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Hitler

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success would transform in a trice the political atmosphere of Europe and set entirely new standards, was Adolf Hitler.

And as he combined in his own self the tendencies or moods, all worked to his advantage. He derived considerable profit from European anti-Semitism, which had a large following in Poland, Hungary, Rumania, and the Baltic countries, but was also widespread in France, and which even in England in 1935 inspired the leader of a Fascist group to propose settling the Jewish problem radically and hygienically by "death chambers."⁶

Hitler wrung further profit from the contradictions within the existing peace settlements. The Treaty of Versailles had for the first time introduced moral factors into international relations, factors such as guilt, honor, equality, and self-determination. Hitler played upon these themes more and more loudly. For a time, as Ernst Nolte has trenchantly remarked, he must paradoxically have seemed the last faithful follower of Woodrow Wilson's long-since-faded principles. In his role of heavy creditor to the victorious Allies, clutching a bundle of unpaid promissory notes, he achieved lasting effects, particularly in England. For his appeals not only touched the nation's guilty conscience but also chanced to coincide with traditional English balance-of-power policy. British statesmen who believed in that policy had long been watching with uneasiness France's overpowering influence on the Continent. Hence Hitler constantly received encouragement from English voices. The London *Times* quoted Lord Lothian as saying that any order which did not concede to the Reich the most powerful position on the Continent was "artificial." A leading member of the Royal Air Force early in 1935 told a German that it would arouse "no indignation" in England if Germany were to announce that she was rearming in the air, contrary to the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.⁷ But both, the British and the continental Europeans, the victors and the vanquished, the authoritarians and the democrats, sensed an impending change in the climate of the era. And this was another element Hitler made use of. In 1936 he declared:

We and all nations have a sense that we have come to the turning point of an age. Not only we, the former defeated, but the victors also have the inner conviction that something is wrong, that men seem to have taken leave of reason. . . . Everywhere the nations seem to feel that a new order must come, especially on the Continent where the people are so closely crowded together. The motto for this new order must read: reason and logic, understanding and mutual consideration! Those who think that the word "Versailles" could possibly stand at the entrance to this new order are sadly mistaken. That would not be the cornerstone of the new order, but its gravestone.⁸

Thus Europe offered Hitler as many gateways for invasion as Germany had. A belated opposition would hammer away at the antitheses between Hitler and Europe; this was a misconception, for there were a large number of shared feelings and interests. With some bitterness Thomas Mann,

voicing the attitudes of a minority, spoke of the "painfully slow and reluctant way in which we Germans, those of us who are exiles at home or exiles abroad, who have believed in Europe and thought we had Europe morally behind us, were forced to realize that in fact we do not have it behind us."⁹

The many encouragements he received from English sources tended to support Hitler in his boldest expectations. He clung to the idea he had advanced at the beginning of 1923 of an alliance with England. That remained, in fact, the central concept of his foreign policy, for it was essentially the idea of partitioning the world. England, as the dominant sea power, would command the seas and overseas territories. Germany, as the unchallenged land power, would dominate the vast Eurasian continent. Thus England occupied a key place in Hitler's schemes in the early years of the regime, and the manner in which his actions were received across the Channel immensely fortified Hitler's sense that he was on the right path.

To be sure, not all his actions were equally well received. In May, 1933, Rosenberg had visited London and been sharply rebuffed. The spectacular withdrawal from the League of Nations had not exactly raised Hitler's stock in England. Another blot had been the murder, by Austrian Nazis, of Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss in July, 1934—even though Hitler, as later became apparent, may not have been told of the planned assassination. But selfish interests proved, as always, stronger than moral outrage—especially since Hitler himself was quick to repudiate the affair. The assassins had fled to Germany; he turned them over to the Austrian government, abruptly dismissed Theo Habicht, the inspector of the Austrian National Socialist Party, and recalled Dr. Rieth, the German ambassador, who was implicated in the events. Franz von Papen, Catholic, conservative, and once again a reassuring figure to anxious bourgeois, was sent to take his place.

The unanimity of the foreign reaction to the assassination of Dollfuss had taught Hitler that he would have to proceed more carefully. The attempted coup in Vienna had been hastily organized and poorly co-ordinated. Beyond that, Hitler recognized that his position was not yet strong enough for major challenges; he would do better to wait for provocative pretexts or imperceptibly to work his opponents into the position known in chess as a "forced move"—when a player has only one legal move open to him. Then his own carefully premeditated actions would be disguised as countermoves.

Circumstances arranged matters favorably. Soon afterward, Hitler obtained his hoped-for increase in prestige by winning the plebiscite held in the Saar on January 13, 1935. The region, which had been separated from the Reich under the Treaty of Versailles, voted by an overwhelming majority for reunion with Germany: there were only about 2,000 votes for

union with France as against 445,000 for reunion with Germany and approximately 46,000 for continuance of the status quo, administration by the League of Nations. Although the result had never been in doubt, Hitler presented the vote as a personal triumph. One of the injustices of Versailles had at last been righted, he declared three days later in an interview at Obersalzberg with the American journalist Pierre Huss. Only a few weeks later the Western powers handed him the opportunity for one of those counterstrokes that from now on became his favorite device.

The tactical weakness of the leading European powers vis-à-vis Hitler stemmed from their desire for negotiations. They were forever coming forward with proposals that were supposed to fetter the unruly fellow, or at least put him in an uncomfortable position. Early in 1935 he had received offers from England and France, among others, to extend the Locarno Pact by an agreement limiting the threat of air attacks. There were likewise offers for similar pacts from eastern and central European countries. Far from considering these proposals seriously, Hitler merely used them as a springboard for his tactical maneuvers. They permitted him to spread uncertainty, to achieve easy effects by sham declarations, and to cover up the aims he was unerringly pursuing.

During 1934 he had already taken steps to reach an accord with England on air armaments. His purpose was to induce London, merely by entering into negotiations, to treat the armaments restrictions imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles as nonexistent. At the same time, Hitler proceeded on the assumption that the talks in themselves, and the aura of intimacy they would inevitably create, would be excellent means of sowing distrust between England and France. For this reason he was quite ready to encourage the English side to undertake extensive rearmament. After the talks had been broken off in the aftermath of Dollfuss's assassination, Hitler approached the British government with a new offer at the end of 1934. Characteristically, he increased his demands, as he would always do after a defeat. Hitherto he had asked only that Germany be permitted half the British strength in the air. Now he mentioned, in a casual remark, that parity was "a matter of course"; it had ceased to be an object of negotiation, as far as he was concerned. Rather, the key offer was now for a naval agreement with England.

This proposal by Hitler has been called, with some exaggeration, his "crowning idea."¹⁰ The negotiations on the air agreement had broken down only partly because of the Vienna events; the chief reason for their failure was that the British, though interested, were not ready for a bilateral pact. The offer for a naval agreement, on the other hand, struck them at a vulnerable spot.

Hitler's special envoy, Joachim von Ribbentrop, launched a trial balloon in the middle of November, 1934, when he met with the then Keeper of the Privy Seal Anthony Eden and Foreign Secretary Sir John Simon. Early in

1935 the contacts were continued. On January 25 Hitler "unofficially" received Lord Allen of Hurtwood, and four days later—again "unofficially"—the liberal politician Lord Lothian. The German Chancellor complained about the limping progress of the disarmament negotiations, stressed that both sides had parallel interests, then referred to Great Britain's uncontested dominion of the sea before he made his first specific proposal: he would be ready to conclude an agreement regulating naval strength between Germany and England in the ratio of 35 to 100. In return, Germany, in keeping with her national tradition, would be allowed the stronger land army. Such was the outline of the grand design. In his conversation with Lord Lothian Hitler gave the matter another original twist. If he might speak not as Chancellor of the Reich, he said, but as a "student of history," he would regard as the surest guarantee of peace a joint Anglo-German statement to the effect that henceforth any disturber of the peace would be called to account and punished jointly by these two countries.

The impending visit of the British Foreign Secretary to Berlin would provide the opportunity for discussions of substance. It was set for March 7, 1935. The talks show how closely he had measured the interests and psychology of the other side. For he skillfully implanted in the British those arguments for appeasement that would dominate the politics of the following years. The British came away from the talks with the belief that Hitler urgently desired a treaty in order to legalize his rearmament and at last make Germany eligible for alliances. This need was a trump card that must not go unplayed. Here was a way to end the armaments race, to keep German rearmament within controllable bounds, and to tie Hitler's hands after all. Of course, France would be alarmed by an Anglo-German treaty, but she would have to realize that "England has no permanent friends, but only permanent interests," as the *Naval Review* wrote. These interests would be served if a great power like Germany voluntarily acknowledged the British claim to dominion on the seas, especially under the moderate conditions that Hitler had set. The Versailles era, which meant so much to France, was in any case over, and, as a Foreign Office memo of March 21, 1934, quipped, if there had to be a funeral it might as well be arranged as long as Hitler was in a mood to pay the services of the gravediggers.¹¹

The real meaning of all these considerations was simply that they spelled the end of the solidarity created during the World War and confirmed in the Treaty of Versailles. Once again Hitler had demonstrated his ability to blast apart the united front of his opponents. Even more astonishing was his faculty for spreading among the victors, as he had already done among the vanquished, the sense that the system of peace they themselves had proclaimed only fifteen years earlier was intolerable. In the election campaigns during the last years of the republic he had shown his ingenuity in taking a problematical situation and producing a stylized version of it as

an absurdity and cynical injustice. Now he successfully applied the same trick to foreign affairs. For a moment it seemed as though his antagonists would organize for resistance after all. But instead they produced only an empty defensive gesture, which Hitler saw through immediately. After that they gave him even freer scope.

As if it wished to strengthen the position of its Foreign Secretary the British government on March 4 published a White Paper that condemned Germany's rearmament as an open breach of treaty. Germany's bellicose tone was causing growing insecurity. Therefore the British government thought it proper to increase its air power. Instead of being cowed, Hitler went into a sulk, and canceled the visit from Sir John Simon on the grounds of a sudden "cold." Simultaneously, he exploited the alleged wrong inflicted upon him to launch a counterattack. On March 9 he made an official announcement that Germany had established an air force. The French government responded by extending the term of military service for the conscript classes from the years of low birth rate. The British Foreign Secretary, however, merely told the House of Commons that he and Mr. Eden still intended to go to Berlin.

Making the most of this disparate reaction, Hitler went a step further on the following weekend. He pointed to the measures taken by Germany's neighbors, in whom Germany had repeatedly and vainly put her trust ever since the days of Woodrow Wilson, until she found herself in the midst of a heavily armed world reduced to "a condition of impotent defenselessness as humiliating as it is ultimately dangerous." He was, therefore, reinstating universal military service and establishing a new army with a peacetime strength of thirty-six divisions and 550,000 men.

Hitler combined this proclamation with a brilliant military celebration. On March 17, the day of mourning that had now been renamed Heroes' Memorial Day, he organized a grand parade in which units of the new air force already participated. Alongside von Mackensen, the only living marshal of the old imperial army, and followed by the top-ranking generals, Hitler marched along Unter den Linden to the terrace of the Schloss, where he pinned honorary crosses to the flags and emblems of the army. Then, with tens of thousands cheering, he reviewed the parade. But although the reintroduction of universal military service was popular as a sign of defiance to the Versailles Treaty, Hitler did not dare link it with another plebiscite, as he had done with comparable actions in the past.

The crucial factor at the moment was the reaction of the Versailles signatory powers to this open breach of the treaty. But after only a few hours Hitler saw that his gamble had been successful. The British government did issue a protest, but in the very protest note inquired whether Hitler still wished to receive the Foreign Secretary. To the German side that was a "regular sensation,"¹² as one of the persons closely involved commented. France and Italy, on the other hand, were prepared to take

some strong countermeasures, and in the middle of April arranged for a conference of the three powers in Stresa on Lake Maggiore. Mussolini took the lead in urging that Germany be stopped in her tracks. But the representatives of Great Britain made it clear from the start that they had no intention of imposing sanctions. The result was that the conference petered out in an exchange of ideas. Mussolini observed that consultations are the last refuge of indecisiveness when confronted with reality.

Hitler drew his conclusions, and when Simon and Eden arrived in Berlin at the end of March, they found him thoroughly self-confident. With patient courtesy he waited to hear their proposals, but he himself made no promises. After going on at great length about the Bolshevik menace he once again referred to the German nation's lack of living space and offered a global alliance, the first stage of which was to be the proposed naval pact. When the British statesmen said a firm no to the establishment of a special Anglo-German relationship, and above all refused to sacrifice Britain's close co-operation with France, Hitler found himself in a difficult negotiating position. For a moment the whole idea of the alliance, his grand design, seemed to have failed. But he remained impassive. When the following day's talks threw a new opportunity his way, he used it for a bold bluff. Sir John Simon responded to the German demand for parity in the air by asking what the present strength of the German air force was. Hitler, after a brief pause of seeming hesitation, answered that Germany had already attained parity with England. This information took the others' breath away. For a while no one said a word; the British negotiators' faces betrayed embarrassed surprise and doubt. Yet this was the turning point. Now it became evident why Hitler had postponed the talks until he could announce the building of the air force and the introduction of conscription. England could not be won by wooing alone; Hitler could lend weight to his proposals only by pressure and threats. Not fondness but weapons brought nations to the conference table. Immediately after this round of negotiations Hitler, together with Göring, Ribbentrop, and several cabinet members, went to the British Embassy for a breakfast. Sir Eric Phipps, the ambassador, had lined up his children in the reception room. They stretched out their little arms toward Hitler in the German greeting, and brought out a bashful "*Heil*."¹³

The British, at any rate, had been deeply impressed. Another opportunity to isolate Hitler soon arose when the League of Nations, on April 17, condemned Germany's violation of the Versailles Treaty. Shortly afterward, France concluded a treaty of alliance with the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the British abided by the date for signing the naval pact that had been agreed on in Berlin. It seems clear that Hitler saw this as a telling admission of weakness and planned to exploit it. He therefore instructed his special envoy, Ribbentrop, to initiate the talks in the Foreign Office on

June 4 by putting the agreement in the form of an ultimatum. England must accept the proportion of naval strength of 35 to 100; that was not a German proposal but an unshakable decision on the Führer's part. Acceptance of it was the precondition for the beginning of negotiations. Flushed with anger, Sir John Simon reproved the head of the German delegation and walked out of the session. But Ribbentrop gruffly stuck to his terms. Arrogant and limited as he was, he obviously lacked any sense of how to handle the matter. For here right at the start of the negotiations he was pushing the other party to accept the very method they had recently condemned in their White Paper, then in their protest note after the re-introduction of universal military service, later in Stresa, and most recently in the Council of the League of Nations. He dismissed all the remonstrances "categorically," to use one of the favorite words in his subsequent report; he wanted the alliance to be no less than "eternal"; and when the British objected that he was reversing the order of business, he declared it came to the same thing whether difficult matters were discussed at the beginning or the end. The negotiators parted with nothing accomplished.

Two days later, however, the British asked for another meeting; their opening statement declared that the British government had decided to accept the Chancellor's demand as the basis for further naval discussions between the two countries. And, as if the special relationship of trust that Hitler wanted of England had already been established, Sir John Simon remarked, with a discreet gesture of complicity, that they would have to let a few days pass in consideration of the situation in France, where governments were "unfortunately not so stable as in Germany and England."¹⁴ A few days later the text of the treaty had been worked out. With some feeling for symbolism, the day for signing was fixed as June 18, the hundred and twentieth anniversary of the day the British and Prussians had defeated the French at Waterloo. Ribbentrop returned home to be hailed by Hitler as a great statesman, "greater than Bismarck." Hitler himself called this day "the happiest of [my] life."¹⁵

It was in fact an extraordinary success, and it granted Hitler everything he could hope for at the moment. British apologists have ever since pointed to Great Britain's security requirements and to the possibility that Hitler could have been tamed by concessions. But the question remains whether those requirements and vague hopes could justify an agreement that condoned a policy of brash violation of treaties, sabotaged Western solidarity, and set the political situation in Europe in motion in such a way that there was no knowing when and where it would come to a stop. The naval agreement has rightly been called an "epochal event whose symptomatic importance was greater than its actual content."¹⁶ Above all, it proved to Hitler once again that the methods of blackmail could accomplish absolutely anything, and it nourished his hopes of ultimately concluding the grand alliance for the partition of the world. This pact, he exulted,

was "the beginning of a new age." He firmly believed, he said, "that the British have sought the understanding with us in this area only as the initial step to very much broader co-operation. A German-British combination will be stronger than all other powers together." Given the seriousness of his historical pretensions, it was more than a gesture of empty ceremony when Hitler, in Nuremberg at the beginning of September, accepted the presentation of a reproduction of Charlemagne's sword.

The Anglo-German naval treaty had a further consequence that once and for all demolished all the existing political relationships in Europe. In the two and a half years since Hitler had been appointed Chancellor, Mussolini had pursued a policy of critical reserve toward Hitler in spite of their ideological fraternity. He had shown "a keener sense of the extraordinary and menacing character of National Socialism than most western statesmen."¹⁷ Gratified though he was by the victory of the Fascist principle in Germany, he could not suppress his deep uneasiness about this neighbor to the north who was bursting with the dynamism, vitality, and discipline he had laboriously been trying to instill into his own people. The meeting in Venice had only served to confirm his mistrust of Hitler. But it seems also to have aroused that inferiority complex for which he thereafter tried to compensate more and more by posturings, imperial actions, or the invoking of a vanished past. Ultimately, it would drive him deeper and deeper into his fateful partnership with Hitler. In a speech shortly after the Venice meeting he had declared, with a glance at Hitler's racial ideas, that thirty centuries of history permitted Italians "to look with sublime indifference upon certain doctrines on the other side of the Alps which have been developed by the descendants of those who in the days of Caesar, Virgil and Augustus were still illiterates." According to another source he had called Hitler a "clown," denounced the race doctrine as "Jewish," and expressed sarcastic doubts about whether anyone would succeed in transforming the Germans into "a racially pure herd," adding: "According to the most favorable hypothesis . . . six centuries are needed." Unlike France, let alone England, he was prepared at various times to counter Hitler's breaches of treaties by military gestures: "The best way to check the Germans is by calling up the military class of 1911." At the time of Dollfuss's assassination he had ordered several Italian divisions to the northern border, telegraphed the Austrian government that he was prepared to offer it all support in defending the country's independence, and finally even permitted the Italian press to publish popular lampoons on Hitler and the Germans.

He now wished to cash in on all this good conduct. His glance fell upon Ethiopia, which had been occupying Italy's imperialistic fantasies ever since the end of the nineteenth century, when an attempt to extend the colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland had failed miserably. England and

France, he decided, would impose no obstacles to a conquest, since they would continue to need Italy in the defensive front against Hitler. Addis Ababa, situated in a kind of no man's land, could not really be more important to the two great powers than Berlin. Mussolini interpreted the half-promises that Laval had made in January, when he visited Rome, and the silence of the British at Stresa, as signs of discreet consent. The Duce also reasoned that the Anglo-German naval pact had increased the value of Italy to the Western powers, especially to France.

By means of deliberately provoked border incidents and oasis conflicts, he stirred up feeling for his colonial war, which had an oddly anachronistic air. While France assured him passive support, for fear that a further pillar of her system of alliances would collapse, he dismissed all attempts at mediation with one of those virile Caesarian gestures he had at his command. Surprisingly, it was England who then came forward. After having refused as recently as April to counter Hitler's troublemaking with sanctions, in September England demanded that sanctions be imposed on Mussolini, and to emphasize her resolve ostentatiously reinforced her Mediterranean fleet. Now, however, France objected; France found herself unwilling to risk her good relations with Italy for the sake of an England that had just demonstrated her unreliability as an ally by coming to an arrangement with Hitler. This refusal in turn angered the British. In Italy outrage was whipped up to the point of boastful talk about a preventive war against Great Britain (mockingly referred to as "Operation Madness"). In short, all understandings and time-tested loyalties now disintegrated. In France, influential partisans of Mussolini, including many intellectuals, openly came out in favor of the Italian expansionist policies. Charles Maurras, the spokesman of the French Right, publicly threatened with death all deputies who demanded sanctions against Italy. Ironic defeatists queried, "*Mourir pour le Négus?*" Soon the same question would be applied to Danzig.

There could be only one justification for the British gesture, especially in view of Hitler's stance: if the British government were prepared to counter Mussolini's act of aggression with all resolution, not shrinking from the risk of war. Obviously, British determination did not go quite that far, and thus it merely brought on the misfortune more speedily. Mussolini felt that the threat of sanctions had been such an insult to the pride and honor of Italy that he was bound to go ahead. On October 2, 1935, at a mass demonstration to which 20 million people, assembled in the streets and plazas throughout Italy, listened enthusiastically, he declared war on Ethiopia: "A great hour in the history of our country has struck. . . . Forty million Italians, a sworn community, will not let themselves be robbed of their place in the sun!" It would have taken only the closing of the Suez Canal or an oil embargo to render the Italian expeditionary army with its modern equipment incapable of battle. The Ethiopians would then

have inflicted upon the Italians a devastating defeat, as the Emperor Menelik had done on the same ground forty years earlier. Mussolini later admitted that this would have been "an inconceivable disaster" for him. But England and France shrank from such a course, as did the other members of the League of Nations. A few half-hearted measures were taken, their feebleness only diminishing what prestige the democracies and the League of Nations still had. There were many reasons for caution. President Beneš, for example, who emerged as a particularly vigorous advocate of economic sanctions, prudently excepted Czechoslovakia's own exports to Italy.

The internal contradictions and antagonisms of Europe afforded Mussolini almost unlimited freedom to maneuver. And with unprecedented brutality, which established a new style of inhumane warfare, the modern Italian army set about destroying an unprepared and nearly defenseless enemy. It even employed poison gas. No less unprecedented was the way in which prominent military officers, including Mussolini's sons Bruno and Vittorio, boasted of the sport they had had in their fighter planes harassing fleeing hordes of human beings and raining death upon them with incendiary bombs and machine guns.¹⁸ On May 9, 1936, the Italian dictator stood on the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia announcing his "triumph over fifty nations" to an ecstatic mob, and proclaimed the "reappearance of the Empire upon the fated hills of Rome."

Hitler had at first observed strict neutrality in the conflict, and not only because he had sufficient reasons to be annoyed with Mussolini. This Ethiopian adventure disturbed his fundamental design in foreign policy. That design had always envisioned a partnership with England and Italy. But the crisis was setting his two prospective allies against one another and confronting Hitler with an unforeseen alternative.

Surprisingly, after prolonged hesitation he decided to take Italy's side, and supplied the Italians with raw materials, especially coal, although only a few months earlier he had hailed the Anglo-German treaty as the beginning of a new era. He was obviously not prompted by ideological sympathy. Economic factors did not seem to play a decisive part, either, although he was certainly influenced by such considerations. Much more important was the fact that he saw in the war another chance to create havoc within the established order of things. His trick for manipulating any crisis consisted in supporting the weaker opponent against the stronger. Thus, as late as the summer of 1935, in two highly secret transactions, Hitler had supplied the Emperor of Ethiopia with war materials valued at approximately 4 million marks. Included were thirty antitank guns that were clearly meant to serve against the Italian aggressor. Out of similar considerations he now supported Mussolini against the Western powers. The decision came all the easier for him because, as a secret speech he delivered in April, 1937, makes plain, he did not take England's commit-

ment very seriously. The principles England was defending—the integrity of small nations, the protection of peace, the right of self-determination—meant nothing to him, whereas he saw Italy's imperialistic gamble as representing the true laws and logic of politics. He made the same grave mistake in August and September, 1939, caused, no doubt, by his inability to think in terms other than those of naked-power interests. Moreover, in the exultation of his rapid successes he felt sufficiently secure to test the newly concluded pact with England by a certain degree of strain, provided he could win over another potential ally who up to then had refused to march with him despite all his overtures.

In addition to using the Ethiopian War to break his isolation in the south, Hitler seized upon the obvious indecisiveness of the Western powers and the paralysis of the League of Nations to launch another of his surprise coups. On March 7, 1936, German troops occupied the Rhineland, which had been demilitarized since the conclusion of the Locarno Pact. By the logic of events, that would have had to be his next step, but to all appearances it came unexpectedly even to Hitler himself. If we may judge by the documents, the action had originally been planned for the spring of 1937. But in the middle of February he began to wonder whether he could not advance the date, in view of the international situation. Apparently he made up his mind only a few days later, when Mussolini twice in quick succession informed him that the spirit of Stresa was dead and Italy would not participate in any sanctions against Germany. Yet this time, too, Hitler waited for a pretext that would enable him to assume before the world's eyes his favorite role of one who had been abused. He wanted to be able to cry out against the shame that had been inflicted upon him.

This time he took his cue from the Franco-Soviet mutual assistance pact. The agreement had been negotiated some time before, but not yet ratified. It lent itself all the better to Hitler's purposes because it had been the subject of protracted domestic controversies within France and had stirred considerable concern internationally as well, especially in England. In order to disguise his intentions, on February 21 Hitler granted an interview to Bertrand de Jouvenel. He expressed his desire for rapprochement and in particular repudiated the intense anti-French bias of *Mein Kampf*. At the time he was writing the book, he explained, France and Germany had been enemies; but by now there were no longer any grounds for conflict. Jouvenel then asked why the book, widely regarded as a kind of political bible, was still being reprinted in unaltered form. Hitler replied that he was not a writer who revised his books, but a politician: "I make my corrections every day in my foreign policy, which is aimed entirely at rapprochement with France. . . . My corrections will be written in the great book of History." But when the interview was not published in *Paris-Midi* until a full week later, and in fact not until the day after the Chamber of Deputies had ratified the Franco-Soviet Pact, Hitler felt he had been hoodwinked.

When François-Poncet called on him on March 2, Hitler angrily told the ambassador that he had been made a fool of. Political intrigues had kept the interview from being published in time; all his statements had since been outstripped by events, and he would be making new proposals.

The directive that War Minister von Blomberg prepared for the occupation of the Rhineland was dated that same March 2. On March 7 his troops crossed the Rhine, with the population cheering and throwing flowers. But Hitler was well aware of the risk he had taken. Later he referred to the forty-eight hours after the occupation as the "most nerve-racking" period in his life. He did not want to go through another such strain for the next ten years, he said. The build-up of the army had only just begun. If it came to fighting, he had only a handful of divisions against the nearly 200 divisions of France and her East European allies, for in the meanwhile the forces of the Soviet Union had also to be added. And although Hitler himself did not appear to have suffered a nervous breakdown, as one of the participants later asserted, the nerves of the sanguine War Minister did give out. Shortly after the beginning of the operation, he was all for withdrawing the troops in view of the French intervention that could certainly be expected. "If the French had marched into the Rhineland," Hitler admitted, "we would have had to withdraw with our tails between our legs, for the military resources at our disposal would have been wholly inadequate for even a moderate resistance."¹⁹

Nevertheless, Hitler did not hesitate to take the risk, and his readiness to do so was undoubtedly connected with his increasingly contemptuous assessment of France. In his time-tested manner he made the operation as safe as possible. Once again he ordered it for a Saturday, knowing that the decision-making committees of the Western powers could not meet on weekends. Once again he accompanied his breach of a treaty, this time a double violation of the treaties of Versailles and Locarno, with pledges of good behavior and emphatic offers of alliances, even proposing a twenty-five-year nonaggression pact with France and a return of Germany to the League of Nations. Again he had his step legitimized by the democratic process, making it the issue of an election in which he for the first time achieved the "totalitarian dream figure"²⁰ of 99 per cent of the vote. "Abroad and domestically that always has enormous effect," he later said. How consciously he combined this plan of surprise blows with reassuring talk is evident from a remark in the table talk in which he criticized Mussolini's indulgence toward the Curia: "I would march into the Vatican and fetch out the whole crew. I would then say: 'Sorry, I made a mistake!'—But they would be gone!" Quite rightly he called this phase, which left the strongest imprint on his tactics, the "age of *faits accomplis*."²¹

The Reichstag speech in which Hitler supported his action exploited to the hilt the contradictions, fears, and longings for peace in Germany and the rest of Europe. Again he drew a picture of the "horror of the Com-

munist international dictatorship of hate," the danger from the sinister East, which France was bringing into Europe. He pleaded for "raising the problem of the general antagonisms among European nations and states out of the sphere of irrationality and passion and placing it under the quiet light of higher insight." Specifically, he justified his action on the grounds that in the German legal view the Franco-Soviet Pact must be regarded as a violation of the Locarno Pact, since it was undeniably aimed against Germany. And although the French disagreed, Hitler's argument had a certain validity, even if his own policy of revisionism was what had prompted a France concerned for her security to enter the alliance with Russia.

His arguments and assurances did not fail to make an impression. The Paris government did consider a military counterblow for a moment—as we now know—but shrank from general mobilization in view of the prevailing pacifist mood. England, for her part, had difficulty understanding the French excitement; the British thought that the Germans were merely returning "to their own back garden." And when Eden advised Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin to respond to France's anxiety at least by having the military staffs make contact, he was told: "The boys won't have it."²² Of all of France's allies, only Poland indicated any readiness to intervene. But, left dangling by the passive French government, it ended by falling into considerable embarrassment in its efforts to find even a reasonably plausible explanation vis-à-vis Berlin for its seeming aggressiveness.

Thus everything followed the model of the preceding crises. Hitler's abrupt action was followed by loud protests and threats, then serious consultations, finally conferences (with and without Germany), until the prolonged palavers had used up all the energy that might have been produced by injured righteousness. The Council of the League of Nations, which came hastily to London for a special session, unanimously declared Germany in violation of her treaties, but it also took grateful note of Hitler's repeatedly announced "desire for co-operation." And, as if to say that its own vote sprang from a rather absurd whim, it recommended negotiations with the treaty breaker. When the Council set up a neutral zone in the Rhineland about thirteen miles in width and demanded that Germany refrain from building fortifications in this area, Hitler merely replied that he would not bow to any dictates, that German sovereignty had not been restored in order to be restricted or eliminated immediately afterward. This was the last time the powers were to speak in the forceful tone of victors; in any case they had been using that tone less and less of late. That was certainly implied by the London *Times*, which saw in Hitler's conduct "a chance for reconstruction."

What all these reactions added up to was the admission that the Western powers were no longer able or no longer willing to defend the peace system they had established in and after Versailles. Only a year before, after the

weak reaction to Germany's reintroduction of universal military service, François-Poncet noted anxiously that Hitler must now be convinced that he could "permit himself anything and prescribe the laws for Europe." Encouraged by the cheers of his own people and by the weakness and egotism of the other side, he continued to climb higher and higher. Returning from his triumphal ride through the reoccupied Rhineland, after a speech preceded by pealing bells at Cologne Cathedral and followed by fifteen minutes of radio silence, he turned to his cronies in the special train and once again expressed his relief at the limpness of the Western powers: "Am I glad! Good Lord, am I glad it's gone so smoothly. Sure enough, the world belongs to the brave man. He's the one God helps." Passing by glowing blast furnaces, slag heaps, and derricks in the nocturnal Ruhr district, he was overcome by one of those moods of euphoria that brought on in him a desire for music. He asked that a record of Wagner's music be played, and, listening to the prelude of *Parsifal*, meditated: "I have built up my religion out of *Parsifal*. Divine worship in solemn form . . . without pretenses of humility . . . One can serve God only in the garb of the hero." But even in such moments, spoiled by almost incomprehensible successes and virtually stunned by the cheers he had received, he was still very close to his early days with their dreary resentments. Even in good fortune he was incapable of summing up much serenity or magnanimity. That is clear from the remark he made at the next selection, the funeral march from *Götterdämmerung*: "I first heard it in Vienna. At the Opera. And I still remember as if it were today how madly excited I became on the way home over a few yammering Yids* I had to pass. I cannot think of a more incompatible contrast. This glorious mystery of the dying hero and this Jewish crap!"²³

At first the occupation of the Rhineland scarcely affected the actual balance of forces among the European powers. But it gave Hitler that safety in his rear troops—in the West—which was essential to him if he were to realize his aims in the Southeast and East. And the time was now drawing nearer. No sooner had the excitement over his operation faded than he began building a strongly fortified line of defense along the German western frontier. Germany's face was now turning to the East.

An intensified sense of the Communist threat would have to be whipped up in order to prepare the people psychologically for the turn to the East. And as if he himself were pulling all the stops in the historical process, Hitler once more found circumstances meeting him halfway. The Communist International had resolved upon its new Popular Front tactics in the

* A typical Hitler formulation: *mauschelnde Kaftanjuden*. *Mauscheln* means "to talk with a Jewish accent" and also carries overtones of "to cheat." The kaftan, which some Jews in Vienna still wore, seemed to excite a peculiar horror in Hitler, and became in itself a term of abuse. By comparison, the last word of the passage, *Judenreck*, is relatively mild.—TRANS.

summer of 1935. Those tactics met with spectacular success in the Spanish elections of February, 1936, and shortly afterward in France, where the electoral victory of the united French Left benefited chiefly the Communists, who increased their seats in the Chamber of Deputies from ten to seventy-two. On June 4, 1936, Léon Blum formed a Popular Front government. Six weeks later, on July 17, a military revolt in Morocco touched off the Spanish Civil War.

When the Spanish Popular Front government turned to France and the Soviet Union for aid, General Franco, the rebel leader, asked for similar backing from Germany and Italy. Together with a Spanish officer, two Nazi functionaries set out from Tetuan in Morocco for Berlin, to transmit personal letters from Franco to Hitler and Göring. Both the Foreign Office and the War Ministry declined to receive the delegation officially, but Rudolf Hess decided to take the matter straight to Hitler, who was in Bayreuth for the annual festival. On the evening of July 25 the three envoys met Hitler as he was returning from the Festspielhaus on its hill above the town and handed him the letters. Out of the euphoric mood of the moment, without consulting the ministers concerned, the decision was taken to lend active support to Franco. Göring, as commander in chief of the air force, and von Blomberg as War Minister, immediately received directives to this effect. The most important immediate measure, and perhaps the decisive one, consisted in the dispatch of several formations of Junkers 52's. With the help of these planes Franco was able to transport his troops across the Mediterranean and create a bridgehead on the Spanish mainland. During the following three years he received support in the form of war matériel, technicians, advisers, and the Condor Legion. Nevertheless, the German aid did not significantly affect the conduct of the war, and in any case lagged far behind the forces placed at Franco's disposal by Mussolini. Documents reveal the interesting fact that here again Hitler acted chiefly with tactical ends in view and showed a rational coolness entirely devoid of ideology.²⁴ For years he did virtually nothing to bring about a victory by Franco, but he did all in his power to keep the conflict going. He was always fully aware that crisis was useful to him. Every critical situation demands a frank admission of real interests, like a creditor's oath that he is concealing none of his assets. Every critical situation produces discord, ruptures and reorientations. And such troubles offer a springboard for the political imagination. The real profit Hitler was able to derive from the Spanish Civil War consisted in the turmoil it introduced into European conditions.

Compared with that, all other gains paled—even that of putting the German air force and tank troops to test in battle. One further gain that counted was the militant demonstration of superiority to all rival political systems. The cries of indignation arising from the entire civilized world at the bombardment of the port of Almería, or the air raid upon Guernica,

were complemented by perverse respect for the inhuman brutality with which the Communist threat was challenged and ultimately smashed. On a vastly larger plane this matched the discovery Hitler had made in the beer-hall brawls: terrorism exerts an attraction upon the masses.

Soon, too, it became possible to discern the polarization to which the war was pushing things—and once again familiar lines appeared. Anti-Fascism created its legend on the battlefields of Spain, when the Left, split into numerous cliques and factions, rent by internal feuds, nevertheless united in the International Brigades as if for "the final conflict" and once more demonstrated the continuing force of the old myths. But the concept of the power and danger of the Left had never been much more than a legend. It had exerted its most significant function as legend: to bring together and mobilize the opposition.

This was the effect of the Left's commitment in Spain, despite all its defeats. It finally brought together the Fascist powers that had long been at odds and had only tentatively begun to approach one another. The result was the "Berlin-Rome Axis," presumably a new and triumphant element of strength around which the decadent democracies and the antihuman, terroristic systems with a leftist tinge rotated in jittery orbits. From this point on, there existed a Fascist International of sorts, its power center in Germany. And simultaneously the line-up of the Second World War first appeared in outline.

For all the inadvertent prodding from outside, this alliance did not come into being with ease. Several hurdles had to be taken. The reservations on the Italian side were matched by considerable reservations in Germany. Bismarck had remarked that it was impossible to engage in any political relationships with Italy because as friend and as foe she was equally untrustworthy. During the First World War that comment had become an axiom, and it was as difficult to make an alliance with Italy acceptable to the public as, for example, the one with Poland. The bias did not go quite so far as Mussolini presumed when in December, 1934, he remarked to Ulrich von Hassell, the German ambassador in Rome: "I have the feeling that no war would be so popular in Germany as a war with Italy." Still, the Germans were hardly convinced by Ciano's assurance that Fascist Italy had abandoned all intrigue and attempts to seek its own advantage and was no longer "the whore of the democracies."

What strengthened the tie in the end was the personal liking Hitler and Mussolini developed for one another, after their unpropitious first meeting in Venice. Despite obvious differences between them—Mussolini's extrovert nature, his practicality, spontaneity, and ebullience contrasted markedly with Hitler's solemn rigidity—both men had important traits in common. They shared a craving for power, a hunger for greatness, irritability, boastful cynicism and theatricality. Mussolini felt himself the elder and liked to take a patronizing tone, a kind of Fascist precedence, toward his

German partner. At any rate, a number of leading Nazi functionaries began reading Machiavelli. A heavy bronze bust of the Italian dictator stood in Hitler's study in the Brown House; and in a most unusual burst of veneration Hitler referred to Mussolini during a visit from the Italian Foreign Minister in Berchtesgaden in October, 1936, as "the leading statesman in the world, to whom none may be remotely compared."

Mussolini had been watching Hitler's obvious wooing with a good measure of skeptical reserve. His inveterate fear of "Germanism" recommended restraint. So did the interests of his country, which, strictly speaking, pointed in the opposite direction. To be sure, he had won his East African colonial empire partly because National Socialist Germany had provided a distraction. But Germany could do nothing to secure this empire. Rather, everything now depended on Italy's consolidating her new acquisitions by a policy of good behavior toward the West. That, however, was a political consideration, and, in the light of Hitler's rapid ascent, Mussolini no longer wanted to engage in mere politics. He wanted to make history, to participate in the march to greatness, to display dynamism, to arouse faith, to satisfy the old "yearning for war," and so on—there were many other phrases to express such fateful self-infatuation. Therefore, no matter what he might have felt originally about the German dictator, Mussolini was impressed by the boldness with which the strange fellow left the League of Nations, proclaimed universal military service, repeatedly defied the world, and broke up stultified European patterns. Mussolini was all the more provoked because it seemed as though Hitler, who had made such a poor showing at Venice, had taken over the original Fascist policy of *éclat* and was putting it across with remarkable energy. Concerned for his own standing, Mussolini began considering the rapprochement.

Hitler himself removed the most serious obstacle. Convinced that everything could be arranged later on among friends, he pretended to give way on the question of Austria. In July, 1936, he concluded a pact with Vienna whose main point was his recognition of Austrian sovereignty. He promised nonintervention in Austrian affairs, and in exchange for this received the concession that "decent" Nazis would no longer be barred from assuming political responsibility. Naturally, Mussolini interpreted this treaty as largely his own personal triumph. Even so, he might still have been wary of moving closer to Germany had not some curious circumstances favored such a tie at this very moment. For likewise in July the League of Nations powers revoked their not very effective edict of sanctions against Italy. Thus, with a confession of failure, they left Ethiopia to its conqueror. At the same time, Mussolini was able to satisfy his pride in Spain, where his commitment far exceeded Hitler's and where he appeared as the leading Fascist force.

In September Hans Frank called upon Mussolini to bring him a note from Hitler. It began by the most flattering tributes to Italian hegemony in

the Mediterranean region before proposing close co-operation. Mussolini still hung back; but he was obviously only displaying a great man's majestic indolence. A month later he sent his son-in-law and Foreign Minister, Count Ciano, to Germany to reconnoiter. Shortly afterward the prominent Fascists Tullio Cianetti and Renato Ricci, Minister of Corporations, then a thousand Fascist *avanguardistas*, made similar trips. At last, in September, 1937, Mussolini went himself.

To honor his guest, Hitler put on a display of all the spectacle of which the regime was capable. The effects, as Munich Gauleiter Wagner attested, were of Hitler's own devising. On arrival Mussolini found that he was to pass down a lane of busts of the Roman Emperors, flanked by laurel trees. Thus the Duce, restorer of the Roman imperium, was placed in the line of the noblest ancestry in European political history. During their first conversation Hitler conferred the highest German decoration on his guest as well as a golden party badge, which he alone had hitherto worn. Meanwhile, designer Benno von Arent had created a mile-long triumphal avenue in Berlin between the Brandenburg Gate and the West End, lined with white pylons from which were festooned garlands, banners, and streamers, reiterating the symbols of fasces and swastika. On Unter den Linden hundreds of columns were set up, crowned with gold imperial eagles. For the night show the stage managers had conceived a play of lights featuring the green-white-red of Italy and the black-white-red of Hitler Germany.

Hitler had taken leave of his guest in Munich, before Mussolini was to be conducted to Berlin. But as the Italian dictator's special train reached the city limits of Berlin, Hitler's train surprisingly appeared on the adjacent track and accompanied the Duce's, their two cars side by side, for the last stretch of the way. At last it pulled a bit ahead, and when Mussolini arrived at the Heerstrasse station, his host was already waiting at the predetermined spot and holding out his hand in greeting. Standing beside Hitler in the open limousine, deeply impressed by the solemnity and the obvious sincerity of the tributes that were being paid him, Mussolini entered the capital of the Reich. Sightseeing, parades, banquets, and demonstrations followed one another in continual whirl. At a drill ground in Mecklenburg the Italian dictator was shown the newest weapons and the striking power of the new German army. At the Krupp plant in Essen he saw the capacity of German war industry. On the evening of September 28 at the Maifeld, close to the Olympic Stadium, Hitler held a "demonstration of the nations of the 115 millions," at which he again cleverly ministered to the pride of his guest. He hailed Mussolini as "one of those lonely men of the ages on whom history is not tested, but who themselves are the makers of history."

Obviously overwhelmed by the impressions of the past few days, the Duce delivered a speech in German in which he opposed to the "false and mendacious idols of Geneva and Moscow" the "radiant truth" that tomorrow all Europe would be Fascist. Before he had finished his speech a

tremendous thunderstorm with torrents of rain scattered the audience in panic, and he found himself suddenly alone. At the Maifeld, Ciano noted ironically, there had been "beautiful choreography: lots of sentiment and lots of rain." Drenched, Mussolini had to find his way back to Berlin. Nevertheless, the impression of that visit to Germany remained with him for the rest of his life.

"I admire you, Führer!" he had exclaimed in Essen at the sight of a giant cannon until then kept a strict secret. But the feeling was mutual. Little as Hitler was capable of undivided feelings in other respects, he manifested toward the Italian dictator a rarely candid, seemingly almost naïve liking, and preserved it through the many disappointments of later years. Mussolini was one of the few persons toward whom he did not show pettiness, calculation, or envy. A contributing factor was that both had come from simple circumstances. With Mussolini he did not have that sense of constraint he felt almost everywhere else in Europe with representatives of the old bourgeois class. Their mutual understanding was spontaneous, at any rate after the unfortunate first meeting at Venice had been put behind. Trusting in this, Hitler had, in the agenda, reserved only a single hour for political discussion.

Mussolini was unquestionably a man of judgment and political acumen; but the style of personal foreign policy practiced by Hitler, the method of direct dialogue, handshakes, man-to-man talk, appealed to the stronger side of his nature. Under the influence of Hitler he yielded to it more and more, and the result was that ultimately he became curiously vulnerable, diminished, and finally drained, like so many of Hitler's other victims. Even then, when he allowed political rationale to be corrupted by flatteries and grandiose theatrical effects, he was basically lost; the inglorious end at the gasoline station on the Piazzale Loreto, not quite eight years later, could already have been foreseen. For, in spite of all his ideological community with Hitler, his own future depended on his not losing sight of their fundamental difference of interests: the difference between a weak, saturated power and a strong, expansionist power. Under the spell of the visit he had already veered far too widely from the categories of politics to the unpolitical category of blind shared destiny. That became clear in the course of his Berlin speech, when he referred to a precept of Fascist and personal morality; that precept held, he said, that when one has found a friend, one must "march together with him to the end."

Thus Hitler had succeeded with surprising rapidity in achieving one side of his design for alliances. For the first time in modern history two governments joined under ideological auspices to form a "community of action . . . and contrary to all the predictions of Lenin these were not two socialist but two Fascist governments." The question was whether Hitler, after entering upon an alliance that flaunted its ideological nature, could win over his other dreamed-of partner, England. Or had he not, in terms of

his own premises and aims, already taken the first step which was to prove fatal for him?

Some time back, shortly after the reoccupation of the Rhineland, Hitler had made a fresh effort to bring England over to his side. Once again he did not employ the Foreign Office, by now relegated to a technical apparatus for routine tasks. Hitler was bent on carrying out his designs largely by himself, with the aid of special envoys. Since the happy conclusion of the naval pact, he considered Joachim von Ribbentrop a natural-born diplomatic genius and expert on the British mentality. Hitler now assigned him the task of bringing about the alliance with England.

His choice could hardly have been worse, but also hardly more characteristic. In the end none of the leading personalities of the Third Reich came in for such unanimous contempt as Ribbentrop. Friend and foe denied that there was anything in the least likable about him, or that he had the slightest practical competence. The favor and protection that this henchman enjoyed with Hitler from the summer of 1935 on indicates to what extent the Führer was already using mere instruments and seeking relationships whose chief element was servility. For Ribbentrop's bombast and pompousness toward the outside world were matched by an almost lunatic obsequiousness toward Hitler. Forever wearing the clouded brow of the statesman, he was the quintessence of the petty bourgeois type that had risen so rapidly with the class shifts after 1933. Now he was busily casting his resentments and catastrophic inclinations into demonic molds of historic grandeur. Soon he designed a fancy diplomatic uniform for himself; the epaulets were embroidered with a globe on which the German eagle perched proprietarily.

Ribbentrop now conveyed a message, via a mediator, to British Prime Minister Baldwin proposing a personal meeting between the Prime Minister and Hitler. Such a conversation would "determine the fate of generations," he said, and would represent the fulfillment of the German Chancellor's "greatest wish." Baldwin was a great procrastinator; he was phlegmatic and loved his comfort. As one of his intimates has described it, the go-between had great difficulty in getting the Prime Minister to look up from his evening game of patience and hear out the proposal. Still less was he interested in the enthusiastic feelings the proposal awoke in his entourage. Baldwin instinctively drew away from complications of this sort. He was no more concerned with this fellow Hitler than he was with the rest of Europe, of which, as Churchill bitingly commented, he knew little and disliked what he knew. But if there had to be a meeting, let Hitler come to see him; he did not like either planes or traveling by boat. The thing was not to make any great fuss about it. Perhaps, he conceded, the Chancellor could come in August; they could meet in the mountains or in the Lake District. That was about all he cared to say about the matter. "Then a drop

developments now played into his hands. Three months later, he had ousted his top generals and totally reorganized both the diplomatic and the military structure in accord with his program for the future.

The seemingly innocent starting point was Blomberg's decision to remarry; his first wife had died years before. It was rather awkward that the bride, Fräulein Erna Gruhn, had "a past," as Blomberg himself admitted. Consequently, she did not meet the strict status requirements of the officer corps. Seeking advice, Blomberg took Göring into his confidence as a fellow officer. Göring strongly urged him to go ahead with the marriage, and even assisted him in getting rid of a rival by paying the man off and arranging his emigration. On January 12, 1938, the wedding took place, in an atmosphere of some secrecy. Hitler and Göring were the witnesses.

Only a few days later, rumors began circulating that the field marshal's marriage was a *mésalliance* of interest to the vice squad of the police. A police file soon provided evidence that Blomberg's newly wedded wife had spent some time as a prostitute and had once been convicted of serving as a model for lewd photographs. Twelve days after the wedding, when Blomberg returned from a brief honeymoon, Göring informed him that he had become unacceptable. The officer corps, too, saw no reason to come to the defense of the field marshal who for so long had been devoted to Hitler with boyish exuberance. Two days later, on the afternoon of January 26, Hitler received him for a farewell visit. "The embarrassment for me and for you was too great," he declared. "I could no longer wait it out. We must part."

In a brief discussion about a possible successor, Hitler rejected the presumptive candidate, Fritsch, and Göring as well. The latter, in his greed for posts, had desperately tried to secure the appointment. Apparently Blomberg, still abjectly loyal, proposed what Hitler in any case intended, that he take over the position himself. "When Germany's hour strikes," Hitler said at the end of the interview, "I will see you at my side and the whole past will be regarded as wiped out."

The decision had evidently been taken while Göring was still intriguing to exclude his rival, Fritsch. For now, instigated by Göring and Himmler jointly, a second police file was brought to light, this time on Fritsch, in which he was charged with homosexuality. In a scene out of a third-rate drama, the unsuspecting commander in chief of the army was confronted with a hired witness in the chancellery. The man's accusations soon proved untenable, but that did not matter. They had served their purpose: providing Hitler with the pretext for the thoroughgoing shakeup of personnel on February 4, 1938. Fritsch, too, found himself dismissed. Hitler took over the post of commander in chief of the armed forces. The War Ministry was dissolved, replaced by the High Command of the Armed Forces (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, abbreviated OKW), headed by General Wilhelm Keitel. For a prize specimen of Hitlerian comedy, we may read Gen-

eral Jodl's diary note on Keitel's installation: "At 1 P.M. Keitel is ordered to the Führer in civilian dress. The latter pours out his heart on the difficulties which have descended upon him. He is growing more and more lonely.

He says to K: I am relying on you; you must stick it out with me. You are my confidant and only adviser on defense questions. Unified and coherent leadership of the Armed Forces is sacred and inviolable to me." Hitler then continued without transition and in the same tone of voice: "I shall take command of them myself with your help." As successor to Fritsch he appointed General von Brauchitsch, who, like Keitel, seemed the natural candidate for the post because of his servility and weakness of character; he had announced that he was "ready for anything" that was asked of him. In particular, he gave assurances that he would lead the army closer to National Socialism. In the course of these measures sixteen older generals were additionally retired, forty-four transferred. In order to alleviate Göring's disappointment, Hitler named him a field marshal.

With one blow, without a jot of opposition, Hitler had thus eliminated the last power factor of any significance. He had put across, as it were, a "bloodless June 30." Contemptuously, he declared that all generals were cowardly. His disdain was increased by the shameless eagerness many generals had shown to occupy the vacated positions. Such behavior made it plain that the unity of the officer corps had at last been shattered and caste solidarity—which had notably failed to put in an appearance in the case of the murders of von Schleicher and von Bredow—no longer existed. Speaking for the benefit of "later historians," General von Fritsch resignedly recorded his indignation at this "shameful treatment." To be sure, one group of army officers began to plot some action against the dictator and tried to make contact with Fritsch. Now, and once again six months later, he refused to support them, remarking fatalistically: "This man is Germany's fate and this fate will go its way to the end."

Meanwhile, the reshuffling was not limited to the armed forces. At the same cabinet session in which Hitler announced the changes in the top military leadership, he also informed Neurath of his dismissal from the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs. Ribbentrop replaced Neurath. Simultaneously, several important ambassadorships (Rome, Tokyo, Vienna) were changed. The careless way in which Hitler controlled the state is evident from the manner in which he appointed Walter Funk Minister of Economics. Hitler had met him at the opera one night, and during the intermission assigned him the post. Göring, he added, would give him further instructions. At the cabinet session of February 4 he was introduced as Schacht's successor. That was, incidentally, the last meeting of the cabinet in the history of the regime.

Throughout the crisis Hitler was worried that the events might be viewed abroad as symptoms of hidden struggles for power and therefore as a sign of weakness. He also feared new conflicts if the court-martial investigation

of the Fritsch case—which he had had to concede to the generals—brought the intrigue to light and rehabilitated Fritsch. “If the troops find out about that, there’ll be a revolution,” one of the insiders had predicted. Consequently, Hitler decided to cover up the one crisis by another, far more comprehensive one. As early as January 31, Jodl had noted in his diary: “Führer wants to divert the spotlights from the Wehrmacht [the armed forces]. Keep Europe gasping and by replacements in various posts not awaken the impression of an element of weakness but of a concentration of forces. Schuschnigg is not to take heart, but to tremble.”

Thus Hitler resolutely headed into another crisis. Since the July agreement of 1936 he had done nothing to improve German-Austrian relations. Rather, he had used the terms of the agreement solely to pick an endless series of new quarrels, bickering over clauses like a shyster lawyer. With growing concern the Vienna government had observed the ring gradually tightening. The obligations under the agreement, which it had assumed only under intense pressure, limited its freedom of action as much as did the ever closer ties between Rome and Berlin. In addition, the strong Nazi underground movement within Austria, encouraged and funded by the Reich, was stirring up trouble. It had a double basis for its passionate campaign for Anschluss: the ancient German dream of unification, feasible at last with the breakup of the Dual Monarchy in 1919; and Hitler’s Austrian origin. The very idea of unity seemed to be incarnate in the person of Hitler. Nazi propaganda was operating upon a country that still remembered its days as a great power while at present living in a functionless rump state that meant nothing to most of the citizens. Humiliated, spurned by the new nations which had once been part of the shattered monarchy, impoverished, and insultingly kept in a dependent status, the population of Austria craved change. Existing conditions were so bad that few asked what would follow. With an acute sense of ethnic and historical ties, many Austrians turned their eyes more and more upon a self-assured Germany that seemed utterly transformed and was spreading panic among the arrogant victors of yesterday.

Desperately, Kurt von Schuschnigg, the successor to the assassinated Chancellor Dollfuss, looked around for help. In the spring of 1937 he vainly tried to secure a British declaration guaranteeing Austria’s independence. When that was not forthcoming, his prolonged and tenacious opposition to the Nazis, which he had backed up by bans and persecution, gradually weakened. At the beginning of February, 1938, Papen proposed a meeting between him and the German Chancellor. Reluctantly, Schuschnigg agreed. On the morning of February 12 he arrived in Berchtesgaden. Hitler received him on the steps of the Berghof.

Immediately after the two men had exchanged greetings, the Austrian Chancellor found himself the victim of a tirade. When he remarked on the impressive panorama offered by the grand living room, Hitler brushed the

remark aside: “Yes, my ideas mature here. But we haven’t met to talk about the beautiful view and the weather.” Then he worked himself up. Austria’s whole history, he said, was “a continuous betrayal of the people. In the past it was the same as it is today. But this historical contradiction must at last come to its long overdue end. And let me tell you this, Herr Schuschnigg: I am firmly determined to put an end to all of it. . . . I have a historic mission and I am going to fulfill it because Providence has appointed me to do so. . . . I have traveled the hardest road that ever a German had to travel, and I have accomplished the greatest things in German history that ever a German was destined to accomplish. . . . You certainly aren’t going to believe that you can delay me by so much as half an hour? Who knows—perhaps I’ll suddenly turn up in Vienna overnight, like the spring storm. Then you’ll see something!” His patience was exhausted, he continued. Austria had no friends; neither England nor France nor Italy would lift a finger for her sake. He demanded the right for the Austrian National Socialists to agitate freely, the appointment of his follower, Seyss-Inquart, as Austrian Minister of Security and of the Interior, a general amnesty, and accommodation of Austrian foreign and economic policy to that of the Reich.

According to Schuschnigg’s account, when the time came to go to dinner, the man who a moment before had been gesticulating excitedly was transformed into an amiable host. But in the subsequent conversation, when the Austrian Chancellor remarked that because of his country’s constitution he could not give any conclusive assurances, Hitler wrenched open the door, gestured for Schuschnigg to leave, and shouted in an intimidating tone for General Keitel. After Keitel came in, closed the door behind him, and asked for his orders, Hitler said: “None at all. Have a seat.” Shortly afterward, Schuschnigg signed. He refused Hitler’s invitation to sup with him. Accompanied by Papen, he crossed the border to Salzburg. During the entire ride he did not say a word. But Papen chattered on easily: “Yes, that’s the way the Führer can be; now you’ve seen it for yourself. But next time you’ll find a meeting with him a great deal easier. The Führer can be distinctly charming.” The next time Schuschnigg came under guard and on his way to Dachau concentration camp.

The Berchtesgaden conference gave a great boost to the Austrian Nazis. They heralded their impending victory by a series of boastful acts of violence, and all of Schuschnigg’s efforts to stem the tide came too late. In order to offer last-minute opposition to the open disintegration of state power, he decided on the evening of March 8 to call a plebiscite for the following Sunday, March 13. In this way he hoped to refute, before the eyes of the whole world, Hitler’s claim that he had the majority of the Austrian people behind him. But Berlin immediately objected, and he was forced to drop his plan. Urged on by Göring, Hitler decided to take military action against Austria if necessary; for Ribbentrop had reported from

London that England was not in the least disposed to fight for this troublesome leftover of the Versailles Treaty. Without England, Hitler knew, France would not intervene.

For a time it seemed that the German grab for Austria was stirring old allergies in Mussolini and forcing Italy toward a rapprochement with England. On March 10, therefore, Hitler sent Prince Philip of Hesse to Rome with a handwritten letter in which he spoke of the Austrian conspiracy against the Reich, the suppression of the nationalistic majority, and the prospect of civil war. As a "son of the Austrian soil" he had finally been unable to look on, inactive, he continued, but had decided to restore law and order in his homeland. "You, too, Your Excellency, could not act differently if the fate of Italy were at stake." He assured Mussolini of his steadfast sympathy and once again pledged the inviolability of the Brenner Pass as the boundary between Germany and Italy: "This decision will never be amended or altered." After hours of excited preparation, shortly after midnight he issued Directive No. 1 for Operation Otto:

If other measures do not succeed, I intend to march into Austria with armed forces in order to restore constitutional conditions there and to prevent further outrages against the nationalistic German population. I personally shall command the entire operation. . . . It is to our interest that the entire operation proceed without the use of force, with our troops marching in peacefully and being hailed by the populace. Therefore every provocation is to be avoided. But if resistance is offered, it must be smashed by force of arms with greatest ruthlessness. . . .

For the time being no security measures are to be taken on the German frontiers with other countries.

The terse, self-assured tone of this document almost entirely concealed the mood of hysteria and indecision in which it had come into being. All reports from members of Hitler's entourage speak of the extraordinary chaos surrounding the decision, the panicky confusion that overtook Hitler on the verge of this first expansionist action of his career. A multitude of overhasty mistaken decisions, choleric outbursts, senseless telephone calls, orders and cancellations of orders, followed in quick succession during the few hours between Schuschnigg's call for a plebiscite and March 12. Once again, to all appearances, those "damaged nerves" were giving trouble. First, the military leadership was told in great excitement to prepare an operational plan within a few hours. Hitler flared up at Beck and later Brauchitsch for their remonstrances. Then he canceled his marching order, then issued it again. In between came pleas, threats, misunderstandings. Keitel later spoke of the period as a "martyrdom."

If Göring had not taken the initiative at the moment he did, the public and thus the world would presumably have realized how much psychotic uncertainty and irritation Hitler showed in situations of great pressure. But Göring, who because of his part in the Fritsch affair had every interest in the operation and its obscuring effects, vigorously pressed the vacillating

Hitler forward. Years later, Hitler remarked, almost stammering, with the admiration of a high-strung man for another's phlegmatic, cold-blooded temperament:

The Reich Marshal has gone through a great many crises with me. He's ice-cold in crises. In times of crisis you cannot have a better adviser than the Reich Marshal. The Reich Marshal is brutal and ice-cold in crises. I've always noticed that when it's a question of facing up to a decision he is ruthless and hard as iron. You'll get nobody better than him, you couldn't find anybody better. He's gone through all the crises with me, the toughest crises, and was ice-cold. Whenever the going was really hard, he turned ice-cold. . . .

On March 11 Göring issued an ultimatum demanding the resignation of Schuschnigg and the appointment of Seyss-Inquart as Austrian Chancellor. Upon instructions from Berlin, the Nazis all over Austria poured into the streets that afternoon. In Vienna they thronged into the chancellery, filled the stairways and corridors, and settled down in the offices until, toward evening, Schuschnigg announced his resignation over the radio and ordered the Austrian army to retreat without offering resistance to the invading German troops. When President Miklas stubbornly refused to appoint Seyss-Inquart as the new Chancellor, Göring, in one of his many telephone conversations with Vienna, gave one of his go-betweens characteristic instructions:

Now listen closely: The important thing now is for Inquart to take possession of the entire government, keep the radio and everything else occupied. . . . Seyss-Inquart is to send the following telegram. Write this down:

"The provisional Austrian Government, which after the resignation of the Schuschnigg Government regards its task as the restoration of peace and order in Austria, addresses to the German Government an urgent appeal to support it in its task and to help it to prevent bloodshed. For this purpose it requests the German Government to dispatch German troops as soon as possible."

After a brief dialogue, Göring said in conclusion: "Now then, our troops are crossing the frontier today. . . . And see to it that he sends the telegram as soon as possible. . . . Present the telegram to him and tell him we are asking—he doesn't even have to send the telegram, you know; all he needs to say is: Agreed." And while the Nazis throughout the country began to occupy the public buildings, Hitler at last issued the marching order at 8:45 P.M.—even before Seyss-Inquart had been informed of his own appeal for help. Hitler rejected a later request from Seyss-Inquart to stop the German troops. A bare two hours later, the impatiently awaited word from Rome arrived: at half-past ten Philip of Hesse telephoned, and Hitler's reaction revealed how much tension he had been under:

Hesse: I have just come back from the Palazzo Venezia. The Duce accepted the whole affair in a very, very friendly manner. He sends you his cordial regards.

Hitler: Then please tell Mussolini I shall never forget him for this.

Hesse: Very well, sir.

Hitler: Never, never, never, whatever happens. . . . As soon as the Austrian affair is settled, I shall be ready to go through thick and thin with him, no matter what happens. . . . You may tell him that I thank him ever so much; never, never shall I forget.

Hesse: Yes, my Führer.

Hitler: I will never forget, whatever may happen. If he should ever need any help or be in any danger, he can be convinced that I shall stick to him, whatever may happen, even if the whole world were against him.⁷³

On the afternoon of March 12, to the peal of bells, Hitler crossed the border at his birthplace, Braunau. Four hours later, he passed flower-decked villages and hundreds of thousands of persons lining the streets to enter Linz. Just outside the city line the Austrian ministers Seyss-Inquart and Glaise-Horstenaus awaited him; with them was Heinrich Himmler, who had gone to Vienna the previous night to begin purging the country of "traitors to the people and other enemies of the State." With palpable emotion Hitler delivered a brief address from the balcony of the town hall to a crowd waiting in the darkness below him. In the speech he evoked once more the idea of his special mission:

If Providence once called me from this city to assume the leadership of the Reich, it must have charged me with a mission, and that mission can only have been to restore my dear homeland to the German Reich. I have believed in this mission, have lived and fought for it, and I believe I have now fulfilled it.

Next morning he laid a wreath on the grave of his parents in Leonding.

Everything seems to indicate that up to this time Hitler had as yet made no specific decisions about the future of Austria. Presumably he wanted to wait to the last to see what the foreign reaction would be, to test out the chances, repercussions, and accidents of the new situation, confident that he could exploit them more rapidly than his antagonists. It would appear that he decided upon immediate Anschluss only under the impact of the triumphal ride from Braunau to Linz, the cheers, the flowers and the flags. This elemental delirium seemed to permit no alternatives. Late on the evening of March 13, in the Hotel Weinzinger in Linz, he signed the "law concerning the reunion of Austria with the German Reich." One of those present reports that he was deeply moved. For a long time he remained quiet and motionless. Tears trickled down his cheeks. Finally he said, "Yes, the right political action saves blood."⁷⁴

On this and the following day, when Hitler entered Vienna from the direction of Schönbrunn Palace amid cheering and the tolling of bells, he was enjoying the realization of his earliest dream. The two cities that had witnessed his failures, had disdained and humiliated him, at last lay at his feet in admiration, shame, and fear. All the aimlessness and impotence of those years were now vindicated, all his furious craving for compensation

at last satisfied, when he stood on the balcony of the Hofburg and announced to hundreds of thousands in the Heldenplatz the "greatest report of a mission accomplished" in his life: "As Führer and Chancellor of the German Nation and of the Reich I hereupon report to History the entrance of my homeland into the German Reich."

The scenes of enthusiasm amid which this "reunion" took place "mocked all description," a Swiss newspaper wrote.⁷⁵ And although it is hard to determine how much of this clamor, how much of the flowers, the screaming and the tears, sprang from organized or spontaneous passion, there can be no doubt that the event stirred the deepest emotions of the nation. For the people who lined the streets for hours in Linz, Vienna, or Salzburg, this was the consummation of a longing for unity that had outlasted, as an elemental need, all the ancient dissensions, divisions and fraternal wars of the Germans. And it was out of this feeling that the people hailed Hitler as the man who had superseded Bismarck and brought his work to completion. The cry of "One People, One Reich, One Leader" was more than a clever slogan. That alone explains how not only the churches but also socialists like Karl Renner could let themselves be carried along by the euphoria of union.⁷⁶ The hope for an end of domestic political strife arose out of the same state of mind, though also from the existential anxiety of a nonviable republic. Added to such longings was the desire to have the powerful united Reich regain something of that brilliance that had dimmed since the end of the monarchy. Old Austria seemed to be returning in this prodigal son of Austria, however illegitimate and vulgar he might be.

In this aura of consummation and bliss the physical force that accompanied the event went unnoticed. "The Army was joined by standards of the SS detached units, 40,000 men of the police, and Death's Head Formation Upper Bavaria as second wave," the official journal of the High Command of the armed forces noted. These units instantly set up a system of rigorous repression. It would be mistaking Hitler's psychology to imagine that his resentments were forgotten for any length of time in the euphoria of triumph. And in fact the uninhibited savagery with which his squads now openly fell upon opponents and so-called racial enemies betrays something of his unforgotten hatred for Vienna. The sometimes ferocious excesses, particularly of the Austrian Legion, which had just returned from Germany, nakedly revealed what might be called the "Oriental" element that Hitler had introduced into German anti-Semitism; now he was unleashing it in followers of his own origin and his own emotional structure. "With bare hands," Stefan Zweig wrote, "university professors were compelled to scrub the streets. Devout, white-bearded Jews were dragged into the temple and forced by yowling youths to do knee bends and shout 'Heil Hitler' in chorus. Innocent persons were caught en masse in the streets like rabbits and dragged off to sweep out the latrines of the

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SA barracks. All the morbidly filthy hate fantasies orgiastically conceived in the course of many nights were released in broad daylight."⁷⁷ A wave of refugees poured into non-German Europe. Stefan Zweig, Sigmund Freud, Walter Mehring, Carl Zuckmayer, and many others fled from Austria. The writer Egon Friedell threw himself out of his window. Nazi terror manifested itself in all openness. But these circumstances did not weigh heavily in the outside world. The impression of rejoicing was too strong, the German reference to the Wilsonian principle of self-determination too irrefutable. That principle was confirmed triumphantly with the predictable 99 per cent of the votes in the regime's fifth and last plebiscite on March 16. The Western powers indicated that they were disturbed; but France was deeply embroiled in her domestic problems, and England refused to give France or Czechoslovakia any guarantees. England also rejected a proposal by the Soviet Union for a conference to prevent further aggression on the part of Hitler. Chamberlain and the European conservatives continued to regard Hitler as the commandant of their anti-Communist bulwark, who must be won over by generosity and simultaneously tamed. The Left, meanwhile, reassured itself with the thought that Schuschnigg was nothing but the representative of a clerico-Fascist regime ripe for overthrow, and one that had formerly fired upon workers. The League of Nations did not even hold a meeting on the question; the world by now was not bothering about mere gestures of indignation. Its conscience, as Stefan Zweig wrote bitterly, "only growled a little before it forgot and forgave."⁷⁸

Hitler stayed in Vienna less than twenty-four hours; it is hard to say whether his bias against the hated "sybaritic city" or his impatience prompted him to return so hurriedly. In any case, the effortlessness with which he had achieved this major victory encouraged him to push at once toward the next goal. Only two weeks after the annexation of Austria he met with Konrad Henlein, the leader of the Sudeten Germans, and declared his readiness to solve the Czechoslovakian question within the foreseeable future. Another four weeks later, on April 21, he discussed with General Keitel the plan for a military attack upon Czechoslovakia. Out of regard for world opinion he rejected an "attack out of a clear sky, without any pretext or possibility of justification." He would prefer a "lightning-like action on the basis of an incident," for example an "assassination of the German Ambassador in conjunction with an anti-German demonstration."

As with Austria, Hitler was again able to utilize the inherent contradictions of the Versailles system. For Czechoslovakia was one grand negation of the principle upon which it was supposedly based. Its creation had been far less connected with the right of self-determination than with France's strategic interests. For Czechoslovakia was a small multinational state in which one minority was pitted against the majority of all the other minorities, who were all manifesting that egotistic nationalism it had itself shown

during its own struggle for independence. Chamberlain had once denigratingly called it not a state but "scraps and patches." The comparatively high degree of freedom and political participation that the government granted its citizenry did not suffice to control the centrifugal forces operating within it. The Polish ambassador in Paris spoke bluntly of a "country condemned to death."⁷⁹

By all the laws of politics there was bound to be a clash with Czechoslovakia as German strength grew. The 3.5 million Sudeten Germans had felt oppressed ever since the foundation of the republic, and they attributed their economic distress, which was in fact very serious, less to structural causes than to the "alien rule" of Prague. Both Hitler's seizure of power and the elections of May, 1935, when Konrad Henlein's Sudeten German party had become the strongest political party in the country, enormously swelled their self-assurance, and the annexation of Austria had inspired massive demonstrations under the slogan of "Home to the Reich." As early as 1936 an anonymous letter writer from the Sudetenland has assured Hitler that he looked upon him "as a Messiah"; and such hysterical expectations were now stirred up by wild speeches, provocations, and clashes. Hitler had coached Henlein to constantly present Prague with such high demands that they would "be unacceptable to the Czech government." He encouraged him to adopt a challenging attitude. He thus laid the grounds for that crisis which would require him to intervene. In the meantime, he let events take their course. Early in May he traveled with a large retinue of ministers, generals, and party functionaries on a state visit to Italy, where Mussolini now had to try to surpass Hitler's hospitality. The backdrop of the Eternal City was festively decorated with flags, fasces, and swastikas. The houses along the railroad line were freshly painted, and near San Paolo Outside the Walls a special station had been erected, at which the King and Mussolini received Hitler. Hitler noticed, however, with some irritation that protocol required Mussolini to keep in the background. Hitler himself, as head of state, was the guest of Victor Emmanuel III, whom he contemptuously called "King Nutcracker." Right from the start he offended the King by small rudenesses, such as entering the royal carriage before him. He also objected to the reactionary and arrogant manners of the court. Long afterward, he justified his later acts of suspicion against his Axis partner on these grounds.

On the other hand, the reception and the tributes paid him by Mussolini deeply impressed him. In resplendent parades the new *passo romano*—the Roman parade steps—was displayed. At a naval show in Naples one hundred submarines simultaneously vanished beneath the waves, to reappear a few minutes later with ghostly precision. Extensive tours enabled Hitler to satisfy his aesthetic inclinations, and years later he tended to extol the "magic of Florence and Rome." How beautiful Tuscany and Umbria were, he would exclaim. In contrast to Moscow, Berlin, or even Paris,