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## THE LAST DAYS OF PEACE FROM WITHIN THE AXIS: ITALIAN EFFORTS TO AVOID THE GERMAN AGGRESSION AGAINST POLAND

### AN UNEXPECTED PREMISE

Recently, Polish historiography witnessed a harsh and significant debate about the origin of World War II, asking what would happen had the Polish attitude toward Germany been different. This discussion relied on Polish and German sources, somehow on the French and British ones, however Italian sources seem to have been neglected. This is a remarkable lack, for not only was Italy the other part of the Axis, but it was also the Axis nation trying to avoid or at least delay the war. Such a gap needs to be filled, and filling it, as we are going to see, will provide some non-negligible and perhaps decisive information.

What is interesting is that all the parts composing this story are available in print. One must simply look at Italian diplomatic documents and at the “Book of Minutes”, as Ciano repeatedly called it in his memoirs, which is not to be easily found. It is a register containing all minutes of the meeting Ciano had as the King’s minister of foreign affairs. It was published soon after World War II and, as far as I know, twice re-published but never translated, and it is a pity considering the information within the document. Thanks to this book, we can understand what happened in 1938–1939 and thus we can compose a mosaic, which was left scattered by the still-prevailing Allied propaganda-affected historiography.

The rather unknown story begins three weeks after the Pact of Munich. On the evening of 23 October 1938 in Rome, the Italian foreign minister Galeazzo Ciano’s telephone rang. It was Ribbentrop. He spoke a bit about the arbitrate between Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and ‘en passant’ he told Ciano that “he had a personal mission by the

Führer to the Duce to be accomplished in person” and that he wanted to come to Rome in the second half of that same week, possibly on Friday or Saturday. He added that his visit would be very short and unofficial.<sup>1</sup> Ciano asked Mussolini for approval and when he received it, Ribbentrop arrived on 27 October. The next evening, on 28 October, he met Mussolini and offered Italy a military alliance with Germany. Ciano provided the minute: “Ribbentrop exposes concepts which push the government of the Reich to think that in this moment signing a pact of military alliance among Italy, Germany and Japan would be very useful.”<sup>2</sup>

These words must be kept in mind. This was the root of the troubles. The German offer for an alliance was not new. Hitler had openly foresaw it since he wrote *Mein Kampf* in 1923. The Prince of Hessen, who had married the daughter of the King of Italy, already announced it to the Italians on Hitler’s behalf on 25 September in Munich. And five days later, on 30 September, Ribbentrop showed Ciano a complete project of a German-Italian-Japanese alliance.

Thus, it was not a nuance. Moreover, Hitler did not know that Mussolini was sure that a war would come for at least eleven years, because in September 1928, the Air Force deputy secretary of State Italo Balbo informed general Costanzi that the Duce told him that in 1938 there would be a war, and that the air force had to be ready for that time.<sup>3</sup> In 1928, Mussolini did not specify the enemy and the reason for such a war and he had probably said it just because he supposed that war was simply a natural phenomenon. But now Ribbentrop was confirming his idea: a war was coming. But itself it did not create the future problems; it was rather Ribbentrop’s further declaration that the war had to happen within three or four years, because this practically meant no war before Autumn 1941 or 1942.

It is of utmost importance to understand what happened later and why it happened that way. One may wonder whether was it by chance that the most modern Italian weapons had to be ready by summer 1941. The first two new super-battleships of the Littorio class had to be at sea and fully operational by summer 1940, but the next two were expected in the next twelve months and the fleet was expected to be fully operational by summer 1941. The most modern Italian aircraft, the Macchi MC 202, flew above Tobruk in summer 1941. The motor-jet aircraft Caproni Ciampini – a quasi jet – had

<sup>1</sup> “Conversazione telefonica con il ministro degli Esteri del Reich von Ribbentrop – Roma, 23 ottobre 1938-XVI” [Telephone conversation with the Foreign minister of the Reich von Ribbentrop – Rome, 23 October 1938 – 16<sup>th</sup> year of the Fascist Era], in: G. Ciano, *L’Europa verso la catastrofe – La storia d’Europa dal 1936 al 1942 in 184 colloqui di Mussolini, Hitler, Chamberlain, Sumner Welles, Rustu, Aras, Stojadinovic, Goring, Zog, François-Poncet ecc. verbalizzati da Galeazzo Ciano, con 40 documenti diplomatici inediti*, [Europe toward the Catastrophe – the History of Europe from 1936 to 1942 in 184 Talks of Mussolini, Hitler, Chamberlain, Sumner Welles, Rustu, Aras, Stojadinovic, Göring, Zog, François-Poncet etc. minuted by Galeazzo Ciano, with 40 unpublished diplomatic documents] Verona 1948, p. 369–370.

<sup>2</sup> “Colloquio fra il Duce e il ministro degli Esteri del Reich von Ribbentrop presente il conte Ciano – Roma, 28 ottobre 1938-XVII” [Conversation between the Duce and the Foreign minister of the Reich von Ribbentrop in presence of count Ciano – Rome, 28 October 1938 – 16<sup>th</sup> year of the Fascist Era], in: G. Ciano, *L’Europa verso la catastrofe...*, p. 373–378.

<sup>3</sup> A. Pelliccia, *Il maresciallo dell’aria Italo Balbo* [Air Marshall Italo Balbo], Roma 1998, p. 197.

its first flight in August 1940 and was basically ready by 1941. The improved version of tank M 13/40, the M 14/41, appeared in 1941; the same happened for the 75/18 self-propelled howitzer and for many vehicles and weapons.

Moreover, Italy had already been at war for a decade in Eastern and Northern Africa and in Spain, and needed to refill its depots and to gather money, because all those conflicts exhausted Italian financial and military resources. In October 1938, it was clear that all these operations could end by 1939, but if a further war happened, a two or three years long peace was vital.

We shall not lose time here speaking about the Italo-German alliance, and we can jump directly to a further German confirmation of what Ribbentrop said. When on 5 and 6 April 1939 general Alberto Pariani, the Chief of Staff of the Italian Royal Army, met his German counterpart in Innsbruck, he was told by Keitel that no war had to be expected for three or four years,<sup>4</sup> thus only before Spring 1942 or 1943. So, the Italians were calm and thought of all but of an upcoming war, and then, soon after the Pariani-Keitel meeting, suddenly, in the very spring of 1939, the German-Polish relations dramatically worsened and the Italians started worrying. It was too early for a war. Any war had to be avoided in that moment and delayed as soon as possible.

