

The Origins of the British Guarantee to Poland of 31 March 1939¹

Marek Rodzik

ORCID ID: 0000-0001-7436-2408

Abstract

During an address to the House of Commons on 31 March 1939, Arthur Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, gave a guarantee to Poland. Today, there is no doubt that the United Kingdom guaranteed only the independence of the Polish Republic and not its territorial integrity, thereby enabling the possibility of a peaceful settlement of the German-Polish dispute over Gdańsk and the so-called Danzig Corridor. This guarantee was a turning point in relations between Warsaw and London, leading to direct political co-operation between both states in the months leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War.

The aim of the present short paper is to determine the essential factors which underlay Chamberlain's guarantee. For while sharing the established historiographical view that, had Germany not broken the Munich Agreement, it would have been difficult to imagine a serious political dialogue between Poland and Great Britain, it is worth considering whether the first heralds of a direct and common understanding between London and Warsaw can be observed in as early a period as the Sudeten crisis.

Historiography has repeatedly emphasized that Great Britain's policy of *appeasement* in the second half of the 1930s was dictated by numerous motives; the inadequate armament of the United Kingdom and the awareness of the negative impact on the economy of overly exorbitant military spending, the traumatic experiences of the First World War, the detachment of the dominions from the problems of the Old Continent, as well as the belief held by a large part of the establishment that Germany, having been treated too severely at the Paris Peace Conference, would be satisfied with concessions within reasonable limits – these are just some of the more important arguments which guided Great Britain's conciliatory political course.²

Historians have traditionally associated the breaking of the Munich Agreement by Hitler on 15 March 1939 with a radical change in British foreign policy, which resulted in the abandonment of the concept of *appeasement* in favor of attempting to contain Germany. This interpretation began to face progressive challenges based on the assumption that the United Kingdom's political priorities had only partially changed. Anna Maria Cieniała, a specialist in the British politics of the period, has made a significant contribution to the consolidation of this view, going so far as to state that it was old politics in a new costume. Generally speaking, London sought to resolve the Polish-German dispute over the Free City of Gdańsk in a peaceful manner and to the benefit of Berlin, with the intention of postponing armed conflict. However, the possibilities of political maneuver – especially for the Prime Minister, Arthur Neville Chamberlain, who was still an adherent of *appeasement* – were limited by the pressure of public opinion, and thus Warsaw could not be subjected to such far-reaching pressure as Czechoslovakia had experienced in the previous year (Cieniała, 1986; 1990; 2008).

The Polish policy of balance, based on the maintenance of armed neutrality between Germany and the Soviet Union, also assumed reassurances through its alliance with France and was intended to be further strengthened through efforts aimed at obtaining a direct agreement with Great Britain. The conclusion of a German-Polish Non-Aggression Pact on 17 January 1934 and the extension of the non-aggression treaty signed two years previously with Moscow were diplomatic steps that strengthened Poland's political position in the region. This was noticed in the United Kingdom, although it did not sway London to abandon its principle of avoiding political commitments east of the Rhine (Kornat, 2012, pp. 310 ff.).

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2 For a summary of the opinions of English historiography on *appeasement*, see Sidney Aster (Aster, 2008).

Historiography suggests that, essentially, the British guarantee was brought into being in consequence of the changes that were made in the United Kingdom's policies in the second half of March 1939 as a result of Hitler's violation of the Munich Agreement.³ It should be considered, however, whether the initial factors leading to the issuance of the guarantee can possibly be found – even to a limited extent – in the period of the Sudeten crisis.⁴ Paradoxically, Chamberlain and Beck's concepts of foreign policy – with the obvious differences in their determinants – was united by a common position regarding the importance of bilateralism. For London, this translated into an attempt at the direct equalization of relations with Germany at the expense of the concessions forced upon Czechoslovakia, thus determining the course of British policy towards Poland. Therefore, one can agree with the thesis expressed by historian Mieczysław Nurek that the place of the Republic of Poland in the concept followed by the United Kingdom was definitely secondary and subordinate to its relations with Germany (Nurek, 1983, p. 139).

At the same time, the Foreign Office did not disregard the strategic importance of the Republic of Poland, and this finds reflection in contemporary documentation. In his memorandum of 17 March 1938, Orme Sargent, a higher-ranking official at the Central Department of the Foreign Office, proposed a plan for the provision of financial support to states that could be useful in halting German imperialism, which also represented a long-term threat to the security of Great Britain. As Sargent wrote:

Such subsidies might take either the form of special commercial credits, guaranteed loans, or direct gifts either of money or war material. The countries who might be considered for loans and credits would be Japan, Italy, Russia, Poland, and whatever Spanish Government may emerge from the civil war (especially if it is a Franco government). This list is a repellent one, but necessity makes strange and unpleasant bedfellows (Memorandum by Sir O. Sargent..., 17 March 1938, p. 7).

