

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 304

### “Axis and Anschluss II”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In November 1937, German Führer Adolf Hitler outlined to his closest advisors his international goals, first of which were the annexations of Austria and Czechoslovakia. But conservatives like his war minister and the commander of the Army feared Hitler was leading his country into a military confrontation with the Allies, a confrontation Germany could not hope to win.

As fate would have it, some of the most prominent naysayers would soon be out of his way, and there would be no one left to stop Hitler from taking the first step, in Austria.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 304. Axis and Anschluss, part two.

Last week, I told you about a meeting held on November 5, 1937 between Adolf Hitler, his foreign secretary, war secretary, and the heads of the three service branches, at which Hitler laid out his ambitions for Germany’s future, which included annexation of Austria and Czechoslovakia.

Hitler left that meeting disappointed by the cool reception his vision had received from old-school conservatives like Foreign Minister von Neurath and War Minister von Blomberg, both of whom were holdovers from the Weimar days, not to mention the old-school military commanders like Army chief Werner von Fritsch. Back in the Weimar Republic days, these were the Nazis’ right-wing allies who helped bring Hitler to power and end the reign of the socialists, but they were not true Nazis and clearly did not have the proper Nazi attitude.

You know who else fits that description? Hjalmar Schacht, the once again President of the Reichsbank, who had supported Hitler’s rise to power, and since 1934 had served as his minister of economics. Schacht had supported Hitler’s public works projects, like the Autobahns, but the military buildup went too far for him. He regarded Hermann Göring as an ignoramus in economic matters and worried that the ambitious Four-Year Plan Göring was heading would bring back inflation. Germany was already at full employment; a big new government spending

plan would only compete for resources and increase prices. Schacht had already slain the inflation demon once, in 1923. He did not want to see it rise again.

For this heterodoxy, Schacht was forced to resign as economics minister that same month, November 1937, although Hitler kept him on at the Reichsbank and in the Cabinet as a minister without portfolio, out of fear the international markets would react badly if they heard that Schacht, who was respected by bankers in other countries, was completely expelled from the Hitler government.

Hitler needed similar shakeups in a few other places, like the foreign ministry, the war ministry, and the military: out with the old guard, in with the Nazis. As luck would have it, a golden opportunity was about to fall into his lap.

The story of said golden opportunity begins two months earlier, in September 1937, the very same month Mussolini came to visit. One day, Werner von Blomberg, the war minister, was taking a pleasant late summer stroll through the Tiergarten, the lovely park in central Berlin. Here the 59-year-old widower met a 24-year-old woman named Margarethe Gruhn. It was love at first sight.

Just three months later, on December 22, von Blomberg and Hitler were both attending an elaborate state funeral in Munich following the death of the old Great War general, Erich Ludendorff. Remember Erich Ludendorff? The old soldier had been an early supporter of Hitler and the Nazis and had even participated in the 1923 *putsch* in Munich, but had drifted away from the Nazi movement afterward. By the 1930s, Ludendorff was publishing weird extremist stuff that was off-putting even to Nazis, such as denunciations of President Hindenburg, his old boss, and attacks on the Catholic Church. Remember Hindenburg? Ludendorff had died of liver cancer two days earlier, at the age of 72, and Hitler ordered an elaborate state funeral, because of course he did. It would be good for the country, good for the Party, and good for Hitler personally. Never mind that Ludendorff had expressly asked not to be so honored. Who cares what he thinks? He's dead.

So von Blomberg introduced his new girlfriend Margarethe to the *Führer* at the funeral. Perhaps the timing wasn't the best. He told him she was his secretary, which was a little white lie, and asked permission to marry her. He needed permission because he was a military officer. Now in the old days of Kaiser Wilhelm—remember Kaiser Wilhelm? Unlike Hindenburg and Ludendorff, he's still with us. In the old days, an old-school senior Prussian military officer with a *von* in his name marrying a common young woman would have been viewed as a scandal in itself, but Hitler, also a commoner, approved of the union. Here was a token of the new Germany where class distinctions were abolished and everyone was equal, so long as they were Germans. True Germans, I mean.

Von Blomberg and Margarethe were married in a small, private civil ceremony a couple of weeks later, in January 1938. Apart from her mother and his children, the only others in attendance were Adolf Hitler and Hermann Göring, who also served as the witnesses.

