

Chapter 23

Poland, the 'Danzig Question' and the Outbreak of the Second World War

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On 31 March 1939 Neville Chamberlain announced to the Commons:

in the event of action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly consider it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power.¹

This commitment, a startling break with British foreign policy of dissociation from legal entanglements in European affairs, came on the background of rumours of an impending German move to incorporate the Free City of Danzig into Germany. This was a political gesture intended to forewarn Germany not to proceed with aggressive plans. The background to the British initiative was a localized conflict over the port city, which might have led to a European war. By March 1939 the Danzig crisis was merely a reflection of the general state of tension that came to dominate European politics. The British guarantee to defend Poland was a last-ditch attempt to avert the war, even if it gave the appearance of Britain supporting a cause for which it had hitherto no sympathy.

The idea of a Free City had originated in the debates that took place during the Paris Peace talks in 1919. US President Woodrow Wilson stated that after the war Poland should have access to the sea in his fourteen-point declaration of US war aims. The Poles therefore requested the incorporation of the city and of East Prussia into the borders of the newly emerged Polish state. Lloyd George's opposition to Polish demands is well known, but less fully acknowledged is Wilson's lack of support for this request. Clemenceau, Wilson and Lloyd George, the three dominant personalities who determined the course of the debates, argued over a number of issues, and a compromise solution to the Danzig issue was advocated by the US delegation swayed the debate in favour of the Free City solution. Wilson finally suggested that the city and surrounding areas should become a Free City guaranteed by international agreements.² This turned out to be an uneasy compromise resented by Germany and Poland. League of Nations members were soon to find out that conflicts in the city would dominate League discussions and ultimately sour relations between the member states and the two claimants to the city.

The decision to appoint a High Commissioner whose role it was to mediate between the Free City and the Polish government proved unsatisfactory. From the outset the Poles contested their limited rights in the city. These disputes were made worse by genuine ambiguities and unresolved issues. The town and the areas included in the Free City comprised an area of 1,892 square kilometres. Ninety-five per cent of the community declared themselves to be German with only three per cent admitting to being Polish. The Free City was to be administered by an elected Senate, which was nearly entirely German too. Economically, the Free City created many areas for conflict. It had developed as an outlet for trade along the River Wisła, now entirely within the new Polish state, and its economic wellbeing depended on Polish trade. The Polish state was allowed to use the port facilities. This was in fact a defeat, as the Poles had hoped to secure the ownership of the port and to obtain a military base. In the late 1920, as a result of economic conflicts with Germany and anxious about the consequence of the German economic blockade, the Polish state built a new port in the town of Gdynia. The result of this was a slump in trade passing through Danzig.

Polish thinking on the issue of access to the sea and on the Danzig question was never consistent and went through various stages. In the first place, strategic rather than economic factors played a role. Access to the sea was seen as a vital element of any plans for a future war against Germany or the Soviet Union. It was assumed that France, Poland's military ally, would send aid to Poland via the Baltic.³ In 1927 Polish irritation with the League was reciprocated by the League High Commissioner, who tried to reduce the extent of the League's intervention in Poland's relations with the city. The Polish government's method of dealing with these problems was to open direct talks with the Senate, thus bypassing the League. In 1927 this policy looked likely to succeed when a centre-left coalition won a majority in the Senate.⁴

Yet the Polish government consistently viewed difficulties in its dealings with the Senate of the Free City through the prism of its relations with Germany. The League's interventions were interpreted as favouring Germany. This was not always the case, but the Piłsudski regime, which came to power in 1926, assumed that the League was always hostile to Polish interests. This brief period of constructive relations came to an end when the Nazi Party became increasingly active in the Free City. Stresemann's policy had been that of maintaining Germany's claim to the Free City, but not to press this demand, and instead to seek partial accommodation with the Polish government. This, it was hoped, would lead to the return of Danzig to Germany, with Poland being granted its own port within Danzig.⁵

The economic situation in Danzig had always been difficult, but during the early 1930 the consequences of the world economic crisis became acute. The Danziger's response was to blame the Poles for having rerouted trade to Gdynia.⁶ This led a rise of support for the local Nazi party. The local German community was angry at the Poles' ability to undermine the city's economy, but

they were not prepared to approve any agreements with the Polish government. The Nazi leadership in Berlin exploited the economic situation and the nationalist frustration. Goebbels was sent to Danzig to restructure the local Nazi party organization and to initiate an aggressive campaign. He was successful.⁷ The Danzig Nazi organization grew rapidly, securing seats in the elected assembly and entering into coalition agreement with the right-wing parties. Attacks on Polish prerogatives in the city and the port were challenged repeatedly. The Polish government and the Senate contrived to arrange incidents to highlight their respective grievances. Count Manfredo Gravina, an Italian who was the League representative in the City during this period, supported German claims and fanned the difficult situation by showing open hostility to Polish arguments.⁸

