

Germany to Austria, 11-3-1938

The previous month the Austrian government led by Chancellor Schuschnigg had complied with a set of wide ranging demands contained in a German ultimatum, including the appointment of Nazi sympathiser Seyss-Inquart to the post of minister of public order and security.¹ (see case Germany to Austria, 12-2-1938) In return for Austria's compliance with Germany's demands, Germany had committed to respecting Austria's sovereignty. But Hitler's subsequent failure to give public expression to this pledge in a major foreign policy speech on 20 February 1938 created both resentment and anxiety on Schuschnigg's part.² When no international assurances of support were forthcoming from France or Great Britain,³ Schuschnigg decided to attempt and seize the initiative. On 9 March he declared a plebiscite on the question of a possible *Anschluss* with Germany which was to be held only days later. The terms of the plebiscite were tilted towards continuing Austrian independence. Schuschnigg presented the Austrian people with a choice between merging with Germany or supporting 'a free and German, independent and social, Christian and united Austria'.⁴ Schuschnigg's announcement took the German government completely by surprise. Hitler and his senior military officials spent the next two days making war preparations. On 10 March, Seyss-Inquart called upon Schuschnigg to resign. His call was followed by a series of messages from Berlin each carrying stronger demands, starting at 10:00 in the morning of 11 March. These demands included a secret voting procedure for the plebiscite (rather than an open one); a two week postponement of the plebiscite; Schuschnigg's resignation and the appointment of Seyss-Inquart to the Austrian chancellorship; the formation of a new cabinet with two thirds of incoming cabinet members of Nazi-affiliation; the removal of all constraints on liberties for the Nazi party in Austria; and the repatriation of Austrian Nazi exiles who had been living in Germany for the past five years.⁵ Around 14:45 Schuschnigg offered to accept the postponement, but refused to step down. The German government then demanded the appointment of Seyss-Inquart by 17:30 and compliance with the other conditions before 19.30. Schuschnigg tendered his resignation around four o' clock. This was rejected by President Miklas who told the Germans 'I will give way to force [...] I will fall by force, but I will not do what you demand of me. I will not break my oath by violating the duties of my office.'⁶ Then around 6.30 p.m., a final message was delivered by the German military attaché. This final message was an ultimatum informing the Austrian authorities that 200,000 German forces would enter Austrian territory if Schuschnigg had not complied with German demands by 7.30 p.m. – one hour later. Both before and during the crisis, it was clear to all participants involved that no foreign governments would come to Austria's aid.⁷ Hitler had sent Mussolini a last moment letter notifying him of the coming intervention and assuring him of his friendly attitude to Italy, which Mussolini accepted.⁸ At 19.30, Schuschnigg spoke to the Austrian people on the radio announcing his resignation and declaring that even though he did not accept the demands in the ultimatum, he had

¹ For a description of the events that day, see Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, 72–82. See also Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 185–223, esp.207–9; 691–92.

² Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, 293.

³ Weinberg, 294–95.

⁴ Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, 74.

⁵ Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 207, 209. Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, 76–77.

⁶ Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 209.

⁷ Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, 297; Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 215–17.

⁸ Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 218; Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, 299.

ordered the Austrian armed forces not to put up any resistance.⁹ Meanwhile, Austrian Nazis were occupying government buildings and creating havoc on the streets around the country.¹⁰ Around midnight President Miklas finally gave up and appointed Seyss-Inquart to the chancellorship. But by that time, Hitler had already issued the invasion order which he refused to reverse when Seyss-Inquart asked him to. German forces entered Austria around 5.30 a.m. on 12 March. They were followed by Hitler that same afternoon who received a warm welcome from large crowds.¹¹ On 14 March Hitler entered Vienna, one day after laws had been published proclaiming the *Anschluss* with Germany which was ratified with overwhelming support in a plebiscite the following month.

⁹ Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 209.

¹⁰ Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, 77.

¹¹ Kershaw, 79–80.