

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 303

“Axis and Anschluss I”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Relations between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy got off to a rocky start, but by 1936, Mussolini and Hitler were warming to each other.

This was good news for them, but bad news for Europe generally and in particular, the nation that lay between them, Austria.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 303. Axis and Anschluss, part one.

In the year 1916, a German businessman named Otto Winter built himself a chalet in the Bavarian Alps near the town of Berchtesgaden, close to the Austrian border. He named it Haus Wachenfeld. In the 1920s, Adolf Hitler, who had lived his early years in Austria and Bavaria, began to take his vacations in this region, known as Obersalzberg. In 1928, Hitler leased Haus Wachenfeld from Otto’s widow, Margarete. The lease included the right of first refusal in the event Margarete chose to sell the house. Hitler’s half-sister Angela lived in the chalet and served as its housekeeper.

Frau Winter offered to sell the house to Hitler in autumn of 1932, but you’ll recall that was a busy time for him. It took nine months before the deal was closed in June 1933, by which time Adolf Hitler had become chancellor. He took possession of the house and all its furnishings.

For the first year or so after the purchase was settled, Obersalzberg became something of a tourist attraction for Hitler’s admirers. The chancellor was known not only to frequent the chalet, but to enjoy going out for long walks to take in the magnificent Alpine scenery. Sometimes he would drop in at a nearby restaurant. Visitors would gather at the foot of the driveway or along public walking trails in the hope of catching a glimpse of the man who had risen from corporal to world leader.

But that didn’t last. In 1935, Hitler began sketching out his ideas for expanding his mountain retreat, which were passed on to an architect for development. He would keep the existing chalet, but some of its walls would be opened up so that it could be integrated into a larger complex of

thirty rooms in a building 37 meters wide and three stories tall. It became the equivalent of a small resort hotel, capable of hosting twenty or more guests, with a full-time housekeeping staff, and was known as the Berghof, which translates as something like “the mountain court.”

The centerpiece of the Berghof was the Great Hall. At one end, a large picture window looked out over the mountains. The window was retractable; it could be lowered into the wall to open the space to the Alpine air. Before the window was a six-meter-long marble table. Here documents were laid for Hitler to sign or plans and blueprints unrolled for his inspection. In a few years, these would be replaced by maps of the front lines of war. Beside the table stood an oversized globe.

A fireplace of red marble stood opposite, at the far end of the hall, facing a semi-circle of upholstered chairs where guests could gather for conversation. A tapestry on a side wall could be lowered to reveal a motion picture screen, converting the hall into a cinema where Hitler and his guests could take in the latest from Hollywood, following dinner in the grand dining room.

Instrumental in turning Hitler’s sketches into the Berghof was Nazi Party member and chief of staff to Deputy Führer Rudolf Hess, the 35-year-old Martin Bormann. Bormann not only oversaw the construction of the Berghof, but bought up dozens of farms and other properties around it. Those who resisted selling were subject to Nazi threats. Soon there were no more farms, no more gawking tourists. No one could even enter the area without a special permit.

Bormann used the land to turn Obersalzberg into a vacation Chancellery. He built a barracks for Hitler’s SS bodyguards and a greenhouse to supply the vegetarian *Führer* with fresh vegetables year round. There were also vacation homes for other high-ranking Nazi officials, buildings for communications and support staff, and even a small landing strip for aircraft. The crowning touch was a tea house built atop a mountain peak 800 meters above and accessible by elevator. It became known as the “Eagle’s Nest” and was presented to Hitler as a gift for his fiftieth birthday on April 20, 1939, although he rarely visited there. Hitler liked to joke that “Bormann” was aptly named; he was constantly boring holes into the mountains.

As the Berghof expanded, Hitler’s half-sister Angela graduated from sole housekeeper to head of the housekeeping staff. That lasted until the 1934 Nuremberg rally. (This was the same rally at which Leni Riefenstahl filmed *Triumph of the Will*.) There Eva Braun was for the first time permitted to sit in the VIP seats, and her presence infuriated many of the wives of prominent Nazis, women such as Magda Goebbels and Henriette von Shirach. But it was only Angela who had the nerve to tell her brother to his face how unhappy she and the other women were over Eva Braun’s being included among the Nazi elite. Hitler’s response was to fire Angela and send her packing. The two of them seldom saw each other or spoke ever again.

