

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 286

“Unwinding Versailles”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

A French premier should have said in 1933, as I certainly would have, had I been French premier: “The author of Mein Kampf, which contains this and that, has become German chancellor. This man cannot be tolerated as a neighbor. Either he will have to disappear, or we will start marching.”

That would have been completely logical, but it was not done. They let us be, and we were able to proceed unhindered through the zone of risk.

Joseph Goebbels, at a press conference in 1940.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 286. Unwinding Versailles.

In 1933, the new British ambassador to Germany, Sir Eric Phipps, told the British Foreign Office that if you thought about the new German chancellor solely as the author of *Mein Kampf*, that left you no option except war. Joseph Goebbels later admitted the same thing, in the quote I just read to you.

With the benefit of historical hindsight, we can say today that it would have been for the best for everyone if Britain and France had immediately gone to war with Germany, or at least threatened war, with the goal of removing Hitler from the chancellorship.

Of course, world leaders of the time didn't have our historical hindsight. Hitler's accession to the chancellorship of Germany was a cause for concern, to be sure, but war? The lesson of 1914 was that even small squabbles between nations can blow up horrifically. No one wanted to go through that a second time. Also, the Western democracies were in 1933 mired in the depths of the Great Depression. Tax revenues were shrunken, along with the economy, and in Britain, as in most countries, the government was looking for ways to cut expenditures. Any sort of

mobilization or military buildup would only make balancing the budget that much more challenging.

Also keep in mind that in 1933, when Hitler became chancellor, *Mein Kampf* was nine years old. Even Hitler seemed embarrassed by it. Publicly, he dismissed it as the ruminations of a man in prison with nothing better to do. Privately, he said that if he had known in 1924 that he was going to be chancellor in nine years, he never would have written it. Nevertheless, after Hitler became chancellor, there was a great deal of interest in the book in Germany, and sales soared. It became a popular wedding present in the Germany of the 1930s. Hitler earned enough income from royalties that he was able to buy himself a nice little vacation home in the Bavarian Alps and upgrade it into something really special. But that's a story for another episode.

Another reason the international community was not unduly alarmed by Hitler's becoming chancellor was that the new German government certainly did not sound very threatening. The German foreign minister was Konstantin von Neurath. He was no Nazi; he was a career diplomat who had originally been appointed to the position by Franz von Papen, and he served through the Papen government, the Schleicher government, and now the Hitler government. His remaining in office was taken as a sign that not much had changed. Likewise, the same ambassadors represented Germany in the world's capitals after Hitler took office as before. There was no wholesale shakeup of the German Foreign Office or of Germany's diplomatic corps, and the message the Foreign Office and the diplomats were sending to the rest of the world was one of continuity. Sure, governments change, and new governments take office with new domestic priorities, but foreign governments were assured that no great shift in German foreign policy was under consideration.

And this was mostly true. For the first 18 months after he became chancellor, Hitler was focused almost exclusively on maintaining and expanding his power within Germany and he was content to let the Foreign Office handle foreign relations. This was the period of the Reichstag Fire, the March 1933 election, the Enabling Act, the dissolution of other political parties, the November 1933 election, the Night of the Long Knives, the death of President Hindenburg, and the consolidation of the offices of president and chancellor. That's quite enough to keep anyone busy.

When Chancellor Hitler did speak on foreign policy, he said the right things about wanting peace. In this regard, Hitler was copying the strategy that had made him chancellor. He had tried to seize power by force in 1923 and failed miserably. Then he had pledged to seek power only by lawful means. This got him out of prison and got the ban against the Nazi Party lifted. And he had kept his promise to pursue political power only by lawful means—kind of—despite occasional pressure to do otherwise from his own supporters and it had all paid off. It had gotten him to the chancellorship; once there, he was able to rewrite the laws to keep himself there. A violent revolution hadn't even been necessary.

Similarly, when Hitler spoke of his foreign policy goals, he was always careful to emphasize that he did not intend to use force to achieve them. In his first speech on foreign policy before the Reichstag, he had emphasized that another European war was as much against German interests as it was the interests of any other nation, and so Germany would rely on peaceful means to get what it wanted.

