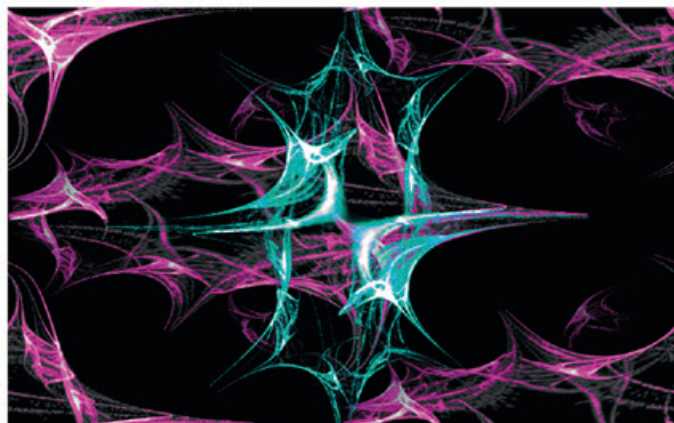


Marek Kornat

Poland and the Origins of the Second World War

A Study in Diplomatic History (1938–1939)



Marek Kornat

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This monograph deals with Polish foreign policy shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War. In tracing the diplomatic activity of foreign minister Józef Beck, it discusses six general problems: (1) the Polish political situation under the pressure of appeasement; (2) the project of Intermarium and efforts to implement it; (3) the action against Czechoslovakia and the conflict with the Soviet Union; (4) the Polish attitude towards the German concept of *Gesamtlosung* in Germany's relations with Poland; (5) the genesis of the Polish alliance with Great Britain; (6) the Allies' military inaction after Nazi Germany's aggression. In these conditions, Poland made four key decisions: it stood against Czechoslovakia, it rejected German demands, it allied itself with the United Kingdom, and it rejected the Soviet Union's claim for the Red Army to march across Polish lands.

The Author

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Poland and the Origins of the Second World War

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PETER LANG

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Introduction

This book covers the last phase of the Polish “policy of balance” and the final months of the Second Polish Republic’s existence, during which a great international crisis happened. The crisis began in March 1939 and ended on 1 September 1939, when German armed forces invaded Poland. The dilemmas of the Polish foreign policy of the reborn Poland included issues that Polish historians have discussed for many years: in fact, they have discussed them from the 1939 defeat until today. The discussion ranges from radical criticism to affirmation. The more time passes from the realities of the interwar period, the clearer the understanding of the period’s circumstances becomes. Perhaps the discussion will never definitely conclude because the past always has a way of making us see it in a different light. This book is another attempt to analyse the main issues of the Polish foreign policy, from the perspective of the 70 years that have passed since the Second World War began.

A historian is not supposed to judge, defend, or accuse. The historian is supposed to gather arguments “for and against”, consider past dilemmas, and recreate the atmosphere of the period he or she studies. The historian is a translator of the past, not a judge. We will never see a conclusive synthesis of such a complex problem as Poland’s international situation in 1938 and 1939. In historical studies, nothing is definitive or ultimate. As the Polish historian Henryk Wereszycki writes: “A judgment concerning the past is always a relative value”. We would like our considerations to become “a matter for reflection”, as the Polish political writer Juliusz Mieroszewski would say. This book will fulfil its purpose if it motivates the reader to ask further questions.

The book covers the questions concerning Poland’s situation in international relations in the last two landmark years that preceded the outbreak of the Second World War. My purpose is not to create a new monography. Instead, I want to enrich studies on this topic. Historians devote studies concerning the international relations’ situation of Poland in 1938 and 1939 to problems, which, in my opinion, required a new approach. Moreover, these problems require a new approach despite the presence of the enormous number of multilingual works on the topic of the Second Polish Republic diplomacy and the 1938–1939 international crisis.

I quote Jan Karski, who writes the following in his famous book *The Great Powers and Poland 1918–1945. From Versailles to Yalta*:¹

It seems that from Poland’s resurrection at the end of World War I to its demise following World War II, only once were the Poles able to determine their own fate by themselves. That was during the Polish-Bolshevik war of 1919–1920. Only once—at

1 J. Karski, *The Great Powers and Poland 1918–1945. From Versailles to Yalta* (London, 1985).

the Versailles Peace Conference—did a Great Power, the United States, throw its support on behalf of Poland for reasons other than its own interest. In all other instances, Poland was unable to play an independent and effective role in the international arena, regardless of the merits or demerits of its policies. Essentially, its fate depended on the Great Powers—their short- or long-range goals and their interrelations. The Poles were never strong enough to change that reality.

According to Karski's understanding, Poland determined its fate only once in history, in 1920, as the country managed to defend its newly acquired independence thanks to its armed forces. In 1920, the Polish nation emerged victorious in the war with the Soviets, even though the situation seemed catastrophic. Therefore, never in the future did the reborn Poland decide for itself, although the country was eager to play a significant role in international relations. All contemporary Polish foreign ministers, especially Józef Beck, often repeated the slogan "nothing about us without us", which became the main motto of Polish foreign policy.

Nevertheless, was Jan Karski right? Our considerations are an attempt to answer that momentous question. The 70 years that have passed since the outbreak of the Second World War make us ask that question again and again. The time that has passed since the dramatic events of the 1930s and the end of the Second World War let us look at Polish foreign policy from a more distant perspective, in a more balanced and in-depth way than before.

When we speak of the Polish foreign policy of the interwar period, which happened between 1918 and 1939, we must remember about the previous historiography. Sadly, we do not often refer to this historiography's findings, due to the small volume of studies. The experts in the considered field wrote so much on the topic that it seems almost impossible to add something new. When I approached these considerations, I decided not to write yet another monography on Polish foreign policy. Instead, I decided to discuss the most debatable issues. These issues include, for example, the "Intermarium" block idea, the Soviet threat in September 1938, German territorial claims, the Polish-British alliance, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, and the abandonment of Poland by the allied powers.

Undoubtedly, we cannot undermine fundamental facts. First, Poland would inevitably fail in its 1938 attempts to create a Central European bloc. Second, the Polish government rejected the German territorial claim, as they thought that, if they accepted it, this would mean the end of the independent Poland. Finally, the acceptance of British guarantees of support was Poland's deliberate choice, which meant that the country rejected the possibility of creating a bloc of countries that would defend the status quo. Such a bloc would also have included the Soviet Union. Obviously, we know that Poland could not prevent the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in August 1939, nor could Poland gain real help from the Western powers in September 1939. In May 1939, the latter decided not to attack Germany from the West if Germany invaded Poland. No one can challenge these facts.

When we consider the actions of Polish diplomacy in 1938–1939, we must ask ourselves very different questions. Three seem particularly important. How did the government of the Second Republic perceive the course of ongoing events? Were its actions rationally motivated during the autumn of 1938 and in 1939? Or, perhaps, Poland merely reacted to external circumstances, as a passive subject of international policy without any plan of its own?

Therefore, we deliberately stress not the actions of Polish diplomacy but the understanding of the international situation in which Poland found itself: the perception of threats and the assessment of Poland's capabilities. The historian's ultimate goal involves the reconstruction of the way of thinking of those who took part in historical events. Of course, it is usually impossible to achieve the said reconstruction. Nevertheless, the objective remains worth the attempt to attain.

In 1939, Poland lost its independence for 50 years. Every country that loses its territory due to warfare ceases to be an entity in international relations and becomes a subject of these relations. In 1989, Poland regained its independence. As a result, the question arose once again. Poland had to decide whether its foreign policy would agree with the foreign policy of the West or whether Poland would pursue its own foreign policy. Such experiences as Poland's situation in 1939 are a rarity in the history of nations. Nevertheless, the dilemmas and decisions of that time teach us a lesson that is relevant even today.

Today, history's role in the formation of public awareness seems to diminish. For example, authorities remove history from school curricula. Hence, matters that moved historical imagination in the past lose importance. Nevertheless, the dispute concerning whether Poland was right in its rejection of German territorial claims in 1938 and 1939 remains in the Polish elites' collective consciousness as discussions concerning the "policy of balance". The question whether Poland should have made an agreement with Hitler in 1938 and 1939 arose because people look for possible alternatives for contemporary Polish foreign policy. However, this question will not be key to this book because, in my opinion, we do not and should not discuss the issue of possible alternatives. Everyone who claims that Poland could have acted differently achieves very little. The acceptance of Adolf Hitler's one-time offer would have made Poland a subordinated ally of Germany. Moreover, that act would not have given Poland anything: either in the event of German failure or—unimaginable—victory. Deliberations on the German "overall solution" (*Gesamtlösung*) offer represent yet another attempt to find an answer to the question of possible Polish concessions.

A Polish historian must pay attention to an important issue when he or she analyses interwar Polish diplomacy. The problem lies in its extremely simplistic and unilateral image in Western historiography. Moreover, the image is eminently and unjustifiably negative. Sadly, I do not mean the older Western historiography, which dates to the Cold War period, but also the historiography of today.

The well-known journalist and historian William L. Shirer devotes a few remarks to Polish foreign policy on the eve of Second World War in his famous book *The Collapse of the Third Republic: An Inquiry into the Fall of France in*

1940: “The Polish Government, dominated by a clique of politically inept generals and colonels who had served under the dictator Piłsudski, had begun to detach Poland from its traditional ally and protector, France, and approach Germany in belief that the Reich would better protect Polish lands against the encroachment of the hated Russians”.² In 1992, one American historian claimed that Józef Beck, the foreign minister of contemporary Poland, was responsible for the fact that the Hitler-Stalin Pact became a reality. The historian states that Beck is responsible for the tragedy, as he jeopardised the possibility of creating a “great coalition” against the Third Reich. In the historian’s opinion, the coalition did not come into being because Józef Beck refused to cooperate with the Soviets in the summer of 1939.³ Similar annoying statements by Western historians concerning Józef Piłsudski’s Poland and Józef Beck’s diplomacy are a sad reality from which Western historiography fails to free itself.

We should not be astonished by the fact that the popularisation of knowledge concerning the criminal character of Stalin’s reign in the West did not change Western historians’ views on Polish diplomacy, even when a change could have been expected. Statements by Western authors often include theses that characterise Piłsudski’s and Beck’s Poland as an obstacle to the creation of a collective security system in Europe. Claims that Poland was a low-key ally of the Third Reich are also not uncommon. Some authors perceive the Poland of the 1930s as one of the sources of distress in Europe: they characterise Poland in this way not only in historical journals but also in monographs, rich in sources. Moreover, we find the pejorative perception of Józef Beck’s actions in works of widely recognised historians, such as Donald Cameron Watt, a British author of the most important book concerning the genesis of the Second World War.⁴

An essay by the American historian Henry L. Roberts is the only reliable study concerning Józef Beck in English. Roberts wrote and published it 50 years ago in *The Diplomats*, a volume that Princeton University Press published in 1953.⁵ Let us note another example of work relevant until this day: the monograph by German historian Hans Ross entitled *Poland and Europe: Studies in Polish Foreign Affairs 1931–1939* [*Polen und Europa. Studien zur polnischen Außenpolitik 1931–1939*], published in 1957. Sadly, Polish historiography is practically absent at the international level, if we exclude the books and studies by Polish historians who lecture and write on the matter in the West. The group includes such authors as Piotr S. Wandycz, Anna M. Cienciala, Marian K. Dziewanowski, Roman Dębicki,

2 William L. Shirer, *The Collapse of the Third Republic: An Inquiry into the Fall of France in 1940* (New York, 1994), pp. 241–242.

3 P. Longworth, *The Making of Eastern Europe* (London, 1992), p. 88.

4 D. C. Watt, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War 1938–1939* (London, 1989).

5 H. L. Roberts, “The Diplomacy of Colonel Beck” in: *The Diplomats 1919–1939*, ed. G. A. Craig and F. Gilbert (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 579–614.

and Zygmunt J. Gąsiorowski. I had to underline the abovementioned situation as that is the reality in which the image of interwar Poland functions in the realm of foreign historiography.

This book consists of seven chapters.

The first chapter most concisely considers the reality of the “policy of balance” in 1934–1938, in which I do not present the matter of particular cases but specify the contemporary political leitmotif. The second chapter deals with the most individual idea by Józef Beck; that is, his concept of a “Third Europe” or “Intermarium”: a neutral zone between the two totalitarian powers. In the third chapter, I consider the possibility of a Polish-Soviet armed conflict breaking out in September 1938. It is evident that such a situation would have radically changed the course of subsequent events. Moreover, we cannot comprehend the importance of the possible consequences of such a scenario, as historians cannot use the “what if” type of statements in their argumentation. The fourth chapter considers the German “Gesamtlösung” offer to Poland. We should underline that the rejection of the offer happened due to the Polish idea of normalising relations with Germany. Additionally, this concept involved a specific offer to settle disputes. Notably, Poland did not plan to transfer the Free City of Danzig to the Third Reich nor to allow the Germans to build an extraterritorial highway through Polish Pomerania. Obviously, the Germans did not accept the Polish offer. The fifth chapter deals with the subject of the alliance with Great Britain in the context of Polish political thought and foreign policy. The sixth chapter reviews Poland’s international situation in the context of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. In other words, it deals with the perception of Polish diplomacy in the light of imminent danger. The final, seventh chapter analyses the Polish experience of the outbreak of the Second World War, when the Allies left Poland behind, which shows Polish strategic assumptions and motivations of Polish diplomacy, but also the Allies’ actions: both the real and the virtual.

Krakow, autumn 2012

Chapter 1. The Policy of Balance—Realities and Dilemmas (1934–1938)

“Poland is on the border between two worlds.” When Polish Foreign Minister Józef Beck made this statement in 1933, he was of course thinking of the fact that his country neighboured both the Soviet Union and the Third Reich.⁶ Neither permanent rapprochement nor reconciliation was possible with either one of them. Supporting Germany against Russia was out of the question, as was cooperation with Moscow against Berlin. The subordination of the Polish state to one of these great neighbours would lead irrevocably to the loss of independence, and would involve first of all a violation of Poland’s territorial integrity. It was Marshal Józef Piłsudski, the man who established the foundations of interwar Polish foreign policy, who was most convinced of these facts.

Poland’s foreign policy in 1934–1939 was thus a policy of balance, between Germany and Soviet Russia. Its essence was the idea of strict neutrality towards both neighbouring totalitarian powers, which was understood in a way that excluded all agreements with one of these states against the other. This was the meaning of the metaphorical formula “the policy of balance”. Polish diplomats followed these guidelines consistently until 1939, when the entire international system collapsed and Poland lost its independence.

“The policy of balance” is a term that Beck used—apparently for the first time in February 1934—after returning from the USSR, where he was the first European foreign minister to pay an official visit. In a statement in March that year, Piłsudski put it slightly differently: *pro foro interno*; Polish policy was to “achieve a clear line”, and its basis would be that “Poland is not obliged to support either side against the other”.⁷ This formula would remain the essence of the policy of balance until September 1939.

Issues related to Polish diplomacy in the 1920s have provoked less historiographic debate than have actions that the Polish government took in the international arena in 1934–1939. Poland’s defeat in September 1939 triggered controversies that led to such questions as: what were Polish diplomats’ alternatives in the late 1930s, if any? Had the Polish state’s fate already been sealed? Historians are also faced with another question: what, in the end, are we to make of Polish foreign policy in 1934–1939?

6 Archiwum Akt Nowych (cited hereafter as AAN), Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych (cited hereafter as MSZ), p. 108, note on a conversation between Beck, René Massigli and Jean Paul-Boncour (French delegates to the disarmament conference) in Geneva 3 October 1933.

7 K. Świtalski, *Diariusz 1919–1935*, eds. A. Garlicki, R. Świątek (Warsaw 1992), p. 660.

My considerations here are devoted to reconstructing the dilemmas faced by Polish foreign policy in 1934–1937, my goals being to provide a background for an examination of Poland's situation in the pivotal years of 1938–1939, and above all to show what the Polish leadership's thinking was regarding international matters in general, potential threats, and the Polish state's chances of survival.

Non-Aggression Pacts with the Soviet Union and Germany

The two bilateral non-aggression pacts concluded with Poland's neighbours in 1932–1934 were a momentous achievement for Polish diplomacy. The treaty signed on 25 July 1932 with the Soviet Union was the result of prolonged and successful negotiations and seemed to have normalised Polish-Soviet relations, although it did not represent a real breakthrough. The treaty signed with the German Reich on 26 January 1934, though it is often called a “pact”, was in fact provisional in nature.⁸ Having said that, both agreements established the foundation of Polish foreign policy in the 1930s until 1939.

There is no doubt that it was only an extremely fortunate set of external circumstances under which both agreements could be achieved, agreements that had seemed unthinkable in the 1920s.

Following Gustav Stresemann's course as integrated into the Locarno system, Germany could not be interested in a true normalisation of relations with Poland. Similarly, Soviet Russia—which benefited from special relations with Germany—did not seek to improve relations with Poland because they were neither necessary nor compatible with the Rapallo line. German priorities in the Weimar era can be summed up in three points: (1) to gain changes along Germany's eastern border (Germany considered its western border to be final); (2) to maintain its orientation towards the West but not to renounce the Rapallo line in order to establish a stronger position in relation to the Entente powers and to prevent the stabilisation of the Polish position; (3) to rearm and achieve military parity with the West.⁹ The Soviet-German agreement at Rapallo on 16 April 1922, with its limited obligations, posed no immediate threat to Poland's security, but it did mean that neither of the two parties could, in the foreseeable future, be interested in a true normalisation of relations with Poland. As German historian Hermann Graml once wrote: “Some elements of National Socialist foreign policy had their counterparts

8 Even such a rigorous scholar of diplomatic history as Klaus Hildebrand uses the term “pact”. See K. Hildebrand, “La politique française de Hitler jusqu'en 1936”, in *La France et l'Allemagne 1932–1936* (Paris 1980), p. 356. Indeed, Minister Beck himself called the agreement with Germany a pact.

9 Here I refer above all to studies by Peter Krüger, *Die Außenpolitik der Republik von Weimar* (Darmstadt 1985) and *Versailles. Deutsche Außenpolitik zwischen Revisionismus und Friedenssicherung* (Munich 1993), pp. 136–137.

in certain elements of the foreign policy of the [Weimar] presidential system [*Manche Elemente nationalsozialistischer Außenpolitik hatten ihre Entsprechung in bestimmten Elementen der Außenpolitik des Präsidialsystems*].¹⁰ However, with regard to Poland, the transition from the “presidential governments” of the Weimar Republic and Hitler was not one marked by continuity, even though Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath stated during a session of the Reich Cabinet on 7 April 1934 that Germany’s goal was to revise borders, and that the foundation of Polish foreign policy remained the Versailles Treaty.¹¹

Until the fall of the Weimar Republic in January 1933, fundamental improvements in Polish-German relations seemed entirely impossible. German territorial revisionism was so embedded in the German political consciousness that it was difficult to imagine that Germany could ever reconcile itself with the existing “Versailles” borders. As a condition for the normalisation of relations with Poland, German politicians demanded territorial concessions from their eastern neighbour. Of course, it was impossible for Poland to fulfil such demands given that a state’s territorial integrity was one of the few issues around which there was universal consent (of course, with the exception of communists).¹² German sources suggest that the Poles were prepared to consider the possibility of concessions through the cession of the “Polish Corridor” in exchange for the normalisation of relations with Poland’s western neighbour,¹³ but this suggestion does not seem to be valid in any way, since Piłsudski was undoubtedly aware that a state that voluntarily relinquishes part of its territory also loses its independence.

Signed on 26 January 1934 and based on Piłsudski’s initiative, the Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact was silent on borders; it said only that all disputes were to be settled based on the principles of the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 27 August 1928.¹⁴ The pact itself was largely provisional in nature, but its simple wording heralded a “new phase in bilateral relations” between the two conflictive states. It was supposed to be valid for ten years; it contained no references to the Locarno system; and it was subject to ratification—as if it were a treaty.¹⁵ Of course, Poland was interested

10 H. Graml, “Präsidialsystem und Außenpolitik,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 21 (1973), No. 2: p. 145. See also D. C. Watt, “The German Diplomats and the Nazi Leaders, 1933–1939,” *Journal of Central European Affairs* 15 (July 1955), No. 2: pp. 148–160.

11 M. Wojciechowski, “Niemcy i Polska na przełomie lat 1932–1933,” *Roczniki Historyczne* 29 (1963): p. 159.

12 Until the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in August 1935, the Polish Communist Party recognised neither the Polish-German border defined at Versailles nor Poland’s eastern borders.

13 H. Brüning, *Briefe und Gespräche 1934–1935* (Stuttgart 1974), pp. 117–118.

14 This was a multilateral treaty involving 62 countries that renounced war as an instrument of national policy.

15 German historiography regards this agreement as a *de facto* treaty and attributes the initiative to normalise bilateral relations in “treaty form” not to Piłsudski but to

only in an agreement that was not burdened with obligations that could compromise Poland's independence and territorial integrity, and the 1934 agreement had just such a character. In March 1934, former Polish Prime Minister Kazimierz Świtalski wrote: "The most difficult matter that the Commandant [Piłsudski] had to handle involved the requirement that both pacts be concluded without any additional obligations [...]"¹⁶ At the same time, it was significant that Germany recognised Poland's current commitments as being consistent with the Polish-German agreement, which had not been the case with Stresemann, who in 1928 and 1929 demanded that the Franco-Polish Alliance be cancelled in exchange for Germany's consent to a Polish-German arbitration treaty guaranteed by France.¹⁷ French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou argued that the arrangement signed with Germany was "highly beneficial" for Poland and concluded that "the issue of the Polish corridor will not exist" if the agreement could indeed last ten years.¹⁸

It was not without significance that the process of normalising Polish-German relations was not called an alliance between "two dictatorships", although such accusations would soon be raised. As we know today, the Germans investigated the possibility of a Piłsudski-Hitler summit meeting, which was probably the purpose of the second trip to Poland made in December 1933 by Hermann Rauschning, President of the Senate of the Free City of Danzig.¹⁹ It is also known that the director of the Port Board in Danzig, Professor Ludwig Noé, raised this matter in 1934 in his correspondence with former Prime Minister Kazimierz Bartel.²⁰ Indications are that Piłsudski was not interested in a summit.

Understandably, the Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact has long been at the very centre of debates among historians over how to interpret Polish foreign policy. Was it the greatest achievement in Polish diplomacy since the alliance with France had been concluded, as Beck thought, or should we view it as a harmful and fruitless exercise given that the Germans violated it within five years? It is not the

German diplomats (see, e.g. R. Ahmann, *Nichtangriffspakte. Entwicklung und operative Nutzung in Europa 1922–1939* [Baden-Baden 1988], p. 294). It is the obligation of a Polish historian to point out that this was not a treaty agreement, though it had some features of a treaty (e.g. the ratification procedure).

16 K. Świtalski, *Diariusz 1919–1935*, p. 660.

17 Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères (cited hereafter as AMAE), Papiers Tardieu, 166/256, Laroche to the prime minister, 20 November 1929, regarding talks with the Polish Ambassador Alfred Chłapowski.

18 P. Wandycz, "Louis Barthou o swiej wizycie w Polsce w kwietniu 1934 roku", in idem, *O czasach dawniejszych i bliższych. Studia z dziejów Polski i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* (Poznan 2009), p. 348 (first published in *Niepodległości* 17 [1984]).

19 See J. Jurkiewicz, "Wizyta prezydenta Rauschninga w Warszawie w grudniu 1933 r.", *Najnowsze Dzieje Polski. Materiały i studia z okresu 1914–1939*, Vol. 3 (1960): pp. 163–182.

20 See J. Chudek, *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie w świetle wypowiedzi Hitlera* (Warsaw 1959), pp. 14–15.

place here for us to debate this issue again; I, for one, have already done so in other studies.²¹ But it is worth remembering that Stanisław Stroński, a leading commentator on international policy associated with the National Democrats, compared the declaration of 1934 with the Polish–Prussian alliance of 1790, which leaders of the Great Sejm imposed on King Stanisław August. Writing that he regarded the years 1790–1792 as a political *memento*, Stroński wrote that the Germans in 1934 were putting Poland to sleep, just as the Prussians had in 1790. “There has been too much gamesmanship in our foreign policy over the last two years”, he said in the Sejm in February 1935. “It is wrong when it is too much of a game, and even worse, when the count in which the game was started is mistaken”.²² Similar opinions were expressed by the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) Deputy Kazimierz Czapiński, who declared that it was a serious error to believe that Germany’s pro-Polish turn would last.²³ Beck’s predecessor as foreign minister, August Zaleski, acknowledged in 1941 that “the Germans benefited from the [pact] from the very beginning, but we had no use for it”.²⁴ Careful analysis by historians does not allow for such an unambiguous opinion.

Fortunately, no one in Poland talks about a “Piłsudski-Hitler pact”.²⁵ In addition, no one repeats the senseless statements contained in communist propaganda about Piłsudski’s and Beck’s Poland in a “silent alliance with Germany”. In general, historians share the opinion that the price of the Polish-German agreement was too high, and that the Germans benefited more than the Poles: the Germans were now somewhat less politically isolated; they gained some freedom for manoeuvre; plans for a preventative war were shelved; and they bought time to rearm. Meanwhile, the agreement did nothing to sufficiently secure Poland’s interests.²⁶

However, looking back on events with our current knowledge, it is clear that there was, for Poland, no alternative or rational political solution to the agreement

21 Above all, M. Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop–Mołotow. Problem zbliżenia niemiecko-sowieckiego w polityce zagranicznej II Rzeczypospolitej* (Warsaw 2002), chapter 3; idem, *Polityka równowagi (1934–1939). Polska między Wschodem a Zachodem* (Krakow 2007), chapter 1. See also M. Kornat, T. Schramm, “La politique étrangère de la Pologne 1918–1939 en débats. Les dilemmes et les réalités”, *Revue d’histoire diplomatique* (2010), No. 4: pp. 343–368.

22 S. Stroński, “Kres wędrówki (Mowa w Komisji Spraw Zagranicznych Sejmu 1 lutego 1935 r.)”, in idem, *Polska polityka zagraniczna 1934–1935* (Poznan 1935), p. 23.

23 K. Czapiński, *Świat na wulkanie. Krótki zarys sytuacji międzynarodowej* (Warsaw 1938), 6. The author even spoke of “Hitler-philism” in Polish political thinking.

24 “August Zaleski a Józef Beck. Zeznanie przed tzw. Komisją Winiarskiego [w sprawie odpowiedzialności za wynik kampanii wrześniowej 1939], 24 lutego 1941”, ed. M. Kornat, *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (2009), vol. 170: p. 194.

25 Such wording is in the title of Karol Lapter’s *Pakt Piłsudski–Hitler. Polsko-niemiecka deklaracja o niestosowaniu przemocy z 26 stycznia 1934 roku* (Warsaw 1962).

26 M. Zgórniak, *Studia i rozprawy z dziejów XVI–XX wieku. Historia – militaria – polityka*, ed. G. Nieć (Krakow 2009), pp. 212–213.

with Germany. Given the threat of a four-power “directorate”, along with the fact that France’s international role had been weakened and that the post-Versailles order had been destabilised, some kind of *modus vivendi* with Germany was necessary. The claim that Poland had brought Hitler’s Germany out of international isolation because it had agreed to this pact is baseless. Poland had a contested border with Germany, which was poisoning international relations. When the possibility of a ten-year agreement emerged, Piłsudski took advantage of that fact. The Poles paid relatively little attention to the legal wording because, for Piłsudski, every international agreement was more a manifestation of political will than a “juridical instrument”. As Beck would recall: “Marshal Piłsudski was undoubtedly correct in regarding the non-aggression pact as a serious political declaration rather than as a juridical instrument. He cared only about the preservation of certain basic rules of conduct, not for a text’s details.”²⁷

The second agreement—that is, the non-aggression pact with the USSR—was also more of a political instrument than a juridical one, using Piłsudski’s terms. Everything at the time seemed to indicate that this pact would not come to fruition. But it was in fact concluded after drawn-out negotiations, which were opposed by German diplomats, who wanted to block Poland from taking on any new obligations that would confirm its territorial integrity.²⁸ In the papers of the People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs (foreign minister) of the Soviet Union, Maxim Litvinov, we find a German memorandum: “Comments on the Soviet-Polish non-aggression pact [*Bemerkungen zu dem Plan eines sowjetisch-polnischen Nichtangriffspakt*]” which is undated but which was put together at the end of 1931 or in early 1932, and in which we read that the Germans pointed out that, as a result of a pact so conceived, Poland would receive assurances regarding its eastern border and would then turn westward, which would in turn result in a radical change in the European balance of power. Berlin advised that if the Soviets viewed such an arrangement with Poland as necessary, then it definitely should include no guarantees regarding the current Polish-Soviet border.²⁹ The Soviets disregarded these suggestions.

Polish-Soviet talks were repeatedly halted and then resumed.³⁰ In the summer of 1930, the Red Army’s supreme command even declared a state of “military

27 *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*. Based on texts by, among others, Józef Beck, ed. Anna M. Cieniela (Paris 1990), p. 57.

28 Josef Korbel drew attention to this issue, stressing the efforts of the Reich Ambassador in Moscow, Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau (who served at the mission until 1928). See J. Korbel, *Poland between East and West. Soviet and German Diplomacy toward Poland 1919–1933* (Princeton 1963), p. 210.

29 Archiw wnieśniej polityki Rossijskoj Fiedieracyi (cited hereafter as AWPRF), Fond Litwinowa, f. 05, op. 12, d. 86, k. 67.

30 For documentary evidence in this regard, and for a chronological examination of Stanisław Patek’s work as Polish Envoy to Moscow, see Małgorzata Gmurczyk-Wrońska, *Stanisław Patek. Raporty i korespondencja z Moskwy (1927–1932)* (Warsaw 2010).

emergency” in which Poland was allegedly threatening Soviet society with an armed attack.³¹ At this time, Soviet hopes were great that the “capitalist system” was about to collapse, especially given the then-current world economic crisis (1929–1933).³² It is possible that Moscow had begun to consider the possibility of civil war breaking out in Germany. Based on Soviet sources, we could argue that the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in October 1931 and Japan’s subsequent conquest of it was what prompted the Soviet government to finalise talks with Poland.³³ The classic belief that Russia needed to avoid conflict on two fronts motivated the Soviets to seek security in the west; that is, in Europe, in light of the possible threat in the Far East.

However, the main principles of Soviet policy were shaped by a desire to destroy the Versailles-Riga system, to exploit German revisionism in order to disrupt the European order, and to regain at least those territories lost as a result of the collapse of the Russian Empire after 1917.³⁴ The reorientation of Soviet policy—by which the USSR did not abandon its strategic goals—opened up the possibility of rapprochement with Poland, but all indications are that the non-aggression pact with Poland served the Soviets only as a means of pressuring Germany to rebuild bilateral relations in the spirit of Rapallo.

The Polish-Soviet treaty signed in Moscow on 25 July 1932 clearly stated that the basis of bilateral relations would be the provisions contained in the Treaty of Riga regarding the two countries’ shared border, which meant a new but indirect confirmation of the territorial *status quo* between Poland and the USSR. Each party provided assurances that it would not be bound by any agreements with any third country against the other party. The agreement was concluded for three years, but in February 1934 its duration was extended until 1945. Poland’s fundamental motive in its relations with the USSR was a consistent distinction between the Soviet government and Soviet state on the one hand, and the party and Comintern on the

31 See O. Ken, ‘Alarm wojenny’ wiosną 1930 roku a stosunki sowiecko-polskie,” *Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej* 35 (2000): pp. 41–73. See also Ken’s study *Mobilizacyjnoje planirowanije i polityczeskije rieszenija (koniec 1920 g.–sieriedina 1930-ch gg.)*, second edition (Moscow 2008).

32 For more, see Alexander Fischer, “Sowjetische Außenpolitik in der Weltwirtschaftskrise 1929–1933”, in *Internationale Beziehungen in der Weltwirtschaftskrise 1929–1933*, eds. J. Becker, K. Hildebrand (Munich 1980).

33 In this regard, see Politburo documents in *Politbiuro CK RKP(b) i Jewropa. Reszenija „Osoboj papki“ 1923–1939*, ed. G. Adibekow et al. (Moscow 2001), 213. See also Stalin and Kaganowicz. *Pieriepiska 1939–1936 gg.*, ed. O. Chlewniuk et al. (Moscow 2001), p. 71.

34 On the foundations of Soviet policy in 1922–1933, see among others Jon Jacobson, *When the Soviet Union Entered World Politics* (Berkeley 1994). Still of great use is the monograph by Louis Fisher, *The Soviets in World Affairs: A History of the Relations between the Soviet Union and the Rest of the World, 1917–1929*, Vols. 1–2 (Princeton 1951).

other. As Roman Dębicki, the head of Beck's cabinet, noted: "[...] the external sign of this tactic" was the fact that "the [Foreign] Minister did not see Stalin" during his stay in Moscow at the beginning of February 1934.³⁵

It was not without significance for Poland that, at the same time, the Soviet government concluded similar agreements with the Baltic States (Latvia, Estonia and Finland), towards which Polish diplomats had been making efforts since the mid-1920s.³⁶ Only Soviet negotiations with Romania ended in failure, despite Poland's mediation, the cause of which was the conflict over Bessarabia; the two sides went only so far as to establish diplomatic relations.³⁷ Throughout the entire seven-year period of negotiations over the Polish-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, Moscow viewed the Polish demand that similar agreements be concluded with the Baltic States and Romania as an insidious Polish plan to create an anti-Soviet bloc under the aegis of Warsaw. Now, Soviet diplomats took a new view of the matter and the final results of negotiations looked a great deal like Poland's initial proposals. In making significant concessions, the Soviets believed that, through this series of non-aggression pacts, the *cordon sanitaire*—which had never in fact been created but, in the Soviet political imagination, was already a reality—would be weakened.

Soviet diplomats made these concessions effectively under duress. Japan's aggressive military operations in the Far East deepened Moscow's fears, even if Japan had no strategic plans (at this stage) to provoke a war against the USSR. The Soviet Union's ties with Germany, based on the Rapallo line, expired, although the Berlin Treaty remained valid (until 1933).³⁸ As soon as the Polish-German rapprochement became fact, Stalin saw no need to maintain the Rapallo line.³⁹ From the Soviet point of view, the idea of a directorate of Great Powers seemed to symbolise the worst international scenario: a consolidation of "imperialist forces". All of this meant that a short-lived Polish-Soviet rapprochement could come to fruition.

The legal-treaty normalisation of Polish-Soviet relations was reflected in two other agreements: on 23 November 1932 the two parties signed a Conciliation

35 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Romana Dębickiego, 40/6, "Notatka z fragmentów rozmów Pana Ministra w Belgradzie", May 1936.

36 On 21 January 1932 in Helsinki, a non-aggression pact was signed with Finland; on 5 February 1932 in Riga with Latvia; and on 4 April in Moscow with Estonia.

37 This development took place on 9 November 1934. For more on the Soviet-Romanian negotiations, see *Behind Closed Doors: Secret Papers on the Failure of Romanian-Soviet Negotiations 1931–1932*, ed. Walter B. Bacon (Stanford 1979).

38 Hitler never announced that he wanted to break diplomatic relations with the USSR, especially economic relations, but the crackdown on the Communist Party of Germany was a significant move.

39 E. Kordt, "Die sowjetische Außenpolitik im Wandel der Weltpolitischen Konstellationen," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 38 (1990): p. 170.

Convention,⁴⁰ and on 3 July 1933 a multilateral convention, a modern act of international law, took effect. The latter bound the USSR to most of its neighbours and defined the terms *aggression* and *aggressor*. It was a “non-aggression system” which the Polish Foreign Ministry deemed “complete and precise”.⁴¹ We learn from Soviet sources that the foreign policy leadership in Moscow had set its sights much higher, by planning a far-reaching intensification of efforts to bring Poland to its side. The Soviet offer anticipated, among other things, military cooperation between the two countries.⁴² The Poles also submitted a plan for joint guarantees for the Baltic States.⁴³ It seemed that Polish-Soviet cooperation would be cemented as part of the battle against the Four-Power Pact.⁴⁴

On 4 January 1934, the Soviet envoy to Warsaw, Vladimir Antonov-Ovseyenko, wrote about the prospects of improving Polish-Soviet relations.⁴⁵ But when news of the Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact reached Moscow, there was a sharp downturn in relations between Warsaw and Moscow.⁴⁶ Thus, Polish-Soviet rapprochement turned out to be of only temporary diplomatic use, because the Soviet state was not interested in consolidating the territorial *status quo*, which all these commitments seemed to serve. On 26 March 1934, the Politburo decided to change

40 This agreement established a detailed procedure for regulating bilateral conflicts; for the text, see *Dokumenty i materiały do historii stosunków polsko-radzieckich*, Vol. 5, ed. T. Cieślak et al. (Warsaw 1966), pp. 601–604.

41 R. Dębicki, “Notatka sporządzona po powrocie z Warszawy”, 13–14 lipca 1935, The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Dębickiego, sygn. 40/5.

42 Rossijskij gosudarstwiennyj archiw socjalno-politiceskoj istorii (cited hereafter as RGASPI), f. 558, op. 11, d. 709, Karl Radek’s memorandum for Stalin, “New Stage in Polish-Soviet relations” from 3 December 1933, k. 106–107. For more, see S. Zabięło, “Odprężenie w stosunkach polsko-sowieckich na przełomie 1933/1934 r. oraz wizyta Józefa Becka w Moskwie w świetle pamiętników Stanisława Zabięły,” ed. T. Serwatka, *Czasopismo Zakładu Narodowego im. Ossolińskich we Wrocławiu* (2000), No. 11: pp. 183–201.

43 This matter was included in a report put together by the Polish Envoy to Moscow at the time, Juliusz Łukasiewicz; see *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939. Wspomnienia i dokumenty Juliusza Łukasiewicza ambasadora Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, eds. W. Jędrzejewicz, H. Bułhak (London 1989; second edition, 1995), pp. 423–430 (annex).

44 See K. Lapter, “Polsko-radziecka współpraca w walce z koncepcją tzw. Paktu Czterech Mocarstw latem 1933 roku,” *Studia z Najnowszych Dziejów Powszechnych* (1963), Vol. 3: pp. 74–91.

45 AWPRF, Fond Litwinowa, f. 05, op. 14, d. 99, Report for Boris Stomoniakow, Deputy People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union, k. 61.

46 In a report to Litvinov dated 28 January 1934, Antonov-Ovseyenko opined that the Polish-German agreement was not anti-Soviet in nature, but Soviet policy leaders absolutely rejected this point of view (AWPRF, Fond Litwinowa, f. 05, op. 15, d. 109, k. 68).

the USSR's policy towards Poland because the Soviet government's efforts since the end of 1930 to improve relations with Poland had not produced sufficient results.⁴⁷

Two European Projects: the Four-Power Pact and the Eastern Pact

Polish foreign policy in the 1930s was directed against four systems of international politics: (1) the Rapallo system, meaning German-Soviet cooperation; (2) the Locarno system; that is, the silent division of Europe into two zones, one protected and the other devoid of any security guarantees; (3) the idea of a directorate as a method by which selected Great Powers could govern Europe; and (4) the concept of collective security based on regional political blocs.⁴⁸

As the Versailles system decayed in the 1930s, two alternative and mutually exclusive political concepts emerged, both intended to be an instrument for European stabilisation: the Four-Power Pact in 1933 (understood as a system run by a directorate of powers) and an Eastern Pact as a regional bloc for Central-Eastern Europe. The latter resembled Western Europe's Locarno system, although there was no chance that Great Britain would provide for Central-Eastern Europe the same border guarantees that it had given the French government at Locarno.

Essentially, the Four-Power Pact was to be an instrument for a policy of limited and controlled concessions to aggressor states in the name of peace. This pact—proposed by Benito Mussolini and involving Great Britain, France, Italy and Germany—was signed in Rome on 7 June 1933, but because France and Germany refused to ratify it, the pact never came into full effect. Nonetheless, it did shake the “conventional structure of the international order” at the time, as Beck later put it. In Beck's view, a new spirit had appeared in world politics: a spirit of separating the “embryo” in the form of Great Powers “determined to decide on other nations' matters that they [the Great Powers] considered vital”.⁴⁹ The new system was to operate without Poland, although a little earlier, at the Franco-German conference in Paris at the end of 1932 and beginning of 1933, the idea emerged of including Poland in the group of European powers as part of the “security pact”. Of course, that idea had no chance of success because it assumed the incorporation by Germany of Polish Pomerania and the liquidation of the Free City of Danzig in

47 O. Ken, A. Rupasow, *Politiuro CK WKP(b) i odnoszenija SSSR s zapadnymi sosiednymi gosudarstwami (koniec 1920–1930 godow)*. *Problemy. Dokumenty. Opyt komentarija* (Saint-Petersburg 2000), p. 615.

48 The concept of collective security was in wide circulation before 1934, although it was used in connection with the League and its system of guarantees based on League statutes. See, e.g. Ch. Thorne, *The Limits of Foreign Policy. The West, the League and the Far Eastern Crisis of 1931–1933* (New York 1973), p. 173.

49 AMAE, série: Europe 1918–1940, sous-série: Pologne, t. 374, encrypted telegram from Ambassador Jules Laroche to the Foreign Ministry in Paris dated 6 March 1933.

return for a guarantee by Germany, Great Britain and France of the Polish-Soviet border delineated at Riga.⁵⁰

It is worth noting that terrible memories of the Spa conference of July 1920, which represented the greatest defeat for Polish diplomacy since independence in 1918, must have resurfaced as the idea of a directorate of the Great Powers gained new life, an idea that promised the internationalisation of border issues and opened the door to great power dictates in return for problematic or unrealistic promises of assistance in the event of a Soviet invasion. Polish diplomats vigorously opposed the idea of a Four-Power Pact.

The Polish government juxtaposed the concept that a quartet of Great Powers would appropriate for themselves a special responsibility to maintain peace and the right to review international arrangements with the concept that all nations were equal in the law, and that international agreements and borders could be changed only with the consent of the broader international community. Beck reminded world leaders that “treaties are commitments—they can change, but only in legal ways, i.e. with the consent of all parties. Other ways are unacceptable”.⁵¹ Polish diplomats often repeated that acquiescing to German demands only caused Germany to issue further demands. The Polish government opposed by all means possible any policy to “reform” the League of Nations insofar as those reforms abandoned the principle of the equality of all states under international law.⁵² In response to attempts to impose territorial decisions on Poland, Piłsudski and Beck were firm in their declarations that they would recognise no such decisions. “If someone attacks us, we will respond with gunfire, and we will allow no one to impose political decisions on us.”⁵³ Minister Beck announced that “if anyone, on their own initiative or encouraged by others, violates one square meter of our territory, Ambassadors will stop talking and artillery will take the stage. So, this matter does not exist for us as a problem.”⁵⁴ The real threat that the issue of Polish

50 M. Wojciechowski, *Niemcy i Polska na przełomie lat 1932–1933*, p. 177. On foreign policy initiatives during the last days of the Weimar Republic, see Jacques Bariéty and Charles Bloch, “Une tentative de réconciliation franco-allemande et son échec 1932–1933”, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 15 (1968): pp. 433–465. Talks were held in Luxemburg in April 1932 and Paris in January 1933.

51 AAN, MSZ, 108, Note on Beck’s talks with the head of the disarmament conference Arthur Henderson dated 23 September 1933.

52 It is true that the League of Nations was a forum for the presentation of opinions held by representatives of small and medium-size states that had never had such opportunities before. However, the international democracy that the League of Nations seemed to offer was an illusion, as evidenced by the ways in which fundamental decisions were made. See A. F. Ch. de Beauvoir comte de Saint-Aulaire, *Genève contre la paix* (Paris 1936).

53 AAN, MSZ, 108A, Note on Beck’s talks with Giuseppe Bastianini, the Italian ambassador in Warsaw, dated 4 May 1933.

54 *Ibid.* Note on Beck’s talks with Ambassador Laroche dated 5 May 1933.

borders would be internationalised required the invocation of an “all or nothing” principle that was no romantic distortion, but rather an expression of deep political realism.

It was the primary goal of Polish foreign policy to exclude any possible “compromise” on matters related to boundaries. Any Poland trimmed of its western territories would immediately cease to be independent. Of course, no statements by Polish leaders could change anything if the four powers, who were the pact’s focus, deemed the agreement proposed by Mussolini to be in their national self-interest. Fortunately, however, the Four-Power Pact did not become a permanent mechanism in international politics. Renewed in September 1938 in the form of the Munich system, it was quickly violated by Germany and passed into history.

Poland’s position regarding the Eastern Pact carried much more weight.⁵⁵ This project, which began in the spring of 1934, anticipated the creation of a regional bloc in Central and Eastern Europe that would include Poland, the Baltic States, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, which—within the scope of this project—was a key partner of France. The idea of an Eastern Pact originated in Moscow, but it was the French government that took responsibility for promoting it. As part of the planned pact, all partners were to provide mutual security guarantees and to show respect for borders. The agreement would be based on the principle of guaranteeing the territorial status quo, and it would include reciprocal assistance clauses applying to all signatories. In Central-Eastern Europe, a regional security bloc was possible in several variants, but with this project it appeared with the participation of the USSR (playing an active and central role).

It should be emphasised that for Beck, ad-hoc tactical cooperation with the Soviet Union was in certain circumstances not out of the question; the same held true for tactical cooperation with Germany, if specific circumstances made it necessary. Therefore, on 23 November 1933, in connection with the Geneva disarmament conference, the foreign minister told Antonov-Ovseyenko that:

[...] the Great Powers are in no small trouble. They are counting on Soviet Russia, but they consider it a distant country. As for Poland, we find ourselves, in their opinion, within that group of countries with no world interests. But cooperation between

55 There is significant literature on the Eastern Pact. Above all, see P. S. Wandycz, *The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances 1926–36. French-Czechoslovak-Polish Relations from Locarno to the Remilitarization of the Rhineland* (Princeton 1988), 336 ff. Two American works are valuable: L. Radice, *Prelude to Appeasement: East Central European Diplomacy in the Early 1930s* (Boulder, CO 1981) and A. Komjathy, *The Crises of France’s East Central European Diplomacy 1933–1938* (Boulder, CO 1976). The most detailed and best discussion of the role this matter played in Polish-Soviet relations is Stanisław Gregorowicz and Michał Jerzy Zacharias, *Polska–Związek Sowiecki. Stosunki polityczne 1925–1939* (Warsaw 1995). For a typical product of Soviet-era historiography, see Jarosław Jurkiewicz, *Pakt wschodni. Z historii stosunków międzynarodowych 1934–1935* (Warsaw 1963).

Poland and Soviet Russia precludes the application of these criteria, because then we are a bloc that is too close to the centre of Europe to be ignored. Contact in this matter is most beneficial for both sides.⁵⁶

In other words, Warsaw viewed Polish-Soviet political dialogue as at least desirable to counteract the concept of a Great Power directorate. The idea of an Eastern pact, however, did not become a platform for rapprochement between Warsaw and Moscow.

This Franco-Soviet concept was to be a Locarno for Eastern Europe. Czechoslovakia, which was included in the invitation to the talks, accepted the plan enthusiastically. The Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland) hesitated. Over the course of negotiations, the original idea evolved. First, it was supposed to be a pact providing border guarantees and mutual assistance—an undoubtedly complicated structure.⁵⁷ Under British pressure, Barthou decided to invite the Germans to the bargaining table, but they categorically refused to participate.⁵⁸ After Barthou's tragic death in a terrorist attack in Marseille on 9 October 1934, the new French foreign minister, Pierre Laval, decided to continue negotiations over the Eastern pact, though he silently withdrew from the clause regarding "mutual assistance" and spoke more about a "non-aggression pact and consultation."⁵⁹ He also resumed discussions of older ideas, first raised a few years earlier, about a Danube pact, which Beck welcomed, although he insisted that Hungary not be isolated.⁶⁰

We can assume that the head of the Soviet diplomacy, Maksim Litvinov, was convinced that France had the means to force Poland into joining the Eastern Pact.⁶¹ In fact, no foreign government had such influence, which transpired to represent yet another unpleasant surprise for the Soviets. Poland's determination

56 AAN, MSZ, 108A, note on Beck's talks with the Soviet Envoy in Warsaw, Antonov-Ovseyenko, dated 23 November 1933.

57 The pact involved three aspects of guarantees and obligations: (1) the countries of Central and Eastern Europe would be obliged to provide each other with mutual assistance; (2) France and the USSR would guarantee an entirely new system of obligations; and (3) the Soviet Union would join the Rhineland Pact (from 1 December 1925) as the third guarantor alongside Great Britain and Italy.

58 For more on British policy, see the detailed analysis of Dariusz Jeziorny, *Dyplomacja brytyjska wobec koncepcji paktu wschodniego (1933–1935). Analizy, projekty, działania* (Lodz 2011).

59 J. Szembek, *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka (1935–1945)* (cited hereafter as *Diariusz Szembeka*), Vol. 1 (1935), ed. T. Komarnicki (London 1964), p. 287 (note dated 11 May 1935).

60 Instytut Polski i Muzeum im. gen. Sikorskiego (cited hereafter as IPMS), *Ambasada RP w Londynie*, A.12.49/5, Szembek to Ambassador Raczyński, 23 May 1935.

61 M. J. Zacharias, "Problem niemiecki w stosunkach polsko-radzieckich (jesień 1933 – wiosna 1934)", *Z Dziejów Stosunków Polsko-Radzieckich* 16 (1977): p. 85.

to persevere within the framework of balance was unshakeable, and 1939 would provide greater proof of how real that determination was.

On 11 May 1935 in a conversation with Laval, Beck stated that there was no “dogmatic and negative attitude” against multilateralism in international relations.⁶² But the Eastern Pact plan threatened to destroy Poland’s policy of balance, to render Poland dependent on the USSR, to dilute bilateral Polish-French obligations, and more generally, to negate the results of Polish diplomacy’s activities for peace. And in return, Poland would receive nothing. Were Poland to accept the Eastern Pact offer, it would in the long term inevitably fall into dependence on the Soviet Union. The Franco-Polish Alliance would be replaced by a multilateral system and Polish-German relations could go into a downward spiral given that Germany did not intend under any circumstances to join this pact. Guided by these considerations, Piłsudski and Beck rejected the Eastern Pact concept, which resulted in cooler Franco-Polish relations and a serious deterioration in Polish-Soviet relations. Poland came under widespread criticism for having rejected the Eastern Pact proposal, as did its policy of balance, particularly in the West. Polish policies became an obstacle to the implementation of the idea of collective security. At the same time, they had no place in the vision for peace that emerged victorious in London and Paris in the second half of the 1930s, a vision that involved the appeasement of Germany.

In both Polish and foreign historiography, scholars have repeatedly (and often in a one-sided fashion) criticised the Polish government for not taking advantage of the opportunity, so the argument goes, to bolster Poland’s security by accepting the Eastern Pact.⁶³ It comes as no surprise that Soviet and contemporary Russian historiography has taken the same position.⁶⁴ In the historiography of the communist People’s Republic of Poland (PRL), the line was that the pact was a special opportunity for Poland to strengthen its position and to consolidate the *status quo* in Central and Eastern Europe, but this opportunity was lost due to Piłsudski’s and Beck’s dogmatic “anti-Sovietism”. Judgments made in the West by many critics of Polish foreign policy are perhaps less one-sided, but they are essentially quite similar. Most prominently, Western historiographers of Polish diplomacy accuse Polish leaders of torpedoing the Eastern Locarno initiative of 1934–1935 and subsequent attempts to create a multilateral regional security pact for Central-Eastern Europe. The Polish diplomat Feliks Frankowski (chargé d’affaires in Paris) noted that the draft Eastern Pact was unacceptable, but “it was necessary to propose one’s own counter-proposal, so as not to stop at passive negation”.⁶⁵ We cannot

62 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, p. 287 (note dated 11 May 1935).

63 For example, H. and T. Jędruszczak, *Ostatnie lata Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej (1935–1939)* (Warsaw 1970), p. 75.

64 No doubt Oleg Ken is an exception in this regard. See his *Collective Security or Isolation? Soviet Foreign Policy and Poland, 1930–1935* (Saint Petersburg 1996).

65 IPMS, MSZ, A.11/144E, nr spr. 270, Feliks Frankowski’s testimony before the Winiarski Commission on 31 March 1941.

help but doubt, however, whether such counter-proposal could have been devised in such a way as to take into account both Polish interests and Soviet goals, which were quite obviously irreconcilable.

For several important reasons, we cannot accept the reasoning used by those historians who regard Poland's rejection of the Eastern Pact as a great political error: (1) joining the Eastern Pact would have annulled the declaration of the non-use of force against Germany, because the latter had no intention of joining the pact. Of course, Poland had absolutely no chance of persuading the government in Berlin to change its position, so it is impossible to imagine that Poland, in joining the Eastern Pact, would have been able to continue the policy to normalise relations with Germany on the basis of the agreement signed on 26 January 1934; (2) had the Eastern Pact gone into effect, France would have transferred its bilateral obligations towards Poland to the Soviet Union, which would have been highly undesirable; (3) the pact gave Poland little more than what had been achieved through the bilateral non-aggression agreements with Germany and the Soviet Union, as it offered promises of mutual assistance that appeared to be highly problematic. At the same time, the border guarantees would have represented only a repetition of the provisions contained in the Treaty of Riga, in the non-aggression pact of 25 July 1932, and the Conciliation Convention of 3 July 1933 that defined *aggressor*, given that there was no indication that Germany was going to join the pact;⁶⁶ (4) the Eastern Pact would have paved the way for the USSR to gain an advantage in Eastern Europe, and would probably have subordinated the smaller states in the new system to the USSR; and (5) sooner or later a problem would probably have emerged, namely that the Red Army would have to march through Poland in the event of war, which of course finally broke out in 1939. The USSR did not share a border with Germany, and the Eastern pact—if it were to become an effective security tool—would have had to be supplemented by military conventions.⁶⁷ Laval told Alfred Chłapowski, the Polish ambassador in Paris, that he wanted to come to some *modus vivendi* with Germany, and that rapprochement with Russia was, for him, *contre coeur*. He asked Foreign Minister Beck to help him by signing the proposed pact, because it would not be harmful. "There are so many

66 The proposed draft did not contain guarantees of the territorial *status quo*. A document from the Political Department of the MSZ dated 15 August 1934 regarded this fact as key. See J. Jurkiewicz, *Pakt wschodni*, pp. 155–157.

67 It was at this time that the issue of the Red Army's "march" appeared for the first time. Either Poland or Romania could have provided the Soviets with such possibility. Nobody at the time (in 1935) asked the Polish government for such consent. Rumours that the Romanian government would like to meet the demand were denied by the Foreign Ministry in Bucharest. The French government denied that there were secret clauses in the Franco-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance signed on 2 May 1935; see *Polityka Narodów* 5 (1935): p. 717. This issue returned with full force in the events of 1938 and 1939; see H. and T. Jędruszczak, *Ostatnie lata Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, p. 75.

clauses in it that it is unthinkable that it could ever work.”⁶⁸ So, as Piotr Wandycz rightly pointed out, the entire concept was too unrealistic for Paris to be able to take seriously.⁶⁹

Based on the realities of geopolitics, it is clear that the Eastern Pact could not work as an effective system of obligations unless the matter of the Red Army and its march through Poland was resolved unambiguously and with the consent of the Polish government. Such an eventuality (the Red Army’s march through Poland) would mean the end of Poland’s independence. Could Poland voluntarily agree to allow the Soviet army to enter its territory? Anyone who reflects on this question cannot ignore two fundamental facts, namely that Russia was a rapacious factor in European politics, and that it was a totalitarian state. Totalitarian states cannot co-create “collective security”. As the American historian Henry L. Roberts wrote more than 50 years ago: “In retrospect, Litvinov’s ‘collective security’ can be seen to have been largely a phrase, never a reality”.⁷⁰ Jan Librach assessed this project more cautiously, arguing that if the Soviet approach towards the West was ever a reality, it was only in the period from May 1935 to the summer of 1937; that is, from the conclusion of bilateral agreements with France and Czechoslovakia to the Spanish Civil War, which illustrated German superiority and the weakness of the Western powers.⁷¹

We find in Western historiography a dubious interpretation of Soviet policy that still has its advocates, one which is based on a distinction between the policy’s “long-term” and “short-term” goals. Such interpretation can be found in the biased works of authors such as Michael Jabara Carley, Geoffrey Roberts, and Jonathan Haslam, and above all in a well-documented work by Ingeborg Fleischhauer.⁷² According to these authors, in the 1930s the Soviet Union sought above all to guarantee its own security on a short-term basis, the goal being to establish the foundations for a defence of the territorial *status quo*. But what the proponents of this interpretation fail to take into account is the fact that the Soviets were experts in adapting their policy to changing circumstances. When the “capitalist system” was stable, Soviet policy leaders showed their readiness to accommodate

68 AAN, MSZ, Ambasada RP w Paryżu, 13, Report by Chłapowski dated 9 September 1935.

69 P. Wandycz, “O polskiej polityce zagranicznej dwudziestolecia,” *Kultura* (1964), Nos. 1–2: p. 205.

70 H. L. Roberts, “Maxim Litvinov” in *The Diplomats 1919–1939*, p. 376.

71 J. Librach, *The Rise of the Soviet Empire: A Study of Soviet Foreign Policy* (New York 1964), p. 74.

72 J. Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933–1939* (New York 1978); I. Fleischhauer, *Der Pakt. Hitler, Stalin und die Initiative der deutschen Diplomatie 1938–1939* (Berlin 1990); A. Prazmowska, *Britain, Poland and the Eastern Front, 1939* (Cambridge 1987); G. Roberts, *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War: Russo-German Relations and the Road to War, 1933–1941* (London 1995); M. J. Carley, *1939: The Alliance that Never Was and the Coming of World War February* (Chicago 1999).

the international system, but in the face of conflict with the “bourgeois states”, they tried to do everything in their power to deepen this conflict and to exploit the situation for maximum benefit.

The Neighbouring Totalitarian Powers as seen by Poland

As Poland’s international position took shape in the second half of the 1930s, everything depended on how the foreign policies of the Soviet Union and Germany were assessed after the conclusion of their non-aggression pacts with Poland in 1932 and 1934, respectively. Historians are faced with the following question: was Polish foreign policy in the 1930s based on a realistic assessment of Poland’s international position, or, given the available comments made by Polish leaders, was it based on the eternal Polish maximalism, a programmatic reluctance to compromise, and a general habit of thinking in “all or nothing” terms? Accusations contained in that question have often come from Poland’s foreign observers. It is particularly important to fully understand the answer to the following question: did the two non-aggression pacts dispel concerns about Poland’s security felt by the Polish political leadership?

More than anyone else, Marshal Piłsudski was aware of the threats that Poland faced, and there can be no doubt that he took stock of his country’s position in international politics with a great sense of realism. We can state—with no fear of contradiction—that he predicted early on, and he expressed the view clearly, that the interwar European order would inevitably break down. He formulated this opinion as early as December 1931.⁷³ At the heart of his concerns was the Western (British and French) policy, starting at Locarno (October 1925), to follow a policy of appeasement towards Germany. Another aspect of his thinking involved the bankrupt and discredited League of Nations, which Piłsudski regarded from the very beginning as a tool of Britain and France. No less realistic was Piłsudski’s belief that the durability of the re-established Polish state was uncertain, a belief about which he had spoken as early as in the 1920s. In his eyes, the reborn Poland was “a newly painted state in the middle of Europe that is still trembling for its existence”.⁷⁴ He told General Janusz Głuchowski: “You will not be able to maintain this Poland”.⁷⁵ Developments in the 1930s, especially after his death in May 1935, confirmed the Polish statesman’s radical pessimism. Having said that, Piłsudski always believed that it was both possible and necessary for Poland to conduct an

73 *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*, pp. 53–54. See also H. Roos, *Polen und Europa. Studien zur polnischen Außenpolitik 1931–1939* (Tübingen 1957), pp. 27–31.

74 “Wielka deklaracja Marszałka Piłsudskiego,” *Głos Prawdy* (27 February 1926), pp.118–119.

75 Quote from T. Katelbach, “Rola Piłsudskiego w sprawie polsko-litewskiej,” *Niepodległość* (London) 1 (1948): p. 105.

independent and truly courageous foreign policy, one that was neither passive nor “cliental”.

In the last months of his life, Piłsudski expressed deep scepticism that peaceful Polish-German relations could be maintained. He did not rule out the possibility that the Germans and Soviets could achieve some kind of rapprochement aimed at Poland, despite the ideological gap that divided the Nazis and Communists. The statement he made at a secret meeting of former Polish prime ministers on 7 March 1934 remains powerful today and historians have quoted it many times. At that meeting, the Marshal recalled the origins of the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the eighteenth century. He predicted that relations with Germany and Russia would remain good only in the short term, and he estimated that the non-aggression agreements would last no more than four years.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, Piłsudski’s predictions were correct.

Summing up the results of Polish foreign policy in 1932–1934, Piłsudski and Beck maintained, despite everything, a sense of moderate optimism. Kazimierz Świtalski noted: “Through the non-aggression pacts there have been enormous transformations in international relations, and the Commandant has achieved for Poland a situation that it has never had before”.⁷⁷ In June 1934, Beck told Foreign Minister Barthou:

The Treaty of Versailles has secured the interests of the Western states quite precisely. But it left the eastern part of Europe in a fluid state, forcing Poland to make unprecedented efforts to secure its borders and maintain its independence. The Locarno treaties, concluded six years later, contributed in the long-run to a widened gap between how western and eastern problems are handled. Relations in the West have been regulated in the interests of the Western powers, at the expense of countries in the East, giving the Germans a free hand in this region and the possibility of compensating themselves for concessions made in the West. Poland has worked eight years to restore the balance. It has achieved great success in this field and must take care to maintain that success.⁷⁸ [...] In its attempt to pacify the eastern part of Europe, the Polish government has contributed to the adoption of non-aggression pacts, followed by the convention on the definition of an aggressor [the Conciliation Convention], encompassing all the neighbours of the Soviet Union, from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The Polish government attaches great significance to these successes and believes that through its conduct, in its limited scope, it has served the peace of the world well.⁷⁹

76 K. Świtalski, *Diariusz 1919–1935*, p. 660.

77 *Ibid.*

78 MSZ note on Beck’s talks with Barthou in Geneva dated 4 April 1934. *Dokumenty z dziejów polskiej polityki zagranicznej 1918–1939*, Vol. 2: 1933–1939, eds. T. Jędruszczak, M. Nowak-Kiełbikowa (Warsaw 1996), p. 63.

79 *Ibid.*

In this light, Poland appears not only to have been an important component of the new interwar order, but also a significant player in the process by which the Versailles system—or rather the Versailles/Riga system—was stabilised.

Above all, Piłsudski did not expect that the current order would stabilise, but rather that it would be seriously shaken and would break up. On 1 June 1934, Tadeusz Katelbach said: “The moment of a great general reckoning is approaching”.⁸⁰ He argued that Poland’s position in the framework of the two non-aggression systems would remain politically stable for no more than three to four years. We know that Piłsudski continued to regard Soviet Russia—despite the non-aggression agreement of July 1932—as invariably dangerous and unpredictable in the international arena. In March 1934, he made clear that he regarded Soviet-German rapprochement as always possible. “Despite all appearances and even though Poland’s eastern borders have been set, the Commandant has no confidence in Soviet Russia and will always consider it our most dangerous neighbour.”⁸¹ This does not mean, however, that he ignored the German threat. He expected that, as a result of unforeseeable internal developments, one of these two countries would emerge as an aggressor. In order to study the *interna* (internal conditions) of both of the “new type” of Great Powers, the Marshal ordered the formation of a special “Laboratorium” unit to be manned by army inspectors and ambassadors in Moscow and Berlin. It operated as a “brain trust” until the autumn of 1935.⁸² At a conference of army inspectors in November 1934, Piłsudski ordered the examination of “France’s *interna*” in order to determine that country’s real military capabilities and to gain insights into how its political system might develop in the future.⁸³

At the same conference, General Kazimierz Fabrycy and Colonel Kazimierz Głabisz presented papers in which they stated that Russia “could be” but Germany “will be” the first main threat to Poland. Most of those gathered in the room came out in opposition to this thesis; Piłsudski supported the arguments in opposition, none of which meant, he added, that he trusted the Germans.⁸⁴ For several reasons, Piłsudski considered the Soviets to be the greater danger. First, he emphasised the military character of the Soviet system, which indicates that he accurately recognised the nature of this variety of totalitarianism.

The military, the expansion of the army is, in Russia, the axis of all state work, while in Germany it is one phenomenon in Nazi ideology but not the primary one. The

80 W. Jędrzejewicz, J. Cisek, *Kalendarium życia Józefa Piłsudskiego 1867–1935* [cited hereafter as *Kalendarium*], Vol. 3 (Warsaw-London 1998), p. 384.

81 J. Potocki, “Instrukcje Marszałka dla ambasadora RP w Turcji (1933)”, *Niepodległość* (London) 7 (1962), (after resumption), p. 255.

82 S. Pstrokoński, “Interna,” *Wiadomości* (London), 4 June 1950, No. 218.

83 W. Jędrzejewicz, *Józef Piłsudski 1867–1935. Życiorys* (London 1993) (first edition, London 1984), p. 265.

84 *Ibid.*

motives that could stimulate Germany may be outside the military, rather of a political, internal and international, social and economic nature.⁸⁵

Secondly, Piłsudski did not believe that Poland could win any allies in a possible defensive war against Soviet Russia—except for Romania, though even that was in doubt, if only due to Romania's internal difficulties and its numerous territorial disputes with its neighbours. Piłsudski was also convinced that Russia was “less calculable” and less dependent on the West than Germany.⁸⁶ A telling statement is one Piłsudski made to the army inspector General Fabrycy, namely that “we are sitting on two stools” and Polish leaders should know “which one we will fall off first”.⁸⁷ As Gen. Tadeusz Pełczyński later put it: Piłsudski “repeatedly counted the balance of forces and time. He studied most exactly the possibilities of how an opponent's situation might develop”.⁸⁸

In this regard, Beck's thinking was identical. In May 1934, responding to a questionnaire prepared by Marshal Piłsudski regarding possible threats to Poland's security, Beck stated that in the next “three to four years, Russia may be the primary danger”, but then he immediately added that there was “a high probability that, later, [this] state of affairs will be reversed”.⁸⁹ Beck and his deputy at the Foreign Ministry, Jan Szembek, pointed out that “in the event of a change in political goals, Soviet Russia, in this period of time, will probably remain a country that is less-connected internationally but with a more complete instrument, in terms of armed forces, and incurring less risk. Thus, in this period, Soviet Russia can be considered the neighbour who may be the first to be dangerous.”⁹⁰ This position did not differ in any way from Piłsudski's known views.

In a conversation with French Foreign Minister Laval in Warsaw on 11 May 1935, Beck stated that tension in German-Soviet relations “is the most characteristic aspect of the current political situation in Europe”.⁹¹ But we can better reconstruct the context of debates carried out among Poland's top leaders on the German-Soviet matter by citing diplomats who had different views. In June 1935, Juliusz Łukasiewicz, the Polish envoy (and later ambassador) to Moscow, stated significantly that, in his view, “Moscow is prepared to enter into a combination of pacts

85 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, pp. 153–154.

86 Piłsudski expressed this view in November 1934 (*Kalendarium*, Vol. 3, p. 399).

87 Piłsudski made this statement during a conversation with Fabrycy in June 1934 (*Kalendarium*, Vol. 3, p. 387).

88 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (London), Kolekcja gen. Pełczyńskiego, T. I/5. Text of a lecture delivered at the Piłsudski Institute in London on 19 March 1955.

89 “W sprawie oceny strategicznego położenia Polski w 1934 r. Nieznana notatka Józefa Becka i Jana Szembeka z 7 maja 1934 r.,” ed. M. Kornat, *Niepodległość* (Warsaw), pp. 53–54 (2003/2004): p. 262. See also H. Bulhak, “W sprawie oceny strategicznego zagrożenia Polski z maja 1934 r.,” *Wojskowy Przegląd Historyczny* 15 (1970): p. 371.

90 “W sprawie oceny strategicznego położenia Polski”, p. 262.

91 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, p. 285 (note dated 10 May 1939).

with any partners; and if Hitler extended his hand today towards the USSR, a German-Soviet pact would surely be ready in no time at all.⁹² The Polish envoy to Oslo, Władysław Neuman, claimed in November 1936 that “a return to a Rapallo policy and the rebirth of German-Russian understanding” seemed “more than certain” because “Stalin is gradually finishing off pure communism and turning to a policy of Russian imperialism, continuing in this way the policy of tsarist Russia.”⁹³

A memorandum issued by the Second Department of the General Staff (responsible for military intelligence, etc.), drafted on 9 October 1932 and entitled “A Military-Political Assessment of Poland in 1932”, remains of value to historians. The author of this document, Captain Jan Maleciński, provided evidence for the thesis that the peaceful nature of Polish-Soviet relations, regulated by the non-aggression pact of July 1932, was temporary. Maleciński argued: “Our observations indicate a very serious build-up of Soviet military forces in a quantitative and qualitative sense over the course of the current year. Major advances in the organisation and motorisation of the army, accompanied by the development of air and armoured weaponry, together lend the Red Army today a clearly offensive quality.” His conclusions were approved by Lt. Col. Józef Englicht, head of the Studies Division of the Second Department of the General Staff.⁹⁴

The construction of a giant Soviet military-industrial complex—built on the USSR’s own strength; that is, without foreign loans—and one that enabled communist Russia to produce its own weaponry, added a completely new dimension to Soviet power which no one in the 1920s (before the Soviets entered the era of “five-year plans”) took fully into consideration.⁹⁵ The effects of this fundamental change could not be immediately gauged from abroad, including from Poland.⁹⁶ Stalin, as the architect of this policy, thus gained a new weapon in the struggle to achieve his intended goals in the international arena.

92 Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 317 (note dated 17 June 1935).

93 J. Szembek, *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka (1935–1945)* (cited hereafter as *Diariusz Szembeka*), Vol. 2 (1936), ed. T. Komarnicki (London 1965), 335 (note dated 9 September 1936).

94 AAN, Sztab Główny, Oddział II, 616/619, Opracowanie kpt. Jana Malecińskiego i ppłk. Józefa Englichta, pt. „Wojskowo-polityczna ocena sytuacji Polski w 1932 r.” dated 9 October 1932.

95 Economists commenting on Soviet Russia’s economy agreed that economic development in the USSR was an enormous problem because the Soviets found it impossible to obtain foreign loans. For example, see L. Caro, “Polityka zagraniczna Sowietów,” *Przegląd Polityczny* 10 (1929): pp. 57–74.

96 One of the exceptions was Stanisław Swianiewicz, who noted that Soviet Russia was the only country in the world to implement a large investment program without foreign capital, using the “great myth” of mass mobilisation, which meant the extermination of the peasantry. See S. Swianiewicz, “Rzut oka na zasadnicze problemy sowieckiej polityki gospodarczej”, *Rocznik Instytutu Naukowo-Badawczego Europy Wschodniej w Wilnie* 2 (1934): pp. 1–47.

Unfortunately, as we can conclude from various statements and facts, Beck underestimated Stalin. He did not see Stalin during his visit to Moscow in February 1934, which was motivated by a desire to demonstrate that Polish diplomacy was pursuing a policy of normalisation through bilateral relations with the Soviet government as a partner, and not with the Communist Party or the Comintern.⁹⁷ In June 1935, in a loose form, he noticed that “he did not really understand who Stalin was, as a figure, and he did not quite know whether or not he was an outstanding political individual”.⁹⁸

Summa summarum, the 1932 pact did not put an end to Polish fears of an eastern threat, proof of which is the fact that priority was given to staff work on plan “W”; that is, guidelines for a defensive war in the east, which were completed in 1938. As British Ambassador Howard Kennard wrote to Foreign Secretary Samuel Hoare on 27 June 1935, Beck was aware that Russia wanted to take over France’s position in Eastern Europe and to establish hegemony there.⁹⁹ Even more alarming were the ongoing discussions in the offices of European diplomacy on how the Soviet army would have to march through Poland if war broke out between the USSR, in coalition with the Western powers, against Germany.¹⁰⁰

We should be clear that, within elite political circles in Poland in the 1930s, there were no major differences of opinion over the fact that the danger from the East was real. There were only different judgments about what the near future held in store: a large group of generals saw the greater threat coming from Hitler’s rearmed Germany than from Stalinist Russia, which, once the five-year plan system was implemented, was also intensively developing and modernising its armed forces.¹⁰¹ However, if we look more broadly at Polish political thought in the 1930s, we find opinions advocating the possibility of rapprochement with Soviet Russia as part of the Eastern Pact concept.¹⁰² They appeared in 1932–1934 and they would not appear later.¹⁰³

97 At this time, Stalin had no state function; he was General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, a position he had held since 1922.

98 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, p. 319.

99 *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, eds. K. Bourne, D.C. Watt, Part 2: *From the First to Second World War, Series A. The Soviet Union 1917–1939*, Vol. 13 (London 1986), p. 12.

100 The Austrian Envoy Maximilian Hoffinger called such solution an “a necessary evil [*unvermeidliches Übel in Kauf*]” for the Poles; see his report to Minister Egon Beger-Waldenegg dated 31 January 1936, Neues Politisches Archiv, Akten der Republik (Wiedeń), Gesandtschaft Warschau 80, 12 August 1936. Hoffinger wrote that it would be impossible to force the Poles to consent to the Red Army marching through their territory (*ibid.*, p. 81).

101 *Kalendarium*, Vol. 3, p. 383.

102 Stanisław Stroński expressed such opinion (*Polska polityka zagraniczna 1934–1935* [Poznań 1935]), as did Włodzimierz Wakar earlier (in 1932–1933) in *Przegląd Wschodni*.

103 Of course this consensus did not apply to communists.

The fact that Warsaw did not view communist Russia as a factor in European stabilisation was not some error of judgment stemming from Polish-Russian history. The Soviet Union was following a two-track policy. For Moscow, “collective security”—even if it were possible—offered no path forward for the Soviet leadership in its attempt to secure the *status quo* in Eastern Europe, though it served as a convenient propaganda slogan and political tool in the USSR’s effort to bring at least some of the region’s countries into its sphere of influence; this was the Soviet Union’s “minimum plan”.¹⁰⁴ The “ultimate goal was still to communise the world and thus gain a dominant position in it”. The plan to “set this goal aside at the expense of prior consolidation of the strength and power of the socialist Soviet state, which was the starting point of the great world revolution, would only establish a stronger and more solid foundation for this [ultimate] goal”.¹⁰⁵

The historian can do nothing but acknowledge the fact that it was impossible for Poland to cooperate with Soviet Russia on virtually any important matter in international politics. Soviet policy was marked by a hostile attitude towards the “bourgeois world” and by a habit of thinking in terms of spheres of influence, facts which were not fully appreciated in Western capitals. Not without reason, Beck thus expressed the view that “Western Europe does not know Russia, does not understand it, and has never understood it”.¹⁰⁶ Reflecting the Polish notion that the two countries belonged to two different civilizations, that they represent separate worlds that cannot be reconciled, the Polish foreign minister declared: “The Polish-Soviet border is one of the most important European borders, because it is the border between two mentalities”.¹⁰⁷

The Polish approach to the Third Reich was much more ambivalent, which might surprise people today. It is also difficult not to notice that Polish interpretations of the “new” Germany’s policies focused on the person of Hitler and on

104 The American ambassador to Moscow, William Bullitt, interpreted Soviet strategy precisely in this way. At the heart of this strategy was the idea to construct a series of buffer states as a kind of cordon. The Soviet Union feared reconciliation in Europe. Moscow recognised that war was “inevitable” and, at the same time, “desirable” in the long-term interests of the Soviet state (National Archives, Department of State, Decimal Files, mf T.1247, Report for the Secretary of State dated 19 July 1935).

105 W. Stachiewicz, “Sytuacja polityczna i wojskowa Polski”, in idem, *Wierności dochować żołnierskiej. Przygotowania wojenne w Polsce 1935–1939 oraz kampania 1939 w relacjach i rozważaniach szefa Sztabu Głównego i szefa Sztabu Naczelnego Wodza*, foreword by B. Stachiewicz, ed. M. Tarczyński (Warsaw 1998), p. 95.

106 *Dokumenty z dziejów polskiej polityki zagranicznej 1918–1939*, Vol. 2: 1933–1939, eds. T. Jędruszcak, M. Nowak-Kiełbikowa (Warsaw 1996), p. 107.

107 Polish note on Beck’s conversation with von Ribbentrop in Warsaw dated 26 January 1939, *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne, 1939 (styczeń–sierpień)* [cited hereafter as PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień)], ed. S. Żerko in cooperation with P. Długołęcki (Warsaw 2005), p. 49.

attempts to divine his real intentions towards Poland.¹⁰⁸ Among Polish political elites, there were significant differences of opinion on Hitler's Germany. And in the few statements they made that are available to us today, Piłsudski and Beck (in the period after May 1935) emphasised different aspects of the matter.

On 2 November 1933, the American ambassador in Warsaw, John Cudahy, had a conversation with Beck in which the foreign minister was asked about his view of the Germans and their current policy. Beck said:

A large country in a state of revolution poses a number of dangers to others. We are not threatened more than others. When it comes to real danger, strong action must be prepared; this requires time. We are calm and collected. In addition, time is at work here. The Marshal has talked to me about the situation in Germany several times recently. He views the situation calmly. He is a statesman and commander; he does not like (jokingly) to make prophecies, like journalists.¹⁰⁹

Beck no doubt viewed the Nazi political revolution in Germany as a radical break in the course of German history. In December 1933, he told the French ambassador, Jules Laroche, that there were “new people, revolutionary politics” in Berlin. “The government [there] was treating its nation's past as a *tabula rasa*.”¹¹⁰ On 4 December 1933, he made similar statements to the British ambassador in Warsaw, William Erskine. He assessed improvements in Polish-German relations as:

[...] a more serious development resulting from the fact that if the pure Prussian element that had until recently ruled Germany was replaced by another element, then warmer relations are indeed possible given that Prussian tendencies are not all-German tendencies. Therefore, one should not think that it has been a purely tactical game.¹¹¹

Asked by the ambassador if “territorial issues [would not] get in the way of good relations between Poland and Germany”, Beck replied that: “these matters are not more important in reality than other kinds of revindication, especially with Hitler, who rejects the Germanisation policy and condemns Bismarck. The difficulty is more a matter of custom and the psychological than it is the practical”.¹¹²

108 For an analysis of the Polish marshal's views on German political elites, see Tomasz Serwatka, “Opinie marszałka Piłsudskiego na temat niemieckich elit politycznych”, in *Idea Europy i Polska w XIX–XX wieku. Księga ofiarowana dr. Adolfowi Juzwence, dyrektorowi Zakładu Narodowego im. Ossolińskich z okazji 60-lecia urodzin* (Wrocław 1999), pp. 77–84.

109 AAN, MSZ, 108, Note on Beck's conversation with Ambassador Cudahy dated 2 November 1933.

110 *Documents diplomatiques français* (cited hereafter as DDF), series 1 (Paris 1970), Vol. 5, doc. 162, pp. 318–319.

111 AAN, MSZ, 108, Note on Beck's conversation with ambassador Erskine dated 4 December 1933.

112 *Ibid.*

Initially, Beck believed that the most important thing was to give matters some time; the situation could be better assessed later. The January 1934 agreement was to serve precisely this purpose. Although it was not possible to gauge precisely the “value of Hitler’s move, it should be stated that it represented a break from the fracas”.¹¹³ A little later, in June 1935, Beck delivered a highly positive assessment of Hitler’s intentions: he expressed hopes for a real breakthrough in future relations with Germany and stressed that Germany had put a great deal of effort into implementing the “1934 line” in relations with Poland. Beck added that “the leadership of the Nazi Party” was working to “overcome the anti-Polish aspect of the German psyche”.¹¹⁴ In Beck’s view, the effect of the “Nazi revolution” was, to a decisive degree, a historical levelling in relations between the two neighbours, none of which means, however, that Beck did not talk about the “German threat” *pro foro interno*.¹¹⁵

There is little to be said about Piłsudski’s views on Germany from 1933–1935, because except for his well-known utterance at the conference of former prime ministers in March 1934 and his statement of April 12 of that year to army inspectors (in the presence of Beck and Szembek), we have almost no sources on which to reconstruct his thinking. In any case, that statement, which amounts to his final political testament, leaves no doubt: he did not trust the “new Germans”, a fact which has been repeatedly pointed out in historical literature. Convinced though he was that any agreement with Germany was temporary in nature, Piłsudski considered such agreement absolutely necessary. Evidently, the marshal avoided expressing his opinion on the “future course” of the Third Reich and German policy. On the other hand, after Piłsudski’s death Beck recognised that improved relations with Germany could, over time, become durable, and that Poland should take measures to consolidate Polish-German relations.

The new course of German policy towards Poland undoubtedly contributed to the deepening impression that it was not just a temporary manoeuvre, but represented permanent change. Hitler took steps to make his Polish counterparts believe that the “pro-Polish” course of German policy was irreversible. To these ends he played the anti-Soviet card, aware as he was that Poland felt threatened by its eastern neighbour. In the spring of 1935, Ambassador Józef Lipski reported what Hitler had told him:

[...] if anyone in Germany thinks that the Russian danger is not significant, because Poland separates Germany from Russia, then it is necessary to give this issue some historical perspective. In his [Hitler’s] opinion, Russia poses a danger to the entire

113 AAN, MSZ, 108, Note on Beck’s conversation with Ambassador Laroche dated 4 May 1933.

114 “Józef Beck o stosunkach polsko-niemieckich. (Wystąpienie na konferencji u ministra spraw wewnętrznych 5 czerwca 1935 r.)”, ed. M. Kornat, *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (2001), z. 137: 123.

115 For example, *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 2, p. 368 (statement from 15 January 1936).

West. If the West does not wake up, it may pay a great price in the loss of culture and civilization. It is quite simple, he said: Poland could maintain its position in the East for a period of 10–15 years, but for effective opposition, solidarity among everyone would be necessary. From this point of view, all disagreements among European countries lose their significance.¹¹⁶

Of crucial importance here for the crystallisation of Beck's views and those of Poland's other foreign policymakers regarding the "new Germany" was Beck's visit to Berlin in July 1935. It was at this time that he became convinced that Hitler truly valued the normalisation of relations with Poland and that this would lead to a kind of political partnership.¹¹⁷ The Reich Chancellor himself said that in the German view, the significance of Polish-German relations was on a par with British-German relations. Speaking with Lipski in December 1935, Hitler asked: "How can you tie yourself to Soviet Russia, which has proclaimed world revolution"?¹¹⁸ Around the same time, foreign minister von Neurath said that the Western powers wanted a directorate of powers against Poland, but Germany was not interested in such a solution.¹¹⁹ In this context, Deputy Foreign Minister Szembek's statement in September 1938 is also significant, namely that "*Mein Kampf* was written under different conditions" and that "one must accept what Hitler now says and declares as his definitive standpoint".¹²⁰

In Beck's opinion, improved relations with Germany was the "greatest and most precious achievement" of Polish politics.¹²¹ Much more than Piłsudski, he emphasised the durability of normal relations with Poland's great neighbours.¹²² In his view, Polish foreign policy—having reached bilateral agreements with Germany and the USSR—had contributed to the stabilisation of Central and Eastern Europe. On 4 February 1935, in a meeting with the new British Ambassador Howard Kennard, Beck stated that the agreement with Germany was "not a ten-year truce", but a permanent change for the better.¹²³ The Polish envoy in Stockholm, Antoni

116 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/5, Lipski's report for Beck dated 13 April 1935.