3 For historiographic views on the British guarantee, see Marek Kornat (Kornat, 1999) and Bruce Strang (Strang, 1996). It is worth mentioning that the first Polish historian to investigate the direct route of Great Britain to granting Poland this groundbreaking political commitment on the basis of minutes of Cabinet meetings was Janusz Stefanowicz (Stefanowicz, 1971).

4 It should be noted that Simon Newman devoted an entire chapter of his monograph on the British guarantee to economic interest of a political nature in South Eastern Europe, which was displayed by London in the second half of the 1930s, although he strongly overestimated its importance (Newman, 1981, pp. 60–83).

The approach he proposed was not accepted by the British government, but initiatives related to his proposal made themselves felt to some extent in May 1938, when the Interdepartmental Committee on Central and South Eastern Europe was established. Initially, Poland was not included in this body's scope of operations. A Foreign Office memorandum from 24 May 1938 emphasized that the economic hegemony of the Third Reich in Central and Eastern Europe was a state that would be extremely difficult to reverse. The British side could, however, counteract this state of affairs with a limited economic response in order to present itself as a viable alternative political force for countries in the region; Romania, Greece, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia were mentioned in this context (Memorandum British Influence..., 24 May 1938). The omission of Poland could have resulted primarily from its geographical remoteness from the Mediterranean basin, where British imperial interests were mainly concentrated.

Of equal importance was the fact that Poland's role could only increase if this approach was given the momentum postulated by, for example, Robert Boothby, then a stockbroker and conservative MP in the House of Commons. On 16 June 1938, Boothby sent a letter to Prime Minister Chamberlain calling for more economic resources to counter further German economic expansion in the region. This expansion was to be a prelude to the Third Reich gaining a potential that could be directed against Great Britain's status as a superpower (Copy of a Letter Sent to the Prime Minister..., 16 June 1938, pp. 2-3).⁵ While in the event of serious competition for the markets of Central and South Eastern Europe, which would translate into political stock, Poland's position would naturally become, according to the MP, "in some respects the most important of all" (Copy of a Letter Sent to the Prime Minister..., 16 June 1938, p. 4). Boothby's opinions could not, however, significantly change the priorities of Chamberlain's strategy, although they fit in with the dissident voices being raised in the United Kingdom at the time to stop German economic expansion in Central and Eastern Europe. These voices appeared both in the press, e.g. in *The Economist*, *The Spectator*, and *The Manchester Guardian*, as well as in the parliamentary speeches of Winston Churchill and Harold Macmillan (Kaiser, 1980, p. 248).

The National Archives in London contain a collection of papers of Frederick Leith-Ross, the chief economic advisor to the government

5 "The problem confronting us at the moment is to find a way by which legitimate German economic expansion in central and eastern Europe can be rendered comparatively innocuous from a political and military point of view. For if Germany succeeds in establishing effective political and military control in Europe from the Baltic and the Rhine to the Black Sea and the Dardanelles, then everything we have struggled and fought to prevent happening for the last three hundreds will have been achieved, and the very existence of the British Empire will be threatened as never before."

and the Head of the Interdepartmental Committee on Central and South Eastern Europe, according to which it was his initiative that influenced Poland's inclusion in the Committee's scope of interest. In a letter to Alexander Cadogan, Permanent Undersecretary of State at the Foreign Office, dated 8 June 1938, Leith-Ross described the justifiability of including Poland in the committee's activities; certain that the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord Halifax, would agree to such a solution, this suggestion raised no objections from Cadogan. (Letter by F. Leith-Ross..., 8 June 1938; Letter by A. Cadogan..., 11 June 1938; Letter by F. Leith-Ross, 14 June 1938). Ultimately, Poland was included in the activities of the Interdepartmental Committee on Central and South Eastern Europe by the decision of the Foreign Policy Committee of 16 June 1938 (Cabinet. Committee on Foreign Policy..., 16 June 1938).

