



A speech of foreign minister Józef Beck at the Polish Sejm, May 5, 1939. Photo from the National Digital Archives

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The last year of peace

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The taking of Austria by the Third Reich did not raise any major alarms among the leadership of the Second Republic of Poland, mainly because the blade of the German expansion seemed to be going towards the Balkan Peninsula. This assessment, however, quickly changed with the fate of Czechoslovakia and the new, post-Munich stage of Polish-German relations.

The Third Reich began the preparations for the territorial eradication of Poland's southern neighbour practically on the next day after the Anschluss. The fate of the repressed, according to Hitler, German minority in Czechoslovakia was the pretext for the attack. The demands for autonomy made by the Sudeten Germans received international publicity already in March, 1938. Interestingly, per Beck's instructions, Poles

living beyond the Olza river made similar postulates.

Poland, using the pressure from Germany, more and more visibly intended to bring back the order from before January, 1919, when the Zaolzie Silesia belonged to the recovering Second Republic of Poland. In 1938, however, this made Czechoslovakia look like it had a unified policy towards both the Third Reich and Poland.



Pedestrians in front of the map of Europe on a Parisian street in September, 1938. Photo from the National Digital Archives

Prague between a rock and a hard place

The Czechoslovakian crisis, with the passive stance of the West, escalated at the end of August. President Edvard Beneš then decided to send a personal message to Mościcki. While proposing to resolve the border disputes, he did not hide the fact that certain corrections were possible in this regard. Nevertheless, it was already too late for a positive Polish response (the letter was delivered on September 26).

Three days after Beneš's initiative at the conference in Munich, attended by France, Great Britain, Italy and Germany, the decision was made to immediately give the Sudety Mountains to the Third Reich. Poland, absent in Munich, exacerbated its anti-Czech direction. Warsaw sent an ultimatum to Prague, demanding to give back Zaolzie to Poland. These demands were met on October 1. Polish troops crossed the border already on the next day. Even though state propaganda portrayed this event as the symbol of Poland's might and the public opinion mostly succumbed to these triumphant moods, it soon turned out that the victory was problematic.



Photocopy of the picture taken at the signing of the Munich Treaty on September 29-30, 1938. In the first row from the left are Neville Chamberlain, Edouard Daladier, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Galeazzo Ciano. Photo from the archives of the Institute of National Remembrance

German proposals

Already on October 31, Slovakia lost its lands in Spiš, Orava, and the Jablunkov Pass. Poland had to face the perspective of “general re-evaluation” of the Polish-German relations as the Third Reich’s foreign minister Joachim Ribbentrop called the German proposals on October 24, in a conversation with Poland’s ambassador, Lipski.

The demands, made by Ribbentrop in Hitler’s name, did not seem especially dangerous at first. The minister demanded for Gdańsk to return to the Third Reich and an extraterritorial highway connecting the Reich with East Prussia and a multi-track railway line to be led through the "corridor", for which Poland would receive a similar highway in Gdańsk, a railway line and a free port. The Second Republic of Poland would also receive the guarantee to sell its products in Gdańsk. The territorial changes would be sanctioned with bilateral guarantees. The Third Reich and Poland would recognise its borders, the Polish-German agreement would be prolonged for the next 25 years with an added consultative clause and Poland would finally be included in the Anti-Comintern Pact, meaning the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo axis.



The front page of the *L'Œuvre* daily from May 4, 1939, with the article by Marcel Déat titled *Mourir pour Dantzig? (To die for Gdańsk?)*

In Hitler's opinion, these proposals were more than reasonable. For Beck, they were the reflection of Ribbentrop's private views. In reality, to accept them would mean to make Poland Germany's subject. To refuse - would mean war.