117 To Beck, Hitler seemed "absolutely sincere in his assurances" (*Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, p. 332).

118 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A. 12.P/35/4, Note on Lipski's conversation with Hitler dated 18 December 1935.

119 Ibid. Note on Lipski's conversation with Foreign Minister von Neurath dated 16 December 1935.

120 Szembek's conversation with Ambassador Noël on 13 September 1938, in *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka (1935–1945)* (cited hereafter as *Diariusz Szembeka*), Vol. 4 (1938–1939), ed. J. Zarański (London 1972), p. 268.

121 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, p. 233 (note dated 13 February 1935).

122 Justifiably, Stanisław Żerko highlights this fact in his monograph *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie 1938–1939* (Poznań 1998), pp. 18–19.

123 T. Piszczkowski, *Anglia a Polska 1914–1939 w świetle dokumentów brytyjskich* (London 1975), p. 388.

Roman, wrote: "After the present agreement expires in ten years, it will be harder for Germany to restart a campaign of hatred".¹²⁴ Beck was even more convinced in a speech delivered at the Interior Ministry on 5 June 1935, in which he mentioned "psychological changes" in German society which could weaken Polish-German antagonism and consolidate the achieved *modus vivendi* between both nations. Beck ruled out the possibility of a relaxation in Berlin-Moscow relations. "Soviet-German animosity is derived from ideological premises; these are two worldviews, two political religions that cannot be reconciled with each other."¹²⁵ Such arguments would be contradicted by the events of 1939.

In any case, Beck was fully aware that the German military was growing in strength compared to Poland's, and that this fact would make it possible for Germany to dictate conditions in the immediate future. On 7 September 1936, he said: "As Germany's power has grown, there has been an increased desire to play brutally and to minimise our value, but we have noticed that the Germans balk at the idea of allowing the policy of understanding to collapse".¹²⁶

Not everyone in Poland's leadership in the second half of the 1930s shared Beck's optimism. General Edward Śmigły-Rydz paid close attention to the ongoing threat from Germany, about which his statement of 30 June 1936 leaves no doubt. In line with Beck's argument that Poland should stay the course in its relations with Germany, he told Szembek that one should be "on guard" because German weapons were "directed against us". He estimated that the German military required two to three years to achieve "full combat readiness". Any war would start over Danzig. He stated that Germany was building up its forces in East Prussia, but not in Upper Silesia, which suggested that the former would be used as a "gateway" for a future attack on Poland.¹²⁷

In Beck's eyes, the Third Reich was an innovative organisation built on an ideological foundation. Seen from this perspective, Hitler was above all the heir to German Romanticism. In this regard, Beck was not alone. General Władysław Sikorski, for example, believed that "Hitler's policy is only a continuation of the long-held views of the German nation".¹²⁸ Today, we know that attempts to explain the Nazi phenomenon through historical analogies represent a great simplification, but observers in the 1930s were not yet able to fully grasp and understand

124 AAN, MSZ, 7060, Report for Beck dated 15 January 1935.

125 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 2, p. 370 (statement from 15 January 1936).

126 *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne, 1936* (cited hereafter as PDD/1936), ed. S. Żerko, in cooperation with P. Długołęcki (Warsaw 2011), p. 545 (note with Beck's verbal instructions to all MSZ officials).

127 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 2, p. 238.

128 General Sikorski spoke these words during a conversation with British Prime Minister Chamberlain on 16 November 1939; that is, just after the Soviet-German pact that divided up Poland; see *Na najwyższym szczeblu. Spotkania premierów Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej i Wielkiej Brytanii podczas February wojny światowej*, ed. M. K. Kamiński, J. Tebinka (Warsaw 1999), p. 1.

the novelty of totalitarianism; they had at their disposal no proper language to describe it, and they thus felt an irresistible need to invoke history.¹²⁹

The generation of politicians who gained influence in Poland in the 1930s faced an unprecedented challenge with the rise of totalitarianism and the expansion of the totalitarian powers, phenomena which—for the European political elite at the time—were hardly intelligible. In this regard, Beck was by no means an exception, which is a fact that historians must keep in mind. Through their dynamic nature, the depth of their ideological impact on everyday life, and their maximalist goals, totalitarian movements and totalitarian systems confounded politicians throughout Europe. Beck talked a great deal about the dynamism of totalitarian states, and he highlighted the powerful role that ideology played in the way they functioned. But he did not go beyond what was, at the time, orthodox thinking.

We can confidently say that Piłsudski and Beck, slight differences of opinion notwithstanding, both viewed Hitler above all as an ideologue-revolutionary who wanted to tailor the lives of people and nations to his own political doctrine, but also as a reformer of Germany's domestic order whose goal was the "internal transformation of the human being". Accordingly, they emphasised Hitler's dynamism and maximalism, which meant in turn that it would take the führer a great deal of time to implement his ambitious plans within Germany. For this reason, Poland could conclude tactical agreements with Germany that would survive a given period of time. Such a motivation seems to explain the essence of Beck's beliefs.

It is undisputed that after Piłsudski's death, diplomats in the Polish Foreign Ministry grew increasingly convinced that Poland could play a significant stabilising role in Europe. In a letter to the Polish Envoy in Belgrade, Roman Dębicki, in the spring of 1937, Deputy Foreign Minister Szembek made a remarkable comment on Poland's external position:

For now, thanks to the general international situation, this stage of events is somehow holding up, though mainly because we are an element of essential importance to the conflicted parties, one of whom everyone is afraid, one who no one wants to see cross over to the opposite camp. I'm starting to think of the paradox that our famously bad geographical situation is not the worst thing, because it makes us a buffer between two behemoths.¹³⁰

The head of a short-lived Polish government, Marian Zyndram-Kościałkowski, in a conversation on 18 March 1935 with the Soviet ambassador in Warsaw, Yakov Davydov, invoked the metaphor of a mattress to describe Poland's role between Germany and the Soviet Union, which meant that, without Poland's consent, war

129 For more on this subject, see M. Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop-Mołotow*, pp. 440–441.

130 IPMS, Kolekcja 85/47, copy of a letter from Jan Szembek, undated but no doubt from the spring of 1937.

between these two countries could not take place.¹³¹ On 4 January 1937, the Polish delegate to the League of Nations, Tytus Komarnicki, wrote to the head of Beck's cabinet, Michał Łubieński: "Poland, if it is strong, will retain its role as the thumb on the scale between the Germans and the Soviets".¹³² It is easy to regard these beliefs as illusory, since only permanent and irreversible German-Soviet antagonism ensured the success of Polish policy, but the fact is that, in the mid-1930s, the conditions had been created for a real increase in Poland's significance in Europe's geopolitical realities.

It is true, on the one hand, that Polish politicians and diplomats in the late 1930s generally overestimated Poland's importance in the international arena, but on the other it must be admitted that no one, not even the most eager supporters of an active Polish foreign policy, doubted that the relative strength of Poland's two great neighbours was, to a threatening degree, growing, and that this fact placed Poland at a disadvantage. In his book *Idea Polski* published in 1935, Władysław Grabski wrote: "Keeping what we have today will not be an easy thing".¹³³ In this regard, no one in the General Staff had any doubts.¹³⁴ In the autumn of 1938, in his controversial booklet *Polska jest mocarstwem*, Juliusz Łukasiewicz wrote that "currently we are remarkably weaker than Germany and Russia [...]".¹³⁵

The Alliance with France—Crisis and Attempts to Re-evaluate

Unfortunately, Polish-German rapprochement came at the price of a weakened Franco-Polish alliance, although that alliance had been losing its value since 1925, when reconciliation with Germany became a centrepiece of French policy symbolised by the ideas of Aristide Briand. French diplomats even tried to avoid using the word "alliance". Of course, the Franco-Polish alliance only just one part of the decaying system of eastern alliances that France had been able to build in the 1920s.¹³⁶

131 AAN, MSZ, 7059, Note by Wiktor Skiwski (head of the MSZ Press Department) on a conversation between Premier Kościółkowski and Ambassador Davydov.

132 J. Szembek, *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka (1935–1945)* (cited hereafter as *Diariusz Szembeka*), Vol. 3 (1937), ed. T. Komarnicki (London 1969), p. 41.

133 W. Grabski, *Idea Polski* (Warsaw 1935), p. 178.

134 For more, see Aleksander Woźny, *Niemieckie przygotowania do wojny z Polską w ocenach polskich naczelnych władz wojskowych w latach 1933–1939* (Warsaw 2000). See also A. Szymański, *Zły sąsiad. Niemcy 1932–1939 w oświetleniu polskiego attaché wojskowego w Berlinie* (London 1959).

135 J. Łukasiewicz, *Polska jest mocarstwem* (Warsaw 1938), p. 35.

136 On 25 January 1924, the Franco-Czechoslovak alliance was concluded, without a military convention, while on 10 June 1926, a "treaty of friendship" went into effect between France and Romania. For more on the foundations and history of that

In March 1934, Marshal Piłsudski said that “the alliance with France has not provided sufficient strength”.¹³⁷ Ever since the Locarno Conference of October 1925, he had been convinced that Poland required a *modus vivendi* with Germany. It is difficult to find any sober Polish politician who did not understand this need. The two canons of Polish foreign policy; that is, normalisation of relations with Poland’s great neighbours and the maintenance of alliances formulated in the second half of 1926, grew out of this conviction and was not at all innovative. But it is significant that Marshal Piłsudski viewed the task of normalising relations with Germany and the Soviet Union as being more important than maintaining the alliances with France and Romania.

On 26 January 1934—that is, the day the Berlin declaration was issued—the French ambassador to Warsaw, Jules Laroche, asked Piłsudski: “Does the Alliance still exist?” To which Piłsudski answered without hesitation: yes.¹³⁸ In the Polish view, rapprochement with Germany was not related to any shift in focus from France to Germany, as propagandists hostile to Poland claimed. The normalisation of relations with Germany was supposed to open up new possibilities for Polish diplomacy. Significant here are statements made by Polish diplomats which, though *ex post*, seem to accurately reflect the thinking that went into Polish foreign policy at the time. “The clientele period has ended once and for all”, said diplomat Anatol Mühlstein.¹³⁹ Edward Raczyński said: “To the extent that our policy crystallised as a balance between East and West with simultaneous concern for Anglo-Polish rapprochement, the attitude towards us within English political circles has improved”.¹⁴⁰ We must therefore agree with Tytus Komarnicki, who argued that the agreement of 26 January 1934 “helped, in the further course of events, to bring about the Anglo-Polish agreement”.¹⁴¹ Foreign Minister Barthou’s statement before the National Assembly’s Foreign Affairs Committee after visiting Poland in April 1934 is characteristic: “[...] maybe we have not always appreciated Poland’s real value and true strength. [...] You have to treat Poland in the same way you treat a power that has proven its existence.”¹⁴²

Rapprochement with Germany was to serve a policy of independence, to make Poland an important actor on the foreign policy stage. It was to be a means to re-evaluate the alliance with France, which was always understood as a strictly

treaty, see T. Sandu, *La grande Roumanie alliée de la France. Une péripétie diplomatique des Années folles, 1919–1933* (Paris 1999).

137 Quote from M. J. Zacharias, “Józef Beck i ‘polityka równowagi’”, *Dzieje Najnowsze* (1988), No. 2: p. 14.

138 *Kalendarium*, Vol. 3, p. 369.

139 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, p. 91.

140 “Ambasador Edward Raczyński i jego ocena ‘polityki równowagi’”, ed. M. Kornat, *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] 2001, z. 135: p. 95.

141 IPMS, MSZ, A.11/144E, nr spr. 500, Tytus Komarnicki’s testimony before the Winiarski Commission.

142 P. Wandycz, “Louis Barthou o swej wizycie w Polsce,” pp. 347–348.

bilateral system of defence tied to potentially precise bilateral military obligations. “The Commandant once anticipated problems that would arise from unhealthy romances with the Germans”, Beck wrote in May 1939 in a famous letter to Ambassador Bolesław Wieniawa-Długoszowski, “but he believed that we would not come to a reasonable deal with the countries of Western Europe if for some period we did not create our own Polish-German policy”.¹⁴³ This reasoning had deep logic. Piłsudski acted as if he had in mind a notion formulated many years later by Henry Kissinger, namely that “a Power absolutely committed has no negotiating position”.¹⁴⁴ August Zaleski had essentially the same thing in mind when, as part of the statement quoted above, he judged *ex post* that it was necessary to recognise “this pact only as a springboard to strengthen our position against France and England”.¹⁴⁵ In March 1934, Piłsudski stated that alliances “must be maintained as a counterweight”, but also that “Poland does not need to pay for these alliances with victims”.¹⁴⁶ Undoubtedly, and as Beck said in January 1936, the agreement with Germany “raised Poland’s value in the eyes of the French”.¹⁴⁷

As we know, Beck was not concerned that France would renounce the alliance with Poland because such a move “would amount to suicide”.¹⁴⁸ On 7 September 1936, when the Franco-Polish payment agreement was signed at Rambouillet, he stated: “Our position towards Germany based on the principle of being a good neighbour is by no means timid. Undoubtedly, the French would behave differently towards us had we not achieved some sort of parity with the Germans.”¹⁴⁹ The policy of balance was to allow Poland to strengthen its negotiating position in the international arena. “The world was slowly getting used to the new face of the reborn Poland.”¹⁵⁰ Juliusz Łukasiewicz (the Polish ambassador in Paris from June 1936) told Deputy Foreign Minister Szembek that the role and “value of Poland on the international scale consists in the fact that both France and Germany try to draw Poland towards themselves out of concern that it [Poland] should not go over to the other camp”.¹⁵¹ Having said that, foreign policy leaders in Warsaw continued to make every effort to exploit all possible options

143 The foreign minister’s letter to Ambassador Bolesław Wieniawa-Długoszowski in Rome dated 10 May 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 454.

144 Quote from P. Wandycz, “Polish Foreign Policy: Some Observations”, in *Poland between Germany and Russia 1926–1939: The Theory of Two Enemies*, eds. A. Korczyński, T. Świętochowski (New York 1975), p. 63.

145 “August Zaleski a Józef Beck”, p. 191

146 K. Świtalski, *Diariusz 1919–1935*, p. 660.

147 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 2, p. 370.

148 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, p. 223 (note dated 27 January 1935).

149 PDD/1936, p. 546.

150 These were Beck’s words from 1940. See W. Pobóg-Malinowski, “Na rumuńskim rozdrożu”, *Kultura* (Paris) (1948), No. 9–10: p. 175.

151 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 2, p. 96.

to strengthen and clarify Polish-French military obligations. Unfortunately, those efforts proved to be futile all the way up to September 1939.

In his realistic assessments, Piłsudski did not ignore the foreign criticism that Poland received in the wake of the Polish-German agreement of January 1934. He explained such criticism by highlighting the obvious interest that foreign players had in making sure that the “new Poland” had no real opportunity to stand up for itself and to establish for itself a significant position in Europe, but he was satisfied with the fact that Poland was now a player on the international stage. “Knowing that Poland could be exploited as a result of its vulnerabilities, all countries tried to prevent the conclusion of non-aggression pacts because such pacts reduced their ability to exploit Poland.”¹⁵² Juliusz Łukasiewicz wrote that, among all the new states that the powers dubbed satellites, Poland “has emerged as an undesirable exception, one which wants to hand neither its fate nor its interests over to the disposition of the world’s powers, and does not want to accept any commitments other than those based on reciprocity.”¹⁵³

Piłsudski’s and Beck’s understanding of the Franco-Polish Alliance was based on the argument that both countries were to respect certain mutual obligations and, at the same time, maintain the ability to respond to any developments on the international scene without having to tolerate a situation in which the stronger partner would attempt to force the weaker party to accept its point of view. The Locarno ideology, along with the deceptive slogans of multilateralism at all costs, were in Piłsudski’s view the harmful product of French politics as shaped by Briand.¹⁵⁴ “Every country”, Beck once told Władysław Pobóg-Malinowski:

[...] has its own set of vital interests and its own angle on the matters it must confront. Countries bound by an alliance, much like people in everyday life, if they want sincere and fruitful cooperation, must be willing to make concessions; they must seek not to compensate for or eliminate the differences that separate them, because such differences will always exist, but to reduce the sharpness of the angles that are created from differences in points of view. One party cannot demand that an ally make one-sided concessions or submit to its interests. Under these conditions, that ally would become an ordinary vassal.¹⁵⁵

Piłsudski’s plan regarding relations with France, which Beck was to implement after May 1935, was never fully realised. As has been repeatedly written,

152 K. Świtalski, *Diariusz 1919–1935*, p. 660.

153 J. Łukasiewicz, *Polska w Europie w polityce Józefa Piłsudskiego* (London [1944]), p. 10.

154 Recalling his historic trip to Paris in February 1921, Piłsudski reportedly said: “It was easiest for me to come to an understanding with Millerand—he represented healthy French nationalism.” See W. Baranowski, *Rozmowy z Piłsudskim* (Warsaw 1931), p. 157.

155 W. Pobóg-Malinowski, *Na rumuńskim rozdrożu (fragmenty wspomnień)* (Warsaw 1990), pp. 82–83 (previously published in *Kultura* [Paris], Nos. 7, 8 and 9–10 in 1948).

the French complained that the government in Warsaw had not informed Quai d'Orsay about the course of Polish-German negotiations at the end of 1933 and in early 1934, which were carried out far from the public eye. French suspicions were reduced, in part, during Minister Barthou's important visit to Warsaw in April 1934,¹⁵⁶ but the growing wave of accusations that an alleged secret protocol had been appended to the 26 January 1934 declaration served to create a black legend around Piłsudski's and Beck's Poland.¹⁵⁷ Increasingly, Poland's image was that of an aggressive country interested in changing Europe's territorial order.¹⁵⁸ The Polish foreign minister was burdened with a negative stereotype as a Germanophile and Francophobe, a man who, in the French view, had a "temperament ambitieux et autoritaire".¹⁵⁹ This stereotype circulated throughout the international stage; it was cultivated by anti-Polish actors and was fuelled by Poland's internal opposition. Related to all of this is the fact that Poland, especially before Piłsudski's coup of May 1926 (Poland's parliamentary democracy between 1921–1926 proved to be largely dysfunctional) was susceptible to foreign interference, the goal of which was to bring Polish international policy in line with the expectations of one or the other foreign power. The stabilisation of Warsaw's authoritarian regime after 1926 seriously reduced the chances that attempts to interfere in Poland's internal affairs—undertaken most prominently by Paris, but also by London—could be successful.¹⁶⁰ Nonetheless, old habits did indeed die hard.

We cannot forget that, for France and from the point of view of its priorities, Poland was from the beginning *une alliée de remplacement* and, by the second half of the 1920s, it had become an obstacle in reaching a settlement with the German Reich. After Locarno, the authors of French foreign policy set out to reach an agreement with Germany, seeing this as a matter of overriding importance. Although their efforts fell short in the end, those efforts indicated the main direction that French diplomacy would take.¹⁶¹ The only response that Polish diplomats

156 At a session of the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee, Barthou stated that there was no secret Polish-German agreement and that Piłsudski "never saw" Hitler. See P. Wandycz, "Louis Barthou o swej wizycie w Polsce", p. 343.

157 M. Kornat, *Polityka równowagi*, pp. 229–306 (Chapter 5: "Pakt, którego nie było...").

158 On 14 February 1934, Litvinov told US Ambassador Bullitt that he did not believe that the newly concluded Polish-German agreement contained secret clauses. Polish-German talks were surely taking place about a future attack by both countries on the USSR if the latter were involved in a war with Japan. See National Archives [Washington], Department of State, Decimal Files, mf, T.1247.

159 AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Pologne, p. 298, Note on Beck dated 8 May 1935.

160 Officials in the British Foreign Office expressed hope that Marshal Śmigły-Rydz, in opposition to Beck, would represent a different and alternative line towards Germany. See Lord Robert Vansittart in a memorandum dated 31 August 1938 in T. Piszczkowski, *Anglia a Polska 1914–1939*, p. 449.

161 See Maria Pasztor, "Polityka francuska wobec Polski w latach 1936–1939", in *Droga ku wojnie. Polityka europejska i amerykańska w przededniu drugiej wojny światowej*, red. T. Kisielewski (Bydgoszcz 1999), pp. 59–84.

could make was to achieve some sort of balance in relations with Germany. Of course, talks could be carried out only with the German government as it exercised real power in Berlin, and from 30 January 1933, that government was Hitler's. Piłsudski and Beck recognised that Poland had no choice but to attempt some kind of rapprochement with Germany.

We cannot fail to note the significant fact that France's position was weakening as its foreign policy transformed into a defensive military strategy. The tangible expression of this transformation was the Maginot Line, the construction of which began in 1929.¹⁶² Having said that, the French General Staff did not immediately scrap all plans for offensive actions; indeed, the French military included such actions in their operational plan of 1932 (which came into force in 1933), which anticipated the need to pre-empt a German attack by moving through Luxembourg and taking military control of German territory west of the Rhine.¹⁶³ But the French lacked what we might call the political will to take preventive military action, even though such an action was possible until the Rhineland was remilitarised in 1936. Polish General Tadeusz Kutrzeba, studying the problem of a defensive war in the west, believed that "if we were forced or determined to stand up to Germany in the event of their military involvement in Austria, we would now have a good chance of winning if France would go along with us".¹⁶⁴ The problem was that the very thought of starting a war to avoid a future war seemed, to the political elites of France (and Europe), absurd.¹⁶⁵

From time to time Polish diplomats reminded the French of Piłsudski's effort in 1933 to sound out opinion regarding possible preventive measures against Germany.¹⁶⁶ The negative results of that effort were of great importance for the

162 See J. E. Kaufmann, H. W. Kaufmann, *The Maginot Line: None Shall Pass* (Westport 1997). For more on French military and armament plans, see R. J. Young, *In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning 1933–1940* (Cambridge, MA 1978); E. C. Kiesling, *Arming against Hitler: France and the Limits of Military Planning* (Lawrence, Kansas 1996).

163 M. Zgórnjak, "Sytuacja międzynarodowa Czechosłowacji i niektóre aspekty stosunków czechosłowacko-polskich w latach 1919–1937", *Najnowsze Dzieje Polski. Materiały i studia z okresu 1914–1939*, Vol. 9 (1965), p. 13.

164 *Wojna obronna Polski 1939. Wybór źródeł*, ed. E. Kozłowski (Warsaw 1968), pp. 43–44.

165 W. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939. The Path to Ruin* (Princeton 1984), p. 362.

166 This work was done by Ambassador Juliusz Łukasiewicz, who took up that position in Paris in June 1936. See H. Bułhak, M. Gmurczyk-Wrońska, "Juliusz Łukasiewicz, ambasador w Paryżu o 'wojnie prewencyjnej' przeciwko Niemcom w 1933 roku", *Mazowieckie Studia Humanistyczne* (2002), No. 2: pp. 257–266. For more on the "preventative war", see T. Kuźmiński, "Wokół zagadnienia wojny prewencyjnej w 1933 roku", *Najnowsze Dzieje Polski. Materiały i studia z okresu 1914–1939*, Vol. 3 (1960), pp. 5–50, and Waław Jędrzejewicz, "Sprawa wojny prewencyjnej z Niemcami w 1933 roku", *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] 1966, z. 10: pp. 143–174. At the time of

further evolution of Polish foreign policy. After the events of 1932–1934 (the disarmament conference, the Four-Power Pact, and the Eastern Pact project), Piłsudski doubted not only the effectiveness of the alliance with France, but also whether that country would be able to effectively defend its own *raison d'état*. At the end of 1934, Piłsudski said: “I fear for France in a war with Germany. France will not win such war”.¹⁶⁷ Concerns about France’s “decadence” were justified, although according to Beck, Piłsudski believed that France would eventually be reborn, albeit not in his lifetime. It seems that the Polish leader was fully aware that Polish diplomacy could not possibly exert effective influence over the policies of the Western powers, and he instructed Polish officials “not to interfere or try to influence relations between Western countries”. It is most likely he supposed that Western policies would turn in a direction that was beneficial to Poland’s interests once Germany’s power had grown to a point where it threatened the West’s interests.

Unfortunately, it is true that the fruitless Eastern Pact project caused Paris to revise its political assumptions and to begin down the path of appeasement, whose origins were not in Paris, but in London. The Eastern Pact had offered the possibility for stronger Polish-French relations, but, as mentioned above, its conditions proved unacceptable to Poland. In practice, political cooperation between the Allies, still bound by the agreements of 1921 and 1925, had ceased. In 1934, the alliance entered a serious period of material decay.¹⁶⁸ To make matters worse, French diplomats in Paris did not trust Poland, a fact that has often been described in secondary literature, and which cannot be ignored in any analysis of interwar Polish foreign policy.¹⁶⁹

French foreign policy oscillated consistently between attempts to achieve a *modus vivendi* with Germany and efforts to build a new system of Eastern alliances in which the Soviet Union would play the role of leading partner.¹⁷⁰ As

writing this volume, the American historian Peter Hetherington is preparing a new study of this matter.

167 *Kalendarium*, Vol. 3, p. 400.

168 P. S. Wandycz goes into this subject broadly and deeply in *The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances*, 19 ff (Chapter entitled “The Shadow of Locarno”).

169 After the attack in Marseille, on 10 November 1934 (just before his own death) Philippe Berthelot wrote in his papers that Alexander I of Yugoslavia had been France’s most trustworthy partner: “It was the most solid thing we could count on because Poland is very insecure, Czechoslovakia is weak, and Romania is nothing [*C’était l’élément le plus solide sur lequel nous pouvions compter car la Pologne est très peu sûre, la Tchecoslovaquie est faible, la Roumanie est nulle*]”. See J.-L. Barré, *Le Seigneur-Chat. Philippe Berthelot 1866–1934* (Paris 1988), p. 415.

170 For more on the dilemmas of French foreign policy, see Anthony Adamthwaite, *Grandeur and Misery: France’s Bid for Power in Europe, 1914–1940* (London 1995). See also the monograph by Anthony Komjathy, *The Crises of France’s East Central European Diplomacy*. For more on the dilemmas of France’s Eastern policy, see Nicole Jordan, *The Popular Front and Central Europe: The Dilemmas of French Impotence, 1918–1940* (Cambridge 1992).

all indications suggest, the French preferred the first option without having to renounce the second option. Regardless, alliances with the Eastern “small allies” had to be subordinated to the larger concept. On the margins of his reflections on France’s Eastern policy, Piotr Wandycz observed: “France could neither renounce its system [of Eastern alliances] in favour of Great Powers’ entente—indeed, the system was meant to enhance France’s power status—nor revitalise it. A vicious circle existed.”¹⁷¹ This judgment points to the real, invisible barrier that stood in the way of good relations between Poland and France. It is difficult to challenge this statement, regardless of how French policy at the time is judged; whether through the heat of “Gaullist” criticism (Jean-Baptiste Duroselle) or through attempts to rehabilitate it (for example, Elisabeth du Réau).¹⁷²

After the failure of the Eastern Pact project, the French government decided to conclude a bilateral pact on mutual assistance with the USSR, which was signed in Moscow by Foreign Ministers Laval and Litvinov on 2 May 1935. Three days later, Beck sent instructions to the Polish diplomatic missions on Poland’s *désintéressement*, adding that “the conclusion of a bilateral agreement between Paris and Moscow reduces the chances of multilateral arrangements in Eastern Europe”.¹⁷³ On 15 May of the same year, the Franco-Soviet alliance was supplemented by the Soviet-Czechoslovakian Treaty of Alliance, which included a protocol stipulating that the Soviet Union would fulfil its obligations towards Czechoslovakia if France were to regard such an eventuality as *casus foederis*.¹⁷⁴ The French, and then the British, repeated that this move represented a preventive measure to block a Berlin-Moscow agreement.¹⁷⁵ This argument was shared by diplomats at the British Foreign Office. To avoid German-Soviet rapprochement, a policy of “collective security” had to be pursued, and Soviet-German rapprochement could be prevented by cooperation with the Soviets—so went the argument made by senior Foreign Office officials at the beginning of 1936.¹⁷⁶

In Warsaw on 11 May 1935, Foreign Minister Laval explained to Beck that “apart from the announced agreement on mutual assistance, there is no other Franco-Soviet pact”. He added that it was the French government’s first concern to prevent

171 Piotr Wandycz, *The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances, 1926–1936: French-Czechoslovak-Polish Relations from Locarno to the Remilitarization of the Rhineland* (Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 299.

172 See J.-B. Duroselle, *La décadence 1932–1939* (Paris 1979); idem, *L’abîme 1939–1944* (Paris 1986); E. du Réau, *Édouard Daladier 1884–1970* (Paris 1994).

173 Papięski Instytut Studiów Kościelnych (Rzym), Ambasada przy Stolicy Apostolskiej, Szyfry (from 1929), Vol. 1.

174 In September 1934 (seven months after Beck), Beneš visited Moscow.

175 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 21095, N.3129/45/38, “Summary of Recent Correspondence on the Value of the Franco-Soviet Pact”. Report from the British ambassador in Moscow to Lord Chilston for the Foreign Office dated 27 May 1937.

176 Ibid., 20346, C.911/187/38, Lord Chilston to Collier, letter dated 15 February 1936.

the violation of its alliance with Poland. Most importantly, the signed treaty “does not provide for automatic assistance and gives the French Government absolute freedom in the final interpretation of its provisions”. In response, Beck highlighted to Laval that Poland could point to its own specific achievements in the area of building security in Europe. “While for France the issue of so-called security in North-East Europe is only an incidental and secondary aspect of its policy, for Poland it is the most important issue.” Beck also emphasised that the Polish government would accept “no conditions that would weaken and dilute (*dilluer*) our existing bilateral pacts of nonaggression with our neighbours [...]”.¹⁷⁷ This was a meaningful exchange of opinions that illustrated two irreconcilable points of view.

Article 4 of the Franco-Soviet Treaty of 2 May 1935 contained an invitation to Poland and other states eligible for participation in the Eastern Pact, calling on them to consider joining the new system of obligations. Neither agreements were equipped with military conventions, as Soviet Russia shared no border with Germany. In order to carry out its assistance to France or Czechoslovakia, the Red Army would thus have to gain the right to march through Polish territory in the event of a *casus foederis*. Of course, it would have been suicidal for any Polish government to agree to such a move. Therefore, in connection with the conclusion of these arrangements, the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw issued a statement declaring that their provisions could impose no new obligations on Poland, and that the Franco-Polish Alliance was strictly bilateral in accordance with the provisions of the treaty of 19 February 1921. With these principles of Polish policy in mind, Laval agreed to Franco-Soviet staff negotiations; plans were made for these negotiations to start, although in the end they did not happen.¹⁷⁸ And it was at this very time in Moscow that the concept was born of marching through Poland by force without its consent (this fact needs to be remembered and highlighted).¹⁷⁹ So Beck was wrong when, during internal discussions at the Foreign Ministry, he expressed the view that “in contrast to Germany, Russia does not have a territorial appetite

177 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/5, Szembek to ambassador Raczyński, 23 May 1935.

178 See W. E. Scott, *Alliance against Hitler. The Origins of the Franco-Soviet Pact* (Durham, NC 1962), pp. 254–255. In the end, staff negotiations never took place because France began to go down the path of appeasement.

179 At the beginning of 1936, the Soviet military attaché in Paris used the word “strike” in the context of what had been a “march” through Poland to help Czechoslovakia. See *Les événements survenus en France de 1933 à 1945. Témoignages et documents recueillis par la Commission d'enquête parlementaire. Rapport fait au nom de la Commission de l'Assemblée Nationale* (Paris 1951), Annexe VI, 861 (published by a parliamentary investigating committee of the French National Assembly). For more on this, see Ivan Pfaff, “Stalins Strategie der Sowjetisierung Mitteleuropas 1935–1939. Das Beispiel Tschechoslowakei”, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 38 (1990): p. 553.

for us”, and when he thought that the “stabilisation of peace in eastern Europe” had been achieved.¹⁸⁰

For France—as it appears clearly to us today—its alliance with the USSR was meant to check Germany diplomatically and to force Germany to become more conciliatory; this fact did not go unnoticed in Moscow, although the Soviets did not intend to actively engage on the side of France.¹⁸¹ From the Soviet perspective, the agreement of 2 May 1935 served primarily to exert pressure on the Germans to persuade them to return to the Rapallo path, which was probably not fully understood in Paris. However, it is worth remembering that, immediately after the conclusion of the Franco-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance, the People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs, Litvinov, approached the Germans with specific proposals for the normalisation of bilateral relations, but they were rejected.¹⁸² The Germans did not need closer relations with the Soviets at that time, although Hitler never allowed trade with the USSR to be frozen.

It is difficult not to recognise as justified Poland’s desire to improve its position within the alliance with France so as to render that position more equal. What could the Polish government achieve by agreeing to the French vision of international relations? Was it possible for Poland’s two allies to find a common position against Soviet Russia? In the face of the policy to appease Germany, was it possible to consolidate the alliance? In the context of these rhetorical questions, statements that Foreign Minister Beck made on 15 January 1936 during a conversation held in the office of Deputy Speaker of the Sejm, Tadeusz Schaetzl, are significant. “The Polish public’s good feelings toward France” and “sympathy for the French nation” were based on “a great historical tradition and sympathy for French culture”. But in Poland, “the criteria of *raison d’état* had been forgotten”.¹⁸³ “The common interest connecting Poland and France in the alliance is the German threat; which, however, does not mean that Poland needs to renounce its own political ideas, especially in the context of Eastern Europe.”¹⁸⁴ Therefore, there could be no question of subordinating Polish foreign policy to French policy. The military alliance had to be maintained as an instrument of “reinsurance”, Beck concluded, “in the

180 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, p. 267.

181 On 11 October 1938; that is, just after Munich, Władimir Potiomkin told Ambassador Grzybowski: “There has been and there could be no collaboration. Who are we supposed to collaborate with: with an ambiguous Laval or with an impossible Blum? After all, for France, the pact was only meant to prevent our rapprochement with Berlin.” Grzybowski’s report dated 11 October 1938, *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne, 1938* (cited hereafter as PDD/1938), ed. M. Kornat, in cooperation with P. Długolecki, M. Konopka-Wichrowska, and M. Przyłuska (Warsaw 2007), p. 686.

182 Documentation in *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik* (cited hereafter as ADAP) (Göttingen 1975), series C, Vol. IV, part 1, doc. 78, p. 138.

183 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 2, p. 368.

184 *Ibid.*

face of post-war uncertainty".¹⁸⁵ Fresh experience, however, suggested that the way the alliance would actually work, when truly tested, would prove to be highly problematic.

Undoubtedly, Beck was trying to execute the political testimony of Marshal Piłsudski, who had said that "the road to Paris leads through London",¹⁸⁶ which should be understood not as a call for British mediation, but rather as a belief that Poland, as an agent for stabilisation in Central and Eastern Europe, would be a factor in British policy and would thus be in a position to become a true partner in relations with its French ally. France's growing dependence on the United Kingdom regarding European security could not be ignored. For this reason, in 1935 Polish diplomats launched efforts to start talks with the British government. In November 1936, Beck made an official visit to London, which produced no immediate results.

The pivotal year of 1936 brought about the collapse of the Locarno system, which was the only somewhat effective multilateral security system established in Europe after the First World War; despite their universalism, neither the League of Nations nor the Kellogg-Briand Pact were as effective. On 7 March 1936, German troops occupied the demilitarised Rhineland. There was no doubt that the French government was entitled to use force in defence of the provisions of the Rhineland Pact. But in the afternoon of 7 March, the French Cabinet adopted a resolution to appeal to the League of Nations, and to not use force.¹⁸⁷ Poland was not a party to the Rhineland Pact and was not obliged to France to defend the Locarno system, but as a result of the remilitarisation of the Rhineland, Poland's position deteriorated significantly; after all, in light of France's response to developments in the Rhineland, it was much more difficult for Poland to expect that France, in the event of war, would fulfil its obligations as an ally.

Undoubtedly it was with this in mind that in the afternoon of 7 March 1936, during talks with French Ambassador Léon Noël in Warsaw, Beck reaffirmed Poland's commitments as an ally if France resorted to the use of force.¹⁸⁸ The

185 Ibid.

186 Beck understood his entire policy as the realisation of Piłsudski's heritage, a fact which was viewed in various ways, including that Piłsudski's policy after his death had been taken "to absurd extremes by his epigones [...]". See R. Wodzicki, *Wspomnienia. Danzig – Warszawa – Berlin, 1928–1939* (Warsaw 1972), p. 663.

187 For an incisive article on this topic, see Stephen A. Schuker, "France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland, 1936", *French Historical Studies* 14 (1986): pp. 299–338. For a full study of the matter, see James T. Emmerson, *The Rhineland Crisis, 7 March 1936: A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy* (Ames, Iowa 1977). See also P. S. Wandycz, *The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances*, 410 ff; George Sakwa, "The Franco-Polish Alliance and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland", *Historical Journal* XVI (1973), No. 1: pp. 125–146.

188 Noël confirmed that these talks took place at 5:00 pm on 7 March 1936, during a conversation with the Czechoslovak envoy to Poland, Juraj Slávik; see report to Minister Krofta dated 9 March, Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Juraj Slávik Collection, Box 40.

Polish statement achieved no concrete results, although it was a far-sighted step that Poland was not legally required to take. Prime minister and foreign minister Pierre-Etienne Flandin did nothing with the Polish offer, despite the fact that the declaration of allied loyalty was repeated by Ambassador Alfred Chłapowski on 9 March. The Polish Military Attaché, Gustaw Łowczowski, repeated it again to General Louis Colson, presumably on 12 March, as Marian Zgórniak believes.¹⁸⁹ Nevertheless, the commander-in-chief of the French army, General Maurice Gamelin, later claimed that he learned about this Polish declaration only after the war.¹⁹⁰

Convinced that France would not act, Beck took a highly ambiguous public stance; he was aware that French actions would be fruitless and he did not want to contribute to a break with the Germans. As Piotr Wandycz wrote: “Having taken a firm position, Beck had to guard himself against being used as a pawn by Paris in a diplomatic showdown with Berlin”.¹⁹¹ All of this caused a new wave of animosity towards Poland and further complaints. Opinions put forward by historians claiming that the Polish foreign minister was in March 1936 playing a “game of ambiguity” are unfounded.

A French Foreign Ministry memorandum from February 1936 stated that Poland continued to interpret the agreement of 1921 as an alliance and expressed its will to uphold it, but that Poland was also determined to follow an “independent policy”, one that involved rapprochement with Germany and hostility towards the USSR and Czechoslovakia.¹⁹² The idea propagated in Warsaw that Poland was the organiser of a peaceful order in Eastern Europe collided with such French ideas as a triangular system that would include the USSR, Poland and Czechoslovakia. Such ideas promised Poland no real security assurances, even if their advocates

189 M. Zgórniak, “Sytuacja międzynarodowa Czechosłowacji”, p. 30. The author of this study based his work on Gustaw Łowczowski, “Przymierze wojskowe polsko-francuskie widziane z attachatu paryskiego”, *Bellona* (London) (1951), z. 1–2: pp. 44–54 and idem, “Remilitaryzacja Nadrenii w marcu 1936 r. a zagrożenie Polski i Czechosłowacji”, *Goniec Karpacki* (London) (1960), No. 3: pp. 43–45 (letter to the publication’s editors). We should also recall the comments by Roman Dębicki, “The Remilitarization of the Rhineland and its Impact on the French-Polish Alliance”, *Essays on Poland’s Foreign Policy 1918–1939*, ed. T. Gromada (New York 1970), pp. 60–65.

190 P. S. Wandycz, *The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances*, p. 441, note 146. Apparently, Łowczowski submitted his report to the head of Second Department of the Polish General Staff on 13 March 1936. See Łowczowski’s polemical letter on these matters sent to, and published by, the editors of *Bellona* (1960, z. 4: pp. 310–311). For more, see Henryk Bułhak, “Polska deklaracja sojusznicza w czasie remilitaryzacji Nadrenii, marzec 1936 r.”, *Wojskowy Przegląd Historyczny* 19 (1974), No. 4: pp. 272–290, idem, *Polska – Francja. Z dziejów sojuszu 1933–1936* (Warsaw 2000), p. 97.

191 P. S. Wandycz, *The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances*, p. 439.

192 AMAE, Papiers Massigli, 217/15, Note dated 8 July 1936: “Sécurité française”.

were able to come up with rational justifications, and they would have led to the subordination of Poland's interests to those of totalitarian Russia. Just as hopeless were continued attempts by Paris to encourage rapprochement between Poland and the weakened and increasingly irrelevant Little Entente.¹⁹³ Warsaw rejected them outright as being fundamentally unproductive. In a note dated 9 July 1936, the director of the Political Department at the French Foreign Ministry, René Massigli, in connection with General Gamelin's planned trip to Poland, wrote that Beck "assures us that he will remain faithful to the alliance with France, but [Poland's] military situation would be particularly difficult if Czechoslovakia were left alone in the struggle with the Germans [...]", since such neglect could cause Poland to be encircled from the south.¹⁹⁴ Yvon Delbos's instructions to Noël dated 30 July 1936 left no doubt that the French were interested in implementing a second variant of the Barthou plan,¹⁹⁵ at the core of which was the combination of Polish, Soviet and Czechoslovak forces. Recently, a French historian called this arrangement an "impossible triangle".¹⁹⁶ But more important is the fact that, under these circumstances, Polish efforts to strengthen the Franco-Polish alliance could not achieve results.

In Beck's conversation with Prime Minister Léon Blum on 3 October 1936, the French politician expressed serious reservations about Polish policy, though he admitted that the agreement itself tying Poland to Germany "has never created difficulties between Poland and France". Whatever difficulties arose were the result of the fact that, "in other areas of its policy, Poland, as a result of this pact, has set a new course for itself".¹⁹⁷

After the disastrous defeat in the Rhineland, leaders in French military circles became increasingly aware that Poland was the country without whose participation it would be impossible to create an Eastern front if the Germans started a war in Europe, especially if Germany's first move was westward. French fears that

193 Officials at the *Quai d'Orsay* considered the idea of a treaty with the Little Entente and an agreement between the bloc and Poland. See a memorandum prepared by the Political Directory of the Foreign Ministry dated 20 November 1936 entitled "Projet de traité entre la France et la Petite Entente," *ibid*.

194 M. Pasztor, "Wokół wizyty gen. Gamelina w Warszawie w r. 1936", *Kwartalnik Historyczny* (1998), z. 4: p. 81 (Massigli's note "Évolution des rapports polono-tchécoslovaques depuis les échanges de visites Gamelin-Rydz-Śmigły" dated 7 November 1936, one conclusion from which reads: "Nous sommes prêts à aider et à défendre nos deux Alliées, mais nous ne voulons ni ne pouvons sacrifier l'un à l'autre [...]").

195 M. Pasztor, *Polityka francuska*, p. 60.

196 F. Dessberg, *Le triangle impossible. Les relations franco-soviétiques et le facteur polonaise dans les questions de sécurité en Europe (1924–1935)* (Brussels 2009). See also Isabelle Davion, *Mon voisin, cet ennemi. La France face aux relations polono-tchécoslovaques entre les deux guerres* (Brussels 2009).

197 See the Polish note, PDD/1936, p. 588.

Poland would abandon its policy of balance and would go over to the “German camp”, which was a constant concern among pro-Soviet actors in the West, must have played a certain role, and it was in these circumstances that General Gamelin travelled to Poland in August 1936 and that the Polish General Inspector of the Armed Forces, General Edward Śmigły-Rydz, travelled to France a month later. Beck tried to lend these events a strictly military character, writing to the Polish embassies on 8 August 1936 that Polish policy, as set by Warsaw, was undergoing no alteration.¹⁹⁸

As a result of the payment agreement signed at Rambouillet on 7 September 1936, Poland received a defence loan of 2 billion Francs, the largest loan received from abroad by the Second Polish Republic. According to Wiesław Domaniewski, who participated in the Polish-French financial negotiations, General Śmigły-Rydz’s efforts stalled at some point. The French initially offered only 1 billion Francs “in kind” (i.e. tied to the purchase of military equipment), but deputy prime minister Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski demanded 3 billion, after which a compromise was adopted at 2 billion. While half of this amount came as a cash loan, the second half was “material” in nature.¹⁹⁹ The agreement was concluded without any additional political conditions, which was of great importance for the Poles.

Foreign Minister Beck contemplated making a trip to Paris, but this did not happen.²⁰⁰ In turn, the French ambassador in Warsaw, Léon Noël, attempted to play on “internal factors” within Poland, counting primarily on Beck’s conflict with General (and as of November 1936, Marshal) Śmigły-Rydz. He wrote to his superior, Prime Minister Flandin: “[...] Mr. Beck’s coming to France could only have inconveniences; in particular, by the polemics which it would not fail to arouse. It is not likely to bring the Polish Minister closer to us, nor to improve our relations with Poland [*la venue en France de M. Beck ne saurait avoir que des inconvenients; en particulier, par les polemiques qu’elle ne manquerait pas de susciter, elle ne sérail de nature ni à rapprocher de nous le Ministre polonais, ni à améliorer nos relations avec la Pologne*].”²⁰¹ Flandin shared this opinion. Attempts to pit Beck against Śmigły-Rydz were a well-known tactic, one on which Paris seems to have pinned a certain amount of hope.²⁰² Śmigły-Rydz emphasised the importance of maintaining the alliance with France and raised the matter of the German threat, which he expressed

198 Papiieski Instytut Studiów Kościelnych (Rzym), Ambasada przy Stolicy Apostolskiej, Szyfry (from 1929), Vol. 1.

199 See W. Domaniewski, “Umowa w Rambouillet,” *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] 1979, z. 47: pp. 226–228. See also Domaniewski’s letter to Giedroyc, *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] 1979, z. 49: pp. 233–234.

200 Officially, Beck visited Paris only once, in September 1933.

201 AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Pologne, 375, Noël’s report dated 31 March 1936.

202 These efforts did not work, although the alleged foreign policy differences between Beck and Śmigły-Rydz in 1936 are also a subject of Polish historiography. See, for example, the Instytut Historii PAN publication *Historia Polski*, Vol. 4: 1918–1939, ed. T. Jędruszczak (Warsaw 1978), p. 264.

by way of a recommendation, in his government's early weeks in summer 1935, to study plans for a defensive war against Germany. Having said that, he never denied the need to maintain relations with the Third Reich under the 1934 treaty, for as long as possible.

The Polish government wanted to take advantage immediately of the revival of the alliance, initiated by Beck's courageous declaration of 7 March 1936, in order to specify its operations and to clarify the *status quo* in Polish-French relations. On 4 April 1936 and on Beck's instructions, the head of the Legal-Treaty Department, Władysław Kulski, drafted a memorandum on this matter, in which he argued that what was needed was not a new arrangement but rather greater specificity, in a separate document (a protocol or agreement concluded through the exchange of notes), concerning mutual obligations.²⁰³ These Polish efforts brought no concrete result; they ended with a non-productive exchange of notes in the summer of 1936.

Regardless of all the distractions and complications, the year 1936 brought a real renewal of ties between Poland and France and fresh confirmation of the principles of the policy of balance. During a briefing for senior Foreign Ministry officials on 7 September 1936, Beck stated:

[...] the line we have maintained is starting to bring positive results. There have been no attempts this time to draw us into Eastern European combinations corresponding to the changing requirements of French policy. While on the Polish side there has always been a clear tendency to maintain the bilateral alliance, the French have been holding on to various 'eastern concepts' into which they have wanted to draw us, treating Poland as one of the *poussière des petits états*. The contradictions in Polish-French policy did not arise out of disputes over the operation of the alliance, but rather out of attempts to involve us in such Eastern concepts with the Czechs or Soviets.²⁰⁴

Indeed, anything that improved the atmosphere in Warsaw-Paris relations was favourable for Poland. However, the reconstruction of the alliance as a potentially precise system of obligations—a process that required detailed staff negotiations—did not take place until 1939.

In 1936, Poland did nothing that could be called a political mistake, and yet its international position changed for the worse. The remilitarisation of Rhineland, carried out in the face of France's complete passivity, brought Germany a spectacular triumph; the Germans enjoyed a psychological sense of superiority over "decadent France", which had been unable to defend its most vital interests on its own, without British support. The Western powers now regarded the policy of limited concessions to aggressive states as the only way to save peace in Europe, to avoid war, or to at least postpone war in order to gain time to rearm. This view would serve as the justification for a policy of appeasement that France could not

203 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Kulski Collection, Box 2.

204 PDD/1936, pp. 543–546.

resist. All of these changes were a bad omen for the Polish Republic; and the fact is that Poland was in no position to effectively influence the policies of Germany, the policy course to be taken by the Western powers, or the rapacious policies of the Soviet Union. Poland could not stop the continued break-up of Central and Eastern Europe.

In place of the destroyed Locarno system, a new system was devised under the name of the Western Pact. Hitler extended an offer in this regard to the governments of France, Great Britain and Italy. The new agreement was to be a revival of the Locarno system without the provisions for the demilitarisation of the Rhineland. Having been generally informed of the matter, the Polish government took stock of Poland's interests under the new pact, despite Warsaw's negative attitude towards multilateral agreements in general. As Beck wrote to Ambassador Łukasiewicz informing him of his conversation with French Foreign Minister Yvon Delbos on 27 January 1937, it quickly transpired that:

- 1) there is little chance that the Rhineland Pact can be rebuilt in its previous form,
- 2) between London and Rome, there is the greatest difference of views on the future arrangement, so that it seems doubtful that the English and Italian guarantees could even be contained in one document,
- 3) in the conclusion of this assessment, we stated that we should work along the lines of several protocols regulating guarantees between groups of countries under some kind of common *chapeau*.²⁰⁵

Negotiations for a Western Pact brought no practical results.²⁰⁶

The Western Pact project created new fears in Warsaw about the division of Europe. Beck was concerned that if this concept were implemented, a definitive breakdown would follow in the Franco-Polish alliance, and France could be "restricted in its decisions necessary for the effective execution of its obligations towards Poland".²⁰⁷ In a conversation with Anthony Eden in November 1936, having indicated that Poland did not expect any special "privileges for itself", the Polish foreign minister stressed that withdrawal from the provisions of the 1921 treaty would be a gift that "we cannot offer".²⁰⁸ Tactically deviating from Poland's programmatic bilateralism, Beck volunteered Poland's participation in the proposed system, which is not surprising given that only in this way would it be possible to avoid a further deterioration in the alliance with France. Having said that,

205 IPMS, MSZ, A.11.49/F/4, Beck to Ambassador Łukasiewicz.

206 Michał Jerzy Zacharias wrote most broadly on this subject in *Polska wobec zmian w układzie sił*, pp. 238–269. Maria Nowak-Kiełbikowa's conclusions are also important; see her *Polska–Wielka Brytania. W dobie zabiegów o zbiorowe bezpieczeństwo w Europie 1923–1937* (Warsaw 1989), pp. 517–521 and 554–566.

207 PDD/1936, p. 672. For a convincing interpretation of Polish policy in this context, see Michał Jerzy Zacharias, "Polska polityka zagraniczna wobec próby porozumienia mocarstw zachodnich w 1936 r.", *Kwartalnik Historyczny* (1976), No. 4: pp. 836–857.

208 PDD/1936, pp. 671–672.

Polish efforts could not bring the expected result, even if negotiations had showed signs of real progress, which they did not.

In the new reality, France formally had four allies in the east: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and the USSR. In Paris, an argument—apparently very rational—took hold that these countries could, in the future, create an effective anti-German front, but only if France's "little allies" (Poland and Romania) would support the Soviet Union. In other words, from Paris's perspective, the effectiveness of Poland's resistance in the event of German aggression depended on the conclusion of Polish-Soviet-Czechoslovak cooperation. From the moment the Rambouillet agreements were concluded, as historian Yves Beauvois has written, France should have tried to "establish some form of military cooperation between Moscow and Warsaw, which could be real (large supplies of ammunition and strategic raw materials), even if not direct."²⁰⁹ This argumentation would have been realistic had it been possible to win over the Soviet Union, and independent Poland, to a plan to consolidate the *status quo*, which did not seem possible.

The French were generally aware of the realities of the Polish-Soviet conflict, though they were unable (or unwilling) to accept that it was based not on Polish Russophobia, but on essential differences in geopolitical interests, not to mention on an ideological divide and on Polish historical memory. In April 1935, Laval declared to Beck that "from conversations with Poles from various circles, the French feel that there is a powerful anti-Russian mood in Poland". The Polish foreign minister replied that "this is completely contrary to reality", while "Poles are concerned that France, through its policy, may bring about a deterioration in Polish-Soviet relations".²¹⁰ This exchange of opinions, reflecting two opposing viewpoints, characterised the Polish-French relationship at this time. Poland was not able to persuade its French ally of the futility of trying to convince Bolshevik Russia to defend the *status quo*. In these circumstances, despite the fresh confirmation that the Franco-Polish Alliance was still in force, a situation of growing ambiguity developed between Paris and Warsaw.

The Polish Foreign Ministry viewed the diplomacy of "collective security", which the Soviet Union joined in 1934, primarily as a carefully thought-out and skilfully masked plan to promote the USSR to the rank of a power that could decide on the vital interests of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.²¹¹ This concern led to the conclusion that Russia could not possibly defend the *status quo*, but would rather fight solely for its own interests, which were incompatible with the

209 Y. Beauvois, *Stosunki polsko-francuskie podczas dziwnej wojny*, trans. I. Kania, (Krakow 1991), p. 11.

210 AAN, MSZ, 108A, Note on the Beck-Laval conversation dated 15 April 1935.

211 See D. S. McMurry, *Deutschland und die Sowjetunion 1933-1936. Ideologie, Machtpolitik und Wirtschaftsbeziehungen* (Köln 1979). Jiří Hochman challenged the myth of "collective security" as a creation of Soviet propaganda; see Hochman, *The Soviet Union and the Failure of Collective Security, 1934-1938* (Ithaca, NY 1984).

defence of the “global capitalist system”. French diplomacy was not able to change this state of affairs.

Polish fears that the Popular Front which was about to take power in France would become Moscow’s tool were not confirmed in fact (this represents one of the few pessimistic predictions on the part of the Polish leadership that, fortunately, did not become a reality).²¹² As Ambassador Łukasiewicz stated in Moscow on 21 April 1936, despite its pact with France, “the USSR’s influence on the essence of French policy in Western European is very small”.²¹³ The Popular Front governments (after elections in June 1936) brought neither communism nor civil war to France. Beck welcomed the fact that the French foreign minister (in a Popular Front government) Yvon Delbos, while visiting Poland in December 1937, did not try to persuade the Poles to join “any pro-Soviet combination”, as Barthou and Laval had.²¹⁴ In addition, Delbos skipped a visit to Moscow by visiting Warsaw and Prague. As Feliks Frankowski recalled, “Blum, Auriol and Delbos were friendly to us”. They were “generally honest people, unspoiled by power, and sincerely wanted to have an ally in Poland”. And the Popular Front had done a great service to France “by saving [it] from civil war”.²¹⁵ In March 1938, General Gamelin also admitted that Poland was France’s most important ally—after Great Britain.²¹⁶

However, these gestures produced nothing new regarding mutual military obligations and plans for a future defensive war. In their “Study of Poland’s Strategic Plan against Germany [*Studium planu strategicznego Polski przeciw Niemcom*]” from the end of 1937, General Tadeusz Kutrzeba and Colonel Stefan Mossor considered it a foregone conclusion that Germany enjoyed a distinct military advantage, and they asked the fundamental question: would the French army want to fight outside its borders? The authors leaned towards a negative answer to that question.²¹⁷ They also concluded that, for Poland, the alliance made sense only if France would fight beyond the borders of its national territory and if it would come to Poland’s assistance either immediately or within six to eight weeks after a potential German attack.²¹⁸ This thesis seems, *mutatis mutandis*, to faithfully reflect the thinking at the time within the Polish General Staff. The French reluctance to

212 On 2 July 1935, Beck suggested that, given the offensive by the Popular Front and the growing Soviet influence in France, “closer and friendlier relations with Germany will turn out to be a necessity for us”. See *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, p. 328.

213 *Stosunki Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z państwem radzieckim 1918–1943*, ed. J. Kumaniecki (Warsaw 1991), p. 206.

214 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 3, p. 224 (note dated 21 December 1937).

215 IPMS, MSZ, A.11/144E, nr spr. 270, Feliks Frankowski’s testimony before the Winiarski Commission on 31 March 1941.

216 David E. Kaiser, *Economic Diplomacy and the Origins of the Second World War: Germany, Britain, France and Eastern Europe 1930–1939* (Princeton 1980), p. 238.

217 *Studium planu strategicznego Polski przeciw Niemcom Kutrzeby i Mossora*, eds. M. Jabłonowski, P. Stawecki (Warsaw 1987), pp. 56–57.

218 *Wojna obronna Polski 1939*, p. 44.

go to war, the possibility that the military convention would be terminated, and the growing dependence of French foreign policy on the fluctuations of public opinion—these are three things that cast a shadow over France’s value as an ally.²¹⁹ For this reason, in work tied to the “Z” operational plan undertaken in 1938, Polish staff officers assumed that Poland could not count on France, because France’s domestic problems would prevent it from making a significant military effort.²²⁰

There was still no Paris-Warsaw collaboration at staff level, and no staff plan for joint warfare had been developed. The French General Staff began serious work on the concept of a war with Germany on two fronts only after the Munich Conference when it became clear that any Third Reich offensive could first be directed westward.²²¹ The Maginot Line, erected along the border with Germany but not along the Franco-Belgian border, did not protect France. In certain circumstances it could be an effective system, but it required a change in thinking on the part of French military strategists, a change that did not occur until June 1940.

The decline in France’s international significance revealed the need to battle for a political dialogue with Great Britain on fundamental European security issues.²²² France’s accommodation of British strategy was so obvious to Polish policymakers that Deputy Minister Szembek, in one of his political letters written *pro foro interno*, called France “England’s satellite”. In March 1938 in Belgrade, Roman Dębicki wrote: “Against this background, France’s weakness is perhaps even disturbing. There is probably nothing else left to France but a common line with England, although it seems to me that whereas until recently they went hand-in-hand, England now seems to lead its companion by the arm.”²²³ In another letter, to the Ambassador in Tokyo, Tadeusz Romer, Dębicki stated: “We have come far since France ‘ruled’ Europe surrounded by satellites. It seems that she, in turn, has become England’s satellite today.”²²⁴ The leader of the Third Reich also detected the degradation of France’s global importance. Ambassador Lipski wrote: “In November 1937, Hitler was well aware of France’s dependence on Britain. After

219 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

220 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

221 T. C. Inlay, *Facing the Second World War. Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France 1938–1940* (Oxford–New York 2003), pp. 355–356 (this study added a great deal new to the subject). On France’s political and military strategy, see also A. Adamthwaite, *France and the Coming of the Second World War. 1936–1939* (London 1977); Y. Lacaze, *La France et Munich. Étude d’un processus décisionnel en matière des relations internationales* (Paris 1979).

222 For a valuable contribution on the British perception of Poland as it pursued its policy of balance, see Maria Nowak-Kiełbikowa, *Polska–Wielka Brytania*, pp. 317–566.

223 Letter dated 5 March 1938; see *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka. Materiały uzupełniające*, ed. W. Jędrzejewicz, *Niepodległość* 15 (New York–London 1982): p. 73.

224 PDD/1938, p. 53.

Munich, his conviction was even greater.”²²⁵ We cannot help but regard these statements as anything but significant.

It is impossible not to ask whether Piłsudski and Beck believed that French and British policy towards Central and Eastern Europe could be changed. In response, we can only note that, certainly in Piłsudski’s time, Polish politicians believed that any policy of appeasement would continue until further concessions threatened the Western powers’ most important interests. Only when that point was reached would new opportunities be created for cooperation between Poland, Paris and London.

In secondary literature it is easy to find the view that Piłsudski and Beck neglected Poland’s alliance with France, having trusted declarations made by Germany’s leaders. But the historical reality is extremely complex. In 1934–1936, the Polish government had to deal with a France that was oriented towards cooperation with the Soviet Union. In the 1937–1938, it was a France that followed Great Britain passively in the conduct of the policy of appeasement. There was no “other” France.

Confronting German Diplomacy

Ongoing debate over Hitler’s foreign policy contains the argument that the führer was an opportunist who benefited from the weakness and disorder of his partners, exploiting to the greatest degree opportunities to expand his influence and achieve territorial gains. British historians Alan Bullock and A. J. P. Taylor took this position; in their opinion, Hitler was only a nationalist leader who dreamed of historic national revenge, using possibilities for expansion if and when the situation *hic et nunc* allowed.²²⁶ Raising the question of whether Hitler was “*un homme à programme nun disciple de Machiavel*”, Klaus Hildebrand came to the conclusion that such a programme of course existed, and his crowning achievement, to which everything was subordinate, was to be Germany’s war with Russia—for “living space” in the east.²²⁷ I agree with this argument; in fact, I believe that the policies of National Socialist Germany cannot be understood in any other way.

225 J. Lipski, “Stosunki polsko-niemieckie w świetle aktów norymberskich,” *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* (London) (1947), R. 1, No. 2–3: p. 22.

226 See A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (Oxford 1961) and A. Bullock, “Hitler and the Origins of the Second World War”, in *The Origins of the Second World War. Historical Interpretations*, ed. E. M. Robertson, second edition (London 1973), pp. 189–224. For criticism of Taylor’s argument, see Piotr Wandycz, “Polska między Wschodem a Zachodem”, in idem, *Z dziejów dyplomacji* (London 1988), pp. 101–118.

227 K. Hildebrand, “La politique française de Hitler jusqu’en 1936”, in *La France et l’Allemagne 1932–1936*, pp. 343 and 370. For an advocate of the existence of Hitler’s “foreign policy program”, see Axel Kuhn, *Hitlers außenpolitisches Programm. Entstehung und Entwicklung 1919–1939* (Stuttgart 1970).

The whole meaning of Germany's new approach towards Poland in 1934–1939 boiled down to the silent assumption that Poland would one day become a subjugated ally of the Third Reich, and would take part in the war against Bolshevik Russia. We can also confidently assume that, were it not for such an assumption by Hitler, there would have been no Polish-German rapprochement that lasted five years.

Deciding to make an agreement with Poland, the führer believed that this arrangement was needed in order to strike at the French “political system” in Central and Eastern Europe, and to wrest Poland out of it.²²⁸ Germany's relations with France and the Soviet Union were strained, and Hitler thus assumed that he had to bring about a tactical détente with Poland. He did not want to sign a non-aggression treaty, because a treaty on that level would have contained *expressis verbis* recognition of Germany's current boundaries as final. In this first phase, Hitler probably did not have a well-thought-out concept of Poland's future role. It seems that in 1935 or 1936 he decided that, at some time in the future, a new agreement would have to be concluded with Poland which would turn it into a subordinate ally of Germany, a *Juniorpartner*.²²⁹ This was to happen once the Polish government accepted the rules of the game as imposed by the German hegemon over the weaker partner. After Pilsudski's death, Hitler found in Beck a kind of guarantor of the course whose expression was the 1934 pact. However, if he believed that the “far-sighted policy of Colonel Beck” (*die grosszügliche Politik des Obersten Beck*) would serve as a bridge to Poland's dependence on, and subordination to, the “Great Germany”, he was seriously mistaken.²³⁰

According to this idea, Hitler tried to create the impression in Polish minds that he was not “a man who would work for temporary prosperity, that there are no difficulties between Poland and Germany that he [...] would not be able to solve along with Min[ister] Beck”.²³¹ However, Beck was not confirmed in his belief that political rapprochement between the two governments would result in a permanent psychological transformation within German society, one by which hostility to the Polish nation would recede. It was the case only that, on Hitler's orders, the German hate campaign was put on hold for a couple of years. The mechanisms of

228 It would be easy today to show that the system of French Eastern alliances was largely a fiction even before Hitler took power, but from the perspective of 1933 or 1934 its fate did not seem to have been decided.

229 This concept was introduced by Georg Wollstein, “Hitlers gescheitertes Projekt einer Juniorpartnerschaft Polens” *Universitas* (1983), No. 5: pp. 525–532. See also his essay, “Die Politik des nationalsozialistischen Deutschlands gegenüber Polen 1933–1939/1945” in *Hitler, Deutschland und die Mächte. Materialien zur Außenpolitik des Dritten Reiches*, ed. M. Funke (Düsseldorf 1976), pp. 797–807. On Hitler's programme dilemmas in foreign policy from 1933–1936, see K. Hildebrand, “La politique française de Hitler”, pp. 339–372.

230 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 3, p. 223.

231 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 479.

totalitarian control over collective emotions made that task easy, but the fact is that that campaign was merely put on hold, not stopped.²³² In August 1936, Joachim von Ribbentrop (at that time the ambassador in London) told Deputy Minister Szembek that “no one wants to violate” the charter of the Free City of Danzig.²³³ The Germans tried to persuade the Poles that they would be making no territorial claims. On 16 February 1937, Marshal Śmigły-Rydz, having received Hermann Göring, heard a clear declaration: “We do not want the corridor. I say it honestly and categorically. The corridor is unnecessary for us.”²³⁴

On 25 January 1934, the day before the declaration of the non-use of force was signed, Józef Lipski noted Hitler’s first statements about the need for Polish-German solidarity against Russia.²³⁵ From that time onwards, Hitler returned consistently to the argument that Polish-German reconciliation was necessary in the name of defence against the Soviet Union. In a conversation with Ambassador Józef Lipski on 27 August 1934, Hitler emphasised that in his opinion, “the Soviets’ entire strength is based on their international communist doctrine. Unlike Nazism or fascism, Bolshevism does not respect national borders. It is an illusion to think that the period of Bolshevik expansionism is over and done with.”²³⁶ He called Russia “a colossus with unlimited possibilities. It is also an illusion to think that something will change in Russia in the coming years. The doctrine cannot change.” And “from the military point of view, Russia has made enormous progress.”²³⁷ German diplomats would return to the theme of the Soviet threat many times in 1935–1938, and they would do so for the last time in January 1939. The anti-Soviet theme was one of Hitler’s most important arguments, perhaps his main argument, in conversations with the Poles. It was usually before new and important international measures by the Third Reich when Beck heard that Hitler’s “negative stance” towards the Soviets was “inviolable.” He heard it for the last time on 14 January 1938, when he visited Berlin.²³⁸ Several winter visits by Göring to

232 For a thorough justification of this argument, see Eugeniusz C. Król, *Polska i Polacy w propagandzie narodowego socjalizmu w Niemczech 1919–1945* (Warsaw 2006), pp. 116–204.

233 This conversation took place on 14 August 1936. The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Lipskiego, 11/3, Szembeknote.

234 *Ibid.*, Kolekcja Dębickiego, 40/6, MSZ note about this conversation.

235 K. Lapter, “Dokumenty dotyczące genezy polsko-niemieckiej deklaracji o niestosowaniu przemocy z 26 January 1934 (Z archiwum Józefa Lipskiego),” *Studia z Najnowszych Dziejów Powszechnych* 5 (1963): p. 283.

236 Ambasador Lipski to Beck, report dated 27 August 1934, quote in K. Lapter, *Pakt Piłsudski–Hitler*, załączniki, dok. 25, p. 316.

237 *Ibid.*

238 PDD/1938, p. 29.

Poland in 1935–1938 were meant to persuade Poland to come to some agreement with the German Reich against Soviet Russia.²³⁹

Attempts to persuade Poland to participate in the anti-Soviet coalition under Germany's leadership are a problem that has been well described and documented in literature. But we should keep this matter in mind to gain a comprehensive picture of the dilemmas faced by Polish foreign policy in the years leading up to the Second World War.

The leadership at the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw could not resist the conviction that “for any action against the Soviets, we would have more allies than we could wish for”.²⁴⁰ In the autumn of 1936, after the conclusion of the German-Japanese agreement to combat the Communist International (the Anti-Comintern Pact), Reich diplomats probed the possibility that Poland would join this group. When met with rejection, the Germans tolerated the Polish policy of balance—temporarily, of course. Efforts to persuade Poland to participate in the anti-Soviet bloc under the Third Reich's leadership were intensified in autumn 1937, as German diplomats were preparing themselves for fundamental decisions. In the face of the wave of Stalinist terror in the USSR, and given external signs that the USSR was weakening, Germany presented Poland with a different justification for the need for an alliance against the Soviets. In February 1938, in a conversation with Marshal Śmigły-Rydz during his fourth visit to Poland, Hermann Göring claimed: “[...] in the event of war, the Soviets would not be difficult to overcome”. He also repeated well-known Polish arguments about natural Polish-German solidarity in the face of “a very serious threat”, adding that “in this respect, Poland and Germany's interests are in total alignment, because these countries constitute a bulwark [*bollwerk*] against Bolshevism”. In Germany, there was absolute clarity that “if Poland succumbed in a Polish-Soviet conflict, the consequences of this fact would be the rapid communisation of Germany.”²⁴¹ Of course, on none of these occasions did the Poles take this topic up. We cannot find a single document involving Polish diplomacy on whose pages we read about Polish interest in territorial changes in Eastern Europe on the path towards cooperation with the Third Reich.

All attempts by Hitler's diplomacy to subjugate Poland were in vain, although there have been repeated attempts to rewrite history to show that Hitler's dictatorship and the authoritarian Polish government shared a bond of spiritual kinship, anti-liberalism, a kind of führer mentality, and anti-communism. In Warsaw, all offers leading to a Polish-German alliance were, *de facto* or *de iure*, rejected. Hitler's attempt to play the anti-Soviet card since the spring of 1935 proved ineffective.

Poland reacted negatively to all German offers; it accepted no solutions that would have turned it into one of Germany's subordinate allies. Over and over again,

239 For Kazimierz Fabrycy's detailed analysis of these efforts, see “Komórka Specjalna i moje stosunki z Göringiem,” Instytut Piłsudskiego (London), Kolekcja 42/12/1.

240 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 2, p. 390.

241 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 42.

the Germans thus heard that the Polish-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact had been concluded in good faith and could not be violated. Germany's informal offers regarding Poland's inclusion in the Anti-Comintern Pact failed. On 9 November 1937, Beck wrote to Polish diplomatic missions:

No proposals for [Poland's] accession to the Italian-German-Japanese Protocol (Anti-Comintern) have been addressed to Poland so far. In any case, Poland would not be able to join such a protocol because of its specific location as a neighbour of the USSR and because of its fundamental stance in opposition to blocs.²⁴²

Polish acceptance of any offer to join the Anti-Comintern Pact would have led to broken ties with the West, ties which Polish diplomats managed to save—despite the policy of appeasement. It would have also led to the Soviets withdrawing from the 1932 non-aggression pact.

Meanwhile, in non-Polish secondary literature devoted to Polish policy on the eve of the Second World War—with a few exceptions such as Hans Roos, Henry L. Roberts and Alan Palmer—there is broad agreement that there existed a Polish-German “partnership” and even “friendship” in the period 1934–1938. Scholars still use the narrative of this close friendship to discredit Piłsudski's and Beck's Poland on an ever-broader scale. Understandably, it has supporters in neo-Soviet historiography, but unfortunately it is also the subject of new works by Western authors, such as Rolf-Dieter Müller.²⁴³

The narrative in question here is based on the seemingly logical thesis that after 1934, Poland pursued a policy convenient for Germany by which Poland would not oppose Germany's violation of the Treaty of Versailles and other international obligations, and above all its rearmament policy. This is certainly suggestive criticism, which happens to be unsupported by the facts. No policy pursued by Poland could have stopped Nazi rearmament, and no such policy could have stopped Germany from violating the provisions of the peace treaty. Historians' claims that Poland's treaty with Germany enabled Hitler's rearmament program is a serious misunderstanding of the facts. The Polish government simply could not have stopped German armament policies, nor could it have prevented various aggressive measures through diplomatic means. Such possibilities—if they existed at all—would have required cooperation with the Western powers, particularly when it came to preventing German rearmament. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom and France set forth a policy of appeasement, and in the autumn of 1937 this policy deepened. Under these conditions, diplomacy could achieve results that were without real effect, without any probability of changing the course of events. Above all, it was Foreign Minister Beck who was aware of this state of affairs; in this regard, he is above reproach.

242 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 3, p. 395.

243 See R.-D. Müller, *Der Feind steht im Osten. Hitlers geheime Pläne für einen Krieg gegen Sowjetunion im Jahr 1939* (Berlin 2011), p. 49.

Very often we come across yet a different view, namely that Polish policies numbed the Polish people, put them to sleep, and that, as Władysław Konopczyński put it, “Sanacja Poland” woke up from the anaesthesia only at the last moment; that, by the time Poland was faced with an armed enemy in 1938–1939, it was already “too late” to change the nature of Polish policy.²⁴⁴ But we need to ask: what does “too late” mean here? The policy of balance did not “dampen the vigilance” of the Polish nation. Even if, in 1934–1938, the Polish government had repeated every day the argument that Germany was Poland’s “eternal enemy”, and foretold the coming military conflict, it would have had little effect—given the realities of civilizational backwardness and economic weakness—on Poland’s preparations for war.

Henryk Batowski has written that:

[...] the fundamental error was Beck’s excessive faith in Hitler’s honesty and the possibility of a truly permanent change in Polish-German relations. The Poles did not understand that Hitler needed a temporary settlement only for tactical reasons and that it could not last long, given the Reich’s undoubtedly continued expansionist appetites. Deceptive and short-sighted was the hope that Germany, once it gave up its eastward expansion, would direct its attention to the south and that the Germans, absorbed there, would have to permanently give up Polish Pomerania, Danzig and Silesia.²⁴⁵

In Marian Wojciechowski’s opinion, the fact that:

[...] interwar Poland was born out of the Versailles territorial and political system and its fate was related to the existence and functioning of this system [meant that] a policy of cooperation with Germany objectively supported the Reich’s aspirations to overthrow Versailles; it cut off the branch on which it was sitting.²⁴⁶

Did Poland and Germany in 1934–1938 essentially cooperate to destroy the Versailles order? This is an important question that cannot be left unanswered.

Poland and Germany participated in no joint action directed against any country or the Versailles order.²⁴⁷ There was no Polish-German cooperation, and there was no real common action taken against either the Western powers or the Soviets. The German ambassador in Warsaw, Hans-Adolf von Moltke, expected that “Poland would exploit every symptom of Germany’s weakness” and believed that, if it managed to obtain an extension of the non-aggression declaration—towards which

244 W. Konopczyński, *Historia polityczna Polski 1914–1939*, intro. T. Wituch (Warsaw 1995), p. 205.

245 H. Batowski, *Między dwiema wojnami 1919–1939. Zarys historii dyplomatycznej* (Kraków 1988), pp. 204–205.

246 M. Wojciechowski, “Józef Beck – szkic biograficzny,” in J. Beck, *Ostatni raport* (Warsaw 1987), p. 21.

247 They informed each other about political moves on the matter of Czechoslovakia in 1938, but they concluded no agreement.

Beck had been working since January 1938—Poland would be guided only its own interests.²⁴⁸

Minister Beck, who had the reputation of a Germanophile both in Europe and among Polish society, never believed that good relations with Germany had to be maintained at any cost; that is, at the expense of Poland's territorial integrity and independence. At the very foundation of Polish politics was the rejection of any policy concept that would lead to Poland's dependence on Moscow or Berlin.

Rapprochement with Germany had definite limits. Poland ruled out any unilateral commitments, as well as all forms of subordination. It was impossible, as the Polish Ambassador in Paris, Łukasiewicz, put it in August 1938, "that any serious statesman in modern Germany would want to delude himself with the hope that one might talk about Polish matters with even the greatest powers. They know full well that one can talk about Polish matters only with Poland, and one can talk about Poland's territorial matters only on the path to war."²⁴⁹ No one could put it more clearly than did British historian Graham Ross: "Beck can be accused of putting too much faith in German goodwill, but he was careful not to commit himself too far".²⁵⁰

Speaking with French foreign minister Georges Bonnet in August 1938, Ambassador Łukasiewicz said that, when asked about the state of Polish-German relations, Polish diplomats would repeat that:

[...] these relations are good and we hope that they will develop successfully, adding that, of course, we base neither relations with Germany nor relations in general with anyone else on anything other than the positive results of our policies, and in particular on our own strength and determination to defend what belongs to us and our vital interests.²⁵¹

At the centre of a philosophy of international relations so conceived was the principle of reciprocity, the principle that each country had no choice but to pursue its self-interests. Of course, we might regard such guidelines as unrealistic in cases where a country is weak, but we cannot doubt that a policy of passivity and subordination to "world powers" would also pave the way to defeat.

It is unquestionable that, while Polish-German relations in 1934–1939 were characterised by a certain rapprochement, Polish-Soviet relations in the same

248 S. Żerko, *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie 1938–1939* (Poznan 1998), p. 75.

249 Report on Ambassador Łukasiewicz's conversation with Minister Bonnet dated 11 August 1938 (*Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939*), p. 146.

250 G. Ross, *The Great Powers and the Decline of the European States System 1914–1945* (London–New York 1991), p. 85.

251 IPMS, MSZ, A.11.49/CZ/2, Note on Ambassador Łukasiewicz's conversation with Minister Bonnet.

period took the form of a kind of “armed peace”. In the second half of 1936, Soviet propaganda began to take on a clearly anti-Polish tone.²⁵²

It is not difficult to explain this state of affairs. German and Soviet attitudes towards the Polish policy of balance were not the same. For the Soviets, this policy appeared to be an inept Polish propaganda manoeuvre.²⁵³ The Germans, on the other hand, quietly tolerated the policy being followed by their eastern neighbour. In fact, they showed great interest in the maintenance of normalised Polish-German relations. The Soviet Union persistently opposed the Polish policy of balance, and it did so with all available means, thanks to which Polish-Soviet relations reached a state of “cold war” or “armed peace”. Throughout the entire interwar period, Polish-Soviet relations were conducted in an atmosphere of undoubted hostility, except for one short period of détente in 1933, when Soviet leaders took actions that led to far-reaching rapprochement with Poland.²⁵⁴

A “Religious War” in Europe

In 1934–1935 there were indications that European international politics could have evolved differently than they actually did in the years leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War.

Certainly, the Stresa Front concept represented an opportunity to tie Italy, Great Britain and France together. But from the very beginning, British foreign policymakers felt uneasy about the idea. In London, it was broadly understood that effective pressure on Germany was possible only through active British involvement in Central and Eastern Europe, which was precisely what Britain wanted to avoid at all costs.²⁵⁵ As early as June 1935, by concluding a maritime agreement with Germany (contrary to the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles), British diplomacy chose the path of direct engagement with Hitler.

It was possible that another aspect of international politics, as it evolved in this period, could act against the Germans. Italian-German relations heated up in the summer of 1934 in connection with Nazi attempts to control Austria, which was an important factor that could hinder any Berlin-Rome agreement. On 8 August 1934,

252 Ambassador Grzybowski’s report on this matter dated 15 July 1936, AAN, MSZ, p. 1581.

253 Not just suppositions, but also—surprisingly—reports from Soviet intelligence suggested that the governments of Poland and Germany had concluded some sort of secret political and military agreement. Stalin himself received such reports (for example, a report from a “serious Polish source” dated 29 June 1934). See RGASPI, Fond Stalina, f. 558, op. 11, d. 187.

254 AWPRF, Fond Litwinowa, f. 05, op. 12, p. 86, d. 68. The outlines of these plans were contained in a report by Antonov-Ovseyenko to Moscow dated 28 January 1934.

255 H. H. Hall III, “The Foreign Policy-Making Process in Britain, 1934–1935 and the Origins of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement”, *Historical Journal* 19 (June 1976), No. 2: pp. 495–496.

Tadeusz Romer wrote to the head of Beck's cabinet, Roman Dębicki, about the "anger felt towards the Nazis in particular, and the Germans in general".²⁵⁶ Differences between Rome and Berlin raised hopes in Poland, because not only did Italy want to maintain Austria as a "buffer state", but it also had interests in Central Europe, as evidenced by the Rome protocols concluded on 17 March 1934. Italy's involvement in the Abyssinian campaign in October 1935 led to League of Nations' sanctions and that country's isolation, which in turn led to Italian rapprochement with Germany. Once concluded, that rapprochement turned Italy into a subordinate partner to Germany and ended with the fascist catastrophe of 1943.²⁵⁷ Ambassador Alfred Wysocki's argument, expressed in August 1935, that Mussolini would support Austria's independence at all costs out of fear of Germany's power, lost any foundation.²⁵⁸

The years 1934–1936 brought a measurable increase in the importance of the Soviet Union in international politics, which was confirmed by the numerous visits that foreign politicians made to Moscow (Beck, Edvard Beneš, Eden, and Laval). On 27 February 1935, the ambassador in London, Edward Raczyński, wrote to Dębicki: "[...] England, faithful to its empirical method, is constantly responding to current difficulties and dangers. Here the German danger is considered the greatest for the near future. At the same time, Russian stocks are going up [...]"²⁵⁹ No doubt, from the point of view of Poland's interests, the USSR's rise in the international arena after 1934 was a threatening sign, especially since the Soviet Union aspired to become France's main partner in Eastern Europe.²⁶⁰ With what we know today, we might consider to what extent French policy was calculated to consolidate France's alliance with the USSR, and to what extent this alliance served to strengthen France's international position, which—to French policymakers—seemed necessary in order to achieve some *modus vivendi* with Germany.

Signs of further destabilisation of the international situation in Europe came from the ideological war that Beck called a "religious war". The increasingly ideological nature of international politics, a phenomenon that marked the entire twentieth century, rapidly increased in the face of the offensive by totalitarian states. Beck feared that the League of Nations might, as he told Eden in November 1936,

256 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Dębickiego, 40/5. At the time, Tadeusz Romer was Polish embassy counsellor at Quirinal.

257 R. Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino. La politica estera fascista dal 1930 al 1940*, Vol. 1 (Roma 2001), 395 ff.

258 AAN, Ambasada RP w Rzymie, 2, Report dated 3 August 1935.

259 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/5, Ambassador Raczyński to Roman Dębicki.

260 Of course, the question arises whether the Soviets used the rapprochement and alliance with France as a bargaining chip in pursuit of a *modus vivendi* with Germany. Such interpretations have appeared in historiography for a relatively long time and they are not without foundation. See, for example, R. Tucker, "The Emergence of Stalin's Foreign Policy," *Slavic Review* 36 (1977): pp. 563–589.

“lose the character of an international coordinating institution and may degenerate into a group representing one of the conflicting religions”.²⁶¹ In August 1935, the slogan of the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in Moscow was the creation of “popular fronts”; that is, the combined forces of communism and socialism in the battle against fascism.²⁶² In July 1936, civil war broke out in Spain, which functioned as a kind of testing ground for the three totalitarian powers. The “religious war” in Europe undoubtedly served the far-reaching interests of the Soviet Union, which, after it joined the League of Nations, did everything in its power to turn the organisation into an ideological body. Beck told foreign diplomats repeatedly that Russia was not a democracy, although it used a particular kind of democratic propaganda.²⁶³ All of this could not help but widen the distance between Poland and the Geneva institution.

