreign Office through his co-operation with Rudolf Hess, who had become responsible for employment and advancement within the civil service.[70] A large percentage of professional recommendations for vacant diplomatic posts were overruled and Ribbentrop men installed.[71] The Italian desk of the *Wilhelmstrasse* was deprived of reports, which went mostly to the *Buero*; memos designated for the *Fuehrer* first made their way to Ribbentrop's staff for further elucidation.[72]

Hitler was tempted to rely less and less on the Foreign Office once German rearmament had begun and the means for a more aggressive foreign policy became available. More emphasis was placed on military pressure, though this was not a widespread tactic until after 1936. The new trend certainly suited Ribbentrop's style, since he also had no sympathy for genuine negotiations and little patience with lengthy deliberations. His traits "were not considered as weaknesses by Ribbentrop's master, who had lost his own interest in negotiation and the benefits it might bring." [73]

Examples of the *Wilhelmstrasse's* decline and Ribbentrop's ascent are numerous. The diplomats had been excluded from Austrian affairs early in 1933 and were therefore unable to participate in the negotiations leading up to the Austro-German Agreement of July, 1936.[74] Similarly, the Foreign Office had no voice in the decisions to remilitarize the Rhineland and send German military support to General Franco in Spain.[75] Ribbentrop admitted in his memoirs

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68. Dirksen, *Moscow, Tokyo, London*, 181.
69. Weizsaecker, *Memoirs*, 106.
70. Seabury, *The Wilhelmstrasse*, 80. On September 24, 1935, Hitler decreed that Hess be given full control over all civil service administration. Henceforth, the Brown House possessed a veto over all selections of ministerial officials.
71. Kordt, *Nicht Aus Den Akten*, 128.
72. Schwarz, *This Man Ribbentrop*, 167-169.
73. Craig, "Totalitarian Approaches to Diplomatic Negotiations," *War, Politics and Diplomacy* (New York, 1966), 229.
74. Weizsaecker, *Memoirs*, 167-169.
75. *Ibid.*, 107; *Trials of the Major War Criminals*, XXXII, No. 3308-PS,

and testimony in Nuremberg that he had been consulted two or three days before the remilitarization;[76] Goering, on the other hand, claimed that he had known of the decision several weeks in advance. The Ambassador-at-Large agreed completely with his *Fuehrer* that Germany's sovereignty could never be negotiated—success lay in presenting Europe with a *fait accompli* instead of tedious negotiations which promised no results.[77] The Foreign Office was thus ruled out of the action. Frau Annelies von Ribbentrop complained about the late night conferences her husband attended at the *Reichskanzlei* prior to March 7, 1936. It is likely that here Ribbentrop overcame the negative influence of the military and bolstered Hitler's wavering convictions.[78] In the nervous, anxious days that followed the Rhineland coup, Ribbentrop was constantly at Hitler's side and gave him the courage to hold out against withdrawal.[79]

In an attempt to avert League condemnation of Germany's action, Ribbentrop was sent to London on March 13 with new peace proposals to confuse the Allies. The Foreign Office was taken completely by surprise; both Kordt and Paul Schmidt, Hitler's chief interpreter, first saw the document on the plane en route to London. Presumably, Hitler and Ribbentrop were now confident enough to prepare drafts without the assistance of the *Wilhelmstrasse*.[80] Ribbentrop's comment on the affair reveals his pride in sharing Hitler's ideas. One morning after an all-day session spent discussing means to avoid Allied retaliation for the remilitarization, Hitler told Ribbentrop he would propose Germany's return to the League. "I took up my note from the table and showed it to him. It was to the same effect. Is there not, after all, such a thing as telepathy?" [81]

As he rose in prominence, Ribbentrop began to think in terms of the Foreign Ministry, but the death of Ambassador Hoesch in May, 1936, posed the undesirable prospect of his becoming Ambassador to Britain. The duties of a regular ambassador had too many drawbacks for the ambitious diplomat; Ribbentrop lacked the training for regu-

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Schmidt's Affidavit, 142-146. Neurath was consulted a week in advance, but he claimed that he had only been notified of the decision and not asked to give his opinion. The acting Secretary of State, however, accused him of encouraging the plan as a retaliation for the ratification of the Franco-Soviet alliance. *Trials,* XVII, 41; *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression,* I, 1102.

