

France to Germany, 03-09-1939

Prior to the invasion of Poland, the French and German Governments had been in regular contact through the exchange of multiple letters between the French Prime Minister Daladier and the German Chancellor Hitler. Throughout France expressed its desire for peaceful relations with Germany but emphasised its steadfast support for Poland should it come to a conflict with Germany.¹ France continued to strive for a peaceful settlement, while at the same time it ordered the partial mobilisation of its armed forces on 22 August. When attempts to reach a settlement failed, and Germany attacked Poland on 1 September, the French government had to first obtain parliamentary approval, before it could honor its commitments to Poland. The French government ordered general military mobilisation, and convened parliament for the next day.² Meanwhile, it coordinated with the British government and on the evening of 1 September both countries presented a letter similar in content warning Germany to immediately halt all aggressive actions against Poland and to withdraw its forces from Polish territory or face the consequences (see ultimatum Great Britain to Germany, 03-09-1939).³ But neither that day nor the next did the German government offer a reply.⁴ The military timetable meanwhile initially dictated the political timetable, as French military staff – well aware of France’s military weakness – insisted that it needed more time – according to some accounts at least 48 hours – to make defensive preparations.⁵ After going back and forth with London it was decided that the two governments would not be presenting a joint ultimatum.⁶ But following concerted British pressure, the French political leadership decided to shorten the time horizon of their ultimatum with an additional 12 hours.⁷ Following the vote in the French parliament approving the use of force, the French ambassador met with Ribbentrop shortly after noon and asked him about the German reply to the demands that had been presented on 1 September. Ribbentrop answered:

If the French Government feels bound by its commitments to Poland to enter into the conflict, I can only regret it, for we have no feeling of hostility towards France. It is only if France attacks us that we shall fight her, and this would be on her part a war of aggression.⁸

Asked whether this amounted to a negative answer, Ribbentrop affirmed that it was so. The French representative – as instructed by his Foreign Minister Bonnet – then declared the following:⁹

In these circumstances I must, on behalf of my Government, remind you for the last time of the heavy responsibility assumed by the Government of the Reich by entering, without a declaration of war, into hostilities against Poland and in not acting upon the suggestion made by the Governments of the French Republic and of His Britannic Majesty to suspend all aggressive action against Poland and to declare itself ready to withdraw its forces promptly from Polish territory. I have the painful duty to notify you that as from today, September 3,

¹ Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 552. For a full description of the incident see Toynbee and Toynbee, 518–61, esp. 545–57; Thorne, *The Approach of War*, 179–202.

² Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 554.

³ Government of Great Britain, ‘No. 110. The British War Blue Book Miscellaneous 9’; Government of France, ‘No. 345. The French Yellow Book Papers.’

⁴ Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 555.

⁵ Toynbee and Toynbee, 547–50, 555.

⁶ Toynbee and Toynbee, 543–44.

⁷ Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler’s Germany*, 651–52.

⁸ Government of France, ‘No. 367 : M. Coulondre, French Ambassador in Berlin, to M. Georges Bonnet, Minister for Foreign Affairs. Berlin, September 3, 1939. The French Yellow Book : Diplomatic Documents (1938-1939) - Papers Relative to the Events and Negotiations which Preceded the Opening of Hostilities between Germany on the one hand, and Poland, Great Britain and France on the other hand.’, 1939, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/y1bk367.asp>.

⁹ Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 556–57.

at 5 p.m., the French Government will find itself obliged to fulfill the obligations that France has contracted towards Poland, and which are known to the German Government.¹⁰

Later that day Bonnet dispatched a communiqué to all the heads of diplomatic missions in Paris confirming that 'as a result of the aggression aimed by Germany against Poland, a state of war exists between France and Germany as from September 3, 1939, at 5 p.m.'¹¹ The two countries engaged in full scale armed hostilities on land only the following year in the spring of 1940 when Germany invaded France.

¹⁰ Government of France, 'The French Yellow Book', 1939.

¹¹ Government of France, 'No. 368: M. Georges Bonnet, Minister for Foreign Affairs, to all the Heads of Diplomatic Missions accredited to Paris. Paris, September 3, 1939. The French Yellow Book : Diplomatic Documents (1938-1939) - Papers Relative to the Events and Negotiations which Preceded the Opening of Hostilities between Germany on the one hand, and Poland, Great Britain and France on the other hand.', 1939, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/ylbk368.asp>.