CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W.1., on SATURDAY, 2nd SEPTEMBER, 1939, at 4.15 p.m.

PRESENT.

The Rt. Hon. Neville Chamberlain, M.P., (In the Chair)


The Rt. Hon. Lord Haugham, Lord Chancellor.


The Right Hon. Malcolm MacDonald, M.P., Secretary of State for the Colonies.


The Right Hon. L. Hore-Belisha, M.P., Secretary of State for War.

The Right Hon. John Colville, M.P., Secretary of State for Scotland.

The Right Hon. The Earl De La Warr, President of the Board of Education.

The Right Hon. Ernest Brown, M.C., M.P., Minister of Labour.

The Right Hon. Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith, M.P., Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

The Following were also present:

Sir Horace Wilson, G.C.B., G.C.M.G., G.C.B.

Sir Edward Bridges, K.C.B., M.C.

Sir Ernest Bridges, K.C.B., M.C., Permanent Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

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1. THE PRIME MINISTER said that as he and the Foreign Secretary would have to make statements in Parliament very soon after the conclusion of the Cabinet, it would be a great help if Sir Horace Wilson and Sir Alexander Cadogan, who would assist in drafting the statement could be present at the Meeting of the Cabinet.

The Cabinet agreed to this course, and Sir Horace Wilson and Sir Alexander Cadogan then entered the Meeting.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS said that he could best explain the position by reading a note which had been made of a telephone conversation which he had had with Count Ciano and Sir Percy Loraine.

"Count Ciano rang up Lord Halifax at 2.35 p.m. to say that the Italian Government had informed the German Government that they still thought it possible to call a conference with France, Great Britain and Poland, but that they must know first if Germany would be willing to accept. The Italian Government had not pressed the German Government, but had only informed them of their view.

Sir Percy Loraine then came to the telephone and said that the Italian Government had instructed their Ambassador in Berlin this morning to tell Herr von Ribbentrop purely for information and not as a proposal that if Herr Hitler would suspend hostilities and agree in principle to a conference on the lines proposed by the Duee, the Italian Government believed that Great Britain and France would participate and that Great Britain and France would be able to bring Poland also. The Italian Ambassador had now reported that Herr von Ribbentrop had told him that the Fuhrer had taken note of the message, that he would not be against taking it into consideration, but that he found himself in the presence of two Notes, one English and one French, of yesterday evening, the character of which was not clear to him. If their character was that of an ultimatum, the Fuhrer would take no proposal into consideration, and would naturally reply to the British and French Notes in a frankly negative sense.

With Herr von Ribbentrop's consent the Italian Ambassador went immediately to see Sir Neville Henderson, who authorised him to declare that the British Note of yesterday evening did not have the character of an ultimatum."
The Foreign Secretary explained that Sir Nevile Henderson had been authorised to say that this message was not an ultimatum, since we wanted him to refer back to us on receiving the answer to it, in order that the time when we declared war might be arranged in consultation with the French.

"Signor Attolico had informed Herr von Ribbentrop accordingly, but the latter wished (a) to have this confirmed through Rome and (b) to know whether Germany would have time to consider the Duce’s proposal for example up to noon to-morrow.

Sir Percy Loraine read out over the telephone a further telegram from the Italian Ambassador in Berlin to the following effect:

'I wish to make clear that the Fuhrer was making ready to send a reply this morning to the British and French Notes of yesterday evening, but that he has not done so and is not doing so pending receipt of the assurances suggested in my previous telegram.'

Count Ciano then asked Sir Percy Loraine to let H.M.G. know that a few minutes ago he had telephoned to M. Bonnet explaining the situation in the same way and had asked what the reply of the French Government was to Herr von Ribbentrop's two points. M. Bonnet said that the French Government's reply to both points was affirmative. Count Ciano wished to make clear to Lord Halifax that a conference in the view of the Italian Government could only be summoned if there were an immediate armistice.

Lord Halifax said that he would at once speak to the Prime Minister, in view of the statement just about to be made in Parliament. He felt, however, that the reaction of His Majesty's Government would be that the first step must be the withdrawal of German troops from Polish soil. Although he was speaking personally, he felt sure that that would be the judgment of the British Cabinet. Sir Percy Loraine passed this on to Count Ciano, who then said that he was afraid that this would be impossible, but that an armistice with a conference on the following day was, he thought, the maximum which the Italian Government could get across Berlin.
Lord Halifax said that he would ring up later in the afternoon. Count Ciano said that he was waiting for the French reply from M. Daladier. Count Ciano again said that he did not think it possible to obtain the withdrawal of German troops, and Lord Halifax said that it would be very difficult for us to contemplate a conference with German troops on Polish soil."