In October 1933 the League appointed a new High Commissioner, Sean Lester, a Catholic and citizen of the Irish Republic. He was given the task of finding a way of defusing the tension and in particular of negotiating with the Poles. Unfortunately, Józef Beck, the Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs, assumed Lester represented British interests and did nothing to collaborate with the latter's efforts to block the growth of Nazi power in the city. Beck's preoccupation with asserting Polish authority and in particular his deep resentment that Poland was not accorded the status of a Great Power blinded him to the fact that Germany, and not France and Britain, were Poland's biggest enemies. Lester attempted to use the League's authority to prevent the Nazis from taking over the Senate of the Free City. His arrival coincided with a new line in Poland's foreign policy caused by the government decision to establish a dialogue with the German government. This was preceded by probes about the Danzig issue. First Polish approaches to Hitler gave immediate results. In the run-up to the opening of talks on the non-aggression agreement Hitler declared that he was 'against any action directed against Polish rights and legal interest in the Free City of Danzig.'⁹ The signing of the non-aggression declaration meant that the issue of Danzig became a touchstone of good relations. The Poles turned the full force of their irritation against the League, perceiving its presence in the city to be an obstacle to the further improvement of relations with Germany. German withdrawal from the League of Nations and the signing of the non-aggression declaration was followed by a decrease in anti-Polish propaganda. This gave rise to optimism in Warsaw. Although the Nazi leadership in Berlin repeatedly assured the Polish government that Germany had no intention of claiming Danzig, continuing Nazi outrages in the city and the persistent state of tension suggested that the matter was far from resolved.¹⁰

It was unfortunate that the Polish government concluded that the best way forward was to continue building stronger links with Germany, while trying to reduce – what Beck considered to be – the League's irksome interference in Danzig. In February 1937 the League appointed Carl Burckhardt, a Swiss national, to act as the new High Commissioner. By then Lester had admitted that he had failed in upholding the democratic principles in the city and that

the local Nazis through violence and intimidation had secured absolute control over the Senate. Poland had played an important role in that process by refusing to support Lester when he condemned the Nazis. Lester had asked the Polish government to give support to the German parties that opposed the Nazis, but the government ignored his pleas.¹¹ When Burckhardt arrived in Danzig he was left in no doubt that the Poles wanted to see the League withdrawn from the area. The Polish President made it clear to him that Poland and Germany shared a common objective of destroying the Soviet Union. Beck likewise emphasized to Burckhardt that he did not wish to see the League interfering in Poland's relations with the Free City because he was convinced that he was capable of resolving all problems in direct dealings with Berlin.¹² Such a degree of Polish approval for German objectives signalled to the League representatives that the Poles would do nothing to support its role in the city.¹³ Polish foreign policy now moved toward developing closer relations with Germany to the exclusion of outside arbitration. With hindsight, it is obvious that Beck was excessively confident of his ability to negotiate with the German government from what he perceived to be a position of strength. His conviction that the Danzig Nazis were controlled by the party in Germany was not unfounded, but he did not consider the possibility that Berlin would not use its influence on the Danzig party to curb violent attacks on Polish rights and citizens. Thus Beck consistently overlooked information from the Polish Commissioner General in Danzig, who sought to alert him to the fact that by destroying democratic rights in the city the Nazis were changing the political landscape to the point that no civil rights were guaranteed. In 1936 Kazimierz Papée, the Polish Commissioner in Danzig, reported that all but Nazi trade unions were banned and race laws were being introduced, limiting the rights of professionals and traders to pursue any activities in the city without first obtaining a licence from the Senate, which was wholly Nazi.¹⁴ The Commissioner furthermore reported on the extent of Berlin's control over the Danzig Nazis. While this in principle reassured Beck of the rightness of his approach to the Danzig problem, the Polish Commissioner warned that the activities of the Danzig Nazis appeared to go beyond matters relating to the Free City. He reported that they were disseminating anti-Polish propaganda and seeking to encourage anti-Polish feelings within the German communities living within Poland's borders.¹⁵

At this stage attempts were made by Britain to limit the League's involvement in the Free City because conflicts there had the capacity to impact negatively on Britain's policy of appeasing Nazi Germany. In January 1937 the League agreed to limit its involvement in conflicts between the Polish state and the Danzig Senate and to confine its role to that of acting as an observer.¹⁶ This decision proved difficult to maintain as the Danzig Senate's progressive introduction of Para-Nuremberg laws caused an international outcry. From the beginning of 1938, Jewish lawyers and doctors were prevented from practising in Danzig. This in turn required the representatives of the three countries that dealt with Danzig matters in the League to respond. Britain, France and Sweden would

