

■ January 1939: the Polish authorities decline Hitler's offer

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In the second week of January 1939, shortly after Minister Józef Beck spoke with Adolf Hitler in the dictator's spectacular mountain residence near Berchtesgaden, the Polish leaders who gathered in the Royal Castle in Warsaw unanimously rejected the German offer. The way they saw it, an acceptance of the Reich's proposal would place Poland well on its path towards vassalage and subjection to Germany. Contrary to popular belief, the offer concerned not only Poland's consent to the annexation of Gdańsk to the Reich and to creating an extraterritorial link between Germany with Gdańsk Pomerania. Hitler's vision was to turn Poland into the Reich's satellite state and have Polish troops hemorrhage on the Eastern Front while helping to build the German empire.

Five years earlier, less than a year after Hitler ascent to power, Polish-German relations took an unexpected turn. Poland's relations with the Weimar Republic had been severely strained. The successive governments in Berlin pushed to revise the Versailles Treaty and especially to recover some of its lost eastern territories. At a 1925 Locarno conference, the Reich adopted a new foreign policy of friendly cooperation with Western powers. It also declared a trade war against Poland and escalated its revisionist anti-Polish propaganda. The Germans circulated the narrative of a "burning border" with Poland and of an allegedly absurd "Polish corridor" separating the Reich from East Prussia and - in the League of Nations - touted cases of violations of the rights of the German minority in Poland. By the early 1930s, Polish-German relations took a nosedive. To make things worse, the row with Germany coincided with a dramatic erosion of Poland's alliance with France, which ever more flagrantly disregarded the most vital interests of the Republic of Poland.

To the surprise of the international community, Polish-German relations improved significantly shortly after the Nazi party rose to power in Germany. The breakthrough came on January 26, 1934 with the signing by Poland and Germany of a declaration of non-violence that was equivalent to a non-aggression treaty. This gave Poland a few years of untroubled foreign policy. The revision of Poland's western border placed on the back burner for years to come.

Initially, Hitler's motives were purely tactical. Seeking to strengthen his regime, he presented himself to foreign countries as almost an apostle of peace. He assured that all he was trying to achieve was equitable treatment for his country. In fact, however, he remained faithful to the ideas he had described in e.g. *Mein Kampf* in the mid-1920s. These saw Nazi Germany expanding eastwards to build an empire on the ruins of the



Soviet Union and to thus dominate Europe. In his view, to aspire a revision of the Versailles Treaty and the restoration of the Reich's 1914 borders alone would be a ridiculously modest ambition.

If no other reason, geography required that, for Hitler to make his vision reality, he had to "deal with" the problem of Poland separating Germany from the USSR. Hitler quickly envisioned a place for Poland in Europe under the hegemony of the Third Reich. He was pleased with the steady relations between Berlin and Warsaw. He saw Marshal Józef Piłsudski as being firstly a dictator, an anti-communist, an enemy of Bolshevik Russia and a vanquisher of the Red Army in 1920. He valued the strong and large Polish Army whose brave officers had been hardened in battles with the Bolsheviks.

Ever since 1933, just about every time Hitler spoke with Polish diplomats, he would bring up the danger posed by Moscow and the need to stand up to the USSR. In early 1935, Germany launched a concerted effort to woo Poland into becoming its ally against the USSR. It was then that Hermann Göring first came to Warsaw under the pretext of hunting in the Białowieża Forest, but in reality to fulfill the Führer's mission of not only cultivating the best possible relations with Poland, but also of swaying it to join the constellation of pro-German allies. Although Piłsudski himself had told Göring that Poland had no interest in pursuing military cooperation with Germany against the USSR, the latter kept pressing the point during his subsequent annual visits to Warsaw. Encouragement to comply came also from other Nazi dignitaries, such as Hans Frank and Joachim von Ribbentrop, even before the latter became foreign minister.

Poland tried to either ignore or politely decline such prods and exhortations. Nevertheless, rumors circulating internationally had it that, in return for Germany's non-aggression agreement, Poland had been forced to sign a secret annex to this accord that bound it to engage militarily against the Soviets. In 1936 and 1937, the word was that Poland had been invited to join Anti-Comintern Pact signed by Germany and Japan. Therefore, in a November 1937 circular, Minister Beck instructed Polish embassies and legations to deny having made any such commitments. He added that Warsaw would not be in a position to join such a pact due to "being a neighbor of the USSR and owing to its principled opposition to blocs." The minister's position was repeated by the semi-official agency Polish Political Information, which added that Poland was committed to a foreign policy of "balance among neighbors" as a matter of principle.

The term "politics of balance" was quite misleading as Warsaw's post-1934 relations with Berlin were incomparably closer than those with Moscow. Yet, such an asymmetry did not defy the underlying principle as, in its essence, all that the strategy forbade was the forging of alliances with either of Poland's big neighbors against the other. Poland had no intention of affiliating itself with the Reich against the USSR, nor of entering into any alliance in which the USSR would appear to be on its side. Nonetheless, Warsaw did not shy away from working and consulting with Berlin, of which the most vivid example was the Sudeten crisis of 1938 which ended with the infamous Munich Conference of



September 29-30. Although Poland emerged from the crisis having annexed the Zaolzie area, it paid dearly for the acquisition by being internationally labelled a state that although it stops short of actually collaborating with Germany, is known to employ Nazi methods. Such an international image of Poland was reflected in press commentaries, which unsparingly compared it to a hyena or a jackal.

