

Anschluss.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire formed in 1867 was diverse in nature including many ethnic groups such as Hungarians, Slavs, Ukrainians, Slovaks and Slovenes. All were ruled by a German minority centred on Vienna. Unsurprisingly there were constant ethnic tensions. There was also rivalry between Prussia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This rivalry caused Bismarck the King of Prussia to exclude Austria from his plans to unify Germany in 1871. Although many Austrians agreed with the idea of a new German state many still shared an allegiance to the Hapsburg monarchy and wished Austria to remain an independent country.

At the end of the First World War Austria became a republic as the Austro-Hungarian Empire disintegrated. with many of the diverse ethnic groups forming their own autonomous states. Yet there were significant majorities in parts of Austria, notably in the Tyrol and Salzburg in favour of joining the new German Weimar Republic. The Treaty of Versailles and the Treaty of St. Germain however specifically excluded Austria from unifying with Germany since France and Britain feared a Germany which included Austria would be too powerful. Opposition to unification also came from within Austria , primarily from the old nobility and many of the Catholic majority. Germany by comparison was overwhelmingly Lutheran. Nevertheless the news constitutions of the Austrian and Weimar republics both included the political goal of unification which was widely supported throughout the 1920s and early thirties.

Indeed in 1931 the Austrian government looked to a possible customs union with Germany.

When the Nazis came to power in Germany during 1933 the Austrians withdrew from economic ties. Germany's subsequent rapid rearmaments programme meant the Nazis viewed Austria's rich raw materials and industrial prowess as ideal to support its own resources. Austria also had plentiful gold and foreign currency reserves. The stated aim of the Nazi Party was to unite all Germans either born or living outside the Reich to create an all German Reich. Thus, Hitler intended to unite the two countries by any means possible.

The first Austrian republic gradually disintegrated from internal strife until by 1933 its parliament was dissolved and after a short 'civil war' a one party state emerged controlling the press and labour relations. The Austrian National Socialist Party was banned. Power was centralised in the office of the Austrian Chancellor who like his contemporary across the border ruled by decree.

Despite the Catholic opposition the idea of Austria joining Germany grew in popularity and indeed Anschluss might have occurred by democratic means had not Austrian Nazis started a terrorist campaign. The Austrian Chancellor Engelbert Dollfus was assassinated by Austrian Nazis on 25th July 1934 and their subsequent terrorist acts had killed more than 800 people by 1938. This carnage strengthened the resolve of the new Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg to maintain Austria's independence, yet under increasing pressure from the German Nazis he was forced to sign an Austro-German

pact with the German Ambassador to Austria in 1936 in which Austria agreed to the release of Austro-Nazi prisoners and to declare itself a 'German state', and to accept the Nazi Party into Austrian politics. In return the Austrian Nazis would cease their terrorist attacks. Even this did not satisfy Hitler.

The German Four Year Plan of 1936 aimed to dramatically increase military spending in order to prepare Germany for European war by 1940. Hermann Goring put in charge of the Plan eyeing up the huge resources possessed by Austria pushed hard for unification. In the Hasbach Memorandum of 1937 Hitler acknowledged that Germany's current problems in falling behind in the arms race with France and Britain could be solved by unifying with Austria.

Hitler hoped that unification might be prompted from within Austria and therefore in February 1938 presented a set of demands to the Austrian Chancellor calling for greater involvement of Austrian Nazis in the Austrian government. In return he would honour the 1936 Pact to respect Austria's national sovereignty. Schuschnigg the Austrian Chancellor subsequently held a national referendum in order to establish the Austrian mood for unification, much to Hitler's annoyance, declaring he would not accept the results of the plebiscite. Instead he issued a further ultimatum on March 1st that the Austrian Chancellor should hand power over to the Austrian Nazis or face an invasion. Despite Schuschnigg pleading for help from the French and British unsuccessfully he was forced to resign and a pro-Nazi chancellor Seyss Inquart took over the following day as Austrian Chancellor.

Simultaneously the Austrian President Wilhelm Mikles resigned on the same day in protest.

On the morning of March 12th 1938 the German Eighth Army crossed the border into Austria and was welcomed by cheering Austrians giving the Nazi salute and throwing flowers over the invading troops. Hitler had intended to make Austria a puppet state but the apparent enthusiasm for the invasion caused him to completely incorporate Austria into the German Reich. On the 13th March 1938 the new Austrian Chancellor revoked article 88 of the Treaty of St. Germain allowing the unification of Austria and Germany.

The seizure of Austria demonstrated Hitler's aggressive territorial ambitions and the failure of the British and French to take any meaningful action against Hitler for violating the Treaty of Versailles. Hitler's popularity reached a new peak with his German speaking subjects after the anschluss because he had completed the long awaited idea of a greater Germany.

Shortly after the invasion the German SS led by Heinrich Himmler rounded up Austrian opponents of the anschluss and within a few days had arrested 70,000 people, either sending them to concentration camps or murdering them.