have preferred to ignore these developments, but this proved difficult due to the strength of outcry from the Jewish communities in the Britain and the US. Danzig Jews also sought to leave the city and requested visas, which caused the British Foreign Office anxiety about the numbers of Jews likely to arrive in the UK. The Polish representative in Danzig had cautioned his government about the implications of the Danzig situation on Poland's standing in Europe.¹⁷ At this point, the Polish government became once more anxious that the League should still remain responsible for the city. By then Berlin's role in reining in and unleashing the Danzig Nazis was fully recognized.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Beck continued to object to the League's presence in the Free City, implying that it was an obstacle to Poland resolving all outstanding problems through direct dealings with Berlin. Whereas in reality when the Polish government realized that the League had postponed making a decision on withdrawing the High Commissioner, Beck tried to cover all options. While he publicly attacked British and French interference in Danzig, he attempted to increase Poland's standing through direct negotiations with Berlin. This very same policy was being pursued by Hitler's regime. In January 1938, during a meeting with Beck, Hitler reassured the Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs that he did not want to change the situation in Danzig. By stressing that he attached importance to the maintenance of good relations with Poland, Hitler assured Beck that the Danzig issue would not be allowed to impact negatively on relations between the two states. Hitler told Beck that this commitment was 'binding irrespective of the fate of the League'.¹⁹

The background to Poland's apparent dependence on direct negotiations with Hitler was the fact that British and French policies appeared to focus on developing good relations with Germany. While the two viewed the Danzig issue as an obstacle to the constructive pursuit of their appeasement of Germany they were effectively pushing Poland in the direction of strengthening its ties with Germany. During the tense early months of 1938, Burckhardt left the Poles in no doubt that if the situation in Danzig was to become untenable the British and the French would withdraw the League from the city.²⁰ This message was confirmed in London. When in July 1938 the Danzig Gauleiter Albert Foster visited London the Foreign Office confirmed that he was left in no doubt that 'the British Government would view with pleasure the possibility of Poland and Germany reaching an agreement over Danzig'. The only condition was that the cloak of legality should be retained.²¹ Both leaks from Burckhardt and information from London fanned Beck's suspicion that the Danzig issue would be used by the European powers as part of negotiations to improve relations with Germany, where a willingness to withdraw the League from Danzig would be offered as a gesture of good will irrespective of the consequences of such actions on Polish rights in the city.

The Czechoslovak crisis of 1938 appeared to offer the Poles an opportunity to obtain reassurances from Germany. Unfortunately, in spite of close co-operation between the two states in the propaganda war waged against Czechoslovakia, Poland failed to secure the most important objective, namely,

the establishment of Polish authority in areas between the Soviet Union and Germany. The Poles anticipated that the Western powers would object to German plans for the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. As it turned out, Chamberlain took the lead in defusing the crisis. The German government's claims that it was merely representing the interests of the persecuted German community in Czechoslovakia were accepted as legitimate. The Poles had their own reasons for supporting German policies. They hoped to regain control of the Teschen region grabbed by the Czechs in 1919. In the long term, they hoped to weaken the Czechoslovak state by encouraging Slovak independence and the breakaway of Ruthenia, which they hoped would be incorporated into Hungary, forming a common border with Poland. Beck's desire to profit from what he firmly believed to be German need for Polish co-operation and approval of its policies towards Czechoslovakia went even further. His *chief de cabinet* recorded that Beck discussed the matter with President Sławoj-Składkowski and Śmigły-Rydz, the Minister of Defence. The latter suggested that Poland's willingness to see Czechoslovakia weakened and dismembered should only be offered in return for guarantees in Danzig.²² When Poland was not invited to the Munich Conference, its irrelevance to Germany was starkly manifested.

The sense of unease that haunted the Poles as the Czechoslovak crisis unfolded intensified when Britain became closely involved. So anxious was Beck about the implications of Western approval for German actions in Eastern Europe that immediately after Chamberlain's first visit to Hitler on 15 September he instructed Józef Lipski, Polish diplomat and Ambassador to Germany, to seek a meeting with Hitler. Clearly affected by the atmosphere created by the meeting with the British Prime Minister, Hitler refused to engage in a conversation on the Danzig issue.²³ Acting on Beck's further instruction, Lipski requested a separate meeting with Joachim Ribbentrop, the German Minister for Foreign Affairs. The meeting, which took place on 24 October 1938, marked a new stage in Polish-German relations. The Poles were left in no doubt that Germany's success in the destruction of the Czechoslovak state and the realization that Britain and France would do little to protect the status quo in Eastern Europe lay at the root of Ribbentrop's determination to put relations with Poland on to a new footing. Lipski was treated to a comprehensive review of relations. Whereas Germany was willing to extend the Polish-German non-aggression agreement for another twenty-five years, Ribbentrop suggested that the Free City of Danzig should be in due course incorporated into the Third Reich and that an extra-territorial link through the Polish-held territories should be built thus linking the city with West Prussia. There was no disguising the fact that Germany was moving towards treating Poland as a subordinate state and not a partner. The most obvious indication of this important change of policy and tone lay in the boldness with which Ribbentrop put forward demands relating to the Free City.²⁴

The first Polish response to these new German demands reflected bewilderment at the new state of affairs. Beck instructed Lipski to reassure Ribbentrop that Poland would seek a mutually acceptable solution to the Danzig problem.