From Warsaw’s perspective, antagonistic blocs of states appeared to be a harbinger of war. Michał Łubieński, director of Beck’s cabinet from mid-1935, wrote that the best solution for Poland was a programme of strict neutrality in the “ideological conflict that is beginning to divide Europe increasingly into two camps”.²⁶⁴ On one side of the conflict, there were the totalitarian powers—Germany and Italy, which joined the Anti-Comintern Pact in November 1937—²⁶⁵ and on the other side, there were France and Great Britain as the “democratic powers”, which in April 1936 began bilateral cooperation at the staff level.²⁶⁶ The Soviet Union was making overtures towards this camp, although it did not abandon the possibility of reaching a *modus vivendi* with Germany; rumours of the latter circulated throughout Europe in 1936–1938. In conversations with foreign diplomats, Beck responded to these rumours by stating that they had “no meaning” (*keine Bedeutung*) and that they had originated with the Soviets.²⁶⁷ Preliminary German-Soviet trade talks at the

261 PDD/1936, 673.

262 See M. J. Zacharias, “Rozbieżności polsko-sowieckie w okresie July Kongresu Kominternu”, in *Międzymorze. Polska i kraje Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, XIX–XX wiek. Studia ofiarowane Piotrowi Łossowskiemu w siedemdziesiątą rocznicę urodzin*, eds. A. Ajnenkiel et al. (Warsaw 1995), pp. 343–352.

263 Neues Politisches Archiv, Akten der Republik (Wiedeń), Gesandtschaft Warschau, p. 81, Austrian Envoy Schmid to Minister Guido Schmidt, report dated 7 January 1938.

264 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 2, p. 272.

265 The Pact contained secret protocols but none of them established a formal alliance, and none of them presumed the possibility of military actions against the USSR. These protocols were first revealed by Gerhard L. Weinberg, “Die geheimen Abkommen zum Antikomintern Pakt”, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 2 (1954), No. 2: pp. 193–201.

266 On 19 April 1936, the British government gave France guarantees of assistance in the event of a German attack.

267 Neues Politisches Archiv, Akten der Republik (Wiedeń), Gesandtschaft Warschau, 81, Austrian Envoy Schmid to Minister Guido Schmidt, report dated 15 April 1937.

end of 1936 and beginning of 1937 revived speculation.²⁶⁸ The Soviet delegate to the talks, David Kandelaki, was received in Berlin by Hjalmar Schacht and Marshal Hermann Göring.²⁶⁹ Hitler never ended economic cooperation with the USSR, even though he preached anti-communism and anti-Sovietism in their most extreme forms. On 30 September 1936, after talking with General Śmigły-Rydz, Szembek wrote that he was aware that it would be impossible to maintain a neutral position between two blocs for long; Poland would have to choose between them. In response, Śmigły-Rydz noted that Poland certainly could not take the “Bolshevik” side.²⁷⁰

Although the “essential element” of the current situation in Europe, according to Beck, was the “religious war”, he also identified as significant the clashing influences of the Great Powers. And he believed that, in this state of affairs, Poland could play a key role, given that its central geopolitical position made Poland a “natural” battlefield in the coming war. On the other hand, through political engagement Poland could prevent or at least hinder the outbreak of such a war; after all—so the argument went—such a conflict was unthinkable without Poland’s engagement. He saw in this set of circumstances important possibilities for Poland, not to mention additional justification for the concept of balance. “It forces Polish policy not to engage in any direction, because only in this way can Poland avoid a conflict being played out on its territory between representatives of both ‘denominations.’” Beck aptly recognised that if “Poland tipped to the Soviet side, it would lead to an armed conflict on our western border and vice versa, if we tipped towards Germany, we would cause a clash on our eastern border.”²⁷¹ If Poland joined the “anti-fascist” camp, it could transform the ideological war in Europe into an armed conflict. Similarly, if Poland joined the anti-Comintern bloc, it could trigger a European war.

268 David Kandelaki’s mission in Berlin in 1936 represents one of the Soviet initiatives to come to some *modus vivendi* with Hitler’s Germany. See the study and documentation by Lew Bezymiński, “Geheimmission in Stalins Auftrag? David Kandelaki und die sowjetisch-deutschen Beziehungen Mitte der dreißiger Jahre”, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 40 (1992): pp. 339–357. See also L. Kochan, “Russia and Germany 1935–1937. A Note”, *Slavonic and East European Review* 40 (1962): pp. 518–520; for more on German-Soviet relations in this period, see D. S. McMurry, *Deutschland und die Sowjetunion 1933–1936. Ideologie, Machtpolitik und Wirtschaftsbeziehungen* (Cologne 1979). In 1977 Robert Tucker made the argument that, in 1923 (after the failed revolution in Germany), Moscow decided that good relations should be sought with Germany regardless of what kind of government ran the country, and that this Soviet policy remained a political priority down to 23 August 1939; see R. Tucker, *The Emergence of Stalin’s Foreign Policy*, p. 578.

269 ADAP, Göttingen 1981, seria C, t. VI, cz. 1, dok. 183 and 187, pp. 401–402 and 409–410.

270 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 2, p. 293.

271 *Ibid.*, p. 221.

We can imagine various potential scenarios in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1930s: an implemented Four-Power Pact could have set up a directorate of the big powers. What results would this arrangement have brought? This is a question to which the historian cannot give an answer, because the subject of the studies is only what really happened, not what our imaginations might offer us. In any case, the scenario for a non-military dismantling of the Versailles order would have remained open. The establishment of an Eastern Pact could have created a political system in which Bolshevik Russia was the main political factor in Eastern Europe on which other signatories to the Pact were dependent. To this end, Poland opposed various solutions by claiming that a “neutral zone” between German and Russia was subjective. This tactic was based on the realistic assumption that since it was impossible to establish a system of universal security, bilateral agreements establishing a *modus vivendi* between antagonistic nations would have to suffice.

In 1936, it was the aggressive powers that had the advantage and were taking the international political initiative. At that time, the Polish Foreign Ministry took into account the possibility of a European war beginning with Germany or Russia, but also considered a military incident that would bring about a full-scale conflict, similar in a way to the events of 1914. Deputy Foreign Minister Szembek’s view of the situation was that there was no reason to think:

[...] that the Germans or the Russians wanted to risk war. But an armed crisis may arise from a completely tertiary conflict, one that is apparently completely minor. Therefore, we oppose pacts that divide Europe into clearly hostile camps. Because such pacts, by generating a hostile atmosphere, encourage minor disputes being turned into serious conflicts, which instead of remaining local, expand to involve all parties.²⁷²

An alternative method to “ideological blocs” and the intensifying “religious war” in Europe seemed to be “building neighbourly relations” based on bilateral arrangements. Bilateralism is a characteristic feature of Beck’s political thought and that of the leadership of the Polish Foreign Ministry. “On this road,” Szembek claimed:

[...] we have achieved excellent results. I pointed out that I was struck by the difference between us and Eden, in assessing the political and military value of Russia and Germany. Eden arrived greatly impressed by Germany’s military strength, and at the same time firmly convinced that the Soviet army was of little value. I emphasised that this view seems to me completely false.²⁷³

Bilateralism in the Polish version seemed to have served nicely to stabilise Central and Eastern Europe. It brought real benefits to Poland, although these benefits would transpire to be temporary. In the spring of 1935, Beck told British foreign

272 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, p. 257.

273 *Ibid.*

minister Eden: “For Poland, like for every country on the continent, neighbourly relations are the most important. Poland has two significant neighbours: Germany and Soviet Russia. That is why almost 80 percent of our political work is directed at establishing and maintaining relations with these countries.”²⁷⁴

The truth is that the man who created Polish foreign policy in 1934–1939 demonstrated a deep scepticism towards the League of Nations and towards the entire unproductive phraseology of “collective security”. In various political conversations, he openly questioned the very usefulness of the Geneva institution. He spectacularly refused to cooperate with the League on the implementation of treaty provisions for the protection of national minorities (13 September 1934). He also advocated a new interpretation of Article 16 of the League’s Statute, by which the obligations described there would be optional. Documents exist showing that such statements irritated, for example, diplomats at the British Foreign Office. In January 1937, Foreign Secretary Eden, criticising Poland’s harshly negative attitude towards the League of Nations, noted that “more than other European nations, it is Poland that, due to its difficult location, may need such an organisation as the League of Nations”.²⁷⁵ None of this means, however, that the Polish government did not appreciate the Geneva institution as a consultative forum, which is an idea that also served attempts to redefine the obligations of states under Article 16 of the League’s statute. At the same time, it cannot be said that Beck did not see the value of “European solidarity”.²⁷⁶

Beck was convinced that Poland’s geopolitical position between two antagonistic totalitarian powers condemned Poland to bilateralism. He told French foreign minister Yvon Delbos in December 1937 that “Poland has never been in a situation in which more than 50 percent of its interests could be dealt with in the League, because while the Russians were entering the League, the Germans were leaving it.”²⁷⁷ Polish criticism of the League was fierce, but it did not lack reference to “international solidarity”.²⁷⁸ In any case, Beck believed that, given the realities of conflicted Europe, there was no room for regional political blocs, because every “multilateral system is a chain whose strength is measured by its weakest link”.²⁷⁹

274 Note on the Beck-Eden conversation dated 2 June 1935. *Dokumenty z dziejów polskiej polityki zagranicznej*, Vol. 2, p. 90.

275 National Archives, Foreign Office 371, 21800, C.193/193/55, Note dated 17 January 1937. For more, see W. Michowicz, “Polska a Liga Narodów w dobie ostatniego kryzysu (1935–1939)”, in *Międzymorze. Polska i kraje Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, pp. 333–342.

276 See *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, p. 380.

277 IPMS, MSZ, A.11.49/F/4, note on Beck’s conversation with Minister Delbos dated 6 December 1937.

278 For example, Beck to the Secretary General of the League of Nations on League reforms dated 18 September 1936. See J. Beck, *Przemówienia, deklaracje, wywiady, 1931–1939* (Warsaw 1939), p. 243.

279 M. Łubiński, *Refleksje i reminiscencje*, intro. and ed. M. Kornat (Warsaw 2012), p. 106.

These concepts were based on a more developed political philosophy. Following Piłsudski’s example, Beck repeated that, when developing plans, a middle state’s skilful policy required a kind of minimalism. In an interview given to the Łódź periodical *Republika* on 11 August 1931, before his time as foreign minister, Beck stated:

We hear people demanding that Poland take a broad initiative in foreign policy. I have serious doubts whether this approach would be effective. [...] I am afraid that today’s war-torn generation suffers rather as a result of an excess of initiatives, whether aimed at creating a fiction of a particular state’s hegemony, or at saving the world against its will and interests, starting from purely doctrinal assumptions and reasons.²⁸⁰

Tied to this philosophy was the notion of a “non-ideological” foreign policy, whose justification was precisely the phenomenon of the European “religious war” about which Beck talked. In May 1937, Beck tried to convince the British Conservative politician Neville Chamberlain of the need for a “realistic approach to political problems”, one which “avoided the favouritism of blocs, whether doctrinal or otherwise”.²⁸¹ This way of thinking within the Polish diplomatic leadership led to further dissociation with the Soviet Union, which appeared in full force in 1936. After the USSR joined the League of Nations, Soviet foreign minister Maksim Litvinov began to speak the organisation’s “moral language with so much success that he soon became an outstanding figure”.²⁸² As we know, Polish diplomacy opposed the activities of Litvinov, who tried to “turn the League into an anti-fascist bloc” which, of course (from the Polish point of view), led to a widened “split of Europe into two ideological blocs”.²⁸³

The American Ambassador to the USSR, William Bullitt, described Polish-Soviet relations as “extremely bad, and in the eyes of the unbiased observer an unnecessary evil”.²⁸⁴ In the summer of 1936, the new Polish Ambassador to the USSR, Waclaw Grzybowski, heard from the Deputy Soviet foreign minister, Nikolay Krestinsky, that “political relations between us could not be any worse”. Krestinsky added: “We are working to increase the prestige of the League of Nations and strengthen collective security; we are fighting all forms of aggression and fascism. We [the Poles], on the other hand, are conducting a diametrically different policy, aimed at weakening the League of Nations, combating efforts to achieve collective security, supporting Italy and sympathising with Japan”. Generally, “in terms

280 J. Beck, *Przemówienia, deklaracje, wywiady, 1931–1939*, p. 21.

281 AAN, MSZ, 108A, Note on Beck’s conversation with the British Chancellor of the Exchequer Neville Chamberlain (later prime minister) dated 14 May 1937.

282 Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm: The Second World War*, Vol. 1 (RosettaBooks, 2010), p. 95.

283 J. Gawroński, *Moja misja w Wiedniu 1932–1938* (Warsaw 1965), p. 475.

284 National Archives, Department of State, Decimal Files, mf T.1247, Report for the Secretary of State dated 19 July 1935.

of policy, Poland is in Germany's orbit",²⁸⁵ In connection with Litvinov's insinuation that Poland was "a silent ally of the German Reich", Beck issued a sharp statement from the podium of the General Assembly of the League of Nations on 16 October 1935.²⁸⁶

Of course, Poland was never "in Germany's orbit", but the question is whether Poland could have done more than it did in reality to maintain peaceful order in Central and Eastern Europe while at the same time sticking to the principles of its policy of balance. In answering this question, we can only be sceptical. If such possibilities were available, Poland could have used them only if it received real support from the Western powers, which proved impossible because of their application of the policy of appeasement. The simple fact that Poland maintained a balance between Germany and Russia served to stabilise Europe. As the US ambassador in Berlin, William E. Dodd, wrote after a conversation with the American ambassador to Paris, Bullitt, on 18 November 1937: "The Poles would do everything possible for peace [...]"²⁸⁷

The Policy of Appeasement

In a conversation with General Kazimierz Fabrycy in November 1934, Marshal Piłsudski voiced a thought that he did not finish: "The West is currently a lousy bunch", and if this situation did not change, "you will have to find new work".²⁸⁸ Any attempt to suggest what he meant exactly by this statement would lead nowhere. It is clear, however, that the author of these words was talking generally about the need to survive the difficult period marked by the policy of appeasement, the road that Great Britain and France took after 1933.

The concept of appeasement was deeply rooted in the British political tradition, where it had a highly positive connotation, and its origins can be dated back to either 1933 or 1935, when the Anglo-German maritime agreement, signed on 18 June 1935, came into effect.²⁸⁹ Prime Minister Chamberlain (from May 1937) "did

285 Final report of the Polish ambassador in Moscow, dated 6 November 1939, for the foreign minister of the government in exile August Zaleski, in *Dokumenty z dziejów polskiej polityki zagranicznej 1918–1939*, Vol. 2: 1933–1939, eds. T. Jędruszczak, M. Nowak-Kiełbikowa (Warsaw 1996), p. 267.

286 See *Zbiór dokumentów*, ed. J. Makowski, supplement to *Polityka Narodów* 10 (October 1935), No. 10: pp. 217–218.

287 W. E. Dodd, *Ambassador Dodd's Diary, 1933–1938* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1945), p. 437 (these were reportedly the words of Foreign Minister Beck).

288 W. Jędrzejewicz, *Józef Piłsudski 1867–1935*, p. 265.

289 See Charles Bloch, "Great Britain, German Rearmament and the Naval Agreement of 1935," in *European Diplomacy between Two Wars 1919–1939*, ed. H. W. Gatzke (Chicago 1972). See also H. H. Hall III, "The Foreign Policy-Making Process in Britain". There has been no shortage of attempts to give the beginning of appeasement an earlier date (e.g. as far back as the Locarno conference). A practical

not claim that war should be avoided at all costs".²⁹⁰ However, he did think that Great Britain was not prepared for war. He was convinced of Germany's legitimate continental interests and, to a certain extent, Italy's in the Mediterranean region.²⁹¹ He did not believe that the territorial decisions made after the First World War should be considered inviolable. They only set the conditions by which border changes could take place in a non-violent fashion. At the same time, Chamberlain was driven by economic motivations, believing that various countries' conflicting interests could be mitigated through economic concessions, which was undoubtedly an illusory dream as he confronted the totalitarian dictators.²⁹²

In the realities of the 1930s, the policy of appeasement proved to be a double misunderstanding. In London, it was assumed that a negotiating partner would be rational and moderate, which Hitler in no way was. In Berlin, there was the expectation that Germany could have a completely free hand in the east of the continent, which the British government did not accept. But was it possible to have pursued a different policy? This is a very difficult question. One thing is beyond discussion: the pro-Soviet theories put forward by Western historians who argue that Churchill's "Grand Alliance" was an alternative solution, which emerged as a concept only in 1941 under the force of events, have no basis in reality.²⁹³

consensus omnium has developed on the notion that this policy entered its decisive phase in November 1937, when Lord Halifax issued, on his own initiative, a well-known statement to Hitler about the lack of British opposition to the Reich's limited territorial aspirations (Austria, Sudetenland, Danzig), on condition that their rule was not carried out *manu militari*. A different concept could be adopted, one with which we distinguish between three stages of appeasement: the first began in 1933, the second in June 1935, and the third, at the peak, in November 1937.

- 290 S. Żerko, *Niemiecka polityka zagraniczna 1933–1939* (Poznań 2005), p. 223. For a more detailed view, see: R. A. C. Parker, *Chamberlain and Appeasement. British Policy and the Coming of the Second World War* (London 1993); F. MacDonough, *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement and the British Road to War* (Manchester 1998); and D. Faber, *Munich, 1938. Appeasement and the World War February* (New York–London 2008). See also R. Douglas, "Chamberlain and Appeasement", in *The Fascist Challenge and the Politics of Appeasement*, ed. W. J. Mommsen, L. Kettenacker (London 1983), pp. 79–88; K. Middlemas, *Diplomacy of Illusion. The British Government and Germany, 1937–1939* (London 1972).
- 291 On 2 January 1937, Great Britain and Italy signed a "gentlemen's agreement" on the maintenance of the *status quo* in the Mediterranean. See P. Brundu Olla, *L'equilibrio difficile. Gran Bretagna, Italia e Francia nel Mediterraneo (1930–1937)* (Milan 1980); H. Batowski, *Między dwiema wojnami*, p. 260.
- 292 On the economic motives of appeasement, see B.-J. Wendt, *Economic Appeasement. Handel und Finanz in der britischen Deutschland-Politik 1933–1939* (Düsseldorf 1971). A separate study could be written about the policymakers behind appeasement and the economisation of international politics.
- 293 M. J. Carley, "End of the Low, Dishonest Decade: Failure of the Anglo-Franco-Soviet Alliance in 1939," *Europe-Asia Studies* 45 (1993), No. 2: pp. 303–341.

Was appeasement a “policy of defeat” or a rational concept that simply did not apply to a confrontation with an irrational negotiating partner (aggressor)? Such a question can be the subject of endless debate.²⁹⁴ For Poland in the 1930s, questions regarding the essence of appeasement were not especially important. A policy so defined made it impossible for Poland to count on real support for the defence of its borders.

The way events unfolded clearly shows that Poland did not have any realistic alternative to the plan to maintain Polish-German relations under the terms of the agreement of 26 January 1934, as long as it was possible to reconcile this policy with Polish independence and territorial integrity, which could not be subject to negotiation. It is here where the essence of the matter rests, and not in the question whether or not Beck “took Hitler’s promises seriously”.²⁹⁵ Had Poland broken with Germany, Poland would have been at the top of the list of potential victims of the policy of appeasement. The stabilisation of relations with Germany protected Poland from the consequences of appeasement and from the ever-present Soviet threat, despite the fact that, given Hitler’s consolidation of power in Germany, the prospect that German-Russian rapprochement (a possibility which Piłsudski never ruled out and which, in the Polish political consciousness at the time, resembled in the Polish mind the deal at Rapallo) was receding.

As is generally known, Poland’s strength relative to Germany was changing, and that change was not to Poland’s advantage. After 1936, this disadvantage became significant. The British deterrence diplomacy, conducted in 1933–1937, entered a phase of real appeasement, when Lord Edward Halifax visited Hitler on 19 November 1937 and attempted to find agreement on the two powers’ strategic principles.²⁹⁶ He offered Hitler a revived four-power concept, which at that time had no chance of being effective given that, two weeks earlier, the Reich Chancellor had declared Germany’s need to fight for “living space” through war, as indicated in the Hossbach Memorandum.²⁹⁷ He mentioned Danzig as one of the Reich’s three objects of territorial ambition (next to Austria and the Sudetenland) that Germany could peacefully “recover” with Great Britain’s consent. The State

294 On the first of these two arguments, see Alan Leslie Rowse, *Appeasement: A Study in Political Decline, 1933–1939* (New York 1961). For a deeply revisionist interpretation, see Peter Neville, *Hitler and Appeasement. The British Attempt to Prevent the Second World War* (New York 2006). For a historiographic view, see William R. Rock, *Appeasement on Trial: British Foreign Policy and its Critics, 1938–1939* (London 1966).

295 August Zaleski’s words; see “August Zaleski a Józef Beck”, p. 191.

296 The monograph by Gaines Post Jr. deserves particular attention here. See *Dilemmas of Appeasement: British Deterrence and Defence, 1934–1937* (Ithaca, NY 1993).

297 For the content of the “Hossbach Memorandum”, see *Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof, Nürnberg 14 November 1945–1 Oktober 1946* (Nürnberg 1947), Vol. 25, pp. 402–418; in English translation: *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918–1945*, series D (1937–1945) (Washington D.C. 1953), Vol. 1, pp. 29–39.

Secretary in the German Auswärtiges Amt, Ernst von Weizsäcker, informed the Poles of this fact, adding that the Reich Chancellor had “not brought up” the subject of Danzig.²⁹⁸ German diplomacy thus discounted the policy of appeasement in German manoeuvring to subjugate Poland.

Beck’s intention to maintain good relations with Germany as long as possible, relations that had been normalised in the 1934 pact, manifested itself in various ways: in his efforts both to gloss over anti-German opinion in the Polish press and to mitigate pressure on governmental officials regarding matters of policy towards the German minority in Poland. An incident in the summer of 1938 involving the violation of Polish airspace by two German airplanes, along with the Polish air defence’s lack of reaction to this event, revealed differences of opinion between Beck and Marshal Śmigły-Rydz, who was said to have favoured an unyielding stance.²⁹⁹

Greater hopes were tied to the belief that the policy of appeasement might one day come to an end; that Germany’s subsequent demands, fulfilled or tolerated without active opposition by the Western powers, must reach a limit, the violation of which would threaten these powers and their interests. But no one in 1936–1938 was able to predict when that would happen. Only two things were important: not to allow Poland to become one of appeasement’s first victims, and to maintain a certain bond with the Western powers, despite the weakened Franco-Polish alliance, the ideological war in Europe, British reluctance to engage in Central and Eastern European security, and French passivity.

In his instructions for Ambassador Juliusz Łukasiewicz on 22 April 1938, Beck bolstered the argument that, given the policy of appeasement and France’s increasing subordination to Great Britain, it made no sense to seek political dialogue with France about security matters in Central-Eastern Europe. “I do not think,” Beck wrote:

[...] that any deeper talks with the French government on Central European affairs could bring any practical result: *Primo*, I do not believe that the current government will reach a decision to revise its policy, which means that deeper discussion would only sharpen differences of opinion. *Secundo*, I am not convinced that the present government has what it takes to be durable, because it does not seem likely to me that the same people would be able to break the organic defects of the system in which they grew up and built their careers.³⁰⁰

298 For a note on a conversation (2 December 1937) between chargé d’affaires in Berlin Stefan Lubomirski and Ernst von Weizsäcker on the Hitler–Halifax talks, see *Monachium 1938. Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne*, eds. Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski (Warsaw 1985), pp. 17–20.

299 AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Pologne, Vol. 364, encrypted telegrams from Ambassador Noël to the French Foreign Ministry dated 27 July and 4 August 1938.

300 PDD/1938, p. 227.

Having said that, the cited document certainly does not mean that Polish diplomacy was passive in the face of appeasement. We know that the programmatic rejection of passivity corresponded to one of Piłsudski's deepest beliefs: the Marshal was convinced that, given its geopolitical position, Poland could not afford to face future challenges and threats with passivity. According to Lubiński, head of the foreign minister's cabinet, Beck's political motto was: "The only one who counts in politics is the one who makes difficulties".³⁰¹ The principle of dynamism in foreign policy was one of the most important to which the Polish foreign minister appealed. "We must repeat our grievances persistently so that people will believe in their rightness and eventually start to pursue them. Because the confused world today is afraid of dynamic countries and eagerly make deals with them, to avoid an argument—let us emphasise those elements that make clear that we are one of the dynamic ones."³⁰² It seems that by setting such a task, Beck correctly understood the basic issues and conditions of international politics.

Above all, the political dynamism that Beck called for led to plans to reconstruct the *Międzymorze* (Intermarium) sphere in accordance with Polish demands, which found its final expression in the form of the "Third Europe" concept of 1937–1938.³⁰³

Another aspect of the Polish government's policy was its consistent effort to bring Britain closer to Poland, assuming that France, as a Polish ally, would prove insufficient even if Poland and France were able to clarify bilateral commitments as Poland interpreted them. One of Beck's most well-known (and often described) moves was his trip to London in November 1936, where the Polish foreign minister decided not to ask for anything, but rather to discuss European security problems and gain insight into British views. During his conversations with Minister Eden on 9 and 10 November 1936, Beck repeated: "[...] we understand well that England has neither the interest nor resources to engage in the details of East European issues".³⁰⁴ Beck's instructions to the Ambassador in London, Edward Raczyński, from 29 November 1938, and thus in the post-Munich realities, indicate emphatically how important it was to establish a certain level of British interest in matters of Central-Eastern Europe's security.³⁰⁵ The foreign minister then instructed the Ambassador to talk to Lord Halifax, "without forcing it", to gain insights into the situation that would allow him to assess whether the Polish point of view on international politics "corresponds with our English partner. What kind of opportunities (if any) exist for cooperation".³⁰⁶

301 M. Lubiński, *Refleksje i reminiscencje*, p. 108.

302 Such was the way that Beck characterised Polish diplomacy's task in instructions to the Polish delegation to the XVIII Session of the General Assembly of the League of Nations in Geneva in September 1937; see M. K. Kamiński, M. J. Zacharias, *W cieniu zagrożenia. Polityka zagraniczna RP 1918–1939* (Warsaw 1993), p. 203.

303 I will discuss this further in chapter 3.

304 AAN, MSZ, 1581.

305 PDD/1938, pp. 798–800.

306 *Ibid.*

Other initiatives and ideas put forward by Poland's foreign policy leadership in this period attract the historian's attention and provide evidence against any claim that Polish foreign policy was passive. The Polish offer to mediate relations between Italy and France in March 1938, rejected by both the French and Mussolini, is an episode in diplomatic history that is of interest on a broader scale; it offers us an indication of the delicate manoeuvres undertaken at the time to change the European balance of power.³⁰⁷ The fascist leader responded to Beck's offer with "dismissive silence", while foreign minister Galeazzo Ciano:

[...] emphasised that in the goals that Italy has set for itself, there is nothing that could cause a conflict with France. The difficulties, he admits, are great, but they are rather of a psychological and doctrinal nature. Any rumours of any territorial revindication should not be taken seriously.³⁰⁸

These explanations did not correspond to reality.

The historiographic criticism—strongest in the West—to which historians in Poland have long been accustomed, is based on the assumption that under Beck's direction, Poland was pursuing policies that were too risky, at the foundation of which was a baseless confidence in his own country's military strength.³⁰⁹ The German historian Klaus Hildebrand expressed this opinion so clearly that it can be quoted as a representative *pars pro toto* for these views:

A risky policy of balance between National Socialist Germany and Communist Russia which authoritarian Poland pursued took a daring course and ended tragically. Beck's foreign policy, based on national sovereignty, proved to be a risky mixture of sober calculation and lofty pride. The integrity and identity of the country could only be preserved if it maintained distance towards each of the two sides that were just waiting to destroy Poland. The Polish foreign minister clearly counted on keeping in check both sides, who were hungry for conquest, and on getting help from Western countries. At the same time, he greatly overestimated his own armed forces. Apparently unrealistic attempts to create a Third Europe from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic Sea under the aegis of Poland and to counterbalance the situation on the continent with the help of the axis thus created, caused undeniable losses. How long it was that Beck

307 Note on Beck's conversation with French chargé d'affaires in Rome, Blondel, dated 9 March 1938, PDD/1938, 125. See also A. Wysocki, *Tajemnice dyplomatycznego sejfu*, ed. W. Jankowerny, 2nd edition (Warsaw 1979), p. 650. For a new view on Poland's position in Italian policy, see Valerio Perna, *Galeazzo Ciano, operazione Polonia. Le relazioni diplomatiche italo-polacche degli anni Trenta (1936–1939)* (Milan 1999).

308 PDD/1938, p. 123.

309 For example, J. Pagel, *Polen und die Sowjetunion 1938–1939. Die polnisch-sowjetischen Beziehungen in den Krisen der europäischen Politik am Vorabend des Zweiten Weltkrieges* (Stuttgart 1992), p. 320.

could stick by his statement, spoken with contempt for the threat, that “when you lie down with lions, they are not that dangerous at all” [...].³¹⁰

This thinking goes hand in hand with the dubious thesis that Beck was the creator of the doctrine of two enemies, as British historian Peter Neville put it.³¹¹ The threat from the east and west was not a doctrinal generalisation. It was a reality.

Polonia farà da se is a motto that was attributed in the West to the Poland of Piłsudski and Beck.³¹² It is fact that Polish foreign policy leaders were convinced that Poland could “count only on itself and on no one else”.³¹³ Historian Zygmunt Jerzy Gąsiorowski wrote that Polish leaders felt proud that they were realists and they revelled in their illusions, but such words are little more than standard *ex post* judgments.³¹⁴ They bring us no closer to answering the question of what other policy, in the final analysis, could have produced a better result.

The problem undermining Poland’s security was not the fact that its foreign policy leadership believed that it was possible to reduce Polish-German antagonisms, but rather the fact that, as a result of the great economic crisis, Poland’s national income in 1933 had dropped by as much as 55 percent compared to 1928.³¹⁵ In 1938, the level of industrial production in the territories that made up interwar Poland did not equal that which it had been in 1913. All of which drastically restricted Polish armament plans. Human determination could not change this state of affairs. The economic recovery of 1936–1938 made it possible to begin an arms programme, but that left insufficient time to achieve more substantial results.

Additionally, various arguments emerged in Polish historical thinking, for example that the Polish leadership paid too little attention to the country’s economic weakness and showed excessive faith in the military high command and its optimistic assessments of the Polish military’s defensive capabilities.³¹⁶ In his

310 K. Hildebrand, *Das vergangene Reich. Deutsche Außenpolitik von Bismarck bis Hitler* (Stuttgart 1995), pp. 679–680.

311 P. Neville, *Appeasing Hitler: The Diplomacy of Sir Neville Henderson, 1937–1939* (London 2003), p. 162.

312 See the note in the Europe section of the French Foreign Ministry dated 8 May 1935 (AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Pologne, p. 298).

313 Beck’s wording based on his talks with Ambassador Kennard dated 23 April 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), pp. 224–225.

314 Z. J. Gąsiorowski, “The German-Polish Non-Aggression Pact of 1934”, *Journal of Central European Affairs XV* (April 1955), No. 1: p. 29.

315 J. R. Godlewski, *Wybrane zagadnienia polskiego planowania wojennego w latach 1919–1939* (Danzig 1982), p. 298.

316 After the defeat of September 1939, two of Beck’s closest associates addressed this matter: Szembek and Łukasiewicz. See J. Szembek, *Diariusz, wrzesień – grudzień 1939*, ed. B. Grzełowski (Warsaw 1989) [this source was published earlier in *Niepodległość* 20 (1987): 3–169], pp. 172–173 (conversation dated 25 December 1939 in Paris).

famous book *In the Shadow of Katyn: Stalin's Terror*, the Sovietologist and economist Stanisław Swianiewicz wrote:

After the death of the Marshal, Beck conducted a rather inflexible policy, based on the assumption that Poland was a major power capable of defending its own interests. In reality, it was a policy of bluff. As an economist who was studying the economies of Russia and Germany, I fully realised how incredibly weak we were in comparison with our larger neighbours.³¹⁷

All of this is true. But the question remains, how would Poland's situation have changed if the country's leadership had recognised its weaknesses? There is no need here to prove that the reborn Poland, with its relative economic and military weakness, had little in the way of means to cope with the growing external threats.

As Maria Nowak-Kielbikowa put it: "If Poland did not fall victim to the peaceful, revisionist manipulation of the Great Powers, it was largely due to the existence of the Polish-German non-aggression pact, and above all due to its own determination to defend its territory by any means, including armed struggle." It would be difficult to add anything more to these very apt words.³¹⁸

Had Poland had no agreement with Germany, it would have undoubtedly become a victim of the policy of appeasement. If, to protect itself from the effects of appeasement, it decided to collaborate with the Soviets, then its independence would have become a fiction long before the outbreak of the Second World War. Undoubtedly, the policy of balance was a policy established to wait out the policy of appeasement. This thesis, in my opinion, does not appear to be merely an *ex post* evaluation.

Policy Ideas and Reality

Polish foreign policy in 1934–1938 can be summarised as follows: *primo*, the adoption of the principle of neutrality between Germany and the Soviet Union as the only way to ensure Poland's political independence; *secundo*, an effort to maintain an alliance with France and establish a dialogue with Great Britain on the issue of security in Central and Eastern Europe; *tertio*, an attempt to build a Central European bloc, which was reflected in the "Third Europe" idea; *quatro*, opposition to various concepts leading to the subordination of Poland's interests to those of the USSR (the idea of the Eastern Pact from 1934) or those of Germany (offers to join the Anti-Comintern Pact). As Beck explained to Swedish foreign minister Rickard Sandler in April 1937:

317 Stanisław Swianiewicz, *In the Shadow of Katyn: Stalin's Terror* (Borealis Pub., 2002), p. 200.

318 M. Nowak-Kielbikowa, *Polska–Wielka Brytania*, p. 574.

We consider “spheres of influence”, very often cultivated by the Great Powers, to be dangerous to peace. As experience shows, international friction and even armed conflicts most often arise not along the borders of Great Powers with conflicting interests, but rather between smaller states contained within “spheres of influence.”³¹⁹

As it implemented such a program, in 1933–1934 Poland undoubtedly became an important factor in international politics, whose importance grew, albeit briefly. Poland was able to extend this state of affairs into 1935–1938, as external conditions deteriorated. Poland’s importance in international relations grew not so much as a result of its individual importance as a country, but as part of the complicated international balance of power. In a sense, a great deal depended on Poland; while a Polish “yes” would have made the Eastern Pact possible, a Polish “no” would have served as a veto of the idea. While Poland joining the Anti-Comintern Pact could help establish the premise for the emergence of a great anti-Soviet coalition, Poland’s refusal would weaken those opportunities and, at the same time, prevent an attack on Bolshevik Russia from the west.

The idea of balance, with Poland as a third force in Central and Eastern Europe, was deeply rooted in Polish political thought, which is to say that it did not appear *ad hoc*. But in the 1930s it led to a policy that was only provisional in nature; given the expansion of two dynamic totalitarian powers, it could not be otherwise.³²⁰ At the end of 1937, the stabilising influence of the policy of balance seemed indisputable. As Szembek wrote to Dębicki in December 1937: “Against the backdrop of the current situation in Europe, one argument seems to be irresistible, namely that Poland, in all of the various considerations, is mentioned neither as one that might be the reason for conflict in Europe, or nor as one who is supposed to bear the brunt of efforts to secure the peace.”³²¹

The fact is that Poland established this policy of balance; that is, neutrality between Germany and Russia, and it furthered the tenets of this policy throughout the 1930s; there is no point in trying to undermine this obvious and unshakable truth. Historians did not invent the idea *ex post* in order to defend the legitimacy of Polish diplomacy at the time. The policy of balance was a reality, although it is indisputably true that Polish-German relations in 1934–1938 showed signs of rapprochement and revival, and that Polish relations with the Soviet Union were characterised by a state of “armed peace”. This policy cannot be seen as a set of *ad hoc* manoeuvres carried out by Poland between Hitler’s Germany and Bolshevik Russia or between Germany and France.

319 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Gustaw Potworowski Collection, Box 1.

320 Similarly, the *Antemurale* idea was deeply rooted in Polish intellectual reality but could not be applied either in the Enlightenment era or in the nineteenth century, as during the Enlightenment Russia had managed to become a great power and Poland, in the nineteenth century, simply did not exist and that which remained was just the dream of the *Antemurale* as a memory of past greatness.

321 *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka. Materiały uzupełniające*, pp. 62–63.

The concept of balance did not mean that any form of cooperation with Germany or Russia was ruled out in advance. Poles excluded only the possibility of making commitments to Berlin against Moscow and commitments to Moscow against Berlin. And in fact the Polish government never made any commitments to one of those powers directed against the other. Based on the principles tied to the policy of balance, the Poles rejected both the Eastern Pact (submitted by the French government several times in 1934–1935) and the offer to join the Anti-Comintern Pact (submitted by Germany for the first time in autumn 1936). Poland's policy of neutrality was a deliberate and thought-out choice made by the creators of Polish foreign policy. Although it was proclaimed in 1934, the policy was actually a doctrine implemented throughout the entire interwar period by leaders of the reborn Polish Republic. The option of neutrality between Germany and Russia determined Poland's place in international relations. The Polish government's stance towards all aspects of international relations at the time were motivated by a desire to maintain—for as long as possible—the principles of balance between Germany and the Soviet Union.

We have become accustomed to narratives about international relations in the interwar period that describe the Polish policy of balance as an irrelevant episode, as a camouflaged pro-German option exploited by Berlin, or as simply the latest incarnation of Polish political romanticism that once again brought defeat.

But we must view the matter differently. The policy of balance had a significant stabilising potential: it served to consolidate the peace in Central and Eastern Europe. It was not the Polish policy of balance, but the unprecedented offensive by two totalitarian powers, that prevented any long-term stabilisation of international relations in this region of the continent and throughout Europe. During the Stresa conference, which was the last peaceful chance to stop uncontrolled German armament, Beck said on 12 April 1935: "The current stabilisation of peace in Eastern Europe is above all the work of Poland".³²² The policy of balance brought about a real albeit transient promotion of Poland in the international hierarchy, which was a country that had faced resistance "from that part of world opinion that does not want to see our return to the international arena".³²³

As a result of certain developments, such as Poland's agreement with Germany in 1934 or its denunciation of the minority treaty, there was undoubtedly also a certain "de-popularisation" of Polish policies in the world. But this issue also had deeper determinants. With its independent foreign policy, Poland became an obstacle both to the pro-Soviet concept of "collective security" and to the Western policy of appeasing Germany. In fact, Poland satisfied no one in Europe at the time. It hampered the Soviets in their plans to become a European power. In Central and Eastern Europe, Poland—fearing the hegemony of the Great Powers—tried to play a leading role in the consolidation of the *Międzymorze* bloc. In so doing, it

322 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, p. 267.

323 A. Zaleski, *Przemowy i deklaracje*, Vol. 1 (Warsaw 1929), p. 19.

prevented the Soviet Union from subjugating this region. At the same time, countries in the *Międzymorze* region did not appreciate the stabilising significance of Polish policies.

In 1936–1938, which is of particular interest here, Poland set itself ten main foreign policy goals; in any case, this is how it appears from the perspective of 70 years' hindsight since the outbreak of the Second World War:

- (1) In Piłsudski's view, Poland was to be an independent actor in international politics; it was to remain an important factor in the international balance of power in Central and Eastern Europe. Poland's position in the international hierarchy would be determined by its significance in Eastern Europe. Contrary to what Piłsudski's and Beck's critics claimed, this concept was not tantamount to Great-Power aspirations. Poles and foreigners have often used the term "power politics", not without irony. Although the ruling camp's propaganda (1926–1939) abused this slogan, Minister Beck consistently repeated that Poland was not a "great power". Beck added, however, that "this concept has undergone certain changes". Poland "does not conduct world politics, but rather regional politics".³²⁴ Therefore, Poland's aspirations could not be "understood in the sense of a so-called Great Power, but rather in the sense of a country with an independent policy that plays a decisive role in shaping the fate of its region".³²⁵
- (2) A situation could not be allowed to develop in which Poland would be one of the first to fall victim to the policy of appeasement. The establishment of a quartet of Great Powers as a body with the competence to carry out border changes could not help but lead to the objectification and marginalisation of Poland in the international arena. It would turn Poland into an object of international relations, a danger that the Polish government constantly feared.
- (3) The Polish government set for itself the goal of maintaining relations with Germany for as long as possible at the level established in 1934, not at all costs but respecting, under all circumstances, the principle of preserved independence as the overriding and inalienable condition. One of Beck's most important political assumptions was that relations with Germany should not be damaged for the sake of benefits that were doubtful and difficult to predict. Beck's stance in this regard emerged most clearly in May 1938, when the Polish government refused to agree to France's offer to join the joint Franco-British

324 AAN, MSZ, 108A, Note on Beck's conversation with the French foreign minister Pierre Laval dated 16 and 19 January 1935 in Geneva. The French note, which is much more extensive, contains Laval's harsh accusations against Polish foreign policy leaders for causing a catastrophe like that which led to the partitions of the eighteenth century. See DDF, series 1 (Paris 1980), Vol. 9, pp. 77–78.

325 Beck's instructions to Envoy Franciszek Charwat, who was about to take up the position of Polish envoy to Kaunas, dated 24 March 1938, PDD/1938, p. 149.

démarche in Berlin, in which these powers warned Hitler against an aggressive policy towards Czechoslovakia.

- (4) The goal of Polish diplomacy was to avoid engaging in ideological warfare in Europe. In 1936–1938, such warfare became a reality and was a new destructive phenomenon not found in the 1920s or the first half of the 1930s. To describe this phenomenon, Beck often used the term “religious war”. He also repeatedly argued that the ideologization of international politics would lead to an intensification of conflicts and war. Under these conditions, Poland’s foreign policy was characterised by “restraint and a reluctance to engage outside the sphere in which we have an ability to manoeuvre, and in which our word carries real weight”.³²⁶
- (5) Poland had the concept to build, on its own, a zone of independent states that would conduct an independent policy and that would be the tools of neither Germany nor Russia, a geopolitical zone between the USSR and the Third Reich described in the Polish political tradition as *Międzymorze*. Warsaw viewed the foundations of this neutral zone as a triangle: Poland-Hungary-Romania. Unfortunately, the Poles underestimated the power of Hungarian and Romanian antagonism.³²⁷ To Beck, a common Polish-Hungarian border seemed necessary, which was unthinkable without the disintegration of Czechoslovakia. Such a postulate gave rise to suspicions in Europe that Poland was becoming a “revisionist” state, interested in changing the status quo and thus seeking benefits for itself.
- (6) Contrary to what can be found in some of the historical literature, Poland’s foreign policy leaders wanted to maintain an alliance with France at all costs and prevent that alliance’s collapse, even though the Poles were aware of the ongoing degradation of France’s international situation. Polish leaders also made a consistent attempt to rebuild the alliance in a strictly bilateral form and refused to accept the French vision of the international order. These efforts brought no results.
- (7) One of Beck’s most important programme ideas, in accordance with Piłsudski’s recommendations, was the idea to initiate an exchange of ideas with the British government on security problems in Europe. The result was to be closer Anglo-Polish relations. This idea was realised in the spring of 1939; it was only then that the British government began to consider an agreement with Poland, as a potential anti-German partner and as a country without which it would be impossible to create an eastern front in a potential war with Germany.

326 Speech in front of the Polish Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 18 December 1936. See J. Beck, *Przemówienia, deklaracje, wywiady, 1931–1937* (Warsaw 1938), p. 262.

327 For more on this concept, see my study [M. Kornat], “Realny projekt czy wizja ex post? Koncepcja ‘Trzeciej Europy’ (1937–1938),” in idem, *Polityka równowagi*, pp. 307–352. See also my broader treatment of this matter in the next chapter below.

- (8) Polish policy referred to bilateralism as the method for solving international conflicts. Polish leaders contrasted the fruitless “pact mania” with the concept of specific agreements and limited obligations. The creation of a collective security system that included countries with different types of regimes (democratic, authoritarian, totalitarian) was not possible.³²⁸
- (9) Polish policy in the 1930s was to be a response to the progressive breakdown of the international order created by the peace treaties after the First World War and based on the League of Nations. The first serious crisis in the League of Nations, concerning the Japanese aggression in Manchuria, revealed the bankruptcy of the entire mechanism which that institution had at its disposal to settle international disputes.³²⁹ As Beck put it *ex post*, Piłsudski in December 1931 was convinced that:

[...] the political armature of European relations is weakening, which, on the one hand, requires greater vigilance and a more individual assertion of Polish policy, given that we can no longer count on collective organisations, and which, on the other hand, perhaps opens up a period in which Poland’s “overdue” matters can be settled.³³⁰

At Beck’s request, a list of these “overdue matters” was drawn up at that time involving: (a) Danzig; (b) the treaty on the protection of national minorities; (c) Lithuania; and (d) Cieszyn Silesia. These cases “required corrections” in light of new realities because “they emerged from shortcomings that arose during our country’s early and very difficult period.”³³¹ The Free City of Danzig required a connection with Poland—in the face of a possible collapse of the League of Nations—through a Polish-German “stabilisation system”. The treaty on the protection of national minorities had to be either reformed (by its generalising obligations) or dropped. Relations with Lithuania required normalisation under all appropriate conditions that excluded the possibility of ceding territory in and around Vilnius. The Zaolzie matter was the most difficult: a minimal program involved improving the situation of the Polish population in this territory, but if Czechoslovakia

328 The idea of collective security through regional multilateral agreements was successful in Latin America in the form of the Saavedra Lamas Treaty, adopted at the Pan-American conference in Montevideo and signed on 10 October 1933 in Rio de Janeiro. However, it contained no wording about mutual assistance, as in the Barthou and Litvinov concept, but rather about “non-aggression, conciliation and arbitration”. Argentine diplomacy tried to inspire the European powers with these legal solutions, without success (on this subject, see extensive Polish documentation: AAN, MSZ, 1673).

329 See Ch. Thorne, *The Limits of Foreign Policy. The West, the League and the Far Eastern Crisis of 1931–1933* (New York 1973).

330 *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*, p. 54.

331 *Ibid.*

disintegrated, which Piłsudski considered possible, it would be necessary to demand a territorial cession.

- (10) Piłsudski and Beck declared that in relations between nations and states, it was not only interests (which may be the subject of negotiation) that were important, but also *imponderabilia*—matters that are priceless—which were *ultima ratio* in critical moments, and which included independence and territorial integrity. People who were to their core hostile towards Poland, or who did not understand its history, were used to viewing this political philosophy as part of the heritage of the “romantic curse”. In fact, it was a manifestation of political realism.

* * *

In January 1938, Szembek wrote: “Poland is a factor of decisive value in European politics”. Szembek thus offered proof of having succumbed to illusions about his own country’s political possibilities. However, he quickly added that “we do not and cannot influence” the course of events as they played themselves out.³³² Anyone today who, with our current knowledge of the international politics of that era, wants to argue that these concepts were a manifestation of political illusion has the right to do so, but such argument is unconvincing. Polish foreign policy was fully realistic, well thought-out and moderate, and most importantly: it was extremely difficult to replace that policy with something else, if—that is—we want to regard such values as independence, and such principles as “nothing about us without us” as unshakeable.

The American scholar of diplomatic history Sally Marks once characterised the goal of Italian foreign policy with these words: “[...] how to be a great power while lacking the prerequisites of one”.³³³ A similar formula, often pejorative, has been used in historiography to describe Piłsudski’s and Beck’s Poland. The Polish leadership at the time is blamed for harbouring illusions of superpower status, when in reality it was an idea intended “mainly for internal use”.³³⁴ In general, it is still possible today to debate the extent to which Polish assessments of Poland’s situation in Europe at the time were realistic, the extent to which other decisions and actions were correct. Certainly, in a nutshell, the notion that Poland would be able to conduct a policy of balance over an extended period has not stood the test of time, but the fact remains that the policy of balance between Germany and Russia was the only realistic plan. Of course, in purely theoretical reflections we can imagine another foreign policy for Poland in the 1930s. But as Piotr Wandycz has written, critics of Poland’s policy of balance in 1934–1939 “have failed to show

332 Szembek to Ambassador Romer, 28 January 1938, PDD/1938, p. 52.

333 S. Marks, “Mussolini and the Ruhr Crisis,” *International History Review* 8 (1986), No. 1: p. 56.

334 P. Wandycz, *Z dziejów dyplomacji*, p. 15.

convincingly the existence of other alternatives” that would have defended the country against defeat.³³⁵

Polish political thought consistently supported the thesis that the reborn Poland should be an independent player in international politics between Germany and Russia. Given Poland’s geopolitical situation, it could not have been otherwise. Indeed, in a Europe marked by the aggression of totalitarian regimes and the progressive disintegration of the Versailles-Riga system, no stabilisation was possible, regardless of what action a peripheral and medium-sized country like Poland took.

335 Piotr Wandycz, *Polish diplomacy 1914–1945: Aims and Achievements: A Lecture in English and Polish* (Orbis Books, in conjunction with the University of London School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 1988), p. 48; see also Wandycz, “Myśli o polskiej dyplomacji,” in idem, *O czasach dawniejszych i bliższych*, p. 180.

Chapter 2. The *Międzymorze* (Intermarium) Idea—A Polish Political Plan in 1938

Henryk Batowski wrote that Józef Beck had a “pathological complex regarding the Czechs that is difficult to explain, and in particular an aversion to Beneš [...]”.³³⁶ Such a generalisation has limited scholarly value. Political feelings are generally of little importance; interests are more important, as they are understood in specific realities, not by historians deciphering past experiences years later, but by those who made political decisions *hic et nunc*. It was no different with Beck. I devote this chapter to the justification behind my argument that, in the face of the international crisis of 1938, Polish policy had a rational motivation.

Europe’s political crisis in 1938 has been the subject of countless studies and publications in both Polish and world historiography.³³⁷ It might seem that what is most important has already been said. New source publications have appeared, such as the large volume *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne* for the year 1938,

336 H. Batowski, *Rok 1938 – dwie agresje hitlerowskie* (Poznan 1985), p. 437.

337 In Polish historiography, see Henryk Batowski, *Kryzys dyplomatyczny w Europie. Jesień 1938 – wiosna 1939* (Warsaw 1962); idem, *Zdrada monachijska. Sprawa Czechosłowacji i dyplomacja europejska w roku 1938* (Poznan 1973). For a recapitulation of Batowski’s studies on the year 1938 in European diplomacy, see *Rok 1938 – dwie agresje hitlerowskie*. For more on Beck’s policies, see two volumes by Stefania Stanisławska: *Wielka i mała polityka Józefa Becka: marzec – maj 1938* (Warsaw 1962), and *Polska a Monachium* (Warsaw 1967). The following studies are also important: Jerzy Kozeński, *Czechosłowacja w polskiej polityce zagranicznej w latach 1932–1938* (Poznan 1964) and Krzysztof Lewandowski, “Stosunki polsko-czechosłowackie w latach 1918–1939”, in *Przyjaźnie i antagonizmy. Stosunki Polski z państwami sąsiednimi w latach 1918–1939*, ed. J. Żarnowski (Wrocław 1977), pp. 242–243. There is a growing body of world literature devoted to the Munich crisis. Recent entries include: Igor Lukes, *Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler: The Diplomacy of Edward Beneš in the 1930s* (New York 1996); Ivan Pfaff, *Der Sowjetunion und die Verteidigung der Tschechoslovakei, 1934–1938: Versuch der Revision einer Legende* (Colonge 1996); Hugh Ragsdale, *The Soviets, the Munich Crisis and the Coming of the Second World War* (Cambridge 2004); Anna M. Cienciala, “The Munich Crisis of 1938: Plans and Strategy in Warsaw in the Context of the Western Appeasement of Germany”, in *The Munich Crisis, 1938. Prelude to World War II*, eds. I. Lukes, E. Goldstein (London–Portland, Oregon 1999), pp. 48–81; and Anita J. Prazmowska, *Eastern Europe and the Origins of the Second World War* (New York 2000). For a new synthesis of the issues tied to the origins of the Second World War, see Aleksandr O. Czubarjan, *Kanun wojny* (Moscow 2008).

published in 2007.³³⁸ The basic facts in the history of diplomacy in this crucial period are therefore known and there is not a great deal new to say about these events. It is also increasingly difficult to subject the ever-growing body of world literature to in-depth analysis.

We know that Czechoslovakia's fate was sealed by the policy of appeasement, as carried out by the Western powers, because that country—under threat—received effective aid from no one. It was only a question of whether the Czechs would fight for independence regardless of the chances of success, alone and without allies, as Poland would have to do a year later. Czechoslovakia could not get help either from its ally, France, despite the alliance of 1924 and the guarantee agreement signed in Locarno in 1925, nor from the Soviet Union, despite the alliance of 1935, because the two countries did not share a border. After all, it was highly debatable whether the Soviet leadership intended to put the USSR to war, since it had justified fears that the Western powers would not come to Czechoslovakia's aid, and since Moscow was unsure whether German expansion would be directed further eastwards.³³⁹ In any case, the Soviet Union, which did not share a border with either Czechoslovakia or Germany, could not fulfil its obligations even if it wanted to.

We also know that territorial claims by Poland and Hungary seriously deteriorated Czechoslovakia's position, because these claims—quite separate from their motivations—made it clear to Edvard Beneš that, in the event of war, Prague would not be able to count on Polish and Hungarian neutrality. Everything indicated that the Czech government could have ensured Poland's neutrality by agreeing to the cession of Zaolzie, but it was afraid of establishing a precedent and believed in the end that it would be able to maintain its country's territorial integrity, although there was no longer any real chance that it would succeed. The decisive fact in this regard was that the Western powers abandoned Czechoslovakia; it is difficult to imagine that Poland and Hungary would have fought alongside Germany against Czechoslovakia, if it had received help from the Western powers. French assistance was not forthcoming, because France had clearly subordinated its foreign policy to the British government's strategy of appeasement.

All of the above seems irrefutable.

Among the matters of importance in 1938, there were some that are controversial, matters around which historians disagree. Among these is whether or not Winston Churchill was right when he wrote *ex post* that if the Second World War had broken out in 1938, it would have been less favourable for Germany than a year later.³⁴⁰ Another debatable question is whether Polish-Czechoslovak cooperation

338 PDD/1938.

339 J. Hochman, *The Soviet Union and the Failure of Collective Security*, 194–201; G. L. Weinberg, "Munich After 50 Years," *Foreign Affairs* 67 (1988), No. 1: pp. 176–177.

340 W. Churchill, *Druga wojna światowa*, vol. 1, part 1, p. 303. Through the peaceful partitions of 1938, Germany significantly increased its military potential and its population grew by 10 million.

was possible, which—viewed from a historical perspective—would have been highly desirable as a path to stop Hitler from gaining hegemony over Central and Eastern Europe. But such a path was precisely what was lacking.

To find the answer to that last important question, we must understand what motivated the Polish diplomatic leadership during the Munich crisis. But we cannot understand this motivation without a reminder that the main political assumption of the Polish foreign minister, Józef Beck, was to create a “*Międzymorze*” bloc, also called the “Third Europe” project,³⁴¹ the genesis of which dates back to 1936–1937, and the collapse of which came at the end of 1938. Polish diplomatic documents from this crucial period cast a great deal of new light on these efforts. But few historians have devoted much attention to this matter, with the exception of Hans Roos, who was the first scholar in the West to attempt to show that it was not a narrowly conceived revisionism that motivated Polish actions against Czechoslovakia, but rather a broader political plan which, though it had no chance of being implemented, is nevertheless interesting.³⁴² Most often, other scholars have used the same concise formula, writing that Polish diplomacy sought to concentrate into a large bloc the many “*Międzymorze*” nations, as Josef Anderle put it, “from Finland to Greece”.³⁴³ Hugh Ragsdale noted concisely that the real motive behind Polish diplomacy in 1938 was not to reclaim the relatively insignificant Zaolzie region, but to rebuild Central and Eastern Europe.³⁴⁴ Alan Palmer stated that Third Europe was “Beck’s system”, which was to allow Poland to keep the Russians at a distance and bargain with the Germans.³⁴⁵ Another American historian, Thomas L. Sakmyster, wrote that Beck’s plan was directed against the

341 Hans Roos used the terms “Third Europe” and “Central-European Bloc” interchangeably; see H. Roos, *Polen und Europa*, p. 333.

342 *Ibid.*, pp. 273–375. See also A. M. Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938–1939. A Study in the Interdependence of Eastern and Western Europe* (London–Toronto 1968), pp. 55, 88. See also Piotr Łossowski, *Polska w Europie i świecie 1918–1939. Szkice z dziejów polityki zagranicznej i położenia międzynarodowego Februariusz Rzeczypospolitej* (Warsaw 1990), pp. 203–209; and Jerzy W. Borejsza, “Die ‘kleinen Revisionismen’ und Ostmitteleuropa am Vorabend des zweiten Weltkrieges”, in 1939. *An der Schwelle zum Weltkrieg. Die Entfesselung des Zweiten Weltkrieges und das internationale System*, eds. K. Hildebrand, J. Schmädke, K. Zernack (Berlin 1990), pp. 115–133. For the broadest treatment of Polish plans, see my book: M. Kornat, *Polityka równowagi*, pp. 307–352.

343 J. Anderle, “The First Republic 1918–1938”, in *Czechoslovakia: the Heritage of Ages Past. Essays in Memory of Josef Korbel*, eds. H. Brisch, I. Volgyes (New York 1979), p. 107.

344 H. Ragsdale, *The Soviets, the Munich Crisis*, p. 10.

345 A. Palmer, *Północne sąsiedztwo. Historia krajów i narodów Morza Bałtyckiego*, trans. E. Możejko (Warsaw 2008).

Germans and Soviets.³⁴⁶ French scholar Yves Lacaze put it differently: Third Europe was “a barrier to German expansion [*un barrage à l’expansion allemande*]”.³⁴⁷

It is worth considering the views available to us as expressed by the direct participants in events. In his extraordinary journal from his period of service as Polish Envoy to Belgrade, the Polish diplomat Roman Dębicki probably put it most clearly. Beck was concerned about controlling the post-Munich chaos in Europe south of the Carpathians, through a radical improvement in Romanian-Hungarian relations and closer ties between Poland, Romania and Hungary, which together could become a “bridge” to the Balkan states.³⁴⁸ The British ambassador to Warsaw, Howard William Kennard, wrote to a senior official at the Foreign Office, Orme Sargent, that Poland simply wanted to create a bloc that would be able to resist German pressure.³⁴⁹ The Polish diplomat and long-time chargé d’affaires at the embassy in Paris, Feliks Frankowski, argued *ex post* that a mistake had been made when, in the effort to reconstruct the *Międzymorze* region, leaders in Warsaw imagined that such a bloc could be built even in agreement with Germany.³⁵⁰

Due to all of these various interpretations, the *Międzymorze* is the subject of the considerations below which, I might add, do not represent my first attempt to examine this matter.³⁵¹ Jan Szembek’s priceless *Diariusz* (diary) adds a great deal to our knowledge of the genesis of the *Międzymorze*, although it is a fact that this source does not address many other issues; Szembek complained that Beck did not always inform him of certain matters, and it happened that Beck issued oral instructions to ambassadors “sometimes an hour before their departure”, without issuing a note.³⁵² Events surrounding the culmination of Polish diplomacy in October 1938 are well-grounded in source material, which greatly facilitates the historian’s work.

346 T. L. Sakmyster, *Hungary, the Great Powers, and the Danubian Crisis 1936–1939* (Athens, Georgia 1980), pp. 152–153.

347 Y. Lacaze, *La France et Munich*, p. 315.

348 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Romana Dębickiego, 40/2, R. Dębicki, “Journal”, part 22.

349 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 21808, C.12277/2168/55, letter dated 9 October 1938.

350 IPMS, MSZ, A.11/144E, nr spr. 270, Feliks Frankowski’s testimony before the Winiarski Commission on 31 March 1941.

351 M. Kornat, “Realny projekt czy wizja ex post? Koncepcja ‘Trzeciej Europy’ Józefa Becka (1937–1938)”, in *Sprawozdania Komisji Środkowoeuropejskiej Polskiej Akademii Umiejętności* (Kraków) 17 (2007): pp. 149–187; idem, *Polityka równowagi*, pp. 307–352; idem, „Polskaja koncepcija ‘Mieżdumorja’ w 1937–1938 godach: političeskij mif i istoričeskaja realnost’“, in *Miunchenskoje soglaszenije 1938 goda: Istorija i sowremennost’*, eds. N. Lebediewa, M. Wołos (Moskwa 2009), pp. 59–83; idem, “The Polish Idea of the Third Europe (1937–1938). A Realistic Concept or an Ex-post Vision?”, *Acta Poloniae Historica* (2011), No. 103: pp. 101–126.

352 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 3, p. 221 (note dated 21 December 1937).

The *Międzymorze* Concept and the Polish-Hungarian-Romanian Cooperation Project

First, we must distinguish three concepts: federalism, Prometheism, and the *Międzymorze* programme. The idea of a federation in Eastern Europe is a vision for the reconstruction of a multinational state made up of the territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, whose lands in the twentieth century were already inhabited by the Commonwealth's "successor nations" (to use Timothy Snyder's term).³⁵³ When it became clear that this task could not be accomplished, another concept for the reconstruction of Eastern Europe appeared, a vision proclaimed by the advocates of Prometheism. Their goal was to witness the destruction of the Soviet empire, on whose ruins would emerge the previously enslaved nations of the region: not only Ukrainians, but first and foremost the nations of the Caucasus. The third vision, finally, is the *Międzymorze* idea, from the Baltic to the Adriatic, as a political plan that could be conceived without the notion that Soviet territory had to be violated; it was a plan not yet born in Beck's mind, but one which existed as early as in the 1920s.³⁵⁴ Beck developed its assumptions when, after Piłsudski and, in the second half of the 1930s, as the independent head of Polish foreign policy, he inherited the doctrine of balance between Hitler's Germany and Soviet Russia. Compared to the plan from the 1920s, the *Międzymorze* project had a different emphasis: while the former viewed Czechoslovakia as a crucial element within the entire system, Beck wanted to implement his vision without Czechoslovakia; indeed, on its ruins.

Undoubtedly, there was a close *iunctim* between the Polish idea of a *Międzymorze* bloc and the Promethean concept; that is, the program for the emancipation of nations enslaved by the USSR. Advocates believed that the *Międzymorze* bloc would strengthen Poland's position in international relations. As socialist Adam Uziembło wrote in 1932, "it will undoubtedly attract Ruthenia-Ukraine and probably Belarus, and other nations, all the way to the Caucasus itself".³⁵⁵ Both concepts, of course, were based on the same ambition to expand the "neutral zone" in Central and Eastern Europe, but they were also marked by a fundamental difference: while Prometheism anticipated the construction of new states, the *Międzymorze* idea

353 T. Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven–London 2003) (Polish edition: *Rekonstrukcja narodów. Polska, Ukraina, Litwa, Białoruś 1569–1999*, trans. M. Pietrzak-Merta, [Sejny 2006]).

354 See K. von Jena, *Polnische Ostpolitik nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg. Das Problem der Beziehungen zu Sowjetrußland nach dem Rigaer-Frieden von 1921* (Stuttgart 1980), p. 180. One of the clearest outlines of the bloc idea came out of the MSZ in 1925, thus before the May Coup. See M. Kornat, "Memorandum programowe polskiego MSZ z 1925 r. (w związku z rokowaniami lokarneńskimi)", *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (2009), z. 168: pp. 200–222.

355 A. Uziembło, "Program federacji," *Jutro Rzeczypospolitej* (January 1932). Quote from idem, *Niepodległość socjalisty* (Warsaw 2008), p. 261.

called for consolidation and cooperation among existing states, without violating borders—except for Czechoslovakia, which was to be broken up, not as the result of Polish offensive activities, but because of its complicated national structure.

All of these ideas for the reconstruction of Central-Eastern Europe emerged out of the conviction that the region was unstable, and all of them took into consideration, in one form or another (and usually insufficiently), territorial revisionism.³⁵⁶ Marshal Piłsudski had a clear vision, one that required the organisation of a “Balkanised” Central Europe.³⁵⁷ It was clear to him that national policies for small states, in the face of great threats, were insufficient. In June 1934, he spoke about the approaching “great general reckoning”, adding that “when it happens, positions such as Lithuania’s, taken without us, will mean nothing”.³⁵⁸ But neither he nor anyone else was able to turn this “neutral zone” between Germany and the USSR from a group of conflicted nation states into a real force.

Simply put, and without a concrete document at our disposal that summarises the plan, we can say that the *Międzymorze* (or Third Europe) project called for the creation, under Poland’s aegis, of a bloc of Central European countries, and thus represented a new political concept of how to manage post-war, disaster-stricken “*Zwischeneuropa*” between the German Reich and Soviet Russia.³⁵⁹

While the Polish plan for Polish-Romanian-Hungarian cooperation was quite specific, the concept of a Third Europe remained vague, loosely conceived, and variously understood. Nonetheless, it was deeply rooted in Polish political thought.³⁶⁰

356 For more, see Jerzy W. Borejsza, “Die ‘kleinen Revisionismen’ und Ostmitteleuropa am Vorabend des zweiten Weltkrieges”, in *1939. An der Schwelle zum Weltkrieg. Die Entfesselung des Zweiten Weltkrieges und das internationale System*, eds. K. Hildebrand, J. Schmädke, K. Zernack (Berlin 1990), pp. 115–133. See also H. Batowski, “Lessons from History: Territorial Revisionism in Europe in Interwar Period – Peace Enemy No. 1”, *Polish Peace Research Studies* (Łódź) 1 (1988), No. 1: pp. 61–72.

357 In Piłsudski’s (and Beck’s) view, “balkanisation” referred not so much to a conflict of nation states as to a new country’s inability to create its own “independent foreign policy” (“Poland never wanted to be part of that group of balkanised countries who are deprived of their own policy perspective, and it thus went down the path of independence.” See *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 2, p. 369).

358 Piłsudski’s statement on 1 June 1934 (conversation with Tadeusz Katelbach), see *Kalendarium*, Vol. 3, p. 384.

359 O. Forst de Battaglia, *Zwischeneuropa: Von der Ostsee bis zur Adria*, Vol. 1: *Polen, Tschechoslowakei, Ungarn* (Frankfurt am Main 1954). The term *Zwischeneuropa* suggests territory “between”, but in some other conceptions, the geopolitical anarchy that developed in this region is more prominent. The French columnist de la Revelière gave his reflections on Central Europe the title “fire study”: *Europe centrale. Étude d’incendi* (Paris 1923).

360 In 1925, when Aleksander Skrzyński was serving as foreign minister, his advisors prepared an extensive report on the need to rebuild the international political order in Central and Eastern Europe with Polish interests in mind: “Aide-Mémoire w

Let us just mention that in 1934, diplomats in the Polish Foreign Ministry believed that the goal of Polish foreign policy was “to secure for itself [Poland] room for manoeuvre between the Reich on the one hand and the Moscow state on the other for the full development of [Poland’s] political, cultural and economic possibilities”.³⁶¹ In this document, the above-described task was called “a categorical order of the Polish *raison d’état*”.³⁶²

The key to the plan’s success was reconciliation between Romania and Hungary, which were in conflict over Transylvania.³⁶³ The countries to be included in such bloc would not create a complicated system, but they would conduct independent foreign policies— independent from both Germany and the Soviet Union. They would also not be clients of any Western powers. In Beck’s opinion, it was supposed to be a bloc extending from the Baltic to the Adriatic, but its core would be the geopolitical triangle made up of Poland, Romania, and Hungary. Beck imagined that he would somehow be able to tie the Baltic States to Poland, and perhaps even the Scandinavian countries and (surely) the countries along the Danube. In Southern Europe, perhaps Yugoslavia and probably Greece could be won over to the cause. While Polish-Hungarian-Romanian cooperation was to be close, the affiliation of the Baltic and Balkan countries to the *Międzymorze* zone would remain loose and rather informal.

There was no room for Czechoslovakia in the Beck project.³⁶⁴ In June 1937, the Polish foreign minister said: “[...] the centre of revisionist problems is not in Bucharest or Belgrade, but in Prague [*der Kernpunkt der Revisionsproblemes nicht in*

przedmiocie obecnego położenia Polski na tle sprawy granic” dated 28 March 1925 (*Memorandum programowe polskiego MSZ z 1925 r., passim*). For another such document, see Jerzy Tomaszewski, “Dokument z 1934 r. o zasadach polskiej polityki zagranicznej w Europie Środkowej i na Bałkanach”, *Przegląd Historyczny* 76 (1985), z. 4: pp. 796–818.

361 J. Tomaszewski, “Dokument z 1934 r. o zasadach polskiej polityki zagranicznej”, p. 818.

362 *Ibid.*

363 The origins of post-Trianon Romanian-Hungarian relations are reconstructed (from the Romanian perspective) in Alexandru Ghişa, *Romania and Hungary at the Beginning of 20th Century: Establishing Diplomatic Relations (1918–1921)*, trans. A.-M. Mircea (Cluj-Napoca 2003). See also T. L. Sakmyster, *Hungary, the Great Powers, and the Danubian Crisis*.

364 See *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 341. Beck was not the only one in Warsaw thinking this way. We should recall that a Polish diplomat who was by no means one of “Beck’s people”, the ambassador in Bucharest Roger Raczyński, told Deputy Minister Szembek in April 1938 that “for the consolidation of our influence in the sphere between Russia and Germany, it will be necessary to neutralise French influence in this region and to subdue Czechoslovakia. Our policy should have these goals in sight” (see *ibid.*, p. 133).

Bukarest oder Belgrade, sondern in Prag liege]”.³⁶⁵ A Third Europe was to be created on the ruins of the republic created by Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Edvard Beneš. But it was not Poland that would initiate actions aimed at the territorial integrity of its southern neighbour. As Ambassador Kazimierz Papée, who at the time was Polish envoy to Prague and was one of the most ardent executioners of Beck’s directives, remembered: “Without the formation of such a group, the German march to the east could not be stopped”. He continued: “In general, one can have fundamental doubts whether the group was possible in a practical sense after the absorption of Czechoslovakia by the Third Reich. [...] But if the Areopagus of the Great Powers in Munich sacrificed Czechoslovakia to Hitler on the altar of ‘peace’, it is difficult to be upset by Polish policies and by the fact that Poland tried to oppose the German ‘*Drang nach Osten*’ with a broader combination based on Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia.”³⁶⁶ With his Third Europe project, Beck attempted to fill a geopolitical vacuum created as a result of Czechoslovakia’s potential decay. When considering *ex post* Polish thinking and Poland’s actions in the 1930s, we must keep in mind the defensive character of Beck’s ideas.

In essence, the project was directed against German and Soviet aspirations to gain hegemony over the “neutral zone” that had emerged following the disintegration of the three multinational partitioning empires (Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary).

The idea of gathering a group of smaller Central-Eastern European countries around Poland was undoubtedly one of Beck’s most important and independently created concepts, although it was, of course, based on various ideas that had circulated in Polish political thought and within the Polish Foreign Ministry since the early days of independence.³⁶⁷ At the same time, it is difficult not to notice that Beck modified the programme as laid out by Piłsudski, who took a reserved stance towards Balkan matters. From the time of Beck’s trip to Belgrade in May 1936, we can speak of a significant intensification of Polish diplomatic efforts in this previously neglected area.³⁶⁸ The idea to open up to the Scandinavian countries was also an innovation, as it had not appeared in Polish political thought before Beck.

365 Neues Politisches Archiv (New Political Archive), Akten der Republik (Vienna), Gesandtschaft Warschau, 81, Report from the Austrian Envoy dated 18 June 1937.

366 K. Papée, “Polska i Europa,” *Bellona* (London) (lipiec–grudzień 1957), z. 3–4: p. 64. There were comments from a review of Hans Roos’s book *Polen und Europa*. Papée was the Polish Envoy to Prague in 1936–1938. On Beck’s instructions, on 30 September 1938 Papée handed the Czechoslovak foreign minister the Polish ultimatum on Cieszyn Silesia.

367 A valuable contribution is Wiesław Balcerak, “Koncepcje integracyjne w polskiej polityce zagranicznej (1918–1939),” *Dzieje Najnowsze* (1970), No. 1: pp. 30–56. See also Batowski, “Środkowoeuropejska polityka Polski w latach 1932–1939. Tezy,” in August *Powszechny Zjazd Historyków Polskich. Historia najnowsza Polski*, eds. I. Pietrzak-Pawłowska, K. Piwarski (Warsaw 1960), pp. 265–277.

368 See Beata Lyczko-Grodzicka, *Dyplomacja polska a Ententa Bałkańska 1933–1936* (Wrocław 1981), p. 121. See also W. Rojek, “Poczynania dyplomacji polskiej na

Apparently, initial reflections on the subject of a Third Europe bloc began to form in Beck's mind in the spring of 1935. Beck reportedly told the Italian Ambassador to Poland, Giuseppe Bastianini, that "the Polish government is pursuing the concept of a Central European pact without considering Germany".³⁶⁹

An important motive inspiring Beck's search was his pro-Hungarian attitude.³⁷⁰ "I will never let go of my friends [*Je ne lacherai jamais mes amis*]", These are significant words, repeated several times by the Polish foreign minister in a conversation with his French counterpart Pierre Laval on 23 May 1935 in Geneva.³⁷¹ Polish-Hungarian relations were based on the 1920 experience, when Hungary gave aid to Poland as the only country in Central-Eastern Europe fighting the Soviet Union.³⁷² Having said that, the Hungarians could not provide active assistance because they did not share a border with Poland. Keeping those events in mind, in the realities of 1938 Beck would be a keen supporter of Hungarian territorial claims towards Czechoslovakia and of Hungary's control of at least Transcarpathian Rus. In instructions to the Polish embassy in Rome (on Quirinal) dated 25 September 1938, Beck wrote: "We also support Hungarian aspirations. We believe that without bold and deep decisions on the matter of Czechoslovakia, it will not be possible to construct reasonable living conditions in Central Europe."³⁷³ Indeed, the success of the Third Europe plan required no corrections but rather a certain geopolitical revolution in Central-Eastern Europe. It is difficult not to say that it was a concept tied

tle polityki mocarstw w środkowej i południowej Europie w latach 1936–1938", in *Z dziejów polityki i dyplomacji polskiej. Studia poświęcone pamięci Edwarda hr. Raczyńskiego, Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej na wychodźstwie*, eds. H. Bułhak et al. (Warsaw 1994), pp. 302–316.

369 AAN, Ambasada RP w Rzymie, 2. Quote from Ambassador Alfred Wysocki's letter to the head of Beck's cabinet, Roman Dębicki dated 21 March 1935.

370 Among the experiences that are interpreted to have influenced Beck's pro-Hungarian sympathies is his stay among the *Honveds* in Hungary as a legionnaire, and then a trip to Budapest in the special diplomatic mission of the head of state to the regent Miklós Horthy in 1920. For more on the mission in 1920, see J. Cisek, "The Beginnings of Joseph Beck's Diplomatic Career. The Origins of His Mission to Admiral Horthy in October 1920", *East European Quarterly* (1993), No. 1: pp. 129–140; M. Kornat, "Józef Beck – zarys biografii politycznej (1894–1932)", *Niepodległość* (Warsaw) 55 (35th volume since reactivation) (2005): p. 57.

371 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/5, Note on Beck's conversation with Laval dated 23 May 1935.

372 Above all, this aid involved supplies of ammunition (60 million rounds). A. Divéky, *Co chcieli zrobić i co zrobili Węgrzy dla Polski w okresie wojny* (Warsaw 1939), pp. 26–29; L. Villat, *Le rôle de la Hongrie dans la guerre polono-bolchévique de 1920* (Paris 1930); R. Dębicki, "Węgry a wojna polsko-rosyjska w 1920 r.", *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1977), z. 39: p. 48. See also *Sąsiedzi wobec wojny 1920 roku. Wybór dokumentów*, ed. J. Cisek (London 1990), pp. 288–300.

373 PDD/1938, p. 570.

to high political risk, because if it failed, it would burden Polish-German relations and give Poland the image of a “revisionist” state.

The diplomatic historian has a duty to look for the answer to the question whether the Third Europe project found support in the political reality of Europe in the 1930s. Was it an anti-German project, or more an anti-Soviet project? What possibilities did Polish diplomats have at their disposal in the prevailing circumstances of the late 1930s? Was it a real political plan, or was it just an *ex post* concept constructed by historians? Above all, what determined its failure?

Despite an intensive search, I have been unable to find a document that includes a comprehensive treatment of the concept of the Third Europe bloc.³⁷⁴ However, the fact that we know of no specific Polish draft regarding this topic does not mean, of course, that such a document did not exist, even if only because the files of the Polish Foreign Ministry were preserved to a degree that is far from complete. It is also possible that such a document was not created at all, because the entire project, as we shall see, was only a very loose outline of ideas and postulates. With regard to diplomatic files, one more important reservation is required: it cannot be expected that the sources from the late 1930s available to us today would fully indicate the intentions, feelings and calculations of the Polish political leadership at the time. In diplomacy, plans and evaluations are usually expressed in a limited way. Not every thought is reflected on paper, especially in the midst of such turbulent and dramatic international transformations as those that took place in the late 1930s. We should also note that unfortunately, as a politician, Beck had the mentality of a conspirator. He was a man who only rarely explained the assumptions behind his policy. We need to remember these factors, although it is no less important that the foreign minister viewed his *Międzymorze* project only as a “certain idea” and not as a precise political plan. For all these reasons, when reconstructing the concept of the Third Europe, we must limit ourselves to the known statements made by Polish diplomats and to those that can still be found in Polish and foreign archives.

It is known for certain that this bloc of states conducting a “neutral policy”; that is, one that was independent of the powers that formed the Anti-Comintern pact (Germany, Italy and Japan) and of France and Great Britain, was not supposed to be yet another regional group in Europe. Beck did not anticipate that any formal arrangement would be signed; he was thinking more of “spontaneous cooperation”

374 For a justification of the idea of solidarity among countries in Central-Eastern Europe, see the MSZ memorandum: *Dokument z 1934 r. o zasadach polskiej polityki zagranicznej*, pp. 797–818. A letter sent by Deputy Foreign Minister Jan Szembek to the envoy in Belgrade Roman Dębicki dated 12 July 1938 is of great value. Szembek’s correspondence with Dębicki is preserved in the Józef Piłsudski Institute in New York. Some of these letters were selected and published by Waclaw Jędrzejewicz, *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka. Materiały uzupełniające*, pp. 32–91 (for the cited document, see also: PDD/1938, pp. 374–375).

among *Międzymorze* states in the face of the growing threat posed by Germany and the Soviet Union.

Since it has proven impossible to find a detailed treatment of the Third Europe concept, it is important to refer to Deputy Foreign Minister Szembek, who in one of his letters wrote to the Polish Envoy in Belgrade, Roman Dębicki, that “it is about creating a group of friendly nations speaking with each other in a language whose main leitmotif is the need to protect themselves against excessive German expansion”.³⁷⁵ The American ambassador to Warsaw, Anthony Joseph Drexel Biddle Jr., who had great insight into the dilemmas of Polish politics, was by June 1938 convinced that Poland wanted to play a key role in Central Europe and wanted to create a “neutral Baltic-Black Sea or even Baltic-Aegean Axis” with “ample support from Britain, France, and possibly even Italy” that could run the risk of “provoking German ire and suspicion”.³⁷⁶

The time to implement Polish plans for the construction of a *Międzymorze* bloc seemed to come in the autumn of 1938, when Czechoslovakia cracked and collapsed. President Beneš’ policy, previously recognised and admired in Europe, lay in ruins. At the time of the Munich dictate and Beneš’ acceptance of the four-power decision on 30 September 1938 at noon, the stripped Czechoslovakia lost its status as an independent entity in international politics. Beck decided that the further breakdown of the Pomorze region of Czechoslovakia was irreversible and that a new political configuration had to be created on its ruins, without waiting for Central Europe to be overrun by Germany. Leaders in Western capitals did not understand Beck’s motivations. The Polish foreign minister’s views were met with extremely negative reactions; he was seen as an accomplice in the Czechoslovakian catastrophe.³⁷⁷ This was also the case in Bucharest, where leaders clung to the Little Entente concept as Central Europe’s basic political configuration.

Undoubtedly, territorial “transformations” in south-eastern Europe seemed to offer an opportunity for Hungary to gain strength; after the Treaty of Trianon, Hungary had been relegated to the position of a marginal state in European politics.³⁷⁸ But the Polish government expected too much from Hungary, whose foreign policy in the autumn of 1938 was characterised primarily by passivity and wait-and-see tactics, even though it remained a goal of Hungarian policy to overturn the Treaty of Trianon. The Polish leadership viewed this policy as too passive. In August 1938, the Hungarian Regent Miklós Horthy, residing in Berlin, in a conversation with the Polish Ambassador to Germany, Józef Lipski, stated that he

375 PDD/1938, 375.

376 *Poland and the Coming of the Second World War. The Diplomatic Papers of A. J. Drexel-Biddle Jr., United States Ambassador to Poland 1937–1939*, intro. and eds. P. V. Cannistraro, E. D. Wynot, T. P. Kovaleff (Columbus, OH 1976), p. 219.

377 In connection with this, Winston Churchill called Poland a “jackal”.

378 Hungary lost 72 % of its pre-First World War territory and 13.2 million of its population. The country’s post-war political isolation was partially broken in 1934–1936.

“hopes that the two countries will be sharing a border”.³⁷⁹ The Polish leadership interpreted this to mean that Hungary—given the demise of Czechoslovakia—would take over Transcarpathian Ukraine, while Poland and Hungary would jointly decide the international-political status of independent Slovakia.³⁸⁰ Beck and others failed to take into account the fact that Slovakia was already in play as a *potentielles Tauschobjekt* (a potential object of exchange) in the “game over Poland” that Hitler and Ribbentrop started immediately after the Munich Conference.³⁸¹ As Leon Orłowski, the Polish Envoy to Budapest, put it to Foreign Ministry officials in Warsaw, Hungarian restraint was primarily the result of concern that Hungary “must not find itself in the camp that could lose a possible war”.³⁸² More concretely, Hungary’s most important motive was the belief that it could not afford to act against Germany’s interests. To some extent, Hungarian leaders harboured fears of possible Romanian reactions, although it is difficult to say to what extent these fears were real.

