

# Why Germany Invaded Poland

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## Great Britain's Blank Check to Poland

On March 21, 1939, while hosting French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain discussed a joint front with France, Russia and Poland to act together against German aggression. France agreed at once, and the Russians agreed on the condition that both France and Poland sign first. However, Polish Foreign Minister Józef Beck vetoed the agreement on March 24, 1939.<sup>[1]</sup> Polish statesmen feared Russia more than they did Germany. Polish Marshal Edward Śmigły-Rydz told the French ambassador, “With the Germans we risk losing our liberty; with the Russians we lose our soul.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Another complication arose in European diplomacy when a movement among the residents of Memel in Lithuania sought to join Germany. The Allied victors in the Versailles Treaty had detached Memel from East Prussia and placed it in a separate League of Nations protectorate. Lithuania then proceeded to seize Memel from the League of Nations shortly after World War I. Memel was historically a German city which in the seven centuries of its history had never separated from its East Prussian homeland. Germany was so weak after World War I that it could not prevent the tiny new-born nation of Lithuania from seizing Memel.<sup>[3]</sup>

Germany's occupation of Prague in March 1939 had generated uncontrollable excitement among the mostly German population of Memel. The population of Memel was clamoring to return to Germany and could no longer be restrained. The Lithuanian foreign minister traveled to Berlin on March 22, 1939, where he agreed to the immediate transfer of Memel to Germany. The annexation of Memel into Germany went through the next day. The question of Memel exploded of itself without any deliberate German plan of annexation.<sup>[4]</sup> Polish leaders agreed that the return of Memel to Germany from Lithuania would not constitute an issue of conflict between Germany and Poland.<sup>[5]</sup>

What did cause conflict between Germany and Poland was the so-called Free City of Danzig. Danzig was founded in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century and was historically the key port at the mouth of the great Vistula River. From the beginning Danzig was inhabited almost exclusively by Germans, with the Polish minority in 1922 constituting less than 3% of the city's 365,000 inhabitants. The Treaty of Versailles converted Danzig from a German provincial capital into a League of Nations protectorate subject to numerous strictures established for the benefit of Poland. The great preponderance of the citizens of Danzig had never wanted to leave Germany, and they were eager to return to Germany in 1939. Their eagerness to join Germany was exacerbated by the fact that Germany's economy was healthy while Poland's economy was still mired in depression.<sup>[6]</sup>

Many of the German citizens of Danzig had consistently demonstrated their unwavering loyalty to National Socialism and its principles. They had even elected a National Socialist parliamentary majority before this result had been achieved in Germany. It was widely known that Poland was constantly seeking to increase her control over Danzig despite the wishes of Danzig's German

majority. Hitler was not opposed to Poland's further economic aspirations at Danzig, but Hitler was resolved never to permit the establishment of a Polish political regime at Danzig. Such a renunciation of Danzig by Hitler would have been a repudiation of the loyalty of Danzig citizens to the Third Reich and their spirit of self-determination.[\[7\]](#)

Germany presented a proposal for a comprehensive settlement of the Danzig question with Poland on October 24, 1938. Hitler's plan would allow Germany to annex Danzig and construct a superhighway and a railroad to East Prussia. In return Poland would be granted a permanent free port in Danzig and the right to build her own highway and railroad to the port. The entire Danzig area would also become a permanent free market for Polish goods on which no German customs duties would be levied. Germany would take the unprecedented step of recognizing and guaranteeing the existing German-Polish frontier, including the boundary in Upper Silesia established in 1922. This later provision was extremely important since the Versailles Treaty had given Poland much additional territory which Germany proposed to renounce. Hitler's offer to guarantee Poland's frontiers also carried with it a degree of military security that no other non-Communist nation could match.[\[8\]](#)