76. *Conspiracy,* Supplement B, 1176; *Trials,* IX, 505.
77. Ribbentrop, *Memoirs,* 52.
78. Schwarz, *This Man Ribbentrop,* 147-148.
79. Adolf Hitler, *Hitler's Table Talks, 1941-1944* (London, 1953), 259.
80. Kordt, *Nicht Aus Den Akten,* 146.
81. Ribbentrop, *Memoirs,* 53.

lar diplomatic duties and the thought of permanent absence from his *Fuehrer,* with its concomitant loss of influence, stiffened his opposition to this post. Hitler, however, was intent on sending his self-styled British expert in the hope of realizing an alliance.[82] Ribbentrop, at pains to deny these charges, claimed he had personally requested Hitler to change his appointment from the State Secretaryship to the ambassadorial post in order to promote closer Anglo-German ties.[83] Nevertheless, to guard his relationship with Hitler, should he be sent to London, Ribbentrop made peace with the professional diplomats; he tried to win Kordt's loyalty by promoting him two full classes in the civil service. Buelow's death in June seemed to alleviate Ribbentrop's anxiety somewhat, for now he hoped to receive the coveted State Secretaryship.

The *Wilhelmstrasse,* and particularly Neurath, resisted Ribbentrop's advancement to the end. Hitler's desire for stability after the Rhineland coup gave the diplomats their last significant triumph over their adversary by forcing his appointment to the London post. This was considered from their point of view an ideal position, for it would permit him to display his ineptitude and give him the necessary rope to hang himself. When Papen suggested that Ribbentrop should not be given such an influential post. Neurath exclaimed: "No, no—we must send Ribbentrop there. It is the only way of getting rid of him and his Bureau . . . . After three months in London he will be done for. They can't stand him there, and we shall be rid of him for good and all." [84]

Ribbentrop delayed almost ninety days before accepting his new assignment, hoping that Hitler would change his mind and using the time to fortify his *Dienststelle.*[85] Hitler was so irritated at this outrageous behavior that he refused to contact Ribbentrop for days, and deliberately avoided the Ambassador's guests while making a point to receive those of Hess and Goering. Only after receiving word through Hitler's adjutant that failure to accept the post immediately would mean the termination of their friendship did Ribbentrop on August 11, 1936, publicly announce his appointment.[86] A new period in his political career was about to begin.

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82. Dirksen, *Moscow, Tokyo, London,* 203; Kordt, *Nicht Aus Den Akten,* 146.

83. Ribbentrop, *Memoirs,* 60-61; *Trials of the Major War Criminals,* X, 236-237; Annelies von Ribbentrop, *Verschwoerung Gegen Den Frieden* (Leoni am Starnberger See, 1962), 127.

84. Papen, *Memoirs,* 375.

85. Seabury, *The Wilhelmstrasse,* 54.

86. Kordt, *Nicht Aus Den Akten,* 151-152.

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Neurath's assessment of Ribbentrop's fortunes in London proved to be far from accurate. Ribbentrop was already too influential to be sidelined by the diplomats; by October, 1936, he had established himself as an important figure in Nazi diplomacy. At forty-three he was the youngest man to hold a major diplomatic post in the German foreign service.[87] Starting as an assistant to Rosenberg in 1933, he had taken advantage of opportunities to build his own para-diplomatic organization, and, through his connections with Hitler and a few top Nazi bosses, had begun to advance his candidacy as a leading expert on German foreign affairs. His relationship with the *Fuehrer* was largely instrumental in overcoming the dangerous opposition from within the Party. The indifference of the diplomats in the first two years of the Nazi regime, coupled with Hitler's dislike of the professional civil servants, enabled Ribbentrop to surpass the Foreign Office in influence. The Anglo-German Naval Pact consolidated this new alignment and destined Ribbentrop for higher offices.

His position was not yet paramount, however, for in many instances "it was still Goering who was Hitler's most important *homme de confiance* for his dealings with the foreign countries and especially with Italy." [88] Until 1936 Ribbentrop's activities had been restricted to France and Britain, but now he was to branch out into Italy and the Far East. He was the principal actor in Germany's most momentous decisions before 1938: the signing of the Anti-Comintern Pact and the consolidation of the Rome-Berlin Axis. The *arriviste,* the amateur diplomat, had taken full advantage of the revolutionized German political system which opened avenues of power to the ambitious and ruthless. On February 4, 1938, Ribbentrop was named Foreign Minister of the Third *Reich.*

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87. *New York Times* (August 12, 1936), 4.
88. Elizabeth Wiskeman, *The Rome-Berlin Axis* (New York, 1949), 71; Hill, "The Wilhelmstrasse in the Nazi Era," 557.