Initially, Germany limited its attempts to diplomatic pressure. In the beginning of January, 1939, Beck visited Germany. At the end of the month, Ribbentrop came to Warsaw. Officially, the visit was a response to the Polish side's resistance. Ribbentrop handed the German demands to Lipski on March 21. At that time, the situation of the Second Republic of Poland was much more difficult than right after the Munich conference. Czechoslovakia, stripped of some of its lands since the middle of March, was then completely dependent on the Third Reich's Protectorate of Czechia and Moravia. German troops were stationed on the territory of formally independent Slovakia. Even though Hungary was bordering Poland since March, after taking Carpathian Ruthenia from Ukraine, its strategic situation was extremely dangerous.



Anti-war protest in Warsaw, May, 1939. Photo from the National Digital Archives

Road to war

All German demands were refused. Words, however, were not the only response. Generals designated as commanders of the Polish armies received their orders. Partial, secret call-up was conducted.

At the same time, unexpected diplomatic support came from Great Britain. On the last day of March, the British government published a declaration guaranteeing Poland's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The bilateral Polish-British agreement was signed by Beck in London, on April 6. France confirmed its allied obligations to Poland a week later. Western powers began to reflect, worried over the Reich's appetite. Nevertheless, question remained whether they would actively help in the case of an armed conflict.



Polish Minister of foreign affairs Józef Beck stands among the officers of the British Navy in Portsmouth, during the visit in

**Great Britain, April, 1939. Photo
from the National Digital Archives**

The Polish-British alliance served Hitler as an excuse to break off the Polish-German pact of non-aggression. He did so on April 28, at the Reichstag session. On May 5, Beck responded to the chancellor of the Third Reich from the Polish parliament's rostrum. He talked about the will to keep peace, the need for Poland and Germany to retain good, neighbourly relations, and he especially emphasised that:

“Poland will not let anyone push it away from the Baltic Sea.”

He also added that peace, as a precious and desirable commodity, has its high and adequate price:

“We, in Poland, do not know the concept of peace at all costs. There is only one thing in the lives of people, nations and states which is priceless. That is honour.”



**Leaders of Polish politics:
Minister of Foreign Affairs Józef
Beck and Marshal Edward Rydz-
Śmigły during the inauguration of
the 1938/1939 academic year at**

**the Józef Piłsudski University in
Warsaw, 1938. Photo from the
National Digital Archives**

The firm speech by Beck raised morale in the country. Politicians responsible for the fate of the state were relieved to hear the effects of the Polish-French staff talks, led from 12 to 19 of May in Paris. During the talks, it was agreed that the French air force would react immediately in the case of the German aggression, while the main force of the French army would join in three days after mobilisation, "starting on the 15th day".

The will to fight and defend their country was growing in the Polish society, independently of the propaganda campaigns. Donations were gathered for the National Defence Fund. The opposition declared it would no longer fight politically against the ruling camp, even though it was still unwilling to make the opposition co-responsible for the fate of the country. Only a few saw the deadly, irreversible danger. Perhaps this was the reason why, on April 2, Walery Sławek ended his own life and shot himself.

The criminals' conspiracy

War was coming, however, Hitler needed certainty on the lack of action of the western states and the stance of the USSR. Stalin, on the other hand, by deciding to negotiate with England and France at the same time, tested the waters on who would offer more. He chose Hitler. On August 23, a plane with Ribbentrop on board landed in Moscow. The minister of foreign affairs of the Third Reich officially came to sign a pact on non-aggression. Nevertheless, this document had a secret protocol. It was to bring yet another partition of Poland, as the division of "zones of influence", drawn along Pisa, Narew, Bug, Vistula and San rivers, assumed the complete eradication of the Second Republic of Poland. This was to be done by Hitler, and aided by Stalin.

Two totalitarianisms, the brown and red ones, found agreement with exceptional ease. It was such an absurd alliance that no one even considered it in Poland. There was a strong belief that the German forces, held up by the Polish defenders, would be attacked by the allied offensive from the Rhine river. No one expected a stab in the back. Poles were preparing for a tough, even deadly fight, but with faith in victory. In August, the expected attack did not come yet. The horror of war began on September 1.

This text is a fragment of the book *Dawniej to było. Przewodnik po historii Polski* (2019)

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