

## Great Britain to Germany, 03-09-1939

After the German invasion of Poland, the government of Great Britain decided to honour its security guarantees to Poland. British Representative Henderson in Berlin was instructed to warn the German government that Britain would feel itself bound to live up to its commitment to Poland, should Germany not at once cease all aggressive action against Poland and withdraw its forces from Polish territory. Henderson was ordered to ask for an immediate answer but to frame it in terms of a warning rather than an ultimatum. Although Henderson was not to share this with the Germans, if the Germans would refuse to comply the response of Great Britain would be 'either an ultimatum with time limit or an immediate declaration of war.'<sup>1</sup> The British Government had ordered the full mobilisation of the military forces. The British and French governments coordinated their actions (see ultimatum France to Germany, 03-09-1939). Henderson delivered the British message to German foreign minister Ribbentrop on the evening of 1 September at 9.30 p.m. (followed by the delivery of a similar message from the French).<sup>2</sup> Henderson was informed that Hitler would reply in due course. But in the afternoon of Saturday 2 September, when no German response was forthcoming, the British government, still preferring to coordinate its actions with France, but under considerable domestic pressure to act, decided to issue an ultimatum by itself.<sup>3</sup> The French general staff insisted that it needed more time – according to some sources at least forty-eight hours – to make defensive preparations for a possible German invasion. Following a frantic exchange of messages between London and Paris during the day,<sup>4</sup> the government of Great Britain decided to go it alone on the late evening of 2 September. It then settled on 9:00 a.m. to deliver an ultimatum with a time limit of two hours. This was before the parliamentary session at noon, which, so it was felt by Chamberlain and his fellow cabinet member Halifax, would likely oust the sitting government absent decisive action.<sup>5</sup> Last minute German overtures to the British government for further negotiations were rejected on 2 September. At 9:00 a.m. Henderson delivered the ultimatum to Ribbentrop's translator Paul Schmidt which stated that the Great Britain's warning 24 hours earlier had gone unheeded and unanswered, and then repeated the demands previously articulated in the warning which, if not complied with, would result in a state of war at 11 a.m British time:<sup>6</sup>

In the communication which I had the honour to make to you on 1st September I informed you, on the instructions of His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, that, unless the German Government were prepared to give His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom satisfactory assurances that the German Government had suspended all aggressive action against Poland and were prepared promptly to withdraw their forces from Polish territory, His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom would, without hesitation, fulfil their obligations to Poland. Although this communication was made more than twenty-four hours ago, no reply has been received but German attacks upon Poland have been continued and intensified. I have accordingly the honour to inform you that, unless not later than 11 a. m.,

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<sup>1</sup> Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 540.

<sup>2</sup> Government of Great Britain, 'No. 110. Viscount Halifax to Sir N. Henderson (Berlin). The British War Blue Book Miscellaneous No. 9', 1939, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/blbk110.asp>; Government of France, 'No. 345. The French Yellow Book Papers. Text of the communication handed over on September 1, 1939, at 10 p.m. by M. Coulondre, French Ambassador in Berlin, to Herr von Ribbentrop - The French Yellow Book 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. 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/yfbk345.asp>.

<sup>3</sup> Beevor, *The Second World War*, 25–26. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, 650. Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 539–42.

<sup>4</sup> Toynbee and Toynbee, *The Eve of War 1939*, 543, fn.3.

<sup>5</sup> Toynbee and Toynbee, 544, 546. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, 650.

<sup>6</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, 223.

British Summer Time, to-day 3rd September, satisfactory assurances to the above effect have been given by the German Government and have reached His Majesty's Government in London, a state of war will exist between the two countries as from that hour. If the assurance referred to in the above communication is received, you should inform me by any means at your disposal before 11 a. m. to-day, 3rd September. If no such assurance is received here by 11 a. m., we shall inform the German representative that a state of war exists as from that hour.<sup>7</sup>

At 11.20, German foreign minister Ribbentrop presented the German reply which stated that 'the German Government and the German people refuse to receive, accept, let alone to fulfil, demands in the nature of ultimata made by the British Government.'<sup>8</sup> British Prime Minister Chamberlain then declared in a public broadcast that the Great Britain was at war with Germany, a message that was also delivered in writing to the German representative, and read out aloud in parliament at noon.<sup>9</sup> This together with the French ultimatum and war declaration – which was soon to follow – marked the beginning of the Second World War. Apart from a series of deadly naval engagements at sea, it was not until April and May 1940 the next year that the two countries initiated major hostilities on land in war that would straddle multiple continents and last until 1945.

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<sup>7</sup> Government of Great Britain, 'No. 118. Viscount Halifax to Sir N. Henderson (Berlin). 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', 1939, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/blbk118.asp>.

<sup>8</sup> Government of Great Britain, 'No. 119. Memorandum handed to Sir N. Henderson at 11:20 a. m. on September 3, 1939, by Herr von Ribbentrop. 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', 1939, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/blbk119.asp>.

<sup>9</sup> Government of Great Britain, 'No. 120. Speech by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons on September 3, 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', 1939, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/blbk120.asp>. Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-1945*, 223.