The standard interpretation concerning the state of the Italian Armed Forces in 1939 is that they possessed old equipment, useless in a modern war. This is a fallacy. Their equipment was as good as other European armed forces in 1939, except perhaps the Germans. The problem was that the Italian Armed Forces lacked sufficient equipment to carry out the operations with which they were tasked. They did not have enough vehicles, weapons and ammunitions, due to the war attrition they faced in the previous years. And they could not acquire the material they needed in sufficient quantities because Italy lacked an effective industrial system, but, above all, lacked money. In fact, as said, by spring 1939 Italy had been at war without interruption since more than ten years. Colonial operations in Libya – actually the real conquest after the official conquest in 1911 – ended in 1932, but within three years they were followed by the Italian-Ethiopian War in 1935–36. As soon as it ended, on 5 May 1936, Italy started the counter-guerrilla – and the actual conquest – till 1939, whilst in the same summer of 1936 was involved in the Spanish Civil War, which ended in spring 1939. All these commitments were accompanied by a relatively big intervention in China in 1937 – more or less a mixed Brigade and the local Italian naval squadron – and the occupation of Albania in April

<sup>4</sup> “Verbale riassuntivo del colloquio tra il generale Pariani ed il generale Keitel del 5 aprile 1939” [Minute resuming the talk between general Pariani and general Keitel on 5 April 1939], in: Ministero Degli Affari Esteri (onward MAE), *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, “Ottava Serie 1935–1939”, vol. XIII: 12 agosto – 1 settembre 1939, Roma 1953, p. 422–423. See also: The aide-mémoire Marras, entitled *Laddetto militare a Berlino, Marras, al Sottosegretario alla Guerra, Pariani – promemoria per S. E. il Sottosegretario di Stato, Innsbruck, 5 aprile 1939*, [The military attaché in Berlin, Marras, to Deputy Secretary for War, Pariani – aide-mémoire for H.E. the Deputy State Secretary, Innsbruck, 5 April 1939] in: MAE, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, “Ottava Serie 1935–1939”, vol. XIII: 12 agosto – 1 settembre 1939, Roma 1953, p. 423, which reads: “The concept expressed by General Keitel and which seems to mirror the Führer’s mind is that is not convenient to engage in the near future in a conflict with France, which inevitably would extend to England, but that a war against the Western Powers has to be made within some years (3–4), that is to say when Italy and Germany will have reached a convenient level of readiness.”

1939, involving an Army Corp, a good part of the Navy and the Air Army. By June 1939, Italy had spent a preposterous quantity of money in wars, and was in a bad condition, because the economic sanctions decreed by the League of Nations after the starting of the Ethiopian War in 1935 negatively affected foreign trade and, thus the capability to get money and strong currencies to be used in international transactions. Money was scarce, and Italy needed to save as much as possible, so, it would not be a surprise if, once the Spanish commitment was over, the Italian government preferred to offer the 5,000 military vehicles the Italian troops used in Spain to Franco, because it was cheaper not to bring them back. Gaps were supposed to be refilled with new vehicles in the next years, because nobody was in hurry; for no war – as the Germans said – could happen for three or four years.

The lack of money, weapons and vehicles meant the impossibility of managing a modern war. And in spring 1939, the war was suddenly close; the war that nobody in Rome expected to happen so soon; the war that Ribbentrop declared not to occur before 1941 or 1942 last September, and confirmed it once more in May saying that four or five years would pass before a war exploded; the war that was not to come before 1943 or 1944, that is to say just when Italy would be fully unprepared, as declared by Keitel in early April 1939, and Göring too, unofficially, on 17 April. That unexpected war was almost obvious by the half of July. What was to be done? Mussolini and Ciano's reaction was the same: they acted the same way they did in late 1938 during the Czechoslovak crisis; they looked for room for negotiation, if any. But this was the problem: was there any room for negotiation?

## WHAT EVERYBODY CLEARLY KNEW TO BE HITLER'S OPINION ON POLAND

Actually, there was a first answer to such a question and it was in *Mein Kampf*. Hitler himself mentioned Poland and the situation in Eastern Europe and there was not that much room for hope. In chapter III, he spoke of the Polish policy made by the Germans in the past aimed at Germanising Poles through the imposition of German language, whose result had been 'pathetic', because it generated a population of another race who expressed opinions in German with no link with the German mentality and which, with her lesser value, damaged "the nobility and the value of our nation."<sup>5</sup> Then, there were some implicitly nasty comments saying that in the past "anyone who was a son of Jews, Poles, Africans, or Asians could be safely called a German citizen"<sup>6</sup>, before reaching chapter XIV. There, the fate of Poland according to the Nazi program was implicitly defined. The exam of the German political facts in the last 1,000 years generated two main political points. The first of them was the "organisation and the increasing of the

<sup>5</sup> A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf (La mia battaglia)*, Varese 1991, chapter II, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, chapter III, p. 62.

population of the lands East of the Elbe”<sup>7</sup>, obviously by the Germans. The other was “the system of the Brandenburg-Prussian Nation established by the Hohenzollern as the mirror and the centre of consolidation of a new Reich.”<sup>8</sup> It was easy to realise that in both the points there was no room for Poland as a nation, but, when putting them in relation with what Hitler had previously written and was to write, it was clear that there was no room for Poles too, no matter how Germanised they became.

Hitler went further and, a few pages later, he said “We start from the point where we stopped 600 years ago. Let us stop the eternal German progression to the North and West and let us look at the lands located in the East.”<sup>9</sup>

Then, the book discussed strategy, and once more Poland was the enemy to be destroyed. When speaking of Russia, Hitler hypothesised to reach an alliance with Moscow, but, he added, in the case of war against the Western enemies, Germany could not get any support from Russia, because “between Germany and Russia there is Poland, in French hands. In the case of a conflict, Russia should annihilate Polish resistance before bringing help to Germany.”<sup>10</sup> Anyway that of a Russian alliance was only a possibility, and a few pages later Hitler dismissed it because “Russia’s rulers do not care about having honest pacts, nor about respecting them” and, as last, he concluded that “the aim of our foreign policy shall not tend toward the West or toward the East, but to a policy aimed at acquiring new territories.”<sup>11</sup> Hence, a reader could easily conclude that Germany wanted to expand eastward to Russia, simply conquering Poland and then getting rid of Poles; and this had been written in 1923, published in 1925, sold in millions of copies worldwide and translated in many languages, including Italian and Polish.

Mussolini knew it since 1934, and, also if he defined the book as a ‘brick’, a word used in Italian to define a very heavy and boring book, he had to know what Hitler had in mind, also about Poland. But, in case *Mein Kampf* was dismissed as a ‘past’ program, not necessarily to be still followed, the reports by the ambassador in Berlin were quite enlightening.

## WHAT WAS KNOWN IN ROME

In the early days of July 1939, Galeazzo Ciano was still calm, and Poland was, according to his diary, no longer a problem. He went to Spain on 9 July, but, when he returned ten days later, he realised that something was wrong. This is what one can read in his diary, but was it really so? Ciano’s diary must be taken carefully, for it was rearranged by its author before his death, and, in order to be trusted, the diary often needs a further

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, chapter XIV, p. 224.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, chapter XIV, p. 230.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, chapter XIV, p. 235.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, chapter XIV, p. 240.

and external evidence. So, let us see what Rome actually knew from a different source: the Italian Diplomatic Documents.

A first signal appeared during Göring's visit in Rome from 14 to 17 April. Ciano was very surprised due to Göring's harsh style about Poland and, on the third day of the visit, he wrote in his diary: "What worried me above all during the talks was the way he described the relations with Poland: it resembled too peculiarly to the one used in other times toward Austria and Czechoslovakia."<sup>12</sup>

It was not by chance and it was confirmed by a report sent by the Royal Ambassador in Berlin, Bernardo Attolico on the following day, 18 April. It was a long and dramatic document, which was seen by Mussolini on 20 April 1939. Referring to the German memorandum issued on 21 March to Poland, Attolico said:

"After the answer given to the German proposals on 26 March, an answer which here was considered as negative and immediately dismissed by Ribbentrop first, and then by the Führer, the Cabinet of Warsaw did not act. Lipski went and came back many times, but he does not speak. Clearly he has no instruction to retake the talks, as he hoped. Due to the support of London and Paris, which Warsaw considers to be blind-folded and almighty, the city has become more rigid.

