

Summary of Hitler's Meeting with the Heads of the Armed Services on November 5, 1937 (Hossbach Protocol of November 10, 1937)

Abstract

On November 5, 1937, Hitler and the most important representatives of the military leadership held a secret conference at the Berlin Reich Chancellery. During this meeting, Hitler outlined his foreign policy goals for the near future. Depending on the state of the German economy, the status of rearmament, and the diplomatic situation, Hitler foresaw a German war of conquest as early as the following year (1938) and no later than 1943. His National Socialist conception of race and his belief in the need for additional German "living space" [*Lebensraum*] provided the justification for his war plans, which he regarded as absolutely necessary. Present at the conference were: Commander-in-Chief of the Army Werner von Fritsch, Commander of the Navy Admiral Erich von Raeder, Reich Minister of Aviation Hermann Göring, Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath, and Reich Minister of War Werner von Blomberg. The following record of the secret conference was issued by Hitler's military adjutant, Colonel Friedrich Hossbach, on November 10, 1937. The so-called Hossbach Protocol reveals Hitler's incontrovertible intention to launch a European war as soon as possible.

Source

Berlin, November 10, 1937

Minutes of the Conference in the Reich Chancellery, Berlin, November 5, 1937, from 4:15 to 8:30 PM

Present:

The Führer 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 Göring, Commander in Chief, *Luftwaffe*

Baron von Neurath, Foreign Minister

Colonel Hossbach

The Führer 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 Führer—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 4½ 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, and he asked, in the interest of a long-term German policy, that his exposition be regarded, in the event of his death, as his last will and testament.

The Führer then continued:

The aim of German policy is to make secure and to preserve the racial community [*Volksmasse*] and to enlarge it. It is therefore a question of space.

The German racial community comprises over 85 million people and, because of their number and the narrow limits of habitable space in Europe, it constitutes a tightly packed racial core such as is not to be met in any other country and such as implies the right to a greater living space than in the case of other peoples. If territorially speaking there exists no political result corresponding to this German racial core, that is a consequence of centuries of historical development, and the continuance of these political conditions represents 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 is as little possible as to maintain the present level in Germany itself. Instead of increase, sterility is setting in, and in its train disorders of a social character will certainly 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 is therefore wholly conditional upon the solving of the need for space, and such a solution can be sought, of course, only for a foreseeable period of about one to three generations.

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

Autarky:

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, autarky.

1. In regard to coal, insofar as it is needed for the extraction of raw materials, autarky is possible.
2. But even as regards ores, the position is much more difficult. Iron requirements can be met from home resources and light metals likewise, but with other raw materials—copper, tin—this is not so.
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 autarky is to be answered by a flat "No."

The general rise in the standard of living compared with that of 30 to 40 years ago has been accompanied by an increased demand and an increased home consumption even on the part of the producers, the farmers. The fruits of the increased agricultural production have all gone to meet the increased demand, and so have not represented 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, shows signs of exhaustion, is hardly possible, and it is therefore certain that even with the maximum increase in production, participation in world trade is unavoidable. The not inconsiderable expenditure of foreign exchange to ensure food supplies by imports, even when harvests are good, grows to catastrophic proportions with bad harvests. The possibility of disaster has grown in proportion to the increase in population, in which, too, the excess of births of 560,000 annually has produced, as a consequence, an even further increase in bread consumption, since a child is a greater bread consumer than an adult.

It is not possible over the long run, in a continent enjoying a practically equal standard of living, to meet the food supply difficulties by lowering that standard and by rationalization. Since, with the solving of the unemployment problem, the maximum consumption level has been reached, some minor modifications in our home agricultural production might still, no doubt, be possible, but no fundamental

alteration is possible in our basic food position. Thus, autarky is untenable in regard both to food and to the economy as a whole.

Participation in World Economy:

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

The boom in world economy caused by the economic effects of rearmament can never form the basis of a sound economy over a long period, and the latter is obstructed above all also by the economic disturbances resulting from Bolshevism. There is a pronounced military weakness in those States which depend for their existence on foreign trade. As our foreign trade is carried on over the sea routes dominated by Britain, it is more a question of security of transport than one of foreign exchange, which in time of war has revealed the full weakness of our food situation. The only remedy, and one which might appear to us visionary, lies in the acquisition of greater living space—a quest that 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 is understandable. If, then, we accept the security of our food situation as the principal question, the space necessary to ensure it can be sought only 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, in immediate proximity to the Reich, 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 the great world political constellations progresses slowly after all and the German people with its strong racial core will find the most favorable prerequisites for such achievement in the heart of the continent of Europe. The history of all ages—the Roman Empire and the British Empire—has proved that expansion can only be carried out by breaking down resistance and taking risks; setbacks are inevitable. There has never in former times been spaces without a master, and there are none today; the invader always comes up against a possessor.