Unfortunately, Margarethe had what you might call a checkered past. Back in the days of the decadent Weimar Republic, when she was still a teenager, Margarethe had posed for pornographic photographs. She was also known to the police as a prostitute.

Just days after the wedding, the chief of the Berlin Police was made aware of Margarethe's criminal record. He forwarded the information to the Ministry of War; specifically, to General Wilhelm Keitel, the chief of the armed forces and therefore Blomberg's subordinate. Keitel was not an old-school aristocrat. He was an ordinary guy with an ordinary background who had risen through the ranks during the war. Afterward, he was retained in the post-war Army and had had a hand in organizing paramilitary *Freikorps* units.

Keitel had this reputation as a yes man. He had gotten where he was by polishing the right apples, if you know what I mean. When this bombshell landed on his desk, he wanted nothing to do with it. Obviously, he couldn't forward the report to his supervisor—that would be Blomberg himself. So he referred the matter instead to Hermann Göring. Göring, having recently attended the wedding ceremony, had no difficulty confirming the woman in the pictures was indeed the new Frau von Blomberg.

Hitler was away on another trip to Munich at the time. When he returned to Berlin on January 24, 1938, Göring was waiting for him at the Reich Chancellery, police file in hand. Hitler was shocked. This was bad news for him politically, of course. He had not only granted permission for this marriage, he had blessed it with his presence at the wedding ceremony. His image as a crusader for moral rectitude was on the line.

But it seems clear that Hitler's shock ran deeper than mere concern over a political setback. He cancelled all his appointments and went into seclusion for the next couple of days as he pondered how to handle this mess. This was the very kind of sleazy decadence the old Weimar government had allowed Germany to lapse into, but he was the leader of the political movement that had come to power on a pledge to purge the nation of such immorality and restore traditional values. And yet, five years into Nazi rule, the rot was still present, and at the highest levels of the military and the aristocracy, too. He was heard to remark, "If a German field marshal can marry a whore, than anything is possible..."

There was only one way out. At bare minimum, Blomberg had to give up his post as minister of war. But that wasn't enough to satisfy Hitler. He also wanted the marriage annulled. He instructed Göring to meet with Blomberg, show him the police file, and lay out these two demands, which Göring did. There was nothing Blomberg could do about losing his Cabinet post, but even after he saw the file, Blomberg steadfastly insisted that he loved his wife and would not consider ending the marriage. The next day, Blomberg met with Hitler himself. Hitler

gave him 50,000 Reichsmarks and instructed him to take his new wife on a honeymoon. A honeymoon abroad. A very long, extended honeymoon abroad. Don't come back anytime soon. Get the picture?

As it happened by the morning of this meeting, there was already a second scandal brewing. While he was in seclusion, pondering what to do about Blomberg and what it all meant for Germany, Hitler recalled a meeting in the summer of 1936, eighteen months earlier, with Heinrich Himmler, chief of the SS. At that time, Himmler had shown Hitler a police report indicating that a petty criminal and sometime prostitute named Otto Schmidt had named Army commander Werner von Fritsch as one of his clients. At the time, Hitler had dismissed the accusation, made against one of Germany's highest-ranking military commanders from a respected family by a petty criminal and moral reprobate, and so he had ordered Himmler to destroy the file.

Now, in the wake of the Blomberg scandal, he was having second thoughts. If Blomberg was out as war minister, Fritsch was the obvious choice to succeed him, but the last thing Hitler needed was another sex scandal. And come to think of it, Fritsch had never married and was never seen in the company of a woman. Maybe there was something to this, after all. Hitler contacted the Gestapo and asked them to reconstruct the file on Fritsch. This was a simple matter, as Himmler's assistant, Gestapo chief Reinhard Heydrich, in defiance of the Führer's orders, had simply stashed the file in his office safe for future reference. He had it delivered to Hitler the following morning.

Hitler showed the file to his military adjutant, Friedrich Hossbach, and told him that Fritsch would also have to go. Hossbach refused to believe the accusation. He figured Fritsch to be the victim of some kind of plot to prevent his becoming war minister. He asked Hitler for permission to question Fritsch himself on the matter. Hitler refused.

Hossbach disobeyed Hitler's order and visited Fritsch at his apartment the following evening and told him that he had been accused of engaging the services of a rent boy. Fritsch called the accusation a "filthy, rotten lie." Like Hossbach, Fritsch believed the police report was phony and questioned whether his accuser, the alleged Otto Schmidt, even existed. He demanded the right to confront this man in person.