Everyone else got the message. Eva Braun was untouchable. Soon afterward, the Berghof became virtually Eva’s second home. She had her own bedroom there, connected to Hitler’s bedroom via a private corridor. She was sometimes introduced to guests as the new head of

housekeeping, although in fact she had no duties at the house. That she was in some kind of relationship with Hitler is obvious. Whether or not it was a sexual one is less clear. On the face of it, you'd think, "Of course it was!" But Hitler was a strange guy: eccentric and strict. Even the staff at the Berghof weren't sure. When they were questioned about this after the war, they disagreed among themselves on whether the relationship was physical.

The Berghof was not really a second Chancellery, a place where you might go to take a working vacation. Hitler, like Mussolini, presented himself to the public as a man slaving through fourteen-hour days in his selfless dedication to the Fatherland, but in fact he had little interest in the day-to-day governance of Germany. This he left to his subordinates, who in turn divided their time between sucking up to the *Führer* and lining their pockets. So much for the myth of Nazi efficiency.

But Hitler had a few long-range goals he cared about passionately, and here is where his focus lies: Undoing the Treaty of Versailles, rearming Germany, incorporating or reincorporating lost German territories into the new Reich, and his biggest goal: expansion of Germany and German-speaking people into the vast open lands to the east. And here is where the Berghof served him best, as a sort of retreat center, where he could look out at the gorgeous mountain vistas while pondering his long-range plans. It also served him as place to invite—and impress—distinguished international guests, such as David Lloyd George, who visited in 1936, then went home to declare Adolf Hitler the "George Washington of Germany."

Lloyd George meant by that that Hitler intended only to secure independence for his people, and it's fair to say that by the summer of 1936, barely three years after he became chancellor, Hitler had achieved the seemingly impossible. He had broken Germany free of the shackles of the Treaty of Versailles. Germany was no longer paying reparations. Conscription had returned. Germany was building up its army and building a navy and air force from virtually nothing. The restriction on military deployment into the Rhineland was a dead letter. And best of all, Germany had gained all this peacefully, with scarcely a murmur of protest from France or Britain. Then the 1936 Olympics had granted Germany the opportunity to show off its accomplishments, and its new confidence, before the entire world.

This was exactly what Hitler had promised his people: that he would restore Germany's status as a Great Power, and do it peacefully, without resorting to war or threats. And now that Germany was once again a Great Power and free to pursue its own course in international affairs, what would that course be?

Here's a quick summary of Hitler's thinking on European affairs and Germany's place in them as of 1936. The long-term goal remained what it had been since the day he became chancellor: war in the east. *Lebensraum*. The conquest of the wide spaces of Poland and the Soviet Union, followed by ruthless Germanization. From his early days in office, Hitler calculated that the ideal

moment to strike east would come in 1942 or 1943. That would be when Germany's military buildup would peak. Wait any longer and Germany's enemies would begin to catch up.

The year 1943 seemed a long way off. Hitler would turn 54 that year, not so old, but Hitler had what you could call a premonition, or a superstitious fear, take your pick, that he would not live a normal lifespan, and sometimes expressed this to his subordinates with a sense of urgency. The Nazi movement and its leader would not live forever; therefore, its goals, his goals, should not be put off.

In 1935, Hitler's voice became hoarse. Doctors detected a lump on his vocal cords and recommended surgery. He was all too aware of the story of Kaiser Friedrich III, who had reigned for a mere 99 days in 1888 before succumbing to laryngeal cancer. Hitler was superstitious about history and historical parallels, so this discovery gave him quite a scare. When the lump was removed, however, it proved to be nothing more than a benign polyp. Still, the incident only reinforced Hitler's sense of urgency.

His master plan for this war in the east also assumed conflict with France somewhere along the way. Hitler viewed France as Germany's natural enemy, and no doubt he planned to reclaim Alsace-Lorraine, although he didn't say that part out loud. In any case, since he thought war with France was inevitable, he was all too aware of the danger of a two-front war with both France and Russia, like the previous war. This time, France would have to be neutralized first, before the war with Russia could begin.