And what did Germany want, according to the chancellor? Germany wanted to be restored to its rightful place, as a peer and equal of the other Great Powers. No better, but no worse.

This was a very big promise. Hitler was telling the German people that he would undo the hated Treaty of Versailles and replace it with a new international framework that was more just and treated Germany more fairly, and he was going to do it without resorting to war. It was also a very popular promise. Germany was also suffering the effects of the Great Depression and the German people were no more enthusiastic about another war than were the populations of Britain or France. If anything, the German people had more reason to oppose another war.

Public opinion didn't matter as much in Nazi-dominated Germany as it did in democratic France or Britain, but it did matter some, and the public was quite happy to hear what Hitler was telling them. But could he pull it off?

Hitler was very fortunate in that his negotiating partners, France and Britain, were willing to indulge him. Remember that the Treaty of Versailles had never truly been accepted by the Germans. The Weimar government had been forced to ratify the agreement at gunpoint—literally, since the Allies were threatening to restart the war if Germany didn't sign what was presented to them, no ifs, ands, or buts, and no negotiation.

Even in the days when the Weimar Coalition ran the German government, no one liked the treaty, and the German government continually resisted it, especially the reparations terms and the restrictions on the German military, which Germany was quietly violating. At the same time, though, the Weimar Coalition's great diplomatic achievement was the gradual reintegration of Germany into the international community. By 1933, when Hitler became chancellor, Germany had won some level of trust and respect among its former wartime foes. The old adversaries had sworn to deal peacefully with one another in the future, at Locarno and in the Kellogg-Briand Pact. Germany was even a member of the League of Nations now.

With Germany increasingly being treated as a peer by the Allied nations, it became more difficult in Paris or London to justify the harsh limits the Treaty of Versailles had imposed on it, not to mention in the United States, where the Treaty had never been ratified in the first place, and where from the beginning you heard criticism that the Versailles agreement had gone too far.

So there was sentiment even on the Allied side that the Treaty of Versailles was too harsh, and few who felt ready to confront Herr Hitler and tell him the Treaty was a done deal, carved in stone, and if he didn't like it, how would he like to see Allied troops in the Rhineland again? You

don't talk like that unless you're sure you can back it up, and in 1933, talk like that in Paris or London was more likely to get you shot down in a vote of no confidence than it was to mobilize the army.

The reality in 1933 was that the Versailles agreement was already coming apart, and not because of anything Adolf Hitler had said or done. We already discussed the Lausanne Conference, held in June and July of 1932, in episode 268. There the French and British agreed to extend the Hoover moratorium on reparations repayments. This was supposed to have been contingent on the US reducing Allied war debt, but even after the Americans refused to go along with that, the Allies abandoned any further attempt to collect reparations. They're over. And this happened before Hitler ever came to power. It was the Papen government representing Germany at Lausanne, building on the work of its predecessor, the Brüning government.

Also in 1932, the World Disarmament Conference was meeting in Geneva. This conference had been called to negotiate the arms reductions called for in the Treaty of Versailles. All the League of Nations members were involved, as were the United States and the Soviet Union. These talks would run for almost three years and accomplish little, alas, but in December 1932 it was publicly announced at the conference that the five permanent members of the League of Nations Council—Britain, France, Italy, Japan, and Germany—had agreed in principle to an arms reduction goal of parity among the five. This was only the declaration of a long-range goal; no one was saying Germany could rearm tomorrow, or that the Treaty limitations on the German military should be immediately lifted. But this was big news in Germany nevertheless; the Allies had accepted at least the principle that Germany should be their militarily equal. That meant either the Allies would have to disarm to German levels, or else permit Germany to rearm to Allied levels. And again, this development emerged during the Schleicher government, before Hitler came to power.

So the groundwork had already been laid for Germany to claim a right to full military parity with the Allies, subject of course to potentially lengthy negotiations to work out the details.