The next day, Hossbach confessed to Hitler what he had done and reported Fritsch's reaction. Hitler agreed to set up the meeting. That evening, Fritsch was invited to the Chancellery to meet with Hitler. When he arrived, he was told Otto Schmidt was already in the building. "I want to see the swine!" Fritsch demanded.

But first he had to meet with Hitler and Göring. Hitler laid it out for him. If Fritsch confessed to the charge, he would be relieved of his position and sent on a long holiday, just like Blomberg, but that would be the end of it.

But Fritsch refused and maintained his innocence, and he had something more to say. Since hearing about the charge against him, Fritsch had been racking his brain, asking himself where this kind of accusation could possibly have come from. He told the *Führer* that in 1933 and 1934, he had befriended an impoverished young man in the Hitler Youth and had regularly invited this young man to private luncheons in his apartment. Nothing improper had happened at these luncheons, but Fritsch wondered if someone had taken note of them and jumped to the wrong conclusion.

Alas for Fritsch, this story only served to convince Hitler the accusations were true. Otto Schmidt was brought into the room and he confirmed that Fritsch was indeed the man who had purchased his services. Fritsch swore to Hitler on his honor as a soldier and a gentleman that he had never seen Otto Schmidt before in his life.

Hitler was unmoved. He chose to believe the word of a petty criminal over that of the chief of the Army, and Fritsch was ordered to report to the Gestapo the following morning for further questioning. This would be the 27<sup>th</sup>, the same morning Hitler met with Blomberg and sent him on that extended honeymoon.

But who should succeed Blomberg as war minister, or Fritsch as commander of the Army? And how to explain all this to the German public? So far, it was under wraps, but it couldn't stay that way much longer. Hermann Göring helpfully suggested to Hitler that *he* be appointed war minister, in addition to his other portfolios, including commander of the Luftwaffe. Hitler rejected that immediately. He is quoted as saying privately of Göring, "He doesn't even understand the Luftwaffe."

Joseph Goebbels suggested Hitler take command of the Army personally, but he wasn't ready to take that step. Not yet. Next, Goebbels suggested abolishing the war ministry and replacing it with separate ministries for the Army and the Navy. Hitler liked that idea better.

January 30, 1938 was the fifth anniversary of Hitler's appointment as chancellor, and he had been scheduled to deliver a major speech before the Reichstag to commemorate the occasion, but he canceled it to focus on the new reorganization plan. On January 31, the announcement was made. The war ministry was abolished, and new Army and Navy ministries would take its place. Wilhelm Keitel, the yes man, was appointed Army minister. There was also a shakeup at the foreign ministry. Neurath was out; Joachim von Ribbentrop would replace him. A number of German ambassadors were reassigned or recalled, including Franz von Papen, Hitler's former deputy chancellor, whom you recall was demoted to ambassador to Vienna following the Night of the Long Knives, episode 285.

Hermann Göring was given the title of field marshal as a consolation prize. A number of senior Army commanders were retired, others promoted or transferred. In the midst of this major government and military shakeup, the dismissals of Blomberg and Fritsch barely registered. Nor the dismissal of Hossbach, who was let go for disobeying an order from the *Führer*.

It worked. The foreign press reported on the reshuffle of the German government and military command and speculated about what it all meant for the future of Germany, but took no notice of the two scandals.

Hitler met with senior Army commanders on February 5 and told them about Blomberg and Fritsch. The commanders were stunned. None of them spoke out against the leadership changes in the Army, but many were privately unhappy. They were convinced these charges against Blomberg and Fritsch were baseless, invented by someone in the Gestapo as a way to push them out.

That evening, Hitler called a meeting of his Cabinet to inform them of the changes. Now, ostensibly, Germany is still a parliamentary democracy governed by a chancellor and a cabinet, but the purpose of this meeting was not for discussion or consultation. We are long past the day when the German Cabinet has any real role in running the country. No, this meeting was simply to brief the ministers on recent developments. This particular Cabinet meeting is notable because it will be the very last Cabinet meeting of the Hitler government, even though Hitler will remain *Führer* for another seven and a half years.