The matter was further complicated by the fact that the Hungarians did not want to accept the Slovak people’s aspirations of independence.³⁸³ They could not renounce their claim to “the former Hungarian territories with a Slavic population”.³⁸⁴ Hungarian proposals “did not consider ethnography” and had no chance of success, both because they could not be implemented without cutting down Slovakia, and because—as Lipski, the Polish Ambassador in Berlin, informed the Foreign Ministry on 19 October 1938—they would not enjoy Berlin’s support. The Polish diplomat hoped that “if we reach a regional agreement that gives definite

379 PDD/1938, p. 433.

380 Another variant would be an independent Slovakia. For this, see E. Orlof, *Dyplomacja polska wobec sprawy słowackiej w latach 1938–1939* (Krakow 1980). For Poland, the emancipation process in Carpathian Ruthenia in late 1938 and early 1939 was inopportune, as it was becoming a kind of “Ukrainian Piedmont”. For more on Polish policy towards Carpathian Ruthenia, see Dariusz Dąbrowski, *Rzeczpospolita Polska wobec kwestii Rusi Zakarpackiej (Podkarpackiej) 1938–1939* (Torun 2007); see also J. Jedlička, “Podkarpatska Rus/Karpatska Ukrajina v brezne 1939” in *Česke země a Československo v Evropě XIX a XX století. Sborník prací k 65. narozeninám prof. dr. Roberta Kvačka* (Prague 1997), pp. 409–424. There seems to be no evidence to support the claim made by Feliks Frankowski (chargé d’affaires in Paris) that the Polish General Staff studied the possibility of a temporary occupation of Slovakia (IPMS, MSZ, A.11/144E, nr spr. 270, Feliks Frankowski’s testimony before the Winiarski Commission on 31 March 1941).

381 J. K. Hoensch, *Die Slowakei und Hitlers Ostpolitik. Hlinkas Slowakische Volkspartei zwischen Autonomie und Separation 1938/1939* (Köln 1965), p. 332.

382 Report for Beck, 7 September 1938, PDD/1938, p. 454. One year later, Orłowski thought that the dominant desire was, at all costs, to not offend the Germans. See idem, “Sprawa wspólnej granicy z Węgrami,” *Niepodległość XIII* (1980): pp. 124–125.

383 See Jörg K. Hoensch, *Die Slowakei und Hitlers Ostpolitik*; idem, *Der ungarische Revisionismus und die Zerschlagung der Tschechoslowakei* (Tübingen 1967).

384 Encrypted telegram to the MSZ dated 29 September 1938, PDD/1938, p. 621.

stabilisation, we will get a decision that preordains agreement on the part of certain reliable officials here”, which appeared to reflect Hitler’s declaration to Lipski at Berchtesgaden talking about a “free hand for us beyond a certain geographical line”.³⁸⁵

It is a fact that those in pro-Polish Slovakian circles, such as envoy to Poland Karol Sidor, put their trust in Poland in hopes of halting Hungary’s demands, which involved a great deal because their focus was Bratislava, Nitra and Kosice.³⁸⁶ Beck’s plans even included an idea for Polish arbitration between Hungary and Slovakia (if Budapest wanted it); as he wrote in his instructions to Orłowski: “Please tell [Hungarian Foreign Minister Kálmán] Kánya that we are ready to accept the role of arbitrator if, of course, all the interested parties agree. We are asking Rome and Berlin for their position” on this matter.³⁸⁷ Unfortunately, the addressee of this offer was Kánya, an extremely cautious politician who tended to avoid political risk, and who was unconvinced of the value of the Polish-Romanian-Hungarian triangle.³⁸⁸

However, a different issue was much more important. As we have already noted, the essence of Poland’s *Międzymorze* concept was the idea to bring about close Polish-Hungarian-Romanian cooperation, which first required some kind of Hungarian-Romanian understanding. Polish politicians had been discussing such rapprochement since the beginning of the 1920s, when Poland—seeking assurances in the event of a Soviet attack—entered into an alliance with Romania.³⁸⁹ Of course, a *sine qua non* condition for the implementation of this plan was the desired evolution of Romania’s policy. At this point, it should be added that the idea of an alliance between those countries that had emerged from the Austro-Hungarian Empire was born from within Romanian political thought, of which Warsaw was well aware. Carol II’s Romania, torn by internal conflicts and experiencing the aggression of native fascism (the Iron Guard), did not look like an effective partner. It is difficult to know if Beck grasped this fact. After the removal of Nicolae Titulescu as foreign minister in August 1936, the Polish foreign minister seemed

385 PDD/1938, p. 714.

386 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Leona Orłowskiego, 78/16, encrypted telegram dated 23 October 1938.

387 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Leona Orłowskiego, 78/16.

388 As the Austrian Envoy Maximilian Hoffinger in Warsaw wrote on 9 February 1938 to Minister Guido Schmidt in Vienna, Kánya (who was visiting the Polish capital) told him: “We do not want to enter into any agreement with Poland” because Poland was not a Danube state. Poland’s interests in the Danube region were “platonic in nature” (Neues Politisches Archiv, Akten der Republik [Vienna], Gesandtschaft Warschau, p. 81).

389 This idea appears in the above-mentioned “Aide-Mémoire” dated 28 March 1925. See H. Bułhak, “Polska a Rumunia 1918–1939,” in *Przyjaźnie i antagonizmy. Stosunki Polski z państwami sąsiednimi*, 305–344, and (from the Romanian perspective) F. Anghel, *Construirea sistemului “Cordon Sanitaire”. Relatii româno-polone 1919–1926* (Cluj-Napoca 2003).

to be convinced that Romanian policy was going in the right direction. Although it achieved few practical results, the trip taken to Poland in November 1936 by the new head of Romanian diplomacy, Victor Antonescu, appeared to signal the start of a new phase in Polish-Romanian relations, a departure from Titulescu's heritage, and a "renewal of Polish-Romanian friendship".³⁹⁰ Beck hoped for the internal consolidation of Romania. It is also known that after Beck visited Bucharest in April 1937, his view of Romania's position improved. On 18 June 1937, he reportedly told the Austrian Envoy in Warsaw: "Today Romania has a different mentality [*Heute habe Rumänien eine andere Mentalität*]."³⁹¹ The foreign minister's statements preserved from that time seem to testify to a certain reserve of confidence in Carol II.³⁹² By the end of his trip to Bucharest, Beck already had an outline of his vision for the Warsaw-Bucharest-Budapest triangle.

Romanian-Hungarian political negotiations, aimed at concluding a non-aggression agreement, started in December 1937 but ended with no results. Polish diplomats were aware of these negotiations, which were supported by the Italians. Statements made by King Carol II and documented by the Polish Foreign Service, along with assurances given by Hungarian politicians, seemed from the Polish point of view to open up certain opportunities for real rapprochement between Bucharest and Budapest. Poland's offer to mediate had been clearly formulated by 31 December 1937, when Beck received Romanian Envoy Dan Zamfirescu and told him that he would convey to Horthy (who was to visit Poland) any "message" from Carol II that might be communicated to the Polish government.³⁹³

After speaking with Kánya (who accompanied Horthy on a trip to Poland in February 1938), Szembek wrote to Orłowski on 9 February 1938 that there was a real basis for Hungarian-Romanian détente. Kánya said that:

[...] Hungary is putting forward no territorial demands on Romania and will not do so. Their desiderata are focused only on minority issues, while the respective demands are modest and easy to satisfy. Romanians know these demands, though nothing indicates that they really want to relax relations with Hungarians [...].³⁹⁴

This statement was an indication of sorts that Polish mediation was needed.

390 See Austrian Envoy Hoffinger to Minister Guido Schmidt, report dated 6 December 1936 (Neues Politisches Archiv, Akten der Republik [Vienna], Gesandtschaft Warschau, 81).

391 Ibid.

392 I am thinking here about Beck's statements in his conversations in Berlin with von Neurath in January 1938 (see *Monachium 1938. Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne*, p. 23).

393 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 3, pp. 237–238 (note on a conversation between Szembek with Beck dated 31 December 1937).

394 PDD/1938, p. 60.

In May 1938, the Poles received information from the Hungarians that Horthy had received the Romanian Envoy in Budapest, and that the latter, on behalf of Carol II, gave assurances that “the King sincerely wants agreement with Hungary and is willing to use his influence for its implementation”. The Regent accepted this statement, but he demanded “a clear improvement in the lives of the Hungarian minority”.³⁹⁵ Overall developments gave reason for moderate optimism. As Szembek wrote in his instructions to the legation in Budapest on 28 May 1938:

In general terms, we attach importance to the Romanian Envoy’s declaration in Budapest made on behalf of the king to the regent. [Romanian foreign minister Nicolae Petrescu-] Comnen stresses that he wants to accelerate a bilateral agreement with Hungary, but he cannot go so far as an exchange of notes on settlement of the minority issue, fearing a precedent with respect to the German and Russian minorities.³⁹⁶

But at this point Germany made its presence felt, offering the Hungarians “total support, in the event of a conflict, in fulfilling all territorial aspirations”. The Polish Foreign Ministry was informed of this fact by the Hungarian envoy in Warsaw, András Hory, on 5 July 1938. Talking to Szembek that day, Hory expressed two other important thoughts. *Primo*, that “just like Romania, Germany will undoubtedly frown upon a common Polish-Hungarian border”; *Secundo*, that “Hungary cannot under any circumstances take any aggressive initiative regarding the Czech matter”. Hory also “hid neither his fears that the German Reich would establish political and economic hegemony in the Danube region” nor his concern for Poland “if Czechoslovakia succumbed to Germany”.³⁹⁷

In July 1938, Szembek was in Bucharest, where on 26 July he conferred with Foreign Minister Comnen. Their conversation gave them the opportunity to take a *tour d’horizon* of European politics. Before Szembek left, the Poles received information that Bucharest was considering the option of “levelling” relations with Hungary, though “only in so far as it would encompass all the countries of the Little Entente”. In connection with this, the Polish deputy foreign minister tried to explain to his Romanian counterpart that “such an approach cannot help but lead to a significant political burden for the Romanians, since by concluding a deal with Hungary and with its other partners, it [Romania] will have to pay much more to Budapest than if it made a bilateral deal with Hungary”. For Poles, it was clear that Bucharest still considered the Little Entente system—which no longer actually existed—a political reality.³⁹⁸ Szembek made it clear to Comnen that, in the face

395 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Leona Orłowskiego, 78/16, Szembek to mission in Budapest, instructions dated 26 May 1938.

396 *Ibid.*, Szembek to mission in Budapest, instructions dated 28 May 1938.

397 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Romana Dębickiego, 40/8, Szembek’s note on his talk with Hory dated 5 July 1938.

398 On 23 August 1938, the conference of foreign ministers of the Little Entente, meeting in Bled, agreed to release Hungary from the restrictions on armaments established

of German expansionism, Romania and Hungary were condemned to some kind of *modus vivendi*. "These countries, in conflict with one another, set themselves up as serious targets for German dynamism". The Polish Deputy foreign minister recalled Kánya's statement in February 1938 that Hungary had no territorial claims against Romania, but in response Comnen cited Kánya's speech in parliament, in which Kánya had stated that Hungary had to take control of the situation faced by the Hungarian minority in Romania, where that minority was receiving "the worst" possible treatment.³⁹⁹ Based on Szembek's arguments, Warsaw realistically perceived the consequences of German expansionism.

But Romanian and Polish policies were far from moving in the same direction. On the day of the Munich Conference on 29 September 1938, on Beck's recommendation the Polish Ambassador in Bucharest, Roger Raczyński, made a statement to Romanian foreign minister Comnen suggesting that territorial changes in Central Europe were inevitable. At the same time, the Polish diplomat emphasised that the Hungarian government had not specified its territorial demands on Czechoslovakia. In connection with this, Raczyński stressed that it was necessary to maintain close Polish-Romanian-Hungarian contact, and the Polish government wanted to assure Romania that, as an ally, it would not enter into any talks with Hungary that would directly affect Romania's interests.⁴⁰⁰ In response, Comnen accused Poland of failing to consult Romania on international activities for a long period of time; that is, since the Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact signed in Berlin on 26 January 1934.⁴⁰¹

What is unsurprising is the fact that Berlin kept an eye on Polish efforts to bring about Romanian-Hungarian rapprochement; that officials there did not view them in a positive light; and that historians of diplomacy have not paid this fact due attention. As early as in one of his reports from March 1938; that is, when Polish ideas in south-eastern Europe were becoming concrete, the German Ambassador in Warsaw, Hans-Adolf von Moltke, wrote to the German Foreign Ministry that

by the 1920 Treaty in Trianon. This decision came too late to change anything in the real balance of power.

399 PDD/1938, p. 383.

400 Note from this conversation in the Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen Collection, Box 4. Raczyński declared: "*Les hongrois n'ont pas précise vis-à-vis de la Pologne leurs aspirations, dans l'évolution de la situation, la Pologne désire rester en contact avec le Gouvernement roumain et en tous les cas, la Pologne n'aura pas de conversations avec les hongrois qui toucheraient d'une manière directe les intérêts roumains.*"

401 Comnen made six charges against Poland, including that Polish diplomats carried out activities to undermine the League of Nations. He also drew attention to the Polish ultimatum issued to Lithuania in March 1938, and to Poland's negative attitude towards Czechoslovakia as examples of policies that ran contrary to Romania's interests (Hoover Institution [Palo Alto, CA], Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen Collection, Box 4).

Germany ought not to accept independent Polish aspirations to join the group of four great powers, because in matters related to the Danube region, Polish and German interests were incompatible.⁴⁰² Therefore, the American ambassador in Warsaw, Anthony Biddle, was correct when he wrote on 19 June 1938 in a report for the US State Department that Polish and German interests were clearly at odds with each other in south-eastern Europe.⁴⁰³

Meanwhile, in official talks Germany encouraged Poland to pursue an active anti-Czechoslovak policy. In August 1938, Hermann Göring told Ambassador Lipski “that if there were fundamental territorial changes in Czechoslovakia, it is understandable that Poland would have every right to demand a settlement that would stabilise the situation in the Danube Basin for good”.⁴⁰⁴ There is no indication, however, that this statement was an expression of the real German position.

A very strange situation arose between the Third Reich and Poland. In fact, throughout Europe close relations between Poland and Germany were under discussion, and there was even talk of some secret agreement that Poland had allegedly concluded with Germany.⁴⁰⁵ Meanwhile, the reality was that the Third Reich had no intention of allowing Poland any freedom of movement in Central Europe, and the Germans were planning to thwart Poland’s independent actions. Thus, Polish efforts to build a Third Europe bloc were never agreed with Germany, and—as historiography, especially during the Soviet domination of Poland after the Second World War, has often told us—they were not consistent with the thinking that went into Germany’s interests.

However, it is impossible not to mention the illusory hopes fostered by Foreign Minister Beck that he would be able to explain to the Third Reich leadership that Polish plans did not threaten Germany’s interests, and that “we are not pursuing a particularly grand policy in the Danube Basin”.⁴⁰⁶ Such is what Beck said to Hitler during their talks in Berlin in January 1938, which, however, did not correspond to reality. Meanwhile, Hitler wanted at all costs to weaken Poland’s position and, planning as he was to use Poland in the future in any war against the USSR,

402 “We should not commit ourselves to the Polish desire to participate in the forthcoming negotiations of the four great powers. Similarly, the Danube region question should not be discussed in more depth, as it can be assumed that Polish intentions there are not necessarily in conformity with our interests [*Hinsichtlich polnischen Wunsches, an bevorstehenden Verhandlungen der vier Großmächte teilzunehmen, sollten wir uns nicht festlegen; ebenso wäre Frage Donaupraums nicht zu vertiefen, da anzunehmen ist, dass polnische Absichten dort mit unseren Interessen nicht unbedingt konform laufen*].” See Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin, Botschaft Warschau, sygn. 88, encrypted telegram from the Ambassador in Warsaw, Hans-Adolf von Moltke to the Auswärtiges Amt dated 7 March 1938.

403 *Poland and the Coming of the Second World War*, p. 212.

404 Note from Ambassador Lipski dated 24 August 1938, PDD/1938, p. 431.

405 For more, see my study *Polityka równowagi*, pp. 229–306 (chapter 5).

406 Note on Beck’s conversation with Hitler dated 14 January 1938, PDD/1938, p. 28.

the German Chancellor and his advisers could not allow Poland to create a *fait accompli* in Central Europe without Berlin's knowledge. Such development would conflict with Germany's great-power interests tied to that rich tradition of German political thought that worked under the slogan of a German *Mitteleuropa*.⁴⁰⁷ Polish political leaders were under no illusion about how hostile this slogan was towards both the Poles and the other *Międzymorze* nations. There can be no doubt that in 1937–1938, Warsaw was increasingly aware that Germany's power was growing, that the Western powers were passive, and that the Soviets were nurturing an aspiration to invade.

Understandably, Moscow also paid attention to Beck's statements about a Central European bloc. We have found no concrete documents indicating that Soviet diplomats attempted to counteract Poland's efforts in October 1938, but documents from the preceding period testify to the Kremlin's position. The Italian ambassador in Moscow, Augusto Rosso, wrote about Moscow's attitudes in his reports, and on 16 November 1936 he noted that Moscow interpreted the Polish concept of an agreement among Central and Eastern European countries as an attempt to isolate the USSR—in the interests of fascism. The Italian diplomat emphasised that the Soviets disapproved of Poland's increasing policy of independence.⁴⁰⁸ On 17 February 1937, Rosso came to the conclusion that Moscow "will not forgive Colonel Beck" for attempting to build a bloc aimed at the Little Entente.⁴⁰⁹ Regardless, Soviet diplomats did not have significant assets in the countries of Central and Southern Europe (apart from Czechoslovakia) to actively oppose Polish measures in the autumn of 1938. The USSR's weakened position in the wake of the Munich Conference made the Soviets' task even more difficult.

Polish Diplomatic Activity in September–October 1938

In 1938, German expansionist activities in the Danube region and South-Eastern Europe entered a crucial phase.⁴¹⁰ In the last weeks of relative calm in Europe, at the end of 1937 and beginning of 1938, Beck was able to gain a certain insight into Hitler's plans. After his January 1938 visit to Berlin, the Polish foreign minister

407 See H. C. Meyer, *Mitteleuropa in German Thought and Action 1815–1845* (The Hague 1955), 323–325. In Polish historiography, see J. Pajewski, "Mitteleuropa." *Studia z dziejów imperializmu niemieckiego w dobie pierwszej wojny światowej* (Poznan 1959).

408 Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (Historical Archive of the Foreign Ministry, cited hereafter as ASMAE), *Affari Politici* (1931–1945), URSS, p. 25.

409 The Ambassador's wording: "[...] an attempt to break up this bulwark of peace in Eastern Europe [*un tentativo di scindere questo baluardo della pace nell'Europa Orientale*]" (ibid.).

410 For a full treatment of German policy in south-eastern Europe see Jerzy Kozeński, *Agresja na Jugosławię* (Poznan 1979), pp. 11–38. See also M. G. Hitchens, *Germany, Russia and the Balkans. Prelude to the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact* (Boulder, CO 1983), pp. 4–35.

was convinced that German expansion would be directed towards the absorption of Austria and the breakup of Czechoslovakia.⁴¹¹ Beck wrote to Polish diplomatic missions on 14 January 1938 that there had been no talks between the two parties about “new obligations”.⁴¹² In Warsaw, no one believed that the Western powers would act to stop the Third Reich. The first test of this state of affairs was the Anschluss with Austria, against which France and Great Britain remained passive.

It is not my goal here to fully reconstruct the actions taken by Polish leaders in Central Europe in 1938.⁴¹³ But it is difficult not to state that the German seizure of Austria put Czechoslovakia in a critical position, and that the potential control of Czechoslovakia threatened Hungary and Romania. The prospect of German domination over the *Międzymorze* region was becoming more real than ever before. All Polish actions in the autumn of 1938 stemmed from the belief that, if Poland did not play an active role in Central Europe, the region would fall under German domination. Time was not on Poland’s side; it was on the Third Reich’s side.

In September 1938, Polish foreign policy leaders believed that Hungary, which was keenly interested in altering its borders, should play a key role in any possible territorial transformations. In a conversation with Szembek on 5 September, the Hungarian Envoy to Warsaw, András Hory, speaking on behalf of foreign minister Kánya, proposed a gentlemen’s agreement to coordinate Poland and Hungary’s actions in the face of the Sudetenland conflict.⁴¹⁴ On 8 September, after talking with Hory, Beck approved the formula of the gentlemen’s agreement to which Szembek and Hory had agreed, although he expressed dissatisfaction with Hungary’s passivity in the current crisis.⁴¹⁵ On 11 September, the agreement was approved by the Foreign Ministry in Budapest, about which Hory informed Szembek two days later. Beck wanted the text to remain casual in nature, which it did. Polish-Hungarian relations thus grew stronger, and the concluded agreement formed the basis of a joint *modus operandi*.⁴¹⁶

411 See D. Faber, *Munich, 1938*, p. 72.

412 PDD/1938, p. 32.

413 We have at our disposal extensive literature devoted to the events of 1938 in Polish foreign policy.

414 There is no entry in Szembek’s notes regarding this conversation. Hory’s note is in the collection of Hungarian diplomatic documents, *Diplomáciai iratok Magyarország külpolitikájához, 1936–1945*, ed. L. Zsigmond (Budapest 1962), Vol. 1, p. 187. More important Hungarian documents can be found in *Alianz Hitler–Horthy–Mussolini. Dokumente zur ungarischen Außenpolitik (1933–1944)*, eds. M. Adám, G. Juhász, L. Kerekes (Budapest 1966). However, in this work, Polish-Hungarian relations in 1938 are marginal.

415 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, pp. 262–264 (note on conversation with Beck dated 6 September 1938).

416 For a detailed and still valuable monograph on this subject, see Maciej Koźmiński, *Polska i Węgry przed drugą wojną światową (październik 1938 – wrzesień 1939)* (Wrocław 1970). Unfortunately, there are no more recent studies on Polish-Hungarian relations.

On 12 September, Beck said *pro foro interno* that the Hungarians “do not seem to understand the historical significance of today. And they have such an excellent situation: it is much easier for the Western powers to digest Hungarian territorial demands than German demands, because for both France and England in today’s conflict, it is not about the fate of Czechoslovakia, but about the danger of German expansion.”⁴¹⁷ On 13 September, after talking with Hory, Szembek wrote: “We believe that Hungary is not assertive enough at the moment to bring about a breakthrough for them.” Hungary’s “territorial aspirations are more digestible for the West and therefore less risky to carry out than German demands, because for the West in today’s conflict, it is not about Czechoslovakia, but about German expansion. We do not understand their restraint.”⁴¹⁸ These significant statements undoubtedly testify to the clearly anti-German and defensive nature of the Polish-Hungarian alliance, and of Poland’s entire vision of a Third Europe.

Decisive Polish-Hungarian arrangements were made just after the Munich Conference and after the Polish ultimatum to Czechoslovakia. On 5–6 October 1938, the director of the office of the Hungarian foreign minister, István Csáky, visited Warsaw, and on behalf of the Hungarian government he submitted a plan to Beck “for Hungarian revindication”.⁴¹⁹ Hungarian demands included first of all the “southern areas of Slovakia and Carpathian Ruthenia”. Beck took note of the content of the Hungarian memorandum. The two sides concluded an unwritten political agreement. On 6 October 1938, the Polish foreign minister once again spoke to Csáky and responded on behalf of the Polish authorities. “The Polish government”, we read in the Polish note from this conversation, “has warmly received the Hungarian postulates, especially to the idea of a common border with Ruthenia. It also assures its diplomatic assistance, and in particular takes on the task of blocking Romania”, which could counter Hungary.⁴²⁰

We can reconstruct Poland’s intentions at the time through a letter from the head of the Eastern Division in the Polish Foreign Ministry, Tadeusz Kobyłański, to the Polish Envoy in Budapest, Leon Orłowski, dated 10 October 1938. In this document, Kobyłański informed Orłowski that:

[...] (1) Regarding joining Carpathian Ruthenia with Hungary, we took a firm stance and we gave Hungary diplomatic and press support, based on the supportive attitude of Polish society. We believe that the process of liberating Slovakia should help them in joining Carpathian Ruthenia. However, it is important for negotiations to be conducted vigorously and supported by diversionary action in Russia. This method has shown results before. Complaints from Romania and Yugoslavia or the Great Powers should not be taken into account because they are completely platonic. (2) The

417 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 266.

418 *Ibid.*, p. 269.

419 PDD/1938, p. 663.

420 *Ibid.*, p. 664.

Slovak independence process, once Hungary renounces all claims to ethnographically Slovak lands, is supported by us. The current stage seems to be transitional.⁴²¹

These statements marked a significant change in the Polish view of the Slovak issue. Political leaders in Warsaw originally viewed this country's future as being dependent on Hungarian aspirations. Now, they recognised that the Slovaks had a right to independence, but probably at the price of the cession of the territories inhabited by the Hungarian minority in Slovakia's southern regions.⁴²² Of course, an independent Slovakia would be part of the Third Europe bloc.

Beck outlined the goals of Polish diplomacy in the new international realities most concretely on 18 October in his instructions for the diplomatic missions in Berlin, Rome, Budapest and Prague. The document did not use the term "Third Europe" or "*Międzymorze*", but its guiding idea was the clearly described concept of a Warsaw-Budapest-Bucharest geopolitical triangle. In this document, the foreign minister wrote:

Our interests in the case of Czechoslovakia had two aspects: 1. Our direct revindication, which we obtained by having faced the risk of military conflict; 2. The impact on the future map south of the Carpathians, in which we have vital interests, but where our commitment cannot go as far as in the matter of revindication *sauf l'imprévu*; that is, events that would surprise everyone, or some unexpected military complications to our south—our influence on the course of events in this area is naturally limited.

As for "our goals", Beck made three points. Firstly, there was supposed to be a "common border with Hungary and in Carpathian Ruthenia, because Hungary has a reasonably attainable chance to seize [such is the wording in the text—M. K.] this territory and thus reduce the danger of further complications and political unrest on our border, not because inhabitants of Carpathian Ruthenia could show greater activity, but because a large number of external factors would be at play to exploit this region as a base for various actions that will never be in our interests."⁴²³ Beck's second point included the idea of extending the Polish-Romanian border, if Romania managed to control a piece of Carpathian Ruthenia. As a third task, the foreign minister called for "serious détente between Romania and Hungary, which would stabilise the area to our south."⁴²⁴

On 20 October 1938, Michał Łubieński, Józef Beck's closest associate and the head of his cabinet, went on a mission to Budapest, where talks were held to prepare the ground for an agreement with Romania on Polish conditions. Beck warned, however, that "in the current conditions we cannot encourage the

421 *Ibid.*, p. 681.

422 Regarding the normalisation of Slovak-Hungarian relations, there were fruitless negotiations in Komarno, where the Slovaks rejected far-reaching Hungarian territorial demands. Thus, negotiations broke down.

423 PDD/1938, pp. 699–700.

424 *Ibid.*, p. 700.

Hungarians to engage in open military intervention, because it would include an implicit moral obligation for military cooperation on our part.”⁴²⁵ For the Poles, the results of Łubieński’s talks were not satisfactory, which is confirmed by his letter to the Polish foreign minister, in which he stated that the ground “for direct talks with Bucharest is not yet prepared [...]”.⁴²⁶ The Polish diplomat acknowledged that there was a chance for Polish “mediation in this matter”. In reality, the chances were slim. Poland offered to grant border guarantees to Romania in exchange for consent to enlarge Hungary’s territory at the expense of Czechoslovakia, which is what Beck meant when, in his instructions to the Polish Ambassador in London, Edward Raczyński, dated 29 November 1938, he stated that:

[...] it was the Polish Government’s intention to contribute to a successful arrangement in Hungarian-Romanian relations. In a given situation, we were prepared to mediate and possibly guarantee the achieved agreement. Our readiness in this regard was beyond the obligations of the alliance that connects us with Romania. It was up to Romania to make use of our good intentions—but that did not happen.⁴²⁷

The Polish offer was no doubt far-reaching, but the Romanian government did not find it attractive. Bucharest viewed it as containing more a serious danger than a political advantage. It was understood that the existing territorial system in Central-Eastern Europe, once challenged, would eventually be destroyed,⁴²⁸ and there was a certain logic to this reasoning. But the question arises as to what had to be done, since Germany’s offensive to acquire territory peacefully continued. With that in mind, Beck came to the conclusion that, in the chaos of Central Europe, a Warsaw-Bucharest-Budapest triangle had to be created as a core source of stability and support for Poland as it battled to preserve its independence. He was seeking a “complete solution” to the Czechoslovak matter, not border corrections.⁴²⁹ In this context, the Polish Envoy in Stockholm, Gustaw Potworowski, took note on 28 September 1938 of an important statement by the Polish foreign minister: “After the current crisis, we must begin to rebuild European relations on new grounds, because the current forms are falling to the bottom.” The foreign minister was “afraid”—this note’s author wrote—that “the Great Powers will start doing this from the wrong end”, using such instruments as a new four-power pact or a “concert of Europe”.⁴³⁰

425 Ibid.

426 PDD/1938, p. 718.

427 Ibid., p. 799.

428 For more on Romanian policy, see V. Moisuc, *Diplomația României și problema apărării suveranității și independenței naționale în perioada martie 1938 – mai 1940* (Bucharest 1971).

429 Beck’s aims were accurately portrayed by the Czechoslovak Envoy in Poland, Juraj Slávik, in a report dated 14 October 1938 for Minister František Chválkovski (Hoover Institution [Palo Alto, CA], Juraj Slávik Collection, Box 42.

430 Ibid., Gustaw Potworowski Collection, Box 1.

The decisive events around Beck's plan took place on 18–21 October 1938.

On 21 October 1938, Szembek wrote to the Budapest legation: "In view of the Romanian king's positive attitude towards the normalisation of Hungarian-Romanian relations in the current situation, we would ask that the Hungarian government immediately inform us of its views and point out elements that could serve as a basis for this normalisation."⁴³¹ In the Polish Foreign Ministry, a Hungarian gesture was expected that would encourage Carol II to agree to Hungarian territorial acquisitions at Czechoslovakia's expense. Meanwhile, the Romanians were eager to normalise relations with Hungary, although on the principle of no territorial changes. In Warsaw, the Polish leadership did not realise how strong Romanian feelings were that the possible joining of Carpathian Ruthenia to Hungary "would be in the interest of neither Romania nor Yugoslavia".⁴³² An avalanche of changes would put in question most of the existing borders.

The Hungarian hesitation mentioned above hampered the actions of Polish diplomats, but it was no doubt Romania's conservative policy that represented the main obstacle to plans to reconstruct the power structure of south-eastern Europe.⁴³³ Romania's political moves made clear that it was guided by a certain loyalty towards Czechoslovakia and was concerned not to strengthen Hungary. Above all, Romania did not wish to set in motion a process of border changes that it would not be able to exploit.⁴³⁴ In addition, the government in Bucharest did not want to engage excessively in cooperation with Poland against Germany's will, so as to not make itself vulnerable to the Third Reich's wrath.

Of key importance for solving problems tied to Poland's failed efforts was Beck's trip to Galați in Romania, where on 18–19 October 1938, the Polish foreign minister met Carol II and foreign minister Comnen in an attempt to convince Romanian politicians to support a policy of territorial transformations on the ruins of Czechoslovakia in the spirit of Polish-Hungarian understanding. Beck explained the purpose of his trip to Bucharest as follows: "My personal contact with the

431 PDD/1938, pp. 718–719.

432 Such is the wording in the instructions from the Romanian foreign minister, Comnen, to the Envoy in Berlin, Neagu Djuvara; see A. Zieliński, "Rumuńskie materiały do dziejów stosunków polsko-rumuńskich w latach trzydziestych XX w.", *Studia z Dziejów ZSRR i Europy Środkowej* 20 (1984): p. 221.

433 To what extent we can speak of Romania's well-considered foreign policy in 1938–1940, and to what extent that policy was an *ad hoc* improvisation given frequent personnel changes and the dubious leadership of Carol II, is a matter of debate and requires further study. The best developed studies are those on Romanian-German relations. See Andreas Hillgruber, *Hitler, König Carol und Marschall Antonescu. Die deutsch-rumänischen Beziehungen 1938–1944* (Wiesbaden 1954); more recently, Rebecca Haynes, *Romanian Policy Towards Germany, 1936–1940* (Basingstoke 2000). For a broad monographic synthesis, see Dov B. Lungu, *Romania and the Great Powers, 1933–1940* (Durham, NC 1989).

434 M. G. Hitchens, *Germany, Russia and the Balkans*, p. 29.

Romanian King is aimed at: 1) exploiting Romania's isolation, which has in fact been created today by the Romanian Government's short-sighted policy, in order to bring us closer; 2) preparing Romania for the implementation of our fundamental goals in connection with the breakup of Czechoslovakia.⁴³⁵

Specifically, Beck wanted to obtain the Romanian government's consent to Hungary's annexation of Carpathian Ruthenia in exchange for the transfer of a small part of this territory to Romania. But these efforts by Polish diplomats to bring about Polish-Hungarian-Romanian rapprochement ended in complete failure. It was in Bucharest where the Polish foreign minister's proposals and ideas faced the greatest resistance. Immediately after Beck left Romania, Comnen—in instructions for Romania's envoy in Berlin (Neagu Djuvara)—made it clear that the annexation of Carpathian Ruthenia by Hungary would not be consistent with Romania's political interests.⁴³⁶ In a conversation with von Ribbentrop on 24 October 1938, Ambassador Lipski admitted that "Beck's trip to Romania was a disappointment for Poland".⁴³⁷

The Poles, who considered the "handover of Ruthenia to Hungary" to be the "most appropriate" solution, had no ambitions of their own regarding this territory, and suggestions of this kind appearing in historiography do not correspond to reality. German inquiries in this matter returned an unequivocal answer in this regard. So as to not turn Romania into a passive observer, and believing in the possibility of Romanian-Hungarian rapprochement, the Polish Foreign Ministry opted for "giving Romania some small part of Ruthenia".⁴³⁸ But this move failed to win Bucharest over to the larger Polish plan.

Comnen wrote later in his memoirs: "Beck usually worked against logic and the obvious interests of his country, imagining that he could mould people and matters to his wishes [...]"⁴³⁹ In his memoirs, Beck was much harsher towards his Romanian partner, calling him a "complete idiot" (*un parfait imbécile*).⁴⁴⁰ Polish calculations that foreign minister Comnen's departure would help consolidate the alliance between Poland and Romania transpired to be an illusion, although

435 PDD/1938, p. 700.

436 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen Collection, Box 4, instructions dated 22 October 1938.

437 ADAP, t. V, dok. 81, pp. 87–89 (for the Polish version, see *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej (1939–1945). Zbiór dokumentów*, Vol. 1: 1939, ed. W. T. Kowalski [Warsaw 1989], p. 16). The German note dated 24 October 1939 was drawn up by Walther Hewel.

438 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Juliusza Łukasiewicza, 68/20, Ambassador Łukasiewicz's report after a conversation with Bonnet dated 18 November 1938.

439 N. Petrescu-Comnen, *Preludi del Grande Drama. (Ricordi e documenti di un diplomate)* (Roma 1947), p. 232.

440 J. Beck, *Dernier Rapport. Politique polonaise 1926–1939* (Neuchâtel 1951), p. 173 (in the Polish edition, see *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*, p. 231).

Comnen's successor, Grigore Gafencu, did in fact create a new climate in Polish-Romanian relations.⁴⁴¹

In the face of failure at the end of October 1938, Polish diplomacy went into retreat, which becomes clear especially in Hungarian diplomatic documents.⁴⁴² The Polish initiative to create the foundations of the *Międzymorze* bloc had suffered its final defeat.⁴⁴³ Of course, the Polish government continued to strive for a common border with Hungary, even though Polish leaders understood that this plan was a vast political undertaking.⁴⁴⁴ However, these efforts carried little significance. Moreover, all available evidence indicates that even if Polish-Hungarian-Romanian rapprochement had become reality, it would not have stopped Germany's attempts to master Central Europe, because Germany's advantages were colossal.

Summarising, what determined the defeat of Polish plans were the Romanian policy to not acknowledge changes in the geopolitical realities of Central and Eastern Europe and Hungarian passivity.

Beck and other representatives of the Polish political leadership attached excessive hopes to Italy's involvement in Central and Eastern Europe. This involvement, invigorated by the idea of the "fascist community", seemed to anticipate Italian-German rivalry for influence in this region.⁴⁴⁵ But such hopes transpired to be an illusion. In the realities of 1938, Italy could not become an effective partner with Poland in the construction of the "horizontal axis" (Warsaw-Rome), as a counterweight to Germany's growing power. In this respect, Beck's calculations failed.⁴⁴⁶ His visit to Rome in March 1938 ended in complete failure. Poland had to take

441 Ambassador Roger Raczyński's report dated 21 December 1938 confirms that he harboured such hopes (AAN, MSZ, 6369).

442 *Diplomáciai iratok Magyarország külpolitikájához*, p. 216.

443 For the Polish summary of this important conversation: PDD/1938, pp. 709–711. The Romanian document in the Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen Collection, Box 4. This was Beck's final defeat in this matter; see M. Kornat, *Polityka równowagi*, p. 337. See also Henryk Batowski, "Rumuńska podróż Becka w październiku 1938 roku", *Kwartalnik Historyczny* (1958), No. 2: pp. 423–437.

444 Such was the view of the Romanian ambassador in Warsaw, Richard Franasovici; see his encrypted telegram to Comnen dated 14 November (Hoover Institution [Palo Alto, CA], Nicolae Petrescu-Comnen Collection, Box 4).

445 See, above all, Jerzy W. Borejsza, *Rzym a wspólnota faszystowska. O penetracji faszyzmu włoskiego w Europie Środkowej* (Warsaw 1981). In 1935, Italy submitted a draft stabilisation treaty for Central Europe, contained in the memorandum "*Principales dispositions a inserer dans une Traite general de non-agression, non-immixtion et consultation pour l'Europe Centrale.*" See E. Collotti, *Fascismo e politica di potenza. Politica estera 1922–1939* (Milan 2000).

446 S. Sierpowski, *Stosunki polsko-włoskie w latach 1918–1940* (Warsaw 1975), pp. 506–541; V. Perna, *Galeazzo Ciano, operazione Polonia. Le relazioni diplomatiche italo-polacche degli anni Trenta (1936–1939)* (Milan 1999).

note of Italy's practical *désintéressement* in Central-Eastern Europe.⁴⁴⁷ In the case of Czechoslovakia, Mussolini stated that "the existence or non-existence of this country does not interest Italy",⁴⁴⁸ and Beck heard none of the binding declarations that he had expected regarding Italy's active involvement in Central European affairs. Italy's economic weakness—especially in relation to the Third Reich—was one of the reasons for this state of affairs. Mussolini and Ciano offered only political gestures; in practice, they adapted to the rules of the game as set by Germany. The Czechoslovak envoy to Warsaw, Juraj Slávik, was correct in his judgment that Beck's visit to Rome had produced no results.⁴⁴⁹ In fact, it could not have produced results.

There was a *iunctim* between the failure of Beck's mission in Galați and the immediate weakening of cooperation with Italy, a fact which was highly significant. Italy refused to support Poland's aspirations for a common border with Hungary at the end of October 1938—knowing that Germany did not want it. This decision was made on 24 October, and it was a decision made by Mussolini himself, guided as he was by his overriding interest in maintaining ties with Germany and taking no action that might anger the Germans. After all, no such action could be effective because of Italy's relative power disadvantage. The Italians did not intend to end all flirtations with Poland, but virtually nothing came of them. Pro-Polish sympathies within Italian society and the pro-Polish attitude of certain officials at the Italian Foreign Ministry had little influence.⁴⁵⁰ The Italians needed Poland only to the extent that it could oppose the Third Reich, even if Italy and Germany had similar political systems. Meanwhile, all of Rome's moves were calculated to not antagonise the "great Germans".⁴⁵¹

447 S. Sierpowski, *Stosunki polsko-włoskie*, pp. 506–541. For more on Mussolini and Italy's policy in 1938, see Rosaria Quartararo, *Roma tra Londra e Berlino. La politica estera fascista dal 1930 al 1940* (Rome 2001), Vol. 1, pp. 117–182. See also *L'Italia e la politica di potenza in Europa (1938–1940)*, ed. Ennio Di Nolfo (Milan 1985); M. Kornat, *Polityka równowagi*, pp. 371–384.

448 The Beck–Mussolini and Beck–Ciano conversations took place on 7–9 March 1938, PDD/1938, pp. 123–124.

449 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Juraj Slávik Collection, Box 41, Slávik's report dated 26 March 1938.

450 Pro-Polish feelings were kept alive by the undersecretary of state in the Foreign Ministry, Giuseppe Bastianini; see his memoirs *Uomini, cose, fatti. Memorie di un ambasciatore* (Milan 1959). For more on his mission to Poland as Ambassador in 1932–1936, see Jerzy W. Borejsza, *Mussolini był pierwszy*, second edition (Warsaw 1989), pp. 182–229.

451 For a broader treatment, see Ewa Cytowska, "Próby współpracy polsko-włoskiej w Europie Środkowej (October 1938–March 1939)," *Studia z Dziejów ZSRR i Europy Środkowej* 14 (1978): pp. 152–155.

Clearly, in the realities of the autumn of 1938, Hungary chose a fundamentally different path than Poland. The latter focused on activism, trying to achieve a status such that no party could dictate what would happen in Central Europe.

Polish foreign policy leaders were fully aware of a certain passivity among the Hungarians. Deputy Foreign Minister Szembek's letter dated 18 October to the Polish Envoy in Belgrade, Dębicki, is extremely important.

The Hungarian issue is still complicated for three reasons: first of all because of the behaviour of the Hungarians themselves, *secundo* because of Romania's position, and finally by some snag on the Slovak side. The Hungarians have turned out to be not up to the task, they have not been able to draw bold consequences from the opportunities that have presented themselves, they cannot decide on anything, and by letting things go, they allow time to work to their disadvantage.⁴⁵²

Hungary's wait-and-see policy was frowned upon in Warsaw; it was based on the logical assumption that, while working with Poland, Hungarian policy should not run counter to the interests of either the Western powers or the Germans. Leaders in Budapest took their cues from British policy.⁴⁵³ The governments in London and Paris wanted to maintain the inviolability of the post-Munich Czecho-Slovakia, which Beck perceived as a "mass inheritance". The Germans considered Central Europe to be their area for expansion, and they thus wanted no countries in this region to take independent action.⁴⁵⁴ Bearing in mind Hungarian motivations, Mirosław Arciszewski noted that "Germany prevents them [the Hungarians] from making a move in the first phase of any possible conflict because in such an eventuality, they would face great trouble and gain little effective help: the threat of Romanian and Yugoslavian armed intervention against Hungary would be real."⁴⁵⁵

In particular, the Hungarian government's approval of arbitration in the post-Munich Czecho-Slovakian territorial dispute that played out at a conference in Vienna on 2 November 1938, driven by an agreement between foreign ministers Ribbentrop and Ciano, was received coolly in Warsaw. The representatives of the Western powers had resigned from participating in this conference and thus did not take part in the dispute.⁴⁵⁶ It should also be noted that the Germans rejected a proposal, initiated by Italy and supported by Hungary, to name Poland as one of the arbitrators over Hungarian claims to the post-Munich Czecho-Slovakia. For Italy, this was an important political signal.

452 PDD/1938, p. 696.

453 T. L. Sakmyster, *Hungary, the Great Powers, and the Danubian Crisis*, p. 187.

454 Hitler was displeased by the fact that this was not clearly stated in the Munich Conference resolutions. See Stanisław Żerko, *Niemiecka polityka zagraniczna*, pp. 295–297.

455 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 257 (note on a conversation with Mirosław Arciszewski dated 6 September 1938).

456 H. Batowski, *Między dwiema wojnami*, 325–326.

Warsaw regarded Hungarian consent to four-power arbitration—in fact it was German-Italian arbitration—as a great political mistake.⁴⁵⁷ Polish leaders believed that Hungary had to achieve its goals *manu militari*. The Polish ambassador in Rome, Wieniawa-Długoszowski, had hopes that Hungary would do just that. He wrote to Beck on 22 October: “From conversations with the Hungarian envoy, I conclude that Hungary is ready for armed action. They have about 200,000 men ready. I quote the envoy: ‘You have to pay for everything. Admittedly, blood is the highest price, but it is also the most reliable.’ For my part, I supported his militant mood.”⁴⁵⁸

For the Poles, when the Hungarian government turned to arbitration (this decision being made on 27 October 1938), it meant political defeat. On 29 October, Envoy Orłowski “was forced to criticise Hungarian policy” during a conversation with foreign minister Kálmán Kánya. The Polish diplomat continued: “Because the matter has gone down the wrong path, it has escaped Hungarian hands, and Polish policy was hampered to the highest degree precisely by Hungary’s tactics, as if it were the days of Briand and Stresemann.”⁴⁵⁹ Beck claimed on 4 November 1938: “The Vienna Arbitration showed that the weakness of both partners (Czechs and Hungarians) made it possible for the matter to be settled in any number of ways.”⁴⁶⁰

The first arbitration in Vienna on 2 November 1938, led by von Ribbentrop and Ciano, represented a severe blow to Poland; it foiled Polish plans and calculations. The decisions made at Vienna neglected the matter of the common Polish-Hungarian border. Commenting on the situation in a conversation with Orłowski, regent Horthy declared that “at present, joining Ruthenia to Hungary is mathematics”.⁴⁶¹ The Polish envoy assessed the results of arbitration as the “greatest success” that could be expected, given the possibilities. The regent solemnly entered the city of Košice and visited what Hungary regarded as “recovered” territories. Orłowski advised that Poland take the “most liberal” possible course towards the

457 The British and French governments expressed their *désintéressement* in this matter as they were unable to gain from Hitler guarantees on the new borders of dismembered Czechoslovakia.

458 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Leona Orłowskiego, 78/16. Based on information from Wieniawa-Długoszowski (report dated October 22, 1938) Beck had the right to claim that “Italy will agree to arbitration in the Hungary-Czechoslovak case, as long as Germany and Poland agree to it; Poland would participate in arbitration only on the disputed areas in the east. The dispute over the western areas and Nitra were to be settled by Italy and Germany.”

459 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Leona Orłowskiego, 78/16.

460 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 340.

461 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Leona Orłowskiego, 78/16, Orłowski to the MSZ, 4 November 1938. The regent noted with satisfaction that Hitler, receiving Hungarian prime minister Kálmán Darányi in Berchtesgaden, “declared his *désintéressement* in Ruthenia”.

Slovak population in these ethnically mixed areas.⁴⁶² As events developed in the winter of 1938/1939, Hungary's position underwent some modification. In various contexts and variants, Hungarian leaders gave some consideration to the idea of a Polish-Hungarian protectorate over Slovakia—which was unrealistic without Berlin's consent.

On 5 December 1938, in instructions for the Polish ambassador to Stockholm, Gustaw Potworowski, Beck commented on the failure of his plan, calling on the ambassador to inform the Swedish foreign minister Rickard Sandler that:

[...] we tried to bring about better relations between Rumania and Hungary against the backdrop of the discussion of Ruthenia. Unfortunately, the enmity between these two neighbours did not allow for quick results in this regard. All in all, we should be concerned in the long-term about friction in the Danube region, and I hope there will be no friction of a military sort.⁴⁶³

It is difficult to add anything of substance to this concise assessment.

However, in order to avoid fruitless speculation, we can only note that perhaps a more assertive Hungarian approach would have brought greater results in the autumn of 1938. The Hungarians probably believed that by coming out against Czechoslovakia, they might find themselves in a conflict with Romania and, to some extent, with Yugoslavia. Last but not least, they were rebuked by Hitler and von Ribbentrop, who wanted to foil any close Polish-Hungarian relationship. "Hungary's cooperation with us in recent events has not been heroic", Beck stated on 4 November, adding:

In difficult historical moments they have been weak, but mostly because of the kind of people who are in power there. This is an instructive example. Even great power that is not thrown on the scales of a decision provides nothing. Hungary's tone may be better in principle than that of other countries and it is worth nurturing.⁴⁶⁴

Beck hoped that Yugoslavia would also join Poland's Central European bloc. Poland had a tradition of friendship and trust with the Yugoslavian region, stemming from the nineteenth-century Balkan politics of Adam Czartoryski and the diplomacy of the Hotel Lambert,⁴⁶⁵ and it is worth mentioning here that there was some basis for this optimistic calculation. In April 1937, during talks the Polish foreign minister had in Bucharest, issues related to the Little Entente came up and the Romanian foreign minister, Victor Antonescu, repeated prime minister Milan Stojadinović's preliminary proposal, which came down to the idea of a tripartite

462 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Leona Orłowskiego, 78/16, Orłowski to the Foreign Ministry, 3 November 1938.

463 PDD/1938, p. 813.

464 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 341.

465 For more on Polish-Yugoslavian relations, see above all Anna Garlicka, *Polska–Jugosławia 1934–1939. Z dziejów stosunków politycznych* (Wrocław 1977).

Yugoslav-Romanian-Polish alliance. Because such an idea, if implemented, would result in the breakup of the Little Entente, Antonescu approached the matter with care. Beck, too, was cautious and informed his Romanian counterpart that Poland had no real interest in the Danube Basin or in southern Europe. Without Hungary, such an arrangement would have no value for Poland.

There was another factor that acted against the idea of a Polish-Romanian-Yugoslavian rapprochement. Apart from its internal difficulties, the Yugoslav state felt threatened above all by Italy and wanted good relations mainly with Germany, for which Germany would promise Yugoslavia at least partial protection, all of which was the result of the seemingly sophisticated diplomacy of prime minister Milan Stojadinović, as well as his dubious *Realpolitik*.⁴⁶⁶ Viewing the matter more closely, Yugoslavia found some stability in its international position thanks to this policy, which is how it was viewed throughout Europe, including in Warsaw.⁴⁶⁷ But from the perspective of Yugoslavian politics, Poland was of secondary importance, mainly due to the geographical distance between the two countries.⁴⁶⁸

The Polish leadership sought to conclude a Hungarian-Yugoslav agreement, believing that it would allow for the extension southwards of the *Międzymorze* bloc's borders. But this was not an easy task because Stojadinović was pursuing a pro-German policy.⁴⁶⁹ He assured the Poles that "establishing friendly bilateral relations between Yugoslavia and Hungary" was necessary, but in reality Yugoslavian politics was increasingly drawn into Berlin's orbit.

It was not only fear of the use force, but also Germany's economic penetration in south-eastern Europe, that greatly strengthened the Third Reich's influence, a fact which Minister Beck did not seem to notice, although Polish military leaders did.⁴⁷⁰ Certain diplomats had no doubt in this regard. For example, envoy Roman

466 See Milan Stojadinović, *Ni rat ni pakt. Jugoslavija između dva rata* (Rijeka 1970).

467 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Romana Dębickiego, 40/8, Report by Polish Envoy in Belgrade Roman Dębicki to Beck, 6 October 1938.

468 In his memoirs, Stojadinović treated Polish foreign policy with silence. He recalled only Beck's visit to Belgrade in the summer of 1936. See idem, *Ni rat ni pakt*, p. 500.

469 The Stojadinović-Ciano Agreement (also called the Belgrade Agreement) of 25 March 1937 normalised Italian-Yugoslavian relations, at least temporarily, and the Yugoslavian prime minister was convinced that his country's pro-German orientation helped in this regard.

470 Władysław Bortnowski, in his report for the General Inspector of the Armed Forces, wrote on 30 July 1938 that the settlement of Germans along the Danube is a huge asset for the Third Reich in its position in south-eastern Europe, towards Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria and Greece. "None of these countries will be able to expose themselves to an economic conflict with Germany due to the fear of losing their largest market." See "Stosunki polsko-niemieckie przed February wojną światową. Dokumenty z Archiwum Generalnego Inspektora Sił Zbrojnych," ed. E. Kozłowski, *Najnowsze Dzieje Polski. Materiały i studia z okresu 1914–1939* 3 (1960): p. 201.

Dębicki wrote to Szembek on 10 June 1937 that “it is important for the Germans that there be no organisation of a Balkan bloc, because they are stronger when each of these countries develops economic relations separately, and because a group of interested parties could lead to a consolidation of agrarian states directed against them.”⁴⁷¹ On 7 December 1938, Ambassador Lipski reported to Warsaw about Germany’s “economic control of the Danube basin”, adding that, from the German perspective, Romania was most important because of its natural resources, above all oil.⁴⁷²

Beck’s efforts to build closer relations with the Baltic and Scandinavian states also ended in complete failure. The basis for the Polish foreign minister’s thinking was that these countries would feel threatened by the rise of German power, and that this fact would create a useful platform for exchanging views on European security with Poland’s participation.⁴⁷³ Over time, a framework for real political cooperation would be created. In a conversation with first lord of the admiralty Alfred Duff Cooper, in which the subject of the Baltic States came up, Beck said that “Poland wants to provide them with friendly protection, but we are not thinking about creating a bloc of states under our protectorate.”⁴⁷⁴ He certainly did not want to burden the Scandinavian countries with any formal obligations, because at that time it would have been fundamentally unrealistic; he did think about engaging them in dialogue with Poland on the topic of security in the region and in the broader *Międzymorzezone*.

Beck’s Scandinavian activity in 1937–1938 was one of the important cards in his diplomatic deck.⁴⁷⁵ But the Polish foreign minister’s visits to Norway and Sweden as well as to Latvia and Estonia in the summer of 1938 brought nothing but exchanges of views with the foreign ministers of these countries. Norwegian foreign minister Halvdan Koht later recalled that Beck, as his interlocutor, “spoke in such a tone as if he were quite sure that Poland would overcome all the difficulties facing her.”⁴⁷⁶ Significantly, in his opinion, rapprochement with Poland was desirable as long as it did not involve Norway getting into a conflict with Bolshevik Russia.⁴⁷⁷

The countries of Scandinavia veered between a policy of strict neutrality and a policy of engaging in certain schemes. Periodically after 1932, Scandinavian

471 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Romana Dębickiego, 40/7.

472 *Ibid.*, Kolekcja Lipskiego, 67/3.

473 It was in this spirit that Beck explained his ideas and expectations to the American ambassador in Warsaw, Anthony Biddle, on 19 June 1938. See *Poland and the Coming of the Second World War*, p. 213.

474 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 258 (note of conversation dated 6 September 1938).

475 For more, see A. Staniszewski, “Skandynawia w polityce Józefa Becka,” in *Mysł polityczna i dyplomacja w XX wieku. Studia z historii myśli politycznej i idei*, series title *Historia i Polityka*, Vol. 2 (Torun 2005), pp. 33–51.

476 A. Bielnicki, “Halvdan Koht i Józef Beck,” *Komunikaty Instytutu Bałtyckiego* (Danzig) (1978), z. 27/28: p. 76.

477 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

foreign ministers took part in regional conferences, but they themselves stipulated that such cooperation did not represent a political bloc.⁴⁷⁸ In 1939, Norway and Sweden became involved in the “Oslo group”.⁴⁷⁹ Beck’s hopes notwithstanding, it remained beyond Poland’s reach to gain Sweden as an ally, despite good relations between the Polish foreign minister and his counterpart in Stockholm, Rickard Sandler, to whom Beck repeatedly attempted to explain the principles behind Polish policy. The situation would change if the Soviets managed to take control of (or politically subordinate) Finland, at which time Sweden’s anti-Soviet talk would most likely turn into action.⁴⁸⁰ In the end, Finland—taking advantage of its political independence—took a fundamentally anti-Soviet position, which was, at the same time, quite pro-German. The Soviets viewed Latvia and Estonia (which, from 1934, formed the Baltic Entente with Lithuania) as their natural sphere of influence.⁴⁸¹ Unfortunately in Kaunas and Tallinn, but especially in Riga, faith in the possibility of strict neutrality did not weaken. At the same time, the influence in Lithuania of the Soviet policy to stoke antagonisms towards Poland was clear.

Polish-Lithuanian relations evolved positively after the Polish ultimatum of 17 March 1938, in which Poland demanded that the two countries establish diplomatic relations.⁴⁸² The ultimatum resolved one of the “overdue matters” of which

478 H. Batowski, *Między dwiema wojnami*, p. 270.

479 See B. Skottsberg-Ahman, “Scandinavian Foreign Policy. Past and Present”, in *Scandinavia between East and West*, ed. H. K. Friis (Ithaca, NY 1950), pp. 255–306.

480 On Sweden’s foreign policy at this time, see W. M. Carlgren, *Svensk underrättelsetjänst 1939–1945* (Stockholm 1985). Swedish historiography talks about the concept of the Swedish “policy of solidarity” with Finland; see E. Carlquist, *Solidaritet på prov. Finlandshjälp under vinterkriget* (Stockholm 1971). See also P. Jaworski, *Marzyciele i oportuniści. Stosunki polsko-szwedzkie w latach 1939–1945* (Warsaw 2009), which begins with a treatment of the events of August 1939.

481 For more on these matters, see P. Lossowski, “Związek państw bałtyckich w latach 1918–1934–1940,” *Komunikaty Instytutu Bałtyckiego* (Danzig) (1992), No. 41: pp. 3–34. See also D. J. Dallin, “The Baltic States between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia,” in *The Baltic States in Peace and War 1917–1945*, eds. V. S. Vardys, R. J. Misiunas (University Park, PA 1978), pp. 97–109; “The Baltic in International Relations between the Two World Wars,” ed. J. Hiden, *Studia Baltica Stockholmensia* (1991), No. 3: pp. 1–20; D. M. Crowe, *The Baltic States and the Great Powers. Foreign Relations, 1938–1940* (Boulder, CO 1993). See also Angelo Tamborra, *L’Intesa Baltica* (Milan 1937).

482 See P. Lossowski, *Ultimatum polskie do Litwy 17 marca 1938 roku. Studium z dziejów dyplomacji* (Warsaw 2010). Text of the Polish note: PDD/1938, pp. 140–141. For more, see P. Lossowski, *Litwa a sprawy polskie (1939–1940)*, second edition (Warsaw 1985). For the latest interpretation, see idem, *Stosunki polsko-litewskie 1921–1939* (Warsaw–Łowicz 1997). Lithuanian historiography also talks about an improvement in Polish-Lithuanian relations. Nerijus Šepetyš argues that Poland was beginning to respect Lithuanian neutrality and independence. See idem, *Litauen im Visier des Dritten Reiches. Ungeschehene Geschichte eines Reichprotektorates. März–September 1939* (Vilnius 2002), p. 79.

Piłsudski had spoken in 1931, and it seems unquestionable that Poland thus ceased to be Lithuania's main enemy. In light of the realities of a destabilised Europe, Lithuanian politicians began to realise that the threat to their country's independence would come not from Poland, but from Germany or Soviet Russia.⁴⁸³ Normalised relations between the two countries seemed to open new opportunities for Poland in the Eastern Baltic region, and diplomats in Warsaw once again deliberated over the idea of a political and economic bloc "based on Poland and Finland", not without Lithuania but with its participation, along with that of Latvia and Estonia.⁴⁸⁴

But hopes based on these changes were not reflected in reality. No doubt the illusion of effective neutrality, one that prevailed in the minds of Baltic politicians, hampered any effective planning for cooperation within a bloc. At the same time, Poland was in no position to effectively defend the interests of the Baltic States because, by the end of 1938, Poland had become vulnerable from the outside. The country found itself in political isolation, although this isolation was overcome in the spring of 1939, when the British extended their guarantee to Poland. Meanwhile, the Baltic States remained under the illusion that they could survive by cultivating strict neutrality.⁴⁸⁵

It was not until March 1939 that a common Polish-Hungarian border was established,⁴⁸⁶ when it was already too late for this fact to change Central Europe's political realities. It came as a result of the Third Reich's dictates and without Italy's assistance. From the point of view of Poland's security, this development had no positive significance. Indeed, it meant that Poland was now encircled from the south. Polish plans for a defensive war against Germany—on which the Polish General Staff, by order of Marshal Edward Śmigły-Rydz, had started working immediately after the Munich Conference—had now lost their support in geographic realities; the circumstances had become infinitely more unfavourable.⁴⁸⁷

483 For more on this phase of Polish-Lithuanian relations, see J. Urbšys, "Litwa i Związek Sowiecki w latach 1939–1940," trans. J. Darski, *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1989), No. 90: pp. 109–135. See also F. Charwat, "Rok stosunków polsko-litewskich 1938–1939," ed. M. Siekierski, *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1998), No. 125: p. 134. See also Piotr Łossowski's monograph *Litwa a sprawy polskie* (second edition). The stabilising significance of Poland was revealed only on its collapse in 1939, which meant that Lithuania (and the Baltic States in general) immediately lost the foundations of independent political existence. See S. Liekis, 1939. *The Year that Changed Everything in Lithuania's History* (Amsterdam–New York 2010).

484 Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski, *Polska w Europie i świecie 1918–1939*, second edition (Warsaw 1984), p. 300.

485 See the new and critical monograph by Algimantas Kasparavičius, *Lietuva 1938–1939 m. Neutraliteto iliuzijos* (Vilnius 2010).

486 See J. Sallai, "Gorąca jesień. Granica węgiersko-polska w 1939 roku," *Geopolityka. Półrocznik Instytutu Geopolityki* (2009), No. 1 (2): pp. 133–154.

487 Important light has been shed on these matters by Jerzy R. Godlewski, *Wybrane zagadnienia polskiego planowania wojennego w latach 1919–1939* (Danzig 1982).

As long as there was an independent Czechoslovak state, its neutrality could at least be assumed in the event of a Polish-German war, and Poland could thus count on no threat from the south. But now, in March 1939, the situation had changed completely. Poland was encircled from the west, north and south, and—as it later transpired—Poland could not count on the friendly neutrality of the USSR. In the name of objectivity, it should be stressed that Poland was in no position to defend Czechoslovakia, since its government, in the absence of France’s assistance, decided to capitulate and accept the Munich judgment on 30 September 1938.

In their efforts to rebuild the balance of power in Central and Eastern Europe, Polish diplomats did not gain the support of Western powers. They were in fact met with reluctance even from their ally France, which had produced no new ideas for an Eastern policy. It is an indisputable fact that after 1936 and the remilitarisation of the Rhineland, France lost all political initiative in Europe, despite the genuine revival of its alliance with Poland. France’s system of Eastern alliances had collapsed; in 1938 they were a mere memory.⁴⁸⁸ And most importantly, the Polish government had serious doubts whether France would come to Poland’s aid in the event of war, and fears and suspicion had not subsided in Paris that a Polish-Czechoslovak war might breakout.

The high level of distrust towards Poland is certainly evidenced in a memorandum issued by René Massigli (then director of the Political Department at the French Foreign Ministry), who was aware that the policy of appeasement would lead to chaos. In this document, entitled “*Conséquences pour la France de l’affaiblissement de la Tchécoslovaquie*” and dated 19 September 1938, Massigli expressed the view that the consequences of Czechoslovakia’s subordination to Germany would be that Poland and the Baltic States would come under Germany’s expansive influence, and that Germany would thus become a Great Power ruling over Central and Eastern Europe. In the same very realistic approach taken by foreign minister Bonnet, we read in this document that such a development would mean “Mr. Beck’s victory” because France’s *defection* would provide a new justification for Beck’s “pro-German policy”.⁴⁸⁹

After the conflict over the Sudetenland, French leaders came up with an idea—no doubt influenced by recent experiences with Poland and France’s “**diverging paths**”—to free themselves from the alliance with Poland.⁴⁹⁰ In a political report

For an introduction to these issues, see also *Polskie Siły Zbrojne w drugiej wojnie światowej*, Vol. 1: *Kampania wrześniowa 1939*, part 1: *Polityczne i wojskowe położenie Polski przed wojną* (London 1951), 87 ff.

488 For a broad treatment, see Anthony Komjathy, *The Crises of France’s East Central European Diplomacy, 1933–1938* (Boulder–New York 1976). See also M. Ormos, *Le problème de la sécurité et l’Anschluss* (Budapest 1975), p. 44.

489 Quote from R. Ulrich-Pier, *René Massigli (1888–1988). Une vie de diplomate*, Vol. 2 (Bern–Bruxelles 2006), p. 1394.

490 On the matter of Massigli’s note dated 6 October 1938, see M. Pasztor, *Polska w oczach francuskich kół rządowych w latach 1924–1939* (Warsaw 1999), pp. 58–59.

for Bonnet dated 25 October 1938, the French ambassador in Warsaw, Léon Noël, suggested a formal revision of the alliance with Poland. He proposed to officially terminate the treaties of 19 February 1921 and 16 October 1925, along with the military convention of 19 February 1921. They were to be replaced by a Franco-Polish treaty on “friendship and consultation” and an agreement establishing a *modus operandi* to regulate staff contacts between both armies no doubt designed to allow only for continued cooperation between the Polish Second Department and the Deuxième Bureau.⁴⁹¹

The Polish foreign policy leadership had no doubt that the political passivity of the Western powers towards Polish ideas, or in general towards Central and Eastern Europe, was a reality. On 18 October 1938 Beck wrote that Great Britain and France were “taking their *désintéressement* to an extreme”.⁴⁹² Nevertheless, in November, and thus after the Viennese arbitration, Ambassador Łukasiewicz presented to Bonnet the details of the Polish plan to prepare Hungary’s annexation of Transcarpathian Ukraine, with Romania’s consent, in return for which the latter would obtain a small piece of this territory. “I got the impression,” Łukasiewicz wrote to Beck, “that Minister Bonnet raised the case of Ruthenia to indicate that he would try to influence King Carol towards implementing our plan. I do not even exclude the possibility that Romania’s participation in the division of Ruthenia was suggested to him by the Romanians themselves.”⁴⁹³ His conclusions transpired to be unjustified.

Polish diplomats were not able to find a common language with the French Foreign Ministry. It could not have been otherwise. As we know, on 6 December 1938 the Franco-German Non-Aggression Agreement was signed, in the midst of highly uncertain circumstances, based on the model of the German-British declaration of consultation and non-aggression announced at Munich on 30 September 1938. The Parisian talks between the two foreign ministers remain one of the great controversies in diplomatic history because Ribbentrop later claimed that, in these talks, Bonnet had agreed to give Germany a free hand in Central and Eastern Europe, which Bonnet categorically denied.⁴⁹⁴ There is no doubt that the Paris Declaration

491 DDF, series 2, Vol. 12, pp. 371–378. A little later Noël informed Ambassador Kennard of his thoughts; see his report for Lord Halifax dated 28 November 1938, National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 21809, C.14878/2688/55.

492 PDD/1938, p. 701.

493 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Łukasiewiczza, 68/20, encrypted telegram from the Ambassador to the MSZ dated 18 November 1938.

494 This issue was most thoroughly analysed by Kazimierz Piwarski, *Polityka europejska w okresie pomonachijskim. Październik 1938 – marzec 1939* (Warsaw 1960), 73 ff. On 13 July 1939, in a document to Bonnet, von Ribbentrop referred to an alleged or real declaration made on 6 December 1938 in which the French foreign minister expressed agreement to give Germany a free hand in Eastern Europe. In a statement on 21 July 1939, Bonnet categorically denied that claim.

of 6 December 1938 enabled German diplomats in their efforts to loosen the British-French alliance.⁴⁹⁵

On 17 December 1938, the ambassador in Paris, Łukasiewicz, emphasised that French policy was completely passive and defeatist, which produced numerous highly negative consequences for Poland. "Factually speaking," the ambassador wrote to Beck:

[...] our situation in France is not the result of any deeper change of attitude towards us. A certain, but very vague, role is being played by bitterness left over from the Czech crisis, but the decisive essence of things is much deeper in France's overall attitude towards the broader international situation. Since the Munich Conference, France has played the role of the defeated one who is unable to break from the enemy, which is continuing its pursuit, and is unable to break away from this enemy and turn to a series of new issues. In relation to its earlier international commitments, France is too weak to break with them and too weak to recognise them with sufficient determination. Therefore, it is in a state of inertia and resignation, defeatist towards everything that is happening in Eastern and Central Europe. As things stand today, France sets apart the coordinated policy of the German-Italian axis from cooperation with England, in which France plays a passive role and does not consider the possibility that the alliance with Poland and the pact with Soviet Russia would have any significance from this point of view—not that France doubts our opposition to extensive German designs, but rather because it totally lacks faith that such opposition could be effective. From this point of view, the failure to deal with the matter of Carpathian Ruthenia according to Hungary's and our wishes played a very important and negative role. Broadly speaking, French policy regards only France's alliance with England as a positive asset, while an alliance with us and a pact with Soviet Russia are burdensome, something which one is reluctant to acknowledge. This situation may change if France, acting under England's influence, moves to an offensive policy towards Italy and Germany, which in the near future is completely unlikely, or if events show that our resistance to German policy can be effective and that, consequently, we gain influence over the attitude of other Central and Eastern European countries towards Berlin. It is also possible that if Italy's attack becomes more direct and dangerous and is supported in any form by Germany, then France, being forced to defend itself more actively in an area in which it cannot depend on England's formal obligations, will want to bring its continental alliances into play, but always as an auxiliary, not an equivalent to the English alliance. As for Italy, it is to be expected that Chamberlain's visit to Rome will be an attempt to ease tensions between Rome and Paris, which might bring positive results, at least temporarily, and thus persuade

495 See Hans F. Bellstedt, *"Apaisement" oder Krieg. Frankreichs Außenminister Georges Bonnet und die deutsch-französische Erklärung vom 6. Dezember 1938* (Bonn 1993); see also the article by Jan Przewłocki, "Jeszcze raz o rozmowach Bonnet-Ribbentrop (grudzień 1938)," *Studia z Najnowszych Dziejów Powszechnych* 5 (1965): pp. 213–222.

France to continue its current defeatist stance towards Central and Eastern European affairs.⁴⁹⁶

The logic of these thoughts cannot be denied, although as we know, predictions that Italy might intervene militarily in the West (against France) were not borne out by events.

Undoubtedly, Great Britain showed some interest in Polish plans, despite its programmatic *désintéressement* in Central-Eastern Europe. In December 1937, the *Sunday Times*, whose policy line generally did not correspond with Polish interests, wrote that “creating a strong neutral bloc between Germany and Soviet Russia” would open a new phase in Polish foreign policy.⁴⁹⁷ A memorandum from the British Foreign Office in June 1938 states that “Poland, owing to her geographical position, should be one of the main pillars, if not the main pillar, of a bloc of neutral buffer states between Germany and Russia consisting of herself and the Baltic States, possibly in association with Scandinavian States.”⁴⁹⁸ There was no mention here of the Danube states, but the loose, unfinished but clear idea of a “neutral zone” or “buffer zone” between the totalitarian powers of the Third Reich and the USSR emerged in British foreign policy of the late 1930s. In Poland, whose foreign policy after Piłsudski’s death was led by Beck, the British saw the guarantor of this “neutral zone”. Although the British came to the conclusion that the “balance tilts toward Germany”, they argued that it was not the fault of Beck or Polish diplomacy, but rather the effect of the objective state of affairs.⁴⁹⁹

Signs of sympathy for the Polish idea to expand the “neutral sphere” between Germany and the USSR did not translate into any real British support for Beck’s diplomatic efforts. It could also be argued that in 1937–1938, it was already too late to effectively counteract German expansionism. On 7 November 1938, the British permanent under-secretary of state for foreign affairs, Alexander Cadogan, wrote in his journal that the Versailles system was already irreversibly damaged, and in order to defend it, it would have been necessary to decide to take up arms against the Third Reich at the last minute, when it was still possible, namely on 7 March 1936, when German troops entered the Rhineland.⁵⁰⁰ Historically, there is a great deal right about this statement, but for Polish interests, Cadogan’s statement sounded ominous.

The economic foundations of the Third Europe project were very weak. Poland had little opportunity for economic expansion.⁵⁰¹ Polish exports to Central and

496 PDD/1938, pp. 843–844.

497 *The Sunday Times*, 20 December 1937.

498 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, General Correspondence, 371, 22229, N.2973/349/59, Foreign Office note dated 11 June 1938.

499 T. Piszczkowski, *Anglia a Polska 1914–1939*, p. 391.

500 This reflection is quoted in Clement Leibovitz, *The Chamberlain–Hitler Deal* (Edmonton 1993), p. 382.

501 On the Polish economy and its influence on foreign policy possibilities, see Zbigniew Landau and Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Polska w Europie i świecie* (second edition).

Eastern European countries remained limited. The agricultural nature of the economies that were to make up the Third Europe required cooperation with an industrial power, and that country was Germany.⁵⁰²

In the autumn of 1938, Europe found itself condemning weaker, small- and medium-sized countries to dependence and objectification. As Jerzy Stempowski wrote in 1939: “Following the Munich agreements and the withdrawal of the Western powers behind the Maginot Line, what has prevailed in the rest of Europe is a *vacatio legis*, a period marked by the free play of forces, in which the weaker states have had no visible chances to maintain independence.”⁵⁰³

The Third Europe Project and Beck’s Position on Czechoslovakia

The issue of a Third Europe certainly sheds a great deal of new light on Józef Beck’s attitude on Czechoslovakia. It is in fact one of the most debatable issues in historiography—and the most exciting. It is difficult to avoid addressing this issue, although scholars have considered Polish-Czechoslovak relations in the context of the critical events of 1938 many times.⁵⁰⁴ The temptation for researchers to blame Poland for the “diverging paths” of the two Slavic states can be very strong, but it should be avoided.

For Beneš, Poland was the “Balkans of the North”, not a desirable ally.⁵⁰⁵ Programmatically, and wanting to avoid a conflict with Germany and especially Soviet Russia, he did not consider an alliance with Czechoslovakia’s northern neighbour. Poland and Czechoslovakia had normalised relations, but they formed no alliance.⁵⁰⁶ Out of these subtle but short-sighted assumptions emerged the Czech offer of a “friendship pact” in 1934, around which incidentally many myths have circulated that are a frequent subject in Polish historiography.⁵⁰⁷

Recalling these circumstances, which are nothing new in the eyes of scholars, we arrive at the essence of the Polish-Czechoslovakian antagonism, which was

502 See J. Tomaszewski, “Związki gospodarcze państw sukcesyjnych między wojnami światowymi, *Przegląd Historyczny* (1971), z. 2: 299 ff.

503 J. Stempowski, “Europa w 1938–1939,” *Ateneum* (1939), R. 2, No. 3: p. 371.

504 I do not discuss here the activities, well-described in literature, of Polish diplomacy during the Sudeten crisis, because such a discussion would be mere repetition of known facts.

505 Quote from *Historia dyplomacji polskiej*, Vol. 4: 1918–1939, ed. P. Łossowski (Warsaw 1995), p. 390.

506 For more on Czechoslovak foreign policy, see Petr Jelinek, *Zahraničně-politické vzťahy Československa a Polska 1918–1924* (Opava 2009). For a biography of Beneš based on extensive material, see Jindřich Dejmek, *Edvard Beneš. Politická biografie českého demokrata*, cz. 1: *Revolucionář a diplomat (1884–1935)* (Prague 2006).

507 See above all W. Balcerak, “Legenda bez pokrycia,” *Studia z Dziejów ZSRR i Europy Środkowej* 9 (1973): pp. 201–206.

based not only on the Cieszyn Silesia (Zaolzie) dispute, which is often the narrow focus of Western historians who do not understand the realities of this part of Europe, but above all the conflict between two different visions of the Central and Eastern European order.⁵⁰⁸ This conflict was not born in 1938; rather, it had existed since the founding of both independent states in 1918, after which the two sides made several attempts (always unsuccessful) to overcome it.⁵⁰⁹ It would be a mistake to attempt to explain the crisis in interwar Polish-Czechoslovak relations by citing only this territorial border dispute.

While Warsaw, in Beck's vision, aspired to the role of a central regional player, leaders in Prague repeated the slick phrase that referred to that vision as the "great policy of the small Republic". For many observers of the European political arena in the 1920s, Czechoslovakia was the key to the *système français de l'Europe de l'Est*. President Masaryk and prime minister Beneš realised that Czechoslovakia was a small state, but this did not mean that they had no ambitions to play a key role in Central and Eastern Europe. Piotr Wandycz was thus correct when he wrote that "Poland's Great Power status and its associated megalomania should not be contrasted with Czech modesty."⁵¹⁰

Roman Dmowski understood and emphasised the importance of Czechoslovakia in the consolidation and survival of the Versailles order. If we can trust the exactness of French diplomatic documents, at the end of November or in early December 1918 in Paris, Dmowski offered Masaryk the creation of a Polish-Czechoslovak federation or confederation.⁵¹¹ Masaryk rejected the idea.

508 See A. Essen, *Polityka Czechosłowacji w Europie Środkowej w latach 1918–1932* (Krakow 2006); S. Nowinowski, *Konstatacje i nadzieje. Dyplomacja czechosłowacka wobec kwestii bezpieczeństwa zbiorowego w Europie 1919–1925* (Torun 2005). See also Stanisław Morozow, *Polsko-czechosłowackie stosunki 1933–1939. Czego skrywał się za polityką "równoudalności" J. Becka* (Moscow 2004), pp. 293–499. Morozow portrayed the broad conflict between two opposing visions (Polish and Czechoslovak) of how to organise Central Europe.

509 On 7 November 1921 in Prague, foreign ministers Konstanty Skirmunt and Edvard Beneš concluded a cooperation agreement, but it never went into effect (see P. Wandycz, "U źródeł paktu Skirmunt–Beneš," *Kultura* [Paris] [1958], No. 11: pp. 119–126). In 1925, Beneš visited Warsaw and it seemed warm relations between the two countries would persist. In 1933, Beck intended to travel to Prague and work towards cooperation with Czechoslovakia in order to confront the threat of a dictate imposed by the four powers. But the visit never happened after Beneš, not wanting to upset France, withdrew his opposition to the four power pact; see also P. Wandycz, "Trzy próby poprawy stosunków polsko-czechosłowackich 1921–1926–1933," in *Z dziejów polityki i dyplomacji polskiej*, pp. 223–235.

510 P. Wandycz, "Pierwsza Republika a Druga Rzeczpospolita," in idem, *Polska a zagranica* (Paris 1986), p. 91.

511 AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Pologne, Vol. 67, Note from the Direction des Affaires Politiques et Commerciales at the French Foreign Ministry dated 12 December 1918.

Piłsudski did not believe in rapprochement with Poland's southern neighbour, although he sent a letter, also in December 1918, to Masaryk containing an offer of cooperation.⁵¹² As he indicated to the French ambassador to Warsaw after the May Coup of 1926, Marshal Piłsudski was aware that "the Treaty of Versailles is the foundation of stabilisation in Europe, of its current condition; if you adjust it, everything collapses".⁵¹³ Nonetheless, in December 1927, not trusting the Czech statesman, Piłsudski reportedly asked himself: "With what could we win over the Czechs?"⁵¹⁴

It seems that the Poles could only reconcile themselves with the definitive loss of Zaolzie if Czechoslovakia accepted the Polish political offer leading to political and military cooperation, which transpired to be impossible. Polish leaders were increasingly disappointed with the possibility of achieving the kind of cooperation with Czechoslovakia that would buttress Poland's security. A climate of anti-Czechoslovak thinking evolved in Poland, resulting in the conviction that the partition of this state, or even its internal dissolution, would be in Poland's interests.⁵¹⁵ Piłsudski believed that Czechoslovakia was an artificial creation which, along with Austria, would be one of the first to disappear from the map of Europe as a result of (the apparently inevitable) major shocks in the international order. Following Piłsudski's thinking, diplomats in the Polish Foreign Ministry produced a series of documents in the 1930s on the bankruptcy of the Czechoslovak state; Czech policy had little to offer that was positive, and the centrifugal tendencies in Czechoslovakia were a prerequisite for future difficulties and decay.⁵¹⁶

But with the principle *audiatur et altera pars* in mind, we must remember that Poland was not an attractive partner to Czech leaders. President Masaryk and prime minister Beneš pushed the idea that Poland had artificial borders and that there was little probability either the western border (disputed with Germany) or the eastern territories, obtained as a result of the war with Soviet Russia in 1919–1920, could

The author was probably Pierre de Margerie. See also Z. J. Gąsiorowski, "Dmowski's Overture to Masaryk," *Polish Review* (1974), No. 1: pp. 90–92

512 This letter was dated 12 December 1918, and it was delivered to Prague by legionnaire Damian Wandycz (for the Polish text, see P. Wandycz, *Polska a zagranica*, p. 237).

513 AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Pologne, Vol. 114, French Ambassador in Warsaw Jules Laroche to Aristide Briand, 23 July 1929.

514 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 379. Waclaw Grzybowski reportedly overheard this question as he accompanied the Polish leader returning from Geneva, and he shared his recollection with Szembek on 10 December 1938.

515 In January 1938, Beck agreed with Hitler that "the entire structure of the Czech state is impossible" (the Polish note does not include this phrase; it is contained only in the German version, which Western historians quote, e.g. Ch. Thorne, *The Approach of War 1938–1939* [New York 1968], p. 55).

516 J. Tomaszewski, *Dokument z 1934 r. o zasadach polskiej polityki zagranicznej*, pp. 801–803.

be maintained. In July 1920, British diplomat Lord D'Abernon recorded the highly unfavourable remarks that the Czechoslovak president had made about Poland, and he described how Masaryk had encouraged the Allied mission "not to organise any help for Poles" because it would be ineffective and would only undermine the authority of the Allied powers.⁵¹⁷ In August 1930, President Masaryk gave an interview to the Western press that reverberated throughout Polish public opinion, in which he unfortunately called the "Polish corridor" an "impossibility".⁵¹⁸

In a book from 1934 entitled *Kde kledali příčiny rozpi polsko-československých vstahiv*, one Czech publicist rightly concluded that the real causes of the antagonism between the two countries were not political but psychological,⁵¹⁹ especially since the Spring of Nations in 1848—Kamil Krofta has written—the past divided Poles and Czechs⁵²⁰; mutual perceptions were based on the different historical paths the two nations had taken in the modern era. The Polish insurgent ethos was the antithesis of the Czech political realism that was at the centre of Beneš' political philosophy.

The occupation of Cieszyn Silesia in January 1919 was a traumatic experience in Polish memory. The negative position taken by the Prague government regarding the transit of arms to Poland in the climactic period of the Polish-Bolshevik war in the summer of 1920 tipped the balance in Polish-Czechoslovak relations. As Beck told Laval in May 1935: "These facts are etched in our memory".⁵²¹ However, the thesis can be successfully defended that the Polish foreign minister was not talking here about territorial revindication, but rather about a broad political plan to rebuild Central and Eastern Europe. In 1924, Juliusz Łukasiewicz wrote: "[...] our attitude towards Czechoslovakia is not and cannot be a problem that is at the heart of Poland's true state interests or its foreign policy", but it was not until Beck's time that this thesis took the form of political canon.⁵²²

The French-Czechoslovak treaty concluded on 25 January 1924 caused a *mal-aise* in Poland, which can be read in French diplomatic documents written *pro foro interno*.⁵²³ During talks in Paris on 8–23 May 1924 with the chief of the Polish General Staff, Stanisław Haller, marshal Ferdinand Foch and the French General Staff attempted to persuade the Poles to recognise the necessity of military cooperation with their southern neighbour in order to bring about a Polish-Czechoslovak

517 E. V. D'Abernon, *Osiemnasta decydująca bitwa w dziejach świata. Pod Warszawą 1920 roku*, trans. A. Dobiecki, foreword A. Zaleski (Warsaw 1932), p. 27.

518 Quote from J. Gruchała, *Tomasz G. Masaryk* (Wrocław 1996), p. 226

519 G. Pańko, *Polska i Polacy w czeskiej opinii publicznej w okresie międzywojennym* (Wrocław 1996), p. 23.

520 K. Krofta, "Nasze stosunki z Polską w oświeceniu historii," *Przegląd Współczesny* 43 (1932): p. 137.

521 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, p. 290.