Mobilisation, no matter what is said, is in progress on both sides and every day. The departure to Germany of 90,000 Polish peasants to work in the German regions near the border was suddenly stopped. *Usque tandem?* [Latin: till when?] I do not know if the Führer is disposed to be patient indefinitely.

On the one hand, as it is known, he does not want the war for a couple of years. On the other hand, Ribbentrop asserts in an absolute or even peremptory way that, similarly to September [1938], if in this case Germany would want to enforce its territorial claims toward Poland, not even one English or French soldier would move.

In this moment, Ribbentrop has great influence on the Führer. The two excite each other. And, as the threat of being encircled – the encirclement every German and especially the Führer considers a nightmare – was not enough, Roosevelt's message came.

The Führer will answer on 28 April. Nothing is known yet of what will be his definitive mind about it. It is possible that... he will try to put the situation upside down asking the others whether they accept this or that proposal, at the same time stating the German minimal conditions for a new European agreement.

a) exclusion of Soviet Russia,

b) demanding the Eastern European Countries, who more or less directly co-operated as tools of the British-French encircling, to declare their intentions. Such a demand would naturally be addressed above all to Poland. In this case, the speech to be held in Berlin on 28 April could be for Poland the same 'stop' made by the speech held in Nuremberg on 13 September 1938 to Czechoslovakia.<sup>13</sup>

It is not a matter of simple conjectures. I know that the Führer – touched in his pride and having lost his illusions because Poland frustrated that friendship he always consid-

<sup>12</sup> G. Ciano, *Diario 1937–1943*, 16 April 1939, ed. R. De Felice, Milano 1990, p. 285.

<sup>13</sup> Actually Attolico did not remember well: that speech was held on 12 September.

ered as the cornerstone of his new European policy – and on the other hand pushed by the people’s resentment... I know, I say, that the Führer started behaving this way toward Poland, as enigmatic as a sphinx, foreshadowing his every new smash. I know that the proposal about a highway linking Eastern Prussia to the Reich, granting Poland the rest of the Corridor during the next 25 years, a proposal the Führer was happy with, also if the whole German public opinion was against it, I know, I say, that such a proposal will no more be renewed by the Führer, or will be renewed as an ultimatum.

I beg Your Excellence not to ask me for the source of this information. But it comes to me from a person who can and must know. The next 15 days will be extremely sensible for Germany. But not for Germany alone.

[...]

The worries I felt the duty to submit to Your Excellence are not grounded on the common ‘rumours’...

I’m impressed because I see with my eyes and hear with my ears German responsible persons telling me that a new situation is appearing, which recalls that of September 1938, a situation when ‘all’ the possibilities are possible in that time.<sup>14</sup>

Count Ciano saw this report on 19 April and forwarded it to Mussolini, who, as said, saw it on 20 April. But that was not all. On 19 April, late in the night Attolico sent a new long report resuming his talk with the Romanian foreign minister Gafencu, who was making a diplomatic tour of Europe. Gafencu had met Beck on his train in Krakow on 17 April, and now, on 19 April, he met Hitler. Attolico reported:

“Gafencu also met the Führer, who – after a wide general sightsee of the European situation – underlined the German interest in a long period of peace. Gafencu left the Chancery sure that Hitler does not want the peace. It seems that the Führer spoke in very nasty terms about Poland.”<sup>15</sup>

At the eve of June, the Germans asked formally for a meeting between Hitler and Mussolini. Attolico noticed Rome on 6 June. Rome took it smoothly and, after Attolico insisted, replied it was fine and that the meeting could happen later. It was not said where and when, and this probably was a mistake, as we shall see, also it is doubtful that such a meeting could change anything. Let’s keep it in mind, by now, and let us go on.

After the last sort of agreement about Danzig, on 26 June 1939 Attolico had reported that an absolutely reliable source confirmed to him the current uncontrolled rumours: the Germans ambassador in Paris Welczeck had really been ordered by Ribbentrop to tell the French – in that case the French foreign minister Georges Bonnet – that Germany intended to solve the problem of Danzig by mid-August, no matter how, and that if

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<sup>14</sup> Telexpress, secret, 2986/917 sent on 18 April 1939 by the Royal Ambassador in Berlin Bernardo Attolico to His Excellence the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Italy, Galeazzo Ciano, count di Cortellazzo e di Buccari, in: Archive of the Minister of Foreign Affairs (onward ADMAE), *Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923–1943*, Serie II – Ufficio di Coordinamento (UC), B, Busta 6, UC 7, *Corrispondenza relativa alla conclusione del Patto d’Acciaio, aprile–maggio 1939*, [correspondence concerning the achievement of the Steel Pact April–May 1939] part 2.

<sup>15</sup> Telegram 2063/254 R. sent on 19 April 1939 by Attolico to count Ciano, in: *ibidem*.



England tried to intrude, it had to face the destruction of her empire. Thus, Attolico concluded, the situation had “elements of instability.”<sup>16</sup>

Two days later, the Argentinean ambassador visited Attolico, who wrote a dramatic report. The Argentinean ambassador had been received by Hitler some days before, and Hitler had spoken very harshly about Poland “and its pretensions”, concluding that Germany could solve all in a few hours, for neither France nor Britain would move. The Argentinean ambassador – Attolico wrote – concluded that, as far as he could realise after what he heard and was hearing in those days, if Germany attacked Poland, both France and Britain would enter the war, followed by United States and by the most of Southern American Countries.<sup>17</sup> This could be negligible, because, after all, it was only the personal idea of a Southern American ambassador, thus of an ambassador from a not directly involved country. Moreover, a few days later, on 1 July, Attolico reported his talk about Danzig to von Weizsäcker. Von Weizsäcker admitted that the Germans were improving and arming the Danzig police, but denied any program of ‘excesses’ to exist, and that Germany preferred a peaceful arrangement, as did Beck.<sup>18</sup>

Ciano replied, telling Attolico to meet Ribbentrop and to ask him for which were the actual German plans about Danzig.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the Royal Consul in Katowice was ordered to keep attention due to the “political evolution”, and to report to Rome every exceptional thing, and every military relevant new.<sup>20</sup>

On 3 July, the Royal Ambassador to the Holy Siege reported that the Secretary of State, cardinal Maglione, told him to warn Italy: he had been officially noticed that Britain intended to support Poland in the Danzig affair using arms. Maglione added that he wanted Ciano to know it, for the Vatican had good reasons to think that the Germans nourished illusions about a British non-intervention.<sup>21</sup> War clouds were gathering, thus it was in Italy’s interest to find a peaceful solution.

Probably it was not by chance that on the same day, 3 July, Ciano got a note by Mussolini. The Duce suggested to solve the Danzig problem by a plebiscite after a Danzig Senate’s initiative and under the control of Germany, Poland, Britain, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands and France. That general ballot would be the first step. Had it shown the German character of the city, the same seven Powers could start discussing what to do.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Letter, personal, 4704/1419 sent on 26 June 1939 by the Royal Ambassador in Berlin Bernardo Attolico to His Excellence the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Italy, Galeazzo Ciano, count di Cortellazzo e di Buccari, in: ADMAE, *Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923–1943*, Serie II – Ufficio di Coordinamento (UC), B, Busta 7, UC 8, *Corrispondenza relativa ai rapporti con la Germania, giugno–settembre 1939*, fasc. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Report, reserved, personal, 4838/1446 sent on 28 June 1939 by Attolico to count Ciano, in: *ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> Report, very reserved, 4897/1479 sent on 1 July 1939 by Attolico to count Ciano, in: *ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> Letter, personal, 4869/1479 sent on 2 July 1939 by count Ciano to Attolico, in: *ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> Secret Telegram no. 6, sent on 3 July 1939 by the Deputy Director of General Affairs of the Foreign Affairs Ministry Vidau to the Royal Consul in Katowice Busi, in: Ministero degli Affari Esteri (onward MAE), *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani, Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Ottava Serie 1935–1939, vol. XII: 21 maggio – 12 agosto 1939, Roma 1952, p. 335.