Afterward, Hitler retreated to the Berghof to unwind from all this stress. From the available sources, it seems clear that Hitler was genuinely upset by these events, but it worked out to his advantage. The people who had resisted Hitler's priorities most vigorously at that November 5 meeting: foreign minister Neurath, war minister Blomberg and Army chief Fritsch, were all gone. Now the Foreign Office would be run by Ribbentrop, a loyal Nazi, and the Army by Keitel, who was happy to do whatever Hitler told him to do.

In other words, the last of the old-school right-wing conservatives who had supported Hitler as he rose to power have now been pushed aside, replaced by more compliant Nazis and loyal yes men and consolidating Hitler's control over the government, the military and the nation. In this regard, this moment is reminiscent of the Night of the Long Knives, only with less, you know, murdering.

[music: Wagner, Overture to *Tannhäuser*]

While all this was going on domestically in Germany, the situation in Austria was not developing to Hitler's satisfaction. Chancellor Schuschnigg was dragging his feet on that 1936 pledge to free imprisoned Austrian Nazis and include the Nazi Party in his Cabinet. The Nazi Party was still banned in Austria, but the Nazi movement was growing, especially among young Austrian men. In early 1938, Austrian police raided the apartment of one of these Austrian Nazis and seized documents allegedly outlining a plan under which Austrian Nazis would commit sabotage and acts of violence to give the Germans an excuse to intervene. Schuschnigg proclaimed, "There is no question of ever accepting Nazi representatives in the Austrian cabinet. An absolute abyss separates Austria from Nazism... We reject uniformity and centralization... Christendom is

anchored in our very soil, and we know but one God: and that is not the State, or the Nation, or that elusive thing, Race.”

On February 6, immediately after his recall from Vienna, Franz von Papen came to the Berghof to brief Hitler on the situation in Austria. Hitler was still moody following the business with Blomberg and Fritsch, but he sat up excitedly when Papen mentioned that Chancellor Schuschnigg wanted a meeting with him. “I would be delighted to see him here,” Hitler told Papen. He asked Papen to stay on long enough to issue Schuschnigg an invitation to the Berghof.

The meeting took place six days later. Schuschnigg arrived in Salzburg early in the morning with two officials from his foreign ministry. Papen met them there and escorted them to the Berghof. Hitler greeted Schuschnigg warmly on the front steps of his vacation home, then brought the Austrians inside, where they discovered Army commander Wilhelm Keitel and a number of other generals waiting.

Hitler next invited Schuschnigg to his office for a private meeting. Once they were alone, the façade of politeness vanished and Hitler subjected Schuschnigg to one of his characteristic two-hour harangues. Schuschnigg was betraying the German people, Hitler announced, and warned that he would put an end to it. He spoke of his historic mission. He had been chosen by Providence to lead the German people. His path was ordained. More was being asked of him than had been asked of any German before him, and he intended to achieve more than any German before him had ever achieved. He warned Schuschnigg that if he wished, he could be in Vienna tomorrow morning. He said Mussolini had already consented to a German occupation of Austria—which was not true—and neither France nor Britain would lift a finger to prevent it. Either the two of them agreed upon an acceptable solution, right now, today, here at the Berghof, or else, as Hitler put it, “things would have to take their course.”

Then they broke for lunch. In the Berghof’s expansive dining room, in front of everyone else, Hitler reverted to being a charming host. He boasted to Schuschnigg of the many great civilian construction projects under way in Germany, bigger and better than anything they had in the United States.

Following the two-hour lunch, Hitler retired to his office. The Austrians were asked to wait patiently until the *Führer* was prepared to resume the discussions. This was a tactic Hitler was fond of: make them sweat. They waited three hours. Then Ambassador Papen and Foreign Minister Ribbentrop brought the Austrians a typewritten list of Hitler’s demands: amnesty for all imprisoned Austrian Nazis, the Party to be legalized and granted full political rights, the Austrian government will coordinate with Germany on military, diplomatic, and economic matters, and Austrian Nazi sympathizer Arthur Seyss-Inquart will be made Austrian interior minister, which incidentally would put him in control of the Austrian police.

Hitler then invited Schuschnigg back into his office for a second meeting. Schuschnigg tried to stall for time by pointing out that, constitutionally speaking, only the Austrian President, not the

chancellor, could offer an amnesty or appoint a government minister. Hitler opened the door and called for his Army chief, Keitel, and told Schuschnigg to wait outside. When they were alone, Keitel asked Hitler what he wanted. Hitler laughed and said, “Nothing at all.”