The question for Germany is: Where can she achieve the greatest gain at the lowest cost?

German policy has to reckon with two hate-inspired antagonists, Britain and France, to whom a German colossus in the center of Europe is a thorn in the flesh, and both countries are opposed to any further strengthening of Germany's position either in Europe or overseas; they are able to count on the agreement of all their political parties in support of this opposition. Both countries see 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 cannot 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 is not to be expected. British concessions could at best be expressed in an offer to satisfy our colonial demands by the appropriation of colonies which are not British possessions—e.g., Angola; French concessions would probably take a similar line.

Serious discussion of the question of the return of colonies to us can only be considered at a moment when Britain is in difficulties and the German Reich armed and strong. The Führer does not share the

view that the Empire is unshakeable. Opposition to the Empire is to be found less in the countries conquered than among her competitors. The British Empire and the Roman Empire cannot 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 exist today a number of States stronger than she. The British motherland is 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 interests against attack by Japan!

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

(a) The struggle of Ireland for independence.

(b) The constitutional struggles in India, where Britain's half-measures gave the Indians the opportunity to use the nonfulfillment of promises of a constitution as a weapon against Britain later on.

(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—is expanding her power position, which is thus 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 is striving to exploit 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 cannot 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, is a warning to us, in our territorial expansion, not to allow the foundation constituted by the numerical strength of our own people to become too weak.

France's position is more favorable than that of Britain. The French Empire is better placed territorially; the inhabitants of her colonial possessions represent a supplement to her military strength. But France is going to be confronted with internal political difficulties. In the life of a people [*Volk*], about 10 percent is given to parliamentary forms of government and about 90 percent to authoritarian forms. Today, nonetheless, Britain, France, Russia, and the smaller States adjoining them must be included as factors [*Machtfaktoren*] in our political calculations.

Germany's problem can be solved only by the use of force, and this is never without attendant risk. The campaigns of Frederick the Great for Silesia and Bismarck's wars against Austria and France involved unheard-of risk, and the swiftness of the Prussian action in 1870 kept Austria from entering the war. If one accepts the resort to force as the basis of the following exposition, then there remain still to be answered the questions "when" and "how." In this matter three cases [*Fälle*] will decide:

Case 1: Period 1943–1945

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

The equipment of the army, navy and Luftwaffe, as well as the formation of the officer corps, is nearly completed. Equipment and armament are modern; further delay brings the danger of their obsolescence. In particular, the secrecy of "special weapons" cannot be preserved forever. The recruiting

of reserves is limited to current age groups; further drafts from older untrained age groups are no longer available.

Our relative strength will decrease in relation to the rearmament which by then will have been carried out by the rest of the world. If we do 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 will not be available, and this must be regarded as a “waning point of the regime.” Besides, the world will be expecting our attack and will be increasing its countermeasures from year to year. It is while the rest of the world is still preparing its defenses [*sich abriegele*] that we are obliged to take the offensive.

Nobody knows today what the situation will be in the years 1943–45. One thing is certain, that we can wait no longer.

On the one hand there is the great Wehrmacht and the necessity of maintaining it at its present level, the aging of the movement and 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 leaves no choice but to act. If the Führer is still living, it will be his unalterable determination to solve Germany’s problem of space at the latest by 1943–45. The necessity for action before 1943–45 will arise in cases 2 and 3.

Case 2:

If internal strife in France develops 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 will have 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 is hardly to be regarded as likely that the Czechs would declare war on us on 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 more certainly be counted on in the event of a Franco-German conflict. Our agreements with Poland will only retain their force as long as Germany’s strength remains unshaken. In the event of German setbacks, a Polish action against East Prussia, and possibly against Pomerania and Silesia as well, has 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 can probably be estimated as follows:

Actually, the Führer believes that almost certainly Britain, and probably France as well, have already tacitly written off the Czechs and are reconciled to the fact that this question will be cleared up in due course by Germany. Difficulties connected with the Empire, and the prospect of being once more entangled in a protracted European war, are decisive considerations for Britain against participation in a war against Germany. Britain’s attitude is certainly not without influence on that of France. An attack by France without British support, and with the prospect of the offensive being brought to a standstill at our

western fortifications, is hardly probable. Nor is a French march through Belgium and Holland without British support to be expected; this also is 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 defense [*eine Abriegelung*] on our western frontier during the prosecution of our attack on the Czechs and Austria. And in this connection, it has to be remembered that the defense measures of the Czechs are growing in strength from year to year, and that the actual worth of the Austrian army is also increasing in the course of time. Even though the populations concerned, especially of Czechoslovakia, are 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 forced emigration of 2 million people from Czechoslovakia and 1 million people from Austria is practicable. The incorporation of these two States with Germany would mean, from the political-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.

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

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

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

Should case 2 arise—the crippling of France by civil war—the situation thus created by the elimination of our most dangerous opponent must be seized upon *whenever it occurs* for the blow against the Czechs.

The Führer sees case 3 becoming more likely as a result of the present tensions in the Mediterranean, and he is resolved to take advantage of it whenever it happens, even as early as 1938.

In the light of past experience, the Führer does not see any early end to the hostilities in Spain. If one considers the length of time which Franco's offensives have taken up till now, it is fully possible that the war will continue another 3 years. On the other hand, a 100 per cent victory for Franco is not desirable either, from the German point of view; rather, we are interested in a continuance of the war and in maintaining the tension in the Mediterranean. Franco in undisputed possession of the Spanish Peninsula precludes the possibility of any further intervention on the part of the Italians or of their continued occupation of the Balearics. As our interest lies 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 make her appearance on the side of Italy's enemies. The probability of Italy's defeat in such a war is slight, for the road from Germany is open for the supplementing of her raw materials. The Führer pictures the military strategy for Italy thus: she would remain on the defensive on her western frontier with France and would carry on the war with 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 focal point [*Schwerpunkt*] of the operations would lie 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 the frontiers with Italy and Germany.

If Germany made use of this war to settle the Czech and Austrian questions, it is 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 is 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 does the Führer intend military agreements with Italy, but wants, while retaining his own independence of action, to exploit this favorable situation, which would not occur again, to begin and carry through the campaign against the Czechs. This descent upon the Czechs would have to be 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 must 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 are 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 by now have acquired a structure like a Maginot Line and which 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 Führer dismissed this idea on the ground 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 so near at hand as the Führer seemed to assume, the Führer 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 Führer repeated his previous statements that he was convinced of Britain’s non-participation, and therefore he did not believe in the probability of belligerent action by France against Germany. 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 Göring stated his opinion that, in view of the Führer’s statement, we should consider liquidating our military undertakings in Spain. The Führer agrees to this with the limitation that he thinks he should reserve a decision for the proper moment.

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

HOSSBACH

CERTIFIED CORRECT:

Colonel (General Staff)

Source of English translation: Minutes of the Conference in the Reich Chancellery, Berlin, November 5, 1937, from 4:15 to 8:30PM (November 10, 1937), in United States Department of State, *Documents on German Foreign Policy: From the Archives of the German Foreign Ministry*. Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1957–1964. Series D (1937-1945), From Neurath to Ribbentrop, Volume 1: September 1937–September 1938. Document Number 19, pp. 29–39. Edited by GHI staff.

Source of original German text: Niederschrift des Obersten Hossbach vom 10. November 1937 über die Besprechung vom 5. November 1937 in der Reichskanzlei, an der Hitler, von Blomberg, von Fritsch, Raeder, Göring und von Neurath teilnahmen, mit Wiedergabe von Hitlers Rede über die Ziele der deutschen Politik, die Hitler als seine „Testamentarische Hinterlassenschaft“ bezeichnet und in der er erklärt, dass es „zur Lösung der deutschen Frage nur den Weg der Gewalt geben könne“ (Beweisstück US-25), in *Der Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof. Nürnberg 14. November 1945 - 1. Oktober 1946*. Volume XXV, *Amtlicher Text – Deutsche Ausgabe, Urkunden und anderes Beweismaterial*. Nuremberg 1947. Reprint: Munich, Delphin Verlag, 1989, Document 386-PS, pp. 402–13.

Recommended Citation: Summary of Hitler’s Meeting with the Heads of the Armed Services on November 5, 1937 (Hossbach Protocol of November 10, 1937), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/nazi-germany-1933-1945/ghdi:document-1540>> [May 17, 2024].