

What the World Rejected: Hitler's Peace Offers 1933-1939 by Friedrich Stieve

Germany's enemies maintain today that Adolf Hitler was the greatest disturber of peace known to history, that he threatened every nation with sudden attack and oppression, that he had created a terrible war machine in order to cause trouble and devastation to all around him. At the same time, they intentionally conceal an all-important fact: they themselves drove the Leader of the German people to finally draw the sword. They themselves compelled him to seek to obtain at last by the use of force that which he had been striving to gain by persuasion from the beginning: the security of his country. They did this not only by declaring war on him on September 3, 1939, but also by blocking step by step for seven years the path to any peaceful discussion.

The attempts repeatedly made by Adolf Hitler to induce the governments of other states to collaborate with him in a reconstruction of Europe represent an ever-recurring pattern in his conduct since the commencement of his labors for the German Reich. But these attempts were wrecked every time by reason of the fact that nowhere was there any willingness to give them due consideration, because the evil spirit of the Great War still prevailed everywhere, because in London and Paris and in the capitals of the Western Powers' vassal states there was only one fixed intention: to perpetuate the power of Versailles.

A rapid glance at the most important events will furnish incontrovertible proof for this statement.

When Adolf Hitler came to the fore, Germany was as gagged and as helpless as the victors of 1918 wanted her to be. Completely disarmed, with an army of only 100,000 men intended solely for police duties within the country, she found herself within a tightly closed ring of neighbors all armed to the teeth and leagued together. To the old enemies in the West, Britain, Belgium, and France, new ones were artificially created and added in the East and the South: above all Poland and Czechoslovakia. A quarter of the population of Germany was forcibly torn away from their mother country and handed over to foreign powers. The Reich, mutilated on all sides and robbed of every means of defense, at any moment could become the helpless victim of some rapacious neighbor.

Then it was that Adolf Hitler for the first time made his appeal to the common sense of the other powers. On May 17, 1933, a few months after his appointment to the office of Reichskanzler, he delivered a speech in the German Reichstag, from which we extract the following passages:

"Germany will be perfectly ready to disband her entire military establishment and destroy the small amount of arms remaining to her, if the neighboring countries will do the same thing with equal thoroughness."

"Germany is entirely ready to renounce aggressive weapons of every sort if the armed nations, on their part, will destroy their aggressive weapons within a specified period, and if their use is forbidden by an international convention."

"Germany is at all times prepared to renounce aggressive weapons if the rest of the world does the same. Germany is prepared to agree to any solemn pact of non-aggression because she does not think of attacking anybody but only of acquiring security."

No answer was received. Without paying any heed, the others continued to fill their arsenals with weapons, to pile up their stores of explosives, to increase the numbers of their troops. At the same time, the League of Nations, the instrument of the victorious powers, declared that Germany must first pass through a period of "probation" before it would be possible to discuss with her the question of the other countries. On October 14, 1933, Hitler broke away from this League of Nations with which it was impossible to come to any agreement. Shortly afterwards, however, he came forward with a new proposal for the improvement of international relations. This proposal included the following six points:

1. Germany receives full equality of rights.
2. The fully armed States undertake amongst themselves not to increase their armaments beyond their present level.
3. Germany adheres to this agreement, freely undertaking to make only so much actual moderate use of the equality of rights granted to her as will not present a threat to the security of any other European power.
4. All States recognize certain obligations in regards to conducting war on humane principles, or to the elimination of certain weapons for use against the civilian population.
5. All States accept a uniform general control, which will watch over and ensure the observance of these obligations.
6. The European nations guarantee one another the unconditional maintenance of peace by the conclusion of non-aggression pacts, to be renewed after ten years.

Following upon this a proposal was made to increase the strength of the German army to 300,000 men, corresponding to the strength required by Germany "having regard to the length of her frontiers and the size of the armies of her neighbors," in order to protect her threatened territory against attacks. The defender of the principle of peaceable agreement was thus trying to accommodate himself to the unwillingness of the others to disarm by expressing a desire for a limited increase of armaments for his own country. An exchange of

notes, starting from this and continuing for years, finally came to a sudden end with an unequivocal "no" from France. This "no" was moreover accompanied by tremendous increases in the armed forces of France, Britain, and Russia.