It was just a show, to put more pressure on Schuschnigg. And it worked. Schuschnigg agreed to the German demands, politely declined Hitler’s invitation to dinner, and rode with Papen back to Salzburg. At dinner that night with his remaining guests, Hitler boasted of how he had “demolished”—his word—demolished Schuschnigg.

On February 16, just days after being made Austrian interior minister, Seyss-Inquart came to Berlin for consultations with the German government. On the 20<sup>th</sup>, Hitler appeared before the Reichstag to deliver that speech originally scheduled for January 30. It was broadcast live on the radio across Germany and Austria. During the speech, Hitler expressed his dismay that ten million Germans in Austria and Czechoslovakia were being oppressed, merely because they were good and loyal compatriots who loved Germany. No self-respecting world power could be expected to sit back and do nothing in the face of such a monstrous injustice.

On the other hand, Hitler also praised Schuschnigg for working with the German government to implement the 1936 agreement. It appears at this point, Hitler was satisfied that his meeting with Schuschnigg had succeeded. The Austrian chancellor had learned his lesson. No more sneaky business with the 1936 agreement, and now that Schuschnigg had been scared straight, as it were, *Anschluss* had become inevitable. It might take a while, but Hitler felt confident that Austria was on a trajectory that would lead to peaceful unification with Germany. Mission accomplished.

Schuschnigg must have thought the same thing, that barring any new development, *Anschluss* had become inevitable, so on March 9, barely two weeks after Hitler’s speech, Schuschnigg introduced a new development. Adolf Hitler had publicly claimed that if a referendum were held in Austria, unification with Germany would win the vote easily. Well, Schuschnigg decided to turn the tables on Hitler by putting this claim to the test.

Only, there were a few catches. One was that the referendum would be held just four days later, on Sunday, March 13. That was pretty darn quick. Also, only Austrians 25 years old and older would be eligible to vote in the referendum. This was a clear swipe at the Austrian National Socialists, who drew much of their support from the young. And the wording of the referendum—it asked whether or not you supported a “free, German, independent, social, Christian, and united Austria”—could be regarded as a teensy bit slanted. Apparently, Schuschnigg was not willing to take any chances on the outcome.

This announcement caught Hitler and the German government by surprise. Hitler called a meeting, which lasted all night, where he and Göring and Goebbels and some of his other advisors discussed Germany’s response. One option was to call on Austrian Nazis to boycott the referendum, rendering it meaningless. The other was the bolder gambit: declare that in calling



the referendum, Schuschnigg had violated the 1936 agreement and the supplemental agreement signed last month at the Berghof and intervene militarily.

The following morning, Hitler decided on the second option and issued orders for Operation Otto, as it was known. The name was taken from the 25-year-old Otto von Habsburg, the son and heir to Emperor Karl, the deposed ruler of Austria. As had been the case with the Rhineland, the operation would take place over a weekend. The German Army would move into and occupy Austria, but avoid confrontation. Hitler predicted to his advisers that Italy and Britain would do nothing. Possibly France would, though the French would be deterred by the lack of support from their allies.

On Friday at 10:00 AM, the government in Vienna received a German ultimatum. The referendum must be postponed, Schuschnigg must resign, and Seyss-Inquart appointed to succeed him as Austrian chancellor. Austria must agree to these demands by 5:00 that afternoon.

Schuschnigg at first agreed to postponement of the referendum, but refused to resign. In the face of German threats, he reversed himself that afternoon and submitted his resignation to the Austrian President. But the President of Austria refused to appoint Seyss-Inquart as chancellor.

At 8:00 PM Friday evening, Schuschnigg addressed the nation in a radio broadcast to explain his resignation. He had done it to avoid bloodshed, he told the Austrian people; he had also instructed the Austrian military to withdraw and avoid conflict with the Germans. Then Interior Minister Seyss-Inquart took the microphone to announce that he was still in office and would maintain security. Later that evening, Göring dictated the text of a telegram he wanted Seyss-Inquart to send back to Berlin, requesting German assistance in maintaining calm and order in Austria.

Soon afterward, Hitler received word from Rome that Mussolini had been informed of the impending action and had raised no objection. A grateful Hitler said, "Please tell Mussolini I will never forget this...Never, never, never, come what may." A similar message from London reported that the British government would take no action.

