

THE THIRTEEN DAYS BEFORE THE WAR

By ERICH OETTINGER

On the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the present world war we published in our last issue an article entitled "Success of Two Missions" which uncovered some of the background of this war. As a supplement and conclusion we now present an article which grippingly condenses into a few pages the dramatic events of the last thirteen days before the outbreak of the war on September 3, 1939. The author, a well-known German writer on politics, has used as his material the entire available pertinent literature, including the official documentary publications. With all its dramatic presentation, his work is faithful to actual historical facts.—K.M.

Monday, August 21, 1939

ONCE again the scorching, war-heavy heat of summer hung over Europe. It was August 21, 1939, and in Berlin the International Archaeological Congress, with representatives from thirty-four foreign countries, was in session. In its efforts to make use of even the most modest opportunity for Anglo-German understanding, the Berlin Committee of the German-English Society had invited the English archaeologists to an informal gathering at the Hotel Esplanade. Among the guests there were representatives of the German Foreign Office as well as members of the British Embassy, including the third secretary, young Mr. Ross. The President of the Society, who had left the room for a moment, returned to the gathering and, not without signs of agitation, said: "Gentlemen, I have just heard a special announcement on the radio. The agreement with Russia has been settled!" "Splendid!" exclaimed Mr. Ross and slapped his knee—for he thought the President referred to the planned pact between Britain and the Soviet Union.

"But with Germany," replied the President, who perceived the misunderstanding. "We have concluded a nonaggression pact with Russia! Foreign Minister Ribbentrop is flying to Moscow tomorrow to sign it." The gathering broke up soon after.

Tuesday, August 22

The news of the pact struck the whole world like a thunderbolt. The new policy

of encirclement against Germany had suffered a serious defeat. On August 22 Sir Nevile Henderson, British Ambassador to Berlin, received news from London that Prime Minister Chamberlain was sending a personal letter, written as a result of the new situation, which Henderson was to hand over without delay to Chancellor Hitler, who was staying in Berchtesgaden. How far away were the days of Munich! Poland had been mobilized since March, and England was rearming at top speed. On his way to the airfield, Henderson suddenly turned to the interpreter from the Foreign Office who was accompanying him and said with a bitter smile: "What a joke! We have a military mission in Moscow, and *you* make the agreement!"

Wednesday, August 23

While Ribbentrop was arriving in Moscow, Sir Nevile Henderson's car drew up at the Berghof, Hitler's residence at Berchtesgaden. The Führer sat down with Sir Nevile and the accompanying representatives of the German Foreign Office at the great window of the reception room looking across the mountains to Salzburg. Without much preamble, Henderson handed over the Prime Minister's letter, of which the Führer already possessed a translation and to which he said he would give a written reply. Thereupon the wily diplomat said:

"I hope a solution of the critical situation can be found; Britain fully appreciates the fact that German-British co-operation is necessary for the welfare of Europe."

The Führer replied that this should have been realized sooner. Had it not been for Britain, he would have come to a peaceful understanding with Czechoslovakia in 1938 and the same would have certainly been achieved now with Poland in the Danzig question. Today in Poland the Germans were being ill-treated in every possible way, and this because Britain had given Poland a blank cheque. He then described how, at that very spot several months before, Colonel Beck, the Polish Foreign Minister, had seen possibilities for a settlement on the basis of the German proposals, a settlement that had been made impossible by Britain's interference. The Führer went on to say that, at the least attempt on the part of Poland to take further action against Germany or against Danzig, he would immediately intervene and, furthermore, that a mobilization in the west would be answered by a German mobilization.

"Is that a threat?" Henderson asked.

"No, a protective measure!" replied the Führer, continuing to speak of the British Government's determination to destroy Germany. Sir Nevile protested that Britain did not want to destroy Germany. He argued that it was merely the principle of force which she had opposed, in reply to which the Führer asked whether Britain had ever found a solution for any of the idiocies of Versailles by way of negotiations. Henderson had nothing to reply to this, and the Führer stated that, according to a German proverb, it takes two to make a friendship. With these words he stood up.