Even during the Sudeten crisis, Germany attempted to sway Poland onto a path of close cooperation with the Reich against the USSR. Germany had previously announced to Poland in no uncertain terms that Gdańsk was an essentially German city. Hitler himself had in confidence told Poles about a “corridor” to East Prussia to be built across Pomerania. Nevertheless, on October 24, 1938, three and a half weeks after the Munich Conference, Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop presented the Polish ambassador, Józef Lipski, in a very friendly way, with proposals for a “general framework” of their mutual relations. Poland was expected to agree to “return to the Reich” the Free City of Gdańsk and to hand over to Germany a part of Gdańsk Pomerania, in which an “extraterritorial, German-owned motorway and railway line” would be built. In return, Germany would assure the inviolability of its border with Poland, and have the agreement of 1934 renewed for up to 25 years. However, the clauses of most importance in the agreement were those that required Poland to consult its foreign policies with Germany and join the Anti-Comintern Pact.

A few days later, acting on Ribbentrop’s request, Lipski personally reported his conversation with Ribbentrop to Beck. The Polish minister chose to keep the revelations to himself. He did not take the proposals seriously, considering them a personal plot by Ribbentrop. At a November 4 meeting with some of his most trusted associates, Beck expressed his satisfaction with the state of affairs by saying: “We are in a good place politically.” Two weeks later, on November 19, acting on Beck’s instructions, Ambassador Lipski announced to Ribbentrop that Poland could not agree to having Gdańsk annexed to the Reich. Lipski completely left out the accession to the Anti-Comintern Pact. Even this meeting, though, proved to be very friendly.

However, soon afterwards, Minister Beck happened to learn that Hitler himself was behind the proposals of October 24, 1938. Beck accepted a German invitation and, on his way back from a winter vacation in the French Riviera, made a layover, on January 5, 1939, in Hitler’s picturesque residence, the Berghof, on the slopes of Obersalzberg near Berchtesgaden. The Chancellor told him that Gdańsk should return to the “German commonwealth” and that a German corridor should be established to link the Reich with East Prussia, in return for the Reich’s assurance of inviolability of their shared border. On the following day, Ribbentrop repeated the same to Beck in a conversation in Munich. Ribbentrop added that he saw Poland among the signatories of the Anti-Comintern Pact. Beck replied that Poland could not agree to these proposals. It would not join the Anti-Comintern Pact as it was sufficient for “the Comintern to be handled by Polish courts”.



Upon his return to Warsaw, the head of the Polish diplomatic corps, who by then had lost much of his optimism, finally resolved to bring the German proposals to the attention of Poland's highest authorities. While it is uncertain when precisely this happened, he is presumed to have disclosed the intelligence in the second week of January. All that is known about the meeting has been garnered from Beck's memoirs dictated in Romania in late 1939. According to this account, upon his arrival at the meeting venue, the minister warned President Mościcki and Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły "about disturbing developments that could lead to war". The meeting took place at the Royal Castle in Warsaw, the seat of the Polish President. Other people may have attended, including, most likely, Prime Minister Felicjan Sławoj Składkowski and Deputy Prime Minister Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski. In his memoirs, Beck wrote that "during the meeting, it was made clear:

1. that, if Germany keeps its pressure on matters of as little consequence to them as Gdańsk and the motorway, we should make no mistake that we are in danger of being drawn into an all-out conflict in which such points of contention serve as a mere excuse;
2. that, our wavering stance would inevitably send us on a downward spiral towards the loss of independence and our subjugation to Germany;
3. therefore, whether this is Germany's attempt to bluff their way to a victory or its deliberate attempt to start a war, we need to be firm and composed and draw a clear line on each individual issue that would separate provoking the adversary from presenting our 'non possumus'".

Thus, in January, Warsaw resolved not to yield to the German Reich. It appears that all other options were out of the question for the Polish leaders. A generation that had forged the borders of a restored Polish state in bloody armed combat barely two decades earlier was, as a matter of principle, far from willing to accept "the Führer's generous offer", as German diplomacy would later describe it. Moreover, the Polish public, which already largely disapproved of Józef Beck's policies as being overly pro-German, would not have any of it. Not without significance was the fact that the alliance was being proposed to Poland by an odious dictatorship known for a particularly aggressive foreign policy.

In the months that followed, an open confrontation between Warsaw and Berlin unfolded against the backdrop of German proposals, which subsequently became demands. This happened after Hitler overpowered Czechoslovakia in mid-March 1939 and sent Wehrmacht troops to the streets of Prague. Six months after the Munich Conference, the Reich Chancellor showed what his signature on the Munich Agreement was really worth. This led to a shift in the position of Great Britain, whose government concluded it was paramount to stop any further expansion of Nazi Reich. When, on March 31, 1939, Great Britain announced its commitment to safeguard Poland's independence, Hitler abandoned his delusion of transforming Poland into a satellite state that would sever its political ties with the West, enable Germany to engage in an armed campaign against the USSR and sacrifice its soldiers to build a Nazi empire in Europe.



British assurances meant that the Reich would be forced to wage a war on two fronts. This option was feared by nearly everyone in Germany with the exception of Hitler, who, in his insanity, was prepared to put all his eggs in one basket. With the treaty with Great Britain and the 1921 alliance with France to back him up, Minister Beck assumed that the German dictator would act rationally and refrain from risking an international armed conflict against such odds. Moreover, in a firm tone assumed against the German pressure (as shown in his famous speech on May 5, 1939 in the Polish parliament), Beck signaled to Berlin that Poland was willing to talk and accept a compromise. Such signals were sent through the Japanese, Hungarians, Italians, and Bulgarians. Direct contacts were also attempted. However, by that time, Hitler was too far gone to even consider a compromise. Since Poland was not ready to submit to the Reich and surrender itself to the whims and fancies of Berlin, it had to be crushed as a hindrance to the further expansion of Nazi Germany in accordance with a plan that had been laid out already in *Mein Kampf*.