

Poland and the Coming of the Second World War—The Biddle Report

Excerpts from the Diplomatic Papers of A. J. Drexel Biddle, Jr., United States Ambassador to Poland, 1937-1939

Ohio State University, Columbus

September 7, 1939 Fleeing Warsaw for Krzemieniec

After refueling in Luck, each car of our Embassy Group in turn proceeded through Dubno to Krzemieniec. At the outskirts of Dubno the car I was driving was halted by military guards. We stopped under some trees during an aerial bombardment of the railway yards, not far distant. I arrived at Krzemieniec at about 10:30 A.M. (Thursday, September 7). Mr. Kulski (assistant Counselor of the Foreign Office, who together with his wife had accompanied us from Nalczow in one of my two cars) took charge of preliminary arrangements towards setting up the Foreign Office and billeting the various Embassies and Legations. I was informed by the Foreign Office that their reports indicated (a) the Polish forces were experiencing a major three-column attack; in the north one column was headed for Warsaw; in the central region another column was headed for Warsaw via Czestochowa; still another column was headed for Krakow from the direction of Slovakia; (b) Polish forces in Pomorze consisting of about 100,000 troops were threatened by a pincer movement consisting of columns from East Prussia and from the direction of Czestochowa; (c) that day was considered critical concerning success or failure of German flanking attacks vis-a-vis Warsaw.

Observation during our lengthy motor trek eastward had revealed that at the very outset of the conflict, the first day, the German bombers engaged in a series of effective attacks on all important railway junctions. Shuttling back and forth between Slovakia and East Prussia in three main broad bands of flight in the general direction, respectively, of Bialystok-Lwow in the east, Mlawa-Jaroslaw in the central part, and Gdynia-Katowice in the west, these bombers had succeeded in putting most of the main railway junctions out of business in short order. To this perhaps to more than any other factor was attributable the disruption of the transportation of reserve forces, which in turn caused the failure to complete mobilization.

By this time, I was aware of the effectiveness of the German mechanized thrusts under cover of the withering effect of efficiently coordinated aerial bomb and machine-gun barrages. The German mechanized columns were breaking through wherever possible and pressing forward in swift long-distance thrusts, frequently leaving the opposing divisions behind to fight it out. It was estimated by official circles at this point that the Germans were employing between 85 percent and 90 percent of their first line air force. It was found necessary by the Polish command to limit the main part of the Polish air force to collaboration with the troops in the line, thus leaving but few planes to combat effective efforts of the German bombers to disrupt communications, cripple industrial operations, and render general confusion. During a subsequent visit at the Foreign Office I was informed (a) that the Prime Minister was establishing his headquarters at Luck, (b) that President Moscicki was establishing his headquarters in three different locations within the district between Krzemieniec, the President's headquarters, and Luck. While I found that proper communications from Krzemieniec had not yet been established, a spokesman of the Foreign Office expressed his hope of placing at our disposal in the near future short wave sending facilities. We were meanwhile experiencing difficulties in receiving and sending

communications. Under the extraordinary circumstances prevailing, and as I was aware that the American Press correspondents lacked means of communications with the outside, I cabled our Minister in Bucharest, Mr. Gunther, asking him to notify the respective agencies that the following correspondents could be contacted if addressed care of our Embassy: Mr. Petersen, Associated Press, Mr. Walker, New York Herald Tribune, Mr. Neville, Time Magazine, Mr. Small, Chicago Tribune, and Mr. Shapiro, New York Times. Having expected Mr. Harrison, Second Secretary of Embassy at Naleczow, pursuant to my telephone instructions of September 6, to join us there that day, and having had no information as to his whereabouts since that telephone call, I became concerned regarding his welfare. Accordingly, I asked the Starosta of Krzemieniec to telephone other Starostas along the line for news of Mr. Harrison. The Starosta subsequently reported no information available. The first news I learned from him was from an American newspaper correspondent who arrived in Krzemieniec. He had seen Mr. Harrison leaving Warsaw in his car on September 6 with a Polish friend and much luggage. I was relieved when Mr. Harrison finally arrived in Krzemieniec on September 9. It seemed that his delay in arriving at Krzemieniec was due to his having conducted some Polish friends to their country place in the area northeast of Lublin.