He further maintained that the League was the source of all problems, as he described its role as having 'far reaching prerogatives ... but not able to fulfil its task in a manner beneficial to the Free City and to Polish interests ...'²⁵ While Berlin did not for the time being press its demands, the Poles were left to consider the implications of the initial suggestion. Beck's response was to review the whole of Polish-German relations, an analysis from which he drew some comfort. Although Germany's actions in fomenting anti-Polish sentiments among the Ukrainian population had been noted, new violent attacks on Polish property and nationals in Danzig could not be overlooked. By the Vienna Award of 1 November 1938 Germany had granted Hungary Czech territories. German domination of areas that Poland up to now considered to be its sphere of influence was thus confirmed. Hungary and Romania, two states on which Beck had hoped to base his plans for a Polish-dominated Central European bloc, moved towards closer relations with Germany. As firmly as Beck and his advisers clung to the conviction that Germany had to retain Polish goodwill, realities suggested otherwise.²⁶

In January 1939 Beck made two foreign trips. The first was to Germany where, he held talks with Hitler and Ribbentrop. From them he heard that while the Danzig issue could be postponed, in the long term Germany expected Poland to agree to its incorporation into the Reich. Hitler stressed that good relations with Poland still mattered to Germany and assured Beck that Germany would agree to the incorporation of Ruthenia into Hungary. Though the interview seemed friendly, the statement that Danzig would finally have to return to Germany was worrying. Beck chose to believe that this was not a demand or even a warning, but a game of bluff. Furthermore, he chose to believe that by resolutely rejecting Hitler's demands he had made an impact on the German leader.²⁷ The other trip was to France, where Beck's ostensibly private sojourn was ignored by French politicians. French disinterest only confirmed to Beck that Poland would have to face Germany on its own. His response was, more firmly than before, to focus on Danzig as a barometer of the state of relations with Berlin. If Germany demanded the incorporation of the city into Germany, this would suggest that Hitler wanted a confrontation and not an accommodation with Poland.

On his return to Poland, Beck instigated a major review of Polish foreign policy. It was decided to pursue two lines of policy in relation to Germany: one of firmness and the other of reasonable accommodation. While rejecting the demand that Danzig should be restored to Germany, a number of compromises were to be offered. At this stage Beck still thought in terms of demanding that the League protection should be withdrawn from Danzig hoping that this might satisfy Hitler. Believing that the Germans resented the League's presence as much as he did, Beck hoped to replace the League guarantees of the city's status with direct guarantees from Germany.²⁸

During the month following the signing of the Munich Treaty, while the precise implications of German recent actions remained unclear, all European governments looked for some indication of what were Germany's

next objectives. France and Britain sought further clarification as to what Germany really wanted to do. Unfortunately for Beck, Polish complicity in the break-up of Czechoslovakia had made a negative impression on the French and British ministers, notwithstanding their own active involvement in forcing the Czechs to accept the loss of the Sudeten region. The result was that, anticipating German actions in Danzig, both governments signalled their desire to see the League withdrawn from the city. Edward Raczynski, the Polish Ambassador to London, was only too well aware of the Foreign Office's anger at Beck's public rebuff of British requests that Poland should not press its demands to Teschen at the height of the autumn crisis in Czechoslovakia. He was not surprised when on 9 December 1938 he was informed that the British government would seek the withdrawal of League protection from the city by 16 January.²⁹ Beck protested and finally succeeded in persuading the League Rapporteurs to postpone this decision. By then he had come to the conclusion that he needed the League to remain in the city, at least until he was certain that the German leadership would not make a unilateral decision on the matter. We know that his desire to offer Germany some concession over travel links between the city and West Prussia went hand in hand with a determination to remove the bad impression his previous actions had created on the British. On 23 December 1938 Sir Howard Kennard, British Ambassador to Warsaw, reported that Beck informed him that he wanted to strengthen relations between the Polish and British navies. Under this inauspicious request lay an attempt to set aside previous misunderstandings.³⁰