Germany's proposed settlement with Poland was far less favorable to Germany than the Thirteenth Point of Wilson's program at Versailles. The Versailles Treaty gave Poland large slices of territory in regions such as West Prussia and Western Posen which were overwhelmingly German. The richest industrial section of Upper Silesia was also later given to Poland despite the fact that Poland had lost the plebiscite there.[\[9\]](#) Germany was willing to renounce these territories in the interest of German-Polish cooperation. This concession of Hitler's was more than adequate to compensate for the German annexation of Danzig and construction of a superhighway and a railroad in the Corridor. The Polish diplomats themselves believed that Germany's proposal was a sincere and realistic basis for a permanent agreement.[\[10\]](#)

On March 26, 1939, the Polish Ambassador to Berlin, Joseph Lipski, formally rejected Germany's settlement proposals. The Poles had waited over five months to reject Germany's proposals, and they refused to countenance any change in existing conditions. Lipski stated to German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop that "it was his painful duty to draw attention to the fact that any further pursuance of these German plans, especially where the return of Danzig to the Reich was concerned, meant war with Poland."[\[11\]](#)

Polish Foreign Minister Józef Beck accepted an offer from Great Britain on March 30, 1939, to give an unconditional guarantee of Poland's independence. The British Empire agreed to go to war as an ally of Poland if the Poles decided that war was necessary. In words drafted by British Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax, Chamberlain spoke in the House of Commons on March 31, 1939:

*"I now have to inform the House...that in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence and which the Polish Government accordingly considered 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. They have given the Polish Government an assurance to that effect."* [\[12\]](#)

Great Britain for the first time in history had left the decision whether or not to fight a war outside of her own country to another nation. Britain's guarantee to Poland was binding without commitments from the Polish side. The British public was astonished by this move. Despite its unprecedented nature,

Halifax encountered little difficulty in persuading the British Conservative, Liberal and Labor parties to accept Great Britain's unconditional guarantee to Poland.[\[13\]](#)

Numerous British historians and diplomats have criticized Britain's unilateral guarantee of Poland. For example, British diplomat Roy Denman called the war guarantee to Poland "the most reckless undertaking ever given by a British government. It placed the decision on peace or war in Europe in the hands of a reckless, intransigent, swashbuckling military dictatorship."[\[14\]](#) British historian Niall Ferguson states that the war guarantee to Poland tied Britain's "destiny to that of a regime that was every bit as undemocratic and anti-Semitic as that of Germany."[\[15\]](#) English military historian Liddell Hart stated that the Polish guarantee "placed Britain's destiny in the hands of Poland's rulers, men of very dubious and unstable judgment. Moreover, the guarantee was impossible to fulfill except with Russia's help..."[\[16\]](#)

American historian Richard M. Watt writes concerning Britain's unilateral guarantee to Poland:

*"This enormously broad guarantee virtually left to the Poles the decision whether or not Britain would go to war. For Britain to give such a blank check to a Central European nation, particularly to Poland — a nation that Britain had generally regarded as irresponsible and greedy — was mind-boggling."* [\[17\]](#)

When the Belgian Minister to Germany, Vicomte Jacques Davignon, received the text of the British guarantee to Poland, he exclaimed that "blank check" was the only possible description of the British pledge. Davignon was extremely alarmed in view of the proverbial recklessness of the Poles. German State Secretary Ernst von Weizsäcker attempted to reassure Davignon by claiming that the situation between Germany and Poland was not tragic. However, Davignon correctly feared that the British move would produce war in a very short time.[\[18\]](#)

Weizsäcker later exclaimed scornfully that "the British guarantee to Poland was like offering sugar to an untrained child before it had learned to listen to reason!"[\[19\]](#)

## **The Deterioration of German-Polish Relations**

German-Polish relationships had become strained by the increasing harshness with which the Polish authorities handled the German minority. The Polish government in the 1930s began to confiscate the land of its German minority at bargain prices through public expropriation. The German government resented the fact that German landowners received only one-eighth of the value of their holdings from the Polish government. Since the Polish public was aware of the German situation and desired to exploit it, the German minority in Poland could not sell the land in advance of expropriation. Furthermore, Polish law forbade Germans from privately selling large areas of land.