September 10 Precautions and Soviet Duplicity

I walked to the height of the mountain adjacent to and overlooking the town of Krzemieniec. From that point I peered down and studied the effect of the reflection of the sunlight both on the nickel trimmings and the shiny roofs of cars of our Embassy group. I had in mind that the parking of automobiles in a group served according to our experience to invite the attention of passing German pilots. I thereupon decided that, in the interest of protecting our motor vehicles, it was essential to construct a shed to shelter them from the sight of passing German pilots. Hence, I ordered the construction of a lean-to shed for our automobiles. Moreover, I requested as a further precautionary measure, that the nickel trimmings on all of our cars be painted a dull gray. (Besides, my chauffeur and I together did a quick, if not artistic job, in giving one coat of dark gray paint to my yellow Cadillac. I subsequently threw several buckets of dust on the paint before it dried. The result proved an excellent form of camouflage.) Contrary to the counsel of a number of my colleagues and their chauffeurs, I painted the roof so as to leave a yellow U.S.A. They held it would only draw attention from the sky.

Lunched quietly in the back room of a small restaurant at the north end of the village, with Soviet Ambassador Nikolai Charanov, Mrs. Charanov, their small son and daughter, their military attache, and Estonian Minister Marcus. In the course of conversation the military attache remarked that he had just talked by telephone to the Soviet Consul at Lwow, who said the bombardment, especially of the railway station and yards, was becoming steadily more intensive. Moreover, the German southern forces were advancing rapidly towards the City from the west. The Ambassador then mentioned the large scale mobilization which was currently taking place in Soviet Russia. In response to my question as to whether the mobilization was attributable to Moscow's anxiety lest, if the thrust of the German southern forces towards Lwow succeeded, the Germans might declare Lwow the Capital of an independent Ukrainian state under German auspices, the Ambassador merely smiled, and shifted the trend of conversation. When Minister Marcus had departed, however, Ambassador Charanov referred to my question, stating that, "strictly off the record" and quite unofficially speaking, I had probably hit the nail on the head. However, he was lacking in sufficient information to be clear on the situation. Either his Government had not communicated with him or what communications they had sent had failed to reach him. He would therefore ask Minister Beck the next morning for permission to go to the town on the Russian side of the frontier, in order to telephone his Government. In response to my question as to whether he believed his country, in view of its own oil requirement for its agricultural structure based

upon about 65% to 70% motorization, and now for this reported augmentation of mobilized forces, could afford to satisfy Germany's oil requirements, the Ambassador stated his belief that Germany would suffer a great disappointment. His own country's oil requirements would increase rapidly in proportion to the increase in mobilization. In concluding our conversation he informed me that many of my colleagues had requested him to grant them and their respective staffs visas for Soviet Russia in case the Government and Diplomatic Corps were cut off from Rumania. This was another matter regarding which he wanted to discuss with his Government by telephone.