The statements of two politicians – Józef Retinger and Jan Szembek – are especially interesting in this context. In a private letter from London at the beginning of July 1938, Retinger wrote: "I learn that, indeed, the Polish government is now hurriedly negotiating a larger loan in England and that it has a fairly good chance of success" (Letter from J. Retinger..., 6 July 1938). On the other hand, Szembek, the Polish Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, noted in his diary on 7 July 1938 that the British interest in the economic situation in Central and South Eastern Europe had started to take on a political aspect with regards to the Republic of Poland:

A few days ago, Ambassador Raczyński was visited by Sir George Bowle, one of the very prominent representatives of the English economic and industrial circles, who was sounding out the possibility of replacing French capital with English capital in the financing of our armaments.

And further:

Messrs. Merdinger and Zbijewski from our Embassy in London arrived to present the British offers and points of interest. They were received by Minister Kwiatkowski, who responded very positively to the British suggestions they brought. Mr Podoski (the head of the Anglo-Saxon Section at the Western European Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) emphasized that England is currently greatly interested in the situation in Europe (Szembek, 1972, pp. 210–213).

The British soundings made an impression on Beck; on 8 July, Józef Potocki (Deputy Director of the Political Department and Head of the Western European Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) announced to his deputy that the Minister of the Treasury, Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski, had already involved himself in their analysis (Szembek, 1972, pp. 210–213).

Nevertheless, Poland did not receive British financial support – so eagerly awaited – in 1938. Additionally, Warsaw’s declaration of demands to Czechoslovakia towards the end of the Sudeten crisis, among others for application of the most-favored-nation clause (whereby the Polish minority obtained concessions *de facto* analogous to those granted to the German side), and the seizure of Zaolzie following the submission of an ultimatum, duly accepted by Prague, led to a serious cooling in Polish-British relations.

Paradoxically, this did not mean that the Foreign Office’s ideas of economic influence in Poland were abandoned, but the implementation of similar concepts was hampered by Poland’s relatively low political standing in the United Kingdom. In a letter to Howard Kennard, the British Ambassador in Warsaw, dated 3 December 1938, Orme Sargent pondered the form of London’s policy towards Warsaw, concluding that a negative assessment of Poland’s actions during the Sudeten crisis would not affect Great Britain’s intention to maintain the best possible mutual relations, and that it would remain in British interests to maintain Poland’s independence between Germany and the Soviet Union (O. Sargent to F. Kennard..., 3 December 1938). According to a note made by one of the officials of the Central Department at a meeting at the Treasury on 8 December, a short discussion was to be held on possible financial aid for Poland. The matter was supposed to concern loans for electrification, but it was agreed that it would be a small sum, totaling no more than 200,000 pounds. The Foreign Office accepted, considering the proposed amount politically sufficient to emphasize that Great Britain had not lost all interest in Poland.⁶ At the same time, no projects of greater ambition were submitted, as it was not considered at the time that an increased level of support would have a more pronounced political effect (Note..., 8 December 1938).⁷

In his biography of Lord Halifax, *The Holy Fox. The Life of Lord Halifax*, British historian Andrew Roberts presented an interesting interpretation regarding the origins of Chamberlain’s guarantees to Poland of 31 March 1939, as well as of those granted to Romania on 13 April 1939. He saw them as Halifax’s push for economic aid in order to maintain British political influence in South Eastern Europe. This became apparent after the Munich Conference, which was followed by a deepening of the rift between the Prime Minister, who still thought in terms of *appeasement* and was reluctant to give the impression of an “encirclement” of Germany, and Halifax, who was more and more inclined to return to the concept of

6 “If possible something should be done to show the Poles that we were not losing interest in them.”

7 “[...] we did not consider that any financial assistance on our part would materially affect Polish policy in the balance of power between Russia and Germany.”

balance of power, and who opted to purchase 200,000 tons of grain from Romania despite the lack of any economic justification. As Roberts wrote:

The genesis of the guarantees to Poland and Romania can be found in these strategic and economic debates of late 1938 and early 1939, in which Halifax was the chief proponent of the “forward” policy. [...] Halifax’s refusal to allow Germany a free hand in South-East Europe amounted to a reversion to the mainstream of traditional “balance of power” foreign policy, abandoned after Versailles, of active involvement to prevent any one power dominating Europe (Roberts, 2015, pp. 183–185).

The British government was, however, most hesitant to implement this type of venture on a larger scale. Taking into account the idea of maintaining political influence in Poland via economic means, albeit not realized, one may extend the interpretation proposed by Roberts and accept that the guarantees to Poland originated in the summer of 1938, however with the proviso that this thesis is treated in terms of a largely theoretical interest in Poland’s political value. The concept of financial support appeared primarily in the Central Department of the Foreign Office, but it was also backed – albeit to a lesser degree – by Lord Halifax, who, although supportive of the establishment of the Interdepartmental Committee on Central and South Eastern Europe, remained a devoted advocate of *appeasement* during the Sudeten crisis.

At the political level, the first heralds of an improvement in Polish-British relations – after the serious cooling in the wake of Munich – appeared at the turn of December 1938 and January 1939. It was then that cooperation commenced against the backdrop of the January meeting of the League of Nations’ Committee of the Three (the body of the League of Nations responsible for the affairs of the Free City of Gdańsk, consisting of the representatives of Great Britain, France and Sweden). At Poland’s request, the office of the High Commissioner of the League of Nations was not abolished despite the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws in the Free City in November 1938; furthermore, Carl Jakob Burckhardt, who held this position, went on leave. It was at this time, too, that the idea of Józef Beck’s visit to London was first suggested, and its date was finally set for the first week of April 1939.⁸ A Foreign Office memorandum drawn up at the end of March stated thus: “Since the beginning of this year, Polish policy has tended to swing back to co-operation with Western Powers”

⁸ For additional information, see M. Cienciąła (Cienciąła, 1994) and Marek Rodzik (Rodzik, 2019, pp. 121–146).

(Foreign Office Memorandum..., 29 March 1939). In his diary entry for 13 February 1939, Edward Raczyński, the Polish Ambassador to Great Britain, emphasized:

After the New Year of 1939, prospects for contacts with politicians in London, and especially with the Foreign Office, have improved somewhat. I am working on bringing the foreign minister to London under the guise of the Gdańsk issue, but essentially for a *tour d'horizon* with Halifax (Raczyński, 1997, p. 25).

The threat posed by German imperialism to both countries undoubtedly paved the way for a Polish-British agreement, even regardless of Great Britain's concern that Poland would eventually find itself in the orbit of German influence. Nevertheless, the scope of the German requests and then demands first presented by Joachim von Ribbentrop to Ambassador Józef Lipski on 24 October 1938 remained unknown to London. Poland, on the other hand, had reasons to fear that, despite the growing dynamics of rearmament, the United Kingdom might prefer *appeasement* to a determined effort at stopping Germany.

Both countries were surprised when Nazi troops entered Prague on 15 March 1939. The chain of political events that had begun with the breaking of the Munich Agreement in the second half of that month has repeatedly been a subject of debate for historiographers. There is therefore no need to recall in the present paper the most important events leading up to the unilateral British guarantee of 31 March, which together with Józef Beck's visit to London at the beginning of the following month resulted in the extension of obligations to both parties, thus becoming the basis for the formal alliance entered into on 25 August 1939.

For Warsaw, the guarantee gave hope of finding a means of arranging relations with Germany in Gdańsk that would avert the prospect of war and ensure respect for the necessary minimum of Polish interests. If, however, a compromise turned out to be impossible, the scenario of an isolated clash with Germany would no longer apply (Prażmowska, 1987, p. 67). For London, the guarantee granted to Poland was intended to be a signal to Hitler that crossing yet another line of unilaterally imposed concessions would mean an outbreak of military conflict; nevertheless, from the British point of view this did not close the door to a peaceful resolution of the dispute (Dutton, 2001, p. 213). The Polish-British alliance, formed in March and April 1939, was in no way exotic, for "exoticism" is determined not by geographical distance, but by the lack of a commonality of interests.

In summary of Polish-British relations in the previous six months, Edward Raczyński wrote in his report dated 12 April 1939:

During the last 6 months, the attitude of Great Britain towards Poland has undergone numerous twists and turns: after the vexation and dissatisfaction caused by the incomprehension of our position on the Munich Agreement there was a period of coldness and indifference, then a period of hope that German expansion would bypass the Balkans and go eastwards, via Poland, to Russia, and thereafter the events of March, the occupation of Czechoslovakia, and the threat to Romania have opened their eyes to the danger threatening important defensive points of the Empire. Poland did not lie within the focus of England's immediate interests, interests which, as far as Europe is concerned, were concentrated around the North Sea and the Mediterranean. For this reason, England attached fundamental importance to the situation of Denmark, the Netherlands and Belgium on the one hand, and of the Balkan states, namely Turkey and Greece, on the other (*Raport Edwarda Raczyńskiego...*, 12 April 1939).

It is difficult to deny the realism of Raczyński's appraisal. Although the origins of Chamberlain's guarantee to Poland can be traced to an earlier period, there is no doubt that the guarantor of political rapprochement between Warsaw and London was Hitler, and that without his premeditated violation of the Munich Agreement, the Polish-British alliance would have been a scenario exceptionally difficult to imagine.

(transl. by Ian Stephenson)

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