Those negotiations continued throughout 1933, with little input from Chancellor Hitler, who was devoting all his energies to consolidating and increasing his power within Germany. In Geneva, talk of German military parity with Allied nations was resisted most firmly by the French, the Allied nation right next door to Germany and therefore the one most vulnerable to a revived German military. Every time the Germans demanded parity, the French called for Allied military commitments to defend France's borders. No one took up France's call.

The British foreign secretary, Sir John Simon, working with American and French diplomats crafted a proposal he thought might break the deadlock at Geneva: a four-year trial period, during which international monitors would observe the militaries of Germany and the other powers, to insure everyone was following through on their arms control commitments.

Simon announced the proposal at the Conference on October 13, 1933. The next day, Hitler's government announced his response: Germany would turn down the Simon proposal and withdraw, both from the Geneva Conference and from the League of Nations, subject to a referendum to be held next month. Hastily arranged demonstrations were held in Berlin of SA stormtroopers and Hitler Youth, marching to brass bands in support of the decision. In a radio speech, Hitler evoked a future in which the ancient enemies, Germany and France, lived as peaceful neighbors, though, he said, both victor and vanquished had to find their way to a place of mutual understanding.

When the November referendum was held, 95% of the German public voted to endorse the withdrawal.

So if that won't work, how should the Allies approach Hitler's Germany? A persuasive viewpoint emerged from the British Foreign Office: if Herr Hitler thinks the existing treaty arrangements are unfair to Germany and he's going to continue withdrawing from them, then we'll negotiate a new set of agreements satisfactory both to him and to the Allies. That way, Herr Hitler can go home to Berlin in triumph and announce he had fulfilled his promises to win Germany more equitable treaty arrangements, while the Allies can rest easy, knowing that once Hitler has signed these new agreements and publicly boasted about them, he's hardly going to be able to turn around and denounce them as unfair to Germany, not when they bore his own signature.

Of course, you and I know something important that the British Foreign Office was at this point only beginning to suspect: that Hitler was already planning a major buildup of the German military and the idea of inspectors monitoring the German military was anathema to him.

But fears of a newly militaristic Germany were eased somewhat in January 1934, with the surprise announcement of a Polish-German nonaggression agreement. It was a simple joint declaration of the governments of Germany and Poland that both nations foreswore the use of force against each other, would normalize relations, and pledged to resolve their differences by diplomatic means. Even more surprising than the declaration itself was the word that the agreement was the result of a personal initiative by Chancellor Hitler.

Germany and Poland had not previously had diplomatic relations, and Germany had enforced high tariffs on Polish coal and other imports that were effectively a trade embargo. Questions around the administration of the Free State of Danzig had previously had to be discussed through the League of Nations, since Poland and Germany had no direct diplomatic contact. Now all of this was to change.

Poland and Germany also both had nonaggression pacts with the Soviet Union, so on the face of things, peace in Eastern Europe was now secured by a series of agreements similar to the Locarno Treaties that protected the borders of Western Europe, and the announcement of this new agreement was hailed as a step forward in securing the European peace.

In fact, the agreement omitted a key detail. It was not the “Locarno of the East” that Poland had previously called for, because the German side had pointedly refused to declare its acceptance of the Polish border. That was one of the questions that was supposed to be resolved by future negotiations. And when you consider this agreement in the context of Germany ending its secret military cooperation with the USSR, it looks more like a German tilt toward Poland and away from Russia. It was also an effort to pry Poland away from its alliances with France and Czechoslovakia.

Still, peace was peace, and any time nations pledged not to resort to armed force, that was a good thing, right? Also, Germany’s increasing determination under Hitler to pursue its own course and distance itself from the Soviet Union opened the way for a French-led initiative to invite the USSR to join the League of Nations. The Soviet Union had never been a member of the League, although Soviet diplomats sometimes sat in on League meetings as observers, often alongside U.S. observers. Twenty-nine other League members joined with France in extending the invitation. The final vote at the League was 39 in favor of Soviet membership and three opposed: the Netherlands, Portugal, and Switzerland. The Soviet Union was also given the fifth permanent seat on the League Council, the one that had been vacated by Germany.

