

Poland to Czechoslovakia, 30-9-1938

On 30 September, immediately following the signing of the Munich Agreement, the government of Poland sought to take advantage of Czechoslovakia's weak position after it caved in to Germany's demands concerning Sudetenland. Poland demanded that Czechoslovakia hand over the Czechoslovak regions of Teschen and Frysztat by noon on 1 October.¹ The two regions had been a source of conflict between the two countries since the end of the First World War. The Conference of Ambassadors in Paris had assigned the largest parts of the two regions – whose importance lay in a mixture of military-strategic, economic and ethnographic factors – to Czechoslovakia precisely at a moment when Poland was under attack by Soviet Russia. In the spring of 1938 Poland had already demanded that Czechoslovakia protect Polish nationals living in Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia had then promised to grant similar rights to the Polish minorities as it would to the German minorities in Sudetenland. Over the summer of 1938 the Polish government kept bringing up this promise in conversations with representatives of Great Britain and France. It let it be known that it would not hesitate to take action should the government of Czechoslovakia renege on its promise. In September, the Polish government once again raised this issue during the negotiations at Berchtesgaden in the run up to Godesberg (see also case Germany to Czechoslovakia, 24-9-1938). It threatened to protect its own interests if its demands were not met.² Further ratcheting up the pressure, the Polish government ordered substantial contingents of Polish forces to the frontier on 16 September. This prompted protests by France, Great Britain and the Soviet Union.³ Four days later, Hitler met with the Polish ambassador to whom he promised German support in case of a conflict with Czechoslovakia over Teschen. The following day the Polish Government sent a note to the Czechoslovak government demanding an 'immediate decision' on 'the subject of territories inhabited by Polish population' comparable to the decision it had reached with respect to Sudetenland.⁴ While the Czechoslovak government ostensibly ignored the letter, the British government expressed its dismay. The Soviet government stated on 23 September that the Soviet-Polish non-aggression pact would be rendered void in case of a Polish invasion of Czechoslovakian territory.⁵ Polish threats were rendered more credible not only by Polish troop movements, but also by the British and French position that Czechoslovakia should try and come to terms with Poland. President Beneš eventually sent a letter to the Polish government declaring his intention to comply with Polish demands. Czechoslovakia was willing to cede the requested territories in order to create a new start in bilateral relations. The letter was received on 26 September. When France and Great Britain urged the Polish government to accept the offer they – to their surprise – found out that it refused the offer.⁶ Instead, the Polish government further increased pressure – gradually 'turning the screw' – and issued a note demanding additional concessions on 27 September: in addition to the occupation of the two territories by Polish forces, it now also demanded plebiscites to be held in other areas with Polish minorities. No specific deadline was attached to the letter but the Polish official requested a reply within two days.⁷ The Polish and the German government had coordinated efforts, agreed to a preliminary division of territorial areas, and consultation about potential plebiscites.⁸ On 29 September the Czechoslovak government asked France and Great Britain to intervene on her behalf and offer guarantees to Poland that the Czechoslovak government would

¹ R. G. D. Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938: Volume 3* (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 45–69; esp. 45–46, 62–65. Arnold Toynbee and Frank Ashton-Gwatkin, *The World in March 1939: Survey of International Affairs 1939-1946* (Oxford University Press, 1952), 274,278.

² Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938: Volume 3*, 46–52.

³ Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939*, 124.

⁴ Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 53.

⁵ Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938: Volume 3*, 55. Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939*, 124–26.

⁶ Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939*, 131.

⁷ Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938: Volume 3*, 59–60.

⁸ Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939*, 133–37.

faithfully carry out the offers laid down in President Beneš letter. On 29 September the Polish representative told his point of contact that only an immediate positive reply would 'ward off the inevitable.'⁹ The answer of the Czechoslovakian Government of 30 September did not fully satisfy the Polish Government because it contained several caveats.¹⁰ Then, shortly before midnight on 30 September, the Polish Government issued the ultimatum. The ultimatum, which was to expire by noon the next day, said that the Polish government found the response to the note of 27 September entirely 'unsatisfactory and dilatory' (*'insuffisante et dilatoire'*).¹¹ It went on to demand that Czechoslovak forces should vacate part of Tschén and Frysztat – in line with the demands issued on 27 September – within twenty-four hours immediately after the deadline followed by the rest of these two regions ten days after. In addition, the ultimatum called for negotiations on the form and substance of a plebiscite on the status of remaining territories with Polish residents. Poland demanded full compliance before the expiration of the deadline or the Czechoslovak government would be held 'solely responsible for the consequences.'¹² After the introduction the ultimatum placed the following eight demands:

The immediate evacuation by Czechoslovak armed forces and police officers of the territory as defined by aforementioned note and delineated in the map annexed thereto, and delivery of the said territory, in a definitive way, to the Polish military authorities.

