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1938

Hitler's Gamble

Giles MacDonogh

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INTRODUCTION

The year 1938 was one of cataclysmal change for Germany. On 1 January the Reich was administered by a right-wing coalition led by the Chancellor, Adolf Hitler, and dominated by members of the Nazi Party. The army had sworn a personal oath of allegiance to Hitler, but its commanders had managed to retain a degree of independence. The country lay confined within borders decreed by the Treaty of Versailles nearly twenty years before. Hitler had so far contented himself with policing his own house and grabbing back the Demilitarized Zone in the Rhineland. He had yet to pursue any foreign 'adventures'. Although they had been stripped of their roles in German public life, the Jews were still in possession of their property, and many of them continued to lead relatively normal lives. They were evidently in no hurry to leave.

By New Year's Day 1939, all that had changed. The non-Nazis had been purged of all but a few insignificant roles in government; Hitler had assumed total control of the armed forces; Germany had invaded first Austria then the German-speaking areas of Czechoslovakia; the Jews had been robbed, beaten and imprisoned and many had been driven into penurious exile. Hundreds had been killed. Hitler had emerged *deus ex machina* with all the powers of the Nazi regime consolidated in his own person. And worse was to come. That Germans felt an increase in stress and anxiety during those twelve months is perhaps borne out by one telling statistic: their consumption of strong alcohol doubled in the course of the year.[1]

We remember 1938 now above all for Munich, that moment at the end of September when Western leaders apparently gave in to the Führer's demands. Peace was hanging by a thread: Hitler had launched his second foreign 'gamble', and French and British statesmen met their

fascist counterparts in a bid to avoid war. We are also painfully aware of the condition of much of Europe in May 1945: a collection of smouldering ruins filled with fresh or festering corpses. In those intervening years some fifty million people had died violent deaths. There is, however, a danger in hindsight, and it would be unfair to seek to draw a direct line between the two situations, for the line is not straight at all. Before the outbreak of war in 1939, no grown man or woman could have accurately predicted the depths to which Nazi Germany would sink by the end.

Nonetheless the events that took place in 1938 make it easy to conclude that Hitler had already mapped out the entire series of conquests by which he would regain the old Imperial German borders in the east, and more besides; but we must not race to such conclusions: Hitler could be more pragmatic than his writings and public utterances suggest and he was probably hoping to get what he could without fighting the great powers. If all went well, and the West made no trouble, other territories might fall into his lap. It was only in the spring of 1939, for example, that he began to make plans to take the Polish Corridor by force, after the Poles refused to agree to Danzig reverting to the Reich. Poland suffered its fourth partition in September 1939.

It is similarly tempting to connect the injustice and violence directed against Austria's and Germany's Jews in 1938 with the industrialized slaughter of the Final Solution. Nazi antisemitism certainly took a new turn in 1938, but it would be difficult to argue that plans had already been drawn up to murder the Jews in specially created camps in east-central Europe. Some would say that Hitler had already made up his mind by 30 January 1939, when he delivered a notorious speech to celebrate the sixth anniversary of the Nazi takeover. Maybe so, but he had to find a means of putting his thoughts into action, and, even then, German leaders were remarkably sensitive to foreign opinion. It is more likely that the speech contained a veiled warning to the Jews in the United States, that there would be trouble for their co-religionists if they continued to stifle German trade and rob the country of the foreign currency it so desperately needed to survive.

Words like *vernichten* and *ausrotten*[i] came easily to Hitler's lips. As a front-line soldier in the Great War he had experienced the effects of poison gas, but even by the end of 1938 it was unlikely that he had made the connection between 'problem' and 'solution'. Wartime conditions vastly accelerated projects that had yet to be formulated; only then was the smoke thick enough to cover the activities of the zealots. Massive troop deployment, inadequate communications and inurement to violent death, brought about by casualties on an unprecedented scale, helped remove the last moral barriers to genocide.

Yet 1938 was the crucial year in the history of Nazi Germany before Europe tumbled into war. Every month resounded with shocks or sensations: the Blomberg–Fritsch Crisis in January, which shook faith in the armed forces; the end of Cabinet government in February; the Anschluss in March that melded Austria to the Reich; the Plebiscite in April that revealed overwhelming support for the Führer; Hitler's trip to Rome in May that laid the keel of a proper alliance with Mussolini; Edda Göring's birth in June, which provided Germans with a welcome social event and demonstrated the popularity of Hitler's chosen successor; the Evian Conference in July, which revealed that the countries opposing Hitler's racial policies were not prepared to put their money where their mouths were; the Kendrick Crisis in August, which destroyed the British intelligence network in Germany; Chamberlain's visits to Berchtesgaden and Bad Godesberg in September followed by the notorious Munich Conference; the occupation of the Sudetenland in October and later that month the expulsion of the Polish Jews from the Reich; Goebbels' re-creation of a mediaeval pogrom in November's *Reichskristallnacht*. While the Jews repaired their broken homes and shops in December, the *Kindertransporte* began to ferry their children to safety.

In 1938, the blood was scarcely cold on the battlefields of the Great War and few people were ready for more; yet, in the course of those twelve months, Hitler, Göring and Ribbentrop prodded the West's defences and found out how thin they were. Germany gambled, and with

[i] 'Exterminate' and 'wipe out'.

each easy victory they decided they could push even further. Hitler's eyes were already roving, but for the time being he was looking to the south-east. Germany required *Lebensraum* (living space), raw materials and industry. It was Austria and Czechoslovakia that appealed to him at the beginning of 1938, not right-wing Poland, where many people abominated the Jews as much as he did, and which was still considered a useful bulwark against Bolshevik Russia.

In 1938 the deportation of the Reich's Jews began in earnest. Germany gained experience in forcible expulsion with the eviction of the Polish Jews in October, and after *Reichskristallnacht* two weeks later. Following the pogrom of 9–10 November, as many as 30,000 Jews were shoved into the concentration camps that Himmler had been extending and expanding all year. This was the first large-scale, organized strike against the Jews of the Altreich, as Germany north of the former Austro-German border on the River Inn was now called. A few thousand rich Austrian Jews had been languishing in Dachau and Buchenwald since April. The aim was to speed up emigration, but it also oiled the cogs of a machine that would be used again and again once war began. And when that happened it would mostly mean murder.

PROLOGUE

On 5 November 1937 Hitler set out his new vision for Germany. He proposed to smash the shackles of the Versailles Treaty. This programme is revealed in the now infamous Hossbach Memorandum. This was to be his 'political testament'. Hitler's aim was to test his service chiefs and see how ready they were to subscribe to his more radical plans. No notes were to be taken at the session, which was top secret.[1] Field Marshal Werner von Blomberg's adjutant, the staff officer Colonel Friedrich Hossbach, witnessed the meeting between Hitler and the military chiefs: Blomberg, Werner von Fritsch, Erich Raeder and Hermann Göring together with the Foreign Minister, Constantin von Neurath. Hossbach thought the discussion might interest his mentor, the Chief of the General Staff, Colonel General Ludwig Beck, and scribbled down the main points in his diary.[2]

In the course of a two-hour monologue,[i] Hitler told those present that his aim was to maintain the 'racial community' and enlarge it. Germany required *Lebensraum* – not in the country's confiscated African colonies (which did not interest him) but in Europe, where new agricultural land would provide Germany with the self-sufficiency, or autarky, that it craved. He warned the generals that Germany was also painfully short of raw materials. It had to strike before potential enemies such as the Soviet Union could catch up. He predicted that the Russians would be ready to fight some time between 1943 and 1945, which would allow time for Germany to annex Czechoslovakia and Austria. The strike could come as early as 1938. By acquiring these two territories Germany's frontiers would be made that much more secure and the increased manpower would provide him with twelve fresh divisions for the army.

[i] The meeting took place in the Chancellery from 4.15 to 8.30 p.m.

Blomberg and Fritsch were the first to throw up their hands in exasperation, since operations of this sort required minute planning, but Hitler reassured them that there was no hurry. He predicted that the fragile bonds between Britain and France on the one hand and Britain and Italy on the other would collapse by the summer of 1938, leaving Mussolini resolutely in the German camp. He was convinced that Britain would recoil from fighting, and that France would not participate either, as the country would be confined to its bed by yet another political crisis: during the waning years of the Third Republic, French governments came and went with indecent speed.

Neurath was also jittery after the meeting.[3] Much of what Hitler had said may have looked dangerously radical but to nationalists and National Socialists Austria and Czechoslovakia were obvious targets. The Treaties of Versailles and Saint Germain that followed the defeat of Germany and Austria-Hungary had accorded the precious right of self-determination only to the victors in the First World War, or the formerly oppressed peoples of their enemies. Austria had been shorn of all its territories and left in possession of only its German-speaking core. It had been expressedly forbidden to link up with Germany, because the creation of a super-state might have made Germany stronger than the Allies desired.

British politicians had also begun to question the wisdom and morality of the Versailles settlement and were increasingly conscious of these open sores. There was much discussion of the former German colonies, and whether Hitler should be granted an African empire.[4] In general the British were happier with the idea of concessions on the European mainland that did not threaten their empire. Many, particularly in the British Foreign Office, saw revision of the Austrian and Czech borders as inevitable and a German presence in Bohemia and Moravia as preferable to a Soviet one. It was unfortunate, however, that the man who clamoured loudest for such changes should be Adolf Hitler.

Raw materials were vital to Nazi Germany's survival. Austria had the iron ore of the Erzberg, but Czechoslovakia had much more of everything. Both countries could offer foreign currency that was vital for

purchasing arms and materials abroad. The German economy was simply not strong enough for the tasks imposed on it by the Nazis. In 1933, Germany had been a modestly wealthy, partly modernized society. The Third Reich had taken steps to change that, but the diversion of so many of the country's resources into the arms programme had left many other areas underfunded: troops slept in bivouacs while money was ploughed into arms construction, and the German railway network, together with its rolling stock, was falling apart.[5] The Finance Minister, Graf Lutz Schwerin von Krosigk, was tearing his hair out over Germany's economic crisis, which he thought would last to 1940 at the very least. He told the Propaganda Minister and Gauleiter (regional party leader) of Berlin, Joseph Goebbels, about it, but Goebbels came out with a typically Nazi line: he did not believe a country could be killed by debt, only by lack of weapons.[6]

On 19 November, two weeks after the meeting with the service chiefs, Hitler received Lord Halifax at the Berghof, his opulent country house above Berchtesgaden in the Bavarian Alps. As Lord President of the Council Halifax was a member of the British Cabinet, and he would shortly replace Anthony Eden as Foreign Secretary. Halifax let it be known that Britain was not opposed to a revision of the Versailles settlement as regards Austria, Czechoslovakia and Danzig, provided it came about peacefully.[7] Halifax clearly had the backing of the British government: in December Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain told the German ambassador to the Court of Saint James's, Joachim von Ribbentrop, that he was prepared to discuss both Austrian and Czech issues.[8]

When Halifax left, Hitler emerged in the best of moods and told his entourage that Halifax was 'a clever politician who fully supported Germany's claims'. He summoned the Austrian Legion, an SS unit composed of Austrian Nazis, and told them, 'The hour approaches when your wishes will be fulfilled.'[9] Hitler did not talk of his need to become absolute master in his own house when he addressed his service chiefs earlier that month, but it was not far from his mind. That meant removing all those who were less than wholly committed to National

Socialism. Like a balloonist, he was going to divest himself of the lead weights that impeded his ascent.

Göring took over Germany's finances from Hjalmar Schacht at the beginning of December. Schacht had suggested Göring receive a role in economy in the first place, but Göring was increasingly impatient with Schacht's ways and wanted to use more draconian methods to find money for his projects. Göring now had the job of making Germany self-sufficient while financing German rearmament. Schacht had not thought this autarky feasible. The Foreign Minister, Neurath, was the next victim: he had been appointed by Chancellor Franz von Papen in 1932 and had only joined the Nazi Party in 1937. He was to be replaced by the 'Second Bismarck', Ribbentrop. Four ambassadors were to be jettisoned too: Ulrich von Hassell in Rome, Herbert von Dirksen in Tokyo, Papen in Vienna and, of course, Ribbentrop in London.

It seems unlikely, however, that Hitler had a master plan for these changes or any grand strategy that was specific to 1938. He responded to each crisis as it came along and it was invariably he who came out strongest.

1

JANUARY

'. . . as the silver candelabra had been placed on the table a wonderful light lit up the red and golden wine in all its splendour that was majestically mirrored in the noble wood of ancient furniture and in the wings and clothes of the golden angel together with the balls on the Christmas tree. Every feast day comes and goes in our house as our own new, clear and silent celebration: and the magnificence and the serenity become ever greater with every earthly joy . . . The angels and silver baubles shine from within the dark baroque room: everything is still steeped in Christmas, and therefore from renewed festivity, a new year!'

Jochen Klepper, 1 January 1938.[i]

In the first weeks of January 1938, much of Germany lay under a thick blanket of snow. Like the snow, the regime's secret police were everywhere. For those who had no reason to love the Third Reich, it was best to keep your head down and talk to no one. Communists, socialists and Jews were among those who had most to fear.

It was not the Germans but the Romanians who had turned up the heat for the Jews at the beginning of the year. A fascist government led by Octavian Goga had come to power in Bucharest in December. On

[i] *Unter dem Schatten deiner Flügel: aus den Tagebüchern der Jahre 1932–1942*, Stuttgart 1955, 542.

12 January he revoked the citizenship of the country's three-quarters of a million Jews, causing large numbers to flee. Some of these surfaced in Austria ('a gift', mocked Goebbels) and there was a fear that they might join the other groups of foreign Jews in Germany.[1]

While the Nazi leaders were delighted to find a new ally in the Balkan state, they were less than pleased to be a haven for its Jews. 'The Jewish question has become a global problem once again,'[2] wrote Goebbels. The Nuremberg-based weekly *Der Stürmer* celebrated the precipitate departure of the Jews from Romania in a series of cartoons by Philipp Rupprecht or 'Fips'. One showed Jews in France, Britain and the United States weeping impotently over the fate of their Romanian brothers; another, an avalanche of Jews descending on France; and a third, a Jew arriving at an Austrian hotel to find it 'fully occupied'.[3]

Der Stürmer – the unofficial organ for the state persecution of the Jews – also reported that the French Foreign Minister Yvon Delbos had been in Warsaw for talks before Christmas, and had discussed the possibility of despatching Poland's 3.3 million Jews to Madagascar. The editor, Julius Streicher, preened himself: he had been one of the first to suggest the French colony as a new home for the Jews.[4] On 21 January *Der Stürmer* published a special issue calling for the death penalty for *Rassenschänder* – Jews who slept with Gentiles. Goebbels – who had slept with at least one Jew – heartily approved. The cover showed the fourteen-year-old starlet Deanna Durbin on the arms of elderly Hollywood Jews. The periodical contained a column in which all Gentiles who continued to have professional or personal dealings with Jews were named and shamed.

Victor Klemperer, a rabbi's son married to a Gentile, had been sacked as professor of romance languages at Dresden University. He was reduced to writing a diary that recorded each new blow levelled at his race. Like many Jews, he was beginning to have second thoughts about having wanted to be more German than the Germans and complained of the 'tragedy of the Jew, misled by his desire to assimilate'. Sometimes it seemed the state's bugbears were Catholic priests, at others Protestant pastors. In January 1938 it was Jews.[5]

THE BLOMBERG–FRITSCH AFFAIR

Hitler might have been looking for a means of securing his position and making himself absolute master of the Third Reich, but it was not always clear how he would bring that about. Time and again, circumstances came to his rescue, and he was able – with (as he would put it) the 'instinct of a sleepwalker' – to turn difficult situations to his advantage. One such began to unravel at the first social occasion of the Nazi New Year, although it was a while before Hitler realized how events could be shaped to his own aims. Indeed, he was so unconscious of the plot going on around him that he was able to accompany Goebbels to see *Die Fledermaus* that evening. The Führer was 'in complete raptures'[6] at the Strauss operetta and wholly unaware that behind his back his underlings were about to provoke a two-week crisis and bring the state to a standstill.

Göring held his suitably gigantic forty-fourth birthday party on the morning of Wednesday, 12 January. His position was emblematic of the peculiar structure of power within the Nazi state: officially Hitler's successor, he was also a minister of state and president of the emasculated Reichstag. He was commander of the air force, therefore answerable to the Minister of War, Blomberg. He was, however, on an equal footing with Colonel General von Fritsch, the head of the army.[7]

The former air ace was one of the oldest in the gang, the same age as his enemy Ribbentrop. Goebbels was forty and Heinrich Himmler was thirty-seven. Hitler himself was only forty-eight. Nazism retained its appeal to an unfulfilled element in German youth – those who had been born in around 1910 and grown up unemployed during the depressed years of the Weimar Republic.

On 12 January Göring was feted in the way he loved best: no one dared to stint on the presents. Hitler had just returned from his Christmas break and gave his old friend a 'splendid' hunting scene by the Austrian painter Hans Makart. The party was interrupted, however, for Göring and Hitler had a solemn office to perform: they were due at the town hall in the Tiergarten district of Berlin at ten to twelve, invited to

be witnesses at the wedding of the ageing Blomberg to one Eva Gruhn. As he left the festivities, Göring permitted himself a loud chuckle.[8] For some time he had been looking for a means to extend the Party's influence over the army, and now he saw his chance.[9]

A widower with five children, the noble Blomberg was marrying a much younger woman from the *bas fonds*. Some months before, he had put on mufti and gone to Oberhof in the Thuringian Forest for a cure. Seeing him eating his dinner all by himself, the manager of the hotel had asked him if he would like company. That was when Eva Gruhn sat at his table. Later she informed Blomberg she was pregnant with his child, but he liked her so much that he asked for her hand in marriage.[10] He even went so far as to confess his love to Goebbels, who found the story 'very moving' and promised to help.[11] Eva came from the working-class district of Neukölln in Berlin, where her mother had run a massage parlour. Mother Gruhn had twice been convicted of prostitution and her daughter had followed in her footsteps. She had a police record that documented participation in nude orgies, prostitution and selling pornographic pictures – of herself. She had been on parole earlier that year.[12]

As early as October, Blomberg had cried on Göring's shoulder and told him of his intended's humble origins. He had spared Göring the rest, which he probably did not know himself. He had, however, come under heavy criticism from his own officers. Blomberg had been a stickler for their marrying within their social milieu and was now breaking his own code.[13] Göring reassured him that Hitler's consent would be forthcoming, as he approved any match that struck a blow against the old order. He took great pains to be helpful, going so far as to dispose of a younger rival by packing him off to South America with a well-paid job. Blomberg finally told Hitler after Ludendorff's funeral on 22 December.[14] The marriage went ahead with the Führer's blessing and after their wedding on the 12th the happy couple departed for the island of Capri.[15]

There was a slight glitch a few days later, when they were obliged to cut short their honeymoon, because Blomberg's mother was inconsiderate enough to die. The general was in Berlin on the 17th, the day before her

death, when Goebbels saw him and still thought him a 'fine fellow'.[16] The storm broke, however, on 21 January, when an anonymous caller, claiming to be a general, telephoned Army High Command demanding to speak to Colonel-General Fritsch. When he was refused the caller shouted, 'Tell the general that Field Marshal von Blomberg has married a whore!'[17]

The chief of police, Graf Wolf Heinrich von Helldorf, knew the story already. A member of his vice squad, in the course of his duties, had been with a prostitute who had seen the new Frau von Blomberg together with Hitler and Göring in the newspapers and had instantly recognized her as her old friend. The policeman had looked up the file and taken it in to Helldorf.[18] At the Gestapa – Gestapo Headquarters – in the Prinz Albrechts Palais in Berlin, someone showed Franz Josef Huber, later Gestapo chief in Vienna, a picture of a naked woman, telling him the woman was now Freifrau von Blomberg.[19]

Helldorf went to see General Wilhelm Keitel – whose son Karl-Heinz was engaged to be married to Blomberg's daughter Dorle – and asked him to identify the new baroness from a police photograph. Keitel, however, had little to tell the police chief. He said he had not been invited to the wedding, and the only time he had set eyes on her was at the funeral. Keitel had not been able to make out her features as she had worn a heavy veil. After the funeral, the honeymoon couple made preparations to set off for Italy again.[20]

In a style to which Germany was to become accustomed, Keitel passed the buck. He told Helldorf to approach Göring, for the cogent reason that Göring had been at the wedding, and would have had a good look at Frau von Blomberg. Helldorf drove out to Göring's mansion at Carinhall near Berlin. Göring could indeed identify the woman in the picture. He admitted he had known for a long time that Blomberg intended to marry her, and also revealed how he had eliminated a rival. Blomberg, it appeared, had walked into a honey-trap.

While doubt may still hang over his role in Blomberg's fate, there is no question that Göring was behind the removal of the monarchist and anti-Nazi Colonel-General von Fritsch. He was to be pushed out by

trumped-up charges of infringing Article 175 of the Prussian Criminal Code by frequenting a Bavarian rent-boy called Sepp Weingärtner ('*der Bayernseppl*'[ii]) in November 1933. Fritsch had allegedly been spotted having sex with Weingärtner in a dark place near Wannsee station by a blackmailer called Otto Schmidt. Posing as a policeman, Schmidt followed him back to town and confronted him on the Potsdamer Platz. According to Schmidt, Fritsch took fright, produced his military pass and asked Schmidt to be discreet. Over the next few weeks Schmidt was able to pump over 2,000 RM[iii] out of the unfortunate officer.[21]

Taking full advantage of the Nazi desire to adhere as strictly as possible to the draconian Article 175, Schmidt earned a living by spying on and blackmailing homosexuals. In 1936 he was arrested and, to save his hide, gave the police some details of his business. Among his 'clients' he was able to name the later Minister of Economics, Walther Funk,[iv] the tennis ace and Wimbledon finalist Gottfried von Cramm and a Graf von Wedel, who was police president in Potsdam.[v] He also named Fritsch. Schmidt was interrogated by Josef Meisinger, the chief of a Gestapo unit called the *Reichszentrale für die Bekämpfung der Homosexualität* (The Reich's Central Office for the Repression of Homosexuality), and told him he met the general in Lichterfelde station whenever he wanted more money.[22] Lichterfelde was home to the cadet school and a natural haunt of top army brass.[23] Meisinger showed Schmidt a picture of Fritsch: '*Det is 'er*,' he said in his Prussian idiom – 'That's the man.'

Meisinger had taken the story to Heydrich and Himmler, who had drawn up a report, but Hitler had referred to it as *Mist* (dung), refused

[ii] 'Bavarian Joe'.

[iii] Reichsmarks.

[iv] Goebbels recorded rumours of Funk's homosexuality on 31 December 1937. Even Streicher's *Stürmer* alluded to it. See Elke Fröhlich (ed.), *Die Tagebücher von Joseph Goebbels*, Teil 1, Band 5, Dezember 1937–Juli 1938, Munich 2000, 77. Hitler was also aware of it: see R.J. Overy, *Goering*, London 1984, 71.

[v] A Graf Edgard Wedel or 'Hofwedel' ('Court' Wedel) had been heavily implicated in the homosexual scandals at the Kaiser's court.

to look at it and ordered it to be destroyed. He was still keen to retain Fritsch; it was his entourage who wanted to eliminate him. It is not clear whether it was Göring or Himmler who had been the prime mover in removing Fritsch back in 1936.[24] It was Heydrich who relocated the incriminating dossier and that would point to Himmler, but Göring had been meditating his coup since the end of the previous year, before Eva von Blomberg's shady past had come to light. Himmler wanted Fritsch out because of his opposition to the integration of the SS into the army; Göring because he assumed that Fritsch would be given Blomberg's job, which he coveted. With Himmler's permission, Göring had Schmidt taken out of Papenburg internment camp and brought to his home. Schmidt was shown a picture of Fritsch, whom he once again identified as the man he had seen with *der Bayernseppl*.

After Blomberg's wedding, Hitler had returned to the Berghof and was absent from Berlin until 24 January. The next day Göring represented the Fritsch dossier along with the one Helldorf had penned on the new baroness. When the Blomberg file was produced, the petty-bourgeois Hitler was irate: he had been abused, inveigled into witnessing the ceremony, even kissed the hand of a woman of the streets. He was particularly appalled that the pornographic pictures in the police file had been taken by Eva's one-time lover, a Czech Jew.

Hitler wanted the marriage annulled. Blomberg immediately refused. Hitler would not allow him to continue as Minister of War. Blomberg seems to have felt well out of it, made little attempt to save himself and went happily into retirement. He still claimed to be madly in love in 1945.[25] Unabashed, he even suggested Fritsch as his successor. Hitler was relieved when Blomberg accepted a generous golden handshake and left soon after for Italy, but he continued to seethe. There is a suggestion that his shattered look was a pose, that he was acting,[26] but Goebbels called it 'the worst crisis for the regime since the Röhm Affair . . . The Führer looks like a corpse.'[27] It is unlikely that Goebbels was misled by Hitler's performance. He saw an 'almost sad and very serious' Hitler on the 25th, but as yet had no details of the Blomberg affair. He noted, however, that Göring was at Hitler's side.[28]

Hitler summoned Keitel and asked him who should succeed Blomberg. Keitel naturally said all the right things: Göring was the man. Hitler, on the other hand, refused to consider Göring, who he thought had enough on his plate already and whom he believed to be 'too idle' to take on the extra work.[29] Keitel then advanced the name of Fritsch. Hitler went to his desk and came back with the Fritsch file. Keitel claims that he responded by saying it could only be 'a case of mistaken identity or slander'.[30] Hitler asked Keitel who should have Fritsch's job. Keitel replied: Gerd von Rundstedt. Hitler thought him too old. Keitel's next suggestion was Walther von Brauchitsch; Hitler parried with Walter von Reichenau. This was a hopeful choice, given Reichenau's loyalty to the cause, but Keitel said he was '*Hans Dampf in allen Gassen*' – a busybody too interested in politics and too little applied to the business of the army. He was unpopular with the other generals. Brauchitsch it was to be.[31]

The bachelor Fritsch had already aroused suspicions among some members of Hitler's elite. He had just been on a long holiday in Egypt where he hoped to cure his bronchitis; he had left soon after the meeting in the Chancellery, together with his second adjutant, a former champion point-to-pointer called Jochen von Both.[32] Göring had had Fritsch tailed, but no proof was forthcoming.[33] Fritsch mistakenly believed the contents of the dossier to be based on malicious rumours about some lunches he had offered an impecunious member of the Hitler Youth a few years before. Other sources mention *two* Youths, and Fritsch teaching them history and rapping them with a ruler on their bare calves when they got their facts wrong. The joke did the rounds of the SS that Fritsch was a calf fetishist.[34]

Hitler gave the file to Hossbach, to find out if there were any truth in it. Hossbach instantly smelled a rat and, against Hitler's orders, confronted Fritsch, who denied everything. He seemed aware that the scandal had been brewed by Göring and Himmler, who wanted to rid Germany of a 'reactionary general'.[35] Hossbach told Hitler that Fritsch denied the charge, and painted Fritsch in such a sympathetic light that Hitler was still keen to make him War Minister. Hitler still had not

abandoned Fritsch on 26 January, when the general was asked to come in and see him and Göring in the Chancellery Library. Fritsch entered shouting, 'I really want to look at this pig!'[36] He was not supposed to know that Schmidt would be produced, but Hossbach had told him, thereby incurring the eternal enmity of Göring, who was looking forward to his *coup de théâtre*.

Hitler told Fritsch that he had been accused of infringing Article 175. Schmidt was brought in and promptly identified Fritsch, who in turn vigorously denied the charges. He swore on his word of honour he had never set eyes on Schmidt before and that there was no truth in the allegations. He made the mistake, however, of mentioning the Hitler Youth. Hitler was instantly suspicious: he may have felt there was no smoke without fire, and he was known not to be overly fond of homosexuals. He wrote off Fritsch and Hossbach with him, telling Keitel he never wanted to see the colonel again. The sacking of Hossbach added to Hitler's depression and Goebbels reported the next day that he had been quite tearful.[37] Hitler was not the only lachrymose person around, for Keitel's deputy Jodl reported that his boss was also 'tearful': 'You get the impression of being caught up in one of the German nation's fateful moments.'[38]

Goebbels was finally let in on the Blomberg story by Hitler's former company commander and personal adjutant, Fritz Wiedemann. The two men were joined by Helldorf, who knew the case better than anyone with the exception of Göring and Himmler. When Helldorf brought Goebbels the dossier, he found it 'hair raising'. For a man of honour, there was no alternative but the pistol.[39]

Goebbels finally heard the news about Fritsch's homosexuality too. Positive identification had naturally been sufficient for Göring. The Gestapo-man Huber, however, alighted on a discrepancy: deductions from the bank account of one Captain von Frisch amounted exactly to the sum paid to the blackmailer Schmidt. 'It was like being stung by a bee,' Huber admitted later. He went straight to see his superior, Werner Best, who sent him to Heydrich. Heydrich went pale and took him to Himmler. Himmler thanked him: 'You did well.' It was only when

Meisinger informed him that the file had been around for a couple of years and had been put away for later use that he realized he had stumbled across a conspiracy.[40] The missing 't' and the lesser rank were not to be allowed to stand in the way of the plotters' desire to block Fritsch's progress.

The apparent strike against the officer corps was causing concern. At midday on Wednesday, 26 January, Helldorf called a meeting at the headquarters of the Abwehr (military intelligence service) on the Tirpitzufer. It was attended by, among others, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, the head of the Abwehr, his deputies – Colonels Hans Oster and Colonel Hans Pieckenbrock, together with Hans-Bernd Gisevius and Artur Nebe from the Criminal Police.[41] Helldorf defended Fritsch, but in his opinion Blomberg was too compromised, and he was shocked he could have stooped so low.[42] The meeting marked the parting of the ways between the nationalist fellow travellers and the Nazis. The suspicion that the whole affair was no more than an attempt to weaken the Wehrmacht's *esprit de corps* provoked the burgeoning cell of grumblers into downright opposition. The resisters had made an important conquest in the support of Canaris.

Yet the scandal would not go away. On the 27th Fritsch had to endure a four-hour interrogation by Best,[43] again in the presence of Schmidt. Since Schmidt's appearance at the Chancellery, the Gestapo had interviewed a number of young men who had served under Fritsch's command. They included Gottfried von Cramm, who had just returned from America and was later imprisoned for another offence under Article 175.[44] Both Fritsch and Schmidt clung to their stories, but the Gestapo were not interested in recording the fact that Schmidt made various claims that were clearly factually incorrect. Gürtner, the Minister of Justice, who was equally biased against the general, said Fritsch had not proved his innocence and regarded the story of the Hitler Youth as incriminating. Blomberg had thrown fat on the fire before his departure by saying that Fritsch was 'not a lady's man'.[45] Gürtner recommended that the case go before a military court. The interview coincided with the ex-Kaiser's birthday, and the discontent within the officer corps was clear from the number of pro-monarchist celebrations that took place in their messes.[46]

Hitler was distraught: an embarrassing crisis was discrediting the military elite of the Third Reich. His prudish nature found it hard to come to terms with the vices apparently prevalent among upper-class Prussians. He now had three positions vacant – Minister of War, Head of the Armed Forces and Head of the Army – and there was a queue forming: Göring, Joachim von Stülpnagel,[vi] General Graf Friedrich von der Schulenburg (a former Chief of Staff to the Crown Prince, now a Nazi), Himmler and the Nazi General Reichenau.

It was Goebbels, who had risen from the left of the Party and had fewer illusions about the upper classes than Hitler, who came up with the answer: Hitler should take on the first two roles himself. He had seen the possibilities in divesting the regime of a potentially difficult element in the traditional officer corps.[47] By that stage it suited no one's purposes to exonerate Fritsch, and the process of shaming and removing him went ahead. Goebbels was able to elbow out Göring, who was favoured by the army for the job of War Minister. There was far less planning and a good deal more pragmatism in the decision than has been generally assumed.

The perceived need to protect Fritsch's honour created an Opposition that was to continue looking for a means of deposing Hitler until 20 July 1944. Helldorf was in a position to push the files over the desk to his deputy, Fritz-Dietlof Graf von der Schulenburg (the son of Graf Friedrich), a former Nazi who had lost faith after the Night of the Long Knives of 30 June 1934. Graf Rüdiger von der Goltz went into action as Fritsch's lawyer. On 29 January emissaries from the Opposition set off across the Reich to talk to the leading generals: Oster went to Hanover, Gisevius to Munster and the former mayor of Leipzig, Carl Goerdeler, to Dresden to speak to Generals Ulex, Kluge and List. The message was that the twelve commanding generals needed to make common cause with Fritsch. Some members of the officer corps were out for blood. Oster had to cool the heels of his son Achim and the rest of the garrison in Stettin, who were on the verge of mutiny.[48]

[vi] The idea was dismissed – he was too disloyal. He proved Hitler's point on 20 July 1944.

The upheaval caused by the removal of Blomberg and Fritsch left Hitler 'sullen and touchy'.[49] He cancelled his speech to celebrate the fifth anniversary of his coming to power. He had never done so before, and would not do it again until 1943. Rumours ran rife across Germany. The party went ahead for all that, and Hitler appeared on the balcony of the Chancellery to acknowledge the march past of his *Leibstandarte*. A crowd of 100,000 had gathered by candlelight on the Wilhelmsplatz. There were events to distract his followers: national prizes were handed out to the architect Gerdy Troost, the surgeon Ferdinand Sauerbruch and the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg. There was a Hitler Youth Festival at the Broadcasting House in Berlin. Six million young people were reported to have tuned in. For Fritsch it was a hard night: he spent it being interrogated by Heydrich, but stuck to his guns.

On the last day of the month, Goebbels spent two hours alone with the Führer, who was still ranting about Blomberg and Fritsch. Blomberg had abused his trust. Hitler was firmly convinced of Fritsch's guilt. The general had been 'all but unmasked'. Goebbels had his own suggestion for Fritsch's successor: Beck, who 'came directly from Schlieffen's school'. Goebbels can't have known the general well. Beck was on the point of throwing in his lot with the Opposition. Had it been Beck and not Brauchitsch who was in charge of the army in September 1938, the year might have turned out very differently, but it appears that Beck didn't want the job.[50]

Rundstedt also saw Hitler that day, and found him in a 'fearful state of excitement such as I had never seen him'. Rundstedt believed that Himmler had 'blackened' Fritsch because the head of the army was a monarchist.[51] That day Hitler revealed to Goebbels that he intended making a huge shake-up in his household in order to create a smokescreen. He planned to appoint Ribbentrop to the foreign office, as suggested by his deputy, Rudolf Hess.[vii] Hitler was not enamoured of his London ambassador, thinking him boring and vain, but he valued his

[vii] He came to regret it later. See Reinhard Spitzy, *So Haben wir das Reich verspielt*, new edn 1987, 222.

servility. He wanted men like Keitel and Ribbentrop, whom he believed trustworthy.[52] Goebbels was not impressed. 'I consider Ribbentrop is a waste of space. I made no secret of this to the Führer.'[53]

The Blomberg–Fritsch affair was an excellent example of the Nazi speciality of dirty tricks and a temporary alliance between three very ill-assorted men, Göring, Himmler and Heydrich, with walk-on roles by various secret policemen. Hitler – and to a lesser degree Goebbels – was the dupe. The machinations of his underlings left Hitler's faith in national conservative Germany badly shaken, as a result of which he decided he did not need them as much as he had previously believed. It is also to be noted that it was not Göring or Himmler but Adolf Hitler who came out on top.

CASE OTTO

As 1937 came to a close, Hitler was more and more obsessed with Austria. At Berchtesgaden, he surrounded himself with the Austrian Legionaries who were trained in sabotage by members of his own Praetorian Guard, the *Leibstandarte* 'Adolf Hitler'. The Legion had paraded before Hitler at the Berghof and he had told them that he would not give up the fight for a Nazi Austria: Austria was his home too.[54] While his hand was often stayed by consideration for Italy, Göring was much more gung-ho, as Austria offered some morsels that were particularly delicious in the form of raw materials, and foreign exchange that he craved for his Four Year Plan. When Austria had been digested the western parts of Czechoslovakia would be surrounded on three sides. Göring stood to inherit property there. Schloss Mauterndorf was being kept warm for him by the widow of his Jewish stepfather. Two of Göring's sisters had married Austrian lawyers, and his anti-Nazi brother Albert lived in Vienna, where he had taken out Austrian citizenship and was employed in the film industry.

Since the beginning of the thirties, Austria had been governed by clerico-fascist Christian Socials who had wound up democracy and

replaced the power of the people with seven corporations representing occupational groupings that were allowed to send their advisors to various federal councils. The party had been subsequently abolished and merged into the Fatherland Front. Apart from Italy's Duce, few people – least of all *bien-pensant* intellectuals – expressed any sympathy for Austria's repressive government, and yet the Corporate State was the last bastion to hold out against a merger with German National Socialism.

Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg had signed an agreement with Hitler in July 1936 that was meant to guarantee Austrian sovereignty despite Hitler's persistent attempts to destabilize the country. He had had to agree to allow Austrian National Socialists a small role in government, but Hitler had not kept his word and the terrorist activity had continued. Most recently the Nazis had been afraid that Schuschnigg intended to restore the monarchy under Archduke Otto, eldest son of the last Emperor Charles. According to Goebbels, the Austrian monarchists were becoming increasingly impertinent. Hitler was beginning to fear that if he did not move quickly, they would get there first.[55] In June 1937 the German General Staff had been asked to draw up plans for an Operation Otto to seize Austria.

Every day Hitler's men let off bombs around the country in a bid to make Austria ungovernable; the Corporate State was visibly crumbling, partly as a result of Nazi harassment, partly from its own internal contradictions. Schuschnigg had assumed some of the apparel of the Duce and the Führer, but he did not conform to the image of the strongman: he was more like a cross between Neville Chamberlain and a Jesuit. As the Nazis sought every opportunity to destabilize the state, Vienna became the principal stage of history for the very last time.

At the start of 1938, Schuschnigg's police had discovered an extensive Nazi plot against his government, and plans to assassinate him and stage an uprising in the spring. The papers were signed by Hess. On 25 January the police raided the Nazi Committee of Seven and arrested the civil engineer Dr Leopold Tavs, who was deputy to Hitler's Gauleiter for Austria, Josef Leopold. Tavs had been boasting a little too loudly of his invulnerability and was arraigned for high treason. As the Germans

did not want Hess's role made public, a great deal of pressure was brought to bear by Berlin to scrap the trial.

The German ambassador to Vienna, Franz von Papen, was also to be assassinated. The Nazis would make it look like the work of the Fatherland Front, killing two birds with one stone, as Hitler had been wanting to get rid of Papen for some time, since, like Neurath, he opposed the Anschluss.[56] The former chancellor had only narrowly escaped death on the Night of the Long Knives in 1934. The Nazis were goading Schuschnigg to use his army against them; then they would have a pretext to march in.

Schuschnigg had already dissolved his own Praetorians, the *Heimwehr*, who had been the equivalent of the SA. The leader was Mussolini's protégé Prince Ernst Rüdiger von Starhemberg, 'a man of winning appearance, very modest political gifts, immense ambition and little love of work'.[57] Mussolini, however, who had protected Austria at the time of Dollfuss's assassination in 1934 by moving his troops up to the Brenner, had now decided that his bread was better buttered with Hitler and jilted Schuschnigg. He needed Hitler now that the British and the French were ganging up against him over the invasion of Abyssinia, and he wished to avoid the embarrassment of Hitler bringing up the 250,000 or so Germans who had been living under the Italian flag in the South Tyrol since 1919, and had been persecuted by his government for wishing to remain German. Besides, Schuschnigg himself had once told Mussolini that the majority of Austrians would be in favour of a German occupation and that, if Italy sent troops, the Austrians would unite with the Germans to fight them.[58] The Austrian Chancellor was clearly on his own.