

President's Secretary's File
Diplomatic Correspondence ^{Box}₁₁
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ADDRESS OFFICIAL COMMUNICATIONS TO
THE SECRETARY OF STATE
WASHINGTON, D. C.



DEPARTMENT OF STATE
WASHINGTON

File
Confidential
file
February 18, 1939

1-18-39

My dear Mr. McIntyre:

I am enclosing a copy of Ambassador Biddle's strictly confidential despatch no. 896 of January 13, 1939 concerning Colonel Beck's recent conversations with Chancellor Hitler and Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop. The despatch has been marked for the President.

Sincerely yours,

Enclosure:

No. 896 from Warsaw,
January 13, 1939

The Honorable

Marvin H. McIntyre,

Secretary to the President,

The White House.

Department of State

BUREAU } Eu
DIVISION }

ENCLOSURE

TO

Letter drafted 2-16-39

ADDRESSED TO

Marvin H. McIntyre

DUPLICATE

No. 896

Warsaw, January 13, 1939

Subject: Supplementing cables Nos. 2 and 4 of January 10 and 11 respectively; substance of my several conversations with Minister Beck upon his return from conversations with Hitler in Berchtesgaden and Ribbentrop in Munich.

EXCLUSIVELY CONFIDENTIAL

FOR THE PRESIDENT AND THE SECRETARY

The Honorable

The Secretary of State,

Washington, D. C.

Sir:

I have the honor to supplement my cables Nos. 2 and 4 of January 10 and 11, 1939 respectively, and to report in greater detail the following substance of my several conversations (therein referred to) with Minister Beck upon his return from Berchtesgaden.

At 9:30 p.m. Saturday, January 7, shortly after Beck and his Chief of Cabinet, Count Zubieński, had reached
their

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their office from the train they together telephoned me. Beck stated he had been profoundly impressed by the contents of President Roosevelt's address. Moreover, he could assure me that it caused mental and moral "jitters" both in Berlin and Berchtesgaden. In fact, he was aware that Hitler was not only furious but also extremely worried. He then stated he wanted to see me at the earliest possible moment. While en route from Munich to Warsaw he had remarked to Żubieński that there were a number of things he wanted to talk to me about.

I saw Beck at the New Year's diplomatic reception at the Łazienki when he made a point of repeating he wanted to see me at the first moment he found himself free.

The following morning Beck was in a great rush when I saw him during a short encounter. It was during my conversation with his Chief of Cabinet, Count Żubieński. He knew I was there and came in between his conferences with Government officials. He explained he had wanted to see me at length that morning but had been up to his neck in conferences with his own Government associates. He then hurriedly outlined his talk with Hitler, substance whereof I transmitted to the Department in my cable No. 2 of January 10, 3 p.m. At the conclusion of this conversation, Minister Beck invited me to join him informally for dinner at his house on Tuesday evening, adding we could talk more at length at that time.

Subsequently

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Subsequently at dinner, attended by the Minister and family, Count Józef Potocki, head of the Anglo-Saxon Division of the Foreign Office, and later joined by the Chief of Staff, the Minister and I had ample time to discuss various aspects of his conversations in Germany.

The following morning I again had a brief talk with the Minister by way of clarifying certain points discussed during the preceding evening.

The following is a digest of my aforementioned three talks with Minister Beck:

Beck
deemed it
advisable
to talk
directly
with
Hitler
before
Ribbentrop.

In view of all circumstances, of which I was aware, he had deemed it advisable to talk directly to Hitler.

Indeed, as he had previously told me, he had wanted to talk to Hitler before Ribbentrop. In general the con-

versations with both had proven fairly satisfactory in

that Hitler had given him the definite impression that

Poland might expect no "surprises" - that all matters

bearing on Polish-German relations were negotiable - and

that Poland might take these negotiations in her stride.

Beck's
general
reaction.

I am aware that in his own evaluation of the fore-

going Beck regards the potential course of such negotia-

tions with cautious optimism. By nature, not credulous,

he is ever on guard, particularly as concerns Germany.

He will accordingly no doubt endeavor to insure against

eventualities.

Observa-
tions on
Beck's
attitude.

Beck

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Ukraine
Issue.

Beck had for some time gone on hypothesis that the recent Ukrainian "play-up" was not so much the work of Hitler - it had not borne the traces of Hitler's hand - rather it had smacked more of the machinations of his "extremist" subordinates - all the more reason for his desire to talk with Hitler directly, not with Ribbentrop first.