Refugees and German Terror

Economic Counselor of the Foreign Office, Mr. Jan Wrszlacki, came by our embassy in a droshky accompanied by three other members of the Foreign Office. They were a pathetic sight. Their laps were piled with suitcases; their faces looked haggard and worn. They had just arrived from the railway station about five kilometers distant. Their arrival in Krzemieniec proved a welcome sight, for we were aware that the train of which Mr. Wrszlacki and Count Potulicki (associate counselor of the Foreign Office) had been in charge, had left Warsaw five days before with the wives and children of the officials and the staff, as well as a number of junior officers of the Foreign Office. We were aware, moreover, that while this journey would have taken no more than over night under normal conditions, it had taken more than four days under the current circumstances. During the train's journey reports reached Krzemieniec from time to time indicating that it had frequently been forced to change its routing because of repeated bombardments from the air. This led to its being referred to as the "Phantom Train." Mr. Wrszlacki subsequently told me that the train, carrying about a thousand passengers, had suffered aerial bombardments seventy-two times. Enroute he and Count Potulicki had adopted and successfully developed a system of protecting the passengers from the air raids. The planes began by releasing bombs directly at the train, fortunately missing, though narrowly in each case. At a signal either from Mr. Wrszlacki or Count Potulicki, the locomotive engineer would stop the train. All passengers who could, instantly left the train, running for the nearest woods at the side of the tracks. Those who failed to reach the door of the cars before the return of the planes to machine-gun the passengers, fell flat on their faces on the floor of the steel cars. Moreover, before the planes returned following the bombing to carry out their machine-gunning, the locomotive engineer usually reversed the train some distance in order to prevent the pilots from marking the place at which the train refugees had sought cover in the woods. Mr. Wrszlacki had the highest praise for the engineer's intelligence as well as courage. He said that on almost all occasions when the engineer had thus shifted the train's position, the returning bombers had blindly machine-gunned the woods directly opposite the train's new position, thinking the passengers had sought shelter there. Despite seventy-two bombardments of this character, there were no casualties among the passengers--though there had been many "close shaves." The German air force's continuous knowledge as to the whereabouts of this train is an outstanding example of the efficiency of the German espionage activities in Poland.

September 12 German Air Raid

On the morning of September 12, at about 10:50 A.M., Krzemieniec, a defenseless, open village, suffered a severe bombardment, immediately following which I cabled the Department a full report. The little restaurant where I lunched on September 10 with Soviet Ambassador Charanov was blown and burned to bits. In brief, a flight of four German bombers suddenly swooped down on our section of the village. They commenced to release their bombs at the edge of the town and at a short distance just opposite to the British and American Embassies located on the main street. As they swung into line with the main street they continued to release their bombs. Thence they followed the main street to the

crowded market place which they swept with a spray of machine gun bullets. Three more planes flew low over the village from another direction releasing bombs within even closer proximity of the other foreign Embassies and Legations as well as the Foreign Office.

Upon verifying the casualties I found they included 16 civilians killed, 40 seriously injured, and many slightly injured. Besides considerable damage to business and residential property resulted. Moreover, the population was terrorized by the suddenness and viciousness of the raid. The aftermath was a pathetic scene: burning houses, local inhabitants rushing hither and thither in meaningless fashion; unfortunates bewailing the loss or injury of their dear ones, small groups silently and grimly carrying off several fatally shot women and children; many run-away horses dragging their rattling peasant carts after them, and upsetting everything before them--in general a scene of panic. Almost all merchants and restaurant-keepers rushed into the hills, locking their places of business behind them. This forced our Embassy group thenceforth to take our meals in the cellar of the University which housed the Foreign Office, and where a restaurant had been provided for the officials and staff of the Foreign Office. The fires caused by the incendiary bombs were difficult to extinguish, in that the water supply of the village depended upon a primitive system: filling barrels with water from the nearby river, hauling them up to one's house, and emptying the barrels into the house tank. Water thus delivered cost 80 groscher per barrel. Hence, in several parts of the village whole sections of houses went up in smoke.

Shortly after my arrival at Krzemieniec I looked around for some place which might serve as an air raid shelter in case of an attack. I concluded that the best place for the members of my staff and my family was a narrow gulley, about 18 feet in depth, directly opposite and about 300 feet from our Embassy. At the outset of the raid which actually took place, and recognizing the familiar drone of the bombers, I called to members of my staff and family who were in and around the Embassy at the time to make for the aforementioned gulley. On the way across the main street, Mrs. Biddle suddenly experienced a presentiment, she said she instinctively felt the gulley was a dangerous place. As the explosions were rapidly coming nearer--not only could we hear the whistle of the bombs on their downward course then, from what seemed almost overhead, but also could we see the shell fragments and pieces of clay, kicked up by the explosions, passing overhead and around us--a quick decision was essential. We reversed our course, and stepped in behind the back wall of the British Embassy. As matters turned out Mrs. Biddle's presentiment proved a fortunate one, in that three bombs exploded in the gulley I had previously chosen as a shelter.





A Protest to the World

About noon that same day, the Papal Nuncio emphasized his desire that I attend a conference of neutral mission chiefs which he intended calling at 4:00 P.M. He stated his purpose was to acquire the consent of the conference to address a collective protest to some leading world statesman, and asked me whether I would personally approve his suggestion that the protest be addressed to his Holiness the Pope. I expressed my approval, emphasizing that in joining in such a protest, I should want it understood that there was no political significance attached to the protest and that I would do so merely as an objective observer of what had taken place and on humanitarian grounds. He expressed his appreciation of my attitude. I then consented to his request that he announce to the meeting my personal approval of his proposal on the foregoing grounds. The Nuncio thereupon chose as our meeting place a small grandstand at one end of a sports field, close by the Foreign Office, and at the edge of a series of freshly dug but still uncomplete trenches. Twice during the conference we were driven into these trenches by two separate flights of German planes at exceptionally low altitudes over the town. On these occasions, however, the planes refrained from releasing bombs, and it was believed they had returned for purposes of reconnaissance.

When the Nuncio announced the purpose of the meeting, stating at the same time my approval on the basis aforescribed, the Turkish Ambassador declared his support thereof. Thereupon in turn, the Italian Ambassador, the Spanish, the Swiss and Bulgarian Ministers arose, and in most emphatic terms, stated their refusal to become a part to such a protest. They each pointed out that, in view of the delicate

political situation prevailing in Central Europe, they did not wish to go on record as having taken action which might conceivably be subsequently interpreted as a criticism of German military tactics. The Nuncio, the Turkish Ambassador, and I thereupon re-emphasized the fact that the Nuncio's proposal was devoid of political significance and was based upon a purely humanitarian standpoint, and entailed merely our observations as individuals who had been the eye-witnesses of an aerial bombardment of an open town. Nevertheless, our aforementioned colleagues refused to waver from their respective stands.

The Nuncio thereupon proposed, and it was unanimously agreed, that he make a record, merely of the fact that the conference had taken place; and that each neutral Mission Chief present had stated his intention to transmit his observations to his respective government. Thereupon, the conference ended. The Nuncio subsequently made the aforementioned record, handing it to Cardinal Hlond (then just arrived in Krzemieniec) with the request that he transmit it personally to his Holiness the Pope. In later conversation with the Cardinal, he expressed to me his disgust with the brutality and ruthlessness of German aerial tactics throughout the interior of Poland. I consider Cardinal Hlond a man of outstanding courage and intelligence; he is fair and just in his opinions, and not given to exaggeration. Cardinal Hlond and Mr. Elbrick en-route to Krzemieniec had had to leave their cars and seek shelter from an air bombardment in the same woods.

Ukrainian "Recalcitrance"

About 10:00 o'clock that night Major Colbern, our Military attache, arrived in Krzemieniec by automobile from Tarnopol where he had been observing military activities. Enroute from Tarnopol, he had taken a short cut which had led him through back country. He had observed evidences of recalcitrance on the part of the Ukrainian population along the way. As a matter of fact, he came to a stop at a cross-road in order to read the signs for it was after dark. Suddenly he became aware that he was surrounded by 7 or 8 Ukrainian peasants who appeared to be closing in on him. The spokesman for the group bluntly declared that they intended to have his automobile, and ordered him and his chauffeur out of the car. Realizing his predicament, he whipped out his revolver, warning them that he would shoot the first one to touch his car. He then bade his chauffeur to go on, leaving the group behind without further incident. The Major cited this incident as a warning to us and the members of my staff, should we be forced to take the same road in event we evacuated from Krzemieniec.

During this conference with Major Colbern we compared notes as to our respective observations and reports we had received regarding the theater of military operations. Immediately subsequent to the aerial bombardment I discerned that the local population turned bitterly against the diplomatic corps as well as the Foreign Office, in the belief that their presence in the town was a danger. As a matter of fact, several officials in the Foreign Office imparted to me their concern over the rapidly mounting recalcitrance of the local population. Moreover, the Starosta, commencing that day, declared a nightly curfew between 9:00 P.M. and 4 A.M. In order to police this curfew, the Starosta armed a number of the local youths with old fashioned rifles. Most of them I feel confident had never had a gun in their hands before. This action alarmed several of my colleagues to such an extent that they protested vigorously to the Foreign Office, but without avail. The only practical steps I could take to insure the safety of my staff was to obtain special cards of identity for them which might serve to pass them by the guards at night. Even at that, however, the situation was difficult, in that a number of these armed youths could not read. Moreover, when one turned on one's flashlight to show his card of identity, these youths usually forbade the light, (unless the bulb had previously been rubbed with carbon paper and thus dulled the light to such extent as to render it useless for reading).

September 13 Conversations With Beck

Minister Beck invited me to have a talk after luncheon in the cellar of the University which was then housing the Foreign Office. Minister Beck thereupon stated his concern over the lack of communication facilities with the outside world, and urged me to try to establish communications with my Government, either directly or through relays by way of Bucharest and Paris. He added that it would also be a source of comfort to him and his associates to know that a neutral mission had established touch with the outside world. Besides this, he discussed other aspects of current developments.

In a further conversation with Minister Beck he disclosed in effect the following: 1/the German air and ground forces had succeeded in destroying all lines of Polish armament industry, 2/that while the situation was now exceedingly difficult, both the Polish Government and the High Command were determined to reconsolidate their forces and continue resistance, 3/that among military and other official circles, the impression was rapidly gaining ground that France and Britain were staging more of a demonstration than a serious attack vis-a-vis Germany; his reports indicated that Paris and London official circles were informing the Polish Ambassadors in both capitals that they hesitated to permit their respective air forces to bombard German communications and war industrial plants, for fear of the potential unfavorable effect thereof on American public opinion. (During this conversation, a ranking officer of the Polish army who was present stated at this point that he did not see why the French and British did not send planes for Polish pilots to carry out the disagreeable task, if the French and British hesitated to engage in bombardments of this character themselves. The officer concluded by stating his opinion that for the Poles, it would be a case of justified retaliation). At the end of my talk with Minister Beck, he emphasized that this was a dramatic moment for Poland; perhaps a matter even of Poland's life or death. He intimated moreover that we might possibly soon be on our way towards the south. I was aware that Minister Beck and his associates in the Government as well as the High Command felt that if the French and British did not launch immediately a major shock attack, it might spell the end for Poland.

About 3:00 P.M. that same afternoon, it was officially decided and announced that the Foreign Office and the Diplomatic corps were to evacuate Krzemieniec immediately and proceed to Zaleszczyki, about 250 kilometers distant. Later in the afternoon, I had another talk with Minister Beck upon which occasion he informed me (a) that his military reports showed that whenever the Polish infantry had come into direct contact with the German infantry, the former had proved themselves superior, (b) that Polish troops had succeeded in checking the German advance on Lwow by the previous day's capture of about 7 tanks which had been part of a reconnoitering mechanized thrust at the city's outskirts, (c) in the theatre of military operations in Western Poland, 1/the Polish army hitherto trying to withdraw eastward from a "pocket" formed by the German forces between Warsaw and Modlin, had suddenly wheeled into a southwestward counter attack, recapturing Modlin, 2/the German southward drive was threatening to break through the Polish lines at Modlin, 3/Polish forces were still holding Warsaw.

Minister Beck stated that he had personally already participated in two wars; the Great War, and the Polish war with the Bolsheviks. In this third war, he had had to stand aside. However, he still hoped to take active part in a fourth war, and perhaps to end his days on a battlefield as had his forefathers. Minister Beck then stated he had urged Marshal Smigly-Rydz during the first days of the conflict to launch every bomber at his disposal in an attack on Berlin--at any cost. The demoralizing effect in Germany, the inspiring effect it would have in the West, would have justified the sacrifice. I gained the impression during my talk with him that the Minister was suffering from deep emotions and mixed feelings about the performance of Poland's military establishment. In fact, I felt he knew at that time that nothing could really pull the chestnuts out of the fire for Poland. At about the same hour that I

received from Mr. Kirk, Charge d'Affaires of our Embassy in Berlin, a telegram via Stockholm and Bucharest to the effect that the German Government was urging Consul General John K. Davis' and his staff's departure from Warsaw, Minister Beck received from the Polish Minister in Riga a radio message to the effect that Minister John Riley of our Legation in Riga had requested the latter to ask Minister Beck to issue instructions to cover the evacuation of Consul General Davis and his staff. In discussing the substance of Mr. Kirk's message with Minister Beck, he disclosed his receipt of the message from Riga. He then told me that both communications had reached Krzemieniec when it was no longer possible to communicate with Warsaw, even over military lines.

Leaving Krzemieniec

Though orders had been issued to proceed immediately to Zaleszczyki, I decided it would be safer, based upon previous experience, to proceed after nightfall, especially in view of the customary flights of German planes between 4:00 and 6:00 o'clock in the afternoon. Several of our group decided to proceed by day light. I preferred to wait until after dark before starting out with the cars containing my family and Mrs. Kulski of the Polish Foreign Office (who still lacked other means of transportation. The Government by that time had provided a place for her husband, Counselor of the Foreign Office, in one of the official cars). Again there was considerable confusion and difficulty in acquiring sufficient gasoline to fuel all cars bound for the south.

Before leaving Krzemieniec I went back to the University where Mr. Alex Small (correspondent of the Chicago Tribune) was billeted, to make sure that he was apprised of the evacuation, and that he would have transportation south from the town. (I had seen to it that all other Americans in the town were notified and provided for in terms of transportation). Armed with a flashlight I passed through the immense halls of the University and entered what I believed to be his (Small's) room. It appeared to have been recently vacated. I then went outside the building and shouted for him, whereupon I felt the muzzle of a rifle in my back, and turned only to find, to my added discomfort, that the young lad who held the gun had his finger on the trigger. I knew sufficient Polish to understand that in a Ukrainian dialect he was ordering me not only to cease shouting, but also to cease using my flashlight. Having finally persuaded him that my mission was a friendly one and an effort to help get another foreigner out of town, (an action which I felt confident would appeal to him), he accompanied me through six or more rooms in the University. Having made a thorough search for Mr. Small, and having later received a report that several Americans had left by a train which had departed for the north that same day, I decided it was best to go on, leaving behind one car for several hours, in case Mr. Small might appear. I learned subsequently from the Paris office of the Chicago Tribune that Mr. Small had actually left Krzemieniec on the aforementioned train and after a harrowing experience succeeded in keeping ahead of the incoming Russian troops and reached German-occupied Poland through which he traveled on a refugee train to Berlin, whence he proceeded to Paris.

Having made sure that all the cars of our group would be able to acquire ample fuel for the trip, we proceeded by way of Tarnopol, which as I pointed out in an earlier part of this report was in utter darkness, having suffered a severe aerial bombardment during the late afternoon, and again just previous to our entry. (The blackout was so intense that I found it necessary to walk in front of the car, with one hand on the radiator cap, and feel my way along, calling back directions to Mr. Moszczycki at the wheel of my car. It took us well over an hour to traverse this comparatively small city). We continued to our destination, Zaleszczyki. The only incident worth recording

enroute was that on attempting to pass a slow moving truck on a mid-country road, I was forced to turn on the dimmers of my headlights for an instant (having driven thus far entirely without lights) since the road was narrow and the driver of the enormous truck in front either failed to hear my claxon or refused to pull over. Just at that moment the canvas flap in the back of the truck opened and a Polish soldier, obviously intoxicated, pointed his rifle (which was far from steady in his hands) at us shouting he was going to shoot, because I flashed on the lights. Realizing he was drunk and suspecting we might be in “for it,” I felt there was nothing to do but leave the lights on and make a dash to pass the truck. Pressing the accelerator down to the floor, the car lept forward, and missing the ditch by inches, we fortunately got around to the side of the truck before the soldier, whose brain at that point was fortunately functioning slowly, decided to pull the trigger.