By making his letter a personal one, Chamberlain had chosen an outwardly cordial form for his communication. Its contents, however, lacked any understanding whatever for the German point of view; indeed, it could almost be regarded as an effort at intimidation. The letter made it quite clear that England would permit no adjustment of the Eastern problem among the Central and Eastern European powers alone but insisted on having a hand in this adjustment although she had no direct interests in

these Eastern regions. While the Polish terror, which had already been lasting for months, was increasing in vehemence every day, the British Prime Minister had no other suggestion to make than to arrange for a truce during which steps could be taken to examine and deal with the complaints of the minorities. This, he hoped, would lead to the establishment of suitable conditions for direct negotiations between Germany and Poland.

During the early part of the afternoon the Führer dictated the final sentences of his reply :

The question of the treatment of European problems on a peaceful basis is not a decision which rests on Germany but primarily on those who since the crime committed by the Versailles dictate have stubbornly and consistently opposed any peaceful revision. Only after a change of spirit on the part of the responsible Powers can there be any real change in the relationship between England and Germany. I have all my life fought for Anglo-German friendship; the attitude adopted by British diplomacy—at any rate up to the present—has, however, convinced me of the futility of such an attempt. Should there be any change in this respect in the future nobody could be happier than I.

At 4.15 p.m. Henderson received the Führer's reply from his own hands at the Berghof. After glancing at the two pages, Sir Nevile folded the document and placed it in his inner pocket. He took his leave and turned to go.

"Is there no way of averting this tragedy?" he asked.

"That is entirely up to your Government," replied Adolf Hitler.

While the Führer's reply was being transmitted to London, Polish anti-aircraft guns near the borders of Danzig shot at the German passenger plane *Marschall Bieberstein*. On the same afternoon another German passenger plane was shot at by Polish anti-aircraft batteries and a Polish warship. On the following day there was a similar incident with the German passenger plane D-AHHH. Perhaps the Poles suspected Foreign Minister Ribbentrop of being in one of these planes.

Friday, August 25

Hitler had returned to Berlin during the night, and the news from Poland was

getting more and more serious. Numerous Polish divisions had appeared on the German frontier, and the ring of Polish troops around Danzig was tightening. The persecution of the German minority became more violent. In Kattowitz control had passed overnight into the hands of groups of Polish terrorists. All able-bodied Germans were led off into the interior. At Bielitz there had been shooting which resulted in eight dead and seven seriously wounded. The list of officially reported serious incidents on the German-Polish frontier between August 25 and 31, 1939, compiled by the German Foreign Office on September 1, includes forty-four items. The stream of Germans escaping from Polish terror by secret routes into Germany was swelling hourly.

Henderson was informed that Hitler wished to receive him at the Reich Chancery at 1.30 p.m., where he was met by the Führer in his study in the presence of Ribbentrop. The Führer told Henderson that he desired to make a move as regards England which should be as decisive as the move which had led to the recent agreement with Russia. Before revealing his plan, however, he referred to the fact that both Prime Minister Chamberlain as well as Lord Halifax, the Foreign Minister, had on the previous day made speeches to the effect that Germany wished to conquer the world. This assertion, he said, was ridiculous—the British Empire embraced 40 million square kilometers, Russia 19, America 9½ million, and Germany less than 600,000 square kilometers. It was quite clear who wanted to conquer the world.

He then dealt with the Polish provocations. The German-Polish problem must be solved and would be solved—but once it was solved he would be ready to approach England with a generous and comprehensive offer of a pact of friendship and reciprocal guarantee. He then handed the British Ambassador a memorandum which contained in rough outline his proposal, according to which the solution of the German-Polish conflict and a basic agreement between Germany and

England would preserve world peace. The Führer requested the Ambassador not only to telegraph his proposal to London but to fly there himself in order to leave nothing undone to impress the British Government with the urgency of the German proposal. On the morning of August 26, Henderson flew to London.

