

Germany to Poland, 29-08-1939

The German government planned to annex the Danzig corridor as well as other parts of Poland in order to protect, so it claimed, German minorities living in Poland. Reich Chancellor Hitler had been talking openly about these demands from October 1938 and March 1939 onwards. This had contributed to closer relations between Poland and Great Britain and France.¹ In May 1939 Hitler, in front of an audience of German senior military officers, had spoken about his intentions to attack Poland citing the need for *Lebensraum*. He had also ordered that no diplomatic negotiations about these demands were to take place with the Polish government.² Together with his military staff, Hitler had set out a timetable for military action against Poland to take place after the harvest, but before weather conditions would no longer permit it.³ In August 1939, Hitler started putting pressure on Poland to achieve his objectives. German forces were stationed along the German-Polish border. By 24 August – only days after the rapprochement between Germany and the Soviet Union – Polish Foreign Minister Beck claimed that thirty German divisions had been deployed.⁴ In the Molotov Ribbentrop Pact – as it became known – Germany and the Soviet Union had not only concluded a non-aggression pact, but had also secretly divided Eastern Europe including Poland and the Baltic States into German and Soviet spheres of influence.⁵ One day earlier, on 23 August, the Dantzig Senate – in coordination with the German government⁶ – announced its merger with Germany. That same day British and French forces arrived in Poland to ‘inspire[.] confidence’.⁷ Also on 23 August British representative Henderson delivered a message from the British Prime Minister Chamberlain to Hitler at Berchtesgaden. Chamberlain stressed British firm intentions to stand by Poland in case of armed aggression while highlighting his government’s willingness to discuss all issues between Poland and Germany. Hitler rejected the offer. Two days later, back in Berlin, Hitler told Henderson that he was ready to make a ‘large comprehensive offer’.⁸ Henderson immediately took this message back to his Prime Minister Chamberlain. That same afternoon Hitler signed the invasion order for Poland. He only then learned of the signing of an official defence pact between Poland and Great Britain. On 25 August, Italy’s leader Mussolini told Hitler that Italy would not support Germany, while the French government reaffirmed its commitment to Poland. This led Hitler to renounce the order for invasion he had given only five hours earlier.⁹ The United States continued its isolationist course and did not interfere actively other than through a direct appeal by President Roosevelt to Hitler to reach a ‘pacific settlement’.¹⁰ The evening of 28 August, when Henderson and Hitler met again, featured a repetition of previous events. Henderson laid out the unchanged British position; this time Hitler promised to reply the following day. The British parliament after being briefed on the situation reaffirmed its support for the Chamberlain government. On 29 August, Hitler presented Henderson with an ultimatum to Poland, shortly after Henderson’s arrival at the Reich Chancellery around 7.15 p.m. Hitler, flanked by his Foreign

¹ Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler’s Germany*, 480–89, 498–503, 537–39, 548, 554–62, 578–79. Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939*, 209–37.

² Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler’s Germany*, 579.

³ Weinberg, 582 & 598.

⁴ Weinberg, 609. Anita J. Prazmowska, *Britain, Poland and the Eastern Front, 1939* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 172.

⁵ Saulius Sužiedėlis, ‘The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact: The Documents’, *Lithuanian Quarterly Journal Of Arts and Sciences* 35, no. 1-Spring 1989 (1989), http://www.lituanus.org/1989/89_1_03.htm.

⁶ Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler’s Germany*, 584.

⁷ Prazmowska, *Britain, Poland and the Eastern Front, 1939*, 172.

⁸ Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, 213.

⁹ Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler’s Germany*, 637–38. Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, 214.

¹⁰ ‘No. 127. The following is the text of President Roosevelt’s second appeal to Herr Hitler, dated August 25, 1939. The British War Blue Book Miscellaneous No. 9 (1939) Documents Concerning German-Polish Relations and the Outbreak of Hostilities Between Great Britain and Germany on September 3, 1939 Presented by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to Parliament by Command of His Majesty’, Text, accessed 6 January 2015, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/blbk127.asp>.

Minister Ribbentrop, demanded '[the] return of Danzig and the Corridor to Germany, [and] the safeguarding of the existence of the German national group in the territories remaining to Poland.'¹¹ A Polish official with full power of attorney was to come to Berlin within twenty-four hours as the German government counted

on the arrival of this Emissary by Wednesday, the 30th August, 1939. The German Government will immediately draw up proposals for a solution acceptable to themselves and will, if possible, place these at the disposal of the British Government before the arrival of the Polish negotiator.¹²