German diplomats insisted that the November 1937 Minorities Pact with Poland for the equal treatment of German and Polish landowners be observed in 1939. Despite Polish assurances of fairness and equal treatment, German diplomats learned on February 15, 1939, that the latest expropriations of land in Poland were predominantly of German holdings. These expropriations virtually eliminated substantial German landholdings in Poland at a time when most of the larger Polish landholdings were still intact. It became evident that nothing could be done diplomatically to help the German minority in Poland.[\[20\]](#)

Poland threatened Germany with a partial mobilization of her forces on March 23, 1939. Hundreds of thousands of Polish Army reservists were mobilized, and Hitler was warned that Poland would fight to prevent the return of Danzig to Germany. The Poles were surprised to discover that Germany did not take this challenge seriously. Hitler, who deeply desired friendship with Poland, refrained from responding to the Polish threat of war. Germany did not threaten Poland and took no precautionary military measures in response to the Polish partial mobilization.[\[21\]](#)

Hitler regarded a German-Polish agreement as a highly welcome alternative to a German-Polish war. However, no further negotiations for a German-Polish agreement occurred after the British guarantee to Poland because Józef Beck refused to negotiate. Beck ignored repeated German suggestions for further negotiations because Beck knew that Halifax hoped to accomplish the complete destruction of Germany. Halifax had considered an Anglo-German war inevitable since 1936, and Britain's anti-German policy was made public with a speech by Neville Chamberlain on March 17, 1939. Halifax discouraged German-Polish negotiations because he was counting on Poland to provide the pretext for a British pre-emptive war against Germany.[\[22\]](#)

The situation between Germany and Poland deteriorated rapidly during the six weeks from the Polish partial mobilization of March 23, 1939, to a speech delivered by Józef Beck on May 5, 1939. Beck's primary purpose in delivering his speech before the Sejm, the lower house of the Polish parliament, was to convince the Polish public and the world that he was able and willing to challenge Hitler. Beck knew that Halifax had succeeded in creating a warlike atmosphere in Great Britain, and that he could go as far as he wanted without displeasing the British. Beck took an uncompromising attitude in his speech that effectively closed the door to further negotiations with Germany.

Beck made numerous false and hypocritical statements in his speech. One of the most astonishing claims in his speech was that there was nothing extraordinary about the British guarantee to Poland. He described it as a normal step in the pursuit of friendly relations with a neighboring country. This was in sharp contrast to British diplomat Sir Alexander Cadogan's statement to Joseph Kennedy that Britain's guarantee to Poland was without precedent in the entire history of British foreign policy.[\[23\]](#)

Beck ended his speech with a stirring climax that produced wild excitement in the Polish Sejm. Someone in the audience screamed loudly, "We do not need peace!" and pandemonium followed. Beck had made many Poles in the audience determined to fight Germany. This feeling resulted from their ignorance which made it impossible for them to criticize the numerous falsehoods and misstatements in Beck's speech. Beck made the audience feel that Hitler had insulted the honor of Poland with what were actually quite reasonable peace proposals. Beck had effectively made Germany the deadly enemy of Poland.[\[24\]](#)

More than 1 million ethnic Germans resided in Poland at the time of Beck's speech, and these Germans were the principal victims of the German-Polish crisis in the coming weeks. The Germans in Poland were subjected to increasing doses of violence from the dominant Poles. The British public was told repeatedly that the grievances of the German minority in Poland were largely imaginary. The average British citizen was completely unaware of the terror and fear of death that stalked these Germans in Poland. Ultimately, many thousands of Germans in Poland died in consequence of the crisis. They were among the first victims of British Foreign Secretary Halifax's war policy against Germany.[\[25\]](#)

The immediate responsibility for security measures involving the German minority in Poland rested with Interior Department Ministerial Director Waclaw Zyboriski. Zyboriski consented to discuss the situation on June 23, 1939, with Walther Kohnert, one of the leaders of the German minority at Bromberg. Zyboriski admitted to Kohnert that the Germans of Poland were in an unenviable situation, but he was not sympathetic to their plight. Zyboriski ended their lengthy conversation by stating frankly that his policy required a severe treatment of the German minority in Poland. He made it clear that it was impossible for the Germans of Poland to alleviate their hard fate. The Germans in Poland were the helpless hostages of the Polish community and the Polish state.[\[26\]](#)

