CHAPTER XXXI

The Nazi State to 1938. IV, Foreign Affairs

Adolf Hitler was as unorthodox and personal in his management of foreign affairs as in other aspects of his behavior. He had only scorn for the old-fashioned diplomacy of calculated politeness and for its frock-coated and striped-trousered priesthood. Consequently, he tended to trust the foreign office and the foreign service officers abroad with only minor and routine matters. Neurath remained minister of foreign affairs until 1938, but he seems to have been only a bureaucrat and administrator with little access to matters of high policy. Ambassadors and officials in the ministry complained of the degree to which they were kept in ignorance. They served as a respectable cloak covering the inner workings of the government.

The real source of decisions in foreign policy was Hitler himself. He liked to brood over a matter in solitude, often at his home near Berchtesgaden, and then without warning announce his conclusions to the world over the radio or in a speech to the Reichstag. His combination of intuition, bluff, shrewdness, and aggressiveness led to remarkably successful results for some years. At least he was never on the defensive; he had a highly developed sense of timing for surprise and shock tactics. He was unpredictable; he could be charming and gentle or violent and ruthless, as the situation seemed to demand. In all of his efforts he was ably seconded by Goebbels, whose propaganda barrages served to soften the enemy before the final thrust.

The one adviser to whom Hitler often gladly listened was Joachim von Ribbentrop. Ribbentrop was good-looking, well-dressed, smooth, and versed in both the English and French languages. He had traveled extensively, mainly as a salesman of champagne. He had been adopted by a noblewoman from whom he inherited the aristocratic "von." His combination of lack of intelligence, wishful thinking, arrogance, and
bluster, added to complete obsequiousness before the Führer, won Hitler's high regard. He was in charge of the Foreign Policy Office in the party, generally known as the Ribbentrop Bureau, a group which meddled in foreign affairs, irritated Neurath, and provided Hitler with information independently of the foreign office. Appointed ambassador to Great Britain in 1936, he made a fool of himself and a failure of his work by his preposterous antics. The result was a hatred of Britain combined with a serious underestimation of her potentialities, which shaped Hitler's gross misjudgment of the British. However, not until shortly before his death did Hitler realize the hollowness of his favorite adviser.

Another favorite device of Hitler's was the use of Germans living abroad (Auslanddeutsche). German law did not recognize the nationalization of Germans as citizens of another state; thus the Nazis claimed that these people were still Germans. They were organized into a Gau of the party with Ernst Bohle in command. Propaganda was released and conventions of Germans from abroad were held in Stuttgart, which was declared to be their home city. They were trained to use divisive tactics in their respective countries so that they could be a weakening influence there when it became necessary. In some cases German ships even stood off the three-mile limit to permit the Germans resident in the area to vote in Nazi plebiscites. The success of these measures overseas was doubtful, but in central and eastern Europe the Auslanddeutsche served a useful purpose.

The first important step in foreign affairs taken by the Nazis has already been mentioned, namely the withdrawal of Germany from both the League of Nations and the World Disarmament Conference in October 1933. This action was popular in Germany because it was an assault on the hated Versailles system.

The year 1934 was concerned mostly with affairs in the east and the south. Most important was the German relationship to Austria. A permanent plank in the Nazi foreign platform was that all ethnic Germans should be integrated into a Greater Germany. Naturally, since Austria was almost completely German and was immediately adjacent to Germany, she was of great interest to the Nazis. The idea of Anschluss (the merging of the two states) was of course not new. Ever since 1918 there had been clamor for it on both sides of the frontier for both sentimental and economic reasons, but it was expressly forbidden by the treaties of Versailles and St. Germain.

In 1934 Austria had been governed for two years by the Catholic authoritarian, Engelbert Dollfuss. Dollfuss abrogated parliamentary government in 1933 and took action against the Nazi party, which was growing rapidly. Relations between Germany and Austria became very
strained. The following spring Dollfuss took another step toward establishing his own sort of totalitarian rule by abolishing all parties except his own, the Fatherland Front. The result was an armed uprising in Vienna by the Social Democrats, which was quelled by blood and violence. In international affairs Dollfuss placed his reliance on Mussolini, who had taken both Austria and Hungary under his wing. The Italians had no enthusiasm for a common border with aggressive Nazi Germany because they recalled that they ruled a sizable minority of Germans in the South Tyrol. Shortly after the defeat of the Social Democrats, Dollfuss promulgated a new constitution which turned Austria into a type of Fascist dictatorship.

The clash with the Nazis came on July 25, 1934, a few weeks after the Roehm purge in Germany. A band of Austrian Nazis seized the Vienna radio station and the chancellery, where they shot Dollfuss and let him bleed to death without doctor or priest. However, the whole affair was badly managed and failed. The German Nazis, who undoubtedly had supported the attempt, had to disavow it when Mussolini announced mobilization of the Italian army on the Brenner Pass. Germany was in no position to force a decision of arms with Italy. Shortly afterward Hitler sent Papen as a conciliatory ambassador to Vienna; in 1936 an agreement was signed with Kurt Schuschnigg, Dollfuss' successor, which smoothed over German-Austrian relations for the time being. This coup, a premature forceful effort, is reminiscent of the beer hall Putsch of 1923. It taught Hitler a similar lesson—that he must wait until he was prepared to back up his threats.

The other important action taken abroad by the Nazis in 1934 was even more sensational than the events in Vienna. Very unexpectedly the first state with which Nazi Germany signed a nonaggression pact was Poland. The Poles were all too aware of the danger from an aggressive, nationalistic Germany on account of Danzig and the Polish Corridor. On January 26 the two states announced a nonaggression pact valid for ten years, during which there was to be no change in the relations between them. The world did not yet realize that this was part of Hitler's standard practice of lulling future victims before he was ready to pounce. He was very successful in keeping his enemies divided during his early years. The pact was also important because it indicated that Poland, traditionally friendly with and allied to France, had now reconsidered her position and decided not to antagonize the new Germany. Thus it was a prelude to the decline of the formerly powerful French position in eastern Europe.

These events caused some stirring in the capitals of Europe, where statesmen were beginning to realize dimly the danger that lay ahead.
France had at the moment an able and adventurous foreign minister, Louis Barthou, who traveled all over Europe in an effort to reinforce France's alliance system with the smaller states and to develop a warm relationship with the Russians. The Soviet government went so far as to accept membership in the League of Nations, which it had never considered seriously before. However, France lost much of her initiative in the latter part of 1934 when Barthou was murdered together with King Alexander of Yugoslavia at Marseille. A pact was eventually signed between France and the Soviet Union, but the French were never enthusiastic about it. The general picture of the years up to 1939 reveals a gradual shift of the focus of power on the continent from Paris to Berlin, in some ways reminiscent of the events from 1866 to 1870.

The year 1935 opened auspiciously for the Germans. In January the plebiscite called for by the Treaty of Versailles to decide the final disposition of the Saar area was due to be held. The Saarlanders were to choose among being granted permanently to France, being returned to Germany, or maintaining their neutral status under the League of Nations. It was a foregone conclusion that the Saar would opt for Germany since the population is almost completely German. Nevertheless, Hitler wanted the decision to be an overwhelming one and sent batteries of speakers and propaganda experts to the area. The vote was taken on January 13 and resulted in a 90 per cent victory for Germany. This was Hitler's first territorial achievement.

The next month Great Britain and France made overtures to Germany in the direction of strengthening the Locarno pact and of extending its philosophy to central and eastern Europe. Hitler played along with these suggestions for some weeks while he was planning the announcement of the formation of the air force and the return of conscription. It was apparent to even casual observers that Germany was no longer thinking seriously about disarmament, and both the British and the French announced increases in their own armed forces.

The reaction to Hitler's repudiation of the arms clauses of Versailles was immediate, but hardly alarming to Germany. The Western powers and the League issued formal protests. More important, representatives of Britain, France, and Italy met at Stresa in northern Italy. There they established the so-called "Stresa Front," which issued a joint protest against the German move. However, the Stresa Front had no future because within a few months each of its member states had taken action of varying sorts dooming it to ineffectiveness. France took direct action by signing a defensive treaty with the Soviet Union and acting as the intermediary for a similar treaty between the Soviets and France's ally, Czechoslovakia.
The British action was less explicable. Even before the Stresa conference met, Sir John Simon, the foreign secretary, accompanied by Anthony Eden, visited Berlin, where they found a gentle and cooing Hitler. Nothing immediate came of the meeting, but Hitler dropped the remark that he would be prepared to sign a treaty with Britain to limit naval armaments. It probably came as a delightful surprise to the Führer that the British were interested in this idea and continued to negotiate about it. Finally in June Hitler sent Ribbentrop to London as his special envoy, and on the eighteenth the two governments signed the Anglo-German naval agreement, surely one of the most unaccountable treaties in all history. By this arrangement the Germans agreed to limit their surface navy to 35 per cent of the British navy, but if they deemed it necessary, the Germans were authorized to construct submarines up to 100 per cent of the British submarine fleet. This occurred less than twenty years after Germany had almost won a world war because of her submarine prowess. The treaty also seemed to imply a British belief that the Treaty of Versailles was no longer a binding document.

Italy had even bigger plans in view. Within a few months the Ethiopian crisis began and diverted the world from its immediate preoccupation with German affairs. There followed the dismal story of the imposition of economic sanctions against Italy by the League, the Hoare-Laval “deal,” and the proclamation of King Victor Emmanuel of Italy as emperor of Ethiopia. Italy emerged from these months of crisis swollen in her conceit and charged with hatred against Great Britain. British policy was disastrous. It did not achieve the protection of the Ethiopians but pushed Italy into the arms of Hitler, who was the principal gainer.

Hitler behaved during this crisis with unusual and intelligent forbearance. He was no doubt delighted that the spotlight of the world was temporarily removed from Germany. He took absolutely no part in any action against Italy. Of all the powers Germany was the only one which did not berate the Italians for their African adventure. This policy won the gratitude of Mussolini, who was already disposed to sympathy with the Nazis because of the similarity between the two political philosophies.

As far back as 1924 when he was dictating Mein Kampf, Hitler had admired Mussolini and had recommended an alliance between Germany and Italy. In June 1934 Hitler made his first trip across the German border to visit Mussolini in Venice. The visit was not very successful, and relations between the two countries became very strained that summer when Dollfuss was murdered and the designs of Germany upon Austria became clear. However, the events of the Ethiopian crisis went a distance toward reconciling the two fascist nations.

In March 1936 Hitler was ready for his next big step, the remilitariza-
tion of the Rhineland and the denunciation of Locarno. He gave as legal justification the treaty recently ratified between France and the Soviet Union, which, he insisted, was an implicit breach of Locarno. At the same time he offered an elaborate peace plan composed of nonaggression pacts and guarantees. This was typical of Hitler; when he wanted to, he could talk with the voice of Stresemann, but the aims were quite different. Nothing came of Hitler's peace plans. No foreign action was taken about the Rhineland problem except for votes of censure, but the German people in another plebiscite registered their wholehearted approval.

A major crisis arose in the summer of 1936 when a number of high-ranking officers in the Spanish army led a revolt against their republican government. This revolt broadened into the brutal and bloody Spanish civil war, which raged for almost three years and ended with the victory of the leader of the rebels (or nationalists), General Francisco Franco. Internationally speaking, this war had a catalytic effect on the European scene and divided the powers into two camps (or possibly three, depending on how the Soviet Union is to be classified). From the outset Italy and Germany supported Franco's cause. Mussolini permitted thousands of Italian soldiers, flushed with their African victory, to sail to Spain to support the rebels. Hitler offered help also, but was not prepared to damage many of his new soldiers. The Germans sent technical assistance, cartographers and mechanics capable of keeping motorized equipment in good condition. More important, they also sent units of the new air force, the so-called Condor Legion, which introduced the world to the horrors of mass bombings of civilian populations. The Soviet Union sent aid to the government forces, and while Britain and France officially declared a policy of nonintervention, their sympathies were with the government and thousands of British and French volunteers went to fight in Spain. Thus once again Germany and Italy were on the same team.

The time was ripe in Hitler's opinion to register more formally the friendship between Italy and Germany. The Germans were able to point to their recent treaty with Austria which regularized relations between the two countries; they were able to dangle the bait of recognition of the Italian empire in Africa; they were anxious to secure tangible benefit from the mutual fight against Bolshevism in Spain. Discussions began in both Rome and Berlin. In late October 1936 Mussolini's son-in-law, Count Galeazzo Ciano, the Italian foreign minister, visited both Berlin and Berchtesgaden, where Hitler received him with warm cordiality. The result was the signature of agreements covering all the possible points of conflict between the two states. A few days later Mussolini
mentioned the agreement in a speech and referred to it as an "axis." Thus a new word entered the history of international affairs.

During these central years of his career Hitler harped a great deal on the theme of anti-Communism, although he did not cease profitable Russo-German economic relations. This policy was useful at home in focusing attention on a common foe. It was judged to be useful abroad as well. Hitler hoped that he might use it as a wedge to pry his way into closer relations with Great Britain. In Mein Kampf Hitler had called for an alliance with Britain as well as with Italy. In his attitude toward the British Hitler displayed some of the same ambivalence that had characterized William II; he loved and hated, feared and envied. He sent his beloved Ribbentrop to London as his ambassador in the hope that he could gain the favor of those well-known anti-Communists, Stanley Baldwin, the prime minister, and Neville Chamberlain, his right-hand man. If ever a diplomatic mission was a complete failure, it was this one. Neither Hitler nor Ribbentrop understood the British. While British foreign policy in the thirties was weak and misguided, it did not go so far in its incompetence as to envisage intimate co-operation with Nazi Germany. Ribbentrop returned from his mission full of hatred for the British but nursing the misconception that Britain was now a negligible power.

If the anti-Communist line did not succeed in London, it did in Tokyo. Japan had been a pariah nation since 1931 when she seized Manchuria from China, renamed it Manchukuo, installed a puppet government, and later withdrew from the League of Nations. During these years she was waging an undeclared war of major proportions against the Russians on the remote border of Manchukuo and Soviet Asia. Thus the German suggestion of an "anti-Comintern" pact was attractive to her. This was a pact to which other nations could be invited to adhere, for it was primarily an ideological statement rather than a military alliance (though there were some secret anti-Soviet clauses). Japan and Germany signed this pact in November 1936. The Germans had some difficulty in presenting Japan as their close associate in view of the patent fact that the Japanese people were non-Aryan, but this problem was rather easily resolved.

The year 1937 was a relatively quiet one on the international scene. Hitler did not contrive any major surprises. It was a year of growing strength and the development of past gains. The most spectacular event was the ostentatious visit of Mussolini to Germany in September. He was given a tremendous reception and treated as he thought befitted him. From this time the relationship with Italy was secure. Its first fruit was harvested in November when Italy adhered to the anti-Comintern pact.
The new British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, made a gesture toward Germany in November 1937 when he sent his foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, to confer with Hitler. The conversations came to little or nothing; Hitler was in an unyielding mood. He had ended his courtship of Britain.

By 1938 the European picture was far different from that of five years earlier. Italy was a secure friend of Germany, while Britain and France had shown themselves weak and irresolute. Events had colored the attitudes of the smaller states as well. The government of Prince Paul, regent of Yugoslavia, was not unfriendly to Germany. King Carol II of Romania had instituted a royal dictatorship, patterned to an extent after Nazi Germany. Hungary was almost a satellite of Italy. The Poles were trying hard not to irritate their newly powerful German neighbors. Perhaps the most striking shift of attitude was taken by Belgium, which in 1937 ended her alliance with France and announced once again her earlier policy of neutrality in the hope that this step might save her from another German invasion.

A combination of economic penetration, diplomatic ruthlessness, ideological propaganda, and shrewd timing had done its work. Hitler had cause to be pleased with his achievements. He was now ready to start the campaign of unveiled aggression which was to lead into World War II.