522 J. Łukasiewicz, *Stosunek do Czechosłowacji w polskiej polityce zagranicznej* (Warsaw 1924), p. 14 (reprint from *Przegląd Polityczny*).

523 AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Pologne, sygn. 74, "Note sur la Pologne," 30 May 1924.

military agreement.⁵²⁴ These efforts came to nothing. The last attempt at rapprochement between Warsaw and Prague before Poland's May Coup were agreements concluded in Warsaw during Beneš' visit to Poland in April 1925, but their provisions led only to normalisation, and not to a Polish-Czechoslovak alliance.

It should also be noted that Beck inherited Piłsudski's views of Czechoslovakia (above all his views on that country's political future), which were based on the idea that Czechoslovakia's existence was not permanent. In the Marshal's view, Czechoslovakia was an artificial creation, born out of the realities of the short-term international situation in the wake of the Great War. He emphasised that the Czechs remained a minority in a centrally governed state, a part of a "national mosaic." Let us recall here that in June 1927, in a conversation with the new Polish envoy to Prague Wacław Grzybowski, Piłsudski expressed his belief that "the English policy towards Czechoslovakia is [...] the most important. You will see," the Marshal continued, "that it is England who will decide Czechoslovakia's fate."⁵²⁵ With these words, the Polish statesman seemed to suggest that, if the still fragile balance of power in Europe became destabilised, then Czechoslovakia would be held for "ransom" for peace, a country "written off" by Western powers.⁵²⁶ The events of 1938 proved these predictions to be correct. In Beck's eyes, Piłsudski's views of Czechoslovakia provided yet more proof of the accuracy of the general foreign policy guidelines that the marshal had worked out and left behind for his successors. At the time when Piłsudski articulated these arguments, Beck was head of his cabinet at the Ministry of Military Affairs, the marshal's right hand.

In June 1935, the Polish foreign minister mentioned "two nation states condemned to territorial destruction": Austria and Czechoslovakia.⁵²⁷ In Rome in February 1936, Beck told the ambassador at Quirinal, Alfred Wysocki: "I do not believe in the future of Czechoslovakia". He continued: "It is a country without cohesive power, with an unsteady and variable policy on which you cannot rely".⁵²⁸ This lack of cohesive power came as the result of the fact that the Czech people were a minority in a country they ruled.

The Poles exaggerated the negative aspects of the Czechoslovak state; they spoke of national oppression and even a "police state". In Beck's eyes, the Czechoslovakia of Masaryk and Beneš was a "classic police state", and he declared that in Prague "liberalism was only a matter of appearance".⁵²⁹ On 11 September 1938, in his

524 M. Pułaski, *Stosunki polsko-czechosłowacko-niemieckie od roku 1933 do wiosny 1938* (Poznań 1967), p. 27.

525 W. Grzybowski, "Spotkania i rozmowy z Józefem Piłsudskim," *Niepodległość* (New York-London) 1 (1948): p. 98. See also *Kalendarium*, Vol. 3, p. 77.

526 This term is in Stefania Stanisławska's, *Polska a Monachium*, p. 249.

527 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, p. 316 (note dated 12 June 1935).

528 A. Wysocki, *Tajemnice dyplomatycznego sejfu*, ed. W. Jankowerny, second edition (Warsaw 1979), p. 420.

529 *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926-1939*, p. 99.

instructions for the ambassador in Paris, Juliusz Łukasiewicz, Beck wrote: "None of their neighbours believes in the democracy of the Czech Republic, because this country has been carrying out a brutal police policy for 20 years."⁵³⁰

The term "police state" to describe the interwar Czechoslovakia probably did not reflect reality, but it must be remembered that authorities in Prague did in fact apply a rather brutal policy to Czech-ify the Polish minority in Zaolzie. Harsh criticism of the Czech policy towards national minorities living in the country sounded ambiguous, above all in the eyes of European diplomats. When in August 1938, during a conversation with the Swedish diplomat Sven Grafström, Beck described Prague's national policy as "unreasonable", his interlocutor later wrote in his diary that such argumentation was highly questionable from the point of view of Polish interests. "One must not forget", Grafström wrote, "that Poland also has its minorities—Germans and Ukrainians—who are probably following Warsaw's demands regarding the Polish minority in Czechoslovakia with great interest."⁵³¹

Certainly, Beck offended the splendour of Czechoslovakia as the only stable parliamentary democracy in Eastern Europe. But let us not forget, among the statements made by Czech politicians about Poland, we can find many unfriendly remarks. In 1934, Beneš called Poland's political system a "semi-fascist regime."⁵³² The Polish foreign minister's distaste for Czechoslovakia was reciprocated in Prague. Czech politicians talked in derogatory terms about "Beck's Poland". To the Czechoslovak envoy in Warsaw, Václav Girša, Beck was a "scoundrel, and a very dangerous one."⁵³³ We should also remember that Edvard Beneš' attitude towards Poland and the Poles was always far from sympathetic. Having said that, it is not feelings that determine relations between countries, but rather interests tied to geopolitics. This is why it is much more important to note that, in Beneš' cool calculation, Czechoslovakia had no interest in close ties with Poland.

Czechoslovak politicians tacitly assumed that changing boundaries or reducing Poland's international role would not affect their country's interests. They saw no reason to associate themselves with a country threatened by Germany and in conflict with Soviet Russia. From the point of view of Polish leaders and creators

530 [J. Łukasiewicz], *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939. Wspomnienia i dokumenty Juliusza Łukasiewicza ambasadora Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, eds. W. Jędrzejewicz, H. Bułhak, expanded edition (London 1995), p. 159. See also Beck's conversation with foreign minister Konstantin von Neurath on 13 January 1938, *Monachium 1938. Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne*, p. 24.

531 S. Grafström, *Polskie stronice. Dziennik od 5 lipca 1938 do 6 grudnia 1939 roku*, trans. and ed. J. Lewandowski, A.N. Uggla (Warsaw 1996), p. 54.

532 G. Pańko, *Polska i Polacy w czeskiej opinii publicznej*, p. 162.

533 Envoy Václav Girša's report for the Foreign Ministry in Prague, dated 19 October 1932, on the then deputy Foreign Minister Beck, in Archiv Ministerstva zahraničních věcí (the Foreign Ministry Archive in Prague), Documents on the Mission in Warsaw (quote from J. Kozęński, *Czechosłowacja w polskiej polityce zagranicznej w latach 1932–1938* [Poznan 1964], p. 47).

of Polish foreign policy, German expansion towards south-eastern Europe would give Poland some relief; at least it would buy time for Poland, and perhaps it would entangle Germany in the region's conflicts in the long term. As the American scholar of Central European history Fenton Gregory Campbell has carefully noted, it is impossible to estimate the seriousness of Polish foreign minister August Zaleski's suggestion, made at the beginning of 1927, that Poland would consent to an Anschluss in return for Germany's renunciation of territorial claims against Poland. If such a concept in fact surfaced, it reflected Polish attempts to direct German expansion south of Poland's borders.⁵³⁴ It was an illusion no greater than that which Beneš entertained when he told Zaleski's successor, Beck, in Geneva in 1933, that German-Czechoslovak relations were good and that he had every reason to believe that they would remain so.⁵³⁵

On 18 November 1928, on the tenth anniversary of Czechoslovakia's founding, President Masaryk spoke about the parallel histories of the Czechoslovak and Polish nations. Both lost their freedom in similar circumstances and, as part of a great upheaval, regained it at the same time, which justified the need for reconciliation and cooperation.⁵³⁶ It is also well known to diplomatic historians that Masaryk once stated that "without a free Polish nation there will be no free Czech nation, but without a free Czech nation, there will also be no free Polish nation."⁵³⁷ These words were profoundly true, but in practice they did not become the motto of Czechoslovak foreign policy, as proved by Prague's stance in 1920 or the president's statement to the German press in August 1930 about the need to return the Free City of Danzig and the "Polish corridor" to Germany. Thus, realities confirm that this statesman's attitude toward Polish affairs, as Janusz Gruchała rightly emphasised, "cannot be considered favourable".⁵³⁸

Anna Cienciąła aptly pointed out that the armed seizure of Zaolzie by the Czechs in January 1919, which was later granted to Czechoslovakia by a resolution of the Council of Ambassadors, ruined any chances for normalised relations between the two nations because political forces in interwar Poland almost

534 F. G. Campbell, *Confrontation in Central Europe. Weimar Germany and Czechoslovakia* (Chicago–London 1975), p. 180; see also Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski, *Polska w Europie i świecie*, second edition, p. 301.

535 See "Rozmowa Beneš–Beck (3 lutego 1933 w Genewie)," ed. A. Essen, *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1994), No. 110: pp. 119–134. The Czech politician said: "There is no fundamental dispute between us and Germany, there is no border conflict. The Germans do not really want anything from us and we will never find ourselves in a local conflict with Germany" (*ibid.*, p. 124).

536 *Le Temps*, 18 November 1928.

537 Quote from H. Batowski, "T. G. Masaryk a Polska," *Przegląd Współczesny* 33 (1930): 48. Batowski offers a somewhat different version in *Środkowoeuropejska polityka Polski*, p. 271.

538 J. Gruchała, *Tomasz G. Masaryk*, p. 226.

unanimously emphasised that the territory had to be returned to Poland.⁵³⁹ Polish society generally did not identify with Beck's policy of détente with Germany; the political opposition in Warsaw felt little but distrust towards this policy and protested in sharp demagogic tones. The Polish Foreign Ministry's anti-Czech attitude did not reflect the feelings of all Poles, as Jerzy Tomaszewski pointed out,⁵⁴⁰ but in his effort to recovery Zaolzie in the autumn of 1938, Beck had full public support. This support was evidenced by enthusiastic press articles (not only in the pro-government press), by the doctorates *honoris causa* at Warsaw and Lvov universities that Beck received, and even by a congratulatory letter from Ignacy Paderewski, who was living in Switzerland but remained an unquestioned moral authority in the eyes of Poles. The Polish government's anti-Czech press campaign of 1934–1938, inspired by officials in the Foreign Ministry, justified to Poles the steps taken against Poland's southern neighbour, and the government was able to take political advantage of its "success".⁵⁴¹

The unquestioned promotion of Czechoslovakia on the international stage in the 1920s, its active foreign policy, and Beneš' personal prestige abroad, all seemed to confirm the validity of the Czech leader's political assumptions. In such conditions, the creator of Czechoslovak policy appreciated the need to normalise relations with the Polish Republic, but close cooperation with Poland seemed unnecessary, especially since the reborn Poland's borders were not considered final. In the 1920s, and especially in the post-Locarno period of stabilisation of relations in Europe, it was Poland, not Czechoslovakia, which was exposed to the edge of German revisionism, which was what president Masaryk once suggested to Polish envoy Zygmunt Lasocki.⁵⁴² Meanwhile, for the matter of the Polish "corridor, or whatever it is called", there was no solution.⁵⁴³

539 A. M. Cienciala, "Józef Beck. Szkic biograficzno-polityczny," in *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*, p. 34. For a monograph on the origins of the Cieszyn Silesia cause, see Marek K. Kamiński, *Konflikt polsko-czeski 1918–1921* (Warsaw 2001).

540 J. Tomaszewski, letter to the editor dated 27 July 1992, *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1992), No. 102: 236.

541 There are suggestions that Beck was against this propaganda campaign. See M. Kornat, "Niedoszłe dymisje Józefa Becka," in idem, *Polityka równowagi*, pp. 387–426.

542 Masaryk explained to the Polish diplomat that "he does not think that a conflict will break out with Germany at any time in the near future. He pointed out that the Franco-Prussian War [1870] was followed by 50 years of peace, and he assumes that after the recent world war, which exhausted everyone, peace is again assured for many years." Biblioteka Polskiej Akademii Umiejętności w Krakowie, Teki Lasockiego, 4154, Lasocki's report to the MSZ, 14 January 1927.

543 Masaryk used these words with Briand in Geneva, 19 March 1927 (AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Pologne, p. 113).

When the Polish-German non-aggression agreement was announced on 26 January 1934, Beneš thought that the Poles had been “incredibly naïve” because, with that agreement, Germany had only bought time to rearm and prepare to strike Poland.⁵⁴⁴ This does not change the fact that, for the Czechoslovak politician, this agreement was a shock and bitter surprise.⁵⁴⁵ It is worth mentioning here that Beneš himself tried to achieve a similar “normalisation” deal with Germany, but without success; the secret German-Czechoslovak conversations of 1936–1937 came to nothing.⁵⁴⁶

In 1932, the Czechoslovak envoy in Warsaw, Václav Girša, stated: “Today’s Poland would be a rather burdensome partner”.⁵⁴⁷ The turbulence that struck Europe in 1932–1933 brought about no real rapprochement or cooperation, although in this regard there were expressions of hope.⁵⁴⁸ Beck’s trip to Prague, anticipated as a pivotal journey whose idea was born under the influence of the two countries’ joint struggle against the Four-Power Pact, was cancelled by Warsaw because Beneš—having received assurances from France—withdrew his opposition to the concept of a directorate of Great Powers. “Without military cooperation with Poland, Czechoslovakia cannot create any operational plan,” said General František Bláha, head of President Masaryk’s military office.⁵⁴⁹ Differences of opinion over the Four-Power Pact idea deepened the dispute. The Czechs accepted the French assurances expressed in a memorandum of 7 June 1933. Poles opposed a directorate of Great Powers until the very end.⁵⁵⁰ For Warsaw, these differences were just another source of mutual grievances. Czechoslovakia could

544 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 17744, C.1020/138/18, Envoy Addison’s report (after a conversation with Beneš) to John Simon dated 3 February 1934.

545 Beneš was surprised by the Polish diplomatic move. See J. Dejmek, *Edvard Beneš. Politická biografie*, part 1, pp. 578–579.

546 For more on Czech-German talks on this matter carried out in 1936–1937, see Michał Pułaski, who analysed this matter extensively based on the Albrecht Haushofer documents at the Library of Congress in Washington (see M. Pułaski, *Stosunki polsko-czechosłowacko-niemieckie*, 131 ff).

547 J. Kozeński, *Czechosłowacja w polskiej polityce zagranicznej*, pp. 47–48.

548 On 20 May 1932, the Polish Envoy in Prague, Grzybowski, wrote to Zaleski on Beneš’s planned trip to Poland (AAN, MSZ, 5505).

549 AAN, MSZ, 5505, envoy in Prague, Waclaw Grzybowski, to Foreign Minister Beck, 11 December 1933: “The pressure from these parties on Min. Beneš is significant,” the Polish envoy wrote, referring to military leaders. In contrast to those in political circles, those in Czechoslovak military circles appreciated the importance of a possible alliance with Poland from the point of view of their country’s security. See H. Bułhak, “Z dziejów stosunków wojskowych polsko-czechosłowackich w latach 1927–1936,” *Studia z Dziejów ZSRR i Europy Środkowej* 11 (1975): pp. 129–135. For more on these developments (in their last phase), see Jerzy Kupliński, *Polsko-czechosłowackie kontakty wojskowe od wiosny 1938 do jesieni 1939 roku* (Danzig 1977).

550 Z. Mazur, *Pakt Czterech* (Poznan 1979), p. 266.

not be considered a possible member of any Central European bloc to be built in the name of independence from the Great Powers. Grzybowski wrote to Beck that "Poland's constructive policy has little to do with Beneš' opportunism," adding that "most importantly, however, Czechoslovakia's current dependence on France and its ties to the L[itte] E[ntente] render it a partner that is not very realistic."⁵⁵¹

Felix Vondraček called the Little Entente "a solid foundation for the reconstruction of Central Europe."⁵⁵² But from Polish diplomats' point of view, Czechoslovak foreign policy, based as it was on the purely regional system of the Little Entente, remained an obstacle to the implementation Poland's Central European projects.

Wiesław Balcerak wrote aptly that "the Little Entente remained internationally viable only as long as the balance of forces on which the Versailles system was based remained unchanged."⁵⁵³ I do not intend to prove here either that Polish foreign policy leaders were far-sighted realists or that Czechoslovak politicians were not. But it is clear that Polish diplomacy was driven by a desire to prepare for a situation when the international order built in 1919–1921 would be disturbed or might even experience an irreversible shock. We do not find such aspirations among Czechoslovak policymakers. Meanwhile, we can only be amazed by documents confirming that in the spring of 1937, during foreign minister debates in Belgrade on the Little Entente, the topic of discussion was the restoration of Habsburg rule, which had to be prevented "at all costs."⁵⁵⁴ There was no talk of the German threat.

The chances of normalising relations and establishing cooperation, if they were real at all, were strongest just after the two countries were established, in the initial years after the war. At that time, the idea of a military alliance appeared in documents describing contacts between military officials.⁵⁵⁵ It is a paradox of history that as the entire "new Europe" came increasingly under threat, Polish and Czechoslovak paths were diverging. After 1934, they would never cross again. In April that year, French foreign minister Barthou was in Poland and at that time—as we can read in the Polish note on the French-Polish talks in Warsaw—he "heard a great deal about Poland's rights to Cieszyn and had the impression that this matter would continue to trouble Polish-Czech relations."⁵⁵⁶

551 AAN, MSZ, 5505, envoy in Prague, Wacław Grzybowski, to Foreign Minister Beck, 11 December 1933.

552 F. J. Vondraček, "Diplomatic Origins and Foreign Policy," in *Czechoslovakia*, ed. R. J. Kerner (Berkeley–Los Angeles 1945), pp. 354–355.

553 W. Balcerak, "Pakty regionalne w Europie Środkowej (1918–1939)," *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* (1972), No. 1: p. 75.

554 *Dokumenty československé zahraniční politiky. Československá zahraniční politika v roce 1937* (Prague 2007), ed. J. Dejmeč, Vol. 1, p. 275. Protocol of resolutions from 1–2 April 1937.

555 W. Balcerak, "Sprawa polsko-czechosłowackiego sojuszu wojskowego w latach 1921–1927," *Studia z Dziejów ZSRR i Europy Środkowej* 3 (1967): pp. 207–226.

556 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/5, Note on talks with foreign minister Barthou 22–24 April 1934.

Beneš' statements, made *ex-post*, about his having submitted an offer of a bilateral alliance to Beck, for which there was no satisfactory answer, cannot be treated too seriously.⁵⁵⁷ Envoy Grzybowski's letter to Beck on 5 July 1933 makes clear that there was no Czech offer of an alliance. "I am waiting for the Minister's instructions regarding Beneš' proposal for a 'Friendship Pact,'" the Polish diplomat wrote from Prague. In the same letter, Grzybowski recalled Beneš' idea for a "guarantee treaty regarding our common border".⁵⁵⁸ No other proposals were presented.

The offer of a "friendship pact" was expressed for the last time in a document that the Czechoslovak president handed to general Gamelin in August 1936 during the general's visit to Prague, with a request that it be handed over to Śmigły-Rydz, who was to call on the French army leadership in Paris in September.⁵⁵⁹ The Polish general refused to accept this document; after reading its text, he immediately returned it.⁵⁶⁰ To general Gamelin's question of whether Czechoslovakia could consider its border with Poland to be secure, the Polish commander-in-chief replied in the affirmative. On 12 May 1937, the Czechoslovak envoy in Warsaw, Slávik, once again wrote about the Czech offer of a "friendship pact".⁵⁶¹ Until the last moments of relative peace in Europe, Prague's position did not change. Even if such a change had occurred, it is doubtful that the Poles would have deemed it necessary to associate themselves with a country like Czechoslovakia, which was under threat and which found itself in the insecure position that it did in 1937–1938. No doubt Beneš wanted to "level out" relations with Poland on the basis of the principles of non-aggression and friendly neutrality, but nothing more; these principles were to be ensured by a pact of "perpetual friendship" such as that which Yugoslavia and Bulgaria achieved in January 1937. Only such an offer was possible. Simply put, this "friendship pact" was a way to neutralise Poland, not a way to bind both countries into an alliance. It is thus unsurprising that the Poles would not be interested in such a solution, and it is worth adding that in his

557 Most often, it is assumed that Beneš submitted such a proposal to Beck in 1933 or 1934. But Beneš made unsubstantiated claims that it was submitted in 1932 (when Beck was not yet foreign minister). The offer was supposedly "repeated" in 1933 and 1937 during General Gamelin's trip to Poland, which is also not exact, because the French commander-in-chief visited Warsaw in August 1936. See E. Benes, *Fall and Rise of a Nation: Czechoslovakia 1938–1941*, ed. M. Hauner (New York 2004), p. 148.

558 AAN, MSZ, 5505, envoy Grzybowski to Beck, 5 July 1933.

559 See P. Kołakowski, *Między Warszawą a Pragą. Polsko-czechosłowackie stosunki wojskowo-polityczne (1918–1939)* (Warsaw 2007), p. 205.

560 J. Ciałowicz, *Polsko-francuski sojusz wojskowy 1921–1939*, foreword M. Zgórnjak (Warsaw 1970), p. 229.

561 *Dokumenty československé zahraniční politiky*, Vol. 1, p. 387.

memorandum presented to general Gamelin, Beneš said that, "as a barrier against Russian Bolshevism or German Nazism, Poland is very much in doubt".⁵⁶²

Meanwhile, Czechoslovak officials were providing real support for the anti-Polish activities of Ukrainian émigrés, and there was a Comintern centre in Prague which, in the 1930s, was headed by Bolesław Bierut.⁵⁶³ As Beck would write in his *Preliminaria polityczne do wojny 1939 roku*, dictated in Romania: "[...] every organisation, every person who acted against the Polish state, both as a terrorist and an agitator, could be sure in advance that he would find in Czechoslovakia shelter, care and even assistance if needed. Everyone in Poland knew about this."⁵⁶⁴ In December 1937, when asked by French foreign minister Delbos whether Polish-Soviet relations were better than Polish-Czech relations, Beck replied: "*peut-être* [perhaps]".⁵⁶⁵ On 13 March 1938, the Czechoslovak envoy to Warsaw, Juraj Slávik, wrote to foreign minister Kamil Krofta: "Until changes are made to the regime in Poland, and as long as Beck is at the head of Polish diplomacy, there is no hope for a Czechoslovak-Polish agreement."⁵⁶⁶ Beck once told Hungarian foreign minister Kánya that there was "no way to improve relations" with Czechoslovakia.⁵⁶⁷

It is true that the main source of Beck's reluctance towards Czechoslovakia involved his conviction that Beneš was primarily concerned with "Czechoslovakia's privileged position in Eastern Europe [...]", which inevitably led to rivalry with Poland.⁵⁶⁸ In response to French prime minister Léon Blum's suggestion, in a conversation in Geneva on 3 October 1936, that Poland establish cooperation with the Little Entente, and "in particular with Czechoslovakia," Beck stated openly that:

[...] this matter is not so simple. Since time immemorial, for ten centuries, since Poland first came into existence, it has had its interests throughout the Danube basin. The past gives many examples in this area. The monument to one of our kings is in Varna, on the Black Sea coast, our cavalry was near Vienna and elsewhere in this part of Europe. Similarly, contemporary Poland has its own vital interests corresponding to its present conditions of existence. Thanks to this, we have never associated Polish politics

562 General Gamelin published the text of this document in his memoirs, *Servir* (Paris 1947), Vol. 1, pp. 235–236. See also L. Namier, *Europe in Decay* (London 1966), pp. 283–284.

563 K. Lewandowski, "Stosunki polsko-czechosłowackie," pp. 242–243.

564 *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*, p. 98.

565 Biblioteka Polska (Paris), Akcesja, 4610, Polish Foreign Ministry note on the Beck–Delbos talks.

566 J. Dejmek, "Ministr Beck a jeho zahraniční politika v pohledu československých diplomatů 1932–1939," *Slovanské Historické Studie* (Prague) 23 (1997), "Pocta Henrykovi Batowskemu," p. 133.

567 Neues Politisches Archiv, Akten der Republik (Vienna), Gesandtschaft Warschau, p. 81, Report from Austrian Envoy Maximilian Hoffinger to Minister Guido Schmidt, after talks with Kánya, dated 9 February 1938.

568 *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*, p. 99.

with the Little Entente as such. This concept does not exist politically because we have different relations with each of the countries of the Little Entente. One of them, Romania, is our ally, but apart from that we do not have any political arrangement south of the Carpathians. When it comes to Czechoslovakia, the atmosphere between our countries is not particularly good. We simply do not trust Czechoslovakia. Our past is shaded by a bitter experience. That country's most prominent statesmen, Masaryk and Beneš, have not hesitated to enunciate programs that directly conflict with Poland's interests. In 1919, the Czech army attacked Cieszyn Silesia. In 1920, the Czechs cut off the delivery of ammunition as we were fighting for our existence, and our army went on the offensive having only a dozen or so days of ammunition. By this I do not mean to say that we need to always live in the past, and it is true that time can undoubtedly heal wounds and that international politics must be led from the top by governments and not by moods, but today's condition is not satisfactory. Until recently, support for the Ukrainian subversion, known to us in detail, could not help but offend the Polish government, and treating the Polish population in the Moravian Ostrava region serves at every turn to stir up Polish opinion. I will cite as an example that, at the time of General Śmigły's visit to Paris when Prague tried to create a mood through its press that a revival of Polish-French relations would affect Polish-Czech relations, the great anti-Polish campaign in Moravian Ostrava was not halted. I must admit that I do not understand Prague's policy. On the other hand, I would like to say that all these difficulties, in my opinion, do not go beyond what are normal problems between neighbours and are in no way material for international conflict, thanks to which the word "reserve" best defines our position towards Prague. More important is the general view of the matter, i.e. how it would be impossible to give one of the countries of the Danube basin a privileged position within our policy, which has always been equally friendly to all nations of that basin.⁵⁶⁹

This remains one of the most principled *pro foro externo* statements that Beck ever made.

It would be a great mistake to think that Piłsudski and Beck's negative attitude towards Czechoslovakia was motivated only by matters of status. As French foreign minister Barthou stated in front of the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee after returning from Warsaw and Prague in April 1934, Poland did not strive for "prestigious success" in its dispute with Czechoslovakia.⁵⁷⁰ The irreversibly divergent paths taken by the two countries were decided by interests, as those interests were realistically interpreted "here and now" in both capitals.

In the realities of the 1930s, the Soviet Union became a significant factor. Beck, in the above-mentioned conversation with Delos on 11 May 1937, stated that "our relations with Prague are burdened by the Czech-Soviet treaty of mutual assistance."⁵⁷¹ On 11 June 1938, the American ambassador in Warsaw, Anthony Biddle,

569 AAN, MSZ, 108A, Note on the Beck-Blum talks in Geneva dated 3 October 1936.

570 P. Wandycz, "Louis Barthou o swjej wizycie w Polsce," p. 346.

571 *Dariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 3, p. 276.

told deputy foreign minister Szembek: "The fall of Czechoslovakia would definitely set up the Soviets in Europe".⁵⁷² Here, the American diplomat was stating a view which was not often openly expressed at the Polish Foreign Ministry but which was often held privately and was tied to the oft-repeated slogan that Czechoslovakia would be an "aircraft carrier" for the Soviets in Central Europe. In the interwar period, Poles and Czechoslovaks, especially the two countries' elites, held fundamentally different attitudes towards Russia—especially towards Bolshevik Russia—and Beck's approach to Czechoslovakia was coloured by Beneš' pro-Soviet foreign policy.

In May 1936 in Belgrade, Beck said: "The basic guideline for Czech policy at the time [after Czechoslovakia's rise] was—and remains to this day—the idea of depending on Russia and serving as a bridge between Russia and Western Europe." He continued: Poland's "existence and development [...] are an obstacle to achieving this goal."⁵⁷³ Envoy Kazimierz Papée argued that "a large Poland separating Czechoslovakia from Russia was for Dr Beneš a fact that complicated his policy of basing Czechoslovakia on Russian support and Russian penetration", and he emphasised that Prague was interested only in an "ethnographic Poland".⁵⁷⁴ Jan Šeba's book *Rusko a malá dohoda v politice světové* (1936), which promoted these ideas, caused a political uproar in the Polish press.

Despite the failure of all attempts to normalise relations, the beginning of 1937 seemed to signal an improvement in bilateral relations, although it was perhaps not as "spectacular" as Janusz Gruchała put it. In any case, in February 1937, the new Polish envoy in Prague, Kazimierz Papée, demanded—on his government's orders—autonomy for the Polish minority in Zaolzie, and he defined this demand as a condition *sine qua non* for real improvement in Polish-Czechoslovak relations.⁵⁷⁵ The request was not met. In 1938 Beneš made one final attempt to normalise relations with Poland but the Poles viewed the move as merely another manoeuvre aimed at improving his country's position vis-à-vis Germany.⁵⁷⁶ At the same time, various Czech military officials made moves to improve relations with Poland, also without success.

572 Ibid., pp. 67–68.

573 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Romana Dębickiego, 40/6, „Notatka z fragmentów rozmów Pana Ministra w Belgradzie,” May 1936.

574 "Odpowiedź Kazimierza Papée na ankietę rządu polskiego na uchodźstwie dotyczącą polskiej polityki zagranicznej wobec Czechosłowacji w 1938 r.," eds. M. K. Kamiński, E. Orłof, *Dzieje Najnowsze* (1998), No. 4: p. 150.

575 J. Gruchała, *Czeskie środowiska polityczne wobec spraw polskich 1920–1938* (Katowice 2002), p. 160.

576 P. Kołakowski, "Polsko-czechosłowackie stosunki polityczne (styczeń 1934 – czerwiec 1938 r.)," in *A Pomerania ad ultimas terras. Studia ofiarowane Barbarze Popielas-Szultce w sześćdziesiątą piątą rocznicę urodzin i czterdziestolecie pracy naukowej*, eds. J. Sochacki, A. Teterycz-Puzio (Słupsk 2011), p. 550.

The mutual antipathy between Józef Beck and Edvard Beneš certainly cast a shadow over Polish-Czechoslovak relations in the 1930s. Immediately after Beck took over leadership of the Polish Foreign Ministry, public opinion began to view Warsaw-Prague relations through the prism of the rivalry between these two men, the stakes of which were at the centre of the Central-Eastern European diplomatic stage.⁵⁷⁷ Beneš summed up their first meeting in Geneva rather harshly, writing about Beck's "unextraordinary intelligence".⁵⁷⁸ In turn, Beck told Paweł Starzeński that Beneš was a "short, conceited man".⁵⁷⁹

No doubt Beck and Beneš had a great deal in common when it came to the real tasks of politics. Beneš viewed himself as heir to the Czech historical tradition, with its tactics of achieving goals in small steps. He often emphasised the need for "realism" in politics. He used the term *Realpolitik* with conviction. Beck's thinking and language were entirely different; he was convinced that "having closed my eyes to the importance of imponderables in today's era, one cannot speak of political realism".⁵⁸⁰ His political concepts, formed above all in the post-partition era whose heirs in Poland were both Piłsudski and Beck, were unintelligible to the Czechs, just as Czech "realism", with its basis in "organic work", was incomprehensible to the Poles.⁵⁸¹

In June 1937, the Polish foreign minister told his Romanian counterpart, Victor Antonescu, that "Czechoslovakia can expect nothing from Poland, neither bad nor good".⁵⁸² At the same time, Beck expressed his belief that France would not defend Czechoslovakia when threatened by Germany, as the Franco-Czech alliance stipulated.⁵⁸³ The year 1938 proved the correctness of this belief. Poland's policy towards its southern neighbour must be interpreted on the basis of this fundamental assumption. Poland's mistake was that those in Polish political circles calculated that the German invasion of Czechoslovakia would involve Germany in a prolonged conflict, which would allow neutral Poland to serve as a "buffer state" between the Reich and Soviet Russia, and which would thus allow Poland to gain time for internal consolidation.⁵⁸⁴

577 Such a picture emerges from international political commentary. See for example a brochure by Ferdinand Kahánk, *Beneš contra Beck. Reportáže a dokumenty* (Prague 1938).

578 See *Rozmowa Beneš-Beck (3 lutego 1933 w Genewie)*, p. 121.

579 P. Starzeński, *Trzy lata z Beckiem*, foreword and notes by B. Grzełowski (Warsaw 1991), p. 52.

580 *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*, p. 99.

581 See an important article by Piotr Wandycz, "Pierwsza Republika a Druga Rzeczpospolita," *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1974), No. 28: pp. 3–20.

582 Quote from P. Kołakowski, *Polsko-czechosłowackie stosunki polityczne* (Słupsk 2011), p. 549.

583 Beck made such a comment to Ambassador Biddle; see National Archives (Washington), Department of State, Decimal Files, mf T.1247/2, Biddle's report dated 8 October 1937.

584 *Ibid.*

Polish policy towards Czechoslovakia in 1938 was the result of many years of negative experiences in bilateral relations. With this in mind, we must emphasise that Polish diplomacy in 1938 initiated no actions aimed at breaking Czechoslovakia up. It is true that the Polish government proposed a "privileges clause" in the treatment of the Polish minority in Czechoslovakia, demanding that the same solutions be applied to it as in the case of the German population in the Sudetenland.⁵⁸⁵ But it is indisputable that Poland adapted its tactics to the policy of the Great Powers, following their actions and attempting to secure what Beck understood as Poland's vital interests. Recognising that France would not come to Czechoslovakia's aid, leaders in Warsaw assumed that that country's fate was sealed, and the Polish government's only concern was not Czechoslovakia's survival, but rather the management of what would be left of Czechoslovakia. If the Western powers decided to come to Czechoslovakia's aid, Beck was prepared to change his political tactics within 24 hours, which is what he told the American ambassador to Warsaw, Anthony Biddle, in June 1938.⁵⁸⁶ It is extremely interesting that the Czech leaders themselves realised that if the Western powers abandoned the policy of appeasement, Poland would then change its political course, as cooperation with Germany would not then be in Poland's interest. But as the Czechoslovak foreign minister Kamil Krofta wrote, the key to changing the West's policy was in England's hands.⁵⁸⁷

We can imagine the conflict over Zaolzie in 1938 being settled differently than with a Polish ultimatum, which has generally been considered a serious error on Beck's part.⁵⁸⁸ Before 30 September 1938, Czechoslovakia took as a basis for further action the British-French plan of 21 September, which did not exclude the possibility that the Sudetenland would be ceded. On the same day, the Czechoslovaks committed themselves to introducing the "privileges clause" to the Poles in Zaolzie; that is, the same solution that applied to the Sudeten Germans.⁵⁸⁹ On 22 September in a personal letter, Beneš promised Ignacy Mościcki "rectification of the border" in

585 The Hungarian government took a similar position, and Miklós Horthy said as much in a letter to Hitler dated 15 September 1938; see *The Confidential Papers of Admiral Horthy*, eds. M. Szinai, L. Szücs (Budapest 1965), 102.

586 In his report dated 19 VI 1938, Ambassador Biddle wrote: "It is well to bear in mind that one of Beck's guiding policies is to keep Poland in such a position as to jump at a moment's notice in the direction which Beck feels will serve Poland's interests to the best advantage" (see *Poland and the Coming of the Second World War*, 200).

587 See Krofta's statement dated 2 September 1938, *Dokumenty československé zahraniční politiky. Československá zahraniční politika v roce 1938*, ed. J. Dejmek (Prague 2001), Vol. 2, p. 218.

588 At a meeting of the country's top leadership with the Polish President on 30 September 30, Beck presented and justified the idea of such a move. It was approved in the face of deputy prime minister Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski's opposition.

589 PDD/1938, p. 553 (a Beck circular sent to Polish diplomatic missions on 21 September).

Cieszyn Silesia, but the Polish President received this letter only on 26 September.⁵⁹⁰ As we know, the Czech response to the Polish note of 27 September demanding that the solution submitted on 21 September be implemented, was slow to arrive in Warsaw, which suggests that the Czechs were playing for time.

The Polish ultimatum of 30 September 1938 contributed to the darkened atmosphere around Europe, and today it is one of the key arguments used by the critics of interwar Poland. It immediately created the impression that Polish measures against Czechoslovakia had been agreed to by Germany. As French foreign minister Bonnet told ambassador Łukasiewicz on 30 September 1938, “it is unacceptable” in particular that “we [Poles] created a new tension on the international scene precisely when France and England are happy that peace has been saved”.⁵⁹¹ It is no doubt true that it was during the Munich crisis in the autumn of 1938 that Polish diplomats faced the greatest threat to the foundation of their policy of balance.

It is worth adding that on 27 September, the French ambassador in Warsaw, Léon Noël, recognised Poland’s recovery of Zaolzie as “perfectly justified”.⁵⁹² The British ambassador Howard Kennard threw accusations at Polish diplomats and told Szembek that “German dynamism will turn against others who share a border on the Reich’s East”.⁵⁹³

The Polish ultimatum of 30 September (before midnight) was directed towards Prague at a time when Czechoslovakia was no longer independent, because at noon on that day its government had accepted the resolutions of the Munich Conference. Leaders in Warsaw considered the demands made on Czechoslovakia to be justified and believed they would remain in force “regardless of how the Czech-German conflict plays out”, but in fact the possibility of their implementation depended on how the situation developed.⁵⁹⁴ The theory that Poland cooperated in the partition of Czechoslovakia thus requires a correction of its essential elements, which have been known to historians of diplomacy for a long time.

It is necessary here to quote the arguments of one of the creators of Polish foreign policy at the time, the Polish ambassador in London Edward Raczyński, an eminent diplomat, someone who was not a “Beck man”, who was critical of Beck, but who was loyal to him. “I have been under the impression,” he said:

590 For more than 50 years, scholars have known about this exchange of correspondence between presidents Mościcki and Beneš at the end of September 1938; it was first revealed by Stefania Stanisławska in *Polityka* (1959), No. 7. See also *Monachium 1938. Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne*, pp. 425–426 and 446–447.

591 *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939*, p. 174.

592 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, pp. 279–280 (note on a conversation between Szembek and Ambassador Noël dated 27 September).

593 *Ibid.*, p. 280. Kennard also informed Szembek on 27 September that the map of German territorial demands handed to Chamberlain at Godesberg included the areas of Bohumin and Moravian Ostrava, claimed by Poland.

594 *Ibid.*, p. 276 (note on a conversation between Szembek and Hory dated 23 September).

[...] that we are on a dead-end street, because we have come out against the Czechs, we demand equality, and Munich has created such a situation that we can either tell ourselves that we lost or we can go to Hitler to ask him for a piece of Czechoslovakia. That was the reason why I accepted, with a certain sense of relief, the Polish ultimatum to the Czech Republic, because it freed us from a stupid situation in which, going with the Germans, we would find ourselves empty-handed while they took everything. This feeling did not, of course, diminish my conviction that, rationally speaking, Munich was a defeat for us, and Zaolzie was a frantic attempt to get out of this dead-end.⁵⁹⁵

Analysing the consequences of the Sudeten crisis at a meeting at the Foreign Ministry on 4 November 1938, Beck was deeply affected by the Czech leadership's peaceful surrender to the Munich resolutions,⁵⁹⁶ saying: "The internal shock that country [Czechoslovakia] experienced, given the dimensions of the disaster, was very weak; it seemed as if the majority of people in Czechoslovakia were not interested in it. It was possible to get the Czechs to give up a great deal without encountering much opposition. The weakness of this country has exceeded our expectations."⁵⁹⁷

The most important theme in Polish actions taken on 30 September 1938 was anti-Munich; Poland's actions were directed to a much greater degree against Munich than they were against Czechoslovakia. Beck said: "[...] an attempt was made by a directorate of the Great Powers to impose binding decisions on other states, to which Poland cannot agree, because then it would turn into a political object which others would lead around according to their will."⁵⁹⁸ This thought was fundamental to how Beck conducted himself at the time.

At this point, it is worth referring to the instructions Beck gave to ambassador Raczynski on 29 November 1938, because we find therein a significant statement, without which we cannot understand Beck's political views. Characterising the significance of the Czechoslovak crisis, the foreign minister stressed—like the late Piłsudski before him—that Czechoslovakia was a "sick state". Beck wrote:

595 "Ambassador Edward Raczynski i jego ocena 'polityki równowagi'", pp. 101–102.

596 On 1 November 1938, the Polish government sent one more ultimatum to the post-Munich Czecho-Slovakia, this time demanding Spiš Jaworzyna and a rectification of the Polish-Slovak border. This deepened the pro-German sympathies of the Slovak political elite. See the newly issued documents: "*Tretia ríša*" a vznik Slovenského štátu. Dokumenty/Das "Dritte Reich" und die Entstehung des Slowakischen Staates. Dokumente, Vol. 1, eds. M. Schwarc, M. Holák, D. Schriffl (Bratislava 2010).

597 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 341. On Polish public opinion and the Czechoslovak issue, see S. Pilarski, *Polskie ugrupowania polityczne wobec Czechosłowacji 1938–1939* (Warsaw 2008) and J. Januszewska-Jurkiewicz, *Zaolzie w polityce rządu i opinii społeczeństwa polskiego (1925–1937)* (Katowice 2001).

598 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 284 (statement from 30 September 1938).

Czechoslovakia's internal, "organic" weakness was, in the end, the reason why the country in its previous form transpired to be impossible to save. In cooperation with the great powers, we were prepared to settle our demands on Czechoslovakia and improve our relations with this country. But since that transpired to be unworkable, we were satisfied with the possibility of solving this issue completely independently, without owing anything to anyone, including to Germany. We were of the opinion that since the matter had already entered a critical stage, then the solution should not be a half-way solution, but one that would guarantee durability.⁵⁹⁹

In the same document, Beck stated that the Munich crisis had "led to the collapse of almost all international rules guiding relations between civilized states. This example, however, is not a 'classic' example because it referred to the second of the two countries that marshal Piłsudski, years before, had described as 'sick' (Austria and Czechoslovakia)."⁶⁰⁰

It would be difficult to disagree with Maciej Koźmiński's interpretation, according to which Beck was not alone in Central Europe in "failing to comprehend the level of threat that the Third Reich posed to the existence of the countries concerned", and to understand that "territorial changes could lead to the destruction of the Versailles order".⁶⁰¹ Undoubtedly, neither Piłsudski nor Beck fully grasped that, given the geopolitical constellation of forces in Central and Eastern Europe, Czechoslovakia was an integral part of the Versailles order, and its undermining threatened to destabilise the entire region. That was the state of affairs—quite separate from Beneš' well-known aversion to Polish foreign policy and to Poles. The Polish foreign minister underestimated the role of the important geopolitical factor in interwar Europe that was the Czechoslovak Republic. It seems that as a politician he did not realise how delicate was the structure created by the peace treaties of 1919–1921, how unstable was the balance of power, nor how easy it would be for the breakdown of one country to lead to the destruction of the entire system.⁶⁰² By overestimating the Polish Republic's military potential, he assumed that after Czechoslovakia's fall, Poland would be able to carry out the reconstruction of Central and Eastern Europe according to its own vision, which transpired to be an illusion. Accusations in this regard—repeatedly thrown at Beck by historiography—must be sustained, and it is here that we see how his position towards

599 PDD/1938, pp. 798–799.

600 *Ibid.*, p. 798. It is interesting to note that a politician with a different geopolitical concept than Piłsudski, namely Erasmus Piltz, also regarded Austria as a country with a particularly problematic future, although he did not apply this opinion to Czechoslovakia. See P. Wandycz, "Erazm Piltz a koncepcje polityki środkowoeuropejskiej," in *Międzymorze. Polska i kraje Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, p. 221.

601 M. Koźmiński, *Polska i Węgry przed drugą wojną światową (październik 1938 – wrzesień 1939)*, p. 109.

602 The events of 1938 proved this.

Czechoslovakia was fundamentally flawed. Until 1938, under conditions marked by “strategic instability”, Poland could not count on help from its southern neighbour, but it could at least assume that Czechoslovakia would remain neutral if Poland were involved in a war.⁶⁰³ After the fall of Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1939, this possibility disappeared. Poland's military and strategic position had deteriorated irreversibly. Poland was now encircled from the south. The chances of an effective defence had been drastically reduced.

It would be possible to blame Polish foreign policy leaders for this state of affairs only if it is possible to prove that a Polish offer to assist Czechoslovakia would have caused Beneš to decide to fight, which would mean that the European war would have begun in September 1938. However, there is no justified way to make such an argument.

Whatever we think about the illusions of the Polish political leadership regarding the possibility of rebuilding Central Europe according to the Polish vision, we must recognise that the only alternative was passivity and delay while Germany encircled Poland for the coming catastrophe. Would it have been better to wait passively in the face of danger, or to take action, the effects of which could be problematic? Poland's political leadership faced this dilemma within the confines of what was possible and in light of Poland's external circumstances. Beck was aware of Poland's “relative poverty and weakness” and its lack of “indirect solutions”.⁶⁰⁴ Poland was too weak a country to actively shape the geopolitical realities of interwar Europe, although it was the strongest of Central-Eastern Europe's “new states”.⁶⁰⁵ We can criticise Polish political thought and the assumptions on which it was based, but we must understand those assumptions in the context of the times in which they emerged. The extent to which Polish political thought was attached to the *Międzymorze* idea (however understood) is evidenced not only by the fact that after the Second World War, such ideas were revived, but also by the fact that chances that those oppressed by the Soviets could regain their independence practically depended on the establishment of a *Międzymorze* system.⁶⁰⁶

In the complicated realities of the Sudeten crisis, Poland tried to maintain its independence at all costs and not to be a pawn in any other country's foreign policy. In 1938, Beck could not take France's and Britain's side, because he did not believe they were sincere in their willingness to defend Czechoslovakia, and he rightly feared ruining relations with Germany. The Polish government could have joined British-French actions to warn Berlin, but such a move would not

603 J. R. Godlewski, *Wybrane zagadnienia polskiego planowania wojennego*, p. 241.

604 Beck's letter to Ambassador Wieniawa-Długoszowski dated 10 May 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 454.

605 R. Szeremietiew, *Czy mogliśmy przetrwać. Polska a Niemcy w latach 1918–1939* (Warsaw 1994), p. 286.

606 For more, see Sławomir Łukasiewicz, *Trzecia Europa. Polska myśl federalistyczna w Stanach Zjednoczonych 1940–1971* (Warsaw–Lublin 2010).

have stopped Hitler. At the same time, Beck never considered the possibility of linking Poland with Germany; all comments by historians to the contrary do not correspond with the facts. Two months after the Munich Conference, Beck decided that, as a result of the Polish ultimatum to Czechoslovakia of 30 September 1938 and the taking of Cieszyn Silesia, it was possible for Polish foreign policy to take an independent course. We should remind ourselves of what Beck stated in November 1938: "In cooperation with the Great Powers, we were prepared to settle our demands on Czechoslovakia and improve our relations with this country. But since that transpired to be unworkable, we were satisfied with the possibility of solving this issue completely independently, *without owing anything to anyone, including to Germany.*"⁶⁰⁷

A Rational but Unrealistic Concept

At this point, a summary is required:

- (1) The *Międzymorze* concept called for a defensive agreement that would protect Poland above all against Germany, but it was not in the USSR's interests to make such a plan work. Of course, guided by their desire to not exacerbate Polish-German relations as regulated by the agreement of January 1934, the Poles could not speak openly about a bloc. Nonetheless, to Germany the intentions of Polish diplomacy were clear from the outset, and the Germans countered them vigorously, a fact which should have been foreseen by politicians in Warsaw and which should have come as no surprise given that the Nazi leadership viewed Central-Eastern Europe as a "natural" zone of exclusive German influence and wanted, at all costs, to avoid "Polish competition". Historians have been clear on these matters for a long time. The essence of Hitler's foreign policy was his assumption that he would be able to reach an agreement with Great Britain that would recognise Central and Eastern Europe as an area meant for German rule,⁶⁰⁸ which indicates the reason why Hitler viewed the Munich agreements as unfavourable to the Third Reich (they gave Germany too little).⁶⁰⁹ The Polish project was not objectively anti-German, but it could not correspond to Berlin's expectations.

607 PDD/1938, 799. Author's emphasis—M. K.

608 *Hitlers zweites Buch. Ein Dokument aus dem Jahr 1938*, ed. G. L. Weinberg, foreword by H. Rothfels (Stuttgart 1961), pp. 164–175. Hitler argued that between Great Britain as a maritime power and Germany, which claimed the right to continental hegemony in Europe, there was no actual conflict of interest. Tensions arose only because Britain was pursuing a policy that was incompatible with its real interests as a result, Hitler claimed, of "Jewish influences".

609 For a detailed and convincing interpretation of Hitler's views, see Stanisław Żerko, *Wymarzone przymierze Hitlera. Wielka Brytania w narodowosocjalistycznych koncepcjach i w polityce March Rzeszy do 1939 r.* (Poznań 1995).

- (2) The idea of creating a *Międzymorze* bloc did not have a fundamentally negative impact on Polish-Soviet relations. Having said that, it was obvious that Moscow viewed this initiative with great distrust, understanding as the Soviets did that its success would be possible only on the ruins of Czechoslovakia, which was a Soviet ally.⁶¹⁰
- (3) The Polish *Międzymorze* project not only did not materialise, but it also never became an object of real diplomatic negotiations. The pre-conditions that would allow the project to take the international stage, among the most important of which was the creation of a Poland-Hungary-Romania triangle, were never fulfilled. Diplomatic negotiations addressed only the normalisation of Romanian-Hungarian relations, in which the Polish government offered its mediation. Attempts to conclude a Polish-Hungarian-Romanian agreement came to nothing. In October 1938, Romania joined forces against Czechoslovakia. King Carol II and foreign minister Comnen did not trust Hungary, fearing that the latter would sooner or later claim Transylvania, which it had lost under the Treaty of Trianon. Romanian leaders did not trust Foreign Minister Beck, suspecting him of dubious ambitions and vague intentions. Beck's offer of a Polish guarantee for the Hungarian-Romanian border as defined by Trianon in exchange for Romania's consent to Hungary's occupation of Carpathian Ruthenia, was not acceptable to Bucharest. The situation could have changed had the political leadership in Budapest decided to take offensive actions in the autumn of 1938. Meanwhile—without renouncing their fundamental goal, which was a revision of the Treaty of Trianon—Budapest pursued a very cautious policy, motivated primarily by a desire to not upset the Western powers.⁶¹¹ Of course, Hungarian leaders were also aware that the Germans' role in the region grew in importance, and they were eager to remain in Germany's favour.⁶¹²
- (4) The *Międzymorze* bloc project was not simply a matter of propaganda and was not calculated to build Poland's international prestige. Rather, it was a manifestation of Poland's desperate search for additional security guarantees in the face of the disintegration of the international system that had emerged after the First World War, at a time when France's influence in Europe was great. Polish leaders were well aware that the international situation was deteriorating immutably. In the realities of the late 1930s, Poland could not expect

610 For more, see Z. Białobłocki, "Próby realizacji koncepcji Trzeciej Europy a ZSRR (1934–1938)," *Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Gospodarki Krajowej* (Kutno) 1 (2001): pp. 25–66.

611 For more on Hungarian policy, see Gyula Juhász, *Hungarian Foreign Policy, 1919–1945* (Budapest 1979).

612 In March 1939, Hungarian foreign minister István Csáky argued that "there is no doubt that the Axis powers will achieve victory". See AAN, MSZ, 5206, Envoy Orłowski's report for the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw dated 28 March 1939.

much from the Western powers in terms of military support, even though the Franco-Polish Alliance, signed in Paris on 19 February 1921, was never terminated.⁶¹³ The defensive military strategy of the Great Powers and their adherence to the policy of appeasement meant that even with specific allied commitments, Poland could expect no military assistance from France, which was confirmed absolutely by the events of 1939.

- (5) The *Międzymorze* project was more of a general vision than a detailed concept. In the history of interwar diplomacy, it was merely an episode, or rather an unfulfilled alternative political solution to the balance of power in interwar Central and Eastern Europe. This initiative was just one in a series of different concepts for the reconstruction and integration of this part of the continent which were debated between the wars, and not only in Poland. At its foundations, this project was undoubtedly not realistic because Poland was not able on its own to bring about the kind of reconstruction of the balance of power in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe that was necessary to implement its project, even partially. Poland could not support its diplomatic action with economic incentives to gain the support of the countries of the Danube basin and the Balkans. Having said that, it is undisputed that this concept required the establishment of a common border between Poland and Hungary, which could be achieved only at the expense of Czechoslovakia's partition, and which in turn Poland wanted to achieve with Romania's consent; after all, a Poland-Hungary-Romania triangle was the desired goal of Polish diplomacy. The replacement of Romania with Hungary as Poland's ally, even if possible, would have brought nothing.
- (6) The Polish policy to reintegrate Central and Eastern Europe—on Polish conditions—encountered active resistance from German diplomats, which proves sufficiently that it was not a policy with which Hitler agreed. In a historic conversation on 24 October 1938, ambassador Lipski explained to Ribbentrop that “a common Polish-Hungarian border is of great importance as a barrier from the East. Rumours about creating an anti-German bloc are nonsense, and Poland's position on Soviet Russia during the crisis is more than their denial.”⁶¹⁴ In response, he heard from Ribbentrop the evasive statement that Romania's “wishes [...] should be respected” and in general “the Hungarian-Romanian issue, due to Hungarian territorial claims, is not simple.”⁶¹⁵ At that point in time, any political initiative in Central and Eastern Europe that ran against the will of the Third Reich, or at least that was being

613 After the Munich Conference, the French ambassador in Warsaw, Léon Noël, advised that Paris terminate its alliance with Poland, but his suggestion was not accepted.

614 *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, Vol. 1, p. 16. The German note dated 24 October 1938 was written up by Walther Hewel.

615 *Ibid.*

conducted independently from Berlin, would inevitably fail. In October 1938, German hegemony over this region was almost a done deal—the only thing left was to subjugate Poland.

- (7) Poland also received no support for its efforts from Italy, although leaders in Warsaw had been counting on it. Italy could not afford to upset its relations with Germany. At the same time, Poland could not count on a friendly response to its plans from the USSR because from the very beginning, Moscow viewed these plans as aimed at Soviet interests. Meanwhile, Beck was overly convinced that Polish power was significant enough to attract the smaller countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Another one of Beck's goals was to establish some kind of rapprochement with the Baltic and Scandinavian countries. Polish leaders were well aware of the consequences of the policy of appeasement followed by Western powers, but officials in the Polish Foreign Ministry took insufficient note of the Third Reich's great military and economic strength. It was wrong to assume both that Germany would tolerate a certain amount of Polish independence in Central Europe, and that a new Polish-German agreement on the Free City of Danzig was possible. Polish diplomats misled themselves by evaluating the Soviet Union in 1937–1938 as a weak state, one which was experiencing an internal crisis and was sinking into international isolation.⁶¹⁶ The Poles also underestimated the numerous conflicts being waged between the new nation states of Central and Eastern Europe, although Beck often repeated the view that “after the war, south-east Europe will be balkanised to the Carpathians”.⁶¹⁷ Finally, Beck did not take into sufficient account that Germany's growing power aroused real fear in the Danube states. Conflict over Transylvania proved to be the most significant destabilising factor.

616 The fall of the Soviet Union's international prestige was described by the Polish ambassador in Moscow, Grzybowski, to the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw. Tadeusz Kobylański and deputy minister Szembek shared this view (e.g. in an encrypted telegram to the embassies dated 18 June 1937, AAN, Foreign Ministry, 6669). On this matter, we also have letters from Kobylański and Szembek to the ambassador in Ankara, Michał Sokolnicki, dated 15 October and 29 November 1937, Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Michał Sokolnicki Collection, Box 1. Beck himself wrote about “the process of the political and technical closing off of the USSR from Europe” (AAN, Foreign Ministry, 6654, Instructions for the diplomatic missions in Riga, Tallinn, Helsinki and Bucharest dated 31 December 1937). This view was expressed in 1937–1938 not only in Warsaw but also in other European capitals.

617 *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*, p. 323. The term *l'Europe balcanisé* was often repeated during interwar cabinet meetings, and not only in Warsaw. It was popularised by the American publicist Paul Scott Mowrer in his *Balkanized Europe. A Study in Political Analysis and Reconstruction* (New York 1921).

- (8) It is undoubtedly true that, while the Polish policy of balance and Poland's policy to build a "neutral zone" between the two totalitarian powers were met with some level of understanding in London (as British Foreign Office diplomatic documents convincingly indicate), those independent Polish policies were met in Paris with disapproval and irritation. Having said that, the Poles were unable to gain active support from either Britain or France for their ideas to build a *Międzymorze* bloc—not from Great Britain because this region was not in its sphere of interests, and not from France because France was too weak and still clung to the anachronistic Little Entente. The very fact that Britain had limited economic interests in Central and Eastern Europe indicates that this part of Europe, from the Western perspective, was of secondary importance.
- (9) Like Piłsudski, Foreign Minister Beck underestimated the stabilising role that Czechoslovakia played in the political constellation of Central Europe. He lost sight of the fact that "the fall of Czechoslovakia had to lead to the hegemony of the Third Reich in all of south-eastern Europe."⁶¹⁸ The Polish foreign minister's assumption that Poland could exploit the Czechoslovak crisis and resulting territorial changes for its own strategic advantage transpired to be fundamentally flawed. Such is the ultimate conclusion that we can derive from studies of this political concept. However, a certain restraint is justified, and indeed necessary, when we assess Beck's views and those held by the Polish leadership. What appears today, from a distance of several decades, to be an anachronism and an example of naiveté, was—in contemporary historical and psychological realities—logical and rational.
- (10) It must be said that the Third Europe project was an idea for discussion which, in the final analysis, was based on logical premises and rooted in Polish political thought, but which was impossible to implement and misunderstood both by contemporary European opinion and by later historians of international relations. Nonetheless, by raising this issue, we can better understand the assumptions behind Polish foreign policy and the dilemmas faced by Polish diplomats before the outbreak of the Second World War. Above all, it reveals the actual motivation behind this policy in 1938.

* * *

The goal of building a Central European bloc, a goal that was made concrete in Polish diplomacy in 1937–1938, was never achieved. And, as it exited the crisis of 1938, Poland had to face this fact.

We cannot help but consider the project itself as being essentially rational. In the Polish view, the *Międzymorze* bloc was to serve as a supplement to the Versailles (Versailles-Riga) system. Actions to establish the bloc were not conceived as a blow to the post-war order, but rather a correction. Although they developed no strict

618 M. K. Kamiński, M. J. Zacharias, *W cieniu zagrożenia. Polityka zagraniczna RP*, p. 226.

guidelines for the plan, the Poles did take specific measures which constituted a logical complement to the policy of balance. The concept of a Third Europe; that is, a great *Międzymorze* bloc from the Baltic to the Adriatic, was undoubtedly quite original, although it transpired to be unworkable. In this regard there can be no doubt.⁶¹⁹ As Piotr Łossowski has written, in Beck's view Poland was to be given a Great Power role even though it was not a Great Power. It is difficult to deny the correctness of these words.⁶²⁰

But here is the question: was there in September 1938 an alternative solution, one understood as a policy that could have changed the geopolitical realities surrounding Poland? What should have been done differently and what was not done? *Ex-post* advice, encountered so often in the work of historians and proffered to the creators of historical events, has little to offer us that illuminates those events or helps us understand them.

In September 1938, Poland essentially had four options. *Primo*, stand with the Germans; that is move from normalisation (or "the line of 26 January 1934") to active cooperation with Germany. Needless to say, this would have been suicide. *Secundo*, stand with Czechoslovakia, in the name of defending the integrity of the Versailles system, an option which was possible only if that country itself wanted to defend itself *manu militari*, but which was not an option without France's help. *Tertio*, take a position of strict neutrality. From today's point of view, this path might appear to have been the most beneficial, but in the realities of that time, it meant simple passivity. *Quatro*, fight for the "privileges clause" on behalf of the Polish population in Cieszyn Silesia and then try to exploit the disintegration of Czechoslovakia to build a new political system in Central and Eastern Europe; that is, implement the *Międzymorze* project. Polish foreign policy leaders choose this last solution and attempted to implement it. The real choice was between the third and fourth options, between strict neutrality and the choice that Beck actually made. It is worth adding that strict neutrality would have meant passivity in the face of the changing realities in the European balance of power.

It was only after the Second World War that an ahistorical narrative was created that in September 1938 Poland should have sided with Czechoslovakia and thus fought a war with Germany on better terms than it did a year later. This argument was made by Poles in exile who were attempting to settle scores with those who had ruled Poland before the September 1939 defeat. The extremist Jędrzej Giertych spoke at length about how Poland wasted a chance to save the Versailles system by acting as it did in the autumn of 1938.⁶²¹ Understandably, French politicians also made this argument, but we must nonetheless direct our attention to René

619 For more, see M. Kornat, *Polityka równowagi*, pp. 353–386 (chapter 8).

620 P. Łossowski, *Polska w Europie i świecie 1918–1939. Szkice*, p. 293.

621 J. Giertych, *Stronictwo Narodowe a kryzys dziejowy 1938 roku. Relacja pamiętnikarska* (London 1987).

Massigli's statement in a conversation with Kazimiera Mazurowa: when asked whether a Polish-Czechoslovak agreement could have reversed the course of events, he answered honestly: "I do not know".⁶²²

It is unacceptable to call the Polish action of 30 September 1938—as it is often called in historical literature—"overt aggression". This action can be criticised on ethical grounds, but judgments arguing that the action was immoral have little to offer historians because, when we apply the ethical rules that govern interpersonal relations to international politics, then we complicate matters greatly.⁶²³

The most important thing is that, in the realities of the European international crisis in the autumn of 1938, the policy of balance was not discredited and its value was not diminished. Poland came out of this crisis with mixed results, but it managed to maintain its strategic stance without becoming dependent on Germany or passively obeying the dictates of foreign powers.

622 K. Mazurowa, *Skazani na wojnę* (Warsaw 1979), p. 213.

623 See Stanisław Senfit, "Dyktat monachijski i jego następstwa w ocenie historiografii polskiej," in *Układ monachijski jako przykład prawno-międzynarodowej kapitulacji wobec agresji*, eds. S. M. Grochalski, M. Lis (Opole 2009), pp. 31–48.

Chapter 3. Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union in September 1938 (facts, hypotheses and interpretations)

Polish-Soviet relations in the 1930s have been the subject of numerous studies,⁶²⁴ which is understandable because those relations constituted one of the most important problems of international politics in Central and Eastern Europe of the interwar period. Unfortunately, a monograph based on archival material from the Soviet Foreign Ministry and on Soviet military documents has not yet been produced. During the Soviet domination of Poland from 1945 to 1989, historians writing inside Poland were allowed to make no mention of the threat posed by the Soviet Union, either in 1938 or in 1939.

Joseph Stalin's strategic plans in the autumn of 1938 are a matter of great importance, one that requires attention and is still awaiting full analysis, although studies devoted to Soviet policy in this crucial period in European history are numerous.⁶²⁵ The Kremlin's aspirations in Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, in 1938 are a highly important historical issue, but unfortunately they have not been handled separately by Polish historians of diplomacy. Obviously, a serious obstacle and one that is impossible to overcome in the definitive reconstruction of the Soviet strategy, involves our incomplete access to Soviet archival material.⁶²⁶ Having said

624 The author of the first synthesis of Polish-Soviet relations free of dogma was no doubt the American historian Bohdan Budurowycz; see idem, *Polish-Soviet Relations 1932–1939* (New York 1962). See also Piotr Wandycz's excellent monograph *Polish-Soviet Relations 1917–1921* (Cambridge, MA 1969). See also the monograph by the German historian Jürgen Pagel, *Polen und die Sowjetunion 1938–1939. Die polnisch-sowjetischen Beziehungen in den Krisen der europäischen Politik am Vorabend des Zweiten Weltkrieges* (Stuttgart 1992). For works in Polish, see Wojciech Materski, *Tarcza Europy. Stosunki polsko-sowieckie 1918–1939* (Warsaw 1994), and Materski, *Na widecie. Februario Rzeczpospolita wobec Sowietów 1918–1943* (Warsaw 2005); see also Stanisław Gregorowicz and Michał Zacharias, *Polska–Związek Sowiecki. Stosunki polityczne 1925–1939* (Warsaw 1995).

625 Hugh Ragsdale's study seems to be most insightful: *The Soviets, the Munich Crisis and the Coming of the World War February* (Cambridge 2004).

626 The Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation allows access to diplomatic correspondence of the central People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs in Moscow. For Poland, see the files collected under Fond Litwinowa (f. 05) and Referentura po Polsce (f. 122).

that, historians have a great deal to say about Soviet foreign policy at this crucial moment in European history.

The aim of my considerations here is not to show that Soviet military preparations in the autumn of 1938 were significantly calculated to attack Poland, or that they were only a show of force. The reconstruction of Soviet strategic and military plans at the time is certainly an important task for historiography, but I do not take this task up here. Rather, the subject of this chapter is the multifaceted and significant role that the Soviet threat played in influencing Polish policy in the autumn of 1938. It was a serious matter, one that is the focus of attention here.

The volume of *Polish Diplomatic Documents* for 1938, which I edited and published four years ago, does not contain many new files regarding Soviet military preparations in this period. Included in this collection is only what has been found in Polish diplomatic files. But this does not mean we cannot address three important questions: did Polish foreign policy leaders have access to information about Soviet preparations and, if so, how did they interpret them? Did this knowledge shape Polish policy at the time? What might the consequences have been of the transformation of the persistent Polish-Soviet cold war into a hot war? How did these issues look to the Polish political leadership of the day? These are the questions for which we need to seek answers in order to understand Polish foreign policy in this period. The following study attempts to answer these questions.

According to pro-Soviet Western historiography, the image of Soviet policy in both 1938 and 1939 has been falsified; in reality—the argument goes—it was peaceful in nature. The first historian in the West to discuss the threat that the Soviet Union posed to Poland's security was the outstanding British military historian (and professor at the University of Manchester) John Erickson, author of a work that has been updated many times since it was first published in 1962, *The Soviet High Command. A Military-Political History 1918–1941*.

Over the two decades that have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, several studies on Stalin's stance towards the Sudeten crisis have been published that reach more or less deeply into Polish-Soviet relations with their highly complex geopolitical, historical and international elements. Particularly noteworthy is the article by the German historian Jürgen Pagel entitled "Polska i Związek Radziecki w czasie kryzysu czechosłowackiego (marzec – październik 1938)," a well-documented and balanced interpretation.⁶²⁷ This study was created on the basis of his well-known monograph: *Polen und die Sowjetunion 1938–1939. Die polnisch-sowjetischen Beziehungen in den Krisen der europäischen Politik am Vorabend des Zweiten Weltkrieges* (1992). A significant place in the current historiography of the Soviet stance towards the Sudeten crisis is occupied by two particularly important studies by Ivan Pfaff, namely "Stalins Strategie der Sowjetisierung

627 J. Pagel, "Polska i Związek Radziecki w czasie kryzysu czechosłowackiego (marzec–październik 1938)," *Niemcy w polityce międzynarodowej 1919–1939*, ed. S. Sierpowski, Vol. 3: *W dobie Monachium* (Poznan 1992), pp. 327–345.

Mitteleuropas 1935–1939. Das Beispiel Tschechoslowakei”⁶²⁸ and *Die Sowjetunion und die Verteidigung der Tschechoslowakei, 1934–1938: Versuch der Revision einer Legende* (Cologne 1996).⁶²⁹ Pfaff’s main thesis is that the USSR had a plan for the sovietisation of Europe long before 1939. Such an argument was also made by Richard Raack, who referred explicitly to a concept put forward by Robert Tucker.⁶³⁰

British scholar Zarah Steiner carefully interpreted Soviet aspirations in the autumn of 1938. In her opinion, Moscow set itself the following objective: to encourage Beneš to resist, but not to share responsibility for how events developed and, above all, to go no further than France, which had an alliance with Czechoslovakia.⁶³¹ Russian scholars have not taken a fundamental position on this topic. In his work *Polsko-sowietskije wojny*, Mikhail Mieltjuchow limited himself to the comment that Soviet warnings were designed to hinder Polish preparations for action against Czechoslovakia, and that “Polish propaganda” exploited Soviet diplomatic moves in order to spread anti-Soviet views and to foster the idea that the two countries were hostile towards each other.⁶³² In his book *SSSR–Francja: trudnyje gody 1938–1941*, Igor Czelyszew did not analyse Soviet moves directed against Poland.⁶³³

An important and well-documented monograph by Igor Lukes, *Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler: The Diplomacy of Edvard Beneš in the 1930s* (1996), addresses many aspects of Polish foreign policy and contains the thesis that Soviet mobilisation measures in the autumn of 1938 were only a political demonstration, and not actually a threat of armed intervention in the ongoing international conflict. The opposite view was taken by the British historian Hugh Ragsdale in his study *The Soviets, the Munich Crisis, and the Coming of World War II* (2004), in which he argued that in the autumn of 1938, Soviet strategists considered the possibility of striking Poland. Lukes argued that the Soviets never truly intended to fulfil their obligations to Czechoslovakia, but they had plans to trigger a revolution in that country, which was apparently confirmed by Andrei Zhdanov’s letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia at the end of September 1938. However, Ragsdale doubted the authenticity of this letter and wrote that there were real Soviet plans to march through Romania, and that the

628 *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 38 (1990): pp. 548–576.

629 This monograph is a revised version of a study published three years earlier in Czech: *Sovětská zrada 1938* (Prague 1993).

630 See R. C. Tucker, “The Emergence of Stalin’s Foreign Policy,” *Slavic Review* 36 (1977): pp. 563–589; R. Raack, “Stalinowski plan ‘przebiecia na zachód,’” trans. J. Kiwerska, *Przegląd Zachodni* (1991), z. 3: pp. 101–110.

631 Z. Steiner, “The Soviets and the Czech Crisis. The Soviet Commissariat of Foreign Affairs and the Czechoslovakian Crisis in 1938: New Material from the Soviet Archives,” *The Historical Journal* 43 (1999), No. 3: p. 767.

632 M. Mieltjuchow, *Polsko-sowietskije wojny. Wojenno-politiceskoje protivostojanije 1918–1939* (Moscow 2001), p. 152.

633 Moscow 1999.

mobilisation in September 1938 cannot be reduced to mere threats against Poland, because it was a demonstration that could have given rise to real military action.

As is widely known, communist historiography fostered the legend that President Beneš capitulated against the will of Czechoslovak communists who wanted to fight, and that the Soviet Union hastened to help them in their efforts.⁶³⁴ At the same time, Poles in exile did not take up the task to produce an in-depth study of this issue.⁶³⁵ There is no need today to convince anyone of the necessity to discuss the international circumstances surrounding the Sudetenland conflict, indeed to do so without taking into account ideological slogans from the past.

Richard Raack believed that Soviet assistance to Czechoslovakia was possible, but only limited assistance consisting of general air support and possibly the formation of an “international brigade” like that which fought in the Spanish Civil War.⁶³⁶ What is remarkable, however, is the fact that in September 1938, the Soviets threatened not Germany, but Poland.⁶³⁷

Understandably, Polish foreign policy in 1938 is and will remain the subject of controversy in world historiography. There is no need to list here all the judgments made about Poland as Germany’s silent ally, because they are so clearly untrue that they do not fit into the canons of historical scholarship. A more interesting view is that of the American historian of diplomacy Williamson Murray, who believed that, in the realities of 1938, Poland had to keep an eye on Russia—as British Ambassador Kennard put it in a report to the Foreign Office on 5 October 1938.⁶³⁸ One of the more recent examinations of Poland’s international situation in the autumn of 1938, a study by Anna M. Cienciala: *The Munich Crisis of 1938: Plans and Strategy in Warsaw in the Context of the Western Appeasement of Germany* (1999), is an attempt to synthesise the dilemmas of Polish foreign policy during this dramatic landmark in international relations.⁶³⁹ The only certainty we gain from every scholarly work on the subject is that, in any event, the Poles did not intend to allow the Soviet Army to pass through their territory.

The realities of the international crisis in September 1938 were analysed by Marek Piotr Deszczyński, who reached the conclusion that it was impossible to determine what Stalin’s actual intentions were. On the other hand, Deszczyński was sceptical about Polish defence capabilities if an armed confrontation took

634 See V. Král, *Spojenectví československo-sovětské v evropské politice 1935–1939* (Prague 1970); idem, “Vládní koalice a mnichovský diktát v r. 1938,” *Acta Universitatis Carolinae. Philosophica et Historica* (Prague) (1978), No. 2: p. 58.

635 In his unpublished attempt at a synthesis, ambassador Michał Sokolnicki omitted this matter. See “Historia polityczna, 1919–1938”, The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), 91/89.

636 R. C. Raack, *Polska i Europa w planach Stalina*, trans. P. Kościński (Warsaw 1997), p. 27.

637 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

638 W. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power*, p. 237.

639 Printed in this volume: *The Munich Crisis, 1938. Prelude*, pp. 48–81.

place between Poland and the USSR. He argued that even if Poland were able to mobilise and concentrate its military to the levels called for in its operational plan, the enemy would be able to muster double those forces on the front.⁶⁴⁰

The following considerations are based on Polish diplomatic documents along with British and French documents. Perhaps they will represent a new and different view of the diplomatic crisis of 1938, from the perspective of Poland and its international position. The main subject of these considerations is not an attempt to answer the question whether the Soviet Union planned military action against Poland in September 1938, but rather to examine the behaviour of the Polish authorities in the face of signs of a Soviet threat, and the external factors that determined the decisions taken in Warsaw.

Soviet Policy: Weakness or Expansionism?

In the common and widely-accepted judgment made by European politicians, diplomats and Sovietologists at the time, the Soviet Union began 1938 seriously weakened. Having joined the League of Nations in September 1934 and concluded alliances with France and Czechoslovakia in May 1935, the USSR “retreated” from Europe and abandoned active international politics. It is in this context that we should view the argument made by General Tadeusz Kutrzeba, who, when evaluating in 1936 the chances of a future defensive war against Germany, considered two possible Soviet policies: (1) friendly neutrality, and (2) strict neutrality. He did not consider a third option and, as it transpired, the most realistic option: an armed attack from the east.⁶⁴¹

In general, Polish foreign policymakers and military leaders maintained their belief that Soviet communism was, practically speaking, “a method by which weaknesses in the international structure could be continuously attacked”.⁶⁴² This understanding was not altered by the new legal and political context of Polish-Soviet relations that came with the non-aggression pact of 25 July 1932. However, discussions conducted at the Polish Foreign Ministry on the subject of Soviet policy were dominated by impressions made by Stalin’s unprecedented and criminal crackdown on the Bolshevik “old guard”. In September 1936, Foreign Minister Beck said: “Stalin, with this radical cut, wanted to cement his position within the apparatus with which he maintained power by shocking or removing potential critics and wavering elements, and by physically eliminating leading activists around whom opposition groups could coalesce.”⁶⁴³ While Warsaw viewed this

640 M. P. Deszczyński, *Ostatni egzamin. Wojsko Polskie wobec kryzysu czechosłowackiego 1938–1939* (Warsaw 2003), p. 207.

641 *Wojna obronna Polski 1939*, p. 40.

642 These are Tadeusz Schaetzl’s words; see The Józef Piłsudski Institute (London), 43/8, “Locarno i Monachium,” pp. 22–23.

643 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 2, p. 506 (instructions dated 10 September 1936).

crackdown on the Leninist elite of the party as a step towards consolidation of the Stalinist system, it interpreted the murder of a significant number of senior Red Army commanders in the summer of 1937 as a blow to the armed forces and even a manifestation of internal disorder within the system. In his instructions to diplomatic missions dated 28 June 1937—just after the death sentence on marshal Michail Tuchaczewski had been carried out—Szembek wrote that “the execution of the generals is the next stage of Stalin’s ruthless struggle with the opposition that is growing against him within the party [...]” Repression, Szembek continued, “must be causing serious shock within the army and the country, and worsening the USSR’s international situation. Further internal complications can be expected.”⁶⁴⁴ Polish diplomats were emphatic that the Soviets were losing a large part of their international popularity,⁶⁴⁵ a fact that Warsaw viewed as a positive development because the newly established bonds between Moscow and the West were weakening.⁶⁴⁶ Ambassador Grzybowski categorically rejected rumours that the Red Army purges were an introduction to some kind of rapprochement in relations between the Soviet Union and Germany, but this hypothesis began to circulate in diplomatic gatherings and in the European press.⁶⁴⁷ The Polish ambassador in London, Edward Raczyński, remarked that in the West there was a true “conspiracy of silence” surrounding Soviet affairs—the Soviet system, its violence and terror.⁶⁴⁸

But the USSR’s weakened military and its decline in international prestige, which were clearly noted in Warsaw, did not mean that anyone believed that the threat from Poland’s east had ceased. As Tadeusz Kobylański wrote in instructions to the Polish ambassador in Ankara, Michał Sokolnicki, on 29 November 1937, the more the Soviet Union weakened, the more the Comintern’s action became visible in order to break down the bourgeois states, especially the states neighbouring the Soviet Union, the aim of which was to “prevent the consolidation of the anti-communist and anti-Soviet front”.⁶⁴⁹ In this context, it is worth adding that Beck,

644 AAN, MSZ, 6669, Szembek to the embassy in Tokyo (encrypted telegram dated 28 June 1937).

645 In particular, Szembek in his instructions to Ambassador Sokolnicki in Ankara, 15 October 1937, Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Michał Sokolnicki Collection, Box 1.

646 From Poland’s perspective, the goal of Soviet policy in 1934–1935 was to turn the Soviet Union into the Western powers’ main partner in Eastern Europe, ahead of Poland.

647 AAN, MSZ, 6652A, ambassador Grzybowski to MSZ, encrypted telegram dated 2 February 1937.

648 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.52/5A, Ambassador Edward Raczyński to Beck, 18 March 1938.

649 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Michał Sokolnicki Collection, Box 1. Rumours about Tadeusz Kobylański’s alleged activity as a spy exist in historiography and recent journalism, but their sources are not evidence, but rather *ex-post* reports by veterans of Soviet intelligence. We cannot help but ask whether the Soviets had a

undoubtedly walking in Piłsudski's footsteps, argued that the "new type" of countries were able to take aggressive actions against growing internal difficulties, in order to defuse them externally.

As we know, in April 1935, during talks in Warsaw with British foreign minister Anthony Eden, Piłsudski and Beck disagreed with the British diplomat's notion that the Soviet army was weak, claiming that "this army is very strong and it is a factor with enormous potential".⁶⁵⁰ After the events of 1937–1938 and as everything indicates, that assessment was no longer valid. Now, observers viewed the Red Army as essentially unable to engage in aggressive offensive actions, though it had considerable defensive potential. This latter interpretation was partially confirmed by the events of 1939–1941, as the Soviet attack on Finland ended in humiliating defeat, but in the defensive battles against Germany the Red Army (after initial defeats) regained its footing before its counter-offensive. We cannot help but label as highly realistic Beck's statement that Soviet Russia's situation could not be measured by European norms, because this country was a separate world.⁶⁵¹

Just before leaving Moscow, ambassador Juliusz Łukasiewicz warned against under-estimating the USSR in the wake of this or that example of Soviet internal unrest.⁶⁵² In February 1936, he expressed concern: "[...] let us not find ourselves in a situation like that which occurred after the Japanese-Russian war of 1905, when Russia turned its attention, and directed its political expansion, towards the West. Nowadays, the situation would look different because we would not be dealing with—as we were then—the internal breakup of the Russian state."⁶⁵³

Nevertheless, if we follow Polish diplomatic correspondence closely, we cannot help but notice statements arguing that, because the USSR had grown weaker, Central-Eastern Europe had stabilised. Speaking on 3 December 1937 in Warsaw with French foreign minister Delbos, Beck said that "we are having to deal with the Comintern and its games and often those of the Soviet government in third countries everywhere, but we do not feel direct pressure on our border, which is normal, and we are handling direct diplomatic affairs with the Soviets perhaps even better than many other countries."⁶⁵⁴ In a letter to the Ambassador in Tokyo, on 28 January 1938 Tadeusz Romer deputy minister Szembek considered whether

view into the centre of Polish foreign policy, but proof that Kobyłański worked for the Soviets cannot be a matter of discussion until it is documented through archival material. At present, there are no grounds to accept the accusations against him.

650 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, p. 257.

651 PDD/1938, p. 800 (note from Ambassador Edward Raczyński with verbal instructions from the foreign minister dated 29 November 1938).

652 This happened in June 1936.

653 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 2, p. 96 (note dated 27 February 1936).

654 Note on Beck's conversation with Delbos, 3 December 1937, Biblioteka Polska (Paris), Akcesja sygn. 610.

Soviet expansion was not being directed towards the Far East, which would represent a Soviet retreat from Europe. "In Russia," Szembek stated:

[...] we are observing a process of rapid separation from abroad. This is manifested in our dealings within the diplomatic corps, in steps taken on our border (and partly on the borders with the Baltic States), where populations are being displaced, roads and rail crossings are being closed, etc. The reasons for this may involve the internal situation or preparations for some kind of move in the Far East. It requires continued observation.⁶⁵⁵

On 13 December 1937, citing ambassador Grzybowski, Szembek pointed out the connection between the situation inside the USSR and the Soviet Union's foreign policy actions: "The administration and army have been destroyed, and the diplomats are next." He claimed that one should expect "the Soviet Union to weaken further, relations with Western European democracies to cool, and the Comintern's activity to grow." Szembek came to the conclusion that "the Soviets are currently not capable of any external action."⁶⁵⁶

In addition to reports on the Soviet Union's internal crisis, we find numerous reports in diplomatic documents from the Polish Foreign Ministry in late 1937 and early 1938 on Soviet military preparations, which at first glance could be interpreted as defensive, but raise the question of whether they were not in fact a prelude to aggressive actions.

Significantly, it was not only in Warsaw that this thesis about "Soviet self-isolation" was put forward. The British ambassador to Moscow, Lord Chilston, interpreted Soviet policy precisely in this way.⁶⁵⁷ Visiting Warsaw on 16–17 November 1937, the American ambassador to Paris (previously to Moscow) William Bullitt, who was considered a renowned expert on the Soviet state, surprised marshal Śmigły-Rydz and Beck with the question if it was true "that Russia intended to create a 200-kilometer strip of desert at its western border as a protective belt to prevent aggression, which would indicate the withdrawal of pressure in our direction. An exception would be made only for the railways as a line connecting the Soviet Union with the world." The demolition of "all civilization mechanisms" was to take place along the border with Poland and Romania. The American diplomat allegedly heard this information from "[Władimir] Potiomkin personally" during their conversation in Moscow. Bullitt's Polish interlocutors regarded the question to have been "posed in a naïve form". Śmigły-Rydz and Beck "rejected this notion as being not confirmed in reports."⁶⁵⁸ This document seems

655 PDD/1938, p. 55.

656 *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka. Materiały uzupełniające*, p. 62.

657 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 22289, N.467/129/38, Report dated 25 January 1938. Chilston wrote about foreign consulates in the USSR being deliberately closed.