The Foreign Secretary said that, as a result of the receipt of these messages, the statements which the Prime Minister and he had arranged to make in the Houses of Parliament had been postponed. Immediately on receiving the message from Count Ciano he had returned to No. 10 Downing Street, and had had a conversation on the telephone with M. Bonnet. He asked Sir Alexander Cadogan to read to the Cabinet the Note he had made of this conversation. The effect of this Note was as follows:-

M. Bonnet recalled a conversation he had had with Count Ciano. Count Ciano thought that a conference, with Poland included in it, might still be possible but had enquired (1) whether the Note delivered in Berlin the previous evening was of the nature of an ultimatum, and (2) whether the German Government would be allowed until midday, September 3rd, to reply. As to (1), M. Bonnet had replied in the affirmative; as to (2) he had reserved his decision. The Secretary of State then informed M. Bonnet that he had told Count Ciano, in reply to similar enquiries, that His Majesty's Government would be likely to insist, as a first essential, on the withdrawal of German troops from Polish territory, a condition which Count Ciano had thought it would be impossible for Herr Hitler to accept. M. Bonnet felt the same, though he had agreed that insistence on this condition was highly desirable. He (M. Bonnet) had added that, before embarking upon a war, it was essential to convince public opinion that every possibility of reaching a settlement had been explored. The Secretary of State promised to let M. Bonnet have the final views of His Majesty's Government on the questions at issue and on the time limit to be inserted in the eventual ultimatum.
THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS said that, following on this conversation, he had had some discussion with the Prime Minister. He thought it would help the Cabinet if he set out the conclusions which they had provisionally arrived at. He had summarised these in the form of points to be made in the House of Commons:

First, that the communication which Sir Nevile Henderson had made to the German Government had been a final warning rather than an ultimatum.

Secondly, if the German Government asked for further time for consideration of their reply to our communication, we should be prepared to allow them until 12 noon to-morrow for this purpose, subject to their agreeing to an armistice.

Thirdly, that the primary condition for any conference would be that German troops should first withdraw from Polish soil.

Fourthly, that while we still thought that direct negotiations between Poland and Germany would be the best course, we were willing to see other Powers associated in the discussions, if this course was desired by the two countries.

The Foreign Secretary added that he thought that we might be prepared to consider an extension of the time limit from 12 noon to-morrow to 12 midnight on 5rd/4th September, if this would facilitate consideration of a conference.

In the discussion which ensued, it was generally agreed that it would be impossible to have any negotiations with Germany while German troops remained on Polish territory.
In this connection, the PRIME MINISTER recalled the words which had been used in the communication handed by our Ambassador to the German Government "that unless the German Government are prepared to give His Majesty's Government satisfactory assurances that the German Government have suspended all aggressive action against Poland and are prepared promptly to withdraw their forces from Polish territory, His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom will without hesitation fulfil their obligations to Poland".

After quoting this passage in the House of Commons yesterday, he stated that he had described the document as a last warning.

THE HOME SECRETARY said that he thought that this communication had been generally regarded as in the nature of an ultimatum, and that he thought there would be tremendous risks in accepting any delay which might well have considerable reactions on public opinion.

THE FOREIGN SECRETARY said that, in considering the hour to be fixed for the expiry of our ultimatum, it should be borne in mind that, while he understood that the Chiefs of Staff were opposed to further delay, he had had a message from the French Government to the effect that they did not want the ultimatum to expire for another 48 hours.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR AIR said that the Chief of the Air Staff strongly opposed a further delay of 48 hours. He understood that this view was based partly on purely military grounds, and partly on the moral effect of redeeming our pledge to Poland with the minimum of delay.

THE FIRST LORD OF THE ADMIRALTY said that the Naval Staff did not attach very much importance to
catching the Bremen. On other grounds, however, they were opposed to any appreciable further delay and they were anxious to carry out a reconnaissance to find out the latest position of the German naval forces.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WAR said that the advice given to him by the General Staff accorded with that given by the Chief of the Air Staff, although it should perhaps be stated that the Chiefs of Staff had not been aware of the proposals emanating from Count Ciano. On the general issue, he was strongly opposed to further delay which he thought might result in breaking the present unity in the country. Public opinion here was strongly against our yielding an inch. If the Germans were prepared to consider a standstill, it showed that they were weakening and that we should show the greatest possible strength. There was also the question that further delay might give units of the German Fleet some advantage. Reports were also current of activities of Germans inside Poland. He thought we should stand firmly on the statement which had been sent to the German Government on the previous night and insist on the immediate withdrawal of German troops from Poland. He also thought it was likely that Italy was acting in collusion with Germany, and he instanced various troop movements which lent support for this view. He therefore favoured giving Germany until midnight 22/23rd September to accept the proposal to withdraw her troops, otherwise we should regard ourselves as at war. The Dictators had made demand after demand and if we were to hesitate now, we might well find ourselves faced with war in a year's time, but in the meantime we should have lost ground by hesitation.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR AIR pointed out that, if Herr Hitler agreed to a standstill and to a withdrawal of his troops, it would mean a great loss of prestige and might result in his downfall.
THE LORD CHANCELLOR said that it must clearly be a condition of any Conference that Herr Hitler agreed, not merely to an armistice but to withdrawal of troops from Polish soil. He thought that there was no reason to believe that Herr Hitler would make concessions at the Conference if it took place.