<sup>21</sup> Telegram by courier 107 sent on 3 July 1939 by ambassador to the Holy Siege Pignatti Morano di Custoza to count Ciano, in: *ibidem*, p. 337.

<sup>22</sup> Appunto (draft) autograph by Mussolini, unsigned, on 3 July 1939, in: ADMAE, *Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923–1943*, Serie II – Ufficio di Coordinamento (UC), B, Busta 7, UC 8, *Corrispondenza relativa ai rapporti con la Germania, giugno–settembre 1939*, fasc. 1.



On the following day, 4 July, the British ambassador in Rome, sir Percy Lorraine, gave Ciano a note, and there was no room for misunderstandings. After a long prologue, it said:

“Men and arms are entering the city from Germany and the fact that the men are ostensibly «tourists» does not disguise their military character. It is reported that all this activity is the prelude to a declaration by the Danzig authorities of their decision to join the Reich and it is said that this declaration will be accompanied by a display of military force backed by assurance of military assistance from the German Government if Poland should interfere to prevent the transfer in this way.

Such a chain of events would undoubtedly lead immediately to a European war, for the United Kingdom is absolutely united in its determination to carry out its pledges to Poland and the position is the same in France.

Before plunging Europe into such a catastrophe, it is right to examine the situation to make sure that it is clearly understood, basically saying that Britain and France hoped Germany and Poland to find a negotiated solution, but, in case that was impossible, they would support Poland [...]. The Poles are convinced, with the example of Czechoslovakia before, that if Danzig became a part of the Reich, it would be transformed into a military base and used for the purpose of ultimately dismembering their country and destroying its independence.

If they are right in their belief, then it is certain that Germany cannot have Danzig without a war in which Italy, Great Britain and the peoples of many other countries who have to-day no quarrel with one another will be involved.

But if the German Government have no such intentions and are willing to give proof that the suspicions above mentioned are without foundation, then it ought to be possible, as the atmosphere cools, for the German and Polish Governments to enter [into negotia]tions [in order to] find a peaceful settlement [of their dif]ferences. That is how the position appears to His Majesty's Government and the Prime Minister has thought it right that Signor Mussolini should be warned of the dangers he sees ahead before they come upon us.”<sup>23</sup>

On that same day, the Royal Ambassador in Paris, Guariglia, reported about the talk he had with the German Ambassador in Paris count Welzeck, to whom Bonnet just gave a formal note about the responsibility of a war, if any war started. Explicitly asked by Guariglia, Welzeck answered that yes, Bonnet had been kind, formal and firm, and that Ribbentrop was sure that both the British and the French would not dare to start a world war, thus what they said was a bluff.<sup>24</sup>

On the same day, Attolico confirmed: Ribbentrop was sure that both the British and the French were bluffing. According to Ciano's orders, he asked to meet Ribbentrop, but the Reichsminister was sick and did not leave his home. Anyway, Attolico wrote that the main point was not if Germany wanted a war, for it was sure that it did not, but if

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<sup>23</sup> Pro-memoria, on 4 July 1939 presented on 7 July by the ambassador of Great Britain sir Percy Lorraine to count Ciano, in: *ibidem*.

<sup>24</sup> Report, very reserved, 4470/2003 sent on 4 July 1939 by the Royal Ambassador in Paris Guariglia to count Ciano, in: MAE, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani...*, p. 351.

Germany thought the British and the French would intervene and, he said – “here is where Ribbentrop’s opinion becomes, according to my mind, dangerous, for he has the illusion that, after all and in spite of all, England and France at the end would not move due to the sole Danzig.”<sup>25</sup>

This was confirmed by the Vatican. On 7 July, Royal Ambassador Pignatti Morano wrote that Cardinal Maglione told him to notice Ciano that someone around Hitler considered England not to be willing to be involved in a war. Upper circles in Berlin, Maglione said, were pressing on the Führer to start the war.<sup>26</sup>

That would have been enough to let everybody worry, but on 7 July Attolico sent a long and very calming report. He met Ribbentrop the day before. They had a long talk. Ribbentrop said that Germany had no desire of a war, unless Poles started it. If such was the case, the problem of Danzig would be solved within 48 hours directly in Warsaw. Then he added that Germany was not in a hurry and, with a bit of time, let us say six months, probably things would evolve in such a way that Britain would abandon Poland. France would never move, blocked by the Siegfried Line and under the threat of a 5,000 Luftwaffe aircrafts ready to destroy Paris. Russia would never move. The Soviets did not want the war and, by the way “Today I sent Schulemburg new instructions which will be enough to put a new flea into Stalin’s ear”, and Attolico noted that he later discovered the new instructions to Schulemburg to be related to a commercial agreement. Danzig was getting weapons just and only to improve its self-defence against ‘Polish armed bands’ and there was no reason for worrying. Ribbentrop added that he was going to leave for his holidays in Salzburg on the next day and that was all, or almost all.<sup>27</sup> There was only a very small alarm-bell, and it was so small that we can only now, after what we know about World War II and Nazi systems, realise it; but nobody, including a smart fox like Attolico could discover that in that moment. Speaking about Poland, Ribbentrop said: “By the way, it cannot be excluded that if Poles – of which by the way we have no signal yet – would come back to their senses some conversations between the two countries could be restarted – also if on new basis, given that the Führer will not renovate the historical and already made offer.”<sup>28</sup>

Now, 80 years later, we can consider this a threat: Poles had to accept the new proposals – no matter which ones – because the last proposals Hitler made were over and lost forever. Seen that those proposals had been rejected due to how hard and unacceptable they were, it is hard to believe that any further proposal could be better or could sound attractive to ears in Warsaw. Unfortunately Attolico came out from the meeting – an informal and friendly one – with the impression that nothing would

<sup>25</sup> Report, very reserved, 4977/1509 sent on 4 July 1939 by Attolico to count Ciano, in: ADMAE, *Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923–1943*, Serie II – Ufficio di Coordinamento (UC), B, Busta 7, UC 8, *Corrispondenza relativa ai rapporti con la Germania, giugno–settembre 1939*, fasc. 1.

<sup>26</sup> Secret Telegram by courier 110 sent on 7 July 1939 by Pignatti Morano di Custoza to count Ciano, in: MAE, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani...*, p. 376.

<sup>27</sup> Report, outmostly urgent, personal, 5006 sent on 7 July 1939 by Attolico to count Ciano, in: ADMAE, *Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923–1943*, Serie II – Ufficio di Coordinamento (UC), B, Busta 7, UC 8, *Corrispondenza relativa ai rapporti con la Germania, giugno–settembre 1939*, fasc. 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 380.

occur before six more months, unless Poland attacked. Attolico concluded that he got the impression that there was nothing to worry about. “Had I not this mind, I would ask to personally see the Führer. Anyway, an exchange of ideas with Hitler remains, in this situation, the only useful thing, but this is up to the Duce.”<sup>29</sup> and, seen that a formal meeting between Hitler and Mussolini was scheduled on a relatively short term, this could be easily made.

Attolico had just sent his report when Ribbentrop phoned him: he confirmed what he said the previous evening, and added that the Reich was moving its fortifications eastward, toward the border, and that the Germans who left Danzig in the past were now going back, joining the local SS to prevent any attempt by Polish bands to enter the city. Attolico added that another source, a reliable one, noticed him that the German Armed forces were requisitioning vehicles and calling German military and civil personnel back home from abroad.<sup>30</sup>

As said, on 9 July Ciano went to Spain. Two days later, on 11 July, Attolico wrote to the deputy foreign-secretary Filippo Anfuso. It was a revealing message. As we know, the Germans had asked for a Mussolini-Hitler meeting to be held in Summer. Attolico now wrote that such a meeting could be much more important than one could think, due to the situation with Poland.

Attolico complained, and between the lines it was clearly complaining about Ciano's behaviour, because nothing had been made in Rome for a meeting with the Germans. On 6 June, Hitler asked for a meeting. Rome – that is to say Ciano – answered only on 15 June, accepting it in general. Hitler replied proposing to hold it on 4 August. Attolico tried to fix that date, holding the meeting in Florence, but Rome replied to delay it till September – due to hot weather – and at the Brenner Pass. Now Attolico openly said: “I am not an alarmist, but the situation is serious”, and added many small details. Ribbentrop went on holidays not far from Hitler. Göring did the same, whilst von Weizsäcker, who tried to push the question of the Italian-German meeting as much as possible in order to have it before his own holidays – as he said – now simply renounced to his holidays at all. The rearmament in Danzig was ‘feverishly’ continuing, and so did the deployment of troops and the shipping of war materials to the northern part of the German-Polish borders. New Army Corps were organised and the summer military exercise had been postponed, but the Italian military attachés had not been noticed and knew those things from their colleagues, and all these movements had to be accomplished within 15 August. Thus, Attolico concluded: “it is by that day that a decision will have to be taken. Seeing this information, which I guarantee, the date of 4 August can be understood very well. The Führer clearly wants to consult the Duce before adopting a definitive and unchangeable line of action. If it does not occur, would the Führer renounce to take a decision by himself? I strongly

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 381.

<sup>30</sup> Report, very reserved, 5073/1532 sent on 7 July 1939 by Attolico to count Ciano, in: ADMAE, *Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923–1943*, Serie II – Ufficio di Coordinamento (UC), B, Busta 7, UC 8, *Corrispondenza relativa ai rapporti con la Germania, giugno–settembre 1939*, fasc. 1.

doubt. Nobody could let the Führer go back if the decision would be taken and if the German honour would be engaged in the clash. This time, the success probabilities for a last hour action, now neither appear so big, nor a new Munich appears at the horizon. Being all or almost all to be left to the direct negotiation between Germany and Poland, the action to be made must be developed on the ground of the possible compromises or on the program of the claims BEFORE that they are announced by Germany. Once announced, I repeat, it will be a matter of «national pride» to inevitably determine and direct the events.

Communication lines to Poland, where roads are, in the Russian way, with no road-bed and no pavement, but are dug in the pure earth, are practically interrupted by the first rains, that is to say since the end of September already. If an attempt must be tried, it is hence in August. And it is in August, toward 10–15 of the month, that the Führer will decide for peace or war.

And it is useless to think that the Führer, desiring to avoid – as he does – a general war, will surely avoid what may lead to the war. It is useless because this is based on the basic misunderstanding I repeatedly exposed and underlined, that is to say the idea, daily fed by Ribbentrop, and pushed by all the groups of the Party, SS, etc, about the deep Anglo-French determination not to march in any case.

All this – I once more underline – is not only my mind, but also the mind of a person who has much inner and broader assessing elements than I may have. And I, within my responsibility of faithful servant of the Country and of the Duce, have the precise duty not to make a mystery of it, also if with the more absolute cares and in line of a strict secret.”<sup>31</sup>

We can only speculate about who that “person who has much inner and broader assessing elements than I may have” mentioned by Attolico was. Given the contemporary situation and each Nazi top rank’s attitude, one by one, probably it was Göring, but we do not know and we shall never know.

Whilst Attolico was shelling Rome with his reports, ambassador Guariglia provided more relaxing news from Paris. He announced a new article by Marcel Déat, who wrote in May his famous “To die for Danzig?” and had now just published “Negotiating for Danzig”. Then Guariglia added that the Polish ambassador no longer paid his ‘daily visit’ to the French foreign minister Bonnet, looking for French support toward the Polish note to be sent to the Senate of Danzig, because Bonnet was said to have answered that by no means did France intend to support or to endorse that note.

Anyway, a further examination of the diplomatic correspondence from Berlin, Warsaw, Moscow and Paris is revealing: the confusion was at its top, and what was said on one day, could be changed on another. It is hence understandable that Mussolini and Ciano may have under-evaluated the risk. It is right that, mostly thanks to Attolico, and

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<sup>31</sup> Letter, very urgent, reserved to the person, 5137 sent on 11 July 1939 by Attolico to Foreign Affairs Ministry Chief of Cabinet Filippo Anfuso, in: ADMAE, *Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923–1943*, Serie II – Ufficio di Coordinamento (UC), B, Busta 7, UC 8, *Corrispondenza relativa ai rapporti con la Germania, giugno–settembre 1939*, fasc. 1.

relying also on other sources, Rome knew as much as needed to get a clear idea of the forthcoming storm, but would also not be a surprise if after all the promises Mussolini and Ciano heard from the Germans about not having a war for another three or four years, and not undertaking a war without telling their Italian Allies in advance, they may have believed in good faith that it was only a storm in a glass of water, purposely made to achieve some negotiating success.

Anyway, as soon as he was back from Spain, Ciano started preparing the meeting requested by Hitler. Mussolini ordered to tell Attolico to suggest an international conference to settle the German-Polish clash. Ribbentrop rejected it on 26 July, and on 27 July Ciano received a report by Attolico: Ribbentrop just confirmed the strong German will to avoid a war.

Was he right, or was he lying? There was a problem, a recent one, due to admiral Canaris, the chief of the German military intelligence. Five days before, on 22 July, Wilhelm Canaris' seaplane arrived in Ostia, the beach and the seaplane-port of Rome. Canaris was back from Spain and met his Italian counterpart, admiral Alberto Lais, chief of the Royal Navy Intelligence. Lais reported their long conversation, underlined that Canaris asked to "let his communications not return to Germany", and then a lot of surprises occurred. Germany was not ready for war. The Army lacked the staff needed for the new units to be organized, and there were neither enough nor well-trained reserves. Keitel was continually hoping not to go to war and the Kriegsmarine was not able to fulfill its mission in the case of war. The Luftwaffe was quite less than everybody expected from Germany, but such a bluff was backed and sustained both in and out of Germany.

Britain was now militarily ready for a war and recently got an American promise for 5,000 fully equipped aircrafts, plus 3,000 more from Russia in the case of a military agreement.