658 IPMS, MSZ, A.11.49/3.

to have indicated that the Soviets wanted to create the impression that the USSR “was withdrawing from Europe”. On 15 November 1937, Szembek wrote to the Polish Envoy in Belgrade, Dębicki: “The process of Soviet isolation is deepening. Weakened as a result of internal developments and checkmated by Japan, the Soviets will probably not give us any surprises [...]”⁶⁵⁹

Bullitt’s question, considered naïve at first, was taken more seriously at the beginning of 1938. On 1 January, Beck instructed the Polish representative in Tallinn, Waclaw Przesmycki, to gather information on how Soviet policy was evolving. In a report on 19 January, Przesmycki—reporting on his conversations with Estonian politicians—wrote that “all interlocutors” (including foreign minister Friedrich Akel, general commander of the army general Johan Laidoner, head of intelligence colonel Richard Maasing and the director of the Foreign Ministry Political Department Nikolai Kaasik):

[...] agreed on the existence of a political and technical process of closing the USSR off from Europe. We have noticed many of the signs, the isolation of the diplomatic corps, evacuation of people from border regions, etc. observed here as well. In particular, the recently proposed idea that Estonia liquidate the Estonian Consulate in Leningrad has not been well received. These measures are being closely followed here, but they do not arouse special concern, because Estonians are convinced that they are defensive in relation to the USSR’s western border, not offensive. They are explained here by the large internal difficulties that [the Soviets] would like to hide from the eyes of foreigners, and by the probability [that they will be] drawn into armed conflict in the Far East, which will probably cause even more internal difficulties, including serious uprisings. Among the phenomena observed at the border here, the following should be mentioned: 1) the evacuation of people from border areas, 2) the demolition of buildings, except those belonging to border guards, after the population has been evacuated, 3) moving border posts hundreds of meters deeper into the country, 4) causing great difficulties regarding incidents involving Estonian fisherman wandering onto the Soviet part of Lake Peipsi, especially young fishermen of draft age, and 5) the increased illegal transfer to the Soviet side of young people belonging to the Russian minority in the vicinity of Narva, which people here are having a hard time explaining.⁶⁶⁰

The exchange of information between the Estonian and Polish Foreign Ministries led to the conclusion that Soviet preparations for armed intervention on the USSR’s western borders were intensifying, and that the Soviets viewed the Baltic States as a weak element in the “capitalist environment”. The Estonian interpretation

659 *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka. Materiały uzupełniające*, p. 58.

660 AAN, MSZ, 6654. Przesmycki was the diplomat who, on Beck’s instructions, delivered the ultimatum to the Lithuanian envoy in the Estonian capital on 17 March 1938 that included the demand for the establishment of diplomatic relations.

of Soviet military preparations was therefore completely different from what Szembek offered in his letter of 28 January 1938.

Having collected information from diplomatic sources on the alleged threat to Poland posed by the Soviet Union, the deputy director of the Political Department and head of the Eastern Division of the Polish Foreign Ministry, Tadeusz Kobylański, pointed to the process of Soviet self-isolation in a note to diplomatic missions on 4 February 1938:

Due to the difficult internal situation inside the USSR [...] the process of political and technical isolation of the Soviets from Europe can be seen both in Moscow and on our eastern border. There are numerous manifestations of this trend: the systematic isolation of the diplomatic corps in Moscow, limitations placed on the activities of foreign consulates (with the Soviets aiming at their gradual liquidation), the reduction of railway traffic (incidents on the Szepietówka-Zdolbunów line) and road traffic (intentional maintenance of border roads in an unserviceable condition), and the displacement of people from border areas. Information received from the legations in Riga, Tallinn and Helsinki confirms these facts. After the population is evacuated, buildings are systematically demolished, border posts are moved several hundred meters toward the interior of the country, all border incidents are exaggerated, while the Soviets seek to delay or block normal procedures.⁶⁶¹

On 28 January 1938, in the above-mentioned private letter to ambassador Romer, Szembek made statements that seem to indicate that he supported the interpretation of Soviet policy as being clearly defensive in nature. He also pointed to another possibility: that it was expansive in nature and directed toward the Far East: "Surely, at the present time, the Soviets have too many internal troubles and feel too weak and isolated in the international arena to make any decision about Japan? But perhaps Russia is consciously not getting involved in the Sino-Japanese conflict in order to wait for the two parties to exhaust themselves and to wait for the right moment to take advantage of their weakness?"⁶⁶²

The Polish ambassador in Moscow, Grzybowski, made the argument most strongly that the Soviet system was in deep crisis. On 8 April 1938, he wrote about the USSR's "inability to solve elementary problems".⁶⁶³ On 3 May 1938, he noticed that "the source of Moscow's pessimism is not the alleged confusion of Europe but rests in the fact that the Soviets are aware of the USSR's isolation in foreign policy and of its internal impotence".⁶⁶⁴ And it was in this context that the ambassador interpreted the Soviet Union's passive reaction in March 1938 when the Polish government sent its open ultimatum to Lithuania demanding the establishment of

661 PDD/1938, p. 57

662 *Ibid.*, p. 52.

663 *Ibid.*, p. 206.

664 *Ibid.*, p. 239.

normal diplomatic relations. On 17 March 1938, he wrote: "The Soviets have put up no obstacles in the Lithuania matter".⁶⁶⁵

An analysis of the new phase of Soviet policy by officials in the Polish Foreign Ministry in the first months of 1938 produced no definite conclusions, but there is no doubt they were dominated by the theme of self-isolation and a weakened Soviet state. A judgment heard frequently in the first months of 1938 was: "[...] our conviction has grown stronger that the Soviet Union is in an advanced state of decomposition, both externally and internally, including in military terms."⁶⁶⁶ The chargé d'affaires in Moscow, Tadeusz Jankowski, confirmed Beck's belief. "The Soviets," Jankowski argued in a report dated 24 April 1938, "are aware of the weakness of their current position as a partner of France in Europe arising out of the USSR's great internal difficulties, its weakened war potential, and complications in the Far East, and they are trying to raise the value of the Franco-Soviet alliance in the eyes of France."⁶⁶⁷ Reading this opinion and others cited earlier, we should recall France's main priorities at this time, one of which was—as René Massigli wrote to the ambassador in Moscow, Robert Coulondre, on 2 February 2, 1938—"the need to keep the USSR in our political system [*la nécessité de maintenir l'URSS dans notre système politique*]"⁶⁶⁸ The Poles were not happy with this French stance; the Soviet Union had its own problems and interests that were not at all the same as those of France, Poland, or as the West broadly conceived.

A careful analysis of political events in 1938 can in no way allow us to think that the Soviets had gone on the defensive. Rather, we can say that Moscow was testing the strength of the USSR's European neighbours and taking the diplomatic offensive.

In February 1938, a low-ranking Soviet diplomat in Helsinki, Boris Yartsev, set up preliminary talks with officials in the Finish Foreign Ministry on territorial concessions that Finland was supposed to extend to the USSR.⁶⁶⁹ The "proposals" he submitted anticipated subsequent Soviet territorial demands against Finland in November 1939.⁶⁷⁰ The Soviets offered to withdraw from the island of Hogland

665 *Ibid.*, pp. 141–142.

666 IPMS, MSZ, A.11E/1495.

667 PDD/1938, p. 228.

668 G.-H. Soutou, "La perception de la puissance française par René Massigli en 1938," *Relations Internationales* (spring 1983), No. 33: p. 21.

669 This was a "friendly conversation" (*freundliche Unterredung*) with Rudolf Holsti, the Finnish foreign minister; see M. Jakobson, *Diplomatie der Finnischen Winterkrieg* (München 1970), 18 ff; for the English version, see *The Diplomacy of the Winter War. An Account of the Russo-Finnish War 1939–1940* (Cambridge, MA 1961). See also D. Spring, "The Soviet Decision for War Against Finland," *Soviet Studies* 38 (1986): pp. 207–226. Jartsev was second secretary at the legation and no doubt represented the intelligence services.

670 For more on Soviet demands on the Finns, see S. Myllyniemi, *Die baltische Krise 1938–1941* (Stuttgart 1979). For more on Jartsev's mission as treated in Polish literature, see A. Kastory, *Finlandia w polityce mocarstw 1939–1940* (Krakow 1993),

(Suursaari), to guarantee Finnish borders, and to conclude a trade agreement. The Finns would reject this offer, which then became a pretext for Soviet aggression and the outbreak of the Winter War on 30 November 1939.

At the beginning of 1938, a mysterious incident took place in Romania, which became known as the Butenko Affair.⁶⁷¹ The Soviet chargé d'affaires in Bucharest, Nikolai Butenko, secretly abandoned his post and "went missing".⁶⁷² The Soviet government aggressively accused Romania of being behind a crime. On 8 February, Mirosław Arciszewski, the Polish envoy in Bucharest, reported Butenko's "disappearance" to the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw and indicated that the Soviets were using it as a pretext to interfere in Romania's internal affairs or to intervene more broadly in Romania.⁶⁷³ On 12 February, Beck sent the following text to Bucharest: "Please inform the prime minister that in the case of Butenko, we are ready to provide all assistance to the Romanian authorities in their attempt to explain the current situation."⁶⁷⁴ Surprised, the Romanian government thus gained assurance from Beck that Poland, a faithful ally, would come to Romania's assistance if the conflict escalated.

As it transpired, such assistance was not needed, because Butenko was "found" in Rome, where he had been detained by the Italian authorities. He gave testimony stating that he was afraid for his own life and, in connection with the escalation of terror in the USSR, wanted political asylum in Italy. Discretely, the Italians informed the Polish Foreign Ministry of this fact. Captain Jerzy Niezbrzycki, head of the Eastern Division in the Second Department of the General Staff, went to Rome and interrogated Butenko, who accused envoy Mirosław Arciszewski of working for Soviet intelligence. The entire Soviet action was thus supposed to have been a blow at the reputation of a Polish diplomat, who was involved in counteracting Soviet influence in Romania. Niezbrzycki came to the conclusion that Butenko was

pp. 8–13; B. Piotrowski, *Wojna radziecko-fińska (zimowa) 1939–1940. Legendy, nieudomówienia, realia* (Poznań 1997), pp. 47–89; and S. Dębski, *Między Berlinem a Moskwą. Stosunki niemiecko-sowieckie 1939–1941* (Warsaw 2003), 255 ff. See also V. Tanner, *The Winter War. Finland against Russia 1939–1940* (Stanford 1957). Tanner was Finland's foreign minister in 1939–1940.

671 For more on this episode, see Hugh Ragsdale, "The Butenko Affair: Documents from Soviet-Romanian Relations in the Time of the Purges, Anschluss and Munich", *The Slavonic and East European Review* 79 (2001), No. 4: pp. 698–720.

672 This was not an isolated incident. During the Stalinist purges, there were several examples of diplomats, frightened for their lives, who left their positions and requested asylum abroad. For more on the effects of terror on the functioning of the Soviet diplomatic apparatus, see T. J. Uldricks, "The Impact of the Great Purges on the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs", *Slavic Review* 36 (1977), No. 2: pp. 187–204.

673 AAN, MSZ, 6652A. Arciszewski also noted that Butenko's real name was Smirnow, and that he was an air force officer.

674 *Ibid.* (encrypted telegram from Foreign Minister Beck).

an NKVD provocateur. Soon thereafter, the “fugitive” Soviet diplomat left Italy and returned to the USSR. For the Polish Second Department, Butenko’s return was proof that his “disappearance” had been a provocation directed by the Soviet intelligence services.⁶⁷⁵

When the governments of Finland and Sweden agreed in May 1938 on a joint plan for the limited remilitarisation of the Åland Islands (demilitarised by the international convention of 1921), the Soviets demanded that this remilitarisation be done under their supervision. Then, Moscow put forward the above-mentioned demand for Hogland Island.⁶⁷⁶ Finland also agreed, under pressure from the Soviets, to accept the USSR’s assistance if it was necessary to defend the Åland Islands.⁶⁷⁷ In international relations, the forced acceptance of assistance could not help but mean a new form of dependence because, it stands to reason, if a country cannot defend itself through its own powers and is forced to accept assistance from a much larger country, then that larger country enjoys a certain and obvious dominance over the recipient. Acceptance of this concept, which the Soviets would try to impose on the Baltic States and Poland a year later in the summer of 1939, would represent a real revolution in international relations, much greater than, for example, the notorious great power (four power) directorate. Not surprisingly, the government in Helsinki did not agree to coerced assistance in connection with the Åland Islands.

All of these demands were motivated by the USSR’s need to fortify its security, but it is not difficult to note their expansive nature; they in fact corresponded to far-reaching strategic goals, one of which was expressed by the Soviet doctrine of the “closed sea” (*mare clausum*), referring to the Black Sea, a doctrine that Moscow was formulating increasingly clearly as a political postulate.⁶⁷⁸

Let us note, moreover, that Jan Szembek described in his diary a conversation with ambassador Bullitt in which the American diplomat referred to talks he had had with commissar Litvinov in which Poland came up as a topic. According to Szembek, Bullitt reported that the head of Soviet diplomacy said that “Soviet Russia does not attach too much importance to the issue of Bessarabia because in any case, Romania will someday be absorbed by Russia.” Moreover, “Litvinov talked about Poland in a similar vein.”⁶⁷⁹ Bullitt also mentioned that “a few years ago, he was traveling together with Litvinov from Moscow to the West, and as they passed

675 Ryszard Wraga to the foreign minister in exile, dated 7 October 1947. Biblioteka Polska in London, Rkp 530.

676 For more, see Adam Bielnicki, “Zagadnienie Wysp Alandzkich w latach 1938–1939,” *Komunikaty Instytutu Bałtyckiego* (Danzig) (1977), z. 26: pp. 81–88.

677 M. Nurek, *Polityka Wielkiej Brytanii w rejonie Morza Bałtyckiego w latach 1935–1939* (Danzig 1986), p. 192.

678 K. Grzybowski, “The Soviet Doctrine of Mare Clausum and Policies in Black and Baltic Seas,” *Journal of Central European Affairs* 14 (January 1955), No. 4: pp. 339–353.

679 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 3, pp. 178–179.

through the Białystok area Litvinov said that he was raised in this part of Poland. When the ambassador remarked that he did not know that Litvinov was Polish, he grew irritated and replied that all this was not Poland but Russia, and that all of this would be ‘ours’ [again].⁶⁸⁰ These words show clearly that the Soviet leadership only temporarily and tactically accepted the limits imposed by the Riga Treaty and the entire international order, which—given the importance of peaceful Polish-Soviet relations for Eastern Europe—should not be called the Versailles order, but the Versailles-Riga order.

Significantly, in February 1938 the Soviet deputy foreign minister Władimir Potiomkin told the Bulgarian envoy in Moscow, Nikolai Antonov, that the Soviet Union did not feel threatened. And if it came to war in Europe, his country would not be the victim of aggression by Germany and Poland, rather “Poland will be defeated and then its ally Germany (for whom colonel Beck works so zealously), instead of defending Poland, would come to us and propose a return to the old practice of the eighteenth century and jointly carry out the fourth partition of Polish lands.”⁶⁸¹ As the Bulgarian diplomat told officials at the Foreign Ministry: “Colonel Beck and those who support him in Warsaw are blinded by megalomania and, under the influence of the mirage of a Great Poland, they turn their gaze to the territories to Poland’s east and south-east—this also applies to Romania—in the hope of separating, for example, Ukraine from the USSR, which of course you cannot even try to accomplish without war.”⁶⁸²

In the final analysis it is impossible not to note also that in 1937–1938, by order of the highest leadership in Moscow, the Soviets carried out a forced resettlement of the Polish population from the Soviet part of Ukraine. At the same time, Poles were removed from the Communist Party apparatus. By order of Nikolai Yezhov, the head of the NKVD, plans were fixed to exterminate over 100,000 Poles who were citizens of the USSR.⁶⁸³ History knows no other such criminal order, issued *expressis verbis* by a state; other well-known acts of twentieth-century genocide were carried out without a specific order in writing. These extermination actions, bearing the NKVD code name “Polish Operation”, still await a full scholarly examination.⁶⁸⁴

680 Ibid.

681 See J. Tomaszewski, “Warianty dyplomacji w Europie Środkowej w latach 1938–1939,” *Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis* (1981), No. 543, *Historia*, Vol. 36, p. 417. Tomaszewski made use of Bulgarian Foreign Ministry archival sources in the Central State Archive in Sofia.

682 Ibid., p. 419.

683 The first to write about this matter was Mikołaj Iwanow, *Pierwszy naród ukarany. Polacy w Związku Radzieckim 1921–1938* (Wrocław 1991); more recently, Tomasz Sommer: *Rozstrzelać Polaków. Ludobójstwo Polaków w Związku Sowieckim w latach 1937–1938. Dokumenty z centrali* (Warsaw 2010).

684 The number murdered in 1937–1938 is estimated at around 140,000.

All of these statements and actions cannot serve as proof that the Soviet leadership was interested in establishing peaceful relations with the USSR's European neighbours; nor can it be said that Soviet policy had entered a phase marked by general retreat and self-isolation. The thesis that the Soviet Union was sinking into internal crisis, and that the pressure it was applying on Europe had ceased, is unjustified. On the contrary: leaders in Moscow were developing plans to regain at least those territories lost as a result of the collapse of the Tsarist Empire, and at most to subjugate Eastern and Central Europe, where the key was Poland, a country perceived as the most intransigent enemy and an essential component of the hated Versailles order.

Soviet Diplomacy between the Austrian Anschluss and Sudetenland Conflict

The Polish examination of the USSR and its policies was dominated by an analysis of the Soviet stance towards the Sudetenland crisis, and Polish officials conducted that analysis in the belief that Soviet policy was clearly on the defensive. In December 1937, Minister Beck emphasised "the process by which the USSR is closing itself off politically and technically from Europe".⁶⁸⁵ This statement did not mean that the USSR had entered a phase of peaceful relations with the rest of the world. Rather, it was an attempt to explain the Soviet Union's increased isolation from the outside world and its efforts to fortify the USSR's border with Poland.

In his unpublished notes from the end of 1937 and beginning of 1938, Colonel Leon Mitkiewicz included the following thoughts:

The Polish Foreign Ministry and the Polish General Staff are anticipating serious developments in Europe that will be caused by Germany, but at the same time they *firmly reject* the idea that Germany will *turn against* Poland, at least in the near future. [...] Soviet Russia is judged by the Polish Foreign Ministry and the Polish General Staff as weak, unable to go on an armed offensive. The attitude towards Soviet Russia at the Foreign Ministry and the General Staff is at least distrustful and lacking any willingness to establish cooperation. Poland's relations with France, and in particular with Czechoslovakia, are bad, the reason being the close relations between those two countries and Soviet Russia and the agreements on mutual assistance, in the event of a German attack on Czechoslovakia, concluded by both of those countries with Soviet Russia in 1935, in the face of Poland's opposition.⁶⁸⁶

685 AAN, MSZ, 6654, Beck to the missions in Riga, Tallinn, Helsinki and Bucharest, instructions dated 31 December 1937.

686 Biblioteka Polska (Paris), Akcesja, sygn. 3178, L. Mitkiewicz, "Polska akcja przeciwko Czechosłowacji," pp. 52–54. These notes were produced before the author's departure to Lithuania as military attaché, after diplomatic relations were established with that country on 31 March 1938. Emphases in original.

The mutual assistance treaties that France and Czechoslovakia signed on 2 and 16 May 1935, respectively, with the Soviet government were, in point of fact, not operable, given that Soviet armed forces could come into contact with the German army in only two ways: either by passing through Polish territory (with the consent of the Polish government or without such consent, which would mean war) or by occupying Polish territory (if the German army were also there). As the Czech scholar Jindřich Dejmek reminded us, there was no cooperation between the Czechoslovak and Soviet general staffs after 16 May 1935.⁶⁸⁷

Polish intelligence agents received information of various kinds about Soviet operational plans that assumed offensive action against Poland. Within the General Staff, such offensive action was even taken for granted, although Polish officials did not always view incoming information as credible, such as in June 1927, when the Polish military attaché in Tokyo, lieutenant colonel Waclaw Jędrzejewicz, received alleged Soviet war plans directed at Poland from Japanese sources, plans which were to be implemented in 1930 in connection with the reorganisation of the Red Army, and a draft of Tuchaczewski's offensive operational guidelines.⁶⁸⁸

Undoubtedly, Moscow's reaction to the Anschluss of Austria in March 1938 was interesting. In a conversation with Polish ambassador Grzybowski in Moscow on 14 March, Potiomkin noted that for the time being "the Soviets cannot outbid the West" in concessions to Germany, but he added that the effects on international politics of the Great Power policy of appeasement would be "far-reaching".⁶⁸⁹

The May 1938 crisis, triggered by the mobilisation of reservists ordered by the Czechoslovak government on 21 May, closed the first phase of the Sudetenland conflict. The Soviet government, through declarations to Lithuania, once again declared the need for an international conference and a multilateral pact on mutual assistance "against all aggression". In fact, Soviet policy was far from actually getting involved in the crisis; Soviet leaders were aware of the consequences of appeasement led by the Western powers. They wanted a conflict that would divide Europe, but they also wanted to play for time.

687 J. Dejmek, "Československá zahraniční politika a snahy o bezpečnost ve střední Evropě mezi světovými válkami (přehled základních problémů)," in *Doświadczenia trzech generacji Polaków, Czechów i Słowaków 1918–1998*, eds. M. Pułaski, J. Valenta (Wrocław 1998), p. 104.

688 On 23 August 1927, the head of the Second Department, colonel Tadeusz Schaetzel, recognised that Japanese intelligence had succumbed to Soviet inspiration. See "Sowiecki plan operacyjny przeciwko Polsce. Materiały agenturalne w ocenie Oddziału February Sztabu Generalnego WP," ed. A. Peplowski, *Obóz* (kwartalnik) (1993), z. 25/26: pp. 191–198. Most probably, this document was provided to the Poles as part of a large-scale sabotage and disinformation operation carried out by Soviet intelligence services. Marshal Piłsudski, as one of the first in Europe, recognised the true nature of "Operation Trust".

689 Ambassador Grzybowski to MSZ, 15 March 1938, PDD/1938, p. 135.

In a report for Beck dated 25 May 1938, the Polish ambassador Grzybowski in Moscow wrote:

Apart from moral support, one has not been able to detect in the Soviet position a willingness to take an independent and active position on the Czechoslovakian matter. This stance is *a priori* dependent on French and English attitudes to Central Europe, and the Soviets are apparently still unwilling to take further steps towards engagement in the region and to clarify their position. However, none of this changes the fact that the Soviet attitude to the Czechoslovak case is much like its attitude to Spain. Beyond general assurances of allied solidarity and an alleged willingness to cooperate in a peaceful resolution of the Czechoslovak matter, the Soviets have worked consistently to aggravate the situation in Central Europe and to buy time in the face of a possible armed conflict.⁶⁹⁰

On 28 May, ambassador Grzybowski put forward his own conclusions in a similar way, writing: "Based on information and impressions gathered here, it appears that the development of a possible conflict and the USSR's direct involvement are not likely."⁶⁹¹ The Polish ambassador's main point was: "The Soviets will avoid active involvement in the Sudeten crisis." Grzybowski believed that such a position was "the logical consequence of the Soviets main political line, which in view of its current internal weakness does not anticipate any benefits from localised European conflicts, which offer something to gain only to countries with a more expansive policy, which are therefore the countries that the USSR considers its enemies." The ambassador was convinced, however, that it was in the Soviet Union's interests that there be "a conflict not just on a pan-European scale, but on a worldwide scale that would eliminate the two main sources of danger for the Soviets, namely Germany and Japan."⁶⁹² While it was widely assumed that Stalin was firmly opposed to a military operation that would draw the USSR into a local war with a small country,⁶⁹³ it was understood that the Soviet leadership remained interested in a great conflict against "world capitalism".

Active Soviet involvement in the deepening conflict over the Sudetenland was not expected. "Moscow understands," Grzybowski claimed:

[...] that by interfering in this localised conflict it would, in the present situation, by no means be able to provoke greater military turmoil; rather, it would run the risk of getting involved in a direct war, without sufficient assistance from other countries. In the Czech case, the Soviets still desire a possible pan-European conflict, since by

690 *Ibid.*, pp. 286–287.

691 *Ibid.*, p. 309.

692 IPMS, MSZ, A.11.49/CZ/2.

693 See comments attributed to colonel Józef Englicht, one of the heads of Polish intelligence. National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 317, 21101, N.5093/250/38, Douglas McKillop to Louis Collier.

drawing Germany in completely, it would secure the USSR's western front and create opportunities for expanding the war to the global level.⁶⁹⁴

From the Polish point of view, the Soviets' position regarding the Czech crisis would be tied to how events developed. There were signs that the conflict could be settled peacefully because Prague's position towards Hitler's demands indicated that the Czechs depended on France's reaction, and the French were not considering any actions (especially military actions) without Great Britain's support. It seemed inevitable that England would "increase pressure on Prague" in the name of further concessions, although the final result of the conflict was difficult to predict.

From this perspective, it seemed rational to interpret Soviet actions as a bluff. Guided by this belief, in a conversation on 11 June 1938 with the American ambassador in Warsaw, Anthony Biddle, Szembek disputed the American diplomat's observations, according to which it was inconceivable that the Soviet Union was preparing for war and to engage in conflict. The Polish deputy foreign minister said:

Effectively, Stalin cannot do much, but he must bluff as long as possible, especially against England and America, maintain calm, give the impression of high confidence in his own strength, and stir up trouble for France. He is well situated now for such a game. Japan is fully occupied in China. The Blücher army is separated from European Russia and Stalin can today break away from it 500 bombers, which can be used for demonstration and bluff. Stalin will not dare to go on any real offensive, because he knows that once he makes any hostile moves in the west, Japan will end its Chinese expedition and hit Vladivostok.⁶⁹⁵

According to this reasoning, Soviet involvement in any European conflict was out of the question, because Japan would exploit that development in the Far East.

For Polish diplomats, the ultimatum posed to the Lithuanian government on 17 March 1938 and "the settlement of the Lithuanian matter represented a serious diplomatic defeat and loss of prestigious for the Soviets" because it put an end to the situation in which Moscow could continue to exploit the Polish-Lithuanian conflict. Czechoslovakia remained Russia's second geopolitical asset. In the eyes of the Polish leadership, it was a "Soviet aircraft carrier" in Central Europe. Szembek thought that "the collapse of Czechoslovakia would cut the Soviets off definitively from their friends in the West, and they cannot allow that to happen."⁶⁹⁶

None of this means that Polish diplomats did not raise concerns about the potential threat from Poland's eastern neighbour. On 14 June 1938, in a conversation with British prime minister Neville Chamberlain, the focus of which was the Soviet Union, ambassador Edward Raczyński expressed the opinion that "no matter how weak the USSR is today due to internal difficulties and a recent deep and

694 AAN, MSZ, 6669.

695 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 184.

696 *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka. Materiały uzupełniające*, p. 77.

bloody 'purge', it has by no means changed its nature. We must treat it as a potential danger."⁶⁹⁷ On 18 June, Szembek wrote to Envoy Dębicki that "Russia's position is not yet clear", although he concluded that "concrete evidence of Moscow's direct wider involvement on Prague's side is absent".⁶⁹⁸

On 18 June 1938, against the backdrop of the Czechoslovak crisis, the Soviet stance towards Poland took on a new tone. On that day, the Polish ambassador in Paris, Łukasiewicz, received a report from French foreign minister Bonnet that the Soviet chargé d'affaires in Paris had told the Quai d'Orsay that "if we [the French] attacked Czechoslovakia, Soviet Russia could not remain indifferent". The Bolshevik diplomat had supposedly heard news "about the alleged concentration of our troops on the Czechoslovak border". Bonnet reportedly "brushed the matter aside with a statement" declaring that the news was "unfounded".⁶⁹⁹

Analysing Stalin's policy in June 1938, Foreign Minister Beck expressed his belief that the Soviet Union was pursuing a "two-pronged" strategy. On the one hand, the Soviets sought to secure their western borders by means of normal international obligations, a goal served by diplomacy. On the other hand, using the Comintern they sought to deepen conflicts between the Great Powers, and the conflict over the Sudetenland was to lead to a European war.⁷⁰⁰ Beck did not see a direct threat to Poland from the east, a view that had a calming effect on the leadership of the Polish army.⁷⁰¹ In the light of our current knowledge of the state of the Soviet armed forces at that time, it seems that—in the assessments he formulated highlighting the decay and chaos caused by Stalinist terror—Beck underestimated the Red Army's combat capabilities.

The foreign minister was of the opinion that the Soviets preferred delaying tactics in their approach to events as they developed, particularly to war should it break out in the "capitalist camp", this in accordance with Lenin's political program and his view that a "second imperialist war" was inevitable.⁷⁰² Lenin considered the exploitation of ongoing conflicts between rival "bourgeois states" as a key duty of Soviet diplomacy. With this in mind, Beck believed that the Soviets were bluffing and that they did not intend to engage in armed conflict over Czechoslovakia, even if such a conflict broke out. The Polish diplomatic leadership was convinced that not so much because of its military strength, but "above all, because of its geopolitical location, Poland could prevent the scenario of events written in Moscow" from becoming real. On 27 May 1938, ambassador Łukasiewicz wrote that Poland could

697 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12/49/WB/2.

698 *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka. Materiały uzupełniające*, p. 77.

699 PDD/1938, p. 348.

700 These are Beck's comments to American ambassador Biddle on 19 June 1938; see *Poland and the Coming of the Second World War*, p. 223.

701 M. P. Deszczyński, *Ostatni egzamin*, p. 208.

702 For example, W. I. Lenin, *Dzieła wszystkie* (Warsaw 1988), Vol. 44, 3 ff.

“significantly paralyse” potential Soviet actions, not through Polish military action, but by preventing the Soviets from interfering in the Sudetenland conflict.⁷⁰³

Guided by this principle, the Polish government rejected Polish-Soviet cooperation in any form. On 15 June 1938, ambassador Łukasiewicz characterised Poland’s policy as excluding “all guarantees” from Soviet Russia; after all, they would be “absolutely illusory”. Neither Poland nor the Western powers had at their disposal effective “means to pressure Moscow”, and Soviet policy was contrary “to every pursuit of serious détente anywhere in the world, especially in Europe”.⁷⁰⁴

On 4 July 1938, the head of the Eastern Division, Kobyłański, drew up some conclusions on how Soviet policy could potentially develop. He highlighted the possibility of war in the Far East, claiming that “the situation is developing towards a Japanese-Soviet conflict, which most interested parties would view positively with the exception of the USSR itself, realising that it is fraught with unpredictable consequences.”⁷⁰⁵ In the summer of 1938, officials at the Polish Foreign Ministry weighed a number of options for how the situation could develop. If the conflict over the Sudetenland could be contained as part of a “direct contest between Berlin and Prague, the Soviets will avoid engaging in this matter”. In another variant, namely a European war, which was possible only if France fulfilled its alliance commitments to Czechoslovakia, then the international situation would offer the Soviets great benefits, without the need for active involvement.⁷⁰⁶

In assessing Soviet actions to date in the context of the Czechoslovak conflict, Kobyłański drew attention to those measures that were designed to maintain the Czechs’ “will to resist”. The head of the Eastern Division reported:

Soviet foreign policy has been oriented towards the active involvement of the Western Powers in guaranteeing Czechoslovakia’s territorial integrity against armed action by the Third Reich. The Soviets have made every possible effort to provoke and maintain an anti-German mood in Western societies and within Western Governments, and to influence decisions in defence of Czechoslovakia’s threatened integrity. Moscow constantly supports a spirit of resistance in Czechoslovakia against appeasing German demands, and it apparently supports any move by the Prague government that might aggravate and potentially provoke conflict. It is in this spirit that the work of the Czech communists is being carried out, making understanding with [Konrad] Henlein’s supporters (Sudeten Germans) more difficult.⁷⁰⁷

703 [J. Łukasiewicz], *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939* (1989), p. 115.

704 PDD/1938, 335. These arguments would remain valid into 1939, in the realities of the new and decisive crisis in the Versailles-Riga order.

705 PDD/1938, p. 372.

706 Biblioteka Polska (Paris), Akcesja, sygn. 3178, L. Mitkiewicz, “Polska przeciwko Czechosłowacji”, p. 48.

707 Ibid.

Writing about Soviet activities in the West, the Polish diplomat meant propaganda conducted under the banner of anti-fascism and the international communist movement controlled through the Comintern.

Launched in the summer of 1937, Japan's offensive against China proper, along with the growing Far East crisis, seemed to herald a drastic deterioration in the Soviet position in the region. Warsaw interpreted this development as yet another indication that the USSR would move into a defensive position in Europe, in accordance with Russia's fixed principle proclaiming the need to prevent a situation in which the country would be entangled in a conflict on two fronts. As Miroslaw Arciszewski, deputy undersecretary of state in the Foreign Ministry, wrote to diplomatic missions on 9 August 1938: "We note the symptoms of limited Soviet activity in Europe (with the exception of actions taken by the Comintern) and the transfer of all efforts to the Asian region. Internal difficulties continue, as evidenced by the constantly recurring waves of terror."⁷⁰⁸ The Polish diplomat added that, for the Soviet regime's position, the "Japan's final victory over China" would be a serious threat.

The thesis that the Soviet Union was acting to escalate the conflict in Europe, to transform the Sudetenland crisis into a European war, was upheld in autumn 1938, when the conflict over the Sudetenland entered its decisive phase. It is worth mentioning that on 12 September, Beck instructed ambassador Łukasiewicz to raise with foreign minister Bonnet the issue of Soviet actions and their role "in complicating the situation in Europe".⁷⁰⁹

Generally, Polish observations regarding Soviet policy in the period between the Austrian Anschluss and the Munich Conference can be summed up quite simply: the Polish Foreign Ministry, despite small differences in detail, interpreted Soviet policy as aimed at provoking a European war, interested in maintaining a wait-and-see attitude, and supporting Czechoslovakia in its resistance to the Third Reich's demands, because if Czechoslovakia surrendered, the possibility of a European war would decrease.

Rumours about Romania's Agreement to Allow the Passage of Soviet Aircraft

One form of assistance for Czechoslovakia that the Soviet Union could provide was air support. This idea arose in May 1938 and, between May and September of that year, it attracted the attention of the Polish Foreign Ministry. In this context, the most serious idea, and the greatest threat to Poland, was the idea to provide air support to Czechoslovakia using Romanian airspace. From the very first moment this issue emerged, the Polish government detected that the Romanian

708 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Akta Michała Sokolnickiego, 91/11.

709 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 267.

leadership was wavering on how to respond. It cannot be determined exactly when the Polish Foreign Ministry first learned of Soviet pressure to get Romania to grant the Soviets the use of its airspace, but it was certainly sometime in May 1938. It is significant that the Czechoslovak foreign minister, Kamil Krofta, openly discussed the matter with the Polish envoy in Prague, Kazimierz Papée.

On 28 May 1938, deputy foreign minister Szembek wrote in his instructions to the Polish envoy in Budapest: "We have ascertained that Romania is maintaining a passive attitude to the conflict. The Romanian government is looking for closer ties with us. [...] In the Soviet position, apart from moral support, one cannot see a willingness to take an independent position on the Czech issue."⁷¹⁰ But in May and June of that year, according to Polish information, Soviet aircraft were flying over Romanian territory on their way to Czechoslovakia. On 18 June, Szembek wrote in a letter to envoy Dębicki that "Krofta even admitted to Papée that they had an agreement with Romania regulating these flights."⁷¹¹ From this he drew unambiguous conclusions: "Bucharest is not playing it straight with us here, such that—in addition to the ways in which we have already intervened—we will be forced to take a stronger stance in this respect. We have even heard rumours—albeit from a Czech, and therefore possibly a tendentious source—that Moscow is again seeking to obtain the right to march through Romania in exchange for guarantees regarding Bessarabia."⁷¹² The USSR's non-recognition of Romania's annexation of Bessarabia, carried out by Romania *manu militari* in 1918, when it was incorporated into Kingdom after the First World War, was the main cause of the Romanian-Soviet conflict, which in turn led to the Polish-Romanian Alliance signed in Bucharest on 3 March 1921. It is well-known (given that it has been repeatedly described by historians) that this alliance was the reason that Soviet-Romanian negotiations over a non-aggression pact collapsed in 1932, despite Polish mediation. The above-mentioned rumours about Soviet readiness to grant Romania a guarantee of territorial integrity would be the first expression of the USSR's change in position, one which appeared advantageous for Romania. If such an offer were indeed made, it would indicate the dexterity of Soviet diplomacy. But the value of such guarantees was, in fact, small. Any Soviet entry into Romanian territory—with the potential consent of the Romanian authorities—would mark a break in that country's independence, and the Polish-Romanian alliance would be irreversibly broken.

Information from Czechoslovak sources about a secret air transit agreement between Prague and Bucharest did not correspond with reality. Nonetheless, this information was disseminated in order to create the impression in Warsaw that Czechoslovakia's position was strengthening, which was supposed to discourage

710 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Orłowskiego, 78/16. The same is included in a telegram from Szembek to envoy Papée in Prague, dated 28 May; see *Monachium 1938. Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne*, p. 142.

711 *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka. Materiały uzupełniające*, p. 77.

712 *Ibid.*

Poland from taking a hard line on the Cieszyn Silesia matter. Having said that, it was undisputed that flights over Romanian territory were taking place.

In this context, on 1 June the Poles sent a note to the government in Bucharest warning the Romanian authorities that permitting the Soviet air force to use Romanian airspace would be a violation of the Polish-Romanian Guarantee Treaty of 15 January 1931.⁷¹³

Conclusions drawn by Polish diplomats observing the fluctuations of Romanian policy filled no one with optimism. Titulescu was seeking to bring Romania into the USSR's orbit of influence. Of course he did not want to weaken his country; rather, he was looking for a way to adapt his country's policy to the theory of collective security, as it was understood in the 1930s. As the British ambassador to Warsaw, Kennard, wrote to Foreign Secretary Samuel Hoare on 27 June 1935, rumours that Titulescu wanted to conclude a treaty of mutual assistance with the Soviets—based on the Czechoslovakia model—made a significant impression on Poland.⁷¹⁴ Warsaw viewed Titulescu's dismissal in August 1936, in which Polish diplomats were involved, as a highly favourable development.⁷¹⁵ There followed some warming of allied relations with Poland, but in 1937 prime minister Gheorghe Tătărescu told the Soviet envoy, Ostrowski, that his country wanted to conclude a treaty of mutual assistance with the government of the USSR.⁷¹⁶ In April 1938, the Soviets sent their envoy in Prague, Sergei Aleksandrovsky, to Bucharest, where he held talks with foreign minister Comnen, which continued that May in Geneva.⁷¹⁷ It was in connection with these facts that rumours circulated among European diplomats that secret Romanian-Soviet negotiations were underway on the use of Romanian territory, the goal being to facilitate Soviet assistance to Czechoslovakia.

713 The fourth article of this agreement: "In order to co-ordinate their peaceful efforts, the two Governments are obligated to undertake to consult each other on foreign policy matters of interest to both Contracting Parties [*Afin de coordonner leurs efforts pacifiques les deux Gouvernements s'engagent à se concerter sur les questions de politique extérieure, intéressant les deux Parties Contractantes*]". We know about the text of this document on the basis of a report put together by the head of the Eastern Division, Tadeusz Kobylański, for the head of the Second Department of the General Staff, colonel Pełczyński (PDD/1938, 314).

714 *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print*, eds. K. Bourne, D. C. Watt, part 2: *From the First to Second World War*, series A: *The Soviet Union 1917–1939*, Vol. 13 (London 1986), p. 12.

715 One participant in the action against Titulescu was the Polish envoy in Bucharest, Miroslaw Arciszewski. For more, see S. Mikulicz, "Wpływ dyplomacji sanacyjnej na obalenie Titulescu," *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* (1959), No. 7–8: pp. 104–123.

716 M. Hauner, "The Quest for the Romanian Corridor: The Soviet Union, Romania and Czechoslovakia during the Sudeten Crisis of 1938", *Mythos München. Le Myth de Munich. The Myth of Munich*, ed. F. Taubert (München 2002), p. 53.

717 Z. Steiner, "The Soviets and the Czech Crisis", p. 755.

Polish concerns that the Soviets would obtain the right of transit through Romanian air space, and especially that they would gain permission to march the Red Army through Romania, significantly increased in July and August 1938.⁷¹⁸ By way of reaction, and given that Poland and Romania shared an alliance, deputy foreign minister Szembek visited Bucharest. There, he conferred above all with the new foreign minister, Comnen, who as we know was not especially pro-Polish. He was in fact a difficult partner. All indications are that he was attached to the notion of the “Little Entente system”, which by that time, in the realities of 1938, was already a thing of the past.

Based on his conversations, the Polish deputy foreign minister, who had become personally familiar with Romanian realities during his five-year service as Polish envoy to Bucharest in 1927–1932, prepared a comprehensive report dated 26 July.⁷¹⁹ This document contains a record of the conversations between the two politicians on Soviet attempts to persuade the Romanian government to allow the Red Army to march through Romania. Szembek was the one who raised this matter, stating that:

[...] for some time now there have been persistent rumours that Romania is ready to give the Soviet army the right to march through its territory to help Czechoslovakia. These rumours come to us from three countries. Moscow is spreading the news that in the event of a conflict that forces them [the Soviets] to provide assistance to Czechoslovakia, Soviet troops will march through Romania, whose leaders will protest the action but will not dare to start a war with Russia.⁷²⁰

Minister Comnen responded with comforting assurances. He:

[...] denied all the gossip as much as possible. He declared that Romania would not let a single Soviet soldier through its territory [...] that he would give his word of honour that there was no truth in all these rumours, that in the event of any Soviet attempts to cross their border, the Romanians would invoke the defensive alliance with Poland.⁷²¹

Comnen reduced the Soviet military flights over Romanian territory recorded by the Polish Foreign Ministry to “a dozen aircraft purchased by the Czech Republic” which had “indeed passed from the Soviet Union to Czechoslovakia”. At the same time, he explained: “One cannot forbid the Czechs from buying aviation equipment in Soviet Russia. Airplanes were allowed to pass, with all possible precautions and

718 Polish diplomatic documentation on this matter was collected by Jerzy Tomaszewski (ed.), *Polska korespondencja dyplomatyczna na temat wojskowej pomocy ZSRR dla Czechosłowacji w 1938 r. przez terytorium Rumunii*, “Z Dziejów Rozwoju Państw Socjalistycznych” (1983), Vol. 1, pp. 159–184.

719 PDD/1938, pp. 383–387. Previously published in the annex to volume 4 of *Diariusz Szembeka*, pp. 234–238.

720 PDD/1938, p. 384.

721 *Ibid.*

under instructions to stop at Cluj for inspection".⁷²² In response, Szembek noted that "by allowing them [the airplanes] to pass over Romanian territory, Romania did the Czechs political harm [...] and did not provide them with military assistance". By this, the Polish Deputy foreign minister meant that German diplomats would exploit this fact in their efforts to escalate the conflict over the Sudetenland, which had been gaining strength since May 1938.

In the Bucharest talks, Szembek did not omit the issue of Bessarabia; he attempted to show that the benefits that would accrue to Romania through the Bolshevik government's recognition of Romania's territorial integrity would be very problematic. It was an "[...] absolute necessity," he warned Comnen, "that [the Romanians] do not find themselves being blackmailed by the Soviets in this matter. They should remember that Bessarabia is an integral part of Romania and they should be careful not to be drawn by the Soviets into paying politically for ceding rights that the Soviets do not have to Bessarabia."⁷²³

In early September 1938, Polish diplomats recorded new signs of Soviet pressure on Romania to allow Soviet warplanes to use its airspace and Soviet troops to march through its territory. As it was possible that the Bucharest government could succumb to this pressure, the Polish Foreign Ministry grew considerably more concerned.

On 10 September 1938, the Polish ambassador to Bucharest, Roger Raczyński, informed the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw that "Romania's position [is] doubtful, although not final", and that the "Romanians do not know what position to take".⁷²⁴ The Polish Ambassador noted that the Romanian approach was unclear and raised doubts whether Romania would give in to Soviet demands. In the same telegram, Raczyński confirmed new flights of Soviet aircraft over Rumania to Czechoslovakia. On 14 September, the Polish delegate to the League of Nations in Geneva, Tytus Komarnicki, conferred with foreign minister Comnen at the annual session of the General Assembly, which was generally unable to organise any assistance for Czechoslovakia as a potential victim of aggression. The Romanian foreign minister assured Komarnicki that "Romania will do nothing without an agreement with Poland", but he asked what Poland would do if war broke out. The Polish diplomat confined himself to responding that "it does not seem that we will shed Polish blood to maintain Czechoslovakia's territorial integrity".⁷²⁵

A day later on 15 September, the Polish consul in Chisinau (Moldova), Aleksander Poncet de Sandon, reported to Warsaw that a forced (not necessarily permitted) march of Soviet forces through Bessarabia was possible without active Romanian opposition.⁷²⁶ On 18 September, Edward Raczyński, the ambassador in London,

722 Ibid., pp. 384–385.

723 Ibid., p. 385.

724 PDD/1938, p. 458.

725 Encrypted telegram from Komarnicki dated 13 September, *ibid.*, p. 475.

726 *Monachium 1938. Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne*, pp. 271–272.

formulated this information somewhat differently, writing that the Romanian Envoy in London, Basile Grigorcea, had assured him that the Soviets would not ask for permission to march through Romania, although they had sought permission to fly its aircraft over Romanian airspace, preferably at night.⁷²⁷

On 13 September 1938, the Hungarian envoy in Warsaw, András Hory, issued a *démarche* to Szembek. Referring to new rumours about Romania's alleged commitment to allow Soviet troops to pass through its territory, minister Kánya asked what the Polish government's position was in this matter. In a calm reply, Szembek referred to Romania's "categorical assurance" that this would not happen. Otherwise, as Szembek made clear, the alliance between Romania and Poland would be put into question.⁷²⁸ It is hard not to notice that if Bucharest agreed to allow Soviet air forces to use Romanian airspace, or to allow Soviet ground forces to cross Romanian territory, such an action would immediately render Romania an ally of the USSR. In turn, such a development would not only destroy the bilateral Polish-Romanian alliance, but would also preclude consideration of Romania as a potential player in the Polish Third Europe project.

Polish Foreign Ministry documents seem to indicate that officials in Warsaw doubtlessly believed that the Czechoslovak leadership seriously hoped that Soviet promises of assistance would be kept. On 18 September, deputy undersecretary of state Arciszewski explained to Szembek that "this assistance will by no means go through Poland, because Poland would surely resist and thus thwart any and all assistance. The Czechs would then be completely at the mercy of Germany. Soviet assistance will go through Romania, or—if that turns out also to be impossible—the Soviets will find another way."⁷²⁹ Thus, the assumption that Romania could make its territory available to the Soviet armed forces remained real.

A day later on 19 September 1938, ambassador Roger Raczyński tried to gain some clarification from Ernest Urdăreanu, minister at the royal court and King Carol II's most trusted advisor. In a conversation with the Polish diplomat, Urdăreanu ruled out the possibility that Soviet troops would be allowed to pass through Romania, although he requested that this information be kept strictly confidential, because its publication would damage the Bucharest government's standing in Romanian public opinion, which was largely pro-Czech. In any case, Urdăreanu stated, "before any final decision is made, the king wants to know the ally's position"; that is, Poland's. This last statement is peculiar given that Carol II should have known that the Polish government's position on this matter had been categorically negative for a long time. In general, Raczyński came away from this conversation with a very ambiguous impression, despite the assurances and promises he had heard.⁷³⁰ Nevertheless, Polish Foreign Service officials continued

727 PDD/1938, p. 503.

728 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 269.

729 *Ibid.*, p. 270.

730 PDD/1938, p. 508.

to send reports to Warsaw about Soviet transports of arms and “war materials” through Romania.⁷³¹

Finally, on 23 September 1938; that is, when Polish-Soviet tensions were at their most extreme (as will be discussed later), minister Urdăreanu told ambassador Raczyński that Romania was definitely withdrawing from aiding Czechoslovakia.⁷³² As we know, agreements establishing the Little Entente did not oblige the Romanians to acknowledge possible German aggression against Czechoslovakia as a *casus foederis*. Urdăreanu’s statement seemed tantamount to a departure from cooperation in order to effect Soviet assistance to Czechoslovakia.

Undoubtedly it was Carol II who made the decision to finally refuse the use of either Romanian air space or Romanian territory by the Soviet military. As the German envoy in Bucharest, Wilhelm Fabricius, reported on 30 September, the king stated that he “would rather see the Germans in Romania as enemies than the Russians as friends”.⁷³³ But this statement was made after the Munich resolutions had been passed, when the issue of the transit of Soviet troops had lost all meaning. It was thus a kind of alibi.

The Polish position on this matter—that it was impossible for Poland to allow the army of a totalitarian power to make use of its airspace and territory—is not subject to any doubt. Nor is there any reason to consider this matter again. Consenting to such a request would mean the end of a country’s independence, its irreversible entry into the orbit of Soviet influence, most probably territorial losses, and above all and most realistically the Bolshevik-isation (for want of a better term) of the entire country. With this understanding in mind, Polish leaders would reject Soviet demands to march through their territory a year later, in August 1939.

Another possibility was the Red Army marching through Romania. Based on available diplomatic correspondence, it seems unambiguous that Soviet diplomats wanted to take advantage of Romania’s internal weakness and to “play on internal factors”. It was difficult not to notice that Bucharest hesitated in this matter. Poland’s pressure on its Romanian ally to prevent the Soviets from using Romanian airspace certainly played a significant role in preparing Carol II’s final decision, a fact which must have been noticed in Moscow.

The Soviet Threat: Reality or Mystification?

It is difficult not to ask how Foreign Minister Beck and the Polish political leadership assessed Soviet war preparations in September 1938. Were they aware of the reality (and extent) of the threat? Files preserved in the Polish Foreign Ministry

731 J. Tomaszewski, *Polska korespondencja dyplomatyczna*, pp. 181–184.

732 *Monachium 1938. Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne*, p. 382.

733 J. Weinstein, “Scenariusz ministra Gafencu,” *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1968), No. 13: p. 154.

allow us to answer this question only partially, but they do help the historian carry out their responsibility, which is to shed some light on these matters.

On 14 September 1938, Ambassador Edward Raczyński told Lord Halifax: "Czechoslovakia, which flanks Poland from the south, is bound by an alliance with a potential enemy of ours, the Soviet Union, whose role in the current conflict must raise serious reservations".⁷³⁴ The use of the phrase "potential enemy of ours" seems to suggest that, in the ongoing conflict over the Sudetenland, Raczyński imagined the possibility of a confrontation between Poland and Bolshevik Russia. But nothing indicates clearly that Polish foreign policy leaders expected the Soviets to make any moves that would make Poland vulnerable to an external threat. Entries in Szembek's diary from September 1938 do not give the impression that officials at the Polish Foreign Ministry had such concerns.

From September 1938, Foreign Minister Beck repeatedly raised the issue of Soviet military preparations, but only after the Munich Conference; he made no statements before 30 September indicating that he put much thought into the impending threat from the east. When he received the Hungarian politician István Csáky in Warsaw (6–7 October 1938), Beck expressed the following idea about the Soviets:

The Polish Government points out that its most important task in the face of the events taking place in Czechoslovakia is to protect the eastern border. Poland does not overestimate the value of Soviet shows of force, but it must take into account the fact that the concentration of troops in the region of Minsk and Ukraine has not been reversed.⁷³⁵

This statement was evidently dictated by the need for Poland to "justify itself" with the Hungarian political leadership regarding the fact that in proclaiming its vision of a Third Europe, Poland did not take greater offensive actions against Czechoslovakia than the ultimatum of 30 September. It thus cannot be used as evidence to suggest that Beck was considering the Soviet threat as a reality *hic et nunc*.

Polish Foreign Ministry documents from the autumn of 1938, with which I am quite familiar, do not allow us to clearly answer the question whether the Polish political leadership took into account the possibility of a Soviet military move against the Polish Republic. Indeed, we do not find in these documents any consideration of such a scenario. But one thing is certain: Beck ordered Polish officials to analyse Soviet preparations and to report to the Foreign Ministry about the Red Army's mobilisation. The consulate in Minsk played an important role here.

734 PDD/1938, p. 474.

735 Notatka MSZ "Misja hr. Csakyego w Warszawie 5–6 paźdź[iernika] 1938", PDD/1938, p. 664.

Intelligence officer Witold Okoński was employed in this mission, probably operating under diplomatic cover, as vice-consul.⁷³⁶

However, there are many indications that the Polish army's top leadership—that is, the General Inspectorate of the Armed Forces and the General Staff—had a much clearer picture of the threat from the east. It is not easy to reconstruct the atmosphere in those offices, but notes left behind by colonel Józef Jaklicz, the then head of the Third Department (operational) of the General Staff, shed some light on this matter. Given that they were written during the Second World War, they project the author's later knowledge back onto past events. Jaklicz wrote:

In the years immediately preceding September 1939, the closer enemy, viewed as more dangerous because it was the faster one, was Soviet Russia. I cannot answer whether this was the result of a political or military evaluation. Events in the autumn of 1938 seemed to confirm the legitimacy of this position. During the period of tension over Zaolzie, the East was moving. Russia ordered the mobilisation of its border corps. Militarily, we regarded ourselves as being on the eve of war, which is why the main operational effort was focused on being ready as soon as possible to resist an eastern invasion. This does not mean that the West was neglected. Not at all: preparations were being made in parallel with the East, although the pace of preparations had the character of normal work, the results of which could be felt only as events developed.⁷³⁷

In addition, it is clear from French diplomatic sources that the General Staff were aware of the threat. On 21 September, the French military attaché in Warsaw, general Felix Musse, after talking with the Chief of the Polish Army's General Staff, general Waclaw Stachiewicz, wrote to the War Ministry in Paris: “[Stachiewicz] is very much concerned about the possibility of Russian intervention [*possibilité d'intervention russe*] into Polish territory”. At the same time, he mentioned that after the explanations Litvinov gave in a conversation with Bonnet in Geneva—which were made during the XIX General Assembly of the League of Nations—“it seems that this possibility has been completely removed”.⁷³⁸

Meanwhile, during a conversation on 20 September 1938 with the Romanian ambassador in Warsaw, Richard Franasovici, Szembek said that “information from the USSR indicates Soviet Russia's complete apathy”. This statement seems to clearly reject any notion that Polish Foreign Ministry officials were concerned about a Soviet armed attack. Although rumours were reaching Warsaw about possible Soviet demands to allow Red Army troops to move through Polish territory, they were generally ignored. On 12 September, Romanian foreign minister

736 Formally, Okoński was the second secretary of the Polish embassy, director of the Consulate General in Minsk (in the Polish Foreign Service since 1928). See *Rocznik służby zagranicznej według stanu na 1 kwietnia 1938 r.* (Warsaw 1938), p. 211.

737 Biblioteka Polska (Paris), Akcesja, 3346, Papiery Józefa Jaklicza, Płk dypl. J. Jaklicz, “Kampania wrześniowa 1939 r. w Polsce,” Grenoble 1942 (manuscript), p. 44.

738 DDF, Paris 1977, series 2, Vol. 11, doc. 274, p. 430.

Comnen reportedly informed King Carol II that Litvinov had told him in Geneva that the Red Army would go to Czechoslovakia's assistance through Polish territory.⁷³⁹ This rumour was given little credence.

In autumn 1938, there were numerous incidents involving Soviet warplanes that "demonstrated violations of the Polish border".⁷⁴⁰ Soviet police were harassing Polish diplomatic missions in the USSR, as reported by foreign embassies in Moscow.⁷⁴¹ After 1932, the non-aggression treaty having come into force, the scale of sabotage activities on the border between Poland and the USSR had generally decreased, and above all operations carried out by armed bands from Soviet territory had stopped, but subversive activities had not ceased completely.⁷⁴² On 17 August 1938, the Soviet embassy in Warsaw protested against the "provocative activity" of the Polish police against Soviet institutions inside Poland.⁷⁴³ Huge Polish army exercises in September were a show of force, but no provocative incidents accompanied them.

The Soviet move on 23 September, discussed below, was certainly a step aimed at strengthening Czechoslovakia in the ongoing crisis, so that the Prague government would not yield to Poland's demands. Let me add a few words about how the Czechs influenced this move. Four days earlier on 19 September, Beneš received Soviet Envoy Sergei Aleksandrovsky and asked him whether the Soviets would come to Czechoslovakia's aid if France did not.⁷⁴⁴ After receiving a note from the Polish government on 21 September, which demanded the same treatment for the Polish population in Zaolzie as Germans in Sudetenland would be given, foreign minister Krofta—on the very same day—asked the Soviet government (allied with Czechoslovakia) to warn Poland that any military action against Czechoslovakia would force the Soviets to revoke the nonaggression treaty of 25 July 1932. At the same time, envoy Aleksandrovsky sent information to Moscow indicating that Poland was concentrating troops along the entire border with Czechoslovakia, which was in fact not true. It is worth noting that the Soviet envoy was aware at

739 M. Hauner, "The Quest for the Romanian Corridor", p. 71.

740 AAN, MSZ, 5511, Instructions from the undersecretary of state in the Polish Foreign Ministry to the Polish embassy in Moscow dated 28 September 1938.

741 The generally well-informed Italian ambassador in Moscow, Augusto Rosso, wrote about this matter to foreign minister Ciano. ASMAE, URSS, 30/7, Report dated 18 August 1938.

742 A. Przechrta, "Radziecka dywersja na terenie Ukrainy Zachodniej w okresie międzywojennym," in *Studia historyczne nad politykę, gospodarkę i kulturę. Księga pamiątkowa z okazji siedemdziesiątej rocznicy urodzin profesora Mariana Eckerta*, ed. B. Halczak (Zielona Góra 2002), pp. 161–168.

743 *Dokumenty i materiały do historii stosunków polsko-radzieckich* (Warsaw 1967), Vol. 6, p. 405.

744 I. Lukes, "Stalin and Czechoslovakia in 1938–1939: An Autopsy of a Myth", *The Munich Crisis, 1938. Prelude*, p. 17.

the time that, once the British-French plan was adopted, Czechoslovakia would no longer consider defending itself.⁷⁴⁵

On 23 September 1938, the crisis in Polish-Soviet relations reached its climax. At four o'clock that morning, chargé d'affaires Tadeusz Jankowski (head of the Polish Embassy in Moscow in the absence of Grzybowski, who was on vacation) was summoned to the offices of the Soviet foreign minister. He was received by the Foreign Ministry's deputy head, Vladimir Potiomkin, who declared that if Poland took military action against Czechoslovakia, the Polish-Soviet non-aggression treaty would be revoked.⁷⁴⁶ The Polish diplomat immediately sent the following telegram to Warsaw:

At four o'clock this morning, Potiomkin summoned me and, on the recommendation of the government, handed me a note saying: "From various sources, the Soviet government has learned that Polish troops are forming up along the Czech border, that they are preparing for a border crossing and for the occupation of a part of the territory of the Czechoslovak Republic. Although these messages have been widely disseminated and are alarming in nature, the Polish Government has not denied them. The government of the USSR expects such a denial immediately. However, in the event that such a denial does not occur and if Polish troops cross the Czech border and occupy the territory of that country, the Soviet government will consider it necessary to forewarn the Polish Government that under Article 2 of the non-aggression pact of July 1932, the Soviet government would be forced without warning to renounce the said pact in light of the act of aggression against Czechoslovakia." Potiomkin asked that this *démarche* be immediately communicated to the foreign minister.⁷⁴⁷

A brief note in Potiomkin's diary from that day contains a claim that Jankowski was "very frightened" and that, after several minutes of silence, he explained that Polish mobilisation guidelines do not call for large-scale military preparations, but are a kind of "police action" protecting the territory of the Polish Republic from an influx of refugees from Czechoslovakia.⁷⁴⁸

The diplomacy of the Western states did not view the Soviet move of 23 September as an action that threatened Poland, nor as a step that could seriously change the strategic realities of Eastern Europe. In a telegram sent to the Foreign Office that day, the British ambassador to Moscow, Lord Chilston, wrote

745 I. Czelyszew, *SSSR–Francja: trudnyje gody 1938–1941*, p. 40.

746 For the Russian-language text of the Soviet note entitled "Declaration of the government of the USSR" dated 23 September 1938, see *Dokumenty i materiały do historii stosunków polsko-radzieckich*, Vol. 6, p. 412, dok. 257.

747 PDD/1938, pp. 545–546 (of course, this document has been published many times). The Soviet warning was also contained in an article in *Prawda* on 21 September under the title "Igranie z ogniem".

748 *Dokumenty i materiały do historii stosunków polsko-radzieckich*, Vol. 6, pp. 412–413, dok. 258.

in restrained tones, informing London without much comment about the “Soviet warning” directed at Poland.⁷⁴⁹

Despite everything, the legal foundation for the Soviet threat was doubtful. Indeed, according to articles 2 and 3 of the treaty of 25 July 1932, “Should one of the Contracting Parties commit an act of aggression against a third State, the other Contracting Party shall have the right to denounce the present Pact without notice. Each of the Contracting Parties undertakes not to be a party to any agreement openly hostile to the other Party from the point of view of aggression.”⁷⁵⁰ Undoubtedly, an armed force’s entry into the territory of a foreign country would be an act of aggression. But the forced cession of part of that territory is not such an act. Such reasoning is additionally confirmed by the London Convention on the definition of the terms *aggression* and *aggressor* of 3 July 1933, to which the governments of the USSR and neighbouring states, including Poland, were parties. Demands made in the Polish ultimatum in no way fit into the category of aggression.

It is true that ambassador Lipski told Hitler on 19 September that “we do not rule out using force” if Poland’s interests in Cieszyn Silesia were not taken into account.⁷⁵¹ In reality, however, it is difficult to talk about Polish military preparations for war against Czechoslovakia; they came down in fact to the formation of the “Silesia” Independent Operational Group on 21 September 1938; that is, the intervention corps under the command of general Władysław Bortnowski, who was to enter Zaolzie after the territory had been obtained through diplomatic means.⁷⁵² The formation of Bortnowski’s corps, at the behest of the Inspector General of the Armed Forces, was the main (in fact, the only) move made by the Polish military in the context of preparations, agreed to by the Foreign Ministry, to support the planned ultimatum against the government of Czechoslovakia, should diplomatic means fail. Poland’s limited preparations to take Zaolzie, short of war with Czechoslovakia, were the topic of a report sent to the Foreign Office by ambassador Kennard, a diplomat who was immensely critical of Polish policy in the autumn of 1938.⁷⁵³ These preparations were intended only to occupy the Polish part of Cieszyn Silesia, the subject of demands, not to start a war with Poland’s southern neighbour.

749 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 21568, C.10581/2319/18.

750 *Współczesna Europa polityczna*, eds. W. Kulski, M. Potulicki (Warsaw 1939), p. 357.

751 PDD/1938, p. 520 (the ambassador’s report for Beck dated 20 September 1938). This sentence is highlighted in Jerzy Tomaszewski, “Polska wobec Czechosłowacji w 1938 r.,” *Przegląd Historyczny* 87 (1996), z. 1: p. 58.

752 M. P. Deszczyński, *Ostatni egzamin*, 128 ff (this is the most detailed and insightful treatment of this matter in Polish historiography).

753 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 21806, C.11146/585/55. Ambassador Kennard’s report dated 25 November 1938, as an addendum a report by the military attaché colonel Keith Sword.

On that same day (23 September) at 4:10 pm, chargé d'affaires Jankowski received Beck's instructions containing the response to Potiomkin, sent to Moscow by Kobyłański.⁷⁵⁴ The second conversation between Jankowski and Potiomkin took place at 7:00 pm Moscow time, also on that same day. The Polish diplomat read out the note written by the Polish Foreign Ministry. The answer was firm and sharp: it contained a well-known statement that the Polish government "knows" the provisions of the agreements it had concluded, so the Polish government did not need to explain itself to anyone regarding actions taken for defensive purposes. Poland was a sovereign state with the obvious right to mobilise its forces. When Jankowski noted that the Polish government had undertaken no mobilisation measures on the border with the USSR, Potiomkin said that "if such orders (on the eastern border) had been given, then the Soviet government would not limit itself only to démarches, but would have to take countermeasures."⁷⁵⁵ The question must be asked what exactly this wording meant. To what remedial measures did Potiomkin refer: mobilisation of the armed forces or actual offensive strikes? As mentioned above, the Polish Army had been carrying out large manoeuvres in Volhynia, but they had ended on 19 September.⁷⁵⁶

On 24 September, the Soviets took further measures calculated to exacerbate the Polish-Czech conflict. The Czechoslovak envoy in Moscow, Zdeněk Fierlinger, was summoned by Potiomkin, who encouraged Czechoslovakia to not yield to Poland's demands and not to seek a diplomatic settlement. After assuring Czechoslovakia of Soviet support, he suggested that the Soviets' goal was to establish a common Soviet-Czechoslovak border in eastern Galicia. Potiomkin even handed Fierlinger a map outlining the plan of territorial changes required to implement this solution.⁷⁵⁷ As Czech émigré historian Boris (Bořivoj) Čelovský remarked, "Moscow sincerely wished for war among the capitalist countries", above all because it was a war in which the USSR had little to lose.⁷⁵⁸

The Soviets supported their statement directed at Poland on 23 September with mobilisation measures on the border, which mostly included placing four army corps on combat readiness. On 24 September, the head of the Polish Consulate General in Minsk, Witold Okoński, reported to Warsaw that Soviet garrisons had departed towards the border with Poland. "A state of emergency has been introduced in Minsk", he reported to Tadeusz Jankowski, the chargé d'affaires in Moscow.⁷⁵⁹ In a letter dated 25 September, Okoński informed Warsaw about Soviet preparations more extensively.

754 PDD/1938, pp. 549–550.

755 Ibid., pp. 551–552. Potiomkin's note on this conversation in his diary; see *Dokumenty i materiały do historii stosunków polsko-radzieckich*, Vol. 6, pp. 413–414, dok. 259.

756 J. Pagel, "Polska i Związek Radziecki," p. 337.

757 I. Pfaff, "Stalins Strategie der Sowjetisierung Mitteleuropas," p. 573.

758 B. Čelovský, *Das Münchener Abkommen 1938* (Stuttgart 1958), pp. 473–474.

759 PDD/1938, p. 574.

A few days earlier, the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw learned about the broad-based Soviet plans. Reports on this subject were included in a report by Tadeusz Chromecki dated 22 September, prepared after his tour of Polish diplomatic missions in the Soviet Union. "The Soviets," the Polish diplomat wrote, "have been seriously preparing to provide Prague assistance. They have been concentrating troops in large numbers (several hundred thousands), which are camped in the woods. Great emphasis has been placed on motorised troops, so huge amounts of gasoline have been collected in Belarus. Unanimous opinion indicates that the Soviets are ready to strike in order to assist Czechoslovakia, on the condition that Germany would be hit first—by the French army."⁷⁶⁰ Chromecki thus seemed to associate Soviet military preparations on the Polish border with the USSR's alleged intention to fulfil its obligations to Czechoslovakia.

A much more important telegram was drawn up by Okoński on 27 September and intended for chargé d'affaires Jankowski in Moscow. It was typically filled with details reflecting the warlike atmosphere of Soviet mobilisation. Okoński wrote:

[...] on 24 September this year, we noticed an abnormal situation on the streets of Mińsk. Most trucks had disappeared from the streets, policemen at the outposts had been provided with gas masks, and there were quite frequent patrols of militia on horseback. In the afternoon, my colleagues went out to the city and found that the troops had left their barracks and were on the roads moving towards the border, with smoking kitchens, supplies, and new uniforms. Vehicles belonging to the Minsk park had been handed over to the army. This indicated an organised readiness, special exercises or a show of force along our border in connection with the Zaolzie Silesia matter and the general political situation. Given that, in the midst of these military developments we were not prevented from leaving the city; that steps were taken in the city that could not escape our attention; and that some motorised troops in helmets passed right under the windows of the General Consulate, we must assume that we were supposed to be aware of these military moves so that they would make a good impression. Officials of the General Consulate travelled freely outside the city and only in one place were they turned back, at a barracks from which the army was leaving. In the evening, the city sank into darkness. Street lighting was not lit, and most shops and trams have blue lighting. The city gives the impression of being located near battle lines. We have not yet noticed an increase in rail transport in the Minsk area. This organisation continues. We have not seen the troops return, while transports of war materiel on the roads are visible, moving towards the border. This indicates that the troops will probably remain near the border until the political situation is clarified. Only yesterday's *komsomolska Czerwonaja Zmiena* (dated the 26th of this month, No. 222) has mentioned the orders issued in Minsk, on the last page under the title "The city is in danger, anti-aircraft exercises in Minsk", declaring that a state

760 *Ibid.*, p. 544. At the time, Chromecki was employed in the Foreign Ministry Personnel Office.

of emergency was introduced on 24 September at noon. Discussing the general orders, the publication mentions that meetings tied to the exercise included discussion of Czechoslovakia's position, and a speech by Commissar Litvinov at the League of Nations session was read. It should be emphasised that the orders carried out in Minsk over the last three days do not coincide with usual exercises and are much broader. Based on our observations, it should be emphasised that the troop march made a great impression on the population, but that there were no signs of enthusiasm anywhere. The Minsk press has recently posted just one aggressive article on Poland tied to its stance against Czechoslovakia (*Zwiazda* dated 24 September, "For peace, against fascist aggression"). I note that, during my vacation, the Belarussian Military District was renamed "Bieloruskij Osobyj Wojennyj Okrug" according to the Far Eastern model, that it was thus reorganised and adapted to take military action. In addition, a number of border military districts have recently been rebuilt by separating several areas from the BOWO [Belarussian Military District] and by creating new military districts. A few weeks ago, more people from the border regions were displaced, and in the middle of Minsk, whole groups of people have been displaced and are sleeping under the open sky.⁷⁶¹

Let us add at this point that Polish intelligence services also delivered information (to the Second Department of the General Staff) about Soviet troop movements along Poland's eastern border.

Czech historian Milan Hauner claimed that the mobilisation orders involved as many as 60 infantry divisions, 16 cavalry divisions, 6 tank units and 17 air brigades.⁷⁶² Hauner argued that these moves were directed at Poland, not at assistance for Czechoslovakia. Much more cautious are calculations made by the American scholar of the Soviet armed forces, David M. Glantz, according to whom the Soviet mobilisation involved no more than 330,000 soldiers.⁷⁶³ In turn, according to Geoffrey Jukes, the mobilisation included not only the Kiev Military District (this order was issued on the evening of 21 September) and the Belarussian Military District (the night of 23 September), but also the Kaliniński and Leningrad districts.⁷⁶⁴ Jukes agrees with Glantz that the total number of mobilised reservists was about 330,000. A telegram from the Soviet Ministry of Defence to the Soviet military attaché in Paris, dated 25 September 1938, referred to 30 divisions on the Polish border, including aviation and tank units, as the total number of mobilised

761 Report by Deputy Consul Okoński dated 27 September 1938, PDD/1938, p. 599.

762 M. Hauner, "The Quest for the Romanian Corridor," p. 63. These figures are certainly inflated.

763 D. Glantz, *The Military Strategy of the Soviet Union: A History* (London–Portland, OR 1991), pp. 69–70.

764 G. Jukes, "The Red Army and the Munich Crisis," *Journal of Contemporary History* 26 (1991): pp. 197–198.

forces.⁷⁶⁵ Marek Deszczyński noted that if the Soviets were concerned only with supporting Czechoslovakia, there would have been no reason to mobilise the strength of the Belarussian Military District or to concentrate significant forces on the border with the Baltic States. Thus the Soviet plan must have had wider ambitions, though it is extremely difficult to define them.

On the night of 30 September/1 October 1938, after the ultimatum note on the Zaolzie matter had been delivered in Prague, the Czechs revived hopes that the Soviets would apply pressure on Poland. Krofta summoned envoy Aleksandrovsky that night, but he received no promises, and the conversation between envoy Fierlinger and Potiomkin in Moscow brought no results. Given Beneš' capitulation in Munich, the Soviets no longer had any offer to make to their abandoned Czech allies. They did not insist that the government in Prague reject Polish demands. In fact, the Soviet government made no reaction to the Polish ultimatum, the conditions of which Czechoslovakia fulfilled at noon on 1 October.⁷⁶⁶ On 11 October, Potiomkin told the Polish ambassador that the Czechs "were left by themselves, because if they had resisted, they would undoubtedly have had the support of the Soviets".⁷⁶⁷ As Batowski aptly put it, "it was rightly thought in Moscow that it was not worth defending someone who doesn't want to defend himself."⁷⁶⁸

Polish diplomats examined the issue of Soviet military preparations against Poland *ex post*. On 11 October, ambassador Grzybowski wrote to the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw:

Some time will pass before we get a clearer picture of the Soviets' real intentions and calculations on those critical days of September. [...] In the Minsk district, the troops are returning to their barracks, marking their return with a string of broken cars on the roads. In the Leningrad district, three age groups were called up on 28 September and wheeled transport was mobilised. It ended with an "emergency" on the 4th of this month ... directed against Finland. Automobile travel to the west of the Kiev is still being prevented.⁷⁶⁹

765 For this document, see *Nowyje dokumenty iz istorii Mjunchena* (Moscow 1958), pp. 139–140. See also Henryk Batowski's comments on Boris Čelovskij's book in "Das Münchener Abkommen 1938," *Przegląd Historyczny* (1959), No. 4: p. 641.

766 J. Pagel, "Polska i Związek Radziecki," p. 340. Only years later did Soviet historiography begin to exploit the Polish-Czech conflict of autumn 1938 in an attempt to create a narrative in which Poland was one of the key factors in the fall of the Versailles order.

767 Ambassador Grzybowski's report dated 11 October 1938, PDD/1938, p. 686.

768 Review of Boris Čelovskij's book *Das Münchener Abkommen 1938*, p. 641. Čelovskij emphasised that the "USSR did not lift a finger" in response to the Polish ultimatum (p. 442).

769 PDD/1938, p. 685.

On 18 October, minister Beck instructed the ambassador to “keep an eye on the situation in Moscow” and told Grzybowski “to keep friendly talks going and to follow Potiomkin’s lead in relaxing our direct relations.”⁷⁷⁰

In a conversation with ambassador Edward Raczyński at the end of November 1938, Beck admitted that “during the recent crisis, against the backdrop of the situation in Czechoslovakia [...] troops on the Soviet side ‘went through the motions’ of concentrating on our border.”⁷⁷¹ This statement seems to suggest that the foreign minister interpreted the Soviet military orders as a bluff and nothing more. However, a note by the Polish envoy in Stockholm, Gustaw Potworowski, dated 25 September, indicates that the foreign minister believed that “if a conflict had broken out and expanded *à la longue*, the Soviets would have taken part, in one way or another (they would have been drawn in?).”⁷⁷² In a conversation with Lord Halifax in London in April 1939, Beck once again mentioned the Soviet mobilisation orders from the previous September. He said: “[...] in autumn 1938, four Soviet corps approached the Polish borders. But Poland did not consider it necessary to move even one of its military units.”⁷⁷³ The Polish foreign minister’s tone here was clearly scornful.

There is no doubt that the Soviet army, in order to assist Czechoslovakia, would have to gain transit through Romanian or Polish territory in one of two ways: either with the consent of one (or both) of these countries, or through an ultimatum directed at the governments of these countries (or at one of them), and a decision to engage in a military campaign motivated by the desire to go to Prague’s aid.

It is not easy to reconstruct in full the nature of the mobilisation orders: were they a show of strength or preparations for war? The Soviets had made extensive military preparations at the border with Poland, along which they had built a large system of fortifications, called the Stalin line, which was decreed in 1929. The anticipated fortifications were to be comprised of a total of 13 reinforced regions, separated from each other by unfortified spaces in which manoeuvres could be carried out.⁷⁷⁴ It allowed for offensive strategic intentions to be clearly legible, because the system was to be a cover for an aggressive war, not a purely defensive structure, like the Maginot Line. It is not known even today whether any effective system of fortifications can be used either for defence (understood purely statically) or as a shield to concentrate resources for the purpose of large-scale offensive actions. Of course, what determines the strategic use of fortifications is war strategy. As historians know well, Soviet military doctrine was subordinate to the

770 *Ibid.*, p. 701.

771 *Ibid.*, p. 798.

772 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Gustaw Potworowski Collection, Box 1, Potworowski’s note dated 25 September 1938.

773 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 273.

774 A. Grzywacz, “Armia sowiecka w ocenach polskiego kierownictwa wojskowego,” *Studia Rzeszowskie* 6 (1999): pp. 75–76.

idea of taking the offensive at all costs.⁷⁷⁵ Intensive exercises by the Red Army were underway at this time, to which the response was the large Polish manoeuvres in Volhynia.

To a certain extent, the Soviet mobilisation orders of 1938 resemble moves that the Red Army supreme command made in 1939 under marshal Kliment Voroshilov's orders of 11 September establishing the Ukrainian Front commanded by marshal Siemion Timoszenko (four armies and an independent corps) and the Belarusian Front under the command of general Mikhail Kovalyov (four armies, a horse-mechanised group and an independent corps). The only difference was the scale of the mobilised forces (they were smaller in 1938).

It is difficult to avoid the question of why specific military preparations were implemented, as nothing indicated at the time that France would fulfil its military obligations to Czechoslovakia, and thus the prospect of a European war sparked by matters tied to Czechoslovakia seemed distant. It was also the case that Poland was making no preparations for a military offensive in the east. Soviet plans and preparations for war cannot be interpreted as an attempt to help Czechoslovakia, unless we recognise that the Soviet plans were to carry out a lightning war, to break up the Polish army and reach the northern borders of Czechoslovakia. But were these the real Soviet plans? The answer to this question remains unknown.

In the confrontation with motorised Soviet forces, would the Polish army have been able to mount an effective defence? What were Poland's defence capabilities in the east? These are questions that we cannot answer unequivocally, but which we cannot help but ask.

We do know a few things for certain. In 1938, not unconnected to the Soviets' ambiguous political moves and their internal troubles, the Polish General Staff intensified work on its "East" plan. The Polish military put together a series of operational documents but it basically carried out no further activities. A defensive fortification project was launched, based on a plan drafted in 1936 and adapted from German and Austrian fortifications from 1915–1916. We know from a post-war account written by general Stachiewicz that a project for the construction of bunkers was developed further, but "there was no closed and fully planned defence system."⁷⁷⁶ The General Staff studied the possibility of an armed attack by

775 Such were the theoretical assumptions of war taken by both Mikhail Frunze and Mikhail Tukhachevsky. For more, see Lennart Samuelson's recent study *Plans for Stalin's War Machine: Tukhachevsky and Military-Economic Planning, 1925–1941* (Basingstoke 2000). See also C. O. Nordling, *Defence or Imperialism: An Aspect of Stalin's Military and Foreign Policy* (Uppsala 1984).

776 For more, see C. Grzelak, "Możliwości obrony Kresów Wschodnich w 1939 roku przed Armią Czerwoną," in *Europa nieprowincjonalna. Przemiany na ziemiach wschodnich dawnej Rzeczypospolitej (Białoruś, Litwa, Łotwa, Ukraina, wschodnie pogranicze March Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej) w latach 1772–1999*, ed. K. Jasiewicz (Warsaw 1999), pp. 924–926.

the Soviets on Poland, and on 15 November 1935 during a briefing with the new chief of the general staff, Brigadier General Waclaw Stachiewicz, the decision was made to prepare a plan for a defensive war first in the east, then in the west.⁷⁷⁷ Work had begun on the “East” plan in 1936, and related work continued through 1937 and into 1938, but it was not until the beginning of 1939 that a defence plan was completed.⁷⁷⁸ In the autumn of 1938, when work on the “East” plan in the Third Department of the General Staff entered its final stage, a note entitled “*Plan poszukiwania wiadomości*” was created, on 1 September 1938. This note was an outline of some preliminary assumptions about the nature of possible Soviet offensive actions.⁷⁷⁹ It was assumed that Russia could strike alone or be supported by Lithuania. Polish officials analysed a strike by Soviet forces in two different variants: (1) against Poland and Romania; and (2) against Poland, Romania and the Baltic States.⁷⁸⁰ “Ultimately, plan ‘East’ adopted the possibility that the enemy would attack with greatest force along a northern front from Belarus through Baranavichy and Białystok to Warsaw, or a southern front from Ukraine through Volhynia to Warsaw. An auxiliary strike was expected in the direction of Płoskirów-Lwów. Studies prepared by army inspectors and generals inspectors for GISZ [general inspector of the Armed Forces] helped specify precisely the possible directions from which the enemy’s actions would come.”⁷⁸¹

Historical Interpretations

Was it possible that a Polish-Soviet conflict could have broken out in the autumn of 1938? This is a question to which I can give no definitive answer. However, we should give it consideration.

Most historians, including almost every Polish scholar, believe that the Soviet army, weakened by Stalin’s murder of much of his high command, was not capable of any real offensive actions. Thus, the prevalent belief is that the Soviets were simply unable to launch armed operations of any offensive nature. However, some scholars hold a different view, arguing that a Soviet offensive was possible and that it posed a real threat to Poland.

It all comes down to the question whether in September 1938 Stalin seriously considered military operations against Poland. An affirmative answer to this question was given first by British historian John Erickson, author of the above-mentioned monograph entitled *The Soviet High Command*. Erickson believed that

777 For the protocol of this briefing, see *Wojna obronna Polski 1939*, p. 30.

778 W. Stachiewicz, *Wierności dochować żołnierskiej*, pp. 371–372.

779 IPMS, A.II.26.A52. See also A. Grzywacz, “Polski plan operacyjny ‘Wschód’ a planowanie sowieckie w 1939 r.,” *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1996), No. 117: pp. 46–47.

780 A. Grzywacz, “Polski plan operacyjny ‘Wschód,’” p. 46.

781 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

the Soviet government's note of 23 September 1938 "seemed to be very far from being an idle gesture". Erickson continued: "If the Poles had actually attacked Czechoslovakia, the Red Army could have moved against Poland with a very fair degree of confidence, since the Soviet view seemed also to be that Germany would not move an inch to pull any Polish chestnuts out of the fire. At one stroke, the Soviet Union could diminish the threat to Ukraine and probably make some territorial acquisition at Poland's expense."⁷⁸²

Marian Zgórnjak, author of the first Polish-language monograph on the military situation surrounding the Sudetenland conflict (*Sytuacja militarna Europy w okresie kryzysu politycznego 1938 r.*), wrote in 1979 that the Red Army's military preparations "seem to indicate that the Soviet Union was ready to meet its obligations to Czechoslovakia and France".⁷⁸³ However, he did not answer the question whether or not the General Staff in Moscow considered the option of forcing the Poles to allow Red Army troops to pass through Polish territory in order to help Czechoslovakia.

Arguably, it is Igor Lukes who has analysed Soviet policy most fully. He presented the results of his research in *Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler*, in which he claimed that the Soviet threats against Poland were merely a bluff. In his view, the Soviets took a wait-and-see stance towards the Sudetenland crisis.