In this way, Germany's position became still worse than before. The danger to the Reich was so great that Adolf Hitler felt himself compelled to act. On March 16, 1935, he reintroduced conscription. But in direct connection with this measure he once more announced an offer of agreements of an extensive nature, the purpose of which was to ensure that any future war would be conducted on humane principles, in fact to make such a war practically impossible by eliminating destructive armaments. In his speech of May 21, 1935, he declared:

"The German Government is ready to take an active part in all efforts which may lead to a practical limitation of armaments. It regards a return to the former idea of the Geneva Red Cross Convention as the only possible way to achieve this. It believes that at first there will be only the possibility of a gradual abolition and outlawry of weapons and methods of warfare, which are essentially contrary to the Geneva Red Cross Convention, which is still valid.

"Just as the use of dum-dum bullets was once forbidden and, on the whole, thereby prevented in practice, so the use of other definite arms should be forbidden and prevented. Here the German Government has in mind all those arms, which bring death and destruction not so much to the fighting soldiers as to non-combatant women and children.

"The German Government considers as erroneous and ineffective the idea to do away with aeroplanes while leaving the question of bombing open. But it believes it possible to proscribe the use of certain arms as contrary to international law and to excommunicate those nations which still use them from the community of mankind—its rights and its laws.

"It also believes that gradual progress is the best way to success. For example, there might be prohibition of the dropping of gas, incendiary and explosive bombs outside the real battle zone. This limitation could then be extended to complete international outlawry of all bombing. But so long as bombing as such is permitted, any limitation of the number of bombing planes is questionable in view of the possibility of rapid substitution.

"Should bombing as such be branded as a barbarity contrary to international law, the construction of bombing aeroplanes will soon be abandoned as superfluous and of no purpose. If, through the Geneva Red Cross Convention, it turned out possible as a matter of fact to prevent the killing of a defenseless wounded man or prisoner, it ought to be equally possible to forbid, by an analogous convention, and finally to stop, the bombing of equally defenseless civilian populations."

"In such a fundamental way of dealing with the problem, Germany sees a greater reassurance and security for the nations than in all pacts of assistance and military conventions."

"The German Government is ready to agree to any limitation which leads to abolition of the heaviest arms, especially suited for aggression. Such are, first, the heaviest artillery, and secondly, the heaviest tanks. In view of the enormous fortifications on the French frontier, such an international abolition of the heaviest weapons of attack would ipso facto give France 100 percent security."

"Germany declares herself ready to agree to any limitation whatsoever of the caliber-strength of artillery, battleships, cruisers, and torpedo boats. In like manner, the German Government is ready to accept any international limitation of the size of warships. And finally it is ready to agree to limitation of tonnage for submarines, or to their complete abolition in case of international agreement."

"And it gives further assurance that it will agree to any international limitations or abolition of arms whatsoever for a uniform space of time."

This time again Hitler's declarations did not find the slightest response. On the contrary, France made an alliance with Russia in order to increase her preponderating influence on the Continent still further, and to augment to a gigantic degree the pressure on Germany from the East. In view of the evident destructive intentions of his opponents, Adolf Hitler was therefore obliged to take new measures to ensure the safety of the German Reich. On March 3, 1936, he occupied the Rhineland, which had been without military protection since Versailles, and thus closed the wide gate through which the Western neighbor could carry out an invasion. Once again, he followed the defensive step, which he had been obliged to take with a liberal appeal for general reconciliation and for the settlement of all differences. On March 31, 1936, he formulated the following peace plan:

1. In order to give to future agreements securing the peace of Europe the character of inviolable treaties, those nations participating in the negotiations do so only on an entirely equal footing and as equally esteemed members. The sole compelling reason for signing these treaties can only lie in the generally recognized and obvious practicability of these agreements for the peace of Europe, and thus for the social happiness and economic prosperity of the nations.

2. In order to shorten in the economic interest of the European nations the period of uncertainty, the German Government proposes a limit of four months for the first period up to the signing of the pacts of non-aggression guaranteeing the peace of Europe.

