

Extracts from "The Hossbach Memorandum"

Background: The Hossbach memorandum is the name given to the notes of a 1937 meeting with Hitler made by one of the officials present. It was used at the Nuremberg War Trials, and by intentionalist historians such as Hugh Trevor-Roper and Richard Overy to prove that Hitler planned to start a general European war, which became the Second World War, as part of a long-range master plan. However functionalist historians such as Timothy Mason, Hans Mommsen, and Ian Kershaw argue that the document shows no such plans, and instead contend that the Hossbach Memorandum was an improvised ad hoc response by Hitler to the growing crisis in the German economy in the late 1930s. AJP Taylor was even more dismissive, stating that this was not an official document but just some informal notes and was therefore of minimal historical value.

BERLIN, November 10, 1937.

Minutes of a Conference in the Reich Chancellery, Berlin, November 5, 1937, FROM 4:15 to 8:30 P.M.

Present:

The Fuehrer 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.

The Fuehrer 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 Fuehrer- 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...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, and he asked, in the interests of a long-term German policy, that his exposition be regarded, in the event of his death, as his last will and testament.

The Fuehrer 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...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 period of about one to three generations.

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 center of Europe was a thorn in the flesh...

Serious discussion of the question of the return of colonies to us could only be considered at a moment when Britain was in difficulties and the German Reich armed and strong. The Fuehrer did not share the view that the Empire was unshakable. Opposition to the Empire was to be found less in the countries conquered than among her competitors...

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...
- (c) The weakening by Japan of Britain's position in the Far East.

(d) The rivalry in the Mediterranean with Italy...The outcome of the Abyssinian War was a loss of prestige for Britain...

France's position was more favorable 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...

Germany's problem could only be solved by means of force and this was never without attendant risk...there remain still to be answered the questions "when" and "how." In this matter there were three cases [Falle] to be 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; further drafts from older untrained 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 the Fuehrer 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.

The Fuehrer 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 could be cleared up in due course by Germany.

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 inhabitants.

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 a Maginot Line and which would gravely hamper our attack.

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

HOSSBACH

Certified Correct:

Colonel (General Staff)

As far as the technical aspect of this document is concerned, I want to say the following: Hossbach was the adjutant of the Führer, the chief adjutant. As such, he was present at the meeting and took notes. Five days later, he prepared this record on the basis of his notes. This document, therefore, contains all the mistakes which easily occur in a record which is not taken down on the spot by alternating stenographers, and which under certain circumstances contains the subjective opinions of the recorder or his own interpretations.

It contains a number of points, as I said at the time, which correspond exactly to what the Führer had repeatedly said; but there are other points and expressions which I may say do not seem like the Führer's words...

Now what did the Führer aim at in this discussion? The Minister of War, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, the Commander-in-Chief of the Navy and the Air Force, and the then Foreign Minister were called together. Shortly before the Führer had informed me, as I was there earlier, that he was going to call this meeting mainly in order, as he called it, to put pressure on General von Fritsch, since he was dissatisfied with the rearmament pace of the Army. He then said it would do no harm if Herr von Blomberg would also exercise a certain amount of pressure on Fritsch.

I asked why Neurath was to be present. He said that he did not want the thing to look too military, that as far as the commanders-in-chief were concerned it was not so important, but that he wanted to make it very clear to Commander-in-Chief Fritsch that the foreign political situation required a forced speed in armament and that for that reason he had asked the Foreign Minister, who knew nothing about details, to come along.

The statements were then made in the way the Führer preferred on such occasions. He went to great lengths to picture things within a large political framework, and he talked about the whole world situation from all angles; and for anybody who knew him as well as I did, the purpose which he pursued was obvious. He was quite clearly aiming at saying that he had great plans, that the political situation was such and such, and that the whole thing ended up in the direction of a stronger armament program.

I should like to say that if the Führer, a couple of hours later, had talked to another group, for instance, diplomats of the Foreign Office, or Party functionaries, then he probably would have represented matters quite differently.

Since the original copy of Hossbach's Memorandum has subsequently disappeared, and the copy used in the International Military Tribunal trial was apparently made late in 1942 from Hossbach's original by an Army Officer working in the Military Archives, much controversy has arisen over the authenticity of this memorandum. General Hossbach, however, survived the war and testified to its general accuracy, except that he remembered the dissenting voices as being more prolonged. In his published memoirs, Friedrich Hossbach recalled the atmosphere of the meeting, which does not come across in his notes.