Wojciech Materski interpreted Soviet military preparations as a show of strength that lacked a real intention to carry out military operations. As he wrote in his book *Na widecie. II Rzeczpospolita wobec Sowietów 1918–1943*:

Without intending to join in the defence of Czechoslovakia's territorial integrity, Soviet authorities tried to give the impression that they were considering such a possibility. A series of war games were carried out near the border with Poland, including at the end of September, when a particularly spectacular series of them took place in the Kiev Special Military District, in the vicinity of Wołoczyska, Proskurów and Kamieniec Podolski. A state of increased readiness was also ordered in the western military districts, under which 30 infantry divisions, as well as cavalry divisions, were deployed in the border zone, of which the French authorities were "loyally" notified.⁷⁸⁴

In his monograph *Ostatni egzamin. Wojsko Polskie wobec kryzysu czechosłowackiego 1938–1939*, Marek Deszczyński did not address the question whether Soviet threats directed at Poland were real. He wrote only—and correctly—that one cannot and should not examine Poland's position towards the Munich crisis without taking into account the Soviet army's orders and preparations in the autumn of 1938.⁷⁸⁵

782 J. Erickson, *The Soviet High Command. A Military-Political History 1918–1941* (London 1962), pp. 503–504.

783 M. Zgórnjak, *Sytuacja militarna Europy w okresie kryzysu politycznego 1938 r.* (Warsaw 1979), p. 227.

784 W. Materski, *Na widecie*, p. 505.

785 M. P. Deszczyński, *Ostatni egzamin*, p. 187.

He also stated that the Polish military leadership did not seriously consider the possibility of an armed intervention by the Red Army and thus of a Polish-Soviet conflict. The Polish Army was not prepared for battle against the Soviet Union, and “defensive preparations, made belatedly and on a small scale, were almost symbolic”.⁷⁸⁶

An in-depth response to the question about the Kremlin’s actual intentions in September 1938 requires a detailed analysis of Stalin’s strategy at that time and the planning put together by the Red Army’s staff in 1938, which is not the subject of this book. Let us only note that, regardless of the fact that the Soviets—with great effort and funds—built the “Stalin line” system of fortifications, the Red Army in fact invariably applied the doctrine of the offensive war as the best form of defence. Put briefly, the idea of a preventive war was the foundation of war planning in the Soviet General Staff. In the summer of 1938, the reorganisation and formation of armed groups began in the Belarussian and Kiev military districts, located along the border with Poland, and these groups were labelled “special”.⁷⁸⁷ The chief of the Red Army’s General Staff, Boris Shaposhnikov (predicting a war on two fronts: in Europe and in the Far East against Japan) created an operational plan based on the assumption that the European theatre of war would be the priority.⁷⁸⁸ It seems impossible that this would have happened without some connection with the tense international situation at the time. Having said that, Stalin’s strategic goals from this period are difficult to read. The fact that historians are divided on this matter makes a convincing interpretation no easier.

For the Soviets, it was not Germany but Poland that was the main source of anxiety and cause for aggression in the autumn of 1938. This interpretation is justified in the light of a letter Litvinov sent to envoy Aleksandrovsky in Prague on 11 October 1938. Litvinov wrote:

[...] even if surrender to Hitler was inevitable, the Czechoslovak army, it seems, was strong enough to repel Poland [...] Even if we did not think it necessary to come out against Poland after the warning we gave her, she would still have to maintain strong forces on the Soviet-Polish border. [...] I doubt if Hitler would attack Prague to support [Polish] demands [against Czechoslovakia], as Fierlinger suspects.⁷⁸⁹

786 Ibid., p. 208.

787 The condition and location of the Soviet armed forces is analysed in detail in Marian Zgórnjak, *Europa w przededniu wojny. Sytuacja militarna w latach 1938–1939* (Krakow 1993), pp. 224–227. Also important are the arguments in Williamson Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power*, pp. 217–263. In the introduction to one of his works (*Dziennik działań bojowych Frontu Białoruskiego we wrześniu 1939 roku* [Warsaw 1998], p. V), Czesław Grzelak also discusses Soviet military preparations in the autumn of 1938. See also the documents collected in *Agresja sowiecka na Polskę 17 września 1939 w świetle dokumentów*, eds. C. Grzelak, S. Jaczyński, E.J. Kozłowski, vols. 1–2 (Warsaw 1994–1996).

788 For more, see David Glantz, *The Military Strategy of the Soviet Union*.

789 Z. Steiner, “The Soviets and the Czech Crisis,” p. 771.

If we can find some sense in these arguments, then it is contained in Moscow's calculation that the Czechs would decide to reject Polish demands while accepting the conclusions made at Munich. In other words, it would be an option in favour of a conflict with Poland, but it would be fulfilling German demands.

It will not be going too far to claim that the experience of September 1938 deepened the negative attitude that the Soviets had towards "bourgeois Poland". This hostility is clear in a note drawn up in November 1938 by officials in the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs on the subject of relations with Poland. This document's conclusion states:

Having regained its independence (1918) as a result of the Great Socialist October Revolution, throughout the last 20 years of its history Poland has consistently rejected all efforts by the USSR to establish good neighbourly relations between the two countries. Recognising Poland's role in securing peace in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union has repeatedly tried to persuade Poland to establish joint guarantees of the independence of small states. But imperialist Poland, having abandoned the dream of rebuilding a "great Poland" from sea to sea within the 1772 borders, evaded all cooperation projects with the Soviet Union, not wanting to bind its hands in Eastern Europe.⁷⁹⁰

At a secret meeting of the People's Commissariat for the Defence of the USSR (the Soviet Defence Ministry) on 29 November 1938, marshal Kliment Voroshilov said the following about Poland:

[...] we have on our western border an enemy, not worse organised than Japan. Here the enemy is organised, in particular I am thinking of Germany. Now, when we talk about countries to our west, we mean Germany; Poland, Romania and the Baltic States no longer count with us—they have not counted for a long time—we will break these countries apart at a given time and under given circumstances.⁷⁹¹

In formulating such conclusions, the Soviet military leadership must certainly have had a low opinion of the strength and condition of the Polish armed forces.

Immediately after the Munich Conference, another motif appeared in statements made by Soviet diplomats: the idea of punishing Poland for its conduct at the end of September 1938. At the end of October, deputy commissar Potiomkin spoke in this spirit, and his comments were noted by, among others, the Italian ambassador in Moscow Augusto Rosso.⁷⁹² A year later on 23 August 1939 in a conversation

790 AWPRF, Referentura po Polsce, f. 122, op. 22, pap. 183, d. 25, "Obzor wzaimootnoszenij miezdu SSSR i Polszej za 20 liet" – note dated 4 November 1938, k. 119.

791 Transcript of Kliment Voroshilov's speech at the meeting of the Council of the People's Commissar of Defence of the USSR, 29 November 1938, in *Wojennyj Sowiet pri Narodnom Komissarie Oborony SSSR. 1938, 1940. Dokumenty i materialy*, ed. N. N. Basik et al. (Moscow 2006), p. 240.

792 ASMAE, URSS, 30/7, Rosso's report for Ciano dated 22 September 1938.

with Beneš, the Soviet ambassador in London, Ivan Maisky, said that “for what happened in September 1938 [...] Poland is already paying, and will continue to pay”.⁷⁹³ These statements are a clear sign of hostility. The Polish idea to persuade the Soviets that the policy of balance served peaceful stabilisation in Eastern Europe had come to nothing.

Officials in Moscow (and in other European capitals) viewed the Polish ultimatum directed at Czechoslovakia regarding the return of Zaolzie as having been issued in agreement with the Third Reich. Thus, to the extent that the main goal of the policy of balance was to reassure both great neighbours that the Polish government would never depart from its principles, then Poland’s actions towards Czechoslovakia seemed to contradict all of that because they seemed to be made in agreement with the Germans, even if there was, of course, no written agreement between Warsaw and Berlin.

However, there can be no doubt that Poland—regardless of any actions taken in the international arena—with its idea of maintaining neutrality between Berlin and Moscow, was perceived in the Kremlin as a ruthless enemy with whom reconciliation was impossible. It is worth noting that the Soviet approach to international relations was based on the premise that a “bourgeois state” cannot be neutral in any conflict, either because of the objective conflict between socialism and capitalism or as a result of the “imperialist actions” of a particular capitalist state.⁷⁹⁴

It can be assumed that the Soviet Union sought to subjugate Poland politically. As a minimum goal, Poland would certainly be deprived of its own independent foreign policy. As a maximum, Poland would have its borders changed; that is, territory would be taken from Poland from the east under an agreement with Germany, about which the Kremlin had been dreaming since the 1920s.⁷⁹⁵ Of course, there was another Soviet scenario, one that was truly maximal and which involved controlling all of Central and Eastern Europe. Such a scenario, however, would require a new European war.

The issue of the Polish-Soviet conflict in September 1938 is tied to another issue of significance for the historical assessment of Poland’s foreign policy around the time of the Munich crisis. Jerzy Tomaszewski made his own interpretation of the Republic’s situation in September 1938, and in so doing addressed the broader international conflict. In his opinion, Poland and Germany were joined by “informal cooperation”, “superficial” and “burdened with mutual distrust”, but most real.⁷⁹⁶ In his article “*Czy we wrześniu 1938 roku Polsce groziła wojna?*”,

793 P. Wandycz, “Beneš o pakcie Ribbentrop–Mołotow,” *Przegląd Wschodni* 2 (1992/1993), z. 4 (8): p. 892.

794 For more, see G. Ginsburgs, “The Soviet Union as a Neutral, 1939–1941,” *Soviet Studies* 10 (1958), No. 1: p. 32.

795 F. Carsten, “Reports by Two German Officers on the Red Army,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 41 (1962), No. 4: pp. 217–244.

796 J. Tomaszewski, “Polska wobec Czechosłowacji w 1938 r.,” p. 58.

Tomaszewski concluded that Polish foreign policy at the time, focused above all on the plan for the recovery of Zaolzie, *nolens volens* led Poland into a situation in which it *de facto* would fight as an ally of Germany. It could happen, Tomaszewski wrote, that Poland would have to defend its territory against the Soviet Union, allied as it was with France and Czechoslovakia, while at the same time engaging in armed conflict against Czechoslovakia.⁷⁹⁷ This would mean, as Stanisław Żerko put it, that “Poland, neutral until that point, would engage the Red Army in battle while also fighting on the German-French front.”⁷⁹⁸

This reasoning would have a real foundation if three additional conditions were met: (1) if Czechoslovakia decided to defend its independence and territorial integrity; (2) if the Western powers helped Czechoslovakia; and (3) if the Soviet Union decided to fulfil its obligations to Czechoslovakia without France joining the war. None of these *sine qua non* conditions was met, and none of them could have been met.

In the realities of 1938, the only certain thing was that Hitler would attempt to achieve his intended goals through all available means—including militarily. He viewed a “little war” as a useful exercise.⁷⁹⁹ He was also convinced that the Western powers would do nothing to defend Czechoslovakia. Great Britain was maintaining a policy of appeasement. And France, without British support, would be unable to decide to take any independent actions.

It is my opinion that this alternative international scenario in autumn 1938 was out of the question. Repeated attempts to speculate on whether a European war was possible at that time lead to no conclusions. It is pointless to wonder how Poland would have fared, in terms of its national interests, were it not for Munich, had general Bortnowski (at the head of his corps) not moved into Zaolzie, and had Poland become “an involuntary ally of Germany”.⁸⁰⁰

Theoretically, we can consider a completely different, somewhat more subtle scenario, one that assumes that President Beneš decided to engage in an armed defence without allies, that the conflict would have become a longer-term military operation, and then, after a period of time (including under the pressure of public opinion) the Western powers would have finally come to Czechoslovakia’s aid. The German-Czech war would thus transform itself into a European war. Of course, such a scenario would require President Beneš’ decision to not capitulate under

797 J. Tomaszewski, “Czy we wrześniu 1938 roku Polsce groziła wojna?” *Christianitas et cultura Europae. Księga Jubileuszowa Profesora Jerzego Kłoczowskiego*, ed. H. Gapski, part 1 (Lublin 1998), pp. 691–697. See also J. Tomaszewski, “Polska wobec Czechosłowacji w 1938 r.”, p. 56.

798 S. Żerko, *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie 1938–1939*, p. 71, note 255.

799 See S. Żerko, *Niemiecka polityka zagraniczna*, p. 380.

800 J. Tomaszewski, “The Aims of Polish Foreign Policy before Munich”, *Mythos München*, p. 127.

any circumstances. As Beneš did not make such a decision, this scenario cannot be considered a viable version of history.

Poland's policy towards the Sudetenland conflict must be reduced to its proper dimensions (it is hardly worth wondering "what would have happened if"), stopping at that which is indisputable, to the extent that it is possible in light of available sources. *Primo*, Beck was of the opinion, correctly, that war would not break out because of the Anglo-French policy of appeasement, and that Hitler would not achieve his goals by force if he could achieve them peacefully. *Secundo*, for Beck the key for Poland during the Munich crisis was that Poland would not find itself fighting a war alongside Germany. This was not mere rhetoric, but a fundamental and inviolable principle of Polish foreign policy. *Tertio*, the Polish ultimatum to the Czechoslovak government of 30 September 1938 was an effect of the Munich Conference and Prague's surrender to the Munich dictate, one that was aimed at protesting the Munich system and preventing the internationalisation of Poland's territorial demands against Czechoslovakia, which would be the subject of further decisions of the Four Powers. *Quatro*, Polish policy in 1938, taken in its entirety—both in the era of the Anschluss and during the Sudetenland crisis—arose out of the conviction that cooperation with the Western powers, under conditions created by the policy of appeasement, was, as Anna Maria Cienciała convincingly pointed out, impossible.⁸⁰¹

Beneš' Decision

Despite everything, the key to answering the question "peace or war?" was in the hands of the president of Czechoslovakia. As the Polish envoy in Prague, Kazimierz Papée, put it *post factum*: "[...] Czech society was marked by the will to resist at that time. The collapse came from above".⁸⁰² All available Czech sources, including President Beneš' later accounts, lead us to conclude that the Czechoslovak leadership precluded the possibility of fighting alone, without outside help.⁸⁰³

President Beneš was doubtlessly in a position to decide whether or not to defend his country's territorial integrity *manu militari*, because France would come to its assistance. Promises repeatedly made by the French government that it would meet its obligations as an ally—in the light of our modern knowledge—cannot be

801 A. M. Cienciała, *Poland and the Western Powers*, p. 54.

802 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 564 (note dated 18 June 1939).

803 "Look what I saved! The only capital of Central Europe that has not been destroyed by the war"—these are the words of Beneš noted by Jaromir Nečas in 1943; see M. Hauner, "Edvard Beneš et Munich", in *La Tchécoslovaquie sismographe de l'Europe au XX-e siècle*, ed. A. Marès (Paris 2009), p. 86. See also Piotr M. Majewski, *Nierozegrana kampania. Możliwości obronne Czechosłowacji jesieni 1938 r.* (Warsaw 2004), particularly the chapter entitled, in Czech, "Fight, or not Fight", pp. 255–260.

treated differently than just one element of the diplomatic game.⁸⁰⁴ It is difficult to determine whether the Czechoslovak president had faith in those promises. It may only be worth mentioning that Beneš admitted *ex post*: “My greatest mistake in the face of history was my faith in France”.⁸⁰⁵ Similarly, we will never have an answer to the question whether Beneš was convinced, already in September 1938, that Munich would represent the beginning of a long-lasting, great European and world conflict, from which Czechoslovakia would—one way or another—escape victorious, or if this was just another narrative *post factum*.⁸⁰⁶ In any case, at least according to one account, as a last resort Beneš counted on the border guarantees that the Western powers had given his truncated state after the cession of the Sudetenland.⁸⁰⁷

The Czechoslovak leader also had to take into account Hungary’s and Poland’s negative attitude to his country. Admittedly, Czechoslovakia could have ensured Poland’s neutrality by offering Zaolzie, but Beneš delayed the final decision on this matter based on the unfounded fear that if he ceded a small part of his own territory, it would set a precedent for further territorial demands by other neighbours. Eventually, Beneš could find no alternative to surrender, which happened in the face of judgments made in Munich. Nevertheless, the choice of what move to make was his, as the leader of Czechoslovakia, which in the end was to become a victim of the Munich crisis.

France could not fulfil its obligations without Great Britain. The latter, on the other hand, favoured a policy of appeasement, about which a great deal has been written.⁸⁰⁸ The days between 12 and 21 September 1938 were marked by decisive events. On 12 September at the NSDAP congress in Nuremberg, Hitler delivered a speech in which he demanded the Sudetenland by 1 October 1938. Also on 12 September, the commander-in-chief of the French army, general Gamelin, prepared a report for the French Cabinet, the basis of which was the assumption that the French army’s “main forces” could be positioned on the western front between 15 and 20 days after a mobilisation order, which would be issued only at the moment of German aggression against Czechoslovakia.⁸⁰⁹ On 13 September, the

804 On 13 September 1938, Ambassador Raczyński reported from London that, according to assurances, Great Britain would stand by France if Germany decided to move unilaterally. See T. Piszczkowski, *Anglia a Polska 1914–1939*, p. 449.

805 Quote from S. Sierpowski, *Między wojnami 1919–1939*, part 2: *Lata 1929–1939* in idem, *Dzieje powszechnie XX wieku* (Poznan 1999), p. 292.

806 I. Lukes, “Stalin and Beneš in the Final Days of September 1938: New Evidence from the Prague Archives”, *Slavic Review* 52 (1993), No. 1: pp. 47–48.

807 One of the president’s close associates and his biographer, E. Taborsky, emphasised this notion in his *President Edvard Beneš between East and West, 1938–1948* (Stanford CA 1981), p. 33.

808 For the fullest treatment of this issue in Polish literature, see Batowski, *Rok 1938 – dwie agresje hitlerowskie*, pp. 329–363 (chapter “Przygotowanie zdrady”).

809 Earlier, an announcement of mass mobilisation was out of the question. Here we have a nice analogy to the crisis that enveloped Poland a year later in August 1939.

French Cabinet met; but the long meeting ended without a conclusion. Under these conditions, prime ministers Édouard Daladier and Neville Chamberlain reached an agreement by telephone. The idea was to resume talks in Prague through lord Walter Runciman, who would convince the Czechs to make concessions, or to appeal to the idea of a conference of three powers (Great Britain, France and Germany, bypassing Italy). Meanwhile, Chamberlain had already put thought into his trip to Germany, and just before talking to Daladier, he offered a meeting to the Germans. On 15 September, Hitler received the British prime minister in Berchtesgaden. The Reich chancellor obtained the consent of the head of the British government to apply the principle of self-determination to the matter of the Sudeten Germans. Three days later in London, important British-French talks took place, during which the two parties agreed to accept the conclusions of Chamberlain's talks with Hitler in Berchtesgaden. On the same day, a telegram was sent to Beneš urging him to agree either to the cession of territory in the Sudetenland or to a plebiscite. On 20 September, the government in Prague rejected the British-French plan, but on 21 September the Czech Cabinet expressed its fundamental agreement to this solution and to the principle of territorial concessions.⁸¹⁰ On 23–24 September, Chamberlain visited Hitler again, this time in Bad Godesberg. He heard new demands from the head of the Third Reich; using a specially prepared map, the Germans now also pointed to mixed-population areas as the object of their claims.⁸¹¹ The British prime minister did not agree to these new demands, and his efforts at diplomacy seemed to have been in vain. Under these conditions, and in a climate marked by strong public pressure to continue efforts to avoid a war, the head of the Italian government, Mussolini, submitted an offer of a four-power conference (27 September). This offer was welcomed by all four governments.

In September 1938, France's approach did not change because of Poland's conduct. The policy of appeasement had a well-established iron logic. As ambassador Łukasiewicz recalled, he heard the following from foreign minister Bonnet on 29 April 1938: "I have left the matter of Czechoslovakia to Mr Chamberlain, let him do whatever he wants with it, and I am ready to sign his every decision with closed

810 H. Batowski, *Rok 1938*, pp. 466–469. Here we can also find a translation of the Czech's rejection memorandum of 20 September and the note accepting the conditions of 21 September. The French government did everything in its power to convince the Czechs to make concessions, though on 19 September 1938 a realistic memorandum was put together by René Massigli with the title "*Consequences pour la France de l'affaiblissement de la Tchécoslovaquie*", which ended with the statement that after the fall of Czechoslovakia "Poland and the Baltic States will suffer more and more from the German Empire [*La Pologne et Etats baltes vont subir de plus en plus l'empire germanique*]". See R. Ulrich-Pier, *René Massigli (1888–1988). Une vie de diplomate* (Bern–Brussels 2006), Vol. 2, p. 1394.

811 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), 91/89, Michał Sokolnicki, "Historia polityczna, 1919–1938," pp. 150–151.

eyes”.⁸¹² Essentially, immediately after lord Runciman’s mission to Czechoslovakia in August 1938, it was decided that Czechoslovakia would not receive Western assistance. Of course, the situation would change if Hungary, wanting to overturn the Treaty of Trianon’s territorial provisions, started an armed conflict with Czechoslovakia. In the Polish Foreign Ministry, it seemed probable that, in such circumstances, Yugoslavia would oppose Hungary, which would mean a large-scale war.⁸¹³ What position Romania would take in this situation is a separate question that is difficult to answer. Probably, leaders in Prague hoped that Romania would neutralise Hungary, at least by mobilising its army.

The Polish perception of the Sudetenland conflict leaves no doubt that the Poles did not consider a European war to be a likely alternative. It is a fact that the predominant opinion among Polish military leaders initially was that Germany would retreat from the crisis, and even lose altogether, as army inspector general Tadeusz Kutrzeba viewed the matter on 9 August 1938.⁸¹⁴ Some Polish officials also argued that “it will not be easy to draw Hitler into a European war”, which meant that he would not risk war with the Western powers in the face of their firm resistance.⁸¹⁵ However, on 12 September 1938, Foreign Minister Beck admitted that he did “not personally believe in the possibility of a European war”.⁸¹⁶ A day later on 13 September in a conversation with Szembek, ambassador Noël argued that France had “executed a number of military orders” and “in the event of a German attack on Czechoslovakia, France will provide her with armed assistance”.⁸¹⁷ Czechoslovak diplomats also had the impression that, as Envoy Juraj Slávik told the Polish deputy foreign minister, “the Czechs are determined to defend themselves”.⁸¹⁸ None of this altered the fact that the Poles were sceptical that France would fulfil its commitments.

The events taking place seemed to fully confirm Beck’s arguments. As Szembek wrote, on 6 September the foreign minister “did not think that there would be a pan-European conflict stemming from the Czech matter”. He put forward three explanations for this thesis: (1) he believed that “Western Europe would make no moves to help Czechoslovakia”; (2) clearly overestimating the role and capabilities of Italy, he thought that were a Franco-German war to break out over Czechoslovakia, the Italians would side with their ally in the east; and (3) he was

812 [J. Łukasiewicz], *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939* (1989), p. 385.

813 Mirosław Arciszewski to the Polish ambassador in Rome and the mission in Belgrade, 19 September 1938, PDD/1938, p. 506.

814 “Stosunki polsko-niemieckie przed February wojną światową. Dokumenty,” p. 209.

815 General Antoni Szylling expressed such an opinion. *Ibid.*, p. 210.

816 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 266.

817 *Ibid.*, p. 269

818 *Ibid.*, p. 270 (Szembek’s conversation with Arciszewski in the presence of Kobyłański, 18 September 1938. Arciszewski reported on his conversation with envoy Juraj Slávik).

convinced that “Czechoslovakia cannot be defended militarily”, both because it was encircled by unfriendly neighbours, and because of Czechoslovakia’s complex national structure that did not allow representatives of nations subordinate to the Czechs to fight loyally.⁸¹⁹ Beck predicted that the crisis would come to a head on more or less 20 September. On that same day, in a conversation with the Romanian ambassador in Warsaw, Richard Franasovic, Szembek stated that “France apparently seeks to avoid a war at the cost of its Czech ally”.⁸²⁰ By 18 September, the Polish Foreign Ministry had received information about what was being called the Chamberlain plan, which no longer attempted to reform Czechoslovakia internally to improve the position of its national minorities, including Sudeten Germans, but rather to cede Sudetenland territories to Germany where more than 50 percent of the population was German. Other concepts also emerged involving a plebiscite or an international conference to consider the Sudetenland case.⁸²¹ On the eve of the Munich Conference, on 28 September 1938, Beck had the feeling that his earlier assumptions were correct: “Everything will blow over without war”, he said, adding that he had always believed it would.⁸²²

It should be emphasised that the predominant view in Western capitals was that Poland would also make no move to help Czechoslovakia. At the request of foreign minister Joseph Paul-Boncour, ambassador Noël publicised this view in April 1938, arguing that the ruling elite in Warsaw considered the Czechoslovak state an artificial creation. In his opinion, Poland wanted only to protect itself from Russia’s involvement in the conflict.⁸²³ British ambassador Kennard formed a very similar judgment.

As we know, on 12 May 1938 the Polish government categorically rejected the Western powers’ offer to join their diplomatic action in Berlin to force Hitler to abandon aggressive measures against Czechoslovakia.⁸²⁴ Of course, any future Polish intervention on the side of the Western powers depended on Soviet actions.⁸²⁵ It should be noted here, however, that Beck—in his instructions to ambassador Łukasiewicz on 24 May 1938—put forward an offer to the French that the two sides restate their faith in the alliance, just as he had on 7 March 1936, but this time under existing commitments and in the context of friendly discussions on any and all current issues in international politics.⁸²⁶

819 *Ibid.*, p. 259.

820 *Ibid.*, p. 272.

821 *Ibid.*, p. 271 (note on a conversation with Arciszewski).

822 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Gustaw Potworowski Collection, Box 1. Note from Potworowski dated 28 September 1938.

823 AMAE, Papiers Massigli, 217/15, note from a conference on 5 April 1938 at the office of foreign minister Paul-Boncour.

824 M. Pułaski, *Stosunki polsko-czechosłowacko-niemieckie*, p. 188.

825 W. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power*, p. 237. The author relied on the view of British ambassador Kennard, as expressed in his *ex-post* report on 10 October 1938.

826 PDD/1938, p. 118.

However, the Soviets' aggressive intentions—even without any indications of their imminent execution—were a factor of immense importance, one that helped determine Polish policy. Could a Polish declaration of assistance for Prague have forced a decision in London and Paris to militarily support Czechoslovakia? The historian cannot provide an affirmative answer to this question. Knowing how well-established was the appeasement strategy, and bearing in mind the military inaction of Poland's allies in September 1939, it cannot be supposed that a Polish-Czechoslovak common front in the autumn of 1938 would have induced the Western powers to engage in war.⁸²⁷

Nevertheless, Beck considered the possibility of a fundamental change in Polish policy if Czechoslovakia decided to defend its independence *manu militari*, having received support from the Western powers, although, as I mentioned, he gave this scenario little credence.⁸²⁸ The policy that Poland was forced to pursue in the realities of the Sudetenland conflict (and, at its heart, it was also about the survival of the Versailles order) was a by-product of the appeasement policy. The scarcity of sources makes it difficult to document the thesis that Beck did not rule out a fundamental shift in Polish policy. But there are certain documents to which we can refer. A statement made by the Polish foreign minister to US ambassador Anthony Biddle on 19 June 1938 contains just such a thought, one that is not at all *ex post*, as an alibi for previous actions. The American ambassador also had no doubt that if there were an armed conflict between the Third Reich and Great Britain and France, Poland would stand with the Western powers. However, since such a conflict was out of the question as tied to recent developments, Polish diplomacy was trying to prevent a break with Germany.⁸²⁹ Michał Łubieński, returning to these matters in his *Refleksje i reminiscencje* (written freshly after the September 1939 disaster), referred to Beck's hesitation in shaping policy towards Czechoslovakia. In his opinion, this policy could have been different, "if we were certain that the Czechs were willing to fight".⁸³⁰

In autumn 1938, it was neither the goal of Polish politics nor objectively possible for Poland to side with Germany in a European conflict, as critics of Beck's diplomacy have maintained for years. At the same time, it must be stressed that

827 A strong supporter of such a notion was Winston Churchill, who in September 1938—as a dissident in the Conservative Party—was a critic of the policy of appeasement.

828 For more on this topic, see the works of A. M. Cieniela, including "The Munich Crisis of 1938," pp. 56–59. See also her study "The Foreign Policy of Józef Piłsudski and Józef Beck, 1926–1939: Misconceptions and Interpretations", *The Polish Review* (2011), No. 1–2: pp. 111–152; and *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*, pp. 217–218.

829 *Poland and the Coming of the Second World War*, pp. 220–221 (the American ambassador's thoughts were not conclusions drawn *ex post*, but rather recorded at the time events happened in June 1938, a fact that gives them greater weight).

830 M. Łubieński, *Refleksje i reminiscencje*, p. 137.

Foreign Minister Beck never considered a Polish-Czechoslovak military confrontation in which Poland was the aggressor. He anticipated Czechoslovakia's "disintegration" and wrongly calculated that it would benefit Poland. He had no faith in that country's internal cohesion. He did not believe in Beneš' effectiveness as a leader. He thought in terms of revenge for January 1919 and summer 1920, but a possible war with Poland's southern neighbour was never the subject of Warsaw's political calculation. None of which is altered by the harsh anti-Czech campaign carried out in the Polish pro-government press, nor by the documented fact that the Polish intelligence services were carrying out secret operational activities in Zaolzie and Carpathian Ruthenia.⁸³¹

Germany's position in the face of the possible outbreak of armed conflict between Poland and the USSR was of utmost importance, undisputedly crucial for the Polish government. But Beck did not pose questions to Berlin about this until 1 October 1938, the day after the Polish ultimatum note was submitted to Czechoslovak officials just before midnight on 30 September. At that moment, it was not yet certain whether the Prague government would accept the ultimatum *ne varietur*, or whether or not the Soviets would take some kind of provocative action.

In a conversation with the Polish ambassador in Berlin, Józef Lipski, on 9 September 1938, marshal Göring declared that, in the event of a Polish-Soviet conflict, "Germany would be ready to extend a hand in Polish-German relations".⁸³² Between the date of that conversation and 1 October, there were no further Polish-German talks in which a question was raised about what Germany's position towards Poland would be. There were also no German statements specifying Göring's above-mentioned declaration.

It was only on 1 October 1938, while waiting for Prague's response to the ultimatum that Polish officials had handed to Krofta, that Beck called on Hans-Adolf von Moltke, the Reich's ambassador in Warsaw. He asked the ambassador what Germany's stance would be towards a possible armed conflict between Poland and the USSR.⁸³³ On that day, Göring declared to ambassador Lipski that "it is completely unthinkable that the Reich would not help Poland in its battle against the Soviets".⁸³⁴ Also on 1 October, minister von Ribbentrop provided the Poles with

831 Polish intelligence documents from Soviet archives, see *Powstanie na Zaolziu w 1938 r. Polska akcja specjalna w świetle dokumentów Oddziału February Sztabu Głównego WP*, eds. K. Badziak, G. Matwiejew, P. Samuś (Warsaw 1997), and *Akcja "Łom". Polskie działania dywersyjne na Rusi Zakarpackiej w świetle dokumentów Oddziału February Sztabu Głównego WP*, eds. P. Samuś, K. Badziak, G. Matwiejew (Warsaw 1998).

832 PDD/1938, p. 450 (Ambassador Lipski's report dated 9 September).

833 ADAP, Baden-Baden 1950, seria D, Vol. 5, pp. 66–67.

834 PDD/1938, p. 654 (Lipski's political report dated 1 October).

additional assurances that the German government's stance would "be more than friendly towards Poland in the event of a Polish-Soviet conflict".⁸³⁵

In September 1938, Poland pursued an independent policy—specifically, independent of Germany; the Polish Republic and the German Reich were joined by no political agreements.⁸³⁶ But in Europe there was a clear impression that the two countries had entered into a secret agreement and that Poland was joined with the "German camp". It is impossible to deny that this was the way Polish policy was interpreted in the Kremlin, since officials in other European capitals were asking whether "[...] our military cooperation with Germany against France [is] possible despite our alliance with France".⁸³⁷ As Wojciech Materski recognised: "[...] actions taken by the Poles could have emboldened Soviet politicians in their conviction that there was an agreement between Warsaw and Berlin, on the basis of which—in the event of a large-scale armed conflict—Poland would turn out to be an ally of the Third Reich".⁸³⁸

Having said that, we need to highlight how extremely important it was, how remarkably far-sighted and particularly difficult it was, for Poland in the highly complicated realities of September 1938 not to depart from its principles of the policy of balance. Poland also did not become a tool for the policy of the Western powers, which from May 1938 sought to involve Poland in a diplomatic intervention in Berlin to stop the Third Reich from taking action against Czechoslovakia.⁸³⁹ Fully aware as he was that this intervention would bring no results, and that it could only lead to a break in the "1934 line" in Polish-German relations, Beck refused to cooperate with the French and British governments. To foreign minister Bonnet's question whether he could "expect Poland to stand by England and France at a critical moment", Beck dictated an instruction-response to ambassador Łukasiewicz in

835 *Ibid.*, p. 649 (Lipski's encrypted telegram dated 1 October).

836 The persistent search in official historiography during the Soviet domination of Poland from 1945 to 1989 for a document of this type ended in failure. Stefania Stanisławska found such an "agreement" in the common protocol of two conversations between Beck and marshal Göring, who visited Poland in February 1938, which testifies eloquently to the methods used by official historiography of that period; see S. Stanisławska, "Umowa Göring-Beck z 23 lutego 1938 roku," *Najnowsze Dzieje Polski. Materiały i studia z okresu 1914-1939* 3 (1960): pp. 182-192. See also J. Chudek (ed.), "Rozmowy Beck-Göring z 23 lutego 1938 r.," *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* (1960), No. 5: pp. 53-57.

837 Tadeusz Kłopotowski's report on a conversation with Latvian Deputy foreign minister Berziņš dated 25 September 1938 (*Monachium 1938. Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne*, p. 403).

838 W. Materski, *Na widocie*, p. 506.

839 Great Britain's and France's intervention in Berlin (without Poland's participation) happened on 21 May 1938 but put Germany on the defensive only momentarily. See Krystyna M. Wiśniewska, "Polska, Francja, Czechosłowacja na wiosnę 1938 roku," *Studia Historyczne* (Kraków) (1973), z. 1: pp. 82-89.

which he “did not respond at all” to the question posed, considering it to be “just as silly as indecent”.⁸⁴⁰ The foreign minister’s instructions to Łukasiewicz included the statement that no talks with France could bring “a reasonable result”.

From the very beginning, the Polish foreign minister seems to have been aware that stopping Hitler required not diplomatic notes, but the use of force. He was never an “appeaser”, a politician characterised by a false hope that peace could be bought with concessions to aggressors. Above all, he saw in the Western powers a willingness to make concessions. On 25 September 1938, expressing the assumption that “everything will play itself out without war—as he has always sensed and claimed”, he noted that although “he has always viewed Czechoslovak policy in a very negative light, he has to admit that what the Great Powers did to Czechoslovakia was as far from any morality [as proclaimed by] allies and guarantors, who incited resistance and then abandoned the client.”⁸⁴¹

Thaw—October 1938

The diplomatic crisis in Europe in the autumn of 1938 was a turning point in Polish-Soviet relations, which had been formally normalised as of 1932 but which since 1935 had been systematically deteriorating to the level of an “armed peace”. Not wanting to allow the territory of the Polish Republic to fall under Soviet occupation, the Polish leadership had no choice but to reject the idea of Soviet troops marching through Polish land should the Red Army want to fulfil its allied commitments to Czechoslovakia. Officials in Warsaw did not view such a scenario as at all realistic.

When we analyse Soviet policy at the time, one thing is clear. The outbreak of war between the Western powers and Germany over Czechoslovakia would be highly beneficial for the USSR. Although his claim seems to be too far-reaching, Richard Raack was right to point out that war would have immediately given the Soviet Union a “hegemonic position” in Central and Eastern Europe.⁸⁴²

In September 1938, the Soviet scenario for extending the USSR’s influence into Central and Eastern Europe in cooperation with the Western democracies failed. Schemes to which the Kremlin had attached great importance based on the prospects of a European war also failed. Instead of these scenarios, what emerged triumphant was the policy of appeasement. The Munich Conference meant the exclusion of the Soviet state from decisions regarding war and peace in Europe. Once the Munich resolutions were made public, the Soviet’s anti-Polish campaign was immediately stopped. On 30 September, ambassador Grzybowski reported that the Soviet press—controlled by the government, of course—reported without

840 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 267 (Szembek’s note dated 12 September 1938).

841 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Gustaw Potworowski Collection, Box 1, Potworowski’s note dated 25 September 1938.

842 R. Raack, *Polska i Europa w planach Stalina*, p. 28.

comment the content of the Munich agreement, but “there have been no attacks on Poland for two days”.⁸⁴³ In a telegram to Warsaw dated 1 October, Grzybowski noted that Soviet newspapers were clearly emphasising that Poland was dissatisfied with the results of the Munich Conference because it had not been invited to the table. On the same day, however, consul Okoński reported from Minsk to the embassy in Moscow that “Soviet troops are still on our border”.⁸⁴⁴ Orders for the withdrawal of the four corps concentrated on the border with Poland had not yet been issued.

A European war did not break out in September 1938. The Munich Conference was interpreted as a spectacular failure for Soviet diplomacy, although it did not encroach upon the “material power” of the USSR in any way. The ambassador in Moscow, Grzybowski, wrote: “The prestige of the Soviet Union has suffered significantly”.⁸⁴⁵ However, the USSR was not truly isolated on the international stage, even if Polish diplomats at the time, along with diplomats from other countries, made the case that it was. The impression was that the position that Soviet diplomats had built for themselves in the international arena in 1932–1935 had been damaged. Polish leaders viewed this development as positive, which is hardly surprising given that the Soviets had been doing everything in their power to hinder the Polish policy of balance.⁸⁴⁶ At the same time, Poland’s position after Munich had become extremely difficult. The alliance with France was no longer in force, and the French were considering its formal termination,⁸⁴⁷ facts which gave rise to one last attempt in the interwar period to normalise bilateral relations. Polish diplomats took the initiative in this direction. Before returning to Moscow from his vacation in Poland, ambassador Grzybowski received instructions from Beck on 26 September to seek warmer relations with the Soviets, and efforts in this regard began in early October.⁸⁴⁸

Grzybowski wrote to Warsaw on 9 October: “Yesterday, Potiomkin started a chaotic private conversation that lasted for two hours, testifying to disorientation and depression. [...] His more tangible points were: a) the interpretation of Munich as consent to neutralise a Soviet ally in Central Europe (Soviet diplomats in Moscow were apparently making this argument); b) based on Potiomkin’s words,

843 PDD/1938, p. 632.

844 *Ibid.*, p. 650.

845 Biblioteka Polska (Paris), Papiery Wacława Grzybowskiego, FN.16548, W. Grzybowski, “Świetny rok polityki Sowietów i ich stosunki z Polską (1 October 1938–1 September 1939).”

846 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, pp. 378–380 (Szembek’s conversation with Grzybowski on 10 December 1938).

847 Ambassador Léon Noël in Warsaw offered such advice in his report dated 25 October 1938 (DDF, Paris 1978, series 2, Vol. 12, pp. 371–378). The Quai d’Orsay was considering the idea of renouncing simultaneously the alliances with Poland and the USSR.

848 J. Pagel, *Polska i Związek Radziecki*, p. 339.

the fear that Germany's expansionism may be channelled towards the Soviets; c) an emphasis on the lack of coordination of Soviet policy with France and condemnation of French policy; d) despite the principle of complete Soviet independence, an expression of a readiness to collaborate and to ensure that no hand extended to the Soviets will be ignored; e) condemnation of Czechoslovakia for abandoning resistance; f) to my remark that strengthening Hungary through the joining of Ruthenia would create a healthier situation in Central Europe, Potiomkin said nothing.⁸⁴⁹ On 11 October, talks continued. The Polish ambassador handed a note to his Soviet partner "on consideration by border committees of numerous violations of our border by Soviet aircraft", which was a reference to incidents of this type from September 1938.⁸⁵⁰ Later recalling his actions at that time, the ambassador would write that in October 1938, the idea emerged again in Moscow of possible cooperation between the USSR and the capitalist states.⁸⁵¹

On 20 October, ambassador Grzybowski again conferred with the Soviet deputy commissar of Foreign Affairs of the USSR. Potiomkin's note on this conversation in his *Dniownik* testifies to a high level of mutual distrust between the two sides, and indicates that the Soviet diplomat felt that the Polish ambassador wanted to provoke him into confirming that the USSR's relations with Germany were irrevocably hostile, and that French-Soviet relations had deteriorated.⁸⁵² We also learn from Potiomkin's *Dniownik* that the Polish ambassador heard complaints that the history of diplomacy in recent years had proven that Poland was "associated with aggressive powers threatening the common peace".⁸⁵³ The Polish diplomat dismissed these remarks with silence; he was used to hearing such accusations. On 25 October, Grzybowski handed Potiomkin concrete proposals designed to settle four issues blocking the normalisation of bilateral relations. These four points were: (1) the "restoration of a legal basis" for relations "through respect for previously concluded agreements"; (2) discontinuation of the propaganda campaign; (3) the "significant expansion of trade"; and (4) the "correct treatment of [diplomatic] institutions".⁸⁵⁴ These proposals constituted a certain minimum programme for Polish diplomacy.

After a series of talks between the Polish ambassador in Moscow and Litvinov and Potiomkin, the two foreign ministries agreed to a joint communiqué, which was announced on 26 November 1938. The communiqué confirmed the validity of

849 Ambassador Grzybowski's encrypted telegram to the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw, see *Dokumenty i materiały do historii stosunków polsko-radzieckich*, Vol. 6, p. 416.

850 Ambassador Grzybowski's report dated 11 October 1938, PDD/1938, p. 686.

851 IPMS, MSZ, A. 11E/1502, Grzybowski's letter to Szembek dated 10 March 1939.

852 *Dokumenty i materiały do historii stosunków polsko-radzieckich*, Vol. 6, p. 418 (note dated 21 October 1938).

853 *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 416.

854 AAN, MSZ, 6755A, Encrypted Telegram from Ambassador Grzybowski dated 25 October 1938.

all existing mutual obligations, above all those contained in the Riga Treaty and the non-aggression pact.⁸⁵⁵ The three remaining points on Grzybowski's list were left unsettled.

The communiqué of 26 November was *de facto* equivalent to an intergovernmental political declaration which came down to a non-aggression agreement. A day later, Beck sent instructions to Polish diplomatic missions highlighting the significance of this agreement. "In the event of a question about the Polish-Soviet declaration," Beck wrote, "please explain that since the Czechoslovak crisis, which was accompanied by Soviet military demonstrations, and since the sharp exchange of opinions between our governments, there has remained a state of tension expressed in a number of difficulties between the two neighbours. The current declaration aims to return us to the political status quo based on the non-aggression pact."⁸⁵⁶ Beck assessed this move as one that mitigated the effects of the conflict of September 1938. At the beginning of November 1938, the Polish foreign minister stated that a reconfirmation of the non-aggression pact of 25 July 1932 was necessary in Polish-Soviet relations, much like that which had occurred in September 1934 when the USSR was admitted to the League of Nations.⁸⁵⁷ Given the events of September 1938, Polish officials considered such a reconfirmation absolutely necessary. Berlin welcomed no such moves on the part of Polish diplomats, and the German ambassador in Warsaw, von Moltke, expressed regret that the Germans had been surprised by the announcement of the Polish-Soviet declaration, thus making it clear that, in his view, such a matter should have been consulted with Poland's western neighbour.⁸⁵⁸

In the realities of that time, it was not a mistake to attempt to improve Polish-Soviet relations, even if the chances of true normalisation in relations with the USSR seemed slight. In any case, such a move demonstrated Polish independence relative to Berlin. An undeniable mistake, however, came when the Poles interpreted Soviet policy as static and passive, when they argued, for example, that the Soviet Union was withdrawing from Europe and had been permanently eliminated from participating in the shaping of global politics.

On 18 October 1938, Beck wrote: "Soviet Russia always presents a potential burden for the situation in Eastern Europe," but Poland for its part does not feel "any special pressure."⁸⁵⁹ Having said that, we cannot lose sight of the efforts that

855 For more, see A. Skrzypek, "O genezie polsko-radzieckiego komunikatu z 26 listopada 1938," *Kwartalnik Historyczny* (1975), No. 3: pp. 560–572.

856 PDD/1938, p. 794 (Beck to the diplomatic missions, instructions dated 27 November 1938).

857 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, pp. 341–342 (statement during a conference at the Foreign Ministry, 4 November 1938).

858 AAN, MSZ, p. 108, Note on the Beck–Moltke conversation of 13 December 1938.

859 PDD/1938, p. 703 (Beck's instructions for Łubieński in connection with his trip to Budapest dated 18 October 1938).

the Polish foreign minister was making to counteract the international impression that the foundations of the policy of balance had been shaken. On 12 January 1939, after talks with Hitler and von Ribbentrop, Beck noted that “our relations with Germany, as explained again in Berchtesgaden, do not stand in any contradiction or hindrance to normal and good neighbourly relations with the USSR, a fact which I expressed openly to the Germans.”⁸⁶⁰ By this time, Soviet press attacks on Poland had stopped.⁸⁶¹ The impression of relaxation in bilateral relations was deepening.

Contemporaneous efforts by the Soviets to normalise relations with Poland have often been interpreted in historiography as motivated by a desire to protect their western borders. But perhaps it is the case that they wanted more than that, namely to counter the further subordination of Poland to the Third Reich. It is difficult to accept the notion that Moscow would agree to confirm the normalisation of bilateral relations with Poland without a definite broader purpose; that is, that they would do it “for nothing”.

Was it possible at the time to deepen détente in Polish-Soviet relations? It was undoubtedly the case that in no circumstances would Poland be interested in détente at the price of abandoning the policy of balance. Additionally, it is difficult at this point not to note the investigatory talks that major Mikhail Korotkich, the Soviet military attaché in Kaunas, held with his counterpart, colonel Leon Mitkiewicz. The latter filed a report on the subject of these talks with the chief of the general staff, General Stachiewicz in Warsaw, and he later described them in his *Wspomnienia kowieńskie*.⁸⁶² During these talks, Korotkich and Stachiewicz discussed the offer of a mutually guaranteed status quo in the Baltic region, which incidentally was a repetition of a concept from December 1933 that Poland had rejected.⁸⁶³ By involving Poland in this political project, the Soviets wanted to examine the real state of Polish-German relations. Poland’s consent to guaranteeing the Baltic States could not help but be interpreted as anti-German. Mitkiewicz presented Soviet proposals to General Stachiewicz, but he did not recommend their acceptance. Referring to this matter in December 1938 in a conversation with the Lithuanian envoy Jurgis Bałtrušaitis, Litvinov said that “small nations will lose their independence and the possibility of life”.⁸⁶⁴

860 AAN, MSZ, 6652A.

861 AAN, Ambasada RP w Berlinie, 738, Encrypted telegram from chargé d’affaires Jankowski to Kobyłański, 3 January 1939.

862 L. Mitkiewicz, *Wspomnienia kowieńskie*, 2nd edition (Warsaw 1989) (1st edition, London 1968), 157 ff. (The author entitled his entries on this subject “The Russian Plan for an Anti-German Coalition in 1938”).

863 For more on this issue, see a note from the envoy in Moscow, Łukasiewicz, dated December 1933, see *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939* (1989), pp. 423–430.

864 Bałtrušaitis’s report dated 21 December 1938, *Dokumenty i materiały do historii stosunków polsko-radzieckich*, Vol. 6, p. 418.

The Polish interpretation of this new phase in Polish-Soviet relations took as a starting point the thesis that the Soviets were weak and their foreign policy was bankrupt. This was no doubt an unrealistic view.

A significant indicator of the mood in the Polish Foreign Ministry can be found in a private letter from Szembek to ambassador Romer on 14 November 1938. Szembek wrote:

Recent transformations in Europe are extremely important and extensive in their reach. However, the process is not finished, so it is difficult to think about drawing any definitive conclusions. One thing, however, seems to be undeniable, namely that the Soviets are being pushed from Europe, and probably not for a short time, because, as minister Beck put it, Soviet Russia's games have not been very successful. Indeed, considering their loss of the Lithuanian and Czech positions, the failure on the Spanish matter, the actual collapse of the popular front concept in France, the cooling of attitudes towards the Soviets as seen recently in England, the defeat of Litvinov's politics seems more than indisputable. It seems that the Soviets themselves understand that they have nothing to say in Europe at present.⁸⁶⁵

This interpretation would make sense if "the Munich system proved to be sustainable". Significantly, however, Szembek predicted that the Soviets would not deviate from their policy to destabilise the "capitalist world", but in the face of a diplomatic defeat they would reach for the only instrument they had left, namely the communist movement in various European countries.

From the same tense weeks after the Munich Conference came another set of reflections in a similar spirit. Their author, the Polish ambassador to Washington Jerzy Potocki, explained to US secretary of state Cordell Hull that one could not speak of the end of the Soviet threat "because the Soviets have not yet renounced the thought of Bolshevising Europe, and the only way to do that would be through a war in which the perfect hotbed for Bolshevism would be battling armies".⁸⁶⁶

However, the Polish diplomats' perception of the USSR changed fundamentally after the Munich Conference. While Soviet military preparations had been the centre of their attention, their focus began to turn to forecasts and assessments of the Soviet Union's internal circumstances. Some Polish officials argued that the crisis within the Soviet system was entering a decisive phase. There were even voices, largely unsupported by evidence, declaring that the country was about to disintegrate.

Beck's predictions, as expressed during a meeting of the Polish Foreign Ministry's senior leadership on 4 November 1938, were entirely inaccurate. He said: "Russia has been effectively pushed out of Europe, probably not for a short time, because the game they have been playing has not worked out too well."⁸⁶⁷

865 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Tadeusz Romer Collection, 5/1 (mf, rolls 1-2).

866 Ambassador Potocki's report dated 19 October 1938, PDD/1938, p. 712.

867 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 341.

Ambassador Grzybowski was under even greater illusions, telling Szembek that “Soviet Russia is becoming increasingly weak and the Russian problem is maturing. Poland should influence the course of this problem, and while it is being resolved, Poland should maintain independence, not allowing Germany to go over to Russia. There was already a moment in history when we had a decisive word on Russian matters: it was when Stanisław Żółkiewski was sitting in the Kremlin in 1610 negotiating with the boyars for the Moscow throne.”⁸⁶⁸ The ambassador, however, soberly remarked that “now our relationship with Russia, at least in its external appearance, should not be hostile. We should not join with the Germans and Japanese in applying political pressure on Russia. We must create the appearance of proper coexistence with the Soviets [...].”⁸⁶⁹ Assessing the USSR’s military capabilities, Grzybowski believed that “Soviet Russia is very weak in terms of offensive capabilities, but its defensive capabilities are still very serious.”⁸⁷⁰ This opinion is also worth noting.

Generally, we can detect great dissonance among Polish officials and their assessments of the Soviet state’s situation at the end of 1938. As the Polish ambassador in London viewed it, “we cannot expect Russia to be a real factor in European politics”.⁸⁷¹ In fact, we can consider this judgement *pars pro toto* as representative of views coming out of the Polish Foreign Ministry.

It would be an over-simplification to argue that it was only the Poles who had the impression that the Soviets were experiencing a serious defeat. It is worth mentioning that on 18 November 1938, ambassador Łukasiewicz heard from French foreign minister Bonnet that “the internal situation in Soviet Russia is deteriorating further and rapidly, and that on the international plane Soviet Russia is weakening”.⁸⁷² The Polish diplomat’s report lacks any statement regarding evidence underpinning this assessment.

Importantly, Beck approached rumours about the Soviet system’s internal collapse with great caution. In November 1938, his judgment was that “the Soviet state has entered a period that would threaten the very existence of a Western European state. However, in Russia,” Beck continued, “reactions are quite specific. Thus, the present condition may persist there for a longer time.”⁸⁷³ Beck’s position was absolutely realistic, and it is worth adding here that never in the 1930s did the Polish leadership assume that the Soviet Union would collapse, although there were undoubtedly statements suggesting such a possibility in the future. Officials

868 *Ibid.*, p. 379 (statement from 10 December 1938).

869 *Ibid.*

870 *Ibid.*

871 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.52/5C, ambassador Raczyński to Beck, 2 November 1938.

872 Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Juliusza Łukasiewicza, 68/20.

873 Ambassador Raczyński’s note, dated 29 November 1938, containing a summary of Beck’s oral instructions for talks with Lord Halifax, PDD/1938, p. 800.

in the Foreign Ministry remembered the words spoken by marshal Piłsudski to Anthony Eden in April 1935, that Soviet Russia was peculiar and that the realities of that country could not be measured by European standards.⁸⁷⁴

At the same time, it is undoubtedly true that Beck had a low opinion of the Soviet Union's military potential. During a conversation in London with his British counterpart, Halifax, in April 1939, when asked how he "assessed the Soviet armed forces and transport capabilities in Russia", Beck responded that "the Polish government does not have a very high opinion of either one of these issues".⁸⁷⁵

Summa summarum, the Polish political leadership interpreted the events of 1938 as a blow to the USSR's Great Power aspirations. The normalisation of Polish-Lithuanian relations through the ultimatum of 17 March 1938 deprived the Soviets of the possibility of exploiting a conflict between those two states. The partition of Czechoslovakia—which still existed as a "residual state"—put an end to the existence of the only country in Central and Eastern Europe which was oriented towards cooperation with Moscow. The contemptuous term "the Soviet aircraft carrier" in Central Europe was one at work not only in Polish diplomatic correspondence.⁸⁷⁶

However, it is difficult not to admit that the optimistic observations (from the Polish point of view) of high-ranking Foreign Ministry officials were tied to a state of affairs that was highly transient. The Soviet Union would probably not have played any significant role in Europe if the Munich system established on 29 September 1938 had proven to be a lasting solution, i.e. the rule of a directorate of four powers supplemented by a German-British bilateral declaration on consultation and non-aggression. Without doubt, the establishment of the directorate degraded the Soviets' international position, but Poland could have been faced by an even a greater threat, namely the threat that the issue of its borders would be internationalised. In any case, the Munich system survived only six months, having been unilaterally broken by Hitler in March 1939.

Soviet Intentions: An Attempt to Interpret

Without a careful analysis of the Soviet Union's position, we cannot understand the diplomatic crisis in Europe in the autumn of 1938, whose main (but not exclusive) element was the German-Czech conflict over the Sudetenland. The history of international relations in this period cannot be written as if the Soviet state was an agent favouring European stability. Nor should Soviet policy be characterised as

874 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 1, pp. 255–256.

875 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), pp. 272–273 (Polish note on the talks of 4 April).

876 Beneš himself told ambassador Bullitt that Czechoslovakia could be a base for the USSR, and that the Soviet air fleet could come to Czechoslovakia's aid, using Czechoslovak airports for operations against Germany (National Archives [Washington], Department of State, Decimal Files, mf T.1247, Report for the Secretary of State dated 19 July 1935).

only a passive component of the balance of power in Europe. The following considerations do not definitively settle the question about the reality of the Soviet threat, a question which, in the end, probably cannot be answered.⁸⁷⁷

While writing this study, I was guided by the idea that I must at all costs avoid an “alternative history” that would bring nothing new to this subject beyond dubious speculation. No less important was the need to avoid *a posteriori* judgments, because, as Piotr Wandycz once put it, they represent the “great trap of historiography”.⁸⁷⁸ In other words, attempts to understand the thinking employed by historical actors are useless if we base those attempts on the knowledge of historical events which we have today, but which they—analysing the reality around them—could not possibly have had.

Despite everything, we will try to sum up the considerations so far with 15 observations:

1. By mobilising certain units in their armed forces and attempting to frighten Poland, the Soviets could assume that they would discourage their western neighbour from armed action against Czechoslovakia, the probability of which—to them—seemed significant. These moves were meant to serve President Beneš, making it easier for him to decide to defend the entire country, which would lead to a war that had some chance of becoming a European war, were third countries to interfere. A war among the capitalist countries would be the fulfilment of the Leninist scenario of a “Second Imperialist War”, one which would bring about the crash of capitalism as a socio-economic order.
2. We cannot simply assume that the Kremlin did not realise that military threats against Poland could force Poland onto the path of cooperation with the Germans. Under such conditions, the Third Reich would probably not miss an opportunity to draw Poland into its own system of alliances.⁸⁷⁹ It would be a unique opportunity for Hitler and von Ribbentrop; much better than in October 1938, when the German government offered Poland a “comprehensive solution” (*Gesamtlösung*). Such a course of events could in no way be beneficial when viewed in the context of Soviet interests. Perhaps the only explanation for Soviet moves in September 1938 is that the Soviets already believed that Poland was connected to the Third Reich, probably through some kind of secret agreement, which Moscow suspected from the moment that the Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact was signed in Berlin on 26 January 1934.

877 The post-Soviet archives (above all the “Archive of the President of the Russian Federation”) will perhaps allow scholars to explore this issue in more detail in the future.

878 P. Wandycz, “Rozbiory Polski i dyplomacja mocarstw zaborczych,” in idem, *Z dziejów dyplomacji*, p. 43.

879 It must be mentioned that in March 1938, Litvinov did not want to intervene in the Polish-Lithuanian conflict; he said that such an intervention would push Poland into Germany’s embrace (see Z. Steiner, *The Soviets and the Czech Crisis*, p. 754).

3. The assumption that the Soviet leadership really planned to strike Poland seems to be in conflict with its guiding principle as expressed by Stalin's thesis of 1925, according to which it was imperative that the USSR maintain, as long as possible, a policy of neutrality in any conflict between the "imperialist powers", and to enter any war at its decisive moment as *tertius gaudens*. If they attacked Poland, the Soviets could not rely on the notion that Poland would give up without a fight. They also had to consider Germany's assistance, especially since the Germans viewed the Polish state as being implicitly connected with the Third Reich. The concentration of troops on the border and threats against Poland put Poland in a situation in which it would have to seek help from Germany. Such was the way it undoubtedly looked in Moscow.
4. By making a demonstration of strength on the Polish border, the Soviets might have been attempting to counteract the Red Army's image of weakness in the wake of the purges of 1937. The Kremlin must have known that these events had severely damaged the reputation of the Soviet armed forces in the eyes of the rest of the world.
5. Two issues should be distinguished: it is one thing to assume that the Soviets would strike Poland if Poland took military action against Czechoslovakia, but another thing to believe that the Soviets would intervene in order to assist the Czechs if Beneš decided to reject German demands. However, neither of these scenarios came into play on 23 September 1938. Czech documents from September of that year, introduced into academic circulation by Ivan Pfaff, seem to indicate two things: that the Soviets aspired to escalate the Polish-Czechoslovak conflict, and that the idea of territorial changes—meaning a partial annexation or total partition of Poland—was already well developed in the Kremlin.
6. One fundamental circumstance made it easier for the Soviets, even if only theoretically, to consider the possibility of striking Poland. From Moscow's perspective, it could not be a secret that Poland was *de facto* isolated, since the Franco-Polish alliance had become inoperable, and there could be no question of cooperation with the United Kingdom.
7. The threat from the east, and in any case the possibility of an attack from the east, had a significant impact on the shape of Polish foreign policy, whose main task in these circumstances was to maintain the Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact of 26 January 1934. If this agreement were breached, Poland would have stood on the brink of disaster. It is perfectly justified in these conditions that Beck did everything in his power to prevent a breakdown in Polish-German relations. The rejection *a limine* of the above-mentioned proposals put forward by the British and French governments in May 1938 to jointly warn Hitler against taking expansionist actions in Czechoslovakia, seems to be fully understandable and the only correct move in this situation.⁸⁸⁰

880 For the documentation on this topic and Ambassador Łukasiewicz's *ex post* commentary, see *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939* (1989), pp. 112–133.

8. Without a doubt, Soviet foreign policy and military strategy in September 1938 was a function of the overall international situation. It was not active in nature; rather, it was a response to events taking place. None of which means that the Kremlin had no long-term strategic plan, a *Langzeitstrategie*, according to which the Soviets had to do everything in their power to get the capitalist states to engage in war among themselves.
9. Soviet leaders and the creators of Soviet policy could hardly help but associate the degradation of the Russian Empire in 1917–1921 with a profound sense of weakness and defeat. Out of the rubble of the empire emerged the small but independent Baltic nations. The people of the Caucasus fell just short of independence themselves. Most important, however, was Poland, which from the very first moment of its existence was not satisfied with the status of a small country; rather, it competed with the “new Russia” over the geopolitical shape of Eastern Europe, in the spirit of its Jagiellonian heritage. One goal of Soviet policy had to be to weaken Poland and to degrade that country’s position on the international stage. It could not be otherwise. Additionally, under these conditions the Soviets naturally viewed Poland’s disappearance from the map of Europe as a favourable outcome, one that would remove Poland as a geopolitical “barrier” preventing territorial access to Germany. This could happen either as a result of a European war (many versions of which were possible) or through an agreement with Germany aimed at dividing up Polish territory. In the realities of 1939, that latter scenario would become a reality.
10. Generally speaking, a historian should not work according to the principle of “what would have happened if”, because such scholarship can be deceptive. However, as an exception to this rule it can be said that a Red Army attack on Poland would have been followed by a Polish decision to undertake a defensive war—regardless of how things would have played out. Having said that, it is not worth expanding on such a scenario for the very reason—of fundamental importance to the historian—that such an attack did not happen. In addition, war did not break out in Europe in 1938, nor did the Soviet Union attack Poland, although its intentions in September 1938, as viewed from Warsaw, were vague and highly problematic.
11. Without Poland’s consent, there could be no attack on Russia from the west. This was a fundamental truth stemming from the geopolitical realities of the interwar period, and it is a truth that must be remembered and emphasised again and again. Up until September 1939, Poland did everything in its power to see that this state of affairs would not change. But there is also a second truth in this regard. Given the interwar circumstances, the Soviet Union was not able to play a leading role in international politics because it was blocked by Poland in the geopolitical balance of Central and Eastern Europe, a fact which deprived it of territorial access to Germany. The USSR’s attempts to break through to the West had logic and motivation, supported by a basic drive to re-partition Poland. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact would be a key element in this operation to penetrate the West. Stalin would long remember the

lessons of interwar international politics, and during the Second World War he did everything in his power to ensure that the geopolitical realities from the pre-war era would not recreated.

12. A European war did not break out in 1938, although the Soviets were certainly planning for that eventuality. If Beneš had chosen war, he would have gained little. Considering Czechoslovakia in 1938, Piotr Majewski pointed to the dilemma of whether “to fight or not to fight”, and he came to the conclusion that Czechoslovakia “could at best lose in ‘a better way’ against Germany, could ‘sell the soldier’s blood more expensively’ than Poland was able to do in 1939”. He also noted that “at this point, however, the historian’s knowledge ends, and sterile speculation begins”.⁸⁸¹ The Czechoslovak army “did not differ fundamentally from the Polish Armed Forces either in terms of armaments, organisational structures, or battle doctrine, though no doubt in some areas (heavy artillery, armour, air force) it had an advantage” over the Polish military.⁸⁸²
13. Could war in 1938 have offered greater possibilities to stop the Third Reich than a year later? This is a question that has been asked many times. As Paul Kennedy noted: “Because the political and public will for war was lacking in the west, it makes little sense here to enter into the lengthy, ongoing debate about what might have happened had Britain and France fought on Czechoslovakia’s behalf, although it is worth noting that the military balance was not as favourable to Germany as the various apologists of appeasement suggested.”⁸⁸³ Opinions put forward by historians do not always follow the reflections of witnesses to history and historical actors. One of them, Winston Churchill, in his memoirs *The Second World War*, expressed the view that although “we might in 1938 have had air raids on London”, it would have been worth it for the western powers to risk war, because it was only through control of France and the Netherlands and the establishment of military bases there that it would have been possible to launch an attack on Great Britain in 1940. “The German armies were not capable of defeating the French in 1938 or 1939.”⁸⁸⁴ The thesis that a European war in 1938 could have created better conditions for an anti-German coalition than a year later has never been dropped in historiography and historical journalism. Its supporters argue that the *Międzymorze* states (including Poland) independent from Germany

881 P. M. Majewski, *Nierozegrana kampania*, p. 260.

882 P. M. Majewski, “Armia czechosłowacka w 1938 roku w porównaniu z Wojskiem Polskim”, in *Spojrzenie na polski wrzesień 1939 roku*, ed. T. Kondracki (Warsaw 2011), p. 76. The armed forces of Czechoslovakia had a total of 32 divisions grouped into four armies.

883 Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (Vintage, 1989), pp. 338–339.

884 Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, pp. 303–304.

could have come together to support an anti-Third Reich coalition.⁸⁸⁵ There will never be a definitive answer to this question. Another Churchill argument, namely that the West could have won over the Soviets in 1938 but not in 1939, does not stand up to scrutiny.⁸⁸⁶ In historiography, marked by very divided and speculatively formulated opinions, only Anthony Adamthwaite decided to state clearly that in September 1938, “France had a last chance of fighting Germany on better or at least even terms” than a year later.⁸⁸⁷

14. We can formulate yet another conclusion: today, with the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see what a slim chance Poland had to stand up for the endangered Czechoslovakia, even if it wanted to. Such involvement would have put Poland in even greater threat not only from the west (Germany), but also from the east. In such conditions, the Soviets would have had unusual opportunities to demand the right to put the Red Army on the march, rushing to help the Czechs, or even strike against defenceless Poland, whose armed forces would have remained tied to the anti-German front. They could have also tried to divide the Polish Republic by reaching an agreement with Germany.
15. Delving into the dangerous sphere of alternative history, it is difficult to avoid asking what the Soviet position would have been if the September crisis had not ended in Munich, but had evolved into a European war. A war in 1938 would have offered the Soviets the possibility of a rather beneficial neutrality. Germany, battling the Western powers, would have had to agree to the wishes of Bolshevik Russia in order to gain access to the raw materials necessary for war. Moscow would have been able to make serious demands; its role as a third force would have become crucial. It is also possible that the Soviets would have acted to extend their sphere of influence, controlling at least the Baltic States, to whom Poland would not have been able to provide assistance. Having said that, all such speculation in this regard is just that: speculation.

885 P. Shen, *The Age of Appeasement. The Evolution of British Foreign Policy in the 1930s* (London 1999), pp. 222–223. See also A. Adamthwaite, *The Making of the Second World War* (London–Boston 1977), pp. 89–90.

886 See John Lukacs, “The Coming of the Second World War”, *Foreign Affairs* 68 (1989), No. 4: 169.

887 A. P. Adamthwaite, *The Making of the Second World War*, p. 81.

Chapter 4. Hitler's Demands and Poland's Rejection (1938–1939)

The reason for the Polish-German conflict in 1939, not to mention the pretext for the outbreak of the Second World War, involved German territorial claims against Poland. The object of those claims was the Free City of Danzig, which, with the Polish government's consent, Adolf Hitler wanted to annex to the Reich. The German government also demanded that Poland grant permission for an extra-territorial motorway to be built through Polish Pomerania to East Prussia, so that this part of their national territory, detached from Germany, would obtain a special land connection with the fatherland. The Germans called it a "corridor through the corridor."⁸⁸⁸ The German nation would thus gain "redress" for the territorial losses incurred as a result of World War I. Hitler, as the guarantor of this agreement, would argue to the German people that they view these losses as a "sacrifice" to Poland and treat them as necessary and definitive.

Poland would get the right for permanent use of the Port of Danzig, but the basic "payment" it would have to make to Germany was the conclusion of a Polish-German treaty of friendship and cooperation, which would replace the existing Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact 26 January 1934.⁸⁸⁹ This new treaty would include mutual border guarantees, which meant that Poles would get what they had long wanted from Germany, namely recognition of Poland's western border. The agreement would be supplemented with a "consultative clause", which obliged the two sides to coordinate their foreign policies. From the German perspective, this treaty represented a *Globalösung* or *Gesamtlösung* in Polish-German relations.

Poland rejected Hitler's demands, even if—in his view—they were very limited. This rejection was the basic reason behind Germany's renunciation on 28 April 1939 of the Non-Aggression Pact and the outbreak of war on 1 September. It also prompted the Germans to return to the idea of partitioning Poland, which was well-rooted in German political thought, and which the Soviets embraced with enthusiasm. Thus, the partition of Poland, to which the Germans and Soviets agreed in outline form on 23 August 1939, was entered into a secret protocol attached to the Treaty of Non-aggression between Germany and the USSR, which was later modified as the German-Soviet Frontier Treaty signed in Moscow on

888 Such wording was used, for example, by the Reich economics minister Walther Funk in a conversation with the Polish ambassador in Ankara, Michał Sokolnicki, on 7 October 1938. See M. Sokolnicki, "Na rozdrożu czasów," *Kultura* (Paris) (1957), No. 1–2: p. 134.

889 While the Berlin Declaration was signed for ten years, the proposed treaty was intended to last for 25 years.

28 September 28. Undoubtedly, one of the sources of Germany's criminal policy of occupation was that, in the eyes of Hitler and the Nazi elite, the Polish nation had treated Germany's "generous offer" with scorn.⁸⁹⁰ In his role as a new type of leader, Hitler was determined to eliminate Poland as an independent political player, a well-documented goal about which he spoke several times before 1 September 1939. Hitler also believed that Poland, having rejected his offer, somehow signed its own death sentence. These were the origins of the "ideological war" of "extermination" which was declared not in June 1941, as is usually reported in German historiography, but in September 1939.⁸⁹¹

So, was the Polish decision of 1938/1939 correct? Were there any alternative political solutions? Without Danzig as a Free City and with an extraterritorial motorway across Pomerania, would Poland really have become a vassal state? Was there a Polish plan to resolve disputes with Germany at the end of 1938? Did the Polish government have a counter-offer to German demands or could it move forward only with a simple "no"?

The Free City of Danzig and Polish Access to the Sea

Polish-German relations in 1938–1939 have been so much the subject of debate among diplomatic historians that it seems unnecessary to return to the subject once again, above all because it is difficult to say anything new. At the same time, the issue of the Free City of Danzig is not a matter that requires reconstruction.⁸⁹² Four serious reasons, however, make it necessary for us to take up this matter again:

890 As emphasised above all by Jerzy W. Borejsza in his *Antyslawizm Adolfa Hitlera* (Warsaw 1988), Hitler had previously been rather quiet in his anti-Polish statements. For more on the National Socialist leader's stance towards Poland, see idem, *Śmieszne sto milionów Słowian. Wokół światopoglądu Adolfa Hitlera* (Warsaw 2006). See also Wolfgang Wippermann, "Od niemieckiego rewizjonizmu granicznego do wojny zaborczej," in *Problem granic i obszaru odrodzonego państwa polskiego (1918–1990)*, ed. A. Czubiński (Poznań 1992), pp. 173–186. Also important are arguments made by Karol Jonca in "Die polnische Nation in der politischen Doktrin Hitlers," in *Menetekel. Das Gesicht des zweiten Weltkrieges. Nürnberger Gespräch zum 50. Jahrestag der Entfesselung des zweiten Weltkrieges*, eds. P. Schönlein, J. Wollenberg, J. Wyrozumski (Kraków–Nürnberg 1991), pp. 169–254.

891 See, for example, Ernst Nolte in "II wojna światowa – alternatywy i konsekwencje" (a historical survey), *Arcana* 28 (1999), No. 4: p. 6.

892 The German monograph by Ludwig Denne, *Das Danzig-Problem in der deutschen Außenpolitik, 1934–39* (Bonn 1959) is the most comprehensive treatment. In Polish historiography, we have books by Stanisław Mikos, a study by Anna M. Cieniela, monographs by Bogdan Dopierała, and studies by Marek Andrzejewski. In addition, we have at our disposal three western monographs, by Herbert S. Levine, Christoph M. Kimmich and Alice-Catherine Carls-Maire.

Firstly, in recent years, an increasing number of opinions and assessments have been published in Poland suggesting that the Polish government, by rejecting Hitler and Ribbentrop's demands, made a significant mistake, because a "tactical" agreement with the Third Reich was possible by which the Polish people could have avoided the terrible tragedy that befell them during the Second World War.⁸⁹³ Historians should not allow such a view to gain currency; it shapes the historical consciousness of the current generation very harmfully—in my opinion.

Secondly, historians often present the origins of the Second World War in two unobjective ways. On the one hand, Poland is perceived as a country irrationally unprepared to offer any concessions and compromises to Germany, a fact which contributed to the outbreak of war.⁸⁹⁴ On the other hand, Poland appears as having played an entirely passive role in the events that led the world to war; events turned Poland into a victim of conspiracy and aggression on the part of neighbouring totalitarian powers. In the face of such a vision of the origins of the war, it is the duty of Polish historians to remind readers again and again that it was of extraordinary importance that the Polish government make a sovereign decision. That decision would have a bearing on the fate of Europe and the world. Poland would not be just a passive object of events as they happened. Unfortunately, in Western historiography and even in Polish historiography, too little of all this is remembered.

Thirdly, in the Polish and European archives we still find new documents whose existence historians have not yet fully recognised or whose contents have not yet been sufficiently analysed. I refer here to unknown (or very poorly known) archival documents from 1936–1937 and from end turn of 1938 and beginning of 1939 created by the Legal-Treaty Department of the Polish Foreign Ministry, which establish a new and more detailed context of the Polish government's decision to reject German demands.

Fourthly, it is necessary that we understand the motivations behind decisions made by the Polish leadership and (above all) foreign minister Józef Beck in the context of the options available at the time. We owe this to the creators of Polish foreign policy if we want to preserve a reliable and un-deformed memory of the Second World War. Of course, as one of the great authorities in Polish historiography, Henryk Wereszycki, taught us, every interpretation must be "carefully extracted from the sources and nothing more", which is a guideline I very much strive to observe.⁸⁹⁵

893 "Wojna polska. Rozmowa z prof. Pawłem Wieczorkiewiczem w 66. rocznicę agresji sowieckiej na Polskę [interview led by P. Zychowicz]," *Rzeczpospolita*, 17–18 September 2005.

894 Such argumentation was presented in A. J. P. Taylor's famous work *The Origins of the Second World War*.

895 H. Wereszycki, "Jak zostałem historykiem," in idem, *Niewygasta przeszłość. Refleksje i polemiki* (Krakow 1987), p. 295.

As we know, the Treaty of Versailles of 28 June 1919 gave Poland territorial access to the Baltic Sea. The fact that this happened—as a result of the diligence of Polish diplomats—is one of the indisputable and great achievements of the Paris Peace Conference.⁸⁹⁶ A signatory of the treaty and co-author of this triumph, Roman Dmowski, regarded this achievement *ex post* as the greatest work of his life, but he also confessed that “the struggle over whether Poland will be a truly independent state, or with the appearance of independence will be reduced to the role of a province of the great German empire [...] was not resolved”, and it continued.⁸⁹⁷ Poles universally regarded access to the sea as a guarantee of true independence, and no responsible Polish politician could consider giving it up.⁸⁹⁸

In Polish political thought, access to the sea was perceived as a condition for the survival of the Polish state and for the maintenance its rightful place in Europe. It was not only Dmowski, considered an adamant spokesman for Western-oriented political thinking, who demanded territorial access to the sea. The view that Danzig was the key to Poland's independence was also voiced by Dmowski's great opponent, Józef Piłsudski, a fact which is confirmed by instructions that he issued on 27 November 1918 to delegates entrusted with negotiating in Paris with the governments of the Entente Powers.⁸⁹⁹

But the territorial decisions made at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 created a major European problem of which Poles are not always aware, namely that East Prussia had been separated from Germany. The conditions under which Germans could travel through Polish territory were regulated in detail by the transit convention concluded in Paris on 21 April 1921 as a tripartite agreement between Poland, Germany and the Free City of Danzig; the convention was ratified in March 1922 and remained in force until 1939. This convention established “privileged” railway transit between East Prussia and the territory of the Reich,⁹⁰⁰ and it guaranteed Germans the right to transport troops and weapons between the two regions if Germany found itself in a defensive war. In the light of its provisions, road transit was subject to Polish law, which was an obvious consequence of Polish sovereignty over the territory between Reich territory and East Prussia. The transport of goods

896 See Anna M. Cienciąła, “The Battle of Danzig and the Polish Corridor at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919”, *The Reconstruction of Poland, 1914–1923*, ed. P. Latawski (London 1992), pp. 71–94.

897 R. Dmowski, *Polityka polska i odbudowanie państwa* (Warsaw 1925), p. 484.

898 We find no statements in Polish political thought calling for a reduction in Poland's territorial rights to access the sea, except for those from the Polish Communist Party.

899 *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne, 1918 (listopad–grudzień 1918)*, ed. S. Dębski, with P. Długolecki (Warsaw 2008), pp. 112–113.

900 For Polish views on this matter, see the Foreign Ministry memorandum from 1937: AAN, MSZ, 4624, “Polska–Niemcy 1919–1937. Chronologiczny rozwój stosunków prawno-politycznych”. See also Z. Barański, *Niemiecki tranzyt kolejowy przez Polskę w latach 1919–1939 (Studium prawno-międzynarodowe)* (Poznań 1957), p. 44.

was subject to fees, the proceeds from which constituted a significant part of the Polish state budget. Of course, German citizens moving through Polish territory were subject to passport control, which they always treated as a great nuisance.

The Paris transit convention regulated no matters concerning the transport of goods from Germany to the Soviet Union. All specific issues for which the Paris convention did not find a solution were regulated and simplified by the convention on the freedom of transit signed in Barcelona in 1921, which was the basic act of international law at the time on road transport and transit, and to which both Poland and Germany belonged. The Polish Foreign Ministry judged that the Paris convention was applied fairly well.⁹⁰¹

The authority of the Polish state in the Free City of Danzig written into the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles was specified in the Polish-Danzig convention signed on 9 November 1920, called the Paris Convention or Treaty of Paris, which was drafted in the General Secretariat of the League of Nations, with René Massigli and Edward Halletta Carr as experts. A Port and Waterways Board was established to administer the treaty's provisions.⁹⁰² Thus, the Free Port of Danzig was not placed at the disposal of the Polish treasury, which would have been the simplest execution of the spirit of the Versailles Treaty, but which resulted instead in a reduction in Polish rights in Danzig and in significant restrictions on the provisions of article 104 of the Versailles Treaty.⁹⁰³ The end effect was constant conflict between the Port Board and the Polish government.⁹⁰⁴

In Warsaw, it was an unchanging goal in the Foreign Ministry to prevent the Free City from achieving full political emancipation and turning into a kind of separate state body.⁹⁰⁵ There is no need to convince anyone that Danzig played an important role in Poland's defence strategies, which were the subject of studies put out by the General Staff (then the Main Staff) of the Polish army. The loss of the Port of Danzig cut Poland off from the Baltic Sea and therefore from the possibility of maritime transport (the construction of the port in Gdynia changed this situation greatly, but it did not end it).⁹⁰⁶

901 Biblioteka Polska (Paris), Akcesja, 4347, "Aide-Mémoire w sprawie stanu komunikacji w Polsce," put together in the Foreign Ministry, dated 29 April 1925.

902 H. Stępniański, *Rada Portu i Dróg Wodnych w Wolnym Mieście Danzigu* (Danzig 1971).

903 See K. Skubiszewski, "Kompetencje państwa polskiego w Wolnym Mieście Danzigu," *Czasopismo Prawno-Historyczne* 11 (1959), No. 2: pp. 145–184; J. Makowski, *Prawno-państwowe położenie Wolnego Miasta Danziga* (Warsaw 1923).

904 S. Mikos, *Wolne Miasto Danzig a Liga Narodów 1920–1939* (Danzig 1979), p. 83. See also idem, *Działalność Komisariatu Generalnego Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w Wolnym Mieście Danzigu 1920–1939* (Warsaw 1971), pp. 106–110.

905 It seems that the first person to clearly formulate this goal was minister Aleksander Skrzyński in his instructions to Jan Ciechanowski dated 19 February 1925, Biblioteka Polska (Paris), Akcesja, 4347, Papiery Ciechanowskiego.

906 For more, see P. Mickiewicz, *Wolne Miasto Gdańsk w koncepcjach wojskowych i polityce February Rzeczypospolitej* (Torun 1999).

The League of Nations Council decided to divide half of the Reich state property in the Free City between Poland and Germany, based on a formulation made by a special League commission. The largest enterprise, the Danzig Shipyard (formerly “imperial”), was transformed into a consortium called the International Shipbuilding and Engineering Company Limited, in which the Polish state treasury had only a 20 percent share. Its long-time director was Ludwig Noé, a Danziger.⁹⁰⁷ The specific authority that Poland enjoyed in Danzig was set out in the convention concluded in Warsaw on 24 October 1921.

Danzig was established on a democratic and liberal basis; the Free City's constitution had the guarantee of the League of Nations. For this purpose, the office of the High Commissioner of the League of Nations for Danzig was established.⁹⁰⁸ The constitution survived without major disturbances until 1933. Later, as we know, along with the development of the Nazi movement and the Nazi takeover of power in 1933, that constitution was simply dismantled, while the League of Nations stood by passively and Poland remained inactive. High Commissioners generally maintained a position that was unfavourable to Poland. The provision by which Poland was to conduct Danzig's foreign affairs and maintain the Free City's defences became a dead letter. Instead, Danzig was incorporated only into a Polish customs zone.

German foreign policy was aimed at preventing the stabilisation of Poland's rights in Danzig.⁹⁰⁹ The German nation had undoubtedly not come to terms with the territorial decisions enshrined in the Versailles Treaty. In German society, a level of revisionism developed which was not at all the intellectual property of the extreme right, which was fighting to destroy the Weimar Republic and to rebuild the “real state”, as the German revolutionary conservatives often called it. The leftist parties—SPD and KPD—were also eager to alter the Polish-German border. Polish arguments that Poland's territorial access to the sea was a guarantee of true independence did not reach the Germans. Revisionism poisoned German public life. After the defeat of 1918, Germany attempted to build a democratic order, but the Prussian tradition of the “negative Polish policy”, as Klaus Zernack put it, remained strong. In a watershed article, another German historian, Heinrich August Winkler, put forward an argument that was stronger and more firmly worded than a Polish historian could hope to attain, writing that “the arrogance towards Poland, which had put down roots in Germany long before 1918, co-created that collective climate that allowed for the rise of National Socialism.

907 S. Mikos, *Działalność Komisariatu Generalnego*, p. 124.

908 This was a function of the fact that the High Commissioner was condemned to the role of mediator between Danzig and Poland, and in fact between Germany and Poland. See F. P. Walters, *A History of the League of Nations* (New York–Toronto 1952), p. 90.

909 For more on Berlin's goals, see Ch. M. Kimmich, *The Free City, Danzig and German Foreign Policy, 1919–1934* (New Haven 1968).

This, in turn, intensified the cultural contempt for the Poles right down to the physical liquidation of the Polish intelligentsia. What then came as a result of the war that Hitler unleashed was the loss of the German East.⁹¹⁰ However, the American scholar Sally Marks risked arguing that, had it not been for German revisionism, European stabilisation in the 1920s would have been possible, as the second major international problem—conflicts caused by disputes over the treatment of national minorities—could somehow have been solved, because with time new countries would have been able to show increased maturity in these matters.⁹¹¹

Of course, in the Weimar era there were Germans whose views were different from those found in the dominant anti-Polish discourse. It is worth mentioning here the journalism of Helmut von Gerlach, and the statements of such German intellectuals as the philosopher Wilhelm Foerster or the Jesuit Friedrich Muckermann. We should also recall the trip made to Poland in 1927 by Reichstag President Paul Loebe, who as an SPD politician attended the PPS Congress in Łódź, where he stated clearly that the “Pomeranian corridor” was territory inhabited mainly by Poles. It is also difficult to ignore the efforts of Ulrich Rauscher, the Reich’s envoy in Warsaw, to normalise bilateral relations. Having said that, German representatives seeking agreement and conciliation with Poland played no great role in the political realities of the day.