The Nazi Party wanted the war. Hitler was now persuaded that both Britain and France would stand, but he supposed it was better to fight at that moment, because within a year the situation would be much less favourable for Germany. Canaris supposed that Hitler was badly informed on the real conditions of the Armed Forces by the exalted Göring, and by Keitel, who feared to lose Hitler's favour, thus Hitler did not know the actual situation and the actual possibility to seize Poland and Ukraine.

According to Canaris, Hitler never exposed his mind, but, even worse, he lied when speaking: no peaceful solution for Danzig was possible, and Canaris thought the solution to appear within a short term. The admiral suspected that Hitler wanted to provoke an incident in Danzig. He admitted to be the expert in such events, but as soon as he told Hitler not to try to do it in Danzig, he realised Hitler was not fond of his advice. Then, Canaris discovered that the Führer passed the responsibility of the whole secret activity in Danzig to the Party Police.<sup>32</sup>

If one put together what Canaris told Lais on 22 July and what Ribbentrop told Attolico on 25 July it was possible that, speaking about war and moving troops within

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<sup>32</sup> Aid memory, document 1/3335 on 22 July 1939 by Admiral Alberto Lais to His Excellence Admiral Domenico Cavagnari, Chief of Staff of the Royal Navy, in: MAE, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani...*, p. 485–487.

their borders, the Germans were really making a bluff to back their diplomatic negotiations in what Ribbentrop himself defined as a 'nerve war'.

## THE ATTOLICO-RIBBENTROP MEETING ON 25 JULY 1939

On 25 July 1939, Attolico and his deputy, count Massimo Magistrati, who, by the way, was the husband of Ciano's sister, met Ribbentrop in Salzburg. Attolico tried to learn whether a war was to happen or not, and mentioned the foreseen meeting between the two dictators. If the situation was peaceful, it was useless – he said, whilst if a war was forthcoming, it was necessary. Ribbentrop did not answer and replied that Hitler was reflecting in that period, so he had to report to Hitler what Attolico said and asked for.

But a highlight appeared about Poland, and it was not necessarily positive. In Attolico's words, a new element appeared, and it was something explaining why Germany and the Führer disliked the idea of 'shaking hands' and sitting at the same table with representatives from Warsaw.

"Von Ribbentrop underlined in advance that last December and in January, the Führer exposed a plan to retain peace between the two countries during the next 25 years directly to Poland. Such a plan foresaw, as it is known, the Polish renunciation to some rights on Danzig in order to let the city legally join the Reich, the creation of an extra-territorial highway with no military importance to link Prussia to Eastern Prussia and the German renunciation to any other desire on the corridor, which would thus remain Polish. Ambassador Lipski simply responded that instead of such a solution, Poland would for sure prefer war against Germany. The Polish mobilisation occurred immediately. The Führer was appalled and furious due to such behaviour. Today – Ribbentrop concluded – the Führer would be really embarrassed if he had to invite Poland to seat with him at a conference, for he should somehow recognise the foolish and insane Polish answer. (Relata refero: I, by the way, have some reason to doubt that the style of the Polish answer was exactly as Ribbentrop told me).

Anyway, concluding this point, Ribbentrop (another very interesting thing) also underlined that if Poland appeared militarily far less dangerous than Czechoslovakia in 1938 for Germany, and declared that "whilst continuing current situation, it can't be excluded that one day Warsaw will no longer be able to keep the current terrible situation of tension and will peacefully change its mind and accept the German proposals."<sup>33</sup>

By the way, Ribbentrop added that Hitler "perfectly agreed with" Mussolini's idea of a conference to settle the question and avoid a war, and wanted to avoid whatever

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<sup>33</sup> Report, urgent, outmost reserved, 5608, sent on 26 July 1939 by Attolico to Foreign Affairs Minister Ciano, in: ADMAE, *Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923–1943*, Serie II – Ufficio di Coordinamento (UC), B, Busta 7, UC 8, *Corrispondenza relativa ai rapporti con la Germania, giugno–settembre 1939*, fasc. 1.

could start a war, also within Danzig, unless he had “the absolute security, that is to say 100/100” to be able to isolate Poland.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, Ribbentrop practically told Attolico: “The Führer made an offer. Poles amazingly refused, thus he could not seat with them now, otherwise their refusal would appear to have been right, thus Germany would not change its mind, but Warsaw could in the future be forced to change its attitude.” But in fact, as we can realise now, Ribbentrop was saying: “There is no room for negotiation; Poland has to accept German proposals and that is all”.

Unfortunately, accepting those proposals meant letting the Germans get Danzig, close the corridor and, moreover, build an extraterritorial highway crossing – and no highway, by itself, could be deprived of military relevance, that is to say cutting Poland in two, from the West to the East: in fact it would have been a complete diplomatic defeat. But what if Poland accepted the proposal? Had Warsaw thought that such an acceptance could settle the situation, would it have been true or not?

In Rome everybody still considered Attolico a pessimist and an alarmist, and believed that there could be room for a settlement without war. But there were alarming elements in the plot. It was Ciano’s brother in law and Attolico’s deputy in Berlin, minister counsellor Massimo Magistrati who underlined the problem. When Ciano was preparing to meet Ribbentrop in Austria, on 7 August 1939 Magistrati wrote a personal letter to his brother in law and the foreign minister, and mentioned the main points of disagreement between Germany and Poland, including the famous highway. Then he recalled the violent Polish popular demonstration against the German embassy in Warsaw during Ciano’s visit in February 1939. But Magistrati said:

“There is, in all of this, at least formally, some misunderstanding. When and how were the question of Danzig and that of the German extraterritorial zone in the Corridor really opened and discussed between Germany and Poland?

Hitler, in his Reichstag speech at the end of April mentioned [some] new proposals he made to Warsaw. And von Ribbentrop, during the conversation he had on 25 July with Attolico and me in Salzburg, declared that actually in a certain moment (when?) he personally had given Ambassador Lipski many proposals to be forwarded to Warsaw. The most important three were:

- 1) definitive union of Danzig with the Reich, with some economical concessions to Poland concerning mercantile traffic;
- 2) creation of a highway between Prussia and Eastern Prussia, included in a strip of land protected by extraterritoriality in favour of Germany (in other words, a corridor in the corridor);
- 3) German renunciation to further territorial claims towards Poland and conclusion among the two Countries of a new Pact of Friendship lasting 25 years, a Pact which, practically, would have given Poland the unquestioned ownership of the Corridor and thus safety of the access to the sea.

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.



These proposals, according to von Ribbentrop, were rejected by the ambassador himself, who, also in a low voice (Lipski was one of the major authors of the late German-Polish friendship) would have declared that the war would be better than such a solution.

But actually when and how did the Warsaw Government discuss those proposals with the Germans? Ambassador Arone di Valentino, who just passed through Berlin, confirmed to me that, at least as far as he knows, it never appeared in Warsaw that the Government had a real plan composed of proposals to be objected by a regular counter plan.”<sup>35</sup>

Magistrati went ahead, resuming the situation and its increasingly stressful impact, and concluded that the situation was worse than in the past, and that: “the Germans (and I repeat here the words von Ribbentrop told us in Salzburg), and Hitler himself, do not «feel like», after the pretended kick the Poles gave them, quietly restarting the negotiation after their initiative, and do prefer to rely on dreams, as they would like to see Warsaw invaded and trampled within seven or eight days by the German infantries in the case of a Polish ‘provocation’. And the Poles, in their hysterical crisis of prestige, heroism and patriotic exaltation, feel like the depositories and owners of the flag of the anti-German crusade in Europe, and, sure of being 110% backed by Paris and London, they think of being, thanks to their attitude of resistance and absolute intransigency, the anti-German warlike will of the democracies. Thus we are in a no-exit street, and, actually, if the situation will remain only in Berlin’s and Warsaw’s hands, we could hardly see a peaceful solution.”<sup>36</sup>

In other words, Magistrati said: “Ribbentrop and Hitler are liars, for the Polish Government never formally received any plan by them, thus how could the Poles reject it, as Ribbentrop claims?”