Around midnight, the Austrian President relented and invited Seyss-Inquart to assume the office of chancellor. Perhaps by this time, he too understood that no one would come to Austria's aid.

But it was too late. At dawn Saturday morning, German troops marched into Austria. Not only did the Austrians not put up any resistance, but in many places the soldiers were welcomed by cheering crowds offering them flowers and Nazi salutes.

That afternoon, Hitler himself entered Austria through the border town of Braunau-am-Inn, where he had been born just shy of 49 years ago. It took his motorcade four hours to cover the 120 kilometers from Braunau to Linz because the cars had to pick their way through throngs of wellwishers.

Hitler had not intended to complete the *Anschluss* immediately; he would have settled for a Nazi government in Vienna, one that would work cooperatively with Berlin and ease Austria into the idea of *Anschluss* eventually, but the overwhelmingly positive reaction of the Austrian people persuaded him it was time to close the deal. A law was passed declaring unification, to be confirmed by a referendum, now scheduled for April 10.

On Monday, Hitler traveled to Vienna, the city where he had tried and failed to make a go of it selling watercolor paintings and postcards more than 25 years ago. The church bells of Vienna rang out in celebration as he arrived. Jubilant mobs gathered outside the Hotel Imperial, where he stayed. The next day, Hitler visited the Hofburg, the palace that had been the residence of Austria's Habsburg rulers until 1918. There he stood on the balcony and addressed a crowd of hundreds of thousands gathered in the Heldenplatz below. "As the *Führer* and chancellor of the German nation and empire, I announce to posterity the entry of my homeland into the German Reich."

Afterward, he visited the grave of his niece, Geli, and received the Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Theodor Innitzer, who greeted Hitler with a Nazi salute and pledged the cooperation of Austrian Catholics with "the project of German reconstruction."

That evening, Hitler flew back to Munich, then returned to Berlin, where he was again greeted by celebratory crowds. In truth, the German public had been a little bit nervous; there are reports of panic buying emptying the shelves of shops in Munich over the weekend, but once it became clear there would be no Allied military response, all Germany let the good times roll.

On March 18, Hitler addressed the Reichstag and then ordered it dissolved, calling for a new election on April 10, the same day as the referendum in Austria. Hitler spent the intervening time campaigning vigorously for the Nazi list in Germany and for the unification referendum in Austria. No one knew it in 1938, but this would be the last time Adolf Hitler took part in an election campaign; the last time an election would be held with him as *Führer*.

When the votes were counted, in Germany, the Nazi list got 99.1% of the vote. In Austria, where Hitler predicted *Anschluss* would win 80% approval, the actual figure was 99.75%, though with Communists, socialists, Roma, and Jews—about 8% of Austria's population—not permitted to vote.

The Nazis did everything else they could to skew the election and the referendum in their favor. The vote was not secret, for one thing. Voters had to hand their completed ballots to an election official, as opposed to depositing anonymous ballots into a closed box. There is no doubt some voted yes out of fear, but neither can there be doubt that a substantial majority of Austrians genuinely approved of the *Anschluss*.

This moment, right here, in the spring of 1938 marks the peak of Hitler's political popularity. He had accomplished what had been once thought impossible, and he had done it in barely five

years. He'd systematically dismantled the limitations the Treaty of Versailles had put upon Germany, one by one, from reparations to rearmament to posting soldiers in the Rhineland to, now, *Anschluss* with Austria. And as he had promised, he had done it all without firing a shot.

*Anschluss* benefited the economies of both countries. Unemployment was high in Austria, while the German labor market was tightening. New workers made it possible for Hermann Göring to further ramp up military production without triggering that inflation that had so worried Hjalmar Schacht. The Austrian Army was incorporated into the German Army, adding 60,000 new soldiers. Austria's mineral wealth—iron ore, tungsten, lead, copper, graphite—was now part of the German Reich. And the Austrian National Bank's reserves of 600 million Reichsmarks in gold and a further 750 million Reichsmarks in German currency holdings, were now assets of the Reichsbank.

The German military leadership, who had been grumbling over the shabby way Blomberg and Fritsch had been treated, stopped grumbling. Clearly this Hitler knew what he was doing.