The German nation’s absolutely revisionist position is particularly puzzling given that in 1929 Germany reached a higher standard of living than in the Wilhelmian era and yet Germans still questioned their borders as a source of broad suffering.⁹¹² The process of delegitimising the Weimar Republic’s political system did not stop, and during the great economic crisis it intensified. At that time, German diplomats, in their attempt to carry out the public’s will, unsuccessfully led the struggle to alter the border with Poland peacefully, in various forums of international politics. It caused such stress in Polish-German relations that they appeared to be irreparable.

The German position regarding future relations with Poland looked clear: it assumed the cession of Gdansk Pomerania and Upper Silesia into the Reich and, of course, the incorporation of Danzig.⁹¹³ This was the “minimum program”. As for an alternative “compromise” with Poland, German politicians had only one idea that

910 H. A. Winkler, “W cieniu Wersalu. Stosunki niemiecko-polskie w okresie Republiki Weimarskiej,” in *Polacy i Niemcy. Historia – kultura – polityka*, eds. A. Lawaty, H. Orłowski (Poznan 2008), p. 75. A valuable study is by Peter Fischer, *Die deutsche Publizistik als Faktor der deutsch-polnischen Beziehungen 1919–1939* (Wiesbaden 1991).

911 S. Marks, *The Illusion of Peace. International Relations in Europe 1918–1933* (London 1976), p. 145.

912 Ch.S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe. Stabilization in France, Germany and Italy in the Decade after World War I* (Princeton, NJ 1975).

913 Another, more radical argument in German political thought pre-supposed the need to restore the pre-First World War status quo in the east.

could be called—using the language of international politics from the eighteenth century—“replacement transaction” or “territorial compensation”; that is, the return of Gdansk Pomerania to Germany, and granting Poland access to the sea, e.g. in the form of a port in Klaipėda or through the incorporation of all Lithuania into Poland. We know that Gustav Stresemann's personal secretary, Henry Bernhard, in the eloquently titled book *Finis Germaniae* written after Stresemann's death in 1929, referred to the idea of a “replacement transaction”. This close associate of the co-founder of the Locarno agreements believed that such a solution was possible and could be implemented peacefully.⁹¹⁴ Bernhard repeated another thought worthy of his superior, writing that if in Franco-German relations there would be a full and comprehensive agreement—“an agreement along the whole line”—then the Polish problem would be settled and would cease to be “an object of concern”.⁹¹⁵ The use of “Briandism”, that aspect of French foreign policy which calculated rapprochement with Germany as a priority, seemed to be an important motif in German diplomacy. Piłsudski was aware of this, and he often expressed this awareness in his negative attitude towards the Locarno system.

The guiding thought in Weimar policy, which envisioned the “peaceful revision” of Germany's border with Poland, did not conflict with various ideas simultaneously under consideration by the Reichswehr leadership for the armed takeover of Danzig and even Polish Pomerania, ideas which we cannot help but mention here, if only briefly. In 1930, after Stresemann's death on 3 October 1929, German officials developed these plans further.⁹¹⁶

For Poles, one more issue is important: that interwar Europe did not reconcile itself to the Polish-German border established at Versailles. Józef Piłsudski understood this well, admitting *pro foro interno* that “Poland was the centre of trouble and eternal fear, it was the source of conflict”.⁹¹⁷ The political rationale by which the Peace Conference Supreme Council granted Polish Pomerania to Poland was questioned throughout Europe and beyond, the argument being that this situation needed to be changed sooner or later, and that it had to be changed not so much to bring about “historical justice” as to stabilise international relations in Europe. Within European public opinion, the Polish-German territorial dispute was very often reduced to the single issue of the “Polish corridor”, which appeared quite commonly as a peculiar absurdity in international politics. The

914 See statements by Julius Curtius, German foreign minister in 1929–1932, in idem, *Sechs Jahre Minister der deutschen Republik* (Heidelberg 1948), p. 244.

915 Ibid.

916 See J. Lipski, *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie w świetle aktów norymberskich*, part 2, *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* (London) 1948, R. 1, No. 4: p. 13. For a separate study on the subject, see Robert Citino, *Niemcy bronią się przed Polską. Ewolucja taktyki Blitzkriegu 1918–1933* (Warsaw 2012) (English-language edition, 1987).

917 Statement made on 7 March 1934 at a conference of former premiers, see K. Świtalski, *Diariusz 1919–1935*, p. 659

term “Polish corridor” entered into general circulation, despite Polish protests and arguments that Gdansk Pomerania was populated by Poles, with a negligible German minority.⁹¹⁸

The Polish counterargument in the conflict with German diplomacy, namely that Danzig was the “focus of efforts at retaliation” against the Versailles system, found no special understanding on the international stage, despite its logic based on facts. Unfortunately, the German argument that Germany’s new eastern borders were unacceptable gained broad acceptance in the West. In particular, in Great Britain and France after the conference in Locarno, it was widely believed that the integral defence of all of the provisions contained in the Versailles Treaty was not possible. Here, the historian of diplomacy could quote a long list of statements by Western statesmen proclaiming the need to remove the “Polish corridor”. American senator William Borah said, for example, that he “would change the Polish corridor if it were possible”.⁹¹⁹ In 1931, American President Herbert Hoover, in a conversation with French prime minister Pierre Laval, called the “Polish corridor” the cause of “political unrest” and the “root of all political and financial difficulties” in Europe. He urged the French government to get its Polish ally to make territorial concessions to Germany. Laval called the “corridor” a “monstrosity” that was simply unsustainable.⁹²⁰

In 1933, Hoover’s successor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, spoke to the French prime minister, Edouard Herriot, and talked about the “Polish corridor” very much like his predecessor had. Herriot recognised that Poland needed to make territorial concessions.⁹²¹ Interestingly, Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, papal secretary of state, in January 1930, expressed practically the same opinion, using different words, when, as the Polish ambassador in Paris Alfred Chłapowski learned, he stated that “he [considered] maintenance of the current situation in the Polish corridor impossible”.⁹²² Attempts to effectively undermine Polish politicians were endless. One attack worth mentioning here was the accusation made in the spring of 1933 that Minister August Zaleski was an advocate of concluding an agreement with Germany under which the Free City would be given back to the Reich, in return for which Poland would be granted “final” confirmation that Gdansk

918 In particular see Anna M. Cienciala, “German Propaganda for the Revision of the Polish-German Frontier in Danzig and the Corridor: Its Effects on British Opinion and the British Policy-making Elite in the Years 1919–1932”, *Antemurale* (Rome) 20 (1976): pp. 77–132.

919 Quote from P. Wandycz, “Stany Zjednoczone a Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia w okresie międzywojennym 1921–1939”, in idem, *Polska a zagranica*, p. 165.

920 Jan Karski, *The Great Powers and Poland: From Versailles to Yalta* (Lanham Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), p. 90.

921 Ibid.

922 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Watykanie, A.44.122/3, Ambassador Chłapowski to foreign minister August Zaleski, 11 January 1930.

Pomerania belonged to the Polish Republic. In a letter to Beck, Zaleski denied these accusations.⁹²³

In Europe in the 1930s, it would be difficult to find a politician who, in the name of peace, clearly opposed measures designed to eliminate the “Polish corridor” and to alter the status of the Free City of Danzig.⁹²⁴ Only the Poles maintained this position. Even Pius XI, a pope who was associated with Poland through his biography and who held a favourable view of Poland, told the French ambassador to the Vatican, François Charles-Roux, in 1933 that “the corridor is not a practical solution”. The Pope, who as Archbishop Achille Ratti got to know Poland serving as Papa Nuncio in Warsaw, argued that diplomats at the Paris Peace Conference “wanted to give Poland access to the sea, but the way it was done did not turn out well. In time, a way will be found to reconcile [Polish and German] interests, which are colliding at this point”⁹²⁵ Pius XI thus favoured the need to “reconstruct” the territorial order of Europe. Having said that, he hoped such a development could be delayed, as did the British statesman Austen Chamberlain, co-founder and signatory to the Locarno agreements.⁹²⁶

The Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact, signed on 26 January 1934, a year after Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany, unquestionably improved relations between the two countries, and the borders problem was put on ice. The Germans needed peace in order to buy time to arm themselves. At one of his first meetings in 1933, the new German chancellor expressed it this way: “the future of Germany depends exclusively on the reconstruction of the armed forces [*die Zukunft Deutschlands hänge ausschließlich und allein vom Wiederaufbau der Wehrmacht ab*].”⁹²⁷ This was Hitler’s guiding premise, which led him to seek rapprochement with Poland, the hated enemy, the “*Saisonstaat*”, with which all German political parties had refused to seek reconciliation.

Of course, interest in the “Polish corridor” on the international stage continued, even if Germany in the years after 1934 did not openly make territorial demands on Poland. In the halls of European diplomacy, new ideas were born and concrete plans were developed to solve this problem whereby Polish interests and German demands could somehow be reconciled. Various ideas circulated around Europe,

923 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), August Zaleski Collection, Box 1.

924 Anna M. Cienciąła points out that some British politicians shared the Polish point of view on the corridor: Winston Churchill and Lord Vansittart (Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in the 1930s); see Cienciąła, *German Propaganda for the Revision of the Polish-German Frontier*, p. 127.

925 AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Saint-Siège, Vol. 37.

926 A. M. Cienciąła, “Nastawienie Austena Chamberlaina do Polski w latach 1924–1933,” in *Polska, Niemcy, Europa. Studia z dziejów myśli politycznej i stosunków międzynarodowych*, ed. A. Czubiński (Poznan 1977), pp. 482–494.

927 Quote from H.-E. Volkmann, “Polen im politisch-wirtschaftlichen Kalkül des Dritten Reiches 1933–1939,” *Der Zweite Weltkrieg. Analysen, Grundzüge, Forschungsbilanz*, ed. W. Michalka (Munich–Zurich 1990), p. 74.

and externally good Polish-German relations seemed to indicate that some kind of “compromise” arrangement between Warsaw and Berlin was possible. There was talk about either a motorway in the form of a gigantic “bridge” across the “corridor” or a motorway through an underground tunnel—all in order to avoid passport-customs complications and other technical inconveniences involved in travel and transport to East Prussia.

The idea of merging East Prussia with the German Reich arose for the first time during the Paris Peace Conference in May 1919, and was reported in the Remarks of the German Delegation on the conditions of peace.⁹²⁸ The Allied Supreme Council rejected the idea at that time, but the idea emerged again later.

President Roosevelt was interested in finding a solution to the problem of German travel through Polish Pomerania, although he was otherwise uninterested in specific European policy issues. In 1929, the leader of the pan-European movement, Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi, circulated the idea of a German motorway through Polish Pomerania that would not jeopardise Poland’s extraterritoriality.⁹²⁹ Benito Mussolini became an advocate of the concept of an underground tunnel. In general, the Italian dictator wanted to play the role of mediator in the matter of the “Polish corridor”.⁹³⁰

The Italian engineer and senator Piero Puricelli, a motorway designer, studied the issue of the “Polish corridor” carefully and presented his proposals to Hitler.⁹³¹ He wanted to play the combined role of expert and mediator, as confirmed by his statements recorded in both Polish and Italian diplomatic documents. In the summer of 1939, on the eve of the now all-but-inevitable war, Italian foreign minister Galeazzo Ciano and his deputy at Palazzo, Chigi Giuseppe Bastianini, advised the Polish ambassador, Bolesław Wieniawa-Długoszowski, to dig a special tunnel connecting Reich territory and East Prussia with a motorway.⁹³² Of course, German diplomacy appeared to be interested in this matter.

Deprived of access to the sea, the country of 30-million people would be “choked out” and every Pole would, as Minister August Zaleski put it, “not hesitate

928 *Sprawy polskie na konferencji pokojowej w Paryżu w 1919 r. Dokumenty i materiały*, eds. R. Bierzanek, J. Kukułka (Warsaw 1965), Vol. 1, p. 190.

929 M. Przegiętka, “Włoski projekt niemieckiej autostrady przez polskie Pomorze”, *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (2009), No. 170: p. 69.

930 As the general commissioner in Danzig, Henryk Strasburger, wrote to the Foreign Ministry (report dated 17 February 1931), the then high commissioner of the League of Nations in the Free City, Manfredo Gravina, told Strasburger that it would be good if Piłsudski, on his way back from Madeira, would make a stop in Rome, where Mussolini could submit his proposals. *Archiwum Państwowe w Gdańsku* (cited hereafter as APG), Akta Komisariatu Generalnego RP w Wolnym Mieście Gdańsku, 259/862. The Poles did not take this offer up.

931 M. Przegiętka, “Włoski projekt niemieckiej autostrady,” pp. 69–70.

932 For more, see J. W. Borejsza, *Mussolini był pierwszy*, pp. 236–238.

to make the highest sacrifice” to defend the Republic and its Baltic coast.⁹³³ Polish public opinion was allergic to any idea of depriving Poland of its possessions along the Baltic Sea, which should come as no surprise; the loss of access to the sea was viewed as a catastrophic prospect. Poland's difficult-to-defend western and northern borders already made the country vulnerable to potential German aggression.⁹³⁴ Marshal Piłsudski's statement about Danzig being a “barometer” in Polish-German relations is well-known, but he also said that its status as a Free City was “the Versailles Treaty's strangest and most complicated creation”.⁹³⁵ No doubt, as the former head of Beck's cabinet, Michał Łubieński, wrote *ex post*, Danzig “had a much greater psychological significance in relations with Germany than it deserved”.⁹³⁶ Against the backdrop of the international political realities of the time, this thought was not particularly original; for most observers, Danzig was still one of the most important “test-points” in Europe, as the League's high commissioner in the Free City, Irish politician Sean Lester, described it in a letter to British foreign minister Anthony Eden. As high commissioner, Lester attempted to perform his duties diligently, which is precisely why in 1937 Germany called on the League of Nations to immediately remove him from office.⁹³⁷

German Territorial Revisionism and Polish Policy

The Polish stance towards German revisionism was based on three assumptions: (1) that any territorial concessions were impossible and no international pressures aimed at peace could force them upon Poland, not only because territorial integrity was inviolable, but above all because the very day Poland would agree to border changes would be the last day of its independence; (2) that one should exhaust all possibilities to maintain Polish access to the sea and to accustom the world to the fact that this state of affairs was irreversible; and (3) that, with the passage of time, new generations of Germans would take the historical stage, and they would reconcile themselves with the loss to Poland of the former Reich's eastern territories. Perhaps time would heal the wounds of the Great War, and Germany would get

933 A. Zaleski, *Przemowy i deklaracje*, Vol. 1 (Warsaw 1929), p. 61. Speech at the Towarzystwo dla Badań Zagadnień Międzynarodowych in Warsaw, 9 January 1927.

934 This was also emphasised in contemporary military literature devoted to German armaments; see, for example, Lieutenant-Colonel Reboul, *Non, l'Allemagne n'a pas désarmé*, 2nd edition (Paris 1932).

935 *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*, p. 58 (Beck's wording).

936 This quote is taken from a letter from Łubieński to Professor Anna Maria Cieniała dated 27 April 1959 (document in the possession of Professor Cieniała; I thank her for making it available to me).

937 National Archives (London), Foreign Office 371, 17794, C.7014/7014/55, Lester to the general secretary of the League of Nations, 17 December 1934.

used to Poland's existence not as a "*Saisonstaat*", but as a permanent component of the international political order in Europe.

Certain rational assumptions followed from the notion that a new generation of Germans would no longer approach Poland with the kind of hatred that had survived the defeat of 1918 and the Treaty of Versailles. Many Polish officials hoped that the passage of time would work on Poland's behalf, which in the 1920s was the way matters were viewed by the Polish envoy in Berlin, Kazimierz Olszowski, one of the finest Second Republic diplomats, and by the well-known PPS politician Herman Diamand, who travelled to Germany in 1928 wishing to establish contacts with the SPD leaders.⁹³⁸ Moreover, various statements by marshal Piłsudski, who spoke in the final period of his life about a "psychological change in the German nation", can also be interpreted in this way.⁹³⁹ Unfortunately, the Polish argument based on such an optimistic scenario was not confirmed by the actual course of events. We might say that, for such a scenario to become real, the Second World War needed to happen. In the interwar period, the reasoning put forward by Polish statesmen transpired to be but an illusion.

Undoubtedly, throughout the entire 20-year interwar period, Poles did a great deal to prevent these three principles from being compromised. In the 1930s, Gdynia developed dynamically as a large commercial port in the Baltic Sea.⁹⁴⁰ It gave Poland new possibilities, anchoring its access to the sea, but it caused a new problem: a dispute over the "full use" of the Port of Danzig. Free City authorities accused Poland of not using the Port of Danzig fully, which, according to this interpretation, undermined the purpose for which the Free City was established. In other words, since Poland had its own alternative port, Danzig was unnecessary and, according to the principle of expediency, should be returned to the Reich. At the beginning of the 1930s, the conflict over full use escalated rapidly, although tensions were reduced by the Polish-Danzig parity agreement of 5 August 1932, which established the principle of balance between the two ports.

Before Józef Beck took over as Polish foreign minister on 2 November 1932, Polish diplomacy adhered to what was called "Strasburger's principle" as applied to the Danzig matter, according to which no one was allowed to talk about Danzig in Berlin.⁹⁴¹ The belief was that Danzig had no relation to Germany, even though a

938 See *Pamiętnik Hermana Diamanda zebrany z wyjątków listów do żony* (Krakow 1932), pp. 291–292.

939 "Józef Beck o stosunkach polsko-niemieckich. (Wystąpienie na konferencji u ministra spraw wewnętrznych 5 czerwca 1935 r.)", ed. M. Kornat, *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (2001), No. 137: pp. 116–126.

940 For more, see B. Dopierała, *Wokół polityki morskiej Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej. Studia historyczne* (Poznan 1978).

941 See H. Strasburger, *Sprawa Gdańska* (Warsaw 1937). Strasburger was Poland's general commissioner in the Free City in 1924–1932. For more on his mission in Danzig, see S. Mikos, *Działalność Komisariatu Generalnego*, pp. 166–244.

majority of its inhabitants were German, and that it was a local problem that had to be handled by “maintaining all proportions”. Of course, this concept had its own logic, but because the Free City authorities acted if not according to instructions from Berlin, then always within the framework of German policy, no *détente* in Danzig could be achieved. One historian who thoroughly investigated these issues, Stanisław Mikos, came to the conclusion that “Danzig nationalists treated attempts to avoid tensions as weakness”.⁹⁴² Drawing the conclusions from this state of affairs, the Polish government carried out two armed demonstrations in Danzig in June 1932 and March 1933, which first caused concern in Europe, but resulted in concrete concessions from Danzig. In the short-term, the best confirmation of the correctness of Beck's stance was the settlement of the Polish-Danzig trade conflict of 1935, in which Hitler personally ordered the Free City Senate to comply with Polish demands; the intransigent position of the Danzig authorities immediately changed.

As a result of the change in Polish-German relations that came in 1934, Danzig, which was the last “special territory” in Europe, lost its reputation as a threat to peace. German grievances were silenced, at least for the time being, a situation that was beneficial to Poland for obvious reasons. But it benefited the Germans as well: as they prepared to make their most aggressive moves in Europe, they could cite developments in Danzig as a sign of their peaceful intentions when approaching difficult bilateral matters.⁹⁴³ The benefits that came with this thaw in relations were mutual.

If a general *modus vivendi* over the Free city were to be found, even one that did not put an end to Polish-German antagonism but only bought time for the new Poland, Foreign Minister Beck recognised that he had to carry out negotiations not with the authorities in Danzig but with the Reich government. Beck not only abandoned Strasburger's principle, but also formulated a second principle: non-interference by Poland in Danzig's internal affairs. This new position was clearly expressed in a communiqué drawn up after the president of the Free City Senate Hermann Rauschning's visit to Poland, a communiqué released on 12 January 1934.⁹⁴⁴ In the realities of that time, this move meant nothing less than passive observation of the process by which Danzig was “Hitler-ized” and the Free City's democratic order destroyed.

942 S. Mikos, *Działalność Komisariatu Generalnego*, p. 244.

943 For example, Hitler referred to the example of Danzig in his political talks, including with the Czechoslovak envoy in Berlin Vojtech Mastny in February 1938 (see his report dated 23 February 1938 to Minister Kroft, *Dokumenty československé zahraniční politiky. Československá zahraniční politika v roce 1938*, ed. J. Dejmek [Prague 2000], Vol. 1, p. 131).

944 This communiqué appeared in the official *Gazeta Polska*. For the Foreign Ministry documents on this visit, see Jarosław Jurkiewicz, *Wizyta prezydenta Rauschninga w Warszawie*, pp. 163–182.

According to Beck's concept, Poland wanted to find some kind of Polish-German agreement by offering Germany, as a concession, Polish consent to the free development of the Nazi movement in Danzig in return for German concessions satisfying Polish interests. In this light, on 17 July 1936 the head of the Legal-Treaty Department at the Polish Foreign Ministry, Władysław Kulski, addressed a note to Beck entitled "Revision of the Danzig Charter", in which he considered the idea of revising the Paris Convention by way of a bilateral Polish-German agreement. The aim of such modification was to "remove the interference of international factors in the internal existence of Danzig" and thus deliver a "concession to the Nazi movement".⁹⁴⁵ In return, Poland should demand for itself a guaranteed possession in the Free City, "so that, having placed Danzig's internal existence into the hands of the Nazis, it [the city] did not turn against our vital interests". Kulski wanted Polish concessions to the Germans to be matched by "an unquestionable basis for armed intervention in Danzig to defend our rights and interests".⁹⁴⁶

Beck's argument that Poland should not oppose the development of the Nazi movement in the Free City was the subject of intense criticism in historiography during post-war Soviet domination of Poland, and it remains so today. This new political line taken by the Polish government, as viewed from the broad post-war perspective, is highly debatable. After all, it did not bring the results that Polish authorities wanted; that is, a lasting improvement in Polish-Danzig relations.⁹⁴⁷ Anyone today who tries to accuse Beck of supporting Hitler in his plans must remember that Polish interference in the Free City's internal affairs would have found no support at all from the Western powers, and could not have stopped the progress of the Nazi movement; to prevent the Nazis from controlling Danzig would have required armed intervention by Poland or by the entire international community, which was simply not going to happen. Even peaceful forms of Polish interference in defence of the Danzig constitution could only exacerbate Warsaw-Berlin relations and would have done little or nothing to change the situation. Beck could not fail to realise this reality. Therefore, his argument must be defended: it was rational and based on logic, and it is difficult to identify any alternative solution.

Marshal Piłsudski thought that the agreement concluded with Germany in 1934, based on his initiative, was highly beneficial because Poland had not been forced to make any serious concessions. Having said that, he was aware that the agreement was not permanent. Some historians and commentators, using various circumstantial evidence, have argued that Piłsudski would have agreed to far-reaching concessions to Germany in order to normalise bilateral relations. However, there

945 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Władysław Kulski Collection, Box 7.

946 Ibid.

947 Such is the way that Bogdan Dopierała conceived it; see his *Gdańska polityka Józefa Becka* (Poznan 1967), pp. 16–17.

is no clear proof of this argument.⁹⁴⁸ In his unwritten political testament from 1935, which is a collection of general and loose instructions for Beck, there is no mention of what to do to extend and consolidate the normalisation of relations with Germany.

Claims made in historiography during post-war Soviet rule, that Piłsudski attached no great importance to the issue of Polish access to the sea, are a great oversimplification. A note written by the then Polish general commissioner of the Free City, Kazimierz Papée, entitled “A visit by the President of the Senate [of the Free City of] Danzig on 7 January 1935 with Marshal Piłsudski”, refutes such claims.⁹⁴⁹ The Polish leader recognised that three-quarters of Polish exports went through Danzig and Gdynia, by sea.⁹⁵⁰ The idea of Poland as a maritime state was a major topic in this conversation, and it would be raised even more emphatically by Beck.

During the period covered by the Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact (January 1934–April 1939), the Poles made the Germans no offer for a special motorway or extraterritorial transportation through Pomerania. The Polish Main Staff opposed any such policy, raising the possibility that this connection could be exploited to transport troops and weapons during war. Nonetheless, there was room for discussions on this subject; indeed, the Germans investigated such possibilities. It is known that the Reich ambassador in Warsaw, Hans-Adolf von Moltke, presented the Poles with proposals on this matter just a few months after signing the non-aggression pact on 26 January 1934. A year later in September 1935, Fritz Todt conferred on this subject with the Polish deputy transport minister, Julian Piasecki. The German engineer came with a specific project for a special motorway that had been drafted in 1933. Marshal Hermann Göring returned to the subject of this initiative during his third visit to Poland in January 1936; he added that Hitler was in favour of the project. Göring talked about the matter once again in Warsaw a year later, and Hitler himself suggested such plans during talks with ambassador Lipski in May and September 1938. None of these attempts moved the matter forward until autumn 1938, when the Reich government—in a post-Munich atmosphere in which Germany was stronger, the Western powers weaker, and Poland's international position unclear—proposed a “comprehensive settlement” in Polish-German relations. Importantly, until the autumn of 1938, Germany had never demanded *expressis verbis* the application of the extraterritoriality clause for a special motorway.⁹⁵¹

948 Piotr Wandycz justifiably came to such a conclusion in “Próba nawiązania przez Marszałka Piłsudskiego kontaktu z Hitlerem jesienią 1930 roku,” in idem, *Polska a zagranica*, p. 266.

949 The high commissioner was Sean Lester.

950 APG, Akta Komisariatu Generalnego RP w Wolnym Mieście Gdańsku, 259/592.

951 In a conversation with the British ambassador in Warsaw, Kennard, on 22 April 1939, Arciszewski pointed out that Hitler was talking at the time only about an “open road” through Polish territory, and had only recently referred to the extraterritoriality

The year 1936 brought a marked intensification in the anti-Polish tone set by Nazis in Danzig, a fact noted by Kazimierz Papée (including in his report on 16 June),⁹⁵² who often signalled that the Nazi party's anti-Polish rhetoric was becoming more prominent, despite all the correctness in Berlin-Warsaw relations. The incident involving the German cruiser *Leipzig*, called forth by the Nazis, represented a blow to the person of the high commissioner of the League of Nations in Danzig, Sean Lester, but it also showed, as Papée explained, that Germany was getting stronger.⁹⁵³ Beck would always remember the lack of international support, highlighted at the Geneva League sessions, that Poland received during the *Leipzig* incident.

Under these conditions in 1936–1937, officials in the Polish Foreign Ministry developed an important political plan. Polish diplomats were well aware of the fact that the Polish-German agreement of 1934 was temporary, and they took steps in 1937 to start negotiations aimed at extending it. The stakes in these negotiations involved the stabilisation of the status quo in Central Europe, and in this context the difficult problem of Danzig's future returned. Did the Poles have any concrete idea about what to do about Danzig?

In answering this question, we must keep in mind that by July 1937 the Polish Foreign Ministry had developed a draft Polish-German declaration regarding the Free City, which stated: "The governments of both countries adjacent to the Free City express a consistent view that in the interests of good neighbourly relations between Poland and Germany, which constitute one of the basic guarantees of peace in Europe, Danzig is respected as a Free City whose character is defined by its special relationship to Poland, which serves as a natural economic base for the Danzig port, which enjoys rights in Danzig provided for in international agreements, and whose population is connected culturally with the Polish population in Danzig (Free City)."⁹⁵⁴ Based on this wording, we can thus conclude that Polish proposals were aimed at maintaining the status quo.

The Germans met Polish efforts with delaying tactics. On 14 August 1937, ambassador Lipski, writing about the matter of the minority declaration and the Danzig issue, reported a lack of progress. Two days later on 16 August, he came forward with another concept, one based on the notion that a negotiated agreement should encompass all problems "which are irritating Polish-German relations": (1)

clause. *Documents on British Foreign Policy* (cited hereafter as DBFP), series 3 (London 1952), Vol. 5, p. 281.

952 APG, Akta Komisariatu Generalnego RP w Wolnym Mieście Gdańsku, 259/924.

953 *Ibid.*, 259/924, Papée's report dated 2 July 1936.

954 The project is dated 14 July 1937. It was prepared by Władysław Kulski and was approved at a conference attended by ambassador Lipski, deputy minister Szembek and the head of the Department of International Organisations Tadeusz Gwiazdoski (Hoover Institution [Palo Alto, CA], Poland/MSZ, Box 196).

minority issues; (2) the Danzig declaration; (3) citizenship matters; and (4) “possibly acquired rights”.⁹⁵⁵

At least until mid-1937, minister Beck was doubtlessly convinced that the non-aggression agreement of January 1934 was a sufficient instrument to maintain normalisation in Polish-German relations. He further realised that each new Polish-German agreement would trigger a new wave of accusations and insinuations, primarily in Moscow, but also in Paris. But given that the League of Nations was effectively bankrupt, Beck was afraid of withdrawing the high commissioner from Danzig and creating a “political vacuum in Danzig”. In all statements, Beck spoke calmly about the case of the Free City. “[...] our use of the port is guaranteed. I have a small garrison at Westerplatte. That is enough. [...] It's a small town and the problem is local [*l'usage du port nous est assuré. J'ai has petite garnison sur la Westerplatte. Cell suffit. [...] C'est une petite ville et le problème est local*]”.⁹⁵⁶

The Germans were careful to provide assurances to the Poles. On 14 August 1936, during a conversation with the then German ambassador to London, von Ribbentrop, deputy minister Szembek, who was in Berlin, heard that “nobody wants to violate the Charter of the Free City Danzig and the position taken by the League of Nations”.⁹⁵⁷ On 6 September 1937, the German ambassador to Warsaw, von Moltke, gave Poland new assurances.

At that time, the Polish Foreign Ministry leadership ascertained the need for the Reich foreign minister, von Neurath, to visit Poland, which was understood as a visit in return for Beck's official visit to Berlin in July 1935. This idea fell through. On the Polish side, however, there was another idea for conducting decisive talks with Germany, which would take place during Beck's trip to Geneva in September 1937. The plan anticipated a working meeting with the leaders of the Third Reich.⁹⁵⁸ At the last moment, Beck withdrew this idea.

On 3 November 1937, the foreign minister formulated his instructions for ambassador Lipski regarding his forthcoming talks with the Germans. He took for granted the right to Danzig's free internal development. “However, there are cardinal principles related to the existence of the Free City for which the Polish government will never remain indifferent. These fundamental Polish rights and interests, specified in the Paris Convention of 1920, have been threatened in recent times”, and this threat was the product of local activities by the National Socialists.

955 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Władysław Kulski Collection, Box 5. Copies of Foreign Ministry documents, including reports by Ambassador Lipski.

956 Austrian envoy to Poland Schmid to minister Guido Schmidt in Vienna, report dated 15 July 1937 (Neues Politisches Archiv, Akten der Republik [Wiedeń], Gesandtschaft Warschau, 81). The Austrian diplomat considered it a “defensive speech”, but one “without a tone of resignation”.

957 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 2, p. 264.

958 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Józefa Lipskiego, 67/3, Ambassador Lipski to Michał Łubiński, letter dated 8 July 1937.

Lipski wrote *pro memoria*: “The Polish ambassador in Berlin has been working in support of the idea of a Polish-German agreement, but he must warn that developments in Danzig may destroy the positive effect of the current new effort (minority declarations) towards the consolidation of Polish-German relations.”⁹⁵⁹

Meanwhile, significant differences of opinion emerged between Beck and the ambassador in Berlin. According to a private letter from Szembek to Dębicki written on 15 November 1937, “Lipski even wanted to introduce a *iunctim* between the announcement of a declaration and obtaining preventive assurances regarding Danzig. But the Minister strongly opposed this, taking the view that the matter of a declaration must be treated on a broad international level.”⁹⁶⁰

The Reich chancellor’s statement on 5 November 1937 that “Poland’s rights in Danzig will be respected” could not be considered sufficient in Warsaw under international law.⁹⁶¹ With no guarantor of the Free City system, it was necessary to find new assurances for its existence as a separate “semi-state”, as some Polish lawyers called it. A new Polish-German system stabilising the existence of the Free City was needed, which is the genesis of the broad concept that Beck tried to carry out from 1937 through to December 1938.

Efforts underway among Polish diplomats to confirm in law Poland’s rights in Danzig were put to an end based on the results of Beck’s visit to Berlin in mid-January 1938. Conversations with Hitler had a calming effect. As the Polish foreign minister wrote to the diplomatic missions on 14 January: “The Chancellor solemnly confirmed the inviolability of Danzig’s legal and political situation”.⁹⁶² Neville Henderson, the British ambassador in Berlin, wrote to the Foreign Office that Beck left Berlin having received “assurances regarding Danzig”.⁹⁶³

A few weeks later, Beck decided to resume his efforts to consolidate the normalisation of Polish-German relations for the last time. In a conversation with marshal Göring in Warsaw in February 1938, he again suggested that the Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact needed to be extended. A stabilisation agreement on the Danzig matter would be complementary. Göring thought that the non-aggression agreement should be extended to 20–25 years, but he added that “this is a confidential matter and he will discuss it personally with the chancellor”.⁹⁶⁴

959 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Józefa Lipskiego, 67/3, Beck’s verbal instructions from 3 November 1937.

960 *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka. Materiały uzupełniające*, p. 57.

961 The extension of the German-Polish Convention regarding Upper Silesia (which expired on 5 July 1937) for a period until a general solution on minority problems was negotiated, was another partial achievement for Polish diplomacy.

962 PDD/1938, p. 32.

963 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 21697, C.335/267/18. Henderson’s report for the Foreign Office dated 18 January 1938.

964 S. Stanisławska, “Umowa Göring–Beck z 23 lutego 1938 roku,” *Najnowsze Dzieje Polski. Materiały i studia z okresu 1914–1939* (1960), Vol. 3: pp. 192–193.

In an attempt to work out the matter with the Poles, Göring suggested a new offer to further normalise Polish–German relations: in an August 1938 conversation with ambassador Lipski, he submitted an idea to replace the 1934 declaration with an agreement signed “for the next 25 years”.⁹⁶⁵ He also used a calming formula that “once the Czech problem was solved, all territorial issues in Europe would be exhausted for Germany”, an oft-repeated line in German propaganda. After the Sudetenland crisis, Hitler would give Poland new guarantees, fully respecting its rights and interests. At the beginning of September 1938, officials considered the possibility of a meeting between Beck and Hitler in connection with the Polish foreign minister’s planned trip to Geneva for the XIX General Assembly of the League of Nations, but Beck did not follow up on this.⁹⁶⁶ Poles regarded German efforts to keep Poland neutral in a potential Sudetenland conflict as a positive sign. As the deputy undersecretary of state in the Foreign Ministry, Miroslaw Arciszewski, noted: “The Germans are behaving very loyally to us and want us to be neutral in a possible conflict. In any case, in their calculations they consider our position to be an element of primary importance.”⁹⁶⁷

On 12 September, the foreign minister clearly expressed the idea that it was necessary to “talk to the Germans”, in order above all to settle the matter of Danzig.⁹⁶⁸ Four days later on September 16, ambassador Lipski spoke to Göring.⁹⁶⁹ Painting a picture of deepened Polish–German normalisation, he referred to assurances that Hitler had given the Italians in the matter of South Tyrol on 20 April 1938, which could serve as a model for a similar statement on Poland, including an *expressis verbis* territorial immunity clause.

The Poles presented a new agreement to the Germans in September 1938. Its outline was provided by Beck in his instructions for ambassador Lipski regarding the latter’s forthcoming talks with Hitler on 19 September.⁹⁷⁰ Of course, the essence of the Polish stance involved the extension of the nonaggression pact. The plan was also based on the following two items: (1) a bilateral agreement on the extension of Danzig’s status as a Free City; and (2) a clear confirmation of existing boundaries. The draft agreement had not yet been finalised, because it had never been the subject of Polish–German talks. In Berlin, German officials did greet the Polish proposals with interest. But in agreement with Beck’s instructions, ambassador Lipski held a decisive conversation on this matter with Hitler in Berchtesgaden on

965 PDD/1938, p. 429.

966 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 260 (note dated 6 September 1938).

967 *Ibid.*, p. 257 (note of conversation with Arciszewski on 6 September 1938).

968 *Ibid.*, p. 266.

969 Lipski’s report on this conversation, PDD/1938, pp. 489–491.

970 Beck’s instructions for Lipski regarding this conversation, dated 19 September 1938: PDD/1938, pp. 509–511. For a detailed interpretation of these matters, see Žerko, *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie 1938–1939*, pp. 82–84.

20 September 1938.⁹⁷¹ It produced no results beyond what had come from Hitler's statement of 5 November 1937.

The Sudetenland conflict and, to a certain extent, the aggressive Soviet policy at this time, seemed to favour efforts being made by Polish diplomats who wanted to take advantage of Germany's objectively strong position in the ongoing international crisis. Officials in Warsaw emphasised that Poland ought to take no action against the Reich, and should play its role as geopolitical protection from the east, preventing Bolshevik Russia's entry into the conflict. They assumed that it would thus be possible to improve bilateral relations with Germany and to settle the most important issues threatening the "1934 line".⁹⁷² The Germans, however, played for time, focusing on the Sudetenland case because they had no doubt that, once this problem was solved, their strength and advantage in Europe would be greater. The Polish plan would probably have had better chances of succeeding if Germany, in its expansionism, had encountered greater resistance from the Western powers; the Reich government would then have had to work harder to gain Poland and would have had to pay for it with specific concessions. But in the realities of the policy of appeasement, there was no reason for Germany to make any concessions to its eastern neighbour, especially since the German political leadership had to be aware that Poland was facing a threat from the east, and that Poland had little room for manoeuvre, apart from working to maintain the "1934 line" in relations with its great neighbour to the west. In any case, by this time the German plan for "normalising" relations with Poland under German conditions had probably already been established.

The five-year period of Polish-German *détente* (1934–1939) came with no solution to the matter of the "Polish corridor". Polish-German antagonisms were simply frozen. The Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact, which was silent on the borders, seemed to have created a climate in which either the status quo could be consolidated or some kind of solution to the Danzig and "corridor" problems could be implemented in the future. But that did not happen. After the Munich Conference, the Germans took the initiative; before that, Polish diplomats put forward various plans, without success.

The key to understanding German policy towards Poland in 1938–1939 is Hitler's plans, both immediate and long-term. Historians have long known about these plans and have long engaged in their interpretation, but we must remind ourselves of them briefly. First—that is, in 1933–1935—Hitler wanted to neutralise Poland so that it would not attempt to disturb the Germans in their re-armament

971 Lipski's report on 20 September, PDD/1938, pp. 518–522.

972 Reading Polish intentions correctly, the US ambassador in Warsaw, Drexel Biddle, wrote to Washington on 19 June 1938: "Poland has gained the impression that for the moment, Germany welcomes a strong Poland to serve as a buffer between herself and the Soviet [Union] during Germany's consolidation of her position in Central Europe" (*Poland and the Coming of the World War II*, p. 211).

program. The agreement with Poland of 26 January 1934 bore all the features of a temporary agreement. While accepting them, Hitler probably regarded them as a kind of “necessary evil”. It is very probable that rumours about an alleged Polish initiative for a preventive war against Germany in 1933, whether true or not, convinced him that without a temporary agreement with Poland, Germany would not be in a position to improve its external situation and would not be able to buy the time it needed to rebuild its power. It is difficult to deny that Hitler's reasoning was good: he believed that he could engage in effective foreign policy only through military strength, and could achieve his goals only with the threat of force, especially when negotiating partners wanted to avoid war at all costs. Such logic is sufficient to explain why he consented to the agreement with Piłsudski and Poland with no pre-conditions.

For the first two years, the German chancellor certainly viewed the normalisation of relations with Poland as positive. He was troubled by Piłsudski's death in May 1935, as Piłsudski had been the guarantor of the current line of Polish diplomacy, but Beck personally reassured the Germans that this course would not be abandoned. Poland had in fact no alternative to what the foreign minister was pursuing. Perhaps, in light of Germany's generally positive relations with Poland, Hitler considered the possibility of permanent rapprochement with Germany's eastern neighbour; certainly such factors as Polish anti-communist sentiments, generally poor Polish-Soviet relations at the time (which had reached a kind of a cold war), and relatively tense Polish-French relations, influenced Hitler and caused him to consider offering Poland a place among Germany's potential allies. However, various conversations, along with offers that Poland join the Anti-Comintern Pact, repeated throughout 1936–1938, yielded no results. Poland rejected all such offers, which demonstrates the best confirmation that Poland fully maintained the principle of balance between Berlin and Moscow.

Anyone today who wants to understand Polish foreign policy in 1934–1938 must accept that Polish leaders (and especially Beck personally) believed that without an agreement with Germany, the matter of changing Poland's western border would be irrevocably internationalised, which in an atmosphere of triumph for the policy of appeasement could only lead to tragic results. With this deep awareness, Beck acknowledged that no matter how it was perceived abroad, Poland had no choice but to enter into dialogue with Hitler to achieve a temporary agreement by which the threat of conflict would at least be reduced, an agreement that could last sufficiently long for Polish independence to be preserved, as a supreme and inalienable value. And Beck pursued this policy consistently until the very end.

At the end of 1938, after the Anschluss with Austria and the annexation of the Sudetenland, Hitler assumed that Germany would be able to establish hegemony on the European continent, provided that, through effective diplomacy, it would manage to prevent the creation of a powerful anti-German coalition.⁹⁷³

973 See the essay by Olaf Gröhler, “Varianten deutscher Kriegspolitik”, in 1939. *An der Schwelle zum Weltkrieg. Die Entfesselung des Zweiten Weltkrieges und das*

He therefore planned to launch a military operation first in the West, the goal being to eliminate France as a European power. He did not intend to enter into conflict with the United Kingdom. Hitler believed that he could reach a negotiated long-term strategic agreement with this Great Power, one which he sincerely admired (he explained the later conflict with Britain as having been caused by “Jewish scheming”).⁹⁷⁴ During the war in the West, Poland was to take on the task of shielding Germany from the east; that is, before the Soviets could launch any offensive action.

In carrying out Hitler’s will, on 24 October 1938 the German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop presented the Polish ambassador in Berlin, Józef Lipski, with a proposal for a “comprehensive solution” (*Gesamtlösung*) for Polish-German relations. Von Ribbentrop started the conversation on this matter by stating that “the time has come to completely cleanse relations between Germany and Poland of all existing problems. It would be the crowning achievement of the work begun by marshal Piłsudski and the führer”.⁹⁷⁵ He referred, for example, to relations between the German Reich and Italy, “where a desire to resolve them completely and to establish a deep understanding demanded that the führer give up South Tyrol”. Von Ribbentrop added that “it cannot be excluded that, one day, it will also be possible to conclude, in light of the führer’s statement on borders, an even more detailed agreement with France”.⁹⁷⁶

Poland was to be compensated for the “return” of the Free City of Danzig to the Reich, for an extraterritorial German motorway, and for an extraterritorial multi-track railway line, by an extraterritorial road or motorway and a railway line leading to port facilities and by the free port itself, as well as by sales guarantees for Polish goods with Danzig.

By making territorial demands, Hitler and von Ribbentrop probably honestly believed that they were offering the Poles favourable conditions. Perhaps in a “German Europe” there would be a place for Poland. The historian cannot say much in this regard except that, despite everything, this place would have been an unenviable one for Poland. But to Hitler, with his subjective convictions, it probably seemed to be a privileged place. What is extremely important is the fact that the Germans did not accept the possibility that the demands they had put forward could be subject to negotiations. In their view, these proposals were so “minimal”

internationale System, eds. K. Hildebrand, J. Schmädke, K. Zernack (Berlin 1990), pp. 21–42.

974 A. Hitler, *Rozmowy przy stole. Rozmowy w Kwaterze Głównej zapisane na polecenie Martina Bormanna przez jego adiutanta Heinricha Heima* (Warsaw 1996), p. 246. Hitler placed great hope in the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 18 June 1935.

975 Attached to Walther Hewel’s note on this conversation is the date 24 October 1938; for a Polish translation of the document, see *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, Vol. 1, p. 17.

976 *Ibid.*

and so justified that their acceptance was an absolute condition for the maintenance of peaceful Polish-German relations, although we must recognise that until March 1939, the Germans did not threaten the use of force. Therefore, all Polish historians who argue that Beck had an opportunity to engage in talks with the Germans in order to “gain time”; that is, to lead them without making the desired concessions, are mistaken.

In 1939, Hitler was in a hurry. Given Germany's growing power and the weakness of the Western powers, the führer accelerated his aggressive policies. The weakness and passivity of the Western powers was something that Hitler could not overlook; this was certainly the rational motive behind his policy. But there was also an irrational factor, and we cannot understand Germany's foreign policy at the time without considering Hitler's psychological motivation. Many historians, led by Gerhard L. Weinberg, claim that he was not only convinced of the “historical mission” of the German people, but that he also feared an untimely death, which would not allow him fulfil this mission. This irrational motif indicates one of the additional premises underpinning the decisions that led to war.⁹⁷⁷ Even today we can find preposterous historiographic interpretations arguing that Hitler did not want war, that the Second World War was a “forced war”.⁹⁷⁸ Of course, these interpretations have no basis in verified historical fact.

The establishment of German rule in Europe and the acquisition of “living space” was unimaginable without considering the need for war against the Soviet Union. Therefore, after subjugating “decadent” France as an obstacle to Germany's continental plans, and after reaching an agreement with Great Britain, the Germans planned to launch a war against the USSR. In this war, Poland would accompany Germany as an ally, and as a vassal state. Poland would be deprived of independence peacefully, because it was a *sine qua non* condition for the success of the great and multi-stage strategy. All indications are that Beck did not fully comprehend Hitler's far-reaching plans at that time, but he had no doubt that Germany wanted to turn Poland into a dependent country. In December 1938, he was absolutely clear in this conviction.

Polish Diplomacy and the German *Gesamtlösung*

We know that the Polish foreign policy leadership considered Germany's proposals of 24 October 1938 unacceptable. Beck expressed this clearly in his instructions to ambassador Lipski on 31 October.⁹⁷⁹ He left no doubt that Poland could not accept the German offer of a “comprehensive solution”.

977 See G. L. Weinberg, *Świat pod bronią. Historia powszechna Februury wojny światowej*, Vol. 1: 1939–1941, trans. M. Jania et al. (Krakow 2001), p. 25.

978 Such is the way that David Hoggan entitled his book on the causes of the Second World War. See Hoggan, *Die erzwungene Krieg. Die Ursachen und Urheber des 2. Weltkrieges* (Tübingen 1961).

979 PDD/1938, pp. 737–740.

Nevertheless, as we know today, officials in the Polish Foreign Ministry gave consideration to what (limited) concessions Poland might be able to make to Germany. Among the Foreign Ministry files scattered in numerous archives in Poland and around the world, there are several documents of great importance in the search for answers to questions on this topic. They contain specific proposals and constitute a Polish offer to consolidate the status quo in Polish-German relations on the basis of the Non-Aggression Pact. When reconstructing Polish Foreign Ministry plans at that time, the question arises as to how far the Polish government was prepared to go to make concessions to Germany.

In Beck's instructions for Lipski dated 31 October 1938, the following wording was added:

The Polish Government proposes replacing the guarantees and prerogatives of the League of Nations with a Polish-German bilateral agreement guaranteeing the existence of the Free City of Danzig so that the national and cultural life of its German majority is assured and all existing Polish rights are guaranteed. Despite the complexity of this system, the Polish Government must state that every other solution, and in particular the tendency to annex the city to the Reich, would inevitably lead to a conflict that would not only be expressed in local difficulties, but would also lead to the suspension of the Polish-German agreement in its entirety.⁹⁸⁰

The main premise behind the Polish foreign minister's reasoning was the idea that there was an organic connection between Danzig and Poland. Beck wrote: "[...] in the Polish Government's understanding, the Danzig matter is determined by two elements: freedom for, and the development of, the German population in the City itself and the surrounding villages, and the connections between Poland and all other factors that make up the concept of the Free City as a port city."⁹⁸¹

On 19 November 1938, Ambassador Lipski, carrying out Beck's instructions, presented von Ribbentrop with the Polish plan for a definitive Polish-German agreement, which had two elements. First, it assumed the necessity of a Polish-German agreement that would stabilise Danzig's future as a Free City. "[...] the status of the League of Nations [as a guarantor]," the ambassador said, "can be replaced by a German-Polish agreement, which would address all matters related to Danzig. Beck would view the basis of this agreement as recognition of Danzig as a purely German city, with all the rights resulting therefrom. At the same time, it would assure Poland and the Polish minority all economic rights, while retaining the character of Danzig as a free city and customs union with Poland."⁹⁸² Secondly, Lipski envisioned the possibility of solving the matter of the German motorway through Gdansk Pomerania to East Prussia. He said that "he can privately state that the German wish does not need to fall on unfertile ground in Poland, and that

980 *Ibid.*, p. 739.

981 *Ibid.*

982 *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, Vol. 1, p. 26.

it might be possible to resolve it in this direction.”⁹⁸³ The Poles were consistent and clear that Danzig would not be returned to the Reich by way of territorial cession, but there was the idea (unclear at first) of a concession regarding the issue of German transit through Gdansk Pomerania.

Without thinking about concessions affecting the territorial status quo, Polish officials seriously considered the issue of German transport through Polish Pomerania in the context of a permanent settlement of this matter. Studies that they put together were rather theoretical in nature, done for the Foreign Ministry's internal use. Their guiding idea involved the construction of a special motorway from the Reich to East Prussia through Polish Pomerania. This idea was mentioned by Józef Potocki, the head of the Western Division at the Foreign Ministry in 1935–1939, in a letter to ambassador Lipski dated 27 November 1938.⁹⁸⁴ Its antecedents were embedded in Polish-German relations throughout the 1930s; indeed, its original outline came in the 1920s. Polish authorities at that time considered various options to resolve this problem, many years before Adolf Hitler rose to power. According to the accounts of Stanisław Swianiewicz, the well-known Polish economist and Sovietologist, at the end of the 1920s Poles were considering a special motorway in the form of a “bridge” so that Poland could avoid having to make territorial concessions.⁹⁸⁵ Of course, the abolition of passport and customs control would lead to reduced revenues flowing into Poland's coffers, given that customs duties from German transit to East Prussia amounted to about 15 percent of the Polish state budget's revenue. However, there is no evidence that the Polish leadership ever favoured the idea of an extraterritorial motorway. In 1937, the Polish Premier and Interior Minister, general Sławoj Składkowski, spoke clearly in support of tightening the rules regulating German transit through Pomerania, and he did so in the context of Polish national security.⁹⁸⁶

In November 1938, talks were held at the Polish Foreign Ministry on the issue of a German motorway through Pomerania, in which the following people participated: the head of the Western Division and Deputy Director of the Foreign Ministry Józef Potocki; head of the Foreign Ministry Legal-Treaty Department Dr Władysław Kulski; and certainly deputy foreign minister Jan Szembek, who wrote in his *Diariusz* on 25 November that the issue of a motorway “is currently being studied, because it is about establishing our argument and position”.⁹⁸⁷ Szembek continued, stating that “Director Potocki believes that this issue should be referred to Foreign Minister Beck, because an entirely official version of the proposal might be presented to the Germans in the near future. To Potocki, in any case, it seems impossible that we could agree to the extraterritoriality of such a possible

983 Ibid.

984 PDD/1938, pp. 795–797.

985 S. Swianiewicz, *W cieniu Katynia* (Paris 1976), pp. 15–16.

986 Składkowski to Beck dated 11 December 1937.

987 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 362.

motorway.”⁹⁸⁸ The question was whether to offer the Germans an extraterritorial motorway or a special but non-extraterritorial motorway.

One document that gives us an idea of what the limits of a “comprehensive solution” would be, if Polish-German negotiations were to start, is a note from Kulski dated 17 November 1938, addressed to Beck entitled “Revision of the Danzig Charter”,⁹⁸⁹ which contains an outline of what the Poles considered possible in terms of concessions. A *résumé* of the Polish plan can be summarised in four principles: (1) the “abolition of the definite fiction” that was the League of Nations’ guarantee for the Free City and its political system; (2) Poland recognising clearly and finally “the right of the German majority [in Danzig] to freely regulate the internal affairs” of the Free City; (3) “confirmation of the external and political autonomy” of Danzig from both Poland and the Reich; and (4) the maintenance and inviolability of Poland’s current rights in the Free City. Kulski’s concept, as expressed in this memorandum, was based on previous ideas put forth by the Polish Foreign Ministry, including in a study dated 17 July 1936, which contained the idea to induce the German government to consent to Poland’s takeover of the mandate to defend the Free City, which now—in autumn 1938—was no longer a possibility.⁹⁹⁰

Based on earlier ideas, and by way of an additional Polish-German agreement on the Danzig matter, Kulski proposed another “prolongation protocol” to the Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact of 26 January 1934. Such a protocol would include provisions on Danzig’s “territorial integrity” and the inviolability of its charter, and it would be an integral part of the non-aggression pact, extended on this occasion for 25 years. Kulski also suggested taking up the matter of the revision of the Paris Convention, which was to be settled in a separate Polish-German agreement, not a Polish-Danzig agreement. The main legal counsel at the Polish Foreign Ministry included the following as this proposal’s most important points: (1) the total demilitarisation of the Free City; and (2) preservation of the existing port organisation and maintenance of the Port Board—no doubt in its current configuration.⁹⁹¹

Let us now move on to the matter of the extraterritorial motorway through Gdansk Pomerania. In this regard, Kulski prepared another note, dated 26 November 1938, which was based on instructions from his superiors and which focused on transportation through the “Polish corridor”. This document was entitled simply “The Question of the Motorway through Pomerania”. Here is the content of this document in its entirety:

988 Ibid.

989 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Władysław Kulski Collection, Box 7.

990 Ibid.

991 Ibid.

In connection with suggestions for a motorway to be used by Germany through Pomerania, the following issues arise: 1. *Extraterritoriality*. A strip of territory that would be allocated to the motorway, if it was considered extraterritorial by Poland, would cease to be under Polish jurisdiction and would go under German jurisdiction. As a result, German law would be in force on that strip of land, German courts would be the competent authorities (including, significantly, over automobile accidents), German police would maintain order, the German customs system would be in force, etc. A criminal who escaped from Poland on the motorway would have to be released to the Polish authorities under an extradition agreement, while political criminals and others could be pursued through Germany along the entire motorway by German police. Regarding taxes, indirect taxes (petrol), monopolies, etc. would be regulated by German law. One of the important consequences of extraterritoriality would be Germany's right to transport troops and war material both in peacetime and during war regardless of Poland's neutrality. 2. *Form of Exploitation*. If we reject the extraterritoriality formula, then the question arises of who should build and operate the motorway for Germany. It seems that it should be a joint stock company that would be under the influence of both the Reich and Poland. The company would receive a licence from the Polish government for a specified number of years for the construction and operation of the motorway. It could be a Polish-German company alone, or it could be created using international capital. Following the second option, the question arises as to what capital it would be, such that it would not be used as an instrument by a third country in Polish-German relations (perhaps Swedish?). The participation of the Reich and Poland could, in turn, manifest itself in the participation of the railway authorities of both countries in their capacity as state-owned enterprises. The shares held by both parties would have to be different. Compensation for Poland for using its territory, for granting concessions and for financial losses that Poland could incur while reducing other transit traffic between the Reich and East Prussia, could involve the transfer of a certain number of shares for free. Influences within the Board and other Company organs should be balanced between Poland and the Reich. The Company would probably have to earn revenue by charging tolls for using the motorway. 3. *The motorway*. The question of the motorway route is not only an issue of importance for the army, but also a political problem. If the route were to run through the northern section of Pomerania, its further sequence would intersect the Danzig area. At that time, the Danzig section would have to be built and operated under the same conditions as the Polish section due to the fact that Danzig is separate from the Reich, and in light of our entitlements in Danzig, e.g. customs. 4. *The Paris Convention*. When terminating the agreement with the Reich regarding the conditions in which the Reich could use the motorway, the issue of the revision of this convention will arise. It would be best on this occasion to completely override the Paris Convention, but Germany will probably not agree even for the price of a military flight. At least the convention would have to be reduced to a minimum. This is connected with the issue of using the motorway during a war in which Germany were a belligerent party and Poland neutral. The Paris Convention contains opaque provisions in this regard. It is in our interest to limit military transit both on the

motorway and on roads (covered by the Paris Convention) to times of peace, and excluding times of war in which the Reich or Poland were a belligerent party. The issue of transporting armies and ammunition along the motorway during peacetime should be regulated in advance in order to avoid a sudden threat to national security in Pomerania. 5. *Link to Polish territory*. The motorway could be built in such a way as to run through Polish territory without any connection with it, or as to have three or four exits onto Polish territory along the route. The first solution emphasises a concession to Germany, while it also facilitates the resolution of customs and foreign exchange difficulties.⁹⁹²

Thus, Kulski considered two variants: a special motorway with an extraterritoriality clause, and one without such a clause.

Undoubtedly, an undated note preserved in the Władysław Kulski papers at the Hoover Institution in California entitled “The Transit Motorway through Pomerania” comes from the same time. This document⁹⁹³ specifies how the head attorney in the Polish Foreign Ministry imagined the solution to this problem as a “Polish circular road”, understood as a special section of the Berlin-Królewiec motorway. Kulski considered two alternatives from the point of view of international law. In the first variant, the motorway would be included in the Polish transport system, i.e. with Polish customs and passport controls. In the second variant, the motorway would be “excluded from the Polish road network” but “left under the sovereignty of Poland”. Passport-customs and foreign exchange controls would be eliminated.⁹⁹⁴ The motorway would be an object for Germany’s exclusive use, but it would not be owned by the Reich. The concept of extraterritoriality was not applied in Kulski’s document.

The author of “The Transit Motorway through Pomerania” proposed a motorway that was not extraterritorial but rather “special”, in that it was separate from the Polish road network but nevertheless under the sovereignty of the Polish state, which would mean that Polish law would apply and it would be under the jurisdiction of Polish courts. Polish police would maintain order, but all passport, customs, and foreign currency controls would be ended for Germans. The motorway would be used only by road vehicles moving between the Reich and East Prussia. It would be isolated from Polish territory. Moreover, such motorway could be included in the system of German motorways and isolated technically from the territory of the Polish Republic.⁹⁹⁵ For the Germans, a motorway so conceived would *de facto* be the same as an extraterritorial motorway, but as a one-sided Polish licence—one that would mark the end of transit revenues—it could somehow be implemented and explained to Polish society. In summary, we can say with certainty that,

992 PDD/1938, pp. 796–797.

993 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Władysław Kulski Collection, Box 6, “Autostrada tranzytowa przez Pomorze,” undated.

994 Customs and passport controls would take place only on access roads from Poland.

995 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Władysław Kulski Collection, Box 6.

in preparation for fair and equal negotiations, the Poles had plans to offer the Germans a concrete set of concessions.

We must remember that the extraterritorial transportation experiment also involved a German motorway through post-Munich Czechoslovakia that would connect Wrocław with Brno and Vienna. The agreement on this matter between the German Reich and Czechoslovakia was concluded on 30 December 1938. Understandably, the Polish Foreign Ministry put together an outline note on this matter, one which can also be found in Kulski's papers and which was undoubtedly produced at the beginning of 1939.⁹⁹⁶ There is not the slightest mention in this document that the Poles considered progress towards agreement on this matter possible.

The ambassador in Berlin, Józef Lipski, was kept informed of emerging concepts on the motorway issue. An important document in this regard, dated 27 November 1938, was addressed to him by Józef Potocki. In it, the head of the Western Division wrote:

In recent days, Kulski and I have been dealing with initial preparations regarding the issue of transit through Pomerania. We want to clarify in the first phase some of the most fundamental points and submit them (presumably in the next few days) to the decision of the [foreign] minister, and then develop a specific plan. These points would be agreed with the Chief of Staff and the Minister of Transportation as the most interested parties. A broader agreement would follow later, because in my opinion, for tactical and negotiation reasons, it is important that no indiscretions be committed and that the Germans not be prematurely led to believe that we accept changing the current regime. The precedence set by the motorway through Czechoslovakia will definitely be advanced, so I think it all the more necessary for us to have our plan. Among the most important questions which we intend to present to the Minister is the question of whether to design a route through the territory of the F[ree] C[ity] of Danzig, or directly to the south of that territory. The latter seems much more convenient.⁹⁹⁷

Based on Potocki's letter, the concept of a Polish-German consortium building a special motorway seemed, inside the Foreign Ministry, to be the most rational and acceptable solution.

On 6 December, Potocki produced a note describing a conversation he had had with Beck:

Regarding the conversation with the [foreign] minister 6/12/38: 1). Due to previous negative decisions by the [minister] of transportation and the staff (letter from deputy [Transportation] minister [Julian] Piasecki dated 29 February 1938), about whether

996 Ibid., "Notatka w sprawie niemieckiej autostrady tranzytowej przez Czecho-Słowację," undated.

997 PDD/1938, p. 795.

we should discuss and agree to them now; 2). Should the issue of the motorway be treated separately or should we study the issue of transit facilitation in general, i.e. the matter of the motorway, railways and military flights; and, consequently, change, reduce or even repeal the Paris Convention? The matter of the Railway was, as we know, raised in conversations with Lipski. The matter of military flights was raised by the Germans in connection with this year's negotiations over an air agreement, which, as we know, has not yet come into force. The Germans did not specify their demands in this respect, but if other transit issues are updated, there is no doubt that they will reopen this matter.⁹⁹⁸

Unfortunately, we do not know Beck's answers to these important questions, but it must be assumed that a conversation on these matters probably took place on 6 December 1938.

Based on the Potocki note, it appears that, as head of the Western Division, Potocki supervised the development of the Foreign Ministry's position on the issue of a special motorway. It is known that consultations were held on this matter at the end of 1938 between the Foreign Ministry, the Army General Staff, and the Ministry of Transportation. Both the General Staff and the Ministry of Transportation took a fundamentally negative position on the issue, while Foreign Ministry officials maintained a much more flexible stance. Finally, it should be noted that the text of the letter was amended in several places by the author himself. We do not know, for example, what Potocki had in mind when he wrote: "[...] at this time, he presented the matter to the competent authorities, but it was considered ... [unfinished sentence]."⁹⁹⁹

To whom was the author of this note presenting his thoughts? We do not know the answer. In another place, the author pointed out that "the precedence set by the motorway through Czechoslovakia is obviously not comfortable", but this statement was crossed out. Why? This is difficult to explain. The only certain thing is that by submitting this letter to Lipski, Potocki wanted to familiarise his friend with his thoughts on a special motorway and probably expected his opinion and advice. It is worth noting that Lipski was regarded within the Foreign Ministry as an expert on German affairs; in Warsaw, his opinions were taken very seriously.

Any kind of extraterritoriality clause for a motorway was undoubtedly out of the question. The experience of post-Munich Czechoslovakia, which had agreed to such a solution, appears to have set a dangerous precedent and indicated that such an option determined the fate of any country that would agree to such concessions.

On 8 December 1938, Beck sent his instructions to ambassador Lipski, contained in a document that can be regarded as a summary of the Polish foreign minister's

998 M. Kornat, "Droga do Gdańska," *Polityka*, supplement "Pomocnik Historyczny," 4 January 2007. I found this document in the archives of The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Józefa Lipskiego, 67/3.

999 Ibid.

position regarding talks with Germany. Above all, the document gives expression to the need for fundamental Polish-German talks. Beck believed that it was necessary to discuss open issues in full; therefore, he put forward the idea of inviting foreign minister von Ribbentrop to Warsaw. Beck specified that the result of such talks should be a declaration on border guarantees, in the form, for example, of an extension of the declaration of 1934 and an agreement on the future of Danzig. "We are not nervous people who every now and then need new guarantees for their state", Beck wrote, but the impression had arisen that while the German-French border was internationally guaranteed, the Polish-German was not.

Beck's 8 December instructions for Lipski contain yet another significant statement: "[...] the ease with which the Third Reich realises its intentions have an influence on the excitement of minds, on the disregard of partners, and on growing appetites". And yet in the sphere of particulars, Beck wrote: "If Ribbentrop raises the issue of transit through Pomerania, please do not take a negative position, rather lead him to understand that there is an *iunctim* between this matter and the Danzig matter. All other issues should be characterised as going beyond the framework of a Polish-German neighbourhood strictly defined, emphasising however that re-ordering the basic issue offers an opportunity for friendly discussion on all topics, without having to prepare them in advance."¹⁰⁰⁰

Due to the bankruptcy of the Free City's guarantor (the League of Nations), the Danzig issue had moved into the foreground, but it seemed to Beck that a new practical formula would be difficult to find quickly. Therefore, he considered it reasonable to obtain a joint Polish-German declaration saying that Danzig could in no way become a cause of conflict, and only then could experts begin work on settling this issue definitively. Beck thought that there was a close connection between the Danzig matter and the issue of transit through Pomerania. Therefore, if progress in Danzig could be achieved, all other difficulties would be resolved.¹⁰⁰¹ In his instructions, Beck did not mention what concessions he would be willing to make on transit through Pomerania, but we can assume that the idea of a special motorway was not foreign to him. Having said that, the Polish foreign minister focused not on the motorway but on Danzig as the priority matter in talks with Germany. Anna Maria Cienciała pointed out, with good reason, that Beck was willing to make far-reaching concessions in possible negotiations, but Hitler did not want to negotiate.¹⁰⁰² We can imagine that the Poles would have made concrete proposals if the Germans had accepted the concept of interviewing experts, but the Germans demanded only one thing: a Polish decision to accept their demands.

1000 Ibid.

1001 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Poland/MSZ, Box 196, Beck's instructions for Lipski dated 8 October 1938.

1002 A. M. Cienciała, "Polska w polityce Wielkiej Brytanii w przededniu wybuchu February wojny światowej," *Kwartalnik Historyczny* (1990), No. 1–2: p. 103.

Significant wording can be found in Szembek's letter to ambassador Romer dated 13 December 1938: "My boss thinks that relations in Europe are now in a fluent state, there is great depression in the wake of the Czech development. The Germans seem to be the masters of Europe—the soda water has gone to their heads. However, even the Germans' situation is still unclear. In any case, we do not feel that Germany has lost interest in Poland. Our declaration with the Soviets was received in Berlin more as a painful warning. The Germans regret, indirectly, that they hindered Hungary from obtaining a military border with Poland."¹⁰⁰³

In a conversation with ambassador Lipski on 15 December 1938, von Ribbentrop "mentioned, on his own, direct Polish-German issues, asking about the motorway"¹⁰⁰⁴. He added that "this matter can only be treated as part of a '*Gesamtlösung*'". Von Ribbentrop stressed that "if we proceed from the assumptions followed by marshal Piłsudski and Hitler in 1933, an agreement between us will be reliably achieved". He added, however, "that this should also mean that the Poles come to understand certain assumptions behind German policy."¹⁰⁰⁵

There is no doubt that Lipski was anticipating extensive Polish-German negotiations. He mentioned to Beck that "in these conditions, one must be prepared for concrete conversations, starting on 10 January." Until then, Lipski wrote to Beck, "it would be necessary to have a memorandum in the case of Danzig, about which I had the honour to speak with you [Beck] in Warsaw, and to better define our position on the motorway (from press releases and recently revealed German plans for a motorway, it would appear that it is a north motorway on the narrowest section that would connect Königsberg, Danzig and Stettin)."¹⁰⁰⁶

In December 1938, Beck undoubtedly took on the belief that Germany's real goal was not to re-settle relations as defined by the agreement of 26 January 1934, but to subjugate Poland. It is hardly a matter of discussion that specific German actions after Munich helped create such an impression, including German diplomatic efforts to counter Polish attempts to establish a common border with Hungary and German measures to play the Ukrainian card in propaganda. The most spectacular action was the very public *Polenaktion*—the collective and brutal expulsion of Polish Jews from Reich territory, which was the first unilateral action carried out against Poland since 1934.¹⁰⁰⁷

The situation became clear during talks with Hitler in Berchtesgaden on 5 January 1939. Beck heard the führer's demands, which he definitively rejected. All Polish considerations about whether to offer the Germans a compromise counteroffer ceased. A negative decision had been made, one which would not change.

1003 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Tadeusz Romer Collection, 5/1 (mf, rolls 1–2).

1004 PDD/1938, p. 827.

1005 *Ibid.*, p. 829.

1006 *Ibid.*

1007 For a perceptive analysis of this topic, see Jerzy Tomaszewski, *Preludium Zagłady. Wyznanie Żydów polskich z Niemiec w 1938 roku* (Warsaw 1998).

It is worth adding here, referring to the words of Michał Łubieński, that Beck had a motto: “when taking diplomatic action, never change a decision once it has been made”.¹⁰⁰⁸

The final outline of the Polish position regarding German demands is captured in the statement Beck made at a briefing for senior Foreign Ministry officials on 24 March 1939 and in the memorandum the Polish government sent to the German government the next day, which set forth the basis for a compromise between Poland and Germany and to which the Polish government received no answer (it is difficult to regard Hitler's statement on Poland in the Reichstag on 28 April 1939 as an answer). At the 24 March briefing, Beck posed, in an unusually clear manner, the most important question: what were the limits of possible concessions? “Where is the line?” Beck asked.

It [the line] is our territory, but not only that. This line also includes the impossibility of our state to accept, on the sensitive point that Danzig has always been, any unilateral suggestion imposed on us. And regardless of what Danzig is worth as an object (in my opinion it is perhaps worth a great deal, but that is not important right now), the point is that in today's state of affairs it plays a symbolic role; that is, if we were to join with countries that allow themselves to dictate the law, then I do not know where it would end. Therefore, it is more reasonable to go up against the enemy than to wait for him to come to us. This enemy is a troublesome actor, because he seems to have lost moderation in his thinking and action. He can regain this moderation when he encounters a kind of decisive attitude that he has never faced before. The mighty were humble towards him, and the weak capitulated in advance, without saving their honour. With the help of the 9th division, the Germans are promenading all over Europe today, with that force no one will take Poland. Hitler and his helpers know this. Therefore, the political game will not play itself out with us as it did with the others.¹⁰⁰⁹

From Beck's statement, it is clear that he recognised, in a truly penetrating manner, that none of Hitler's demands were final, that they always marked the beginning of the next demand. All of this would bring an end to Poland's independence. Therefore, the only Polish response to such demands was *non possumus*. Danzig itself, as viewed from this perspective, was in spite of everything a matter of secondary importance.

The pivotal days of March 1939 did nothing to change the fate of Polish attempts to achieve a *modus vivendi* with Germany. On 23 March, the head of Beck's cabinet,

1008 M. Łubieński, *Refleksje i reminiscencje*, p. 108. The Polish note on these talks was apparently either never produced or lost. The text, in the form of a report for Szembek, was reproduced by Lipski on 8 January 1939 (PDD/1939 [styczeń–sierpień], pp. 13–14).

1009 “Odprawa u Pana Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych w dniu 24 marca 1939,” PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 205.

Łubieński, told Szembek that “the situation is serious, the possibility of a German ultimatum on the Danzig matter”.¹⁰¹⁰ He repeated that ambassador Lipski “is broken and has lost control. [In Poland] attacks on the [foreign] minister have reached unprecedented proportions. Incredible rumours are circulating in the city.” Łubieński emphasised that “we must be absolutely firm and categorical on the question of Danzig. Germany’s proposals to guarantee our borders are of no value, and were we to submit to a single point today, further demands would automatically follow.”¹⁰¹¹ There could be no doubt that a Polish “no” was necessary.

We have at our disposal one more important source regarding the Polish position towards German demands, namely the recently published Polish protocols of conversations in London between Józef Beck and two British political leaders, prime minister Neville Chamberlain and foreign minister Lord Halifax, on 4–5 April 1939. Addressing the issue of Polish-German negotiations over the status of the Free City of Danzig, Beck explained to Chamberlain that he would like an agreement with Germany, but “he has in mind a bilateral Polish-German arrangement which would guarantee freedom for the local population to govern itself, and at the same time would protect existing Polish rights in Danzig”. In this context, Chamberlain asked if that arrangement would also “include wording about a motorway through Pomerania”, to which Beck immediately replied that “Poland would never tolerate an extraterritorial system in connection with such a motorway. On the other hand, it is ready for transit facilitation in the area of visas, customs, etc”.¹⁰¹² It could be argued that this was not a statement that the British prime minister would find satisfactory because, in his thinking, Poland was obliged to make the desired concessions to Germany and could, at the same time, retain its independence, which was in the end impossible. Like many foreign politicians, Chamberlain did not understand that the essence of these demands was precisely to deprive Poland of its independence without using force.

Numerous sources highlight the fact that Polish diplomatic leaders were convinced, unjustifiably, of Poland’s military strength, a view that is open to criticism. But they had decided to fight to defend independence regardless of everything and even without any allies; this decision was made long before the final crisis in Polish-German relations in March and April 1939, and it was unshakeable. Perhaps it was because Polish foreign policymakers were insufficiently aware of the weakness of their own country that they give Hitler such an unequivocal response.

It is important that in the autumn of 1938, the Poles, who could not tolerate the thought that they might offer concessions affecting Poland’s independence, nonetheless gave broader consideration to the issue of German transit through Polish territory. We know that, in the end, the Polish Foreign Ministry did not present the Germans with a specific project for a motorway. Polish diplomatic documents

1010 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 528.

1011 *Ibid.*

1012 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), pp. 284–285.

from the end of 1938 and beginning of 1939 show only that the Poles were ready to negotiate with Germany on two conditions: (1) a unilateral concession in the form of a special motorway through Pomerania and (2) a guarantee, in the form of a bilateral Polish-German arrangement, for the continued existence of the Free City of Danzig.

In his instructions for diplomatic missions dated 20 April 1939, Beck drew up a summary of the Polish position regarding Danzig: "I. The Polish government's position has invariably been to allow the German population of the Free City of Danzig complete freedom of internal-political development. II. The Polish government cannot give up its basic rights and will agree to nothing by which the exercise of these powers would be controlled by third countries. III. The Polish government will not agree to any unilateral decisions regarding the Danzig matter. This position is known to the German government and can be the subject of negotiations at any time, but we do not see any rush in this direction by the Germans."¹⁰¹³

One more document sheds new light on these matters: a private letter, quoted once above, from Michał Łubieński to Professor Anna Maria Cieniela dated 27 April 1959, which has not been used before in the literature on this subject. Reporting *ex post* on the various possibilities for solving the Polish-German conflict over Danzig, the diplomat, who had long been close to Beck, wrote that at a meeting he attended as head of the foreign minister's Cabinet at the beginning of 1939, he proposed "freezing" the status quo regarding the Free City "for three years" in order to obtain some psychological relaxation. This freeze meant that the Free City's Charter would be annulled along with the League's guarantee for the Danzig system. The city board would rest in the hands of a Polish-German mixed commission, while the citizens of the former Free City would be given a citizenship option: German or Polish. Having said that, all of the rights granted to Poland by the Treaty of Versailles would remain in force.¹⁰¹⁴ However, Łubieński added, Beck himself, formulating such concepts, was under no illusions; the chances of a Polish-German compromise were slim. This was also the case when, on Beck's recommendation in May 1939, Łubieński went to Berlin to seek ways to resume contact with the German leadership, where he was met with absolutely no interest in any political talks.¹⁰¹⁵ The Nazi leadership no longer had any doubts that Poland's rejection of Hitler's "magnanimous and one-time" proposals was a challenge to the Third Reich. This impression was also shared by the Romanian foreign minister Grigore Gafencu, who visited Berlin in April 1939.¹⁰¹⁶

1013 *Ibid.*, pp. 365–366.

1014 See also M. Łubieński, *Refleksje i reminiscencje*, 143 ff.

1015 When in 1959 Anna Maria Cieniela asked about this event, Łubieński provided no explanation.

1016 G. Gafencu, *Ostatnie dni Europy. Podróż dyplomatyczna w 1939 roku*, ed. S. Zabiełło, trans. S. Rembek (Warsaw 1984), p. 44.

There is no doubt, and there can be no doubt, that Polish acceptance of the proposal that Ribbentrop first submitted on 24 October 1938 would have resulted in Poland's inclusion in a German system of Eastern alliances. The conditions that the Reich government presented to the Poles were limited, and the eminent German historian and long-time director of the Munich Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Martin Broszat, even described them as "very limited".¹⁰¹⁷ But on their acceptance, Poland would have lost its independence and it would have found itself irreversibly subordinated to Germany, a fact which dictated that the Polish leadership could not consider Ribbentrop's proposals as a starting-point for discussions. Beck rightly believed that if he accepted negotiations on the basis of these proposals, then Poland would find itself on a "slippery slope", and would expose itself to escalating demands and expectations. In view of this threat, Poland had no choice but to reject them. According to a memorandum entitled "Scoring the response to the German memorandum of 28 April 1939" drafted in the Polish Foreign Ministry by Władysław Kułski and dated 1 May 1939, "The Free City of Danzig was not the invention of the Versailles Treaty, but the result of the historical development of relations between the port and its hinterland."¹⁰¹⁸

The "Scoring" referred to the Polish memorandum of 25 March 1939 and it anticipated joint guarantees for the continued existence of the Free City of Danzig and "joint study for the further simplification and facilitation" of German "rail and road transit". However, it included the categorical statement that "Poland cannot renounce its sovereignty over the territory through which the transit motorway would pass, just as it would not renounce its sovereignty over any other part of its territory". In the Polish view, there was a strict *iunctim* between the issue of transit through Pomerania and the Danzig matter. The document stated that the position of the Polish government regarding the transit issue depended on Germany's position on Danzig.¹⁰¹⁹

What do we make of all this?

- (1) Undoubtedly, two important adjustments to previous historiographic views are necessary regarding the position the Polish government took towards German demands in the autumn of 1938. Polish diplomatic leaders did not reject *a limine* the principle of making concessions to Germany, and in this respect they considered different variants of specific solutions. Foreign Ministry officials

1017 M. Broszat, *Nationalsozialistische Polenpolitik 1939–1945* (Stuttgart 1961), pp. 10–11. The "limited" demands made by Hitler and von Ribbentrop have served as a reason to discuss the issue of German intentions in 1939: whether there was a will to expand or to "only" revise the borders; see, for example, H. Booms, "Der Ursprung des Zweiten Weltkrieges – Revision oder Expansion?," in *Kriegsbeginn 1939. Entfesselung oder Ausbruch des Zweiten Weltkriegs*, ed. G. Niedhart (Darmstadt 1976). Such views were shared by Ernst Nolte.

1018 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Władysław Kułski Collection, Box 7.

1019 *Ibid.*

considered fairly specific geographical places for the special motorway, in fact two variants: through the territory of the Free City of Danzig or south of that territory. (2) In October and November 1938, the Polish Foreign Ministry leadership was preparing a special motorway project through Pomerania, a project which was to be presented to the Germans in the near future. At that time, research continued on this project in the Polish Foreign Ministry, the result of which was the definition of boundary conditions—the maximum concessions that Poland could make. Potocki's brief and concise letter to ambassador Lipski dated 27 November 1938, and the lack of other documents, make it difficult to determine absolutely whether the Poles considered only a special motorway, owned by the Polish-German Society, or also an extraterritorial motorway. In any case, as a result of studies put together by Polish officials and consultations with Beck, a concrete solution was to be presented and the concept of extraterritoriality was excluded. (3) In his letter, Potocki referred to the precedent set by the motorway through Czechoslovakia, which, as the government of the post-Munich state had agreed, was extraterritorial in nature, but the Polish Foreign Ministry was reluctant to adopt this solution. (4) This letter gives no reason to draw any conclusions on the position taken by Beck at this stage of consideration. However, since senior officials at the Foreign Ministry were studying different variants of a special motorway, this work and associated consultations were probably carried out on the orders of the foreign minister. (5) We do not have at our disposal a very important attachment to Potocki's letter: namely, a note the letter's author indicated with guidelines "regarding the direction we are going" in terms of "the country to which an eventual route would belong". (6) Potocki and other Foreign Ministry officials (including deputy undersecretary of state in the Foreign Ministry Miroslaw Arciszewski) assumed that in the near future concrete talks would be held with Germany regarding a special motorway, railways and the regulation of military flights in Polish airspace, and discussed whether these matters should be treated together or separately. (7) The decision to grant such politically significant concessions to the Germans as the construction of a special motorway through Polish territory, even if without an extraterritoriality clause, would require a political decision by the Polish government's highest officials, and the Ministry's officials involved in this case were only auxiliary in nature. (8) It seems that we can risk the opinion that had these matters revolved around only the further normalisation of Polish-German relations and reducing the nuisances that Germans were experiencing regarding transit to East Prussia through Polish Pomerania, then the Polish government was ready to make far-reaching concessions. But once it became obvious that what was really involved here was Poland's dependence on the so-called Great Reich, the Polish government could not consider concessions. This position was one that was unchanging and applied without hesitation, one that is defensible in retrospect and ensures that Beck, as head of Polish foreign policy at the time, deserves a dignified place in the history of Poland and of Europe.

The conclusion we draw from these considerations is fundamental, namely that there was a Polish plan for a “comprehensive solution”, that there was a Polish counteroffer of compromise, and that it could have been made concrete during Polish-German negotiations, which however never happened. There were two unacceptable issues from the Polish point of view: the recognition of German sovereignty in Danzig and the extraterritoriality of a motorway through Pomerania. At the end of March 1939, ambassador Lipski submitted Polish counterproposals to the Germans based on these assumptions. Beck regarded them as “the last act in this case”, for which there was no “no response”.¹⁰²⁰ The Poles eventually proposed two things: bilateral negotiations on possible far-reaching measures to facilitate German transit through Polish Pomerania, but without the possibility of ceding territory for the construction of a road and railway connection, and jointly guaranteeing the continued existence of the Free City of Danzig.¹⁰²¹

At the beginning of April—as we know today beyond any doubt—Hitler made up his mind about the coming armed conflict with Poland. Not knowing this decision, and expecting that the Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact would soon be terminated, ambassador Lipski advised Warsaw to pre-empt the German chancellor’s next moves and to reveal German proposals and the content of Polish counterproposals, which had gone without a response.¹⁰²² Beck rejected the idea, deciding to wait and see how events developed. On 28 April, Hitler publicly disclosed the contents of German demands and unilaterally rescinded the non-aggression pact. Seven days later, on 5 May, Beck replied to Hitler in a famous speech in the Sejm, a speech which in historical opinion is a prime example for the argument that the Polish foreign minister, in the face of the crisis in good neighbourly relations with Germany, appealed to a set of imponderables as an *ultima ratio* in international relations. Of course, this is true, but he spoke first and foremost about inalienable interests. Without free access to the sea, there was no independent Poland—this was the most important theme of his May 5 political declaration. In any case, at that point in time, Beck did not think war was inevitable.

Did Beck think it possible to offer concessions if political dialogue with the Third Reich were resumed? It is very difficult to answer this question because of the extremely limited source material on the subject. It is significant, however, that

1020 Beck’s words from his conversation with Ambassador Kennard on 23 April, PDD/1939 (styczeń-sierpień), p. 375.

1021 The outline of Poland’s definite position in the face of the Reich government’s demands is included in Beck’s instructions to ambassador Lipski before his talks with von Ribbentrop on 25 March 1939 (*ibid.*, pp. