

= 1938 Polish ultimatum to Lithuania =

The 1938 Polish ultimatum to Lithuania was an ultimatum delivered to Lithuania by Poland on March 17, 1938. The Lithuanian government had steadfastly refused to have any diplomatic relations with Poland after 1920, protesting the annexation of the Vilnius Region by Poland. As pre-World War II tensions in Europe intensified, Poland perceived the need to secure its northern borders. Five days earlier, Poland, feeling supported by international recognition of the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany, decided it was imperative to deliver an ultimatum to Lithuania. The ultimatum demanded that the Lithuanian government unconditionally agree to establish diplomatic relations with Warsaw within 48 hours, and that the terms be finalized before March 31. The establishment of diplomatic relations would mean a de facto renunciation of Lithuanian claims to the region containing its historic capital, Vilnius (known in Polish as Wilno).

Lithuania, preferring peace to war, accepted the ultimatum on March 19. Although diplomatic relations were established as a result of the ultimatum, Lithuania did not agree to recognize the loss of Vilnius de jure. The government of Poland made a similar move against the Czechoslovak government in Prague on September 30, 1938, when it took advantage of the Sudeten Crisis to demand a portion of Zaolzie. On both occasions, Poland used the international crises to address long-standing border disputes.

= Vilnius dispute =

Lithuania severed its diplomatic ties with Poland after the Polish general Lucjan Żeligowski staged a mutiny in October 1920 by order of Józef Piłsudski. He invaded Lithuanian-held territory, captured the disputed city of Vilnius (known to Poles as Wilno), and established the short-lived Republic of Central Lithuania. This entity was incorporated into Poland in 1922. In demographic terms Vilnius was the least Lithuanian of Lithuanian cities, divided almost evenly between the Polish-speaking population and Jews, with Lithuanian-speaking inhabitants constituting about 2-3% of the population, according to Russian (1897) and German (1916) censuses. Lithuania demanded that Polish troops withdraw behind the line drawn in the Suwałki Agreement, while Poland falsely maintained that it had not authorized Żeligowski's actions. The League attempted to mediate the dispute and Paul Hymans presented concrete proposals to form a federation. However, both sides were unwilling to make compromises and negotiations collapsed in January 1922. In January 1923, Lithuanian troops crossed over to the Allied-held Memelland and staged the "Klaipėda revolt". The Lithuanian occupation of Memel (Klaipėda) was one of the main factors that led to the decision of the Conference of Ambassadors to award Vilnius to Poland in March 1923.

The result was a state of "no war, no peace" as Lithuania avoided recognizing any Polish claims to the city and the region, as well as refusing to undertake any actions that would recognize Poland's control of Vilnius even de facto. Lithuania broke off all diplomatic relations with Poland and continuously emphasized that Vilnius remained its permanent capital (Kaunas was designated as the temporary capital). Poland refused to formally recognize the existence of any dispute regarding the region, since that would have lent legitimacy to the Lithuanian claims. Railroad traffic and telegraph lines could not cross the border, and mail service was complicated. For example, a letter from Poland to Lithuania needed to be sent to a neutral country, repackaged in a new envelope to remove any Polish signs, and only then delivered to Lithuania. The conflict over Vilnius remained the most important foreign policy issue in Lithuania, but it became increasingly marginalized in the international arena. There were unsuccessful informal attempts to normalize the situation, most notably by the Lithuanian Prime Minister Augustinas Voldemaras between 1927 and 1928 and by Foreign Minister Stasys Lozoraitis between 1934 and 1936, who asked Smetona to re-establish the diplomatic relations with Poland. Both sides engaged in emotional and nationalistic rhetoric.

= Rationale =

On March 11, a day before Austria was annexed into Greater Germany following the Anschluss, Justas Lukoševičius, a Lithuanian border patrol, shot Stanisław Serafin, a Polish soldier, on the demarcation line in the village of Trasninkai near Merkinė. The exact circumstances are not clear as the obscure event was variously portrayed as a Lithuanian provocation, a Polish provocation, or as an unfortunate accident. During the 1920s and 1930s, similar incidents had occurred: between 1927 and 1937 seven Lithuanian border guards were killed during the course of 78 events. Usually, such incidents were handled at the local level in an attempt to forestall escalation. On this occasion, however, Polish radio and newspapers picked up the story and fanned anti-Lithuanian sentiment. Protests were held in Warsaw, Vilnius, and four other cities where the crowds shouted for military action against Lithuania. There is evidence that the Camp of National Unity was involved in organizing the protests.

