



Written by [Kurt Hyde](#) on April 10, 2013

## 75th Anniversary of the Anschluss Election

April 10, 2013 marks the 75th anniversary of the infamous Anschluss election. Ninety-nine percent of those voting throughout the German Empire put their stamp of approved on the Nazi takeover of Austria. The percentage of yes votes was even higher in Austria where 99.75 percent voted “Ja.” Adolf Hitler proclaimed, “This hour is the proudest my life.”



Like many elections conducted by dictators, the Anschluss election was more of an international publicity stunt than a genuine election. The elections were held in Germany, Austria, and on vote ships from numerous countries where German and Austrian citizens sailed outside territorial waters to cast their ballots. The *New York Times* of April 11, 1938 described the experience aboard one of those vote ships, the *Wilhelm Gustloff* which sailed from London, England to a point beyond the three-mile limit. The cost per person was “seventy-five cents for a day’s sea-outing with two meals and all the beer desired.” The article attributed the low prices to contributions from Strength Through Joy, an organization of German workers. The article listed the overwhelming yes votes from those on board as 1,167 to five from the Germans and 801 to five from the Austrians. There were only two spoiled ballots, which is amazing considering the free-flow of beer.

### **The Other Half of the Half-Truth**

The overwhelming vote of approval was a half-truth. The other half of the truth paints a considerably different picture — one of power seekers using political power, military might, and corrupt electoral practices.

The time was 1938 and the Nazis had their eyes on Austria for their next conquest. They were aided in this case by a desire that had already existed in the hearts of many Germans and Austrians to unite. Hitler’s strategy was to take advantage of that desire while taking over Austria primarily via diplomatic and behind-the-scenes maneuvers. That February Hitler coerced Austrian Chancellor Kurt Schuschnigg into signing an agreement at Berchtesgaden. The agreement included provisions for amnesty for



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imprisoned Nazis in Austria and appointing of such Nazi sympathizers as Arthur Seyss-Inquart into high-level posts in the Austrian government.

Schuschnigg observed Hitler's skillful use of referendum elections to build an illusion of government by consent of the governed. It was Hitler's way of claiming legitimacy. Hitler's lopsided victories were in large part due to controlling the wording of the questions on the ballot, the timing of the elections, and the news media, plus voter intimidation and undocumented rules of vote counting, as well as behind-closed-doors vote counts and accumulation of vote totals. The Nazis had a habit of keeping election results behind closed doors until they were ready to announce results. By coincidence that also gave them the opportunity to make adjustments to the totals and subtotals, if necessary, to ensure the end results were what they wanted.

### **Schuschnigg Tries to Beat Hitler at His Own Game**

On Wednesday, March 9 Schuschnigg announced a national referendum to vote on Austrian independence, to be held that following Sunday, March 13. Schuschnigg, far from a saint himself, was not above manipulating elections. Calling a national election with only four days' notice was only a start. The *New York Times* of March 10, 1938 listed some of Schuschnigg's highly suspect rules: Only Austrians born before 1915 could vote. Younger voters were excluded because demographically they were more likely to sympathize with the Nazis. The official ballots would be about two inches by three inches with "Ja," German for yes, pre-printed on them. If the voter crossed out the yes and wrote no it would still be counted as a yes. The only way a voter could vote no was to supply his own ballot of the identical size with "Nein," the German word for no, written on it. So much as adding an additional word to "Nein" would make it a spoiled ballot. The rules were eased a bit the next day to have voting officials also make available to voters ballots with "Nein" pre-printed on them.

Schuschnigg's chances in the plebiscite appeared good at first. The same *New York Times* article quoted experts who said the most likely percentage of yes votes in the referendum would be between 60 percent and 80 percent. It looked like Schuschnigg would put a brake on Hitler's plans for a Nazi takeover.

### **Hitler Responds**

The Nazis in Austria started creating disruptions in the streets of numerous cities. Hitler demanded the referendum be postponed or he would invade Austria. Soon Hitler also demanded Schuschnigg's resignation. Both demands were met on Friday, March 11 as the referendum was postponed and Schuschnigg resigned. At that point Nazi sympathizer Arthur Seyss-Inquart, as acting chancellor, invited German troops to enter Austria for the purpose of maintaining order.

The *New York Times* for March 12 reported on the front page that censorship had been imposed. Foreign correspondents in Vienna were told all their telephone calls in the Central Telegraph Office must be in German. It also added: "Correspondents for the International News Services, an American organization, were detained against their will, without charges, at the office." The Nazis closed newspapers that weren't pro-Nazi. All this while Hitler was making speeches saying everything would be beautiful.

### **The Anschluss Election**

The Nazis rescheduled the election for April 10 and renamed it from an independence election to an Anschluss Election, Anschluss being the German word for Union. The new ballot, paraphrased in English, presents the voter with a *fait accompli*: "Do you agree with the 13 March 1938 reunification of Austria



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with the German Reich and do you agree with our leader Adolf Hitler?"

In typical dictator fashion, the *fait accompli* happened four weeks earlier and was already the status quo. The ultimatums, the invasion, and the arrests were described as "reunification." And make no mistake about it, the "Ja" circle's size compared to that for "Nein" coupled with their positioning on the ballot made it relatively easy for the Nazi election officials to monitor the marking of the ballots. William Shirer in his book *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* gave this account of how well Hitler kept his promise of a secret ballot:

As it was, it took a very brave Austrian to vote no. As in Germany, and not without reason, the voters feared that their failure to cast an affirmative ballot might be found out. In the polling station I visited in Vienna that Sunday afternoon, wide slits in the corner of the polling booths gave the Nazi election committee sitting a few feet away a good view of how one voted. In the country districts few bothered—or dared—to cast their ballots in the secrecy of the booth; they voted openly for all to see.

## **What Happened After the Anschluss Election**

Kitty Werthmann was 10 years old when Hitler "reunified" Austria under Germany. She gives a frightening eyewitness account of how many Austrians, sick of years of economic depression, voted for Hitler because they thought it would put the country back to work. But then the reality set in. Werthmann explained how God was kicked out of the government schools. Crucifixes were replaced with pictures of Adolf Hitler and swastikas. The healthcare was socialized and quality went down while the taxes went up. Particularly chilling was Werthmann's account of what Hitler did to firearms owners:

Hitler said that the real way to catch criminals (we still had a few) was by matching serial numbers on guns. Most citizens were law abiding and dutifully marched to the police station to register their firearms. Not long afterwards, the police said that it was best for everyone to turn in their guns. The authorities already knew who had them, so it was futile not to comply voluntarily.

[Werthmann](#) summarized:

Totalitarianism didn't come quickly, it took 5 years from 1938 until 1943, to realize full dictatorship in Austria. Had it happened overnight, my countrymen would have fought to the last breath. Instead, we had creeping gradualism. Now, our only weapons were broom handles. The whole idea sounds almost unbelievable that the state, little by little eroded our freedom.

## **Lessons for America**

Gaining control over elections was an essential element in Hitler's strategy for imposing dictatorship. He understood direct democracy, which is simply majority rule, as opposed to a republic, which is rule by law. He knew, as our Founding Fathers knew and Robert Welch said, "Democracy is a weapon of demagoguery and a perennial fraud." Hitler knew that by controlling the wording on the ballot, being in a position to control the timing of elections and writing the rules of the vote counts he could win every election he called. If necessary, the Nazis would employ their additional safeguard of moving the vote counts and vote accumulations behind closed doors.

America is a republic and not a democracy and we need to keep it that way. A nationwide referendum election is unconstitutional, at least for now. But would a nationwide referendum be unconstitutional if the U.S. Constitution is replaced as a product of a constitutional convention? Even without the Con-Con there are movements within our country to bring about initiatives and referendums.



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The recently created Presidential Commission on Election Administration could well morph into centralized control over our elections very similar to what Austria had 75 years ago today. One of the mission statements of the presidential commission is to address “the adequacy of contingency plans for natural disasters and other emergencies that may disrupt elections.” It sounds harmless when expressed in those terms. But what would the reality be? If it results in centralization of power to rewrite election rules or change election dates in response to real situations or false alarms, it would become essentially the same power that was abused by Kurt Schuschnigg and Adolf Hitler as they rewrote the rules and the schedule of an election. All the time they claimed it was in the best interest of the people; however, history has shown it was simply jockeying for power on their part.

It can't happen here? Maybe not now, but we have been moving gradually in the wrong direction for a number of years. We need to reverse course and put elections back on track or we may suffer the same fate the Austrians did 75 years ago today.

*Photo at top shows border barrier separating Germany and Austria being removed, March 14, 1938: AP Images*



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