The danger there was that a confrontation with France might leave Germany vulnerable along its long borders with Czechoslovakia and Austria. Hitler was dismissive of both these countries, products of the Paris Peace Conference. They weren't real countries at all, he would say, and there was no possibility they'd survive for very long. But so long as they did, they posed a potential threat to Germany.

And then there were Italy and Britain. Hitler had no quarrel with either of these countries. He saw Italy as a natural enemy of France and therefore a natural ally of Germany. Relations between him and Mussolini had gotten off on the wrong foot, with that awkward summit meeting between the two in Venice in 1934, but when Italy invaded Ethiopia and Germany became one of the few countries that were supportive of Mussolini's African adventure, that did a lot to smooth over any ruffled feathers.

As for Britain, Hitler believed also firmly that Germany and Britain were natural allies and that, given time, the British would eventually come around to his way of thinking and realize that their future lay with Germany, not with France. The Anglo-German Naval Agreement signed in 1935, in which Germany voluntarily agreed to cap its Navy at 35% of the size of the Royal Navy, Hitler viewed as a gesture of German good faith and non-belligerence toward the UK. In exchange for this pledge not to threaten either Britain itself or its imperial and commercial

relations with the larger world, Hitler felt he'd earned an implicit British commitment not to interfere in Germany's continental ambitions.

Now, it's been British policy since at least the rise of Napoleon to ensure no one nation becomes supreme in continental Europe, so that was a big ask, perhaps too big. But as late as 1936, Hitler still believed such an understanding was achievable.

With regard to Austria, you'll recall that Austrian National Socialists had already attempted a coup in July 1934, probably with Hitler's foreknowledge and toward the goal of forcing *Anschluss*, that is, the unification of Austria with Germany. But the coup failed. German military intervention had been blocked by a threat of counter-intervention from Italy, and in 1934, that was more of a challenge than the German military was prepared for.

But times have changed. Italy and Germany are growing closer. Italy owes Germany one for its support over the invasion of Ethiopia. On July 11, 1936, Germany and Austria negotiated a treaty in which Germany reaffirmed its respect for Austrian sovereignty and pledged noninterference in Austrian internal affairs. In exchange, Austria pledged to coordinate its foreign policy with Germany and acknowledge that it was a German state. Those were the public provisions. In the secret provisions, the Austrian government agreed to an amnesty for Austrian Nazis imprisoned after the 1934 coup attempt and promised to include Austrian National Socialists in the government. The Austrian chancellor, Kurt von Schuschnigg, likely saw these concessions as a price worth paying to secure that German guarantee of Austrian independence. Hitler probably believed he was creating space for Austria's Nazis to take over the country on their own. But Hitler warned them that he wasn't ready for another international confrontation over Austria just yet, and told them to give it two more years.

Just days after the treaty with Austria was concluded, Spanish military commanders began a coup against the Republican government in Spain. As you know, Hitler was quick to order German military assistance to the generals, despite reservations from members of his own government.

Remember that after the debacle of 1933, when the German Communist Party was destroyed almost overnight, Comintern learned its lesson and revised its strategy accordingly. Communist parties abroad were now encouraged to cooperate with other leftist parties and even centrist democratic parties against fascists and other parties of the right. These leftist coalitions were called "popular fronts."

In Spain, the Communists went into coalition with the left after the January 1936 general election and joined the leftist Popular Front government in Madrid. In France, the Communists went into coalition with the left after the June 1936 general election and joined the government of socialist politician André Léon Blum. An important reason for this left-wing victory in France in 1936 was the scandal that ensued when it became public that the previous right-wing government had embargoed weapons to Ethiopia for the sake of maintaining friendly relations with Italy.

The new French premier was not only a socialist; he was Jewish, France's first Jewish prime minister and a remarkable step forward for a country that had been embroiled in the Dreyfus Affair just thirty years earlier.

You shouldn't be surprised to learn that Hitler viewed France's new socialist government with a Jewish prime minister and Communists in the cabinet with considerable alarm, as it raised that specter of a two-front conflict, between a Communist Russia in the east and a Communist France in the west, backed by a Communist Spain. On the other hand, a pro-fascist Spain would turn the tables on France, threatening *it* with a two-front war.

And so, Hitler was quick to provide support to the Nationalist generals in Spain, beginning with transport planes that aided the generals at a crucial moment early in the fighting, and continuing with arms and materiel and with a Luftwaffe combat unit of some 6,500 that would become known as the Condor Legion.

Mussolini's Italy would also support the Nationalists in Spain, to a much greater degree even than Germany. The Spanish coup turned into the Spanish Civil War, a conflict in which it soon became apparent that the fighting would last not weeks or months, but years. This did not displease Hitler and his government in Berlin. The war in Spain politically paralyzed France, riven as it was between leftists who supported the Republicans and rightists who supported the Nationalists; it also drew international attention away from Germany, and it earned Germany the gratitude of the Italians, who were much more deeply involved in the conflict.

German support for Italy, first in Ethiopia, now in Spain, did a lot to improve relations between the two countries from the low point they reached following the failed Nazi coup in Austria in 1934. Mussolini was also pleased by this new treaty between Germany and Austria. Encouraged by the progress, in September 1936 the German government invited the Italian foreign minister to Berlin for consultations.

The Italian foreign minister at this time was the 33-year-old Galeazzo Ciano, who had recently taken over the foreign ministry from *il Duce* himself. Ciano was the son of Admiral Constanzo Ciano of the Royal Italian Navy. The elder Ciano was a decorated veteran of the Great War, ennobled afterward as Count Ciano by the Italian King Vittorio Emanuele III. Afterward the Admiral joined the Fascist movement. Both the elder and younger Ciano had participated in the March on Rome. The younger Ciano was also Mussolini's son-in-law, after marrying his daughter Edda in 1930.

Soon after the wedding, Galeazzo and Edda traveled to Shanghai, where Galeazzo served for five years as the Italian consul there, and during this time Edda had an affair with the Chinese warlord turned Republican general Zhang Xueliang, who has figured prominently in many of our recent episodes on. In 1935, the couple returned to Italy, where Galeazzo was given the newly created cabinet portfolio of Press and Propaganda. When the war with Ethiopia began, Galeazzo volunteered to serve as a bomber commander. In 1936, he returned to Italy a war hero and

received his appointment as foreign minister. It is widely believed that Mussolini was grooming Galeazzo as his successor but—spoiler alert—that will never happen; in fact, Mussolini will order his execution in 1944.

But that's 1944. In 1936, he is Italian foreign minister and one of Mussolini's favorites. In October, he and his entourage met with Hitler and his government in Berlin, where they signed an agreement pledging Italy and Germany would cooperate in the fight against Communism, recognize the Nationalists as the government of Spain, and consult on foreign policy in the Danube region.

Afterward, Hitler invited Ciano to visit the Berghof, where Hitler pitched a German-Italian alliance. Germany would be ready for another war in three to five years, he told Ciano, and he could see no conflict of interest between Italy's ambitions in the Mediterranean and German ambitions in Eastern Europe. Moreover, Hitler argued, a German-Italian alliance would force Britain to abandon France and join with them; if Britain refused, it would hardly be able to withstand the combined might of their two countries.

After the meeting, Hitler escorted his Italian guests to the Great Hall, and invited them to take in its breathtaking view of the Austrian Alps. As they admired the snow-capped peaks, Hitler complained that though Austria was the land of his birth, the closest he could get today was to peer at those mountains through his telescope.

That was a hint.

Mussolini presumably got the hint, but he showed no sign of concern. Shortly after his foreign minister returned to Rome, Mussolini gave a speech in Milan, at which he declared that the line between Berlin and Rome was not a barrier to the other nations of Europe. "On the contrary, it is an axis around which all European nations can rotate, if they possess the will for cooperation and peace." And here is how the word *axis* became associated with the fascist alliance.

[music: Wagner, *Lohengrin*, Prelude to Act III]

In November 1936, Germany and Japan signed an anti-Comintern pact, in which the two countries agreed to cooperate in opposing Communism. Again, the goal was to present the Soviet Union with a two-front dilemma. Any Soviet aggression against either Germany or Japan would have to be weighed against the possibility of Russia finding itself in a war against both. No one had forgotten that Germany had defeated Russia in 1918 or that Japan had defeated Russia in 1905. Imagine Russia fighting both of them at the same time.

The Anti-Comintern Pact marks the beginning of the German tilt in Asian affairs away from China, with which Germany had previously sought closer relations, and toward Japan. When Japan began its war against China in 1937, the German government remained studiously neutral in the conflict, although privately, many German government leaders expressed sympathy for

China, Germany's most important trading partner in East Asia. The Japanese ambassador in Berlin, Mushanokoji Kintomo, argued that the Japanese invasion of China was consistent with the Anti-Comintern Pact, because it was principally a war against the Chinese Communists, but some in the German Foreign Office believed the opposite was the case: that the Japanese invasion was pushing China into a closer relationship with the Soviet Union.

The biggest proponent of closer German relations with Japan was champagne-salesman turned high-level Nazi Joachim von Ribbentrop. You'll recall we first met him back in episode 269, when he helped broker a deal between Hitler and Papen that led to Hitler's being appointed chancellor.

Ribbentrop had traveled widely on business, in both Europe and North America and was fluent in French and English. This impressed Hitler, who was not himself widely traveled, spoke no foreign language, and who distrusted the career civil servants in the German Foreign Office. Hitler made Ribbentrop an Ambassador-Plenipotentiary at Large for the German Reich, and it was in that capacity that he negotiated the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935 and the Anti-Comintern Pact with Japan in 1936. By this time, he was one of Hitler's closest and most trusted advisors, especially on foreign policy.

Not many people other than Adolf Hitler held Ribbentrop in any kind of regard. The old-school Nazis who'd been around since the days of the Munich *putsch* resented this latecomer, who'd only joined the party in 1932. His only apparent diplomatic skill, they said, was in flattering the *Führer*. He'd learned to listen carefully when Hitler went off on one of his rants, take note of Hitler's viewpoint, then later repeat it back to the boss as if it were his own. Most of us have learned this trick for handling our bosses, but few of us have as our boss one of the most powerful dictators in the world.

Ribbentrop also learned that to really impress Hitler, you had not only to repeat his ideas back to him as if you had come up with them independently, you also had to ramp them up and make them even more extreme. As one of Ribbentrop's own aides put it later, "When Hitler said, 'Gray,' Ribbentrop said, 'Black, black, black.' He always said it three times more, and he was always more radical."

Nonetheless, Hitler thought he was a genius and made him German ambassador to the Court of St. James in August 1936. Hitler was still holding out hope for friendly relations with Britain and sent his new ambassador off to London with these words: "Ribbentrop, bring me an alliance with England!"

He could hardly have made a worse choice. One German diplomat declared flat out that "Ribbentrop didn't understand anything about foreign policy." In London, he offended virtually everyone he met with his vanity and his unsophisticated bluntness. He gave a speech in which he basically laid Hitler's cards on the table: "How about...just giving Germany a free hand in the East?" When Ribbentrop met King George VI, he threw up a Nazi salute. At a dinner with

Winston Churchill, Ribbentrop boasted that “The next war will be different, for we will have the Italians on our side,” prompting Churchill to retort, “That’s only fair...we had them last time.”

He made such a poor impression in the British Foreign Office for his clumsiness and lack of subtlety that the officials there nicknamed him “Herr von Brickendrop.”

Ribbentrop’s diplomatic pratfalls may have been an entertaining diversion for the British, but as we discussed in episode 294, the biggest stir in Britain at the time was the looming constitutional crisis over King Edward and his desire to marry Wallis Simpson. Hitler saw Edward’s abdication and the accession of George VI as a serious setback to his ambition to win an alliance, or at least an understanding, with Britain. In his own words, “His abdication was a severe loss for us.”