Without his (Beck's) having broached the subject, Hitler brought up the Ukraine and Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia and bore out Beck's hypothesis by disclaiming an immediate interest to any measurable degree in the Ukrainian question. Moreover, he gave Beck an impression that whatever interest he did have in the Ukrainian situation was mainly a question of distant consideration and involved the Soviet in general.

Indeed, Hitler made it clear he was distinctly anti-Russian, not merely anti-Soviet and anti-Communist, and that the Ukraine figured merely as a part of Hitler's envisaged future treatment of Russia as a whole. Moreover, his interest in the Ukraine was more economic than political. Beck told me he now believed, as he had felt before his talk with Hitler, that while the latter had a long-range interest in the Ukraine, it had thus far been greatly exaggerated.

Sub-
Carpathian
Ruthenia.

Even von Moltke and Ribbentrop had been obviously taken aback when Hitler disclaimed categorically an

immediate

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immediate interest in the Ukraine in general and in Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia in particular.

In response to my inquiry as to how Hitler could reconcile his denial with the fact that his representative, Ribbentrop, at the Vienna Conference had gone so far as to prevent Hungary's annexing Ruthenia, Beck amusedly stated that Hitler had gone to considerable lengths to allay Beck's suspicions and misgivings on this score. Hitler had accordingly pointed out that when Budapest had demanded the right of a plebiscite in Ruthenia, Hitler and his associates had assumed the position that the entire matter should be settled along ethnographical lines. Subsequently, when he had learned Budapest planned attacking Czecho-Slovakia, about November 21, he had sent word he did not want an open conflict to further complicate the situation in Central Europe. At this point Beck had to admit to me he was aware that the Nazis had evinced more than common interest in "rigging up" the mechanics in Ruthenia, reiterating that Hitler went to considerable pains to allay Beck's suspicions that Hitler's immediate plans envisaged Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia as a strategic base of activities. Moreover, Beck had been led to look for Hitler henceforth to "lay off" Poland's Ukrainian minority in the course of his forward-aimed program.

Beck added Hitler had obviously been down at his mountain haunt alone for some time, with a few exceptions
uninterrupted

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uninterrupted by his "group", resting after the fatigue of his Austrian and Czechoslovak groups - and examining the trend in an effort to gain a perspective as to the future turn of events. Of this Beck had gained a distinct impression.

Hitler's mood.

When Hitler had greeted him, he was philosophical and pensive in demeanor - and only during his oration wherein he reviewed his accomplishments over the past year did he evince a spirit of boastfulness.

At this point Beck reiterated his impression that as far as Hitler was concerned - and he was the deciding factor - Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia did not figure in his immediate considerations. In fact, Beck believed Hitler's interest in the Ukraine up to this point had been exaggerated. Though the "stories" regarding it were not devoid of foundation, they had been exaggerated.

Beck re Poland's position vis-a-vis Ruthenia.

Beck then added with emphasis that if that region continued to prove a menace for Poland, Poland would liquidate the situation in short order.

Of pertinent bearing, Beck stated that in recent representations to Prague, Beck had asked whether Prague had complete control over Ruthenia or not; or whether Ruthenia had become a disorderly center subject to the influence of a third party with designs opposed to Poland's interests. In response, Prague, through its Minister Slavik here and even the Prime Minister of Ruthenia, had gone to great lengths to apologize and to assure Beck that

no

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no third-party influence prevailed in that region.

Beck would wait and see. Moreover, Poland was prepared to deal in Poland's own way with the situation, should it require action.

My observations.

As I have previously pointed out in connection with Ruthenia, both high military and Government circles here have not considered the projected common frontier with Hungary a closed question. However, Hungary's having backed off when she had a pretext to come to grips with the Czechs at Munkacs recently has given rise to considerable discernible but not generally expressed skepticism here as to the mood and capacity of the Hungarians to come through. Hence I feel the Poles are in a mood that, in event potential anti-Polish activities in Ruthenia reached an acute stage, the Poles might conceivably move in and clean up the disorder without waiting on the Hungarians.

Whether the Germans, in the final analysis, would tolerate this is still doubtful in my mind. Besides, insufficient time has passed for me to judge as to how far to ascribe Beck's statement on this score to talk for "home consumption" or full intention to act forcefully in event of further disorders. At the moment I am inclined to believe he means to act.

Rumanian Ambassador's surprise over Beck's remarks re Ruthenia.

Moreover, the Rumanian Ambassador inserted his surprise, if not concern, over his impression gained in conversation with Beck - Beck had spoken to him along lines similar to

those

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those he adopted with me regarding Ruthenia. The Ambassador remarked that the more he saw of the Poles, the more he realized they were a "determined lot".