On March 13, the Polish government issued a threatening statement accusing Lithuania of provocation. On the following day, the Senate of the Republic of Poland called for the establishment of diplomatic relations and for the Lithuanian renunciation of claims to Vilnius. Upon receiving news that Poland was considering extreme measures, President Antanas Smetona was verging towards agreeing to discuss diplomatic relations, but changed his mind at almost the last minute. On the night of March 14, the Lithuanians, acting through France's envoy to Warsaw, proposed a commission to investigate the shooting incident and to agree on measures to avoid such incidents in the future. This was a partial measure that clearly did not satisfy Poland, which responded by refusing, in the first paragraph of the ultimatum delivered three days later, to establish such a commission. At the same time Lithuanian diplomats approached foreign powers in a bid for international support.

= = Initial version = =

The first version of the ultimatum, as drafted by Edward Rydz-Śmigły, Prime Minister Felicjan Sławoj Składkowski, and Jan Szembek, contained six demands:

Establish normal diplomatic and consular relations with Poland

Allow normal railway and road traffic and direct telephone and telegraph lines across the demarcation line

Amend the Lithuanian constitution to acknowledge that Vilnius was no longer the capital of Lithuania

Conclude the convention protecting the rights of the Polish minority in Lithuania in full

Conclude a trade and tariff agreement

Fully investigate the incident in Trasninkai

The Polish Foreign Minister Józef Beck, who had just returned from a trip to Sorrento, called for a government meeting on the night of March 16. During the meeting he argued that the ultimatum needed to contain only one demand: the establishment of diplomatic relations. In his view, such an ultimatum would not have violated any genuine Lithuanian interests and would offer much improved prospects for peaceful resolution of the conflict and a speedy relief of tension. It was in accordance with Beck's vision for Eastern Europe, which was based on a Warsaw-dominated Polish-Baltic-Scandinavian bloc free of Soviet or German influence, a modified version of Józef Piłsudski's *Międzymorze*, which required the normalization of relations with Lithuania. The removal of the other demands also reflected political pressure on Poland from the Soviet Union, France, and the United Kingdom to prevent the conflict from escalating into warfare.

The Polish government agreed to Beck's proposal, and the ultimatum was toned down. However, at the same time, Beck ordered military preparations. Poland assembled four divisions along the demarcation line; about 50,000 Polish troops were present, and just over 20,000 Lithuanian troops. The Polish troops were reinforced by armored vehicles, by two air force regiments, consisting of about one hundred aircraft, and by the Polish fleet in the waters of the Baltic Sea along the Lithuanian shore.

= = The ultimatum = =

The final text of the ultimatum , completed by Józef Beck and delivered through a Polish envoy in Tallinn to Bronius Dailid?, the Lithuanian envoy in Tallinn , was as follows :

1 . " The proposition of the Lithuanian Government of 14 March cannot be accepted for it does not give sufficient guarantees concerning the security of the frontier in view of the negative results of all Polish ? Lithuanian negotiations made up to the present time . "

2 . " For this reason the Polish Government declares that it considers as the only solution corresponding to the gravity of the situation the immediate establishment of normal diplomatic relations without any previous condition . This is the only way to regulate the neighborly questions for a Government animated by good faith to avoid events dangerous to peace . "

3 . " The Polish Government allows the Lithuanian Government 48 hours from the moment the note is presented for the acceptance of this proposition in making it known that diplomatic representations at Kaunas and Warsaw will be accredited not later than March 31 , of this year . Until that date all discussions of a technical or other character between the Polish and Lithuanian Governments shall be continued by the envoys extraordinary and ministers plenipotentiary at Tallinn .

The exchange of notes attached concerning the establishment of diplomatic relations shall take place , before the expiration of the period of 48 hours mentioned , at Tallinn between the Polish and Lithuanian Ministers at Tallinn . "

4 . " The proposition above mentioned will not be the subject of discussion with regard to its content or form ? it is an unchangeable proposition .