The evacuation in the course of 24 hours, beginning at noon 1 October 1938, of the territory shown in the attached map.

The delivery of the remaining territory of the districts of Teschen and Frysztat to be completed over the course of a period of ten days from the same date.

The evacuation of these territories to take place without companies and public utility objects and communications of all kinds being damaged, rendered unusable or removed. All [military] structures are to be disarmed. The manner and timing of the evacuation of the remaining territory mentioned in point 4 above, should be communicated by noon of 2 October 1938.

Other issues raised by the Polish note of September 27, that is to say the issue of plebiscite in the other regions, are left to the subsequent agreement between the two Governments concerned, without excluding the possibility of involving third parties.

The Polish Government is ready to settle with the Czechoslovak Government through negotiations any issues that will arise from the transfer of the aforementioned territories. The Czechoslovak Government will take immediate action to ensure that all Polish speaking Czechoslovak citizens from the two districts Teschen and Frysztat, currently serving in the Czechoslovak armed forces, are released from this obligation and allowed to return to their homes.

The Czechoslovak Government will also take measures to free all Polish political detainees. The Polish government expects an unequivocal response, accepting or rejecting the requests made in this note by the afternoon of October 1, 1938. In case of a refusal or a lack of response, the Polish Government will hold the Czechoslovak Government solely responsible for the course of events.¹³

⁹ Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938: Volume 3*, 61.

¹⁰ Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939*, 141–42.

¹¹ Lewis Bernstein Namier, *Europe in Decay: A Study in Disintegration, 1936-40* (Macmillan, 1950), 297.

¹² Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939*, 63; Cienciala, 142.

¹³ In my own translation. The text of the ultimatum is quoted in full in Namier, *Europe in Decay*, 299–300.: *L'évacuation immédiate par les troupes et la police tchécoslovaques du territoire définie par la note susmentionnée et délimité dans la carte y annexée, et la remise du dit territoire, d'une façon définitive, aux autorités militaires polonaises. L'évacuation dans le cours de 24 heures, à compter de midi 1 octobre 1938, du territoire indiqué dans la carte ci-annexée. La remise du reste du territoire des districts de Teschen et de Frysztat doit être définitivement effectuée au cours d'une période de dix jours, à compter de la même date. L'évacuation des dits territoires doit avoir lieu sans que les entreprises et objets d'utilité publique ainsi que les voies de*

The British and the French government, upon learning of the ultimatum, sought to rein in the government of Poland and at the same time push the Czechoslovak government to comply. Shortly after noon, the Czechoslovak government communicated to its British counterpart that it 'considered Poland's behaviour...infamous, but that as Czechoslovakia had been abandoned she had no option but to accept the ultimatum.'¹⁴ It also indicated its readiness to discuss the practical arrangements of the handover with Poland. The following twelve days Poland sent forces to occupy the two regions, while also occupying additional territory in the Orawa and Spisz areas along the Polish borders. These latter two areas were officially handed over in early November. Poland had gained 800 square kilometres of territory, the control over strategic railways, and large coal supplies and chemical and textile industries, even if it had done so at the expense, if only temporarily, of friendly relations with France and Great Britain.¹⁵

communication de toutes sortes soient endommagés, rendus inutilisables ou enlevés. Tous les ouvrages d'art être désarmés. Les modalités et les délais de l'évacuation du reste du territoire mentionné au point 4 ci-dessus, seront communiqués avant midi du 2 octobre 1938. Les autres questions soulevées par la note polonaise du 27 septembre, c'est-à-dire la question du plebiscite dans d'autres régions, sont laissées à l'entente ultérieure entre les deux Gouvernements intéressés, sans en exclure la possibilité de la participation des facteurs tiers. En ce qui concerne les questions qui résulteront du transfert des territoires susmentionnés, le Gouvernement polonaise est prêt à régler avec le Gouvernement tchécoslovaque par des négociations. Le Gouvernement tchécoslovaque prendra des mesures immédiates afin que tous les ressortissants tchécoslovaques de langue polonaise, originaires des deux districts, de Teschen et de Frysztat, faisant actuellement le service dans l'armée tchécoslovaque, soient libérés de ce service et autorisés de rentrer dans leurs foyers. Le Gouvernement tchécoslovaque prendra également de mesures pour élargir tous les détenus politiques d'origine polonaise.

Le Gouvernement polonaise attend une réponse non-équivoque, acceptant ou rejetant les demandes formulées dans la présente note, jusqu'à midi du 1 octobre 1938. En cas de refus ou d'absence de réponse, le Gouvernement polonaise tiendra le Gouvernement tchécoslovaque pour seul responsable de la suite des événements.

¹⁴ Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*: Volume 3, 68.

¹⁵ Laffan, 65–68; Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939*, 145.