There is no question that Edward was far more sympathetic to, even admiring of, Adolf Hitler than was his younger brother. Still, constitutionally speaking, the British Sovereign has zero influence over British foreign policy. Granted, Edward was not one for strict adherence to constitutional limitations, but even so, his ability to slant British foreign policy toward Germany would have been minimal, even had he kept the Crown, something Hitler appears not to have grasped.

It is a sign of Hitler’s regard for Edward that in October 1937, he invited the now-Duke and Duchess of Windsor to the Berghof during their visit to Germany. The Windsors were treated like royalty and their visit widely covered in the German press. They clearly appreciated the warmth of their reception and returned it with Nazi-style salutes.

The year 1937 was a quiet one, in terms of German international relations. There was the ongoing civil war in Spain, of course, but the rest of the Continent was deceptively uneventful. American journalist William Shirer even noted at the time that spring of 1937 had come and gone without any surprises from Hitler, unlike spring of 1935, when he announced German rearmament, or spring of 1936, when he moved troops into the Rhineland.

Privately, it was a different story. Joseph Goebbels’ diaries reveal that Hitler was by then speaking to his subordinates of how Germany needed both Austria and Czechoslovakia to round out its territory, and one day it would get them. Beyond that, Hitler predicted Germany would be ready for the decisive war in six years, that is, in 1943, or perhaps sooner, if the right opportunity presented itself in the meantime. Goebbels wrote, “As always, his foresight is enormous and brilliant. He sees history with the prophetic vision of an oracle.”

Neville Chamberlain succeeded Stanley Baldwin as prime minister in May 1937, but this development met indifference in Berlin. Hitler had all but given up his hope of a British alliance by this time.

In September 1937, Benito Mussolini visited Berlin. Hitler pulled out all the stops. He had Berlin dressed up with eagles, fasces, swastikas, and artful displays of German and Italian flags. He

hosted the Italian dictator to a gala dinner at the Reich Chancellery, took him on a tour of Berlin, and treated him to a huge military parade, which may also have been meant as a subtle warning. Hitler gave a speech, and Mussolini followed, in German, though with so heavy an Italian accent the audience had trouble understanding him. Even worse, a thunderstorm hit and drenched the event during Mussolini's speech, prompting Berliners to make jokes about *il Duce* and *Dusche*, which is the German word for *shower*.

Nonetheless, the visit went well. Mussolini was so impressed with the German soldiers' goose-stepping that on his return to Rome, he introduced it into the Italian Army. Hitler was also satisfied with the meeting, which had gone much better than the one in 1934. After Hitler received word that Mussolini's train had crossed the border and left Germany, he was so pleased and so relieved that he allowed himself a glass of champagne, an unusual departure for the *Führer*, who was usually a teetotaler.

On November 5, 1937, Hitler held a meeting at the Reich Chancellery that included the commanders of all three branches of Germany's armed forces: Werner von Fritsch, Supreme Commander of the German Army, Erich Raeder, Commander of the German Navy, and Hermann Göring, Commander of the Luftwaffe, the German Air Force. Also at the meeting was the foreign minister, Konstantin von Neurath, and Werner von Blomberg, the Great War general who had become minister of defense all the way back in January 1933, when Hitler first became chancellor, and had served in that position ever since. Hitler had not chosen Blomberg for the post; President Hindenburg had insisted on it as a condition of making Hitler chancellor. But Hitler had no objection to him either.

The stated purpose of the meeting was to hash out conflicts among the service branches over allocations of scarce strategic materials they all needed for the buildups of their respective services. In particular, Navy chief Raeder was loudly complaining about Air Force chief Göring, whom Hitler had also placed in charge of Germany's Four-Year Plan, an economic program Hitler had set up to manage the growth of German industry to support the military buildup. Now Raeder was accusing Göring of abusing that position to favor the Luftwaffe in the competition for resources. Blomberg had asked for the meeting, since Hitler was the only one who had the authority to rein in Göring.

But Hitler was one of those kinds of bosses who was happy to allow his subordinates to fight among themselves, because it's healthy for the organization or some such thing. Or maybe he didn't have the guts to make big decisions. Actually, you could learn a lot about how to be a good manager by studying Hitler and then doing the opposite. Maybe I should write a book about this. I could call it, *The Seven Habits of Highly Ineffective Fascist Dictators*. What do you think? I think it has "best seller" written all over it.