[music: Wagner, “Siegfried Idyll,” from *Siegfried*]

The topic of potential unification of Austria with Germany, known in German as *Anschluss*, has come up before on the podcast. It was under discussion ever since the collapse of the Austria-Hungary. German-speaking Austria, now shorn of its Slav-populated territories, was a small and weak state, landlocked, and devastated by the Great Depression. It was logically difficult to justify maintaining Austria as a separate German state, long after all the other German-speaking states had combined to form Germany.

Still, though it may not have been logical, the diplomats at the Paris Peace Conference saw no reason to allow Germany to become even larger and more powerful than it already was, and so they had inserted clauses into the peace treaties with both Germany and Austria specifically banning unification of the two states without the approval of the League of Nations. Austrian native Adolf Hitler, on the other hand, had dreamed of *Anschluss* since his youth in Vienna.

The Chancellor of Austria at this time was Engelbert Dolfuss. He was the child of a peasant family and had come into politics through a right-wing agrarian political movement. Dolfuss’s first cabinet position was as minister of agriculture in 1931; just 15 months later, the now 39-year-old Dolfuss was invited by the President of Austria to form a government. He did; he put together a government coalition that held a one-vote majority in the Austrian Parliament.

Austria’s political and economic troubles of the early 1930s were similar to—indeed, related to—the problems plaguing Germany, including a small but noisy right-wing party, the Austrian National Socialist Workers Party, the ideological soulmates of the National Socialist German Workers Party in Germany. After Hitler became chancellor in Germany, the Austrian Nazis

began receiving a flood of money and support from the German party and used it to agitate loudly for *Anschluss*.

The Austrian Nazis held no seats in the Austrian parliament, but when the parliament deadlocked, Dolfuss took a page from recent German history and had the President dissolve parliament indefinitely and allow him to rule by decree. But Dolfuss was an opponent of the Nazis and of *Anschluss*. In May 1933, he banned the Communist Party and prohibited Austrian Nazis from wearing their brownshirt uniforms in public. A month later, he banned the Nazi Party altogether.

In Berlin, the German government retaliated by imposing a Rm1000 fee on Germans crossing the border into Austria, which effectively amounted to a ban on tourism, which was a major source of revenue for Austria, and Hitler confidently predicted this would bring down the Austrian government and force a new election, one in which the Austrian Nazis would win a comfortable share of the seats in parliament.

But Austria did not knuckle under in the way Hitler expected. In Rome, Mussolini's government publicly guaranteed Austrian independence, while Dolfuss returned the favor by remaking Austria into a one-party state, on the Italian, not the German, model. An unforeseen side effect of the German travel ban became apparent: by making it difficult for Germans to visit Austria, Hitler had also made it difficult for German Nazis to collaborate with their Austrian allies.

In February 1934, violence between fascists and socialists broke out across Austria, a familiar story. Hundreds were killed and thousands injured; the government outlawed the Social Democratic Party of Austria and the trade unions. Italy made another declaration guaranteeing Austrian independence; this time it was joined by France and Britain.

Four months later, in June, Adolph Hitler traveled to Venice for his first foreign trip since becoming chancellor: a summit meeting with *il Duce*. On the face of things, Italy was a natural ally for Germany, given the two governments' similar political orientations, but Rome and Berlin were not getting on, and the meeting did not go well for Hitler. The Italian government was careful to note publicly that it was Hitler who had requested the meeting, apparently to seek Italian acquiescence in the *Anschluss*, which made Hitler look like a supplicant, come to Venice to kiss Mussolini's ring. Hitler chose to wear civilian clothes for the summit meeting, but Mussolini arrived in full military uniform. The contrast between the large, boisterous, uniformed Mussolini and the smaller, more nervous Hitler dressed in a jacket and tie was not flattering to Hitler.