The failure to respond or the presentation of any supplements or reservations shall be considered by the Polish Government as a refusal . In the event of a negative reply the Polish Government will guarantee the just interest of the state by its proper means . "

The ultimatum contained an attachment : a draft of what would be deemed an acceptable response to the ultimatum . The proposed response stated only that Lithuania agreed to establish regular diplomatic relations , send a legation to Warsaw , and guarantee normal conditions of operation for a Polish legation in Kaunas .

= = International reaction = =

After the Soviet ? Lithuanian Peace Treaty was ratified in 1920 , the Russian SFSR recognized Lithuanian claims to the Vilnius Region and continued to support them . In its responses to the 1938 ultimatum , the Soviet Union expressed concerns over Lithuania 's independence and threatened to abrogate the Soviet ? Polish Non @-@ Aggression Pact of 1932 . It made it clear , though , that it did not wish to be drawn into an armed conflict . This stance has been attributed to the growth of a threat from Japan ; armed assistance to Lithuania would have required the Red Army to invade either Poland or Latvia and could have resulted in a war on two fronts . The Soviets urged France , a major ally of Poland at the time , to de @-@ escalate the conflict and encourage a more moderate version of the ultimatum . France and the United Kingdom , preoccupied with the Anschluss , pressured Lithuania to normalize the relationship with Poland as soon as possible . They feared that the ultimatum had been approved by Nazi Germany .

Germany , led by Adolf Hitler , now turned its attention to the Klaip?da Region , then held by Lithuania . In April 1938 , Hitler stated that control of the Port of Klaip?da (German : Memel) and its surrounding area was Germany 's second @-@ most important issue , following the status of the Sudeten area . In the event of armed hostilities between Poland and Lithuania , German troops were to defend and occupy the Klaip?da region and significant portions of western Lithuania . The Polish ambassador to Nazi Germany , Józef Lipski , was informed of these plans . The Poles agreed to cooperate with German troops and to respect German interests in Klaip?da if such an armed conflict were to arise . However , in Hitler 's assessment , an immediate bid for Klaip?da was impolitic ; he wished to maintain the status quo until more time had passed after the Anschluss . The German suggestion was that Lithuania concede to the Polish demands .

Lithuania , Latvia , and Estonia , the three Baltic states , had formed the Baltic Entente in 1934 . Its principal purposes were coordination of joint foreign policy and mutual international diplomatic support ; it was not a military alliance . In Latvian and Estonian opinion , the Polish ? Lithuanian dispute over Vilnius was outside the scope of the Entente , but they wished for a resolution , considering the conflict detrimental to the stability of the region . Latvia attempted to persuade Estonia to exert mutual pressure on Lithuania for a speedy acceptance of the ultimatum . This reaction from an ally was unexpected .

= = Acceptance = =

President Smetona held a government meeting late on the night of March 18 , to decide whether to accept the ultimatum . Lithuania clearly lacked international support and the demand was rather tame . A refusal would have cast Lithuania in an unfavorable light as an unreasonable disputant that had irrationally rejected peaceful diplomatic relations for eighteen years . Lithuanian diplomats were divided on the issue , while popular opinion was strongly against accepting the ultimatum . Various campaigns for the Lithuanian liberation of Vilnius had attracted massive participation . " Mourning of Vilnius Day " (October 9 , when ?eligowski invaded Lithuania and captured Vilnius) , had become an annual event , and the largest social organization in interwar Lithuania was the League for the Liberation of Vilnius (Vilniaus vadavimo s?junga , or VVS) , with some 25 @, @ 000 members . Passionate feelings about Vilnius were expressed in a popular slogan " Mes be Vilniaus nenurimsim " (we will not rest without Vilnius) , part of a poem by Petras Vai?i?nas . While Paul Hymans ' regional peace plans at the League of Nations were under negotiation , Lithuanian Prime Minister Ernestas Galvanauskas barely survived an assassination attempt . A government decision to open over 80 Polish schools in Lithuania was a probable factor in the 1926 Lithuanian coup d'état . Any government making concessions to Poland at that time risked an ouster .

President Smetona received memoranda from nine nationalistic organizations urging the government to reject the ultimatum . However , a decisive comment was made by General Stasys Ra?tikis , the commander of the Lithuanian army : He testified that a military victory over Poland was impossible and argued for a peaceful resolution . The government 's decision was confirmed by the Fourth Seimas with minimal discussion . On March 19 , Dailid? relayed acceptance of the ultimatum to the Poles , who gave a 12 @-@ hour extension to decide on the ultimatum as a show of good faith .

= = Aftermath = =

The ultimatum contributed to the general atmosphere of tension and fear in Europe . It relieved some of the pressure on Germany that had arisen in the aftermath of the Anschluss and tested the Soviets ' willingness to defend their interests in Eastern Europe . Fears were expressed , both in Lithuania and abroad , that the establishment of diplomatic relations was not the only goal of Warsaw and that more far @-@ reaching ultimata might follow . Speculations arose that Poland might seek to resurrect the Polish ? Lithuanian Commonwealth , using Germany 's annexation of Austria as a precedent . Poland announced that it planned to create a neutral bloc comprising Poland , Lithuania , Latvia , Estonia , and Romania to counter both fascism and communism . It stated that it had no wish to incorporate Lithuanian territories and maintained that the bloc would be formed on the basis of bilateral non @-@ aggression and economic treaties . According to The New York Times , the impact of the ultimatum was felt on Wall Street ; on March 17 , the foreign currency and bond markets sagged , in some cases reaching the lowest points seen in several years . These markets recovered on March 19 , after the ultimatum was accepted .

The acceptance triggered a government crisis in Lithuania : on March 24 , Prime Minister Juozas T?belis , who held uncompromising positions over Vilnius and at the time of the ultimatum was undergoing medical treatment in Switzerland , stepped down . His successor , Vladas Mironas , who was in favor of normalizing relations with Poland , assembled a new cabinet of ministers . Despite increasing pressure to form a broader coalition , the new cabinet was composed solely of members

of the Lithuanian Nationalists Union . The unconditional acceptance hurt Lithuanian pride and damaged the reputation of the party . The suppressed opposition used this damage as an opportunity to renew its activities and formed a group called A?is (Axis) . In Poland the acceptance was greeted with enthusiasm , described as a " great bloodless victory " , and celebrated by a military march in Vilnius .

A few days after the ultimatum , both Lithuania and Poland named their ambassadors . Kazys ?kirpa was sent to Warsaw , and Franciszek Charwat was sent to Kaunas before March 31 , the deadline indicated in the ultimatum . Negotiations over practical matters began on March 25 , in Augustów , and by June three agreements covering rail transit , mail service , and river navigation had been concluded . The railroad , torn apart for several kilometers at the border , was repaired . A customs post was established in Vievis , and consulates were opened in Klaip?da and Vilnius . Lithuania closed the League for the Liberation of Vilnius and the Vilnius Foundation ; the latter organization had given financial support to Lithuanian activities in the Vilnius Region . Nevertheless , Lithuania continued to claim Vilnius as its de jure capital . In May 1938 a new constitution was adopted , which echoed the previous constitution 's statement that Vilnius was the permanent capital of Lithuania and that Kaunas was merely a temporary capital . Poland continued to suppress Lithuanian organizations in Vilnius .

A thaw in Polish ? Lithuanian relations began in spring 1939 . After the German ? Czech and German ? Lithuanian crises , Poland made more active efforts to ensure Lithuania 's assistance , or at least neutrality , in the event of a war with Nazi Germany . Lithuanian General Stasys Ra?tikis and Polish Foreign Minister Józef Beck made high @-@ profile visits to each other 's countries , and Poland improved the conditions of Lithuanians in the Vilnius Region . However , Lithuania did not believe that Poland and its western allies were strong enough to resist Germany and the Soviet Union . When Germany invaded Poland in September 1939 , Lithuania maintained a policy of strict neutrality , refusing repeated German offers for a joint attack on Poland to capture Vilnius . Instead , Lithuania interned about 15 @,@ 000 Polish soldiers and accepted about 35 @,@ 000 Polish civilian refugees . The Soviet Union returned Vilnius to Lithuania after the Soviet invasion of Eastern Poland in September 1939 . Neither country was aware at the time of the secret protocols of the Molotov ? Ribbentrop Pact , signed in August 1939 , in which Germany and the Soviet Union agreed to divide the region into their spheres of influence . In June 1940 , the Soviet Union occupied and annexed Lithuania in accordance with the Molotov ? Ribbentrop Pact . A year later Russia was attacked by Nazi Germany leading to the Nazi occupation of Lithuania .