But in the evening of August 25 the British Foreign Minister and Count Raczynski, the Polish Ambassador to London, concluded an agreement of mutual assistance, of which Article 1 ran as follows:

Should one of the Contracting Parties become engaged in hostilities with a European Power in consequence of aggression by the latter against that Contracting Party, the other Contracting Party will at once give the Contracting Party engaged in hostilities all the support and assistance in its power.

The fact that the words "European Power" referred exclusively to Germany was revealed on October 19, 1939, by the written reply made by Mr. Butler, British Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs, in answer to a question asked by a Member of Parliament, whether the obligations of mutual assistance contained in the Anglo-Polish pact were to cover the case of aggression made by non-German Powers, including Russia:

No, Sir. During the negotiations which led up to the signature of the agreement, it was understood between the Polish Government and His Majesty's Government that the agreement should only cover the case of aggression by Germany; and the Government confirm that this is so.

Was the conclusion of this agreement already the reply to Hitler's generous offer? The latter must in any case already have arrived in London by telegraph. Even so, Berlin did not give up hope that, in spite of the signing of the Anglo-Polish pact, the new situation created by the Führer still left a possibility of understanding open, the more so as Henderson stayed in London for two days and did not return to Berlin till the evening of August 28.

Monday, August 28

It took some time to translate the reply of the British Government to the Führer's proposal of August 25 and to his letter of August 23, so that it was 10.30 p.m.

before Sir Nevile could hurry over to the Reich Chancery. In his pocket he carried the document that was to determine the fate of the world for a long time to come. The Führer read the reply and observed that he must study it carefully and would give the Ambassador a written reply the next day.

The gist of the British Government's reply was, apart from some general phrases regarding the praiseworthy reasons which spoke for the Führer's offer, that England had under all circumstances to honor her word given to Poland (several hours after Hitler had made his proposal!). Thus the responsibility for the coming developments—which had obviously already been discussed with the Poles in London and Warsaw—was for the time being shifted entirely onto the Poles. Nevertheless, this formulation needed some attenuation, and so the document contained the new and constructive-sounding suggestion that Germany and Poland should open negotiations and goes on to say:

[His Majesty's Government] have already received a definite assurance from the Polish Government that they are prepared to enter into discussions on this basis, and His Majesty's Government hope the German Government would for their part also be willing to agree to this course.

So now suddenly the Poles, via London, declared themselves prepared to negotiate. Were they really serious, or was it simply a new diplomatic move to shift the responsibility for coming developments onto Germany? After all, was there not a Polish Ambassador in Berlin in the person of Lipski? But although, on the day after having handed over the memorandum of his Government containing the rejection of the German proposals (March 27, 1939), Ambassador Lipski had promised to do everything in his power to overcome the difficulties, he had in the meantime not made the slightest overture for direct negotiations.

The Führer was faced by the alternative of war or peace, with all that this meant. But with brilliant penetration he found for this complicated, or rather artificially complicated situation an immediate solution by reducing it to its

elementary facts: he was ready to negotiate with Poland; but, now that it was a matter of hours, not at the snail-like tempo of a League of Nations, but at once. If they really wanted to negotiate, they must be prepared to leave at once for these negotiations. The sufferings of the German population in Poland must not continue a moment longer than was absolutely necessary.

Tuesday, August 29

In the late afternoon of August 29 the British Ambassador once again faced the Führer and Ribbentrop in the Reich Chancery and glanced through Adolf Hitler's reply to the British Government's counterproposal. He read:

For the rest, in making these proposals the German Government have never had any intention of touching Poland's vital interests or questioning the existence of an independent Polish State. The German Government, accordingly, in these circumstances agree to accept the British Government's offer of their good offices in securing the despatch to Berlin of a Polish Emissary with full powers. They count on the arrival of this Emissary on Wednesday, August 30, 1939.