The two dictators held their meeting in private, without interpreters. Hitler couldn't speak Italian, but Mussolini insisted he spoke German well enough that a translator was unnecessary. However, Mussolini didn't speak German all that well and had difficulty understanding Hitler's accent, and Hitler's tendency to wind himself up into long monologues merely led to Mussolini losing the thread of what Hitler was talking about and becoming bored. Both leaders left the

meeting with their opinion of the other lowered; Mussolini confided to his wife Rachele that Hitler struck him as not so much intelligent as merely stubborn.

Just six weeks later, on July 25, 1934, a troop of more than 150 Austrian Nazis wearing Austrian Army uniforms forced their way into the Austrian chancellery, where they shot and killed Chancellor Dollfuss. Another group seized control of the Vienna station of the Austrian Broadcasting Service and announced the government had been overthrown. Nazis across Austria rose up in revolt, but they did not get the support they expected from the Austrian Army and police. After a few days of fighting, the putsch failed. Even worse, from Hitler's point of view, the Italian government responded to the news of the coup attempt by moving two Italian Army divisions to the Brenner Pass, a clear warning against German military intervention.

Publicly, the German government denied any knowledge of the putsch, although this persuaded approximately no one. It is likely not only that Hitler had advance knowledge of the affair, but that he had approved it. The German Foreign Office recalled its ambassador to Vienna, and this is the moment when Hitler persuaded Vice Chancellor Papen to take over the embassy in Vienna and help smooth things over. In Austria, Kurt von Schuschnigg took over as chancellor, while retaining the portfolios of minister of justice and minister of education he had already held in the Dollfuss government. The Schuschnigg government would continue the Austro-fascist policies of its predecessor.

The whole affair was an acute embarrassment to Hitler and his government internationally, not least because it destroyed its relationship with Rome. The Italian press spent months denouncing Hitler, the Nazi Party, and the German government generally.

A period of retrenchment was called for. Hitler and his government took on no new foreign initiatives for the rest of 1934. Instead, Hitler continued to speak publicly about the need to resolve European disputes peacefully while covertly building up the German military.

But the military expansion Hitler had ordered in 1933, though it had been easy enough to keep it secret at first, when it was still largely aspirational, became more and more difficult to conceal as time went on. By the time of the putsch in Austria in July 1934, British intelligence had twigged to what was going on in Germany. The creation of a German air force was naturally a particular concern to the British, although the question of what to do about it was a whole other matter.

I touched on some of this last week. From the British perspective, it was not at all clear what should be done about early indicators of a possible German rearmament, especially considering the uncertainties over air force doctrine, the sorry state of the British aircraft industry, and Britain's economic woes of the time. Among other factors. In mid-1934, when the Cabinet voted to increase the size of the Royal Air Force, it was roundly condemned by the Labour opposition and by private peace groups, even though the proposed increase would only bring the RAF back to its numbers as of 1923.

But among those who felt the government wasn't doing enough to respond to developments in Germany were some officials in the British Foreign Office who had access to the intelligence reports coming out of Germany. One of these was Major Sir Desmond Morton. He happened to be friends with Winston Churchill and had assisted Churchill in writing *The World Crisis*, Churchill's account of the Great War. By the latter half of 1934, Morton was leaking classified intelligence reports on the German arms buildup to Churchill. Morton had a home in Kent, just a mile away from Chartwell, so all it took was a pleasant stroll through the autumn Kentish countryside to deliver copies of these reports.

Morton was not acting on his own. He had at least one and probably more colleagues in the Foreign Office who aided and encouraged the leak of this information. Churchill was a safe choice as a recipient. As a Member of Parliament, he could and did raise questions about what was going on in Germany and how the Government was responding. As a former chancellor, war minister, and first lord of the admiralty, Churchill had long had access to the most sensitive government information. Still, Churchill, though a Tory, was on the outs with the Baldwin government, for criticizing their India policy, and was widely seen as having burned all his bridges, which meant Churchill had nothing to lose by raising these uncomfortable truths: that the Treaty of Versailles had explicitly forbidden the creation of a German air force, and Berlin was flagrantly violating that provision. What plan did the Government have for dealing with it?