Other leaders of the German minority in Poland repeatedly appealed to the Polish government for help during this period. Sen. Hans Hasbach, the leader of the conservative German minority faction, and Dr. Rudolf Wiesner, the leader of the Young German Party, each made multiple appeals to Poland's government to end the violence. In a futile appeal on July 6, 1939, to Premier Sławoj-Składkowski, head of Poland's Department of Interior, Wiesner referred to the waves of public violence against the Germans at Tomaszów near Łódź, May 13-15<sup>th</sup>, at Konstancin, May 21-22<sup>nd</sup>, and at Pabianice, June 22-23, 1939. The appeal of Wiesner produced no results. The leaders of the German political groups eventually recognized that they had no influence with Polish authorities despite their loyal attitudes toward Poland. It was "open season" on the Germans of Poland with the approval of the Polish government.[\[27\]](#)

Polish anti-German incidents also occurred against the German majority in the Free City of Danzig. On May 21, 1939, Zygmunt Morawski, a former Polish soldier, murdered a German at Kalthof on Danzig territory. The incident itself would not have been so unusual except for the fact that Polish officials acted as if Poland and not the League of Nations had sovereign power over Danzig. Polish officials refused to apologize for the incident, and they treated with contempt the effort of Danzig authorities to bring Morawski to trial. The Poles in Danzig considered themselves above the law.[\[28\]](#)

Tension steadily mounted at Danzig after the Morawski murder. The German citizens of Danzig were convinced that Poland would show them no mercy if Poland gained the upper hand. The Poles were furious when they learned that Danzig was defying Poland by organizing its own militia for home defense. The Poles blamed Hitler for this situation. The Polish government protested to German Ambassador Hans von Moltke on July 1, 1939, about the Danzig government's military-defense measures. Józef Beck told French Ambassador Léon Noël on July 6, 1939, that the Polish government had decided that additional measures were necessary to meet the alleged threat from Danzig.[\[29\]](#)

On July 29, 1939, the Danzig government presented two protest notes to the Poles concerning illegal activities of Polish custom inspectors and frontier officials. The Polish government responded by terminating the export of duty-free herring and margarine from Danzig to Poland. Polish officials next announced in the early hours of August 5, 1939, that the frontiers of Danzig would be closed to the importation of all foreign food products unless the Danzig government promised by the end of the day never to interfere with the activities of Polish customs inspectors. This threat was formidable since Danzig produced only a relatively small portion of its own food. All Polish customs inspectors would also bear arms while performing their duty after August 5, 1939. The Polish ultimatum made it obvious that Poland intended to replace the League of Nations as the sovereign power at Danzig.[\[30\]](#)

Hitler concluded that Poland was seeking to provoke an immediate conflict with Germany. The Danzig government submitted to the Polish ultimatum in accordance with Hitler's recommendation.[\[31\]](#)

Józef Beck explained to British Ambassador Kennard that the Polish government was prepared to take military measures against Danzig if it failed to accept Poland's terms. The citizens of Danzig were convinced that Poland would have executed a full military occupation of Danzig had the Polish ultimatum been rejected. It was apparent to the German government that the British and French were either unable or unwilling to restrain the Polish government from arbitrary steps that could result in war.[32]

On August 7, 1939, the Polish censors permitted the newspaper *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny* in Kraków to feature an article of unprecedented candor. The article stated that Polish units were constantly crossing the German frontier to destroy German military installations and to carry captured German military materiel into Poland. The Polish government failed to prevent the newspaper, which had the largest circulation in Poland, from telling the world that Poland was instigating a series of violations of Germany's frontier with Poland.[33]