Ten days before this report, on 28 July, Attolico again wrote to Ciano. Hitler was suddenly back in Berlin and Attolico had a conversation with Ribbentrop. It would be useless to report it extensively. The core was: Ribbentrop pushed for a meeting between Hitler and Mussolini. Attolico answered according to the instructions he got from Rome: “there are two possibilities: if Germany wants to go to war (and Italy did not refuse it) it is necessary to discuss and take each other’s advice as soon as possible, or Germany can wait and, if so, it must wait till the right opportunity. But if Germany did not yet see what «the right opportunity» could be, it was better to wait until having a clearer situation. As a conclusion, I literally said «if chances are for war the meeting is understandable and necessary; if they are not, it can be usefully delayed.»”<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Personal letter sent on 7 August 1939 by minister counsellor Massimo Magistrati to Foreign Affairs Minister Ciano, in: ADMAE, *Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923–1943*, Serie II – Ufficio di Coordinamento (UC), B, Busta 7, UC 8, *Corrispondenza relativa alla conclusione del Patto d’Acciaio, aprile–maggio 1939*, fasc. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Personal letter, p. 598.

<sup>37</sup> Report, secret, 5657, sent on 28 July 1939 by Attolico to Foreign Affairs Minister Ciano, in: ADMAE, *Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923–1943*, Serie II – Ufficio di Coordinamento (UC), B, Busta 7, UC 8, *Corrispondenza relativa ai rapporti con la Germania, giugno–settembre 1939*, fasc. 1.

Ribbentrop told Attolico that he understood and that he was going to report to Hitler, and then give Attolico an answer that same evening or the next morning.

As we now know, but as Italy did not know at that time, it must be underlined that no word about the negotiation with the Soviets and the forthcoming Nazi-Soviet pact was transmitted to Attolico or directly to Mussolini, whilst Hitler was clearly looking for Italian military endorsement in the case of war against Poland. But, what is interesting, practically no mention of any actual risk of war was ever made by Ribbentrop or by Hitler in July 1939, thus the Italian foreign ministry and Mussolini had no real reason to think of any German will to march against Poland. Thus Rome could continue thinking that Berlin was bluffing.

There were some small signals, but only now we can acknowledge them, whilst in that moment one had to rely on what Hitler and Ribbentrop said. For instance, on 22 July Attolico told Rome that, according to the Royal consul in Hamburg, “many units of that Army Corps left to the Polish border. Many reserve officers and reserve personnel belonging to all the corps are called on active duty. Some German factories were ordered to stop working for private clients since 3 August onward, and have been noticed that the production must be reserved to military purposes. Generally marked day for German action against Danzig is 16 August. It is confirmed that among the high ranks a failure of the Anglo-French-Soviet negotiations would indicate the possibility to isolate Poland and thus it could be the signal for a new German smash.”<sup>38</sup>

A week later, the King’s minister in Copenhagen, Sapuppo, reported that “the former Danish Foreign Minister Scavenius [...] told me yesterday that a British, [...] whom he considers an intelligence service agent, arrived recently in Copenhagen from London and signaled that the start of the war in September was sure.”<sup>39</sup> Anyway, also if we know now that they were right, those small and scattered signals and rumours could not compete with what Ribbentrop and Hitler said.

Nothing happened in the next few days. Attolico was told that Hitler wanted to wait and see what happened in order to have a clearer situation, but on 1 August Attolico wrote to Ciano. Ribbentrop once more asked for a meeting, thus the Germans probably had something to tell the Italians, hence war was possible and, if so, it was better to meet the Germans, otherwise they would feel free to act without noticing the Italians.<sup>40</sup>

On 2 August 1939, the Italian military attaché in Berlin, general Roatta, sent a long telegram to the chief of the military intelligence, who submitted it to Mussolini. Roatta provided all the information giving evidence of a German silent but effective mobilisation, including the call to arms of 500,000 men. He concluded that ‘a highly ranked

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<sup>38</sup> Report, reserved, 5512/1679, sent on 22 July 1939 by Attolico to Foreign Affairs Minister Ciano, in: ADMAE, *Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923–1943*, Serie II – Ufficio di Coordinamento (UC), B, Busta 7, UC 8, *Corrispondenza relativa ai rapporti con la Germania, giugno–settembre 1939*, fasc. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Telegram, by courier, 110, sent on 29 July 1939 by the Royal minister in Copenhagen Sapuppo to Foreign Affairs Minister Ciano, in: MAE, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani...*, p. 541.

<sup>40</sup> Report, secret, 5821, sent on 1 August 1939 by Attolico to Foreign Affairs Minister Ciano, in: ADMAE, *Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923–1943*, Serie II – Ufficio di Coordinamento (UC), B, Busta 7, UC 8, *Corrispondenza relativa ai rapporti con la Germania, giugno–settembre 1939*, fasc. 1.

source' suggested that the Germans did not fear to be attacked, but asked "what if we attacked?", and, according to the same source, Germany's authorities did not consider it necessary to consult Italy before launching the war.<sup>41</sup>

On 5 August, the King's ambassador in Moscow Rosso reported a long talk he had with the German ambassador Schulemburg, who notified him about some German-Soviet talks about commercial and cultural agreements, whilst any political agreement had been considered by Molotov difficult to achieve, unless the previous German political attitude changed.<sup>42</sup>

On 7 August, Attolico was ordered to announce a visit by Ciano to Ribbentrop. As it is well known, on 9 August von Weizsäcker summoned the Polish ambassador and told him the harsh declaration by the German government about Danzig. Ciano, who just received his brother-in-law Magistrati's report about the lies of the Germans, was notified about the German declaration whilst he was leaving to meet Ribbentrop near Salzburg.

### THE SO-CALLED 'SALZBURG MEETING'

Ciano and Ribbentrop met on 11 August 1939, in the castle of Fuschl near Salzburg. Since the very first moment, Ribbentrop told his Italian counterpart that the situation was extremely serious. Ciano later wrote in his minutes book: "I can't say that he added new elements, he tried to dramatise the events by the well-known negative representation of the persecution suffered by Germans in Poland and emasculations the Polish soldiers let some Germans suffer. But, new facts: none. He said that the honour of Germany is at stake (and sometimes he also said the Axis' honour) and that hence it is not possible that a Great Power does not proceed with a righteous reaction."<sup>43</sup>

Ciano tried to consider Ribbentrop reasonable, but it was impossible. Ribbentrop continued repeating: "[...] mechanically and without a reasonable explanation, the two statements that the conflict will be localised and that, also in case of generalisation, German victory is 100% sure."<sup>44</sup> It was now that, for the very first time, Ribbentrop told Ciano – and Germany told Italy – that there were talks going on in Moscow between Germany and the Soviet Union. Ciano, upset, remarked that such a strictly-kept secret did not accord to what was foreseen by the Steel Pact and with the total loyalty Italy had toward Germany until that moment. At the end, Ciano remarked that the Italian

<sup>41</sup> Report, 22/22/A/4, sent on 2 August 1939 by the military attaché in Berlin general Roatta to the Chief of the Servizio Informazioni Militari general Carboni, copy in: ADMAE, *Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923-1943*, Serie II – Ufficio di Coordinamento (UC), B, Busta 7, UC 8, *Corrispondenza relativa ai rapporti con la Germania, giugno-settembre 1939*, fasc. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Telegram 102, sent on 5 August 1939 by the Royal ambassador in Moscow Rosso to Foreign Affairs Minister Ciano, in: MAE, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani...*, p. 583.