In a speech broadcast on the BBC in November 1934, Churchill said, "I am afraid that if you look intently at what is moving towards Great Britain, you will see that the only choice open is the old grim choice our forbears had to face, namely, whether we shall submit or whether we shall prepare. Whether we shall submit to the will of a stronger nation or whether we shall prepare to defend our rights, our liberties and indeed our lives."

News of the development of a German air force was of particular concern in Britain, where it appeared that modern technology had erased the United Kingdom's most valuable defensive asset: The English Channel. Now, not only was it possible for an enemy to strike the British homeland without first defeating the Royal Navy, but as a quick glance at the map will tell you, one of the first targets aircraft coming into Britain from the Continent will encounter is the sprawling metropolis that is London and its surrounding boroughs. The UK capital city and its most important city was now also its most vulnerable city.

The new year, 1935, brought good news for Adolf Hitler. January marked the 15-year anniversary of the League of Nations administration over the Saarland. The Treaty of Versailles mandated that a plebiscite be held in which the inhabitants of the Saarland would decide the future of their territory: either reunification with Germany, unification with France, or to continue under the administration of the League. Social Democrats and Communists in the Saarland campaigned vigorously to remain under League administration, where their parties could continue to operate freely, and also as a rebuke to the Nazis. Their slogan was, "Defeat

Hitler in the Saar!” Nazis and other right-wing parties campaigned for reunification using nationalist arguments, while also noting that the German economy was recovering by this time.

It seemed likely that reunification would win the vote, but the margin of victory was a surprise: 91% for reunification, 9% for continuing the status quo, and only a miniscule number of votes for unification with France. It was a decisive endorsement of Hitler and his policies and a repudiation of the Communists and the SPD, as most of their voters had apparently abandoned them.

It was good news for Hitler and helped restore his image after the twin debacles of Austria and Venice. But by spring of 1935, the German military buildup had advanced far enough along that it was no longer possible to conceal it, especially with Mr. Churchill raising such a ruckus in the British Parliament. Some intelligence estimates suggested that the German air force was now comparable in size to the RAF. In February, the French and British governments issued a joint communiqué condemning the German buildup and proposing a new round of negotiations on arms control. In response, the German government invited the British foreign secretary, Sir John Simon, and the Lord Privy Seal, Anthony Eden, to Berlin for talks on March 7.

Three days before the scheduled meeting, the British Government issued a white paper announcing a major increase in funding for the RAF, in response to the German buildup. The German Foreign Office angrily cancelled the scheduled meeting, claiming as its excuse that Hitler had become a little hoarse, which became material for many jokes at his expense in the English-speaking world.

But it was no joke to Hitler. He really was having troubles with his voice in early 1935. A doctor’s examination revealed a lump on his vocal cord. Surgery was recommended. This created a good deal of anxiety for Hitler, who like many people had superstitious ideas about historical parallels. In this instance, the historical parallel his condition brought to mind was that of the second German Kaiser, Friedrich III. Long-time listeners will recall from episode 2 that Friedrich reigned as Kaiser for a mere 99 days before succumbing to cancer of the larynx.

Hitler feared the same would happen to him, and was quite relieved when what the surgeons removed proved to be merely a benign polyp. He would be fine, but the experience affected him. He began to worry that death would claim him before he achieved his long list of ambitions.

A few days after the talks were canceled, on March 10, in an interview with British journalist George Ward Price of the *Daily Mail*, Hermann Göring finally admitted publicly what everyone already knew: that Germany had created an air force, the *Luftwaffe*, though Göring claimed it was intended solely for defensive purposes. He boasted that the Luftwaffe already had 1500 airplanes, which would have made it far larger than the RAF and almost the size of the French Air Force, though this was a gross exaggeration. In truth, the Luftwaffe was only about half that size.

On March 16, Adolf Hitler released a decree that proclaimed, falsely, that Germany had kept all its promises to disarm, while the Allies had violated their own pledges and refused to negotiate arms reductions. Therefore, the German government would reintroduce conscription and expand the Army.