Polish Ambassador Jerzy Potocki unsuccessfully attempted to persuade Józef Beck to seek an agreement with Germany. Potocki later succinctly explained the situation in Poland by stating "Poland prefers Danzig to peace." [34]

President Roosevelt knew that Poland had caused the crisis which began at Danzig, and he was worried that the American public might learn the truth about the situation. This could be a decisive factor in discouraging Roosevelt's plan for American military intervention in Europe. Roosevelt instructed U.S. Ambassador Biddle to urge the Poles to be more careful in making it appear that German moves were responsible for any inevitable explosion at Danzig. Biddle reported to Roosevelt on August 11, 1939, that Beck expressed no interest in engaging in a series of elaborate but empty maneuvers designed to deceive the American public. Beck stated that at the moment he was content to have full British support for his policy.[35]

Roosevelt also feared that American politicians might discover the facts about the hopeless dilemma which Poland's provocative policy created for Germany. When American Democratic Party Campaign Manager and Post-Master General James Farley visited Berlin, Roosevelt instructed the American Embassy in Berlin to prevent unsupervised contact between Farley and the German leaders. The German Foreign Office concluded on August 10, 1939 that it was impossible to penetrate the wall of security around Farley. The Germans knew that President Roosevelt was determined to prevent them from freely communicating with visiting American leaders.[36]

## **Polish Atrocities Force War**

On August 14, 1939, the Polish authorities in East Upper Silesia launched a campaign of mass arrests against the German minority. The Poles then proceeded to close and confiscate the remaining German businesses, clubs and welfare installations. The arrested Germans were forced to march toward the interior of Poland in prisoner columns. The various German groups in Poland were frantic by this time; they feared the Poles would attempt the total extermination of the German minority in the event of war. Thousands of Germans were seeking to escape arrest by crossing the border into Germany. Some of the worst recent Polish atrocities included the mutilation of several Germans. The Polish public was urged not to regard their German minority as helpless hostages who could be butchered with impunity.[37]

Rudolf Wiesner, who was the most prominent of the German minority leaders in Poland, spoke of a disaster “of inconceivable magnitude” since the early months of 1939. Wiesner claimed that the last Germans had been dismissed from their jobs without the benefit of unemployment relief, and that hunger and privation were stamped on the faces of the Germans in Poland. German welfare agencies, cooperatives and trade associations had been closed by Polish authorities. Exceptional martial-law conditions of the earlier frontier zone had been extended to include more than one-third of the territory of Poland. The mass arrests, deportations, mutilations and beatings of the last few weeks in Poland surpassed anything that had happened before. Wiesner insisted that the German minority leaders merely desired the restoration of peace, the banishment of the specter of war, and the right to live and work in peace. Wiesner was arrested by the Poles on August 16, 1939 on suspicion of conducting espionage for Germany in Poland.[\[38\]](#)

The German press devoted increasing space to detailed accounts of atrocities against the Germans in Poland. The *Völkischer Beobachter* reported that more than 80,000 German refugees from Poland had succeeded in reaching German territory by August 20, 1939. The German Foreign Office had received a huge file of specific reports of excesses against national and ethnic Germans in Poland. More than 1,500 documented reports had been received since March 1939, and more than 10 detailed reports were arriving in the German Foreign Office each day. The reports presented a staggering picture of brutality and human misery.[\[39\]](#)

W. L. White, an American journalist, later recalled that there was no doubt among well-informed people by this time that horrible atrocities were being inflicted every day on the Germans of Poland.[\[40\]](#)

Donald Day, a *Chicago Tribune* correspondent, reported on the atrocious treatment the Poles had meted out to the ethnic Germans in Poland:

*“...I traveled up to the Polish corridor where the German authorities permitted me to interview the German refugees from many Polish cities and towns. The story was the same. Mass arrests and long marches along roads toward the interior of Poland. The railroads were crowded with troop movements. Those who fell by the wayside were shot. The Polish authorities seemed to have gone mad. I have been questioning people all my life and I think I know how to make deductions from the exaggerated stories told by people who have passed through harrowing personal experiences. But even with generous allowance, the situation was plenty bad. To me the war seemed only a question of hours.”* [\[41\]](#)

British Ambassador Neville Henderson in Berlin was concentrating on obtaining recognition from Halifax of the cruel fate of the German minority in Poland. Henderson emphatically warned Halifax on August 24, 1939, that German complaints about the treatment of the German minority in Poland were fully supported by the facts. Henderson knew that the Germans were prepared to negotiate, and he stated to Halifax that war between Poland and Germany was inevitable unless negotiations were resumed between the two countries. Henderson pleaded with Halifax that it would be contrary to Polish interests to attempt a full military occupation of Danzig, and he added a scathingly effective denunciation of Polish policy. What Henderson failed to realize is that Halifax was pursuing war for its own sake as an instrument of policy. Halifax desired the complete destruction of Germany.[\[42\]](#)

On August 25, 1939, Ambassador Henderson reported to Halifax the latest Polish atrocity at Bielitz, Upper Silesia. Henderson never relied on official German statements concerning these incidents, but instead based his reports on information he received from neutral sources. The Poles continued to forcibly deport the Germans of that area, and compelled them to march into the interior of Poland. Eight Germans were murdered and many more were injured during one of these actions.

Hitler was faced with a terrible dilemma. If Hitler did nothing, the Germans of Poland and Danzig would be abandoned to the cruelty and violence of a hostile Poland. If Hitler took effective action against the Poles, the British and French might declare war against Germany. Henderson feared that the Bielitz atrocity would be the final straw to prompt Hitler to invade Poland. Henderson, who strongly desired peace with Germany, deplored the failure of the British government to exercise restraint over the Polish authorities.[\[43\]](#)

On August 23, 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union entered into the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement. This non-aggression pact contained a secret protocol which recognized a Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. German recognition of this Soviet sphere of influence would not apply in the event of a diplomatic settlement of the German-Polish dispute. Hitler had hoped to recover the diplomatic initiative through the Molotov-Ribbentrop nonaggression pact. However, Chamberlain warned Hitler in a letter dated August 23, 1939, that Great Britain would support Poland with military force regardless of the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement. Józef Beck also continued to refuse to negotiate a peaceful settlement with Germany.[\[44\]](#)

Germany made a new offer to Poland on August 29, 1939, for a last diplomatic campaign to settle the German-Polish dispute. The terms of a new German plan for a settlement, the so-called Marienwerder proposals, were less important than the offer to negotiate as such. The terms of the Marienwerder proposals were intended as nothing more than a tentative German plan for a possible settlement. The German government emphasized that these terms were formulated to offer a basis for unimpeded negotiations between equals rather than constituting a series of demands which Poland would be required to accept. There was nothing to prevent the Poles from offering an entirely new set of proposals of their own.

The Germans, in offering to negotiate with Poland, were indicating that they favored a diplomatic settlement over war with Poland. The willingness of the Poles to negotiate would not in any way have implied a Polish retreat or their readiness to recognize the German annexation of Danzig. The Poles could have justified their acceptance to negotiate with the announcement that Germany, and not Poland, had found it necessary to request new negotiations. In refusing to negotiate, the Poles were announcing that they favored war. The refusal of British Foreign Secretary Halifax to encourage the Poles to negotiate indicated that he also favored war.[\[45\]](#)

French Prime Minister Daladier and British Prime Minister Chamberlain were both privately critical of the Polish government. Daladier in private denounced the “criminal folly” of the Poles. Chamberlain admitted to Ambassador Joseph Kennedy that it was the Poles, and not the Germans, who were unreasonable. Kennedy reported to President Roosevelt, “frankly he [Chamberlain] is more worried about getting the Poles to be reasonable than the Germans.” However, neither Daladier nor Chamberlain made any effort to influence the Poles to negotiate with the Germans.[\[46\]](#)

On August 29, 1939, the Polish government decided upon the general mobilization of its army. The Polish military plans stipulated that general mobilization would be ordered only in the event of

Poland's decision for war. Henderson informed Halifax of some of the verified Polish violations prior to the war. The Poles blew up the Dirschau (Tczew) bridge across the Vistula River even though the eastern approach to the bridge was in German territory (East Prussia). The Poles also occupied a number of Danzig installations and engaged in fighting with the citizens of Danzig on the same day. Henderson reported that Hitler was not insisting on the total military defeat of Poland. Hitler was prepared to terminate hostilities if the Poles indicated that they were willing to negotiate a satisfactory settlement. [47]

Germany decided to invade Poland on September 1, 1939. All of the British leaders claimed that the entire responsibility for starting the war was Hitler's. Prime Minister Chamberlain broadcast that evening on British radio that "the responsibility for this terrible catastrophe (war in Poland) lies on the shoulders of one man, the German Chancellor." Chamberlain claimed that Hitler had ordered Poland to come to Berlin with the unconditional obligation of accepting without discussion the exact German terms. Chamberlain denied that Germany had invited the Poles to engage in normal negotiations. Chamberlain's statements were unvarnished lies, but the Polish case was so weak that it was impossible to defend it with the truth.

Halifax also delivered a cleverly hypocritical speech to the House of Lords on the evening of September 1, 1939. Halifax claimed that the best proof of the British will to peace was to have Chamberlain, the great appeasement leader, carry Great Britain into war. Halifax concealed the fact that he had taken over the direction of British foreign policy from Chamberlain in October 1938, and that Great Britain would probably not be moving into war had this not happened. He assured his audience that Hitler, before the bar of history, would have to assume full responsibility for starting the war. Halifax insisted that the English conscience was clear, and that, in looking back, he did not wish to change a thing as far as British policy was concerned. [48]

On September 2, 1939, Italy and Germany agreed to hold a mediation conference among themselves and Great Britain, France and Poland. Halifax attempted to destroy the conference plan by insisting that Germany withdraw her forces from Poland and Danzig before Great Britain and France would consider attending the mediation conference. French Foreign Minister Bonnet knew that no nation would accept such treatment, and that the attitude of Halifax was unreasonable and unrealistic.

Ultimately, the mediation effort collapsed, and both Great Britain and France declared war against Germany on September 3, 1939. When Hitler read the British declaration of war against Germany, he paused and asked of no one in particular: "What now?" [49] Germany was now in an unnecessary war with three European nations.

Similar to the other British leaders, Neville Henderson, the British ambassador to Germany, later claimed that the entire responsibility for starting the war was Hitler's. Henderson wrote in his memoirs in 1940:

*"If Hitler wanted peace he knew how to insure it; if he wanted war, he knew equally well what would bring it about. The choice lay with him, and in the end the entire responsibility for war was his."* [50]

Henderson forgot in this passage that he had repeatedly warned Halifax that the Polish atrocities against the German minority in Poland were extreme. Hitler invaded Poland in order to end these atrocities.

## **Polish Atrocities Continue against German Minority**

The Germans in Poland continued to experience an atmosphere of terror in the early part of September 1939. Throughout the country the Germans had been told, “If war comes to Poland you will all be hanged.” This prophecy was later fulfilled in many cases.

The famous Bloody Sunday in Toruń on September 3, 1939, was accompanied by similar massacres elsewhere in Poland. These massacres brought a tragic end to the long suffering of many ethnic Germans. This catastrophe had been anticipated by the Germans before the outbreak of war, as reflected by the flight, or attempted escape, of large numbers of Germans from Poland. The feelings of these Germans were revealed by the desperate slogan, “Away from this hell, and back to the Reich!”[\[51\]](#)

Dr. Alfred-Maurice de Zayas writes concerning the ethnic Germans in Poland:

*“The first victims of the war were Volksdeutsche, ethnic German civilians resident in and citizens of Poland. Using lists prepared years earlier, in part by lower administrative offices, Poland immediately deported 15,000 Germans to Eastern Poland. Fear and rage at the quick German victories led to hysteria. German “spies” were seen everywhere, suspected of forming a fifth column. More than 5,000 German civilians were murdered in the first days of the war. They were hostages and scapegoats at the same time. Gruesome scenes were played out in Bromberg on September 3, as well as in several other places throughout the province of Posen, in Pommerellen, wherever German minorities resided.”* [\[52\]](#)