Sir Nevile was taken aback at this unexpected turn in his mission. The hidden rocks in the British Government's note had clearly been avoided. He asked: "If such a Polish plenipotentiary did come [why "if," when the British Government claimed already to have Poland's assent to enter into discussions?], will he be well received? Will the discussions be conducted on a footing of complete equality?"

He received an affirmative reply. The discussions were to be held quite openly; but there must be no delay.

Wednesday, August 30

Another sunny August day dawned on Europe. The millions of people who started it like any other day had no inkling that the political developments in Berlin, London, and Warsaw were rushing toward fateful decisions. With growing anxiety, Hitler and Ribbentrop waited for Poland's reply.

They could well imagine what the atmosphere in the Polish Foreign Office was like. Since his visit to Berchtesgaden

the Polish Foreign Minister Beck had, against his better judgment, fallen more and more under the pressure of the Army and of public opinion, which was led by Poland's Anglo-Francophile press. The pacts with England had once again caused Polish nationalism, to which Poland owed her repeated resurrection, to degenerate into blind chauvinism. In spite of his insight into the situation and his distaste for the development striven for by the militarists, Beck, who lacked true inner firmness, let himself be borne along by the course of events.

Thus it is hardly surprising that the Führer and Ribbentrop waited in vain for news from the Polish Government. The day wore on . . . noon . . . afternoon . . . four o'clock . . . five o'clock. No news. Then, at last, a telephone call from Warsaw at 5.30 p.m. It was the German Chargé d'Affaires in Warsaw. The official on duty at the German Foreign Office took down the message: "Notices ordering a general mobilization have been posted in Poland since 4.30 p.m. The first day of mobilization is August 31." The Polish Army had been mobilized for months—but there had not yet been this general mobilization. Now it had occurred; and this was Warsaw's answer to Hitler's offer to negotiate with Poland.

What was the attitude taken by Poland's friends, France and England, toward the situation? The night before, Monsieur Coulondre, the French Ambassador in Berlin, had telephoned to his Foreign Minister in Paris that he agreed with the British Ambassador in that Poland should appoint an emissary, in order to "show her good will in the eyes of the world." But at the same time he had added that a journey of Foreign Minister Beck to Berlin would entail serious disadvantages, for the world would regard it as a German success and as a concession on the part of Poland.

And as for England: just before midnight on August 30, Henderson arrived at the German Foreign Office. He had intended to be there at 11.30, but at the last moment a dispatch from London had arrived which had to be decoded.

Ribbentrop received the Ambassador in the presence of Ministers Dr. Kordt and Dr. Schmidt.

Sir Nevile handed over a memorandum of the British Government and added that he had been instructed to discuss two further points orally. He began by stating that reports were current to the effect that the Germans in Poland were in part themselves responsible for their persecution.

Ribbentrop objected strongly to this remark. Germany, he said, was aware only of acts of provocation committed by the Poles, but Polish propaganda appeared to have done its work with the British Government. He refused to discuss this matter at all with the British Government.

The British tactics were obvious: the persecution of Germans in Poland gave the German Government an indisputable reason for demanding rapid action and negotiations; in order to prevent early negotiations, the British had at first represented the accusations as being "exaggerated," and now that they could no longer be denied before the world, they were declared to be self-incurred. (In his memoirs, Henderson himself later admitted: "I have no doubt in my own mind that the complaints of the Germans in Poland probably had the greater foundation in fact.")

The Ambassador then came to his second point. He told the Foreign Minister that the British Government found it difficult to advise the Polish Government to accept the procedure adumbrated in the German reply. Translated from the language of diplomats into that of clear facts, this meant no less than that the British Government were against negotiations being conducted in Berlin. This was in complete contradiction to the British Government's declaration of August 28, according to which they had obtained the Polish Government's definite consent to negotiate. In order to gloss over this fact, Henderson produced a new proposal: that the German Foreign Minister should

adopt normal contact, i.e., that when the German proposals were ready the Polish Ambassador be invited to call and to hand him the proposals for transmission to his Government with a view to immediate opening of negotiations.