But I digress. Hitler was one of those kinds of bosses, his preferred style was, instead of making a decision, he subjected everyone else in the meeting to one of his two-hour harangues on his

foreign policy vision, with the idea that once everyone understood what the plan was, they would automatically know what to do without asking any more annoying questions.

What he said at this meeting was substantially similar to what he told the Army and Navy commanders shortly after becoming chancellor, all the way back in February 1933. Eighty-five million German-speaking people were crammed into too small a region of Europe. Germany needed *Lebensraum* for its people, and access to more raw materials to supply the German war machine. He acknowledged there were risks, but these were acceptable and necessary. Frederick the Great had taken risks and Bismarck had taken risks, but without them, there would be no Germany.

Then he got down to cases. France, he acknowledged, would oppose Germany every step of the way. So would Britain, he said, abandoning his previous optimism over relations with that country. Nevertheless, he concluded, the question would be settled somewhere around 1943-45. In the meantime, Germany first needed to subjugate the Czechs and Austria, to head off the threat of a possible flank attack.

The military commanders had no objection in principle to annexation of Austria or Czechoslovakia, but they did have concerns that Germany was not ready for a military confrontation with Britain and France. Germany's *Westwall* project, sometimes called the Siegfried Line, a string of fortifications along the French border, was still at an early stage. Hitler pointed out that Italy would be on their side. The generals countered that France was more than capable of fighting Italy and Germany at the same time, especially if it had British help. Hitler dismissed these concerns. France was weakened by internal political squabbling between the Popular Front and the French right wing. Britain was an aging Empire already showing signs of decay. They would not go to war to defend Austria or Czechoslovakia. In fact, Hitler concluded, it was likely the two Allied powers had already written off Austria and Czechoslovakia as lost causes.

By the way, the minutes of this meeting would eventually become a crucial piece of evidence at the War Crimes Trials in Nuremberg. But I'm getting a little ahead of myself.

I'll have more to say about Germany's diplomatic dealings next week, but we'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Ann for her kind donation, and thank you to Stefan for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Ann and Stefan 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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I can hardly believe it, but the holiday season is upon us once again, and as always, I would like to take this opportunity to remind you that donations and patronages to *The History of the Twentieth Century* make the perfect holiday gift—for me. And they're so easy to give. No worries about whether they're the right size or the right color, and you have my personal assurance they will be deeply appreciated and never be returned. As a patron, you have your choice of tiers, and donations are welcome in any amount. And if neither of those are in the budget, how about a rating and review at the iTunes store, or wherever fine podcasts are distributed. I promise you they are deeply appreciated, too.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we pick up where we left off this week. Axis and Anschluss, part two, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Joachim von Ribbentrop got the message very clearly that Hitler wanted an Anglo-German alliance. He visited Britain often and always came home to the *Führer* with glowing reports about how most Britons favored closer relations between their country and Germany. Meanwhile, the German Foreign Office was offering a much more cautious assessment of the prospects of an agreement. Hitler, being Hitler, interpreted this to mean that Ribbentrop was shrewder and more astute as a diplomat than were the career officials in the Foreign Office, instead of drawing the more obvious and accurate conclusion that Ribbentrop was merely telling him what he wanted to hear.

In 1935, in the aftermath of the signing of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement, there was a brief period of relatively friendly relations between Germany and Britain. Ribbentrop helped further this era of good feelings by organizing visits of German veterans to France and Britain to meet with veterans' groups in those countries, where there were warm greetings and solemn promises never again to make the mistake of 1914. These visits did do a bit of good for Germany's image.

But much of this good was undone after Ribbentrop became ambassador to Britain. The story goes that Hermann Göring tried to warn Hitler that Ribbentrop's unpleasant behavior was alienating the British. Hitler assured Göring that Ribbentrop was a valuable diplomatic asset, as he knew a lot of important people in Britain, to which Göring replied, “[T]hat may be right, but the bad thing is, they know *him*.”

[music: Closing Theme]