The German Army, known since 1919 as the *Reichswehr*, which means “Reichs defense,” or “realm’s defense,” was limited to 100,000 by the Treaty of Versailles, and so it had been ever since. In 1934, the Reichswehr command, acting on their own initiative, had ordered all Jewish soldiers discharged, had incorporated swastikas and other Nazi symbols into German uniforms and equipment, and had introduced a new oath, under which German soldiers swore loyalty not to the German people or the constitution, but to Adolf Hitler personally as *Führer* of the nation. Hitler was quite pleasantly surprised by these developments.

Now, under Hitler’s decree, the Army would be renamed the *Wehrmacht*, which means roughly, “defense force,” and over ten years it would gradually be increased to 550,000 soldiers in 36 divisions. Even Hitler’s own foreign minister was shocked by the news that the Army would be quintupled, and feared the Allied reaction, but among Germans, the news was received with joy. The humiliations of Versailles were coming undone and Germany was reclaiming its proper place as a Great Power.

As for the Allied reaction, it amounted to no more than diplomatic protests. Tellingly, the British diplomatic note protesting the buildup also inquired politely about rescheduling that meeting with Simon and Eden. It was held a few days later. When Simon and Eden raised the question of the German military expansion, Hitler reminded them of Prussian support for Britain at the Battle of Waterloo and asked whether when the Prussians arrived, Wellington first checked with the Foreign Office to make sure the Prussian Army did not exceed agreed-upon treaty limits. Hitler dismissed questions about German air power. The Luftwaffe already had parity with the RAF, so there was nothing left to discuss. As regarded the German Navy, Hitler suggested that Germany would agree to a bilateral treaty with the UK limiting the German Navy to 35% of the Royal Navy.

In April, the prime ministers of the UK, France, and Italy met at the Italian lakeside town of Stresa to discuss the German situation. At the end of the meeting, they issued a joint communiqué reaffirming the Treaty of Locarno and the independence of Austria and warning that the three countries would oppose any further violations of the Treaty of Versailles by Germany.

In May, Hitler gave a major foreign policy speech before the Reichstag, in which he affirmed Germany’s commitment to peace and its willingness to work cooperatively with its neighbors to ensure peace in Europe. It was exactly what everyone wanted to hear, both within Germany and in foreign capitals, and the speech was well received. The British government invited Germany to open talks on the proposed Anglo-German Naval Agreement Hitler had proposed in March.

Hitler sent Joachim von Ribbentrop to London as a special ambassador to negotiate the agreement, which was signed on June 18.

The British side saw value in the agreement, as it represented a voluntary commitment by Hitler to limit the size of his navy, which was better than the alternative, which was no agreement. On the other hand, the agreement amounted to a British concession allowing Germany to build a navy that exceeded the restrictions set by the Treaty of Versailles. Worse still, the British had not consulted with either Paris or Rome before signing the agreement, just two months after pledging along with the French and the Italians not to allow any further German violations.

Four months later, in October 1935, Italy would go to war against Ethiopia. That's a subject that deserves its own episode, and I'll address it later, but for now I'll just note that the war drove a wedge between Italy and its allies, Britain and France, a wedge that Adolf Hitler exploited to woo Italy further away from the Allies.

By January 1936, the Italian government was signaling to Germany that it regarded the Stresa declaration as a dead letter. Italy still wanted an independent Austria, but otherwise it would not participate in any effort to enforce the Treaty of Versailles. After receiving this news, Hitler's thoughts turned almost immediately to the Rhineland.

Remember that the Treaty of Versailles prohibited German military forces from crossing to the west bank of the Rhine River, or even approaching within 100 kilometers of a river crossing. Germany had affirmed its commitment to this agreement as recently as the Locarno treaties.

Hitler had already been planning to move military forces west of the river, into the Rhineland, in 1937. But with Italy abandoning the Allies and France entering into a mutual defense treaty with the Soviet Union, he decided the time was now. The commanders of the Wehrmacht wanted to reoccupy the Rhineland; they believed this was essential to their mission to defend Germany. But the military and the Foreign Office feared Allied reprisals. The military warned that if the French responded by invading the Rhineland, the Army would not be strong enough to resist them. The Foreign Office warned that Allied economic sanctions against Germany would hit hard and might force an end to the military buildup.

