

## Poland to Lithuania, 17-3-1938

On 17 March 1938 Poland issued an ultimatum to Lithuania, demanding the 'restoration of normal relations' and the opening of the border crossing between Poland and Lithuania. In the period leading up to the incident, the two countries' militaries regularly exchanged fire at the border crossing.<sup>1</sup> Eighteen years previously, Poland had seized the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius which it had held ever since. Unsurprisingly, this continued to cause bad blood between the two governments of the two countries. The seizure had marked the end of bilateral diplomatic relations.<sup>2</sup> But with both Germany and the Soviet Union encroaching upon Polish territory, the government of Poland was trying to improve relations with the Baltic States since 1935.<sup>3</sup> Polish attempts to put the Polish-Lithuanian relationship on a better footing had failed as they met with fervent anti-Polish sentiments in Lithuania.<sup>4</sup> The government of the Soviet Union meanwhile was also seeking to improve relations with Lithuania; senior Soviet military officials had paid a number of friendly visits to the country. In the run up to the crisis, cross-border relations between Poland and Lithuania had been deteriorating further. Both governments had started imposing constraints on the rights of each other's national minority groups living within their borders. Border incidents also surged.<sup>5</sup> In November 1937 Polish Foreign Minister Beck noted that seven serious incidents had taken place. He warned the Lithuanian foreign minister that Polish border guards might resort to use force in the future.<sup>6</sup> In this context, a Polish border guard was killed in yet another exchange of cross border fire on the night of 10-11 March of 1938. Following the shooting, the Polish government rejected the Lithuanian government's proposal to install a joint commission to investigate the incident – as was the customary way to handle such incidents. Rumours circulated that the Polish government was preparing to present Lithuania with a series of strong demands, including not only the resumption of official bilateral relations but also the recognition of Poland's claims over Vilnius.<sup>7</sup> Between 12 and 16 March – after Austria's *Anschluss* and whilst Foreign Minister Beck was making his way back from Italy to Poland (where he arrived on 14 March) – patriotic messages urging the government to protect Polish interests in Vilnius circulated widely in the Polish press.<sup>8</sup> The Polish armed forces led by cabinet member Marshal Smigly-Ridz were strongly pushing for aggressive action.<sup>9</sup> The government of Lithuania, fearing its neighbour, decided to internationalise the situation and approached the governments of the Soviet Union and Germany for advice. In both cases its appeals were rejected. The Soviet Union announced that Lithuania should not count on Soviet assistance in case of a crisis. Germany even encouraged Lithuania to comply with Polish demands – fitting as they did with Germany's territorial designs.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, Great Britain and France urged restraint on the part of Poland.<sup>11</sup> On 17 March at 9 p.m., the Polish Representative Przesmycki in Talinn delivered the ultimatum to the Lithuanian government. The ultimatum carried a time limit of forty-eight hours. It declared that the real threat to peace was the absence of diplomatic relations and demanded that Lithuania should agree to the resumption of normal diplomatic relations before 31 March or else

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<sup>1</sup> R. G. D. Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938: Volume 2* (Oxford University Press, 1951), 342–56; esp. 351-353 1938; Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 705. George Sakwa, 'The Polish Ultimatum to Lithuania in March 1938', *The Slavonic and East European Review* 55, no. 2 (1 April 1977): 204–26.

<sup>2</sup> Sakwa, 'The Polish Ultimatum to Lithuania in March 1938', 204–5.

<sup>3</sup> Anna M. Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939: A Study in the Interdependence of Eastern and Western Europe* (Routledge & K. Paul, 1968), 49.

<sup>4</sup> Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 344–47. Sakwa, 'The Polish Ultimatum to Lithuania in March 1938', 207.

<sup>5</sup> Sakwa, 'The Polish Ultimatum to Lithuania in March 1938', 209–10.

<sup>6</sup> Sakwa, 210.

<sup>7</sup> Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939*, 50. Sakwa, 'The Polish Ultimatum to Lithuania in March 1938', 214.

<sup>8</sup> Sakwa, 'The Polish Ultimatum to Lithuania in March 1938', 213.

<sup>9</sup> Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 348.

<sup>10</sup> Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939*, 51–52. Sakwa, 'The Polish Ultimatum to Lithuania in March 1938', 223. Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 350.

<sup>11</sup> Sakwa, 'The Polish Ultimatum to Lithuania in March 1938', 215.

Poland would resort to measures 'by proper means at their disposal'. There was to be no discussion about the demands 'either as to its subject matter nor its form, that is to say the proposal is *ne varietur*'.<sup>12</sup> The Polish government had also attached the precise text for Lithuania's reply. Poland mobilised a substantial contingent of forces in the frontier area – according to one report amounting to 80,000 forces. Lithuania had ordered its border troops to withdraw.<sup>13</sup> In Poland mass demonstrations took place in favour of decisive action.<sup>14</sup> The military attachés of Great Britain and France advised the Lithuanian government that in all likelihood Poland would initiate military action absent full compliance.<sup>15</sup> France asked Poland to push the date for the resumption of diplomatic relations but its attempt was strongly rebuffed by the Polish government:

We consider the French demarche as *nulle et non avenue* and we warn the French Government that it should not lead Kowno into the mistaken belief by this demarche that it might not reply to us and thus postpone the course of the ultimatum.<sup>16</sup>

The response to the ultimatum was deliberated by Lithuanian cabinet in an all night session. Military leaders as well as the members of parliament were included in the deliberations. On the morning of 19 March, Lithuania yielded and communicated full compliance with the demands contained in the Polish ultimatum. The Lithuanian acting Prime Minister Jokūbas Stanišauskis made the decision public observing, nonetheless, that 'force was not law'.<sup>17</sup> Over the next 12 months Polish-Lithuanian relations improved. No further cross border incidents took place, and, due to the threat of further German expansion, political and economic ties were resumed.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> As cited in Ibid., 216. See also Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939*, 51.

<sup>13</sup> Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 352. Sakwa, 'The Polish Ultimatum to Lithuania in March 1938', 219–20.

<sup>14</sup> Sakwa, 'The Polish Ultimatum to Lithuania in March 1938', 220–21. Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 348–49.

<sup>15</sup> Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938*, 353.

<sup>16</sup> As cited in Sakwa, 'The Polish Ultimatum to Lithuania in March 1938', 219.

<sup>17</sup> According to R. G. D. Laffan, *Survey of International Affairs 1938: Volume 2* (Oxford University Press, 1951), 353; Robert A. Vitas, "The Polish Ultimatum to Lithuania - The Despatch of Lithuanian Minister J. Baltrusaitis in Moscow," *Lithuanian Quarterly Journal Of Arts and Sciences* 31, no. 4 (Winter 1985): fn.21, [https://www.lituanus.org/1985/85\\_4\\_02.htm](https://www.lituanus.org/1985/85_4_02.htm).

<sup>18</sup> Laffan, 354–55; Sakwa, 'The Polish Ultimatum to Lithuania in March 1938', 224–25.