Hitler added verbally that his military staff was pushing for action because of unfavourable weather conditions at a later moment.¹³ At the same time, it was stressed, quite contradictory, that this was not an ultimatum, although at the same time the Germans considered the situation critical, not only because of the risk of escalation but also because 'Germans were being massacred'.¹⁴ The government of Great Britain accepted the written communication but did not communicate its contents to Poland until after the expiry of the deadline because it feared a repetition of previous occasions with Austria and Czechoslovakia. (see cases Germany to Austria, 12-02-1938, Germany to Austria, 11-03-1938 and Poland to Lithuania, 17-03-1938) It also communicated to Germany that no Polish official would show up in Berlin.¹⁵ In its official reply to the German note – which was delivered on the evening of 30 August – the British Representative Henderson stated that it took note of the German government's willingness to directly negotiate with Poland. German proposals were expected to be in line with the terms already laid out by the British government, including the international supervision of a settlement that safeguarded Polish core interests.¹⁶ France too communicated its intention to honor its previous commitments and to defend Poland in case of an armed attack.¹⁷ German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop then presented Henderson again with new terms to be transmitted to Poland, while adding that the deadline of the demands the day before had by now expired.¹⁸ These new demands were read aloud but were subsequently refused to be shared in writing.¹⁹ They included the return of Danzig but the holding of a plebiscite about the status of the Corridor; post-plebiscite-arrangements on free lines of communication; the exchange of populations; the recognition of rights for Poles in Danzig and Germans in Gdynia; and the demilitarisation of Danzig, Gdynia, and the Jela Peninsula.²⁰ The government of Great Britain then still advised Poland in the early hours of 31 August to enter into direct negotiations with Germany. The government of Poland had learned of the demands through various channels but had still not received the demands directly.²¹ Poland informed Germany that it was open to direct negotiations to which Germany replied that it would only accept a visit at the ministerial level.²² Poland had

¹¹ Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 528.

¹² Toynbee and Toynbee, 529.

¹³ Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, 218.

¹⁴ Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 529.

¹⁵ Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, 645.

¹⁶ Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 533.

¹⁷ Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, 641–42.

¹⁸ Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 531.

¹⁹ Antony Beevor, *The Second World War* (Hachette UK, 2012), 20–21. Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, 222.

²⁰ Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 533–34, see also fn.5.

²¹ Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, 647.

²² Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 536.

mobilised its forces on 30 August while the German government had formed a war cabinet which merged political and military authority in one body.²³ Later that evening, at around 9 p.m., the German government declared publicly that the Polish government had not responded to Germany's invitation to negotiate but instead had ordered the mobilisation of its forces. The German government then published its sixteen demands which were subsequently shared in writing with the American, British, French, Japanese and Russian representatives.²⁴ Against the will of Hitler, the Italian government was trying to convene an international conference which in the end did not get sufficient traction, neither with Germany nor with Great Britain.²⁵ In the night of 31 August on 1 September German *Schutzstaffel* (SS) forces engineered a fake attack on the German radio station in Gleiwitz. This incident would serve as a pretext for the German invasion, the executive order for which had already been signed by Hitler at noon on 31 August.²⁶ In a public declaration on 1 September Hitler accused Poland of refusing to agree to a 'peaceful settlement of relations' claiming that 'Germans are persecuted with bloody terror' and accusing Poland of engaging in a 'series of violations of the frontier'. He ordered his forces to 'meet force with force from now on'.²⁷ The German invasion started with a bombardment from the German cruiser Schleswig-Holstein which had anchored off Danzig early in the morning, followed by the bombing of Warsaw and major Polish cities and the ground invasion of Poland by German forces entering from north, south and west.²⁸ The campaign lasted five weeks. Over 500 villages and cities were burned with fatality estimates of Polish citizens varying from 16,000 (according to German sources) to a number much higher than that as about 64,000 Polish citizens had lost their lives by the end of 1939, 25,000 of whom did so in the bombing of Warschau.²⁹ Amongst the Polish forces there were 70,000 deaths and 133,000 casualties compared to 11,000 fatalities and 33,400 casualties for Germany.³⁰ The Polish government fled when Soviet forces invaded Poland from the East on 17 September (causing another 50,000 Polish fatalities versus 1,000 for the Soviet Union).³¹ Germany (together with the Soviet Union) partitioned Poland into different pieces, with large parts annexed by Germany.³² The German invasion prompted Great Britain and France to issue counter ultimata (see ultimata Great Britain to Germany, 03-09-1939 and France to Germany, 03-09-1939) marking the beginning of the Second World War.

²³ Toynbee and Toynbee, 524.

²⁴ Toynbee and Toynbee, 537.

²⁵ Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, 640, 651.

²⁶ Weinberg, 607, 611 and 648. 'The trial of German major war criminals: proceedings of the International Military Tribunal sitting at Nuremberg Germany, Volume 2, 450', Text, accessed 5 January 2015, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/11-30-45.asp>. 'The trial of German major war criminals: proceedings of the International Military Tribunal sitting at Nuremberg Germany, Volume 4, 216', Text, accessed 5 January 2015, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/imt/12-20-45.asp>.

²⁷ Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 538; 'No. 107 Herr Hitler's Proclamation to the German Army on September 1, 1939. The British War Blue Book Miscellaneous No. 9 (1939) Documents Concerning German-Polish Relations and the Outbreak of Hostilities Between Great Britain and Germany on September 3, 1939 Presented by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to Parliament by Command of His Majesty', Text, accessed 5 January 2015, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/blbk107.asp>.

²⁸ Prazmowska, *Britain, Poland and the Eastern Front, 1939*, 174–75. Beevor, *The Second World War*, 24, 29.

²⁹ Beevor, *The Second World War*, 30, 34.

³⁰ Beevor, 35.

³¹ Beevor, 32, 35.

³² Beevor, 35.