This new move of delay caused Ribbentrop to remark bitterly that British intervention had so far led to only one tangible result, namely, general mobilization on the part of Poland. Midnight had passed without an answer having been received in Berlin from the Polish Government. The question of a possible proposal therefore no longer existed. Nevertheless, Ribbentrop then read out to the British Ambassador the proposals the German Government had been willing to offer Poland. The most important of these were :

The Free City of Danzig to be returned forthwith to the Reich.

A plebiscite to decide whether the Corridor was to become part of the Reich or remain with Poland.

Gdynia to remain Polish, but to have, like Danzig, a purely commercial character.

Should the result of the plebiscite be in favor of Poland, Germany to be given an extraterritorial traffic zone to secure Germany's unrestricted communication with East Prussia.

Should the result of the plebiscite be in favor of Germany, Poland to have the same right of building an extraterritorial road and railway connection to secure her free access to her port of Gdynia.

Thursday, August 31

It was 2 a.m. Henderson had returned to his Embassy and had telegraphed the report of his interview with Ribbentrop to London. The situation was most uncomfortable for his mission, since a further prevention of contact between Poland and Germany would, as a result of Polish terror and the Polish mobilization, lead to the outbreak of a war for which England would bear the entire responsibility. So Henderson asked the Polish Ambassador Lipski to call on him, hoping thus at the last moment to assume the appearance of a rescuing mediator.

In the early morning hours of August 31 he explained to the Polish Ambassador the German proposals for German-Polish negotiations. "In themselves and at

their face value, these proposals were not unreasonable and might well have served as a basis for negotiation," Sir Neville later wrote in his memoirs. He suggested to Lipski that the latter might recommend to his Government that they propose at once a meeting between Field Marshals Smigly-Rydz and Goering. Lipski agreed.

At the same hour at which the Polish and British Ambassadors were having their conversation, an attack was made by Poles on the German frontier guard on duty at the customs house near Gleiwitz.

At 6.30 p.m. of the same day, Ambassador Lipski appeared at the German Foreign Office. After a moment's wait in the reception room he was asked into the Minister's study. It was not yet too late, but any hopes which the German Foreign Minister may have had were dashed when Lipski declared: "Your Excellency, I have an oral communication to make. The Polish Government have received from the British Government the news of the possibility of a direct discussion between the German Government and the Polish Government. The Polish Government are weighing the proposal of the British Government favorably."

"Your Excellency," the German Foreign Minister inquired, "I herewith ask you expressly: are you empowered to negotiate?"

Europe's fate, indeed, the fate of the world, depended on the answer. It was: "No."

The uncompromising nature of this reply seemed incredible to Ribbentrop, and he made one last effort by asking: "Your Excellency, are you able to discuss the matter with me?"

And again Lipski answered: "No, I am without plenary powers to do so." This ended the conversation.

In the evening of August 31 the German proposals which the Poles had not wanted to hear were broadcast. Toward 8 p.m., the German broadcasting station at Gleiwitz and the customs house of

Hofinden were attacked by Polish insurgents and temporarily occupied. Later in the evening the customs building at Neukrug was attacked by thirty Polish soldiers armed with machine guns and rifles. At other places two German customs officials were fatally injured and one seriously. But the Warsaw radio station reported at 11 p.m.:

Words can now no longer veil the aggressive plans of the new Huns. Germany is aiming at the domination of Europe and is cancelling the rights of nations with as yet unprecedented cynicism. This impudent proposal shows clearly how necessary were the military orders given by the Polish Government.

Friday, September 1

The limit of endurance had been reached. England's and Poland's attitude was clear. On the morning of September 1, the Führer issued a proclamation to the armed forces in which he said:

The Polish state has refused the peaceful settlement of neighborly relations which I have striven for; instead of that, it has appealed to arms. The Germans in Poland are being persecuted by bloody terror, driven from their homes and fields. A series of border infringements, intolerable to a great power, has proved that the Poles are no longer willing to respect the German frontier. In order to put an end to this lunacy, I have no other choice than to meet force with force from now on.