<sup>43</sup> "Colloquio col ministro degli Esteri del Reich von Ribbentrop – Salisburgo, 11 agosto 1939-XVII" [Talk with the Foreign Minister of the Reich von Ribbentrop – Salzburg, 11 August 1939 – 17<sup>th</sup> year of the Fascist Era], in: G. Ciano, *L'Europa verso la catastrofe...*, p. 449.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 452–453.

ambassador had not been notified by any means about such a forthcoming crisis, and Ribbentrop replied that he could not yet let Ciano know the details, for everything was “closed in the Führer’s impenetrable heart.”<sup>45</sup>

After a ten-hourlong discussion, Ciano wrote, “I left him and I’m deeply convinced that he intends to provoke the conflict and that he will object any initiative to peacefully solve the current situation.”<sup>46</sup>

On the following day, Ciano went to Berchtesgaden. On 2:30 p.m., he had a first meeting with Hitler and in the next 3 hours and 45 minutes, he was flooded by a massive amount of military considerations, supported by military maps of Western and Eastern Europe. Hitler told him that Poland was damaging German prestige, and that he intended to definitely resolve the matter within 15 October. Then Ciano reported the four main points of Hitler’s assertions. The first was negligible: Poland provoked Germany, offended Germany’s honour and continued to do it, and this could not be tolerated. The second too was negligible, for it was pure propaganda consisting of actual lies up to a degree the terror affecting German minorities in Poland due to murdering, rapes, emasculations and so on. The third could appear more or less reliable: Hitler knew that Poles were going to seize Danzig after 15 October, but the most important and probably the only true one was the fourth and last. He wanted to attack, Ciano reported, “4. because Poland represents a threat on Germany’s and thus on the Axis’ back. Also in the case a policy of cooperation and peace was made with Poland, this could not deeply modify the situation and, when Germany and Italy would – as one day it is impossible to avoid – fight against the Western democracies, Poland would find the opportunity to put a knife in Germany’s flank.”<sup>47</sup> In other words: Hitler’s strategy necessitated to cancel Poland, as he wrote in *Mein Kampf* in 1923.

On the next day, Ciano met Hitler again. This time it was a matter of only half a hour, and only a new thing was said.

Hitler started telling Ciano that it was better not to publish a press release about the meeting in Salzburg, for no press release left the Axis with free hands. Then, he repeated what he told on the previous day about Poland and about the necessity to solve the clash with Poland in a total way. But, then, something new appeared. Ciano reported: “The objectives of the action against Poland are now fixed in his mind. German people need to ensure the room for themselves and the means guaranteeing their life. Action against Poland provides evidence of the actual direction of march of the German people.”<sup>48</sup> That was the final point and we got through Ciano by Hitler himself. But it was not new: it too had been written in *Mein Kampf* The Germans were marching to seize their Lebensraum in the East, as Hitler clearly and openly wrote in his program. And in order to get the Lebensraum, Poland, which could be a threat, had to be cancelled.

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 453.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>47</sup> “Primo colloquio col Führer – Berchtesgaden 12 agosto 1939-XVII” [First talk with the Führer – Berchtesgaden 12 August 1939 – 17<sup>th</sup> year of the Fascist Era], in: G. Ciano, *L’Europa verso la catastrofe...*, p. 457.

<sup>48</sup> “Secondo colloquio col Führer – Berchtesgaden 13 agosto 1939-XVII” [Second talk with the Führer – Berchtesgaden 13 August 1939 – 17<sup>th</sup> year of the Fascist Era], in: *ibidem*, p. 458.

## CONCLUSION

The Italian documents provide a good evidence of the situation. They make it clear that it was mostly Ribbentrop who pushed toward a harsh solution of the clash with Poland, but shows also that no possibility for a peaceful solution existed at least since mid-April 1939, thus Poland was condemned, no matter which kind of answer it could give but the unconditioned acceptance of all the German requests, whatever they would be. Moreover, recent experience about Czechoslovakia and Austria proved what could Poland expect also if the country accepted the proposals.

Mussolini knew, or at least had to know, since he knew *Mein Kampf*, what Hitler actually thought of Poland and of its strategic role as an enemy threat on the German flank, in the case of war. This had been written in *Mein Kampf* in 1923 and was repeated by Hitler to Ciano in Berchtesgaden in August 1939. This continuity allows a consideration. It is possible that if Poland accepted the German proposals, a peaceful period could follow, but how long would it be before a new set of German proposal was demanded? Czechoslovakia and Austria were an evidence. Their diplomatic life had been flooded with demands sounding as the last demand and the last obstacle on the road of a long-lasting peace, but then, soon after, another demand always arrived. It was due to those unlucky countries' experience that the Chief of Cabinet Michał Łubieński said to deputy Foreign Secretary Jan Szembek on 22 March 1939, "the German proposal about the guarantee of our borders completely lacks value. If we cede on one point, further demands will immediately follow."<sup>49</sup> Beck also had no illusions, for, during the meeting he chaired at his Ministry on the next day, he said: "Germany lost that sense of responsibility it kept till today... [...]. It is equally impossible for the Polish State to accept the enforcement of an unilateral diktat on a sensitive point like Danzig [...]. Danzig is a symbol. If we cede, we shall enter among those states of the East whose law is decided upon by others."<sup>50</sup>

Mussolini knew it, Ciano knew it, and Attolico knew it. Italians hoped that Poles would not react, because they knew that such a reaction meant a general war three years earlier than expected, and that also meant a disaster for Italy. But Italians also knew quite well that Poles only had to react or die slowly and progressively.

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## Ostatnie dni pokoju z perspektywy Osi: wysiłki Włoch w celu uniknięcia niemieckiej agresji na Polskę

Autor przedstawia dostępne materiały archiwalne i opublikowane źródła włoskie poświęcone ostatnim tygodniom pokoju w okresie od marca/kwietnia do września 1939 r. Z materiałów jednoznacznie wynika, że pod koniec wiosny i latem 1939 r. niemożliwe było zawarcie porozumienia lub umowy między Polską i Niemcami. Wynikało to przede wszystkim z politycznej i gospodarczej determinacji Hitlera dążącego do przeprowadzenia ataku i zniszczenia Polski.

### SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

Polska, Niemcy, Włochy, II wojna światowa, Hitler, Ribbentrop, Mussolini, Ciano, pakt stalowy

## The Last Days of Peace from within the Axis: Italian Efforts to Avoid the German Aggression Against Poland

The author presents available archival and published Italian sources devoted to the last weeks of peace between March/April and September 1939. The materials provide clear evidence that in late spring and summer 1939, an arrangement or agreement between Poland and Germany was impossible. The main reason was Hitler's determined political and economic will to attack and destroy Poland.

## KEYWORDS

Poland, Germany, Italy, World War II, Hitler, Ribbentrop, Mussolini, Ciano, Steel Pact

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