THE PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE raised the question of Danzig, and said that in addition to withdrawal from Polish soil, the status quo must be restored in Danzig.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that this was what he and the Foreign Secretary intended.

THE CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER said that in any statement which was made it would be necessary to avoid putting forward proposals which involved an armistice, to be followed by a period in which arrangements for the Conference were discussed, before German troops had been withdrawn from Polish soil. He thought that any armistice must be followed immediately by withdrawal of German troops from Polish soil.

After some further discussion, THE PRIME MINISTER recapitulated the provisional conclusions which he and the Foreign Secretary had reached as follows: He said that they felt it was impossible to agree to Count Ciano's suggestion that a Conference should take place while German troops were still on Polish soil, even if an armistice took place. They had felt, and it was clear that the Cabinet agreed,
that there should be no discussion of terms until Germany had left Polish soil.

The second point was whether we should now say to Germany that she must indicate before midnight tonight her willingness to withdraw her troops from Polish territory, and that, failing her acceptance, we should then declare war; or whether we should give Germany more time. Herr Hitler had asked that he might have until 12 noon tomorrow to consider the Duce's proposal. Under our suggestion there was no question of giving Herr Hitler time to consider the Duce's proposal, since we insisted on acceptance by Germany of the withdrawal of German troops from Poland. It was not very likely that Herr Hitler would accept this condition, and the point at issue was whether the time allowed him to consider it should expire at midnight that night, at 12 noon tomorrow, or conceivably even later. In this connection, it was necessary to bear in mind that the French were asking for another 48 hours. Whatever conclusion was reached by the Cabinet that afternoon, it would be necessary to have further consultations with the French in order to agree our line of action with them.

THE MINISTER FOR CO-ORDINATION OF DEFENCE said that on military grounds he thought that it was undesirable to allow Herr Hitler any longer time than until midnight September 2nd/3rd to make up his mind.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE COLONIES said that the Germans could make up their minds
quickly enough on occasions and had been known to ask other people to make up their minds in a very short time. He was opposed to allowing Herr Hitler any longer period than until midnight on 2nd/3rd September.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR AIR thought that the communication to be made to the German Government should be to the effect that if the German Government would indicate by 12 midnight their willingness to withdraw their troops, we, for our part, would be prepared to consider a Conference of five Powers to consider the questions at issue between Germany and Poland.

In reply to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, THE PRIME MINISTER said that he contemplated that, in the statement which he would have to make in the House of Commons that afternoon, he would say that we were not prepared to consider a Conference unless the German troops were withdrawn from Polish soil.

The question of the military situation in Poland was then raised. The Prime Minister read out a communication which had just been made to him by the Polish Ambassador:—

The Polish Ambassador has just called and asked that the attached telegram which he has just received from his Government should be communicated immediately to the Prime Minister. He was instructed by his Government to request the immediate fulfilment of British obligations to Poland and he asked that he might have an urgent reply to his representation.
The telegram referred to read as follows:

"Battle to-day over the whole of the front has increased in intensity and has acquired very serious character. Our troops are opposing strong resistance. The whole of German Air Force is engaged against Poland. Villages and factories bombarded. The engagement of German aircraft by allied forces of greatest urgency."

THE MINISTER OF SUPPLY said that the Polish Ambassador had spoken to him twice in the House of Commons that afternoon to the effect that he was very disturbed at the attitude taken by M. Bonnet and at the delay in sending Germany an ultimatum.

THE MINISTER OF LABOUR was against allowing Germany any further time to make fresh dispositions by land or sea.

THE MINISTER FOR CO-ORDINATION OF DEFENCE said that each day, delay meant that the Poles were in a less favourable, and Germany in a more favourable, position. If a Conference took place and Herr Hitler did not agree to reasonable terms, we should have lost valuable time. The effect on the morale of the country must also be considered. From the military point of view there should be no delay beyond midnight tonight.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DOMINION AFFAIRS concurred in the view that we should give Germany up to midnight tonight to decide whether she would withdraw her troops from Polish soil.
THE PRIME MINISTER said that he thought there was generally agreement in the Cabinet on the two main points at issue. First, that there should be no negotiation with Germany unless she was first prepared to give an undertaking to withdraw her troops from Poland and Danzig. Secondly, that it was undesirable to allow Germany longer than until midnight, 2nd/3rd September to make up her mind on those points. A communication in this sense clearly constituted an ultimatum. At the same time it was evident that the precise terms of the communication to be made to Germany and the statement to be made in Parliament that afternoon would have to be settled in consultation with the French.

The Cabinet agreed:­

(1) To despatch a communication to the German Government on the lines indicated in the discussion.

(2) Authorise the Prime Minister, and Foreign Secretary to settle the terms of this communication, and of the statements to be made in Parliament this afternoon, after consultation with the French Government.

Richmond Terrace, S.W.1.,
2nd September, 1939.