When the story is told of the run-up to the Second World War, the re-occupation of the Rhineland and the *Anschluss* are often presented as the first steps. The red flags, as it were, that Hitler was bent on European domination, maybe world domination. This is rooted in Allied wartime propaganda, when the Allies found it useful to depict Austria as Hitler's first victim, a nation in the same category as Poland or Norway or Belgium.

But the *Anschluss* was not forced on Austria. Austrians wanted it, and so did Germans. The celebratory crowds in Linz and Vienna, Munich and Berlin, demonstrated that clearly. From the perspective of Rome or Paris or London, it was impossible to deny that unification was popular. To intervene militarily to stop it might technically have been justified under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, but in practice, it would have been contrary to everything the Allied powers had said since 1918 about the right of all peoples to self-determination.

You might be tempted to dismiss the high percentage of yes votes in the referendum as self-evidently implausible and blame Nazi manipulation. If you think all the way back to episode 22, where I talked about Italian unification, every time the Kingdom of Piedmont took control over a new Italian region, there was a referendum, and Italian unification also won those referenda by similarly overwhelming margins, yet no one questions the legitimacy of Italian unification.

But neither is there question that *Anschluss* had its dark side. Even as Hitler rode into Vienna, to be greeted by swastika flags, swastika banners, Nazi salutes and cheering crowds, that dark side of Austria's newfound enthusiasm for National Socialism was already emerging. Nearly 200,000 Austrians were Jewish, and more than half of them lived in Vienna. Hitler's triumphant entry into the city triggered looting of Jewish-owned homes and shops, their owners driven out from their own property. Austrian Nazis forced doctors and lawyers and professors into the streets to scrub away pro-independence graffiti with their bare hands, while young women were rounded

up and trucked to the SA barracks to scrub the lavatories. Old men with white beards were gathered into synagogues and forced to do calisthenics while yelling “*Heil, Hitler!*”

This spontaneous eruption of anti-Semitic hatred in Vienna went far beyond anything that had been seen so far in Germany, even after five years of Nazi rule. Even the German Nazis were appalled by the persecutions in Vienna. Gestapo head Reinhard Heydrich warned the Austrian Nazis they would face arrest and prosecution if the violence continued. It gradually died away, but the German Nazis found the outburst instructive. Laws in Germany had limited the rights of Jewish Germans, but actual anti-Semitic violence was still rare, because the Germans were sensitive to international opinion. But amid all the hoopla over the *Anschluss* itself, the violence in Vienna drew little attention abroad, and German Nazis took note.

Hitler was riding high on an enormous wave of public approval. But pride, as Jewish Scripture reminds us, goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. As had happened following the militarization of the Rhineland, two years ago, Hitler’s triumph further solidified his own self-image as more than just a man or a leader, but an instrument of destiny. He would say that even greater tasks lay ahead, for him and for the German people. He was on an historic mission.

Even those close to him, his subordinates, advisors, and fellow Nazis, found this talk uncomfortable, but they also knew perfectly well what mission he was referring to. He had laid it all out for them as recently as last November.

But that is a story for another episode. We’ll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Mark for his kind donation, and thank you to Harry for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Mark and Harry 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](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

The podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. Sometimes it’s my own work, sometimes it’s licensed, but many times, the music you hear here is free and downloadable. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you’re there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today’s show.

The holiday season is upon us once again, and as I do every year, 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 these are deeply appreciated, too.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue with Adolf Hitler's unfolding plan. Even before the referendum in Austria, he was already looking ahead to the next step, the annexation of Czechoslovakia. Can there be peace in our time? Find out next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Werner von Blomberg and his new bride honeymooned on the island of Capri, in Italy, for about a year. Afterward, they returned to Germany and he lived in retirement. After the war, he was arrested, but his health deteriorated and he died of colorectal cancer in 1946, at the age of 67.

Werner von Fritsch continued to maintain his innocence, and his accuser, Otto Schmidt, eventually admitted he had lied. When war broke out with Poland, Fritsch was recalled to active duty and given a command. He was killed in action outside of Warsaw in September 1939, one of the first German general officers to fall in the Second World War.

Kurt von Schuschnigg was taken into custody following the German occupation of Austria, and he was eventually placed in a concentration camp. In April 1945, Hitler ordered his execution, but he was liberated by soldiers of the US Army before the order could be carried out.

Afterward, he emigrated to the United States, where he taught political science at St. Louis University until 1967. He passed away in 1977, in his native Austria, at the age of 79.

[music: Closing Theme]