But Hitler dismissed these concerns. Part of the reason may have been domestic politics. The German economy was rebounding, in large part because of government spending on the military buildup, but the civilian economy was taking a back seat to military needs. Even as Germans had more marks in their pockets, there were shortages of food and consumer goods to spend them on. A foreign policy win would help quiet the grumbling.

On March 1, 1936, Hitler made the decision. The Army would move into the Rhineland the following Saturday, March 7, with preparations to be kept secret until then. Even the Cabinet was not informed. Hitler appeared before the Reichstag at noon on Saturday to make the announcement. He blamed the recently signed mutual defense treaty between France and the

Soviet Union, denouncing it as a violation of the “spirit” of Versailles and Locarno. Therefore, in the interest of self-defense, Germany must reclaim its full sovereign rights over the Rhineland.

Only about 20,000 German soldiers crossed the river, and only 3,000 of them took up advanced positions near the border, and they were under strict orders to withdraw immediately in the event of any French military response. But such a retreat would have been a major embarrassment for Germany, not to mention a huge personal humiliation for Hitler.

Hitler later described the next 48 hours as the most nervous moments of his life. This is the “zone of risk” Joseph Goebbels later talked about. Germany had laid out its ambitions, but did not yet have the military clout to back them up.

The French did not invade. The French Army command overestimated the strength of the Wehrmacht and doubted their ability to force a German withdrawal. By Monday, it was clear in Berlin that nothing was going to happen. The League of Nations Council met and condemned the German move, but took no further action.

In Germany, the public was jubilant. They admired Hitler’s daring, and even more, his ability to get results. Hitler, it seemed, succeeded at everything he tried.

Hitler called another Reichstag election to confirm public support. These elections were by this time just empty gestures, but even so, the Nazi Party won 99% approval, suggesting widespread public support.

As for Hitler personally, he had forged ahead boldly, ignoring the petty doubts of the old women in the Foreign Office and the nervous military command, and he had been proved correct. The lesson he took from this experience was to trust in his own judgment, his own courage, and his own special insight; to go for broke and to ignore the naysayers. From now on, Adolf Hitler will become increasingly impatient. He will push harder and harder for his remaining military and foreign policy goals, and will shorten the timelines. Some of this was driven by his superstitious fear that he would not live a normal lifespan. And he will interpret any reservations by his subordinates to be evidence certainly of poor judgment, if not outright disloyalty.

Meanwhile, the broader German public would merely shake their heads admiringly and let him have his way. After all, it sure seemed like he knew what he was doing.

We’ll have to stop there for today. We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Mr. Bianchi Rider for his kind donation, and thank you to Rebecca for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Mr. Bianchi Rider and Rebecca help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you’d like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, for the first of two episodes on the evolution of animation in cinema. When comic strips went to the movies, they began moving themselves, in eight-minute tidbits. That's in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Adolf Hitler called the signing of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement in 1935 the happiest day of his life. Hitler had grand ambitions for Germany's future, but conflict with Britain was not one of them. Ideologically speaking, Hitler had no quarrel with Britain. In fact, he was hoping for some kind of alliance between Britain and Germany, or failing that, at least some kind of non-aggression pact.

To the British, the Agreement was an arms control measure, meant to avoid another shipbuilding race, like the one Britain and Germany had gone through before the Great War. To Hitler, it was an implicit non-aggression pact. In exchange for Germany's explicit promise not to challenge British naval supremacy, Britain was implicitly promising to give Germany a free hand in continental Europe, or at least, Hitler hoped, that was the direction the Anglo-German relationship was leading. In his view, Britain's own self interest would lead it into a closer relationship with Germany. By 1937, or 1938 at the latest, Hitler would come around to the view that Britain would remain hostile to Germany, whether that was in its interests or not, and in 1939 he would renounce the naval agreement.

Even so, by that time the Germans had not yet reached even the 35% threshold, so the agreement had no real effect on the size of the German Navy.

[music: Closing Theme]