3. The German Government gives the assurance not to add any reinforcements whatsoever to the troops in the Rhineland during this period, always provided that the Belgian and French Governments act in the same way.
4. The German Government gives the assurance not to move during this period closer to the Belgian and French frontiers the troops at present stationed in the Rhineland.
5. The German Government proposes the setting up of a commission composed of the two guarantor Powers, Britain and Italy, and a disinterested third neutral power, to guarantee this assurance to be given by both parties.
6. Germany, Belgium, and France are each entitled to send a representative to this Commission. If Germany, France, or Belgium think that for any particular reason they can point to a change in the military situation having taken place within this period of four months, they have the right to inform the Guarantee Commission of their observations.
7. Germany, Belgium, and France declare their willingness in such a case to permit this Commission to make the necessary investigations through the British and Italian military attaches, and to report thereon to the Powers participating.
8. Germany, Belgium, and France give the assurance that they will bestow the fullest consideration to the objections arising there from.
9. Moreover, the German Government is willing on a basis of complete reciprocity with Germany's two western neighbors to agree to any military limitations on the German western frontier.
10. Germany, Belgium, and France and the two guarantor Powers agree to enter into negotiations under the leadership of the British Government at once or, at the latest, after the French elections, for the conclusion of a 25-years non-aggression or security pact between France and Belgium on the one hand, and Germany on the other.
11. Germany agrees that Britain and Italy shall sign this security pact as guarantor Powers once more.
12. Should special engagements to render military assistance arise as a result of these security agreements, Germany on her part declares her willingness to enter into such engagements.
13. The German Government hereby repeats its proposal for the conclusion of an air-pact to supplement and consolidate these security agreements.

14. The German Government repeats that should the Netherlands so desire it is willing to include that country too in this West-European security agreement.

15. In order to stamp this peace-pact, voluntarily entered into between Germany and France, as the reconciliatory conclusion of a centuries-old dispute, Germany and France pledge themselves to take steps to see that in the education of the young, as well as in the press and publications of both nations, everything shall be avoided which might be calculated to poison the relationship between the two peoples, whether it be a derogatory or contemptuous attitude, or improper interference in the internal affairs of the other country. They agree to set up at the headquarters of the League of Nations at Geneva, a joint commission whose function it shall be to lay all complaints received before the two governments for information and investigation.

16. In pursuance of their intention to give this agreement the character of a sacred pledge, Germany and France undertake to ratify it by means of a plebiscite if the two nations.

17. Germany expresses her willingness, on her part, to establish contact with the states on her southeastern and northeastern frontiers, in order to invite them directly to conclude the pacts of non-aggression already proposed.

18. Germany expresses her willingness to re-enter the League of Nations, either at once, or after the conclusion of these agreements.

At the same time, the German Government again expresses as its expectation that, after a reasonable time and by the method of friendly negotiations, the question of colonial equality of rights, and that of the separation of the Covenant of the League of Nations from its foundations in the Versailles Treaty will be cleared up.

19. Germany proposes the setting up of an International Court of Arbitration, which shall be responsible for the observance of the various agreements and whose decisions shall be binding on all parties.

After the conclusion of this great work of securing European peace, the German Government considers it urgently to endeavor by practical measures to put a stop to the unlimited competition in armaments. In her opinion, this would mean not merely an improvement in the financial and economic positions of the nations, but above all a diminution of the psychological tension.

The German Government, however, has no faith in the attempt to bring about universal settlements, as this would be doomed to failure from the outset, and can therefore be proposed only by those who have no interest in achieving practical results. On the other hand, it is of the opinion that the negotiations held

and the results achieved in limiting naval armaments should have an instructive and stimulating effect.

The German Government therefore proposes that future conferences shall have one clearly defined objective.

For the present, it believes the most important task is to bring aerial warfare into the moral and humane atmosphere of the protection afforded to non-combatants or the wounded by the Geneva Convention. Just as the killing of defenseless wounded, or prisoners, or the use of dum dum bullets, or the waging of submarine warfare without warning, have been either forbidden or regulated by international conventions, so it must be possible for civilized humanity to prevent the senseless abuse of any new type of weapon, without running counter to the object of warfare.

The German Government therefore puts forward the proposal that the immediate practical tasks of this conference shall be:

1. Prohibition of dropping gas, poison, or incendiary bombs.
2. Prohibition of dropping bombs of any kind whatsoever on open towns and villages outside the range of the medium-heavy artillery of the fighting fronts.
3. Prohibition of the bombarding with long-range guns of towns more than 20 km. distant from the battle zone.
4. Abolition and prohibition of the construction of tanks of the heaviest type.
5. Abolition and prohibition of artillery of the heaviest calibre.

As soon as possibilities for further limitation of armaments emerge from such discussions and agreements, they should be utilized.

The German Government hereby declares itself prepared to join in every such settlement, in so far as it is valid internationally.

The German Government believes that if even a first step is made on the road to disarmament, this will be of enormous importance to the relationship between the nations, and to the recovery of confidence, trade, and prosperity.

In accordance with the general desire for the restoration of favorable economic conditions, the German Government is prepared immediately after the conclusion of the political treaties to enter into an exchange of opinions on economic problems with the other nations concerned, in the spirit of the proposals made, and to do all that lies in its power to improve the economic situation in Europe, and the world economic situation which is closely bound up with it.

The German Government believes that with the peace plan proposed above it has made its contribution to the reconstruction of a new Europe on the basis of reciprocal respect and confidence between sovereign states. Many opportunities for such a pacification of Europe, for which Germany has so often in the last few years made her proposals, have been neglected. May this attempt to achieve European understanding succeed at last!

The German Government confidently believes that it has opened the way in this direction by submitting the above peace plan.

Anyone who today reads this comprehensive peace plan will realize in what direction the development of Europe, according to the wishes of Adolf Hitler, should really have proceeded. Here was the possibility of truly constructive work. This could have been a real turning point for the welfare of all nations. But once more he who alone called for peace was not heard. Only Britain replied with a rather scornful questionnaire, which avoided any serious consideration of the essential points involved. Incidentally, however, she disclosed her actual intentions by setting herself up as the protector of France and by instituting and commencing regular military staff conversations with the French Republic just as in the period before the Great War.

There could no longer be any doubt now that the Western Powers were following the old path towards an armed conflict and were steadily preparing a new blow against Germany, although Adolf Hitler's whole thoughts and endeavors were directed towards proving to them that he wanted to remain on the best possible terms with them. In the course of the years, he had undertaken numerous steps in this direction, of which a few more shall be referred to here. He negotiated the Naval Agreement of June 18, 1935, with Great Britain, which provided that the German Navy should have a strength of 35% of that of the British Navy. By this he wanted to demonstrate that the Reich, to use his own words, had "neither the intention nor the means, nor was it necessary" to enter into any rivalry as regards naval power, such as had had so fateful an influence on its relations to Great Britain in the well-remembered days before the Great War.

He assured France on every possible occasion of his desire to live at peace with her. He repeatedly renounced in plain terms any claim to Alsace-Lorraine. On the return to the Reich of the Saar territory as the result of the plebiscite, he declared on March 1, 1935:

"It is our hope that through this act of just compensation, in which we see a return to natural reason, relations between Germany and France have permanently improved. Therefore, as we desire peace, we must hope that our great neighbor is ready and willing to seek peace with us. It must be possible for two great peoples to join together and collaborate in opposing the difficulties which threaten to overwhelm Europe."

He even endeavored to arrive at a better understanding with Poland, the eastern ally of the Western Powers, although this country had unlawfully incorporated millions of Germans in 1919 and had subjected them to the worst oppression ever since. On January 26, 1934, he concluded a non-aggression pact with her in which the two Governments agreed, "to settle directly all questions of whatever sort which concern their mutual relations."

Thus, on all sides he opposed the enemy plans, his determination to preserve peace and strove to protect Germany in this way. When however he saw that London and Paris were arming for an attack, he was once more obliged to undertake fresh measures of defense. The enemy camp, as we have seen above, had been enormously extended through the alliance between France and Russia. In addition to this, the two powers had secured a line of communication to the south of the Reich through Czechoslovakia having concluded a treaty with Russia, which put her in the position of a bridge between east and west. Czechoslovakia, however, was in control of the high-lying country of Bohemia and Moravia, which Bismarck had called the citadel of Europe, and this citadel projected far into German territory. The threat to Germany thus assumed truly overpowering proportions.

The genius of Adolf Hitler found a way of meeting this danger. The conditions in German Austria, which under the terror of the Schuschnigg Government were tending towards civil war, offered him the opportunity of stepping in to save the situation, and to lead back into the Reich the sister nation to the south-east that had been sentenced by the victorious powers to lead the life of a hopelessly decaying "Free State." After he had thus established himself near the line of communication between France and Russia mentioned above, a process of dissolution set in the mixed state of Czechoslovakia, which had been artificially put together from the most diverse national elements. Until after the liberation of the Sudetenland and the secession of Slovakia, the Czechs themselves asked for the protection of the German Reich. With this, the enemy's bridge came into Adolf Hitler's possession; and at the same time, direct connection was made possible with Italy, whose friendship had been secured some time previously.

While he was gaining this strategic success for the security of his country, Adolf Hitler was again endeavoring with great eagerness to reach a peaceable understanding with the Western Powers. In Munich directly after liberation of the Sudeten Germans, approved by Britain, France, and Italy, he made an agreement with the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, the text of which was as follows:

We have had a further meeting today and have agreed in recognizing that the question of Anglo-German relations is of the first importance for the two countries and for Europe.

We regard the agreement signed last night and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement as symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again.

We are resolved that the method of consultation shall be the method adopted to deal with any other questions that may concern our two countries, and we are determined to continue our efforts to remove possible sources of difference and thus to contribute to assure the peace of Europe.

September 30, 1938

Adolf Hitler, Neville Chamberlain.

Two months later, on Hitler's instructions, the German Foreign Minister, von Ribbentrop, made the following agreement with France:

Herr Joachim von Ribbentrop, Reich Minister for Foreign Affairs, and M. Georges Bonnet, French Minister of Foreign Affairs, acting in the name and by the order of their Governments, are, at their meeting in Paris, on December 6, 1938, agreed as follows:

1. The German Government and the French Government fully share the conviction that peaceful and good-neighborly relations between Germany and France constitute one of the most essential elements for the consolidation of the situation in Europe and the maintenance of general peace. The two Governments will in consequence use all their efforts to ensure the development of the relations between their countries in this direction.
2. The two Governments recognize that between the two countries, there is no territorial question outstanding, and they solemnly recognize as final the frontiers between their countries as they now exist.
3. The two Governments are resolved, while leaving unaffected their particular relations with other Powers, to remain in contact with regard to all questions concerning their two countries, and mutually to consult should the later evolution of those qualities lead to international difficulties.

In token whereof the representatives of the two Governments have signed the present Declaration, which comes into immediate effect. Done in two original Documents in the French and German language respectively, in Paris, December 6, 1938.

Joachim von Ribbentrop Georges Bonnet
Reich Minister for Foreign Affairs Minister for Foreign Affairs

According to all calculations one should have been able to assume that the way was clear for collaborative reconstruction in which all leading powers would participate, and that the Fuehrer's endeavors to secure peace would at last meet with success. But the contrary was true. Scarcely had Chamberlain reached home when he called for rearmament on a considerable scale and laid plans for a new and tremendous encirclement of Germany. Britain now took over from France the leadership of this further encirclement of the Reich, in order to obtain a substitute for the lost Czechoslovakia many times its value. She opened negotiations with Russia, granted Poland a guarantee, and also Rumania, Greece, and Turkey. These were alarm signals of the greatest urgency.

Just at this time Adolf Hitler was occupied with the task of finally eliminating sources of friction with Poland. For this purpose he had made an uncommonly generous proposal by which the purely German Free City of Danzig would return to the Reich, and a narrow passage through the Polish Corridor, which since 1919 had torn asunder the north-eastern part of Germany to an unbearable extent, would provide communication with the separated area. This proposal, which moreover afforded Poland the prospect of a 25-year non-aggression pact and other advantages, was nevertheless rejected in Warsaw, because there it was believed, conscious as the authorities were of forming one of the principal members of the common front set up by London against Germany, that any concession. However minor, could be refused. This was not all! With the same consciousness, Poland then started to be aggressive, threatened Danzig, and prepared to take up arms against Germany.

Thus, the moment was close at hand for the attack on the Reich by the countries which had been brought together for the purpose. Adolf Hitler, making a final extreme effort in the interests of peace, saved what he could. On August 23rd, Ribbentrop succeeded in reaching an agreement in Moscow for a non-aggression pact with Russia. Two days later the German Führer himself made a final and truly remarkable offer to Britain, declaring himself ready "to enter into agreements with Great Britain, "which would not only, on the German side, in any case safeguard the existence of the British Empire, but if necessary would guarantee German assistance for the British Empire, irrespective of where such assistance might be required."

At the same time, he was prepared "to accept a reasonable limitation of armaments, in accordance with the new political situation and economic requirements."

The reply to this was a pact of assistance signed the same day between Britain and Poland, which rendered the outbreak of war inevitable. Then a decision was made in Warsaw to mobilize at once against Germany, and the Poles began with violent attacks not only on the Germans in Poland, who for some time had been the victims of frightful massacres, but on Germans in German territory.

Even when Britain and France had already declared war, as they intended, and Germany had overcome the Polish danger in the east by a glorious campaign without a parallel, even then Adolf Hitler raised his voice once more in the name of peace. He did so although his hands were now free to act against the enemy in the west. He did so, although the fight against him personally was proclaimed in London and Paris, in immeasurable hate, as a crusade. At this moment, he possessed the supreme self-control to proclaim in his speech of October 6, 1939, a new plan for the pacification of Europe to public opinion throughout the world. This plan was as follows:

By far the most important task, in my opinion, is the creation of not only a belief in, but also a sense of, European security.

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