At the same hour the German armed forces, taking over the active protection of the Reich, marched into Poland. At a meeting of the Reichstag on the same day, Hitler explained in detail the reasons for his decision.

The British Foreign Office wired new instructions to Henderson, on the basis of which he requested another interview with Ribbentrop. Meanwhile, the word went out at the British Embassy to "Burn! Burn everything quickly!" Soon from the chimneys of the first of Britain's diplomatic representations on the Continent rose the smoke of burning codes and secret documents. Without waiting for Henderson's meeting with Ribbentrop, most of the members of the British Embassy appeared with their luggage at the Hotel Adlon just around the corner from the Embassy.

At 9.30 p.m. Henderson stood before the German Foreign Minister. He handed

him a communication from the British Government which culminated in the statement that His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom would without hesitation fulfill their obligations to Poland unless the German Government were prepared to give His Majesty's Government satisfactory assurances that the German Government had suspended all aggressive action against Poland and were prepared promptly to withdraw their forces from Polish territory.

Ribbentrop stated in reply to this that it was not Germany who had attacked Poland, but that on the contrary it was Poland who had been provoking Germany for months. Then he remarked that if the British Government had been as active *vis-à-vis* Poland as they had been *vis-à-vis* Germany, a settlement with Poland would have been reached long ago. The Führer had waited a whole day beyond the time limit set—Poland had only replied by new and grave provocations.

Sir Nevile had no arguments to bring forward against this. His mission, that of preventing an understanding between Poland and Germany and of bringing about war, was completed. He left. It was his last interview with Ribbentrop.

At the last minute Mussolini intervened in the course of events. At 1 p.m. on August 31 the Italian Foreign Minister Ciano had informed the French Ambassador in Rome that, if England and France agreed, Mussolini would invite Germany to a conference on September 5. On the following morning at 10.20 a.m. the French Government accepted this proposal for a conference, although the German troops had by this time already been forced to cross the Polish frontier.

Saturday, September 2

On September 2 the Führer declared his agreement to the proposal, if the British communication of September 1, which had been followed by a French one in the same vein, was not to be regarded as an ultimatum. Mussolini confirmed that it was only in the nature of a warning. But at 5.20 p.m. Lord

Halifax telephoned the French Foreign Minister Bonnet: England would only agree to the proposal of a conference on condition that Germany withdrew her troops. How did Lord Halifax imagine this to be possible? How would he then prevent the Poles from falling upon the helpless German minority again? But his condition was only a new move to torpedo Mussolini's last attempt at peace.

Sunday, September 3

At 4 a.m. on September 3, instructions were received at the British Embassy to the effect that Henderson was to call on the German Foreign Minister at 9 a.m. Upon contacting the German Foreign Office, he was informed that Minister Dr. Schmidt had been empowered to receive any communication at the hour indicated.

The interview took place in the study of the Foreign Minister. "I have a communication from my Government to convey," Henderson informed Dr. Schmidt. Dr. Schmidt presented his plenipotentiary power to accept the document. The communication of the British Government again demanded the suspension of all aggressive action against

Poland and the withdrawal of German forces from Polish territory and ended with the words:

Unless not later than 11 a.m., British Summer Time, to-day 3rd September, satisfactory assurances to the above effect have been given by the German Government and have reached His Majesty's Government in London, a state of war will exist between the two countries as from that hour.

That meant in two hours. Henderson knew that he would receive no reply and took formal leave of Dr. Schmidt. At 11 a.m. the British Government informed the German Chargé d'Affaires in London that a state of war existed between Great Britain and Germany.

The French Ambassador Coulondre had, on his Government's instructions, acted in the same way as Sir Nevile Henderson. He had presented a similar ultimatum that expired at 5 p.m. on this Sunday, September 3, and to which he, too, received no reply. France, having utterly renounced her political independence, let herself be dragged without resistance into this British war.

The war had come. The wave of immeasurable suffering that was to engulf all mankind had started on its way.