The last two weeks of March 1939 abounded in rumours and threats of possible German action. On 12 March Hitler decided to destroy what remained of Czechoslovakia and occupied Bohemia and Moravia on 15 March. Two days later, Viorel Tilea, the Romanian Minister to London, informed the Foreign Office that Germany had demanded the monopoly of Romanian oil production. This was a worrying piece of information, as access to oil would allow Germany to wage war without fear of an economic blockade. This coming on the heels of naked German aggression against Czechoslovakia mobilized the British Cabinet to consider the possibility of German demands going beyond merely redressing grievances. The Cabinet's first response was to agree that Germany, through its continuing demands in Eastern Europe, posed a threat to British interests. It was decided that the views of all East European and Balkan states were to be solicited. By 20 March plans were narrowed down to seeking some form of co-operation between Britain, France, the Soviet Union and Poland.³¹ In the meantime, rumours – which the Poles refused to deny or confirm – suggested that Germany was putting pressure on Poland for the return of Danzig. Both the French and British ministers found themselves in a dilemma. Until now they would have wanted the Poles and Germans to resolve their differences and to reach an accommodation on the city. Both Western European democracies feared that Poland would resist with its full military force and this would lead to a European war, not least of all because France would be obliged to take action against Germany.³²

The British and French governments were right in their concern about Polish–German relations. The Poles, mindful of the way the Czechoslovak government lost control over its own affairs when it accepted British mediation in the summer of 1938, would not divulge details of recent Polish–German talks. Nevertheless, it was generally presumed that the two countries were either discussing or disagreeing over Danzig. In reality, the matter was much more serious. The Poles had already felt slighted by lack of German support when they expected to be invited to the Munich Conference. The First Vienna Award marginalized the Poles and also made clear that Germany was determined to act as a broker in regional disputes. The Poles had not been informed by Germany of its proposed action in relation to Czechoslovakia in March. Beck had in the long term hoped to see Slovakia separate from the Czechs. He had hoped that this would lead to the creation of a Slovak state, which would be wholly dependent on Poland, but the Slovak protectorate came under German control. In the Baltic, events unfolded quickly and unexpectedly. On 20 March 1939 Ribbentrop demanded that the port city of Memel should be ceded to Germany. The Lithuanian government had no alternative but to agree. German control over the Baltic coast was thus extended. Hence, when Ribbentrop put to the Polish Government a demand that Danzig should be restored to Germany, Beck saw this request as an ultimatum. To the military regime that had ruled Poland since 1926, the issue of access to the sea was a matter of prestige as well as economic and strategic convenience. Beck in particular had stressed the importance of Poland being a maritime power. In his attempts to form a Central European bloc of countries independent of Germany and the Soviet Union, he went out of his way to develop relations with Sweden and Finland. The expansion of German domination of the Baltic coast clearly rendered these and all strategic plans irrelevant but in the long term also raised questions as to why Germany was pursuing these policies.

On 21 March Ribbentrop held a meeting with Lipski. Ribbentrop's opening sentence was ominous, as he stated that he intended to 'discuss German–Polish relations in their entirety'. Ribbentrop proposed that Danzig should be incorporated into the Third Reich. Poland should also agree to Germany building an extra territorial rail and road link between Danzig and West Prussia. In return, Germany was prepared to offer guarantees that Poland's control of the Poznań region would not be challenged. Germany would also guarantee Poland's frontiers.³³ As if to reinforce the point that Poland was subservient to Germany, Ribbentrop made references to the fact that Germany had not opposed the emergence of an independent Poland. He also reminded the Polish ambassador that Polish and Hungarian demands to Czechoslovak territories had been approved by Germany. Lipski felt that the request, though couched in polite form, was in reality an ultimatum.³⁴ The proposal that Ribbentrop had put to the Poles went to the very heart of relations with Poland, which had been since 1934 based on the assumption that the controversial question of the Free City of Danzig was a reflection of the state of relations between the two states.

By coincidence, the British Ambassador to Warsaw communicated an equally important proposition to the Polish government. The Foreign Office believed that Germany was preparing to challenge Poland on the Danzig issue and the proposal made by Kennard followed on the heels of the earlier enquiry communicated to all East European states about their possible response to German aggression. Kennard put to Beck a startling proposal that Britain would be willing to sign a bilateral agreement with Poland as a result of which both would act jointly on the Danzig issue. In Halifax's formulation, 'if the Danzig question should develop in such a way as to involve a threat to Polish independence then this would be a matter of gravest concern to ourselves'.³⁵ An interesting condition for the conclusion of this agreement was that the French government should not be informed of this agreement.

The British proposal to Poland has to be seen in the context of the fast-evolving situation. The British declared intention to enter into a bilateral agreement with Poland should neither be seen as an expression of a commitment to act if Germany tried to annex the Free City nor was it the outcome of a carefully considered change in British foreign policy. In March, the rapidly evolving situation in Europe caused the British Cabinet and in particular Chamberlain unease. It was agreed that there was a need for action to signal to Germany the unacceptability of its policies, hence the initial badly thought out approaches to the Soviet Union and other East European states. This was nevertheless quickly qualified when the implications of Soviet participation in any anti-German declaration were considered.³⁶ The initiative to approach the Poles with a new proposal was made on the background of rumours that Germany was likely to act. The prospect of a war breaking out over Danzig compelled Chamberlain to enter into direct talks with Poland. The purpose of the initiative was not to reassure the Poles that they would be guaranteed aid were they to take action. On the contrary, the bilateral agreement was a way of making sure that German expansion was halted, but that the Poles did not precipitate a war.³⁷ As Beck evaluated the usefulness of the British offer to his dual approach to relations with Germany, he saw both merits and demerits in it. He continued in his determination to resolve all problems in Poland's relations with Germany by means of direct talks, but the British offer held out the prospect of aid and finance, which Poland's rulers were loath to reject. Thus, Beck offered a cautious but encouraging response mirrored by a continued stubborn unwillingness to share any information as to the substance of talks with the Germans.³⁸

When the final decision was made by the British Cabinet to offer Poland a guarantee to support it if there was a threat to its independence, this was done in the heat of the moment. Although the opinions of the military chiefs and of their French counterparts had been sought, the information provided by both was not used to evaluate the likely success of such a gesture on the events unfolding in Danzig and on thinking in Warsaw. A badly thought out declaration made by Chamberlain was not a genuine commitment to defend Poland but an attempt to forestall another act of aggression by Germany. Rumours

rather than facts lay at the root of the decision to make a public declaration of support to the Poles. This is surprising, since the British Consul in Danzig sent regular reports to the Foreign Office outlining the way the Danzig Nazis reduced the Senate's functions. These nevertheless never made it to the Cabinet discussions.³⁹

Only a day after Chamberlain made the declaration to the House of Commons serious doubts were raised as to whether this indeed meant that Britain would fight in defence of Poland and in particular to maintain the status of the Free City of Danzig. Both the full wording of the declaration and the editorial of *The Times* suggested that the decision as to whether Polish security was threatened and thus whether the British obligation was invoked would rest in British hands. As we know, during the months following the declaration, neither the Danzig Nazis nor Germany proceeded to take action to change to status of the city. The British Embassy in Berlin was a source of information on the state of play, suggesting frequently the imminence of German aggression.⁴⁰ F.M. Shepherd, Acting British Consul-General in Danzig, likewise continued to warn that the Danzig Nazis were remilitarizing the city in preparation for conflict with Polish troops.⁴¹ Danzig remained a constant source of tension in Europe. It was nevertheless a particular source of anxiety to the British government on account of the recently publicly declared determination to aid Poland in the defence of its territory but also because the Polish government remained steadfastly resolute in its policy of keeping the British out of the picture.

During the months preceding the German invasion of Poland the British Foreign Office debated a possibility that would have placed the government in a particular quandary. What would have been the British government's legal obligation if the Danzig Senate voted for the Free City to join Germany? In principle the British, like all member states of the League of Nations, would have been obliged to take action against an aggressor state, but a voluntary *Anschluss* was something quite different. Any action to prevent this happening would have been not only legally dubious, but unlikely to receive public support. As rumours of an imminent vote in the Senate persisted, Halifax grappled with the predicament the Foreign Office faced. He informed the Cabinet that he had warned British ambassadors in Warsaw, Berlin and Rome to prepare for such a possibility. Kennard in Warsaw was asked to hold a meeting with Beck and to try and persuade him that in the event of this happening Poland should not take military action and should instead confine its response to a milder form of diplomatic disapproval, namely economic and diplomatic pressure.⁴² As the Foreign Office reasoned, it was for the time being important to prevent Poland from seeing the likely Senate vote for the incorporation into Germany as action indicative of German aggressive intentions. British diplomatic representatives abroad did not address the Danzig problem in their dealings with German representatives, in line with the policy of trying not to attach undue importance to the emerging flashpoint.

This manner of approaching the Danzig crisis inevitably led to the Foreign Office viewing likely Polish action as threatening European peace. The

underlying British thinking was that the Danzig Nazis would not act on their own and would be guided by Berlin. The most important task therefore became to persuade Beck that were the situation in Danzig to escalate, Poland should not view this as aggression, and that Beck should be prevailed upon not to take action without prior consultation with Britain.⁴³ A diplomatic tug-of-war ensued with the Foreign Office trying to bind the Poles to allow the British government to assume responsibility for reducing the state of tension in Danzig. Since the Polish government would divulge neither the state of relations with Germany nor their own thinking on the subject, British efforts failed. This left the British politicians in a permanent state of anxiety.

Kennard in Warsaw had his time cut out, for he knew Beck and the Polish military regime well enough to realize that any attempt to bind them to comply with British requests not to view German actions in relation to Danzig as significant were doomed. In any case, most British diplomatic representatives in east and south-east European states knew that Britain's standing had been damaged by its complicity in the break-up of Czechoslovakia in the autumn of 1938 and the lack of response to German actions against Czechoslovakia in March 1939. Not surprisingly, Beck's response to Kennard was to ask what Britain proposed to do in the event of German aggression, but a clear answer was not forthcoming.⁴⁴

Throughout April and May 1939 British and French Chiefs of Staff met to discuss joint action. One important item on the agenda of these meetings was the question of the eastern front. It was quickly apparent that such a front was no more than a figure of speech, as neither France nor Britain proposed to actually fight Germany, little more to deploy troops and resources east of Germany. While the Poles were not privy to the ongoing Franco-British staff talks they were aware of the lack of preparation to support Poland on the eastern front. In Paris a Polish delegation continued discussions on a military convention to the Franco-Polish alliance, whereas a British staff mission arrived in Warsaw on 23 May only to inform the Poles that Britain had no plans to aid the Poles in the event of a war with Germany.⁴⁵ The consequence of these exchanges were visible as the Poles continued in their determination not to inform the British as to whether they were holding talks with the Germans and on what they would do if the Danzig Nazis took action. A policy of brinkmanship was being played by the Poles, who not only deeply resented the fact that Britain and France were conducting talks with the Soviet Union, but also were stalling on the completion of the agreement with Poland. The inconclusive financial talks cast a further shadow over Polish-British relations. The Treasury's reluctance to release any funds to Poland was accompanied by attempts to force the Polish government to review a contract awarded to a French rather than to a British electricity company to install an electricity grid in Poland.⁴⁶

While the British government still grappled with the dilemma of whether to support the Poles or to use all means available to try and rein them in, the situation in Danzig rapidly escalated. By August, the Polish and German

governments operated on the assumption that war was inevitable. Leaders of the Polish military regime tried by various means to secure further French and British military commitments and supplies in anticipation of the impending conflict. When these were still not forthcoming they surprisingly acted on the assumption that neither Western democracy would in reality afford to lose Poland as an ally. In these circumstances, Danzig became the fulcrum upon which Anglo-Polish relations came to be unsteadily balanced. This explains why the Danzig issue was the subject of Cabinet discussions in July and August. The full extent of the dilemma faced by British policy makers was articulated by Halifax at a Cabinet meeting on 2 August. During a debate on German long-term objectives he stated that Danzig should not be seen as a reason to go to war, but if a threat to Polish security arose from Danzig then Britain would honour its obligation to support Poland.⁴⁷

At the beginning of August, the Polish government and the Senate were once more in conflict. Since May, Polish customs inspectors had been under constant attack, which made their job impossible. This allowed the Nazis to militarize Danzig to the point that it became a fortress. In August, the Senate informed the Poles that it would no longer recognize Polish customs guards.⁴⁸ This led the Poles to warn the Senate that it was acting outside its jurisdiction. Beck also took an opportunity to attack Burckhardt for supposedly disseminating false information about the city.⁴⁹ The German government intervened only to be informed by the Polish government that it had no right to make representations on behalf of the Danzig Senate. When the Poles had decided to confront the Danzig authorities they did not seek British advice, but merely informed the Foreign Office of the crisis after the fact. The Poles threatened to bomb Danzig from the sea and the Senate backed down. The Foreign Office was appalled to hear how close the two had come to a military conflict. The Danzig issue continued to be a bone of contention between the Polish and German government with Britain desperately trying to wrestle from the Poles an agreement not to proceed without British approval. While Beck belligerently refused to do so, the British government sought means of ascertaining whether indeed Danzig was merely a pretext for a conflict with Poland or a difficulty that could be resolved with a modicum of good will.

The British Cabinet chose to believe that the latter was the case, whereas the Poles increasingly acted on the assumption that war with Germany was likely to break out in the near future. To the Poles the Danzig crisis, like reports of tension on the Polish–German border in Silesia and German claims that Poland was mistreating the German minority were seen as signs of a German propaganda campaign, which inevitably preceded an outright attack.

In the end, it was the Poles who were correct. On 23 August the Danzig Senate voted for the city to return to the Reich. The Danzig Gauleiter Albert Forster was appointed Head of the Danzig state. These actions contravened the League charter and in principle should have been a matter for the League. Instead the British and French government spoke of negotiations and used their

diplomatic offices to try and persuade Beck to appoint a negotiator or at least to accept the appointment of a suitable person to negotiate between the Polish and German government. Events nevertheless fast overtook these efforts for on 1 September the German battleship *Schleswig-Holstein* attacked the Polish fort and ammunition dump of Westerplatte on the tip of the Hel peninsula. Danzig was officially incorporated into Germany on that day. Burckhardt, who was in the city, was instructed to leave immediately. Wholesale attacks on Polish property and citizens completed the picture.

On 1 September 1939 developments taking place in Danzig were of little consequence as on the same day, in the early hours of the morning, Germany initiated a military attack on Poland. In the end the war did not start because of Danzig, though the city had always been a reliable barometer of relations between the two states.

Notes

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- 3 A.J. Prażmowska, 'The Role of Danzig in Polish–German Relations on the Eve of the Second World War' in J. Hiden and T. Lane (eds), *The Baltic and the Outbreak of the Second World War*. Cambridge, 1992, pp. 76–7.
- 4 S. Mikos, *Wolne miasto Gdańsk a Liga Narodów 1920–1939*. Gdańsk, 1979, pp. 144–5.
- 5 C.M. Kimmich, *The Free City: Danzig and German Foreign Policy, 1919–1934*. New Haven, 1968, pp. 104–5.
- 6 H. Levine, *Hitler's Free City: A History of the Nazi Party in Danzig, 1925–39*. Chicago, 1973, p. 37.
- 7 P. McNamara, *Sean Lester, Poland and the Nazi Takeover of Danzig*. Dublin, 2009, pp. 26–7.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 9 W. Jędrzejewicz (ed.), *Diplomat in Berlin 1933–1934: Papers and Memoirs of Josef Lipski, Ambassador of Poland*. New York, 1969, pp. 73–4.
- 10 C. Gdańsk, *National Identity in the Polish–German Borderlands*. London, 1990, pp. 122–3.
- 11 McNamara, *Sean Lester*, pp. 224–7.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 13 C. Burckhardt, *Moja Misja w Gdańsku 1937–1939*. Warszawa, 1979, p. 46.
- 14 Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum (henceforth PISM) A12, 881, 14 January 1936 and 4 February 1937.
- 15 PISM A12, 881, 30 December 1937.
- 16 Mikos, *Wolne Miasto Gdańsk a Liga Narodów*, pp. 322–3.
- 17 Archives of the Free City of Danzig, Gdańsk (henceforth AG), 259/931, 24 May 1938.
- 18 PISM, A12, 881/2, 30 December 1937.
- 19 Jędrzejewicz (ed.), *Diplomat in Berlin 1933–1934*, p. 334.
- 20 AG, 259/931, 27 May 1938.
- 21 AG, 259/931, 22 June 1938.
- 22 J. Zarański (ed.), *Diariusz i Teki Jana Szembeka, 1938–1939*, vol. 4. London, 1952, 12 March 1938.
- 23 Jędrzejewicz (ed.), *Diplomat in Berlin 1933–1934*, pp. 406–7.
- 24 A.J. Prażmowska, 'Poland's Foreign Policy: September 1938–September 1939', *Historical Journal* vol. 29 no. 4 (1986), p. 854.
- 25 Official Documents Concerning Polish–German and Polish–Soviet Relations 1933–1939, also known as The Polish White Book, Poland, 1940, no. 44, pp. 47–8.

- 26 Zarański (ed.) *Diariusz i Teki Jana Szembeka*, 7 December 1938.
- 27 Josef Beck, *Final Report*. New York, 1957, pp. 171–2.
- 28 J. Łubieński, 'Ostatnie negocjacje w sprawie Gdańska. Wyjątki z pamiętnika', *Dziennik Polski i Dziennik Żołnierza*, 3 December 1953.
- 29 PISM A12, 53/21 9 December 1939.
- 30 National Archives, London (henceforth NA), FO 371 23129, C27/27/35, 23 December 1938.
- 31 NA CAB 23/98, Cabinet 13/39, 20 March 1939.
- 32 A.J. Prażmowska, *Britain, Poland and the Eastern Front, 1939*. Cambridge, 1986, pp. 42–5.
- 33 The Polish White Book, no. 61, pp. 61–3.
- 34 Zarański (ed.) *Diariusz i Teki Jana Szembeka*, 23 March 1939, pp. 562–8.
- 35 NA FO371, C4086/3356/18, 24 March 1939.
- 36 Prażmowska, *Britain, Poland and the Eastern Front*, pp. 44–5.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 39 NA FO371, 23133, c3822/93/55, 22 March 1939.
- 40 Documents on British Foreign Policy (henceforth DBFP), 3rd series, vol. v, no. 163, pp. 199–220.
- 41 NA FO 371 23022, C9973/54/18, 14 July 1939.
- 42 NA CAB 23/99, Cabinet 27/39, 20 May 1939.
- 43 DBFP, vol. v, no. 442, pp. 492–3, 10 May 1939.
- 44 DBFP, vol. v, no. 459, pp. 636 and 690.
- 45 Prażmowska, *Britain, Poland and the Eastern Front*, pp. 94–7.
- 46 NA, FO371, 23146, C10029/1110/55, 12 July 1939.
- 47 NA CAB 23/100, Cabinet 40 (39), 2 August 1939.
- 48 Levine, *Hitler's Free City*, pp. 151–2.
- 49 PISM A.12 53/25, 1 August 1939.