Polish atrocities against ethnic Germans have been documented in the book ***Polish Acts of Atrocity against the German Minority in Poland***. Most of the outside world dismissed this book as nothing more than propaganda used to justify Hitler’s invasion of Poland. However, skeptics failed to notice that forensic pathologists from the International Red Cross and medical and legal observers from the United States verified the findings of these investigations of Polish war crimes. These investigations were also conducted by German police and civil administrations, and not the National Socialist Party or the German military. Moreover, both anti-German and other university-trained researchers have acknowledged that the charges in the book are based entirely on factual evidence.[\[53\]](#)

The book ***Polish Acts of Atrocity against the German Minority in Poland*** stated:

*“When the first edition of this collection of documents went to press on November 17, 1939, 5,437 cases of murder committed by soldiers of the Polish army and by Polish civilians against men, women and children of the German minority had been definitely ascertained. It was known that the total when fully ascertained would be very much higher. Between that date and February 1, 1940, the number of identified victims mounted to 12,857. At the present stage investigations disclose that in addition to these 12,857, more than 45,000 persons are still missing. Since there is no trace of them, they must also be considered victims of the Polish terror. Even the figure 58,000 is not final. There can be no doubt that the inquiries now being carried out will result in the disclosure of additional thousands dead and missing.”* [\[54\]](#)

Medical examinations of the dead showed that Germans of all ages, from four months to 82 years of age, were murdered. The report concluded:

*“It was shown that the murders were committed with the greatest brutality and that in many cases they were purely sadistic acts — that gouging of eyes was established and that other forms of mutilation, as supported by the depositions of witnesses, may be considered as true.*

*The method by which the individual murders were committed in many cases reveals studied physical and mental torture; in this connection several cases of killing extended over many hours and of slow death due to neglect had to be mentioned.*

*By far the most important finding seems to be the proof that murder by such chance weapons as clubs or knives was the exception, and that as a rule modern, highly-effective army rifles and pistols were available to the murderers. It must be emphasized further that it was possible to show, down to the minutest detail, that there could have been no possibility of execution [under military law].” [55]*

The Polish atrocities were not acts of personal revenge, professional jealousy or class hatred; instead, they were a concerted political action. They were organized mass murders caused by a psychosis of political animosity. The hate-inspired urge to destroy everything German was driven by the Polish press, radio, school and government propaganda. Britain’s blank check of support had encouraged Poland to conduct inhuman atrocities against its German minority.[56]

The book *Polish Acts of Atrocity against the German Minority in Poland* explained why the Polish government encouraged such atrocities:

*“The guarantee of assistance given Poland by the British Government was the agent which lent impetus to Britain’s policy of encirclement. It was designed to exploit the problem of Danzig and the Corridor to begin a war, desired and long-prepared by England, for the annihilation of Greater Germany. In Warsaw moderation was no longer considered necessary, and the opinion held was that matters could be safely brought to a head. England was backing this diabolical game, having guaranteed the “integrity” of the Polish state. The British assurance of assistance meant that Poland was to be the battering ram of Germany’s enemies. Henceforth Poland neglected no form of provocation of Germany and, in its blindness, dreamt of “victorious battle at Berlin’s gates.” Had it not been for the encouragement of the English war clique, which was stiffening Poland’s attitude toward the Reich and whose promises led Warsaw to feel safe, the Polish Government would hardly have let matters develop to the point where Polish soldiers and civilians would eventually interpret the slogan to extirpate all German influence as an incitement to the murder and bestial mutilation of human beings.” [57]*

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## ENDNOTES

[1] Taylor, A.J.P., *The Origins of the Second World War*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961, p. 207.

- [2] DeConde, Alexander, *A History of American Foreign Policy*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971, p. 576.
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