

Document : The Hossbach Memorandum, 1937

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According to the editors of *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, this Memorandum "provides a summary of German foreign policy in 1937-38."

No.19

Memorandum.

MINUTES OF THE CONFERENCE IN THE REICH CHANCELLERY, BERLIN, NOVEMBER 5, 1937, FROM 4:15 TO 8:30 P.M.

Present: The Fuhrer and Chancellor,
Field Marshal von Blomberg, War Minister,
Colonel General Baron von Fritsch, Commander in Chief, Army,
Admiral Dr. h.c. Raeder, Commander in Chief, Navy
Colonel General Goring, Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe,
Baron von Neurath, Foreign Minister,
Colonel Hossbach, Adjutant to the Fuhrer

The Fuhrer began by stating that the subject of the present conference was of such importance that its discussion would, in other countries, certainly be a matter for a full cabinet meeting, but he - the Fuhrer - had rejected the idea of making it a subject of discussion before the wider circle of the Reich Cabinet just because of the importance of the matter. His exposition to follow was the fruit of thorough deliberation and the experiences of his 4.5 years of power. He wished to explain to the

gentlemen present his basic ideas concerning the opportunities for the development of our position in the field of foreign affairs and its requirements, that his exposition be regarded, in the event of his death, as his last will and testament.

The Fuhrer then continued: The aim of German policy was to make secure and to preserve the racial community (*Volksmasse*) and to enlarge it. It was therefore a question of space.

The German racial community comprised over 85 million people and, because of their number and the narrow limits of habitable space in Europe, constituted a tightly packed racial core such as was not to be met in any other country, and such as implied the right to a greater living space than in the case of other peoples. If, territorially speaking, there existed no political result corresponding to its German racial core, that was a consequence of centuries of historical development, and in the continuance of these political conditions lay the greatest danger to the preservation of the German race at its present peak. To arrest the decline of Germanism (*Deutschtum*) in Austria and Czechoslovakia was as little possible as to maintain the present level in Germany itself. Instead of increase, sterility was setting in, and in its train disorders of a social character must arise in course of time, since political and ideological ideas remain effective only so long as they furnish the basis for the realization of the essential vital demands of a people. Germany's future was therefore wholly conditional upon the solving of the need for space, and such a solution could be sought, of course, only for a foreseeable future about one to three generations.

Before turning to the question of solving the need for space, it had to be considered whether a solution holding promise for the future was to be reached by means of autarchy or by means of an increased participation in world economy.

Autarchy

Achievement only possible under strict National Socialist leadership of the State, which is assumed: accepting its achievement as possible, the following could be stated as results:

A. In the field of raw materials, only limited, not total, autarchy.

1. In regard to coal, so far as it could be considered as a source of raw materials, autarchy was possible.

2. But even as regards ores, the position was much more difficult. Iron requirements can be met from home resources and similarly with light metals, but with other raw materials - copper, tin - this was not the case.

3. Synthetic textile requirements can be met from home resources to the limit of timber supplies. A permanent solution impossible.

4. Edible fats - possible.

B. In the field of food the question of autarchy was to be answered by a flat "No."

With the general rise in the standard of living compared with that of 30 to 40 years ago, there has gone hand in hand an increased demand and an increased home consumption even on the part of the producers, the farmers. The fruits of the increased agricultural production had all gone to meet the increased demand, and so did not represent an absolute production increase. A further increase in production by making greater demands on the soil, which already in consequence of the use of artificial fertilizers, was showing signs of exhaustion, was hardly possible, and it was therefore certain that even with the maximum increase in production, participation in world trade was unavoidable. The not inconsiderable expenditure of foreign exchange to insure food supplies by imports, even when harvests were good, grew to catastrophic proportions with bad harvests. The possibility of a disaster grew in proportion to the increase in population, in which, too, the excess of births of 560,000 annually produced, as a consequence, an even further

increase in bread consumption, since a child was a greater bread consumer than an adult.

It was not possible over the long run, in a continent enjoying a practically common standard of living, to meet the food supply difficulties by lowering that standard by rationalization. Since, with the solving of the unemployment problem, the maximum consumption level had been reached, some minor modifications in our home agricultural production might still, no doubt, be possible, but no fundamental alteration was possible in our basic food position. Thus autarchy was untenable in regard both to food and to the economy as a whole.

Participation in world economy

To this there were limitations which we were unable to remove. The establishment of Germany's position on a secure and sound foundation was obstructed by market fluctuations, and commercial treaties afforded no guarantee for actual execution. In particular it had to be remembered that since the World War, those very countries which had formerly been food exporters had become industrialized. We were living in an age of economic empires in which the primitive urge to colonization was again manifesting itself; and with Germany, too, economic need would supply the stimulus. For countries outside the great economic empires, opportunities for economic expansion were severely impeded.

The boom in world economy caused by the economic effects of rearmament could never form the basis of a sound economy over a long period, and the latter was obstructed above all also by the economic disturbances resulting from Bolshevism. There was a pronounced military weakness in those states which depended for their existence on foreign trade. As our foreign trade was carried on over sea routes dominated by Britain, it was more of a question of security of transport than one of foreign exchange, which revealed, in time of war, the full weakness of our food situation. The only remedy, and one which might appear to us as visionary, lay in the acquisition of greater living space - a quest which has at all times been the origin of the formation of states and of the migration of peoples. That this quest met with no interest at

Geneva or among the satiated nations was understandable. If, then, we accept the security of our food situation as the principle question, the space necessary to insure it can only be sought in Europe, not, as in the liberal - capitalist view, in the exploitation of colonies. It is not a matter of acquiring population, but of gaining space for agricultural use. Moreover, areas producing raw materials can be more usefully sought in Europe than overseas; the solution thus obtained must suffice for one or two generations. Whatever else might prove necessary later must be left to succeeding generations to deal with. The development of great world political constellations progressed but slowly after all, and the German people with its strong racial core would find the most favourable prerequisites for such achievement in the heart of the continent of Europe. The history of all ages - the Roman Empire and the British Empire - had proved that expansion could only be carried out by breaking down resistance and taking risks; setbacks were inevitable. There had never in former times been spaces without a master, and there were none today; the attacker always comes up against a possessor.

The question for Germany ran: Where could she achieve the greatest gain at the lowest cost?

German policy had to reckon with two hate - inspired antagonists, Britain and France, to whom a German colossus in the centre of Europe was a thorn in the flesh and both countries were opposed to any further strengthening of Germany's position either in Europe or overseas; in support of this opposition they were able to count on the agreement of all their political parties. Both countries saw in the establishment of German military bases overseas a threat to their own communications, a safeguarding of German commerce, and, as a consequence, a strengthening of Germany's position in Europe.

Because of opposition of the Dominions, Britain could not cede any of her colonial possessions to us. After England's loss of prestige through the passing of Abyssinia into Italian possession, the return of East Africa was not to be expected. British concessions could at best be expressed in a offer to satisfy our colonial demands by the appropriation of colonies

which were not British possessions - e.g., Angola. French concessions would probably take a similar line.

Serious discussion of the question of the return of the colonies could only be considered at a moment when Britain was in difficulties and the German Reich armed and strong. The Fuhrer did not share the view that the Empire was unshakable. Opposition to the Empire to be found less in the countries conquered than among her competitors. The British Empire and the Roman Empire could not be compared in respect of permanence; the latter was not confronted by any powerful political rival of a serious order after the Punic Wars. It was only the disintegrating effect of Christianity, and the symptoms of age which appear in every country, which caused ancient Rome to succumb to the onslaught of the Germans.

Beside the British Empire there existed today a number of states stronger than she. The British motherland was able to protect her colonial possessions, not by her own power, but only in alliance with other states. How, for instance, could Britain alone defend Canada against attack by America, or her Far Eastern possessions against attack by Japan?

The emphasis on the British Crown as the symbol of the unity of the Empire was already an admission that, in the long run, the Empire could not maintain its position by power politics. Significant indications of this were:

- (a) The struggle of Ireland for independence.
- (b) The constitutional struggles in India, where Britain's half measures had given to the Indians the opportunity of using later on as a weapon against Britain, the nonfulfillment of her promises regarding a constitution.
- (c) The weakening by Japan of Britain's position in the Far East.
- (d) The rivalry in the Mediterranean with Italy who - under the spell of her history, driven by necessity and led by a genius - was expanding her

powerful position, and thus was inevitably coming more and more into conflict with British interests. The outcome of the Abyssinian War was a loss of prestige for Britain which Italy was striving to increase by stirring up trouble in the Mohammedan world.

To sum up, it could be stated that, with 45 million Britons, in spite of its theoretical soundness, the position of the Empire could not in the long run be maintained by power politics. The ratio of the population of the Empire to that of the motherland of 9:1, was a warning to us, in our territorial expansion, to allow the foundation constituted by the numerical strength of our own people to become too weak.

France's position was more favourable than that of Britain. The French Empire was better placed territorially; the inhabitants of her colonial possessions represented a supplement to her military strength. But France was going to be confronted with internal political difficulties. In a nation's life about 10% of its span is taken up by parliamentary forms of government, and about 90% by authoritarian forms. Today nonetheless, Britain, France, Russia, and the smaller states adjoining them, must be isolated as factors (*Machtfactoren*) in our political calculations.

Germany's problem could only be solved by means of force and this was never without attendant risk. The campaigns of Frederick the Great for Silesia and Bismarck's wars against Austria and France had involved unheard - of risk, and the swiftness of the Prussian action in 1870 had kept Austria from entering the war. If one accepts as the basis of the following disposition the resort to force with its attendant risks, then there remain still to be answered the questions "when" and "how". In this matter there were three cases (*Falle*) dealt with:

Case 1: Period 1943-1945

After this date only a change for the worse, from our point of view, could be expected.

The equipment of the army, navy, and Luftwaffe, as well, as the formation of the officer corps, was nearly completed. Equipment and armament were modern; in further delay there lay the danger of their obsolescence. In particular, the secrecy of “special weapons” could not be preserved forever. The recruiting of reserves was limited to current age groups were no longer available.

Our relative strength would decrease in relation to the rearmament which would by then have been carried out by the rest of the world. If we did not act by 1943-45, any year, could, in consequence of a lack of reserves, produce the food crisis, to cope with which the necessary foreign exchange was not available, and this must be regarded as “the waning point of the regime.” Besides, the world was expecting our attack, and was increasing its countermeasures from year to year. It was while the rest of the world was still preparing its defenses (*sich abriegeln*) that we were obliged to take the offensive.

Nobody knew today what the situation would be in the years 1943-45. One thing only was certain, that we could wait no longer.

On the one hand, there was the great Wehrmacht, and the necessity of maintaining it at its present level, the aging of the movement and of its leaders; and on the other, the prospect of a lowering of the standard of living and of a limitation of the birth rate, which left no choice but to act. If the Fuhrer was still living, it was his unalterable resolve to solve Germany’s problem of space at the latest by 1943-45. The necessity for action before 1943-45 would arise in cases 2 and 3.

Case 2:

If internal strife in France should develop into such a domestic crisis as to absorb the French Army completely and render it incapable of use for war against Germany, then the time for action against the Czechs had come.

Case 3:

If France is so embroiled by a war with another state that she cannot “proceed” against Germany

For the improvement of our politico - military position our first objective, in the event of our being embroiled in war, must be to overthrow Czechoslovakia and Austria simultaneously in order to remove the threat to our flank in any possible operation against the West. In a conflict with France it was hardly to be regarded as likely that the Czechs would declare war on us the very same day as France. The desire to join in the war would, however, increase among the Czechs in proportion to any weakening on our part and then her participation could clearly take the form of an attack toward Silesia, toward the north or toward the west.

If the Czechs were overthrown and a common German-Hungarian frontier achieved, a neutral attitude on the part of Poland could be the more certainly counted on in the event of a Franco-German conflict. Our agreements with Poland only retained their force as long as Germany’s strength remained unshaken. In the event of German setbacks a Polish action against East Prussia, and possibly against Pomerania and Silesia as well, had to be reckoned with.

On the assumption of a development of the situation leading to action on our part as planned, in the years 1943-45, the attitude of France, Britain, Italy, Poland, and Russia could probably be estimated as follows: Actually, the Fuhrer believed that almost certainly Britain, and probably France as well, had already tacitly written off the Czechs and were reconciled to the fact that this question would be cleared up in due course in Germany. Difficulties connected with the Empire, and the prospect of being once more entangled in a protracted European war, were decisive considerations for Britain against participation in a war against Germany. Britain’s attitude would certainly not be without influence on that of France. An attack by France without British support, and without the prospect of the offensive being brought to a standstill on our western fortifications, was hardly probable. Nor was a French march through Belgium and Holland without British support to be expected; this was also a course not to be contemplated by us in the event of a

conflict with France, because it would certainly entail the hostility of Britain. It would, of course, be necessary to maintain a strong defence (*eine abriegelung*) on our western frontier during the prosecution of our attack on the Czechs and Austria. And in this connection it had to be remembered that the defence measures of the Czechs were growing in strength from year to year, and that the actual worth of the Austrian Army also was increasing in the course of time. Even though the populations concerned, especially of Czechoslovakia, were not sparse, the annexation of Czechoslovakia and Austria would mean an acquisition of foodstuffs for 5 to 6 million people, on the assumption that the compulsory emigration of 2 million people from Czechoslovakia and 1 million people from Austria was practicable. The incorporation of these two States with Germany meant, from the politico - military point of view, a substantial advantage because it would mean shorter and better frontiers, the freeing of forces for other purposes, and the possibility of creating new units up to a level of about 12 divisions, that is, 1 new division per million habitants.

Italy was not expected to object to the elimination of the Czechs, but it was impossible at the moment to estimate what her attitude on the Austrian question would be; that depended essentially upon whether the Duce were still alive.

The degree of surprise and the swiftness of our action were still decisive factors for Poland's attitude. Poland - with Russia at her rear - will have little inclination to engage in a war against a victorious Germany.

Military intervention by Russia must be countered by the swiftness of our operations; however, whether such intervention was a practical contingency at all was, in view of Japan's attitude, more than doubtful.

Should case 2 arise - the crippling of France by civil war - the situation thus created by the elimination of the most dangerous opponent must be seized upon whenever it occurs (*italics in original*) for the blow against the Czechs.

The Fuhrer saw case 3 coming definitely nearer; it might emerge from the present tensions in the Mediterranean, and he was resolved to take advantage of it whenever it happened, even as early as 1938.

In the light of past experience, the Fuhrer did not see any early end to the hostilities in Spain. If one considered the length of time which Franco's offensives had taken up until now, it was fully possible that the war would continue another 3 years. On the other hand, a 100% victory for Franco was not desirable either, from the German point of view; rather were we interested in a continuance of the war and in the keeping up of the tension in the Mediterranean. Franco in undisputed possession of the Spanish Peninsula precluded the possibility of any further intervention on the part of the Italians or of their continued occupation of the Balearic Islands. As our interest lay more in the prolongation of the war in Spain, it must be the immediate aim of our policy to strengthen Italy's rear with a view to her remaining in the Balearics. But the permanent establishment of the Italians on the Balearics would be intolerable both to France and Britain, and might lead to a war of France and England against Italy - a war in which Spain, should she be entirely in the hands of the Whites, might take her appearance on the side of Italy's enemies. The probability of Italy's defeat in such a war was slight, for the road from Germany was open for the supplementing of her raw materials. The Fuhrer pictured the military strategy for Italy thus: on her western frontier with France she would remain defensive, and carry on the war against France from Libya against the French North African colonial possessions.

As a landing by Franco - British troops on the coast of Italy could be discounted, and a French offensive over the Alps against northern Italy would be very difficult, and would probably come to a halt before the strong Italian fortifications, the crucial point (*Schwerpunkt*) of the operations lay in North Africa. The threat to French lines of communication by the Italian fleet would to a great extent cripple the transportation of forces from North Africa to France, so that France would have only home forces at her disposal on the frontiers with Italy and Germany.

If Germany made use of this war to settle with the Czech and Austrian questions, it was to be assumed that Britain - herself at war with Italy - would decide not to act against Germany. Without British support, a warlike action by France against Germany was not to be expected.

The time for our attack on the Czechs and Austria must be made dependent on the course of the Anglo - French - Italian war and would not necessarily coincide with the commencement of military operations by these three States. Nor had the Fuhrer in mind military agreements with Italy, but wanted, while retaining his own independence of action, to exploit the situation, which would not occur again, to begin and carry through the campaign against the Czechs. This descent upon the Czechs would have been carried out with "lightning speed."

In appraising the situation, Field Marshal von Blomberg and Colonel General von Fritsch repeatedly emphasized the necessity that Britain and France should not appear in the role of our enemies, and stated that the French army would not be so committed by the war with Italy that France could not at the same time enter the field with forces superior to ours on our western frontier. General von Fritsch estimated the probable French forces available for use on the Alpine frontier at approximately twenty divisions, so that a strong French superiority would still remain on the western frontier, with the role, according to the German view, of invading the Rhineland. In this matter, moreover, the advanced state of French defense preparations (*Mobilmachung*) must be taken into particular account, and it must be remembered apart from the insignificant value of our present fortifications - on which Field Marshal von Blomberg laid special emphasis - that the four motorized divisions intended for the West were still more or less incapable of movement. In regard to our offensive toward the southeast, Field Marshal von Blomberg drew particular attention to the strength of the Czech fortifications, which had acquired by now a structure like the Maginot Line and would gravely hamper our attack.

General von Fritsch mentioned that this was the very purpose of a study which he had ordered made this winter, namely, to examine the possibility of conducting operations against the Czechs with special

reference to overcoming the Czech fortification system; the General further expressed his opinion that under existing circumstances he must give up his plan to go abroad on his leave, which was due to begin on November 10. The Fuhrer dismissed this idea on the grounds that the possibility of a conflict need not yet be regarded as so imminent. To the Foreign Minister's objection that an Anglo - French -Italian conflict was not yet within such a measurable distance as the Fuhrer seemed to assume, the Fuhrer put the summer of 1938 as the date which seemed to him possible for this. In reply to considerations offered by Field Marshal von Blomberg and General von Fritsch regarding the attitude of Britain and France, the Fuhrer repeated his previous statements that he was convinced of Britain's nonparticipation, and therefore he did not believe in the probability of belligerent action against Germany by France.

Should the Mediterranean conflict under discussion lead to a general mobilization in Europe, then we must immediately begin action against the Czechs. On the other hand, should the powers not engaged in the war declare themselves disinterested, then Germany would have to adopt a similar attitude to this for the time being.

Colonel General Goring thought that, in view of the Fuhrer's statement, we should consider liquidating our military undertakings in Spain. The Fuhrer agrees to this with the limitation that he thinks he should reserve a decision for a proper moment.

The second part of the conference was concerned with the concrete questions of armament.

CERTIFIED CORRECT: HOSSBACH, Colonel (General Staff).

Different Views of the Hossbach Memorandum

ALAN BULLOCK , *Hitler: A study in tyranny*, London: Penguin Books, 1962, pages 411-412.

The winter of 1937-8 marks the turning point in Hitler's policy from the restricted purpose of removing the limitations imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles to the bolder course which brought the spectacular triumphs of the years 1938-41. It was not so much a change in the direction or character of his foreign policy - which altered little from the time he wrote *Mein Kampf* as the opening of a new phase in its development. The time was ripe, he judged, for the realization of aims he had long nurtured.

Hitler had no cut-and-dried views about how he was to proceed, but, as Hossbach's minutes of the meeting of November 5, 1937 show, he was revolving certain possibilities in his mind and, granted favourable circumstances, he was prepared to move against Austria and Czechoslovakia as early as the new year, 1938.

The prospects Hitler had unfolded at that meeting, however, alarmed at least some of those who were present. The brief report of the discussion which followed Hitler's exposition shows clearly enough the doubts of the Army's leaders, Blomberg and Fritsch, about the risk of war with Great Britain and France, and their anxiety about such material points as the incomplete state of Germany's western fortifications, France's military power, and the strength of the Czech defences. Neurath, the Foreign Minister, supported them so far as to remind Hitler that a conflict between Great Britain, France, and Italy was neither so close nor so certain as he appeared to assume.

These doubts were not removed by Hitler's irritable assurances that he was convinced Britain would never fight and that he did not believe France would go to war on her own. On November 9, Fritsch requested a further interview with Hitler and renewed his objections: Germany, he argued, was not in a position to court the danger of war. Neurath, too, attempted to see Hitler and dissuade him from the course he proposed to

follow. By this time, however, Hitler was so irritated that he left Berlin abruptly from Berchtesgaden and refused to receive the Foreign Minister until his return in the middle of January.

Reasoned criticism of any kind always aroused Hitler's anger: he hated to have his intuition subject to analysis. It is possible that he had already made up his mind to get rid of the last of those in positions of authority who were not National Socialists and might have had doubts about forcing the pace in foreign policy. At any rate, within less than three months of the meeting of November fifth, three of the men who had listened to him - Blomberg, Fritsch, and Neurath - were removed from office, while those who remained were the two who had silenced whatever doubts they felt - Goring and Raeder.

A. J. P. TAYLOR (*Origins of the Second World War*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1961, pages 131-133.)

This record (ie, the Hossbach Memorandum) is supposed to reveal Hitler's plans. Much play was made with it at Nuremburg; and the editors of the Documents on German Foreign Policy say that "it provides a summary of German foreign policy in 1937-38". It is therefore worth looking at in detail. Perhaps we shall find in it the explanation of the Second World War; or perhaps we shall find only the source of a legend.

That afternoon, (ie, Nov. 5, 1937), Hitler called a conference at the Chancellery. It was attended by Blomberg, the minister of war; Neurath, the foreign minister; Fritsch, commander-in-chief of the army; Raeder, commander-in-chief of the navy; and Goering, commander-in-chief of the air force. Hitler did most of the talking. He began with a general disquisition on Germany's need for Lebensraum. He did not specify where this was to be found - possibly in Europe, though he also discussed colonial gains. But gains there must be. "Germany had to reckon with two hate-inspired antagonists, Britain and France. . . Germany's problem could only be solved by means of force and this was never without attendant risk. " When and how was there to be this resort to force? Hitler discussed three "cases". The first "case" was "period 1943-45". After that the situation could only change for the worse; 1943 must be the moment for action. Case 2 was civil war in France; if that happened, "the time for action against the Czechs had come". Case 3 was war between France and Italy. This might well occur in 1938; then "our objective must be to overthrow Czechoslovakia and Austria simultaneously. " None of these "cases" came true; clearly, therefore they do not provide the blueprint for German policy. Nor did Hitler dwell on them. He went on to demonstrate that Germany would gain her aims without a great war; "force" apparently meant to him the threat of war, not necessarily war itself. The Western Powers would be too hampered and too timid to intervene. "Britain almost certainly, and probably France as well, had written off the Czechs and were reconciled to the fact that this question of Germany would be cleared up in due course. " Russia would be held in check by Japan.

Hitler's exposition was in large part daydreaming, unrelated to what followed in real life. Even if seriously meant, it was not a call to action, at any rate not to the action of a great war; it was a demonstration that a great war would not be necessary. Despite the preliminary talk about 1943-45, its solid core was the examination of the chances for peaceful triumphs in 1938, when France would be preoccupied elsewhere. Hitler's listeners remained doubtful. The generals insisted that the French army would be superior to the German even if engaged against Italy as well. Neurath doubted whether a Mediterranean conflict between France and Italy was imminent. Hitler waved these doubts aside : "he was convinced of Britain's nonparticipation, and therefore he did not believe in the probability of belligerent action by France against Germany. "There is only one safe conclusion to be drawn from this rambling disquisition : Hitler was gambling on some twist of fortune which would present him with success in foreign affairs, just as a miracle had made him Chancellor in 1933. There was here no concrete plan, no directive for German policy in 1937 and 1938. Or if there were a directive, it was to wait upon events.

Why then did Hitler hold this conference? This question was not asked at Nuremberg; it has not been asked by historians Yet surely it is an elementary part of historical discipline to ask of a document not only what is in it, but why it came into existence. The conference of 5 November 1937 was a curious gathering. Only Goering was a Nazi. The others were old-style Conservatives who had remained in office to keep Hitler under control; all of them except Raeder were to be dismissed from their posts within three months. Hitler knew that all except Goering were his opponents; and he did not trust Goering much. Why did he reveal his inmost thoughts to men whom he distrusted and whom he was shortly to discharge? This question has an easy answer : he did not reveal his inmost thoughts. There was no crisis in foreign policy to provoke a broad discussion or sweeping decisions. The conference was a manoeuvre in domestic affairs. Here a storm was brewing. The financial genius of Schacht had made rearmament and full employment possible; but now Schacht was jibbing at further expansion of the armament programme. Hitler feared Schacht and could not answer his financial arguments. He knew only that they were wrong: the Nazi regime could

not relax its momentum. Hitler aimed to isolate Schacht from the other Conservatives; and he had therefore to win them for a programme of increased armaments. His geopolitical exposition had no other purpose. The Hossbach memorandum itself provides evidence of this. Its last paragraph reads : “The second part of the conference was concerned with questions of armament. “ (sic) This, no doubt was why it had been called.

E. M. ROBERTSON (*Hitler's Prewar Policy and Military Plans, 1933-1939*, London: Longmans, Green, 1963, pages 106-110.)

On 5 November, a few weeks after his talk with Henlein, Hitler addressed his principal advisers and announced that the time had come to put an end to Czechoslovakia. Blomberg, Fritsch, Raeder, Goring and Neurath were present, as well as Colonel Hossbach, Hitler's adjutant, who recorded the proceedings five days later. According to Jodl no official report of the conference was made and the versions in the possession of the War Ministry and the Air Ministry were not in complete agreement. (1)

He opened on the *Mein Kampf* theme that the aim of German policy was to safeguard, preserve, and enlarge the racial community (*Volksmasse*). The question for Germany was : where could she achieve the greatest gain at the lowest cost? She had to reckon with "two hate-inspired antagonists", Britain and France. Both were opposed to any strengthening of Germany position either in Europe or overseas. Because of opposition from the dominions, and loss of British prestige after the Abyssinian war, the return of the colonies was not to be expected. At most Germany might expect Portuguese Angola. Serious discussion on colonies would have to wait until "Britain was in difficulties" and the Reich "armed and strong". He "did not share the view that the British Empire was unshakeable". The threat from Japan in the Far East and from Italy in the Mediterranean were further reasons for Britain's precarious position. He then elaborated three possible opportunities for German action. In the first it was assumed that Germany would strike when she had attained maximum power, before 1943-45. The second and third set of circumstances would arise if France were torn by civil war or involved in a conflict with Italy. Of the two, the second seemed more likely. The threat to Germany's flanks in a war with the West would be removed by overthrowing Austria and Czechoslovakia simultaneously. Although Czechoslovakia might not declare war on Germany on the day of the outbreak of a Franco-German war, she might do so later at a more convenient time. After the defeat of Czechoslovakia, when Germany had a common frontier with Hungary, threat of force would assure Poland's neutrality in the event of a war

with the West. The Fuhrer believed that Britain and France had tacitly written off Czechoslovakia and that the French would shrink either from attacking the West Wall or from invading the Low Countries without British Support. (2)

Germany for her part would not violate these countries for fear of precipitating British action. During the attack in the South East, operations in the West would be defensive. Hitler spoke highly of Austrian and Czech armed strength and here the main effort would have to be made.

He then dilated on Germany's gains after conquering her first two victims. Provided the expulsion of two million Czechs and one million "undesirable" Austrians could be carried out successfully, there would be additional food for five to six million German citizens. Germany would have strategic frontiers, and troops could be freed for other tasks. On the assumption that one division could be raised from one million inhabitants, the Army could be increased by about twelve divisions. While Italy would not object to the elimination of the Czechs, her attitude to Austria depended on whether the Duce was still alive. (3)

The Fuhrer believed that intervention by Russia could be countered by swift operations : because of Japan, it might even be swiftly discounted. Poland would not act for fear of Russia. The possibility of a Franco-Italian conflict was drawing nearer and he was resolved to take advantage of it, even in 1938. Victory by France was not to be welcomed - on the ground that Britain and France might gain the Balearic Islands. In a war with France, Italy, fearing neither a British landing nor a French invasion across the Alps, could concentrate on attacking French possessions in North Africa. If Germany took advantage of such a conflict, Britain, herself at war with Italy, would not intervene. The timing for the invasion of Czechoslovakia and Austria need not coincide with military operations in the Mediterranean and an alliance with Italy was considered unnecessary. Germany would merely exploit Italy's independent, warlike actions.

Hitler took his audience completely by surprise. They learnt, with consternation, that he might act earlier than they had previously expected. (4)

Remonstrances were spontaneous. Blomberg and Fritsch insisted that Britain and France should be given no cause for intervening. The Fuhrer repeated his conviction that this danger could be discounted. Fritsch pointed out that even if twenty divisions were tied down by Italy on the alpine frontier, the French would still have a preponderance of forces over Germany for an invasion of the Rhineland. They had, moreover, a definite lead in the rapidity of mobilisation. It was also pointed out that German fortifications were inadequate and that the four motorised divisions intended for the West were still hardly capable of movement. Blomberg drew attention to the strength of the Czech fortifications which now resembled the Maginot line, and Fritsch replied that the problem of storming them would be studied in the winter. Fritsch also proposed cancelling his leave, but unwisely accepted the Fuhrer's assurance that a conflict was not imminent. Neurath doubted whether an immediate Franco-Italian conflict was so likely as the Fuhrer assumed, but Hitler replied that the summer of 1938 seemed possible. Finally, Goring's proposal that military support for Franco should be cancelled was adopted. Hitler had cause to be gratified. His audience consisted of a select few, and there was thus less likelihood of concerted opposition. According to Schacht, Hitler excluded many likely opponents, such as himself, by not calling a full cabinet meeting. Immediately afterwards Neurath had a heart attack and offered his resignation : according to Raeder, Hitler had intended to break the old man's nerves. Also during the conference, there had been two altercations - presaging things to come - between Goring and the two generals Blomberg and Fritsch. (5)

Hitler was serious in the pronouncements of 5 November. The Directive of 24 June 1937 was amended in a supplement of 7 December in which Operation Green (a German attack against Czechoslovakia) was to take precedence over Operation Red (a German defensive in the West). (6)

The new suppositions underlying Green were: “When Germany has attained full preparedness for war in all spheres the military conditions for an offensive war against Czechoslovakia will have been established and with it the problem of Germany’s living space can be solved victoriously even if one or other Great Power should intervene against us. Among many other considerations the defensive capacity of our western fortifications is of primary importance. This makes it possible to hold the Western frontier of the Reich for a long time with weak forces against an opponent many times as strong as ourselves. But even then the Government will do everything possible to obviate the risk of war on two fronts and will try to avoid any military situation to which Germany, as far as anyone can judge, is neither militarily nor economically equal.”(6)

NOTES:

(1) *Nuremburg Documents*, 386-PS. See also Hossbach, *Zwischen Wehrmacht und Hitler*, 1934-1938, pp. 217-220. According to Jodl’s Diary for 21 January, Hitler addressed the Generals on history, politics, national unity, religion, and the future of the German people.

(2) He seems either to have ignored or not to have obtained the views of his Minister in Prague concerning the possible extension of French obligations to Czechoslovakia. See DGFP, Vol. II, pp. 30-1, a memorandum of 6 November; also Wheeler-Bennett, Munich, p. 30.

(3) Mussolini gave Ribbentrop his assurance on the following day. *Ciano’s Papers*, 6 November, 1937.

(4) The conference also gave rise to a serious but apparently shortlived scare. Blomberg learnt from what was described as a reliable source that Francois-Poncet (French ambassador in Berlin) had obtained a report of the proceedings on the following day.

(5) See Schacht, *Account Settled*, pp. 126-7; and Hossbach, *Zwischen Wehrmacht und Hitler*, p. 219. Also see *Nuremburg Documents: Neurath 3* and IMT (International Military Tribunal) Vol XIV, p. 36.

(6) There were two supplements. The first can be found in *Nuremburg documents*, 175-C. The second is now published in *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, Series D, Vol. 6, Appendix IIIK. The author's translation is used here.