Danzig

In summing up his impression of Hitler's attitude both as to the Danzig and the Ukrainian issues, Beck stated Hitler was more conciliatory than aggressive.

Beck's
impression
of Hitler's
attitude
towards
Danzig
issue.

It was apparent that he desired Poland's friendship. As to the negotiations now going forward regarding Danzig, while Hitler had discussed the subject, his remarks had been more general than specific. Moreover, the negotiations were still in a formative stage. Beck was vague and guarded with me in discussing them, stating that Hitler had not clearly defined his position with respect thereto.

British
Ambassador's
remarks re
Danzig
after talks
with Beck.

The British Ambassador subsequently imparted that during his conversation with Beck the latter had adopted a similar line regarding Danzig. In response to the Ambassador's reminder that Beck had promised to keep him advised as to progress and that he was under instructions from his Government to keep them posted, Beck said he was fully aware thereof and would not fail to let the Ambassador know as soon as the negotiations assumed sufficiently definite character to permit a clearer than hitherto appraisal as to their outcome. I discern that the Ambassador is nettled over a lack of more information to transmit at this point to the "Committee of Three" shortly scheduled to meet.

Pending

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By obser-
ventions.

Pending more definite clarification of Danzig negotiations, I am still disinclined to exclude the possibility of the Germans' pressing for the inclusion of a right of way across the Corridor as part of a Danzig settlement - the right of way to assume somewhat the following form: combined rail and motor way within a mutually recognized neutral zone; elimination of customs and passport control.

Reverting to my conversation with Beck, while he felt that Hitler's quick successes over Austria and Czechoslovakia complicated matters for Europe, Beck believed that these successes had not diminished Hitler's respect for Poland; Beck was of the opinion that this was extremely important.

Two ques-
tions now
concerning
Hitler's
interest:
Jews and
colonies.

The two questions which were now engaging Hitler's immediate attention were the Jews and colonies. On every topic other than the Jews, Hitler had evinced a calm attitude but when he spoke of the Jews he manifested rage, pounded the table and breathed hard. He shouted that he was absolutely determined to rid Germany of every single Jew within the current year. Beck said the subject was positively an obsession with Hitler, adding his own opinion that Hitler, realizing that internally all matters were not running smoothly and that a conflict of personalities within his regime was in course, undoubtedly made the Jews bear the brunt, laying the fault for everything at their door. As for colonies, Beck looked for this question to become

Hitler's

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Hitler's paramount interest in near future.

The axis.

Regarding the axis, Hitler was obvious in his efforts to give the impression that the axis was more secure than ever and that he and Mussolini were pals. In response to my question as to what effect on this "pardon" Hitler's potential insistence upon assuming Austria's rights in Trieste might eventually have, Beck admitted that if proved an eventuality, it probably would not sit so well with the Italian public.

As regards Italo-French friction, Rome was using Tunis (more of a social than a territorial issue) and Corsica and Nice as a "smoke screen" for the serious questions of Djibouti and Suez.

Whether the Italo-French controversy would break into an open conflict was not yet clear. Ciano had told the Polish Ambassador in Rome about a month ago he did not expect the dispute to come to an open conflict (as reported in a previous despatch). However, Ciano, realizing Poland was France's ally, might conceivably have made this remark for tactical reasons. Hitler, during the talk, had spoken rather sympathetically of France.

The waiters in the hotels at Menton, all Italian, were boasting that it would not be long now before their brethren took the place over. Beck admitted in response to my conjecture that it was perhaps mainly for the Italians' part a confusion- and fear-inspiring campaign.

Nevertheless,

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Nevertheless, the French in that region were convinced that they were in for a fight. Moreover, the French people along the Riviera were convinced there would be a war between France and Italy, were accordingly living in their valises prepared to evacuate the area, and were fully confident of a victorious conflict of short duration. How far, in final analysis, the French politicians might go, was another matter and had not yet crystallized. The only nation to profit by an Italo-French conflict would be Germany, who would undoubtedly swoop down on the Danube area, taking advantage of Italy's being tied up at the front. Poland would continue to devote efforts as a peace broker between the French and the Italians, for such a conflict would do neither any good.

Hitler would like to have given the impression that he was prepared to go "all out" in support of the Italians. When I ventured the conjecture that the Germans might avoid going beyond the point of diplomatic support, Beck said that it was so difficult to gauge that point and so easy to ride beyond it into an explosion that it would be a delicate game at best, and was pregnant with danger in a jittery Continent - a diplomatic offensive of severity was risky business nowadays. Moreover, it was well to bear in mind that the axis was still in vigor. However, I do not think Beck believes Germany would deliberately risk war with the West and thus weaken herself in advance of an eastern venture, her major strategic objective.

Beck

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Polish-
French
relations.

Beck then emphasized there must be a meeting between France and Poland. They must face the realities and understand them. Their respective positions vis-à-vis Germany today, more than ever before, were similar in character.

Appraising their respective positions, it would seem today that Poland enjoyed friendship of closer character than France with Germany, while on the other hand France's being involved with Italy offered little chance of France's offering effective assistance to Poland. Yes, they must sit down at an early date and clarify their positions vis-à-vis one another and vis-à-vis Germany.

Italo-
French
friction
continued.

At the outset of Italo-French friction, Polish official circles' reports from London had indicated the British Government were assuming the attitude that the course of European events depended mainly on Chamberlain and Hitler; that while Hitler had the bark of a wolf, Mussolini had the bark of a fox; and that at most current Italo-French friction might be put down to a diversion to keep France busy.

Subsequently French Ambassador Noel remarked to me the other night that France had no worry as to whether she might enjoy Britain's active support if she required it in the event of a conflict over Tunis, for the fact that the Tunis issue brought Bizerta into the picture made it more of a British than a French problem. Evidently Noel had made a similar remark to Beck, for the latter gave me

the

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the impression that the French entertained ideas along somewhat similar lines.

by obser-
vations.

Personally I am of the opinion that, if France and Italy came to grips, and if Paris and London felt Britain's potential neutrality might mean Germany's neutrality, both Paris and particularly London might favor this course - provided, of course, France felt capable of handling Italy alone, and provided there could be reasonably sure Germany would not suddenly jump in against her.

Beck's re-
action to
the ultimatum of
London on
April 18 -
his visit to
Paris.

Beck went on to say that up to the point of a potential ultimatum London might conceivably continue to influence French foreign policy - but a decision for a war could be made only in Paris today.

Britain was augmenting her air and naval strengths but not her army to any effective degree. This meant she could not take a lead in determining the issues of the Continent.

While France had hitherto appeared to be turning more towards her colonial domain than maintaining her interest in the Continent, this move had served the politicians more than it represented the characteristic interest of the Frenchman. Beck now felt that the Frenchman's natural interest in the Continent would re-express itself.

Chamber-
lain's
Rome visit.

Commenting upon Chamberlain's and Halifax's approaching visit to Rome, Beck did not look for the British statesmen

to

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to accomplish such. The latter, due to public opinion both at home and in France, would be limited in terms of potential "hand-outs", and would have to "tread easy" during the talks. Mussolini, who had already assumed a position of positive character vis-à-vis particularly belligerent rights in Spain, Djibouti and the Suez, might not be expected, in view of his own public opinion, to give much ground.

Moreover, Beck doubted whether the Rome meeting would go far towards immediately bringing about new four-power talks - anyway, the latter would only prove costly to other powers in terms of "peaceful settlements".

Beck's
remarks on
events in
OFFING.

Up until about three or four days after the New Year discussions on the European political arena could have covered little beyond a review of past events, events which could be left to the historians. Only shortly after the turn of the year did there appear any indications of what might be in the offing.

After all, since the Czechoslovak event, statesmen and diplomatists had been suffering from shock - dismay. Then came the Christmas holidays, affording much needed relaxation, then New Year's, then fresh thought and now we begin to discern signs of what we may expect.

Ribbentrop
to come to
BERLIN
JANUARY 26.

Beck added in conclusion that Ribbentrop would come here January 26, and that Hitler had remarked during the conversation that he regretted that his progress on his architectural

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architectural projects had been retarded by the necessity of sending so many men to the Siegfried Line. However, in case he were not able to finish it during his own lifetime, Goering was well versed in his objectives and could carry on readily. Beck added this had been the first time Hitler had ever frankly intimated he expected Goering eventually to succeed him.

My impression of the Beck-Hitler conversation was that Hitler made a tour d'horizon of about three hours, thinking out loud in a conciliatory rather than aggressive tone. Beck seemed fairly well satisfied and under no apparent tension as a result of Hitler and Ribbentrop conversations. Beck has so far avoided receiving the British and French Ambassadors, who, evidently under instructions from their Governments, are making constant efforts to see him.

Respectfully yours,

A. J. Drexel Biddle, Jr.

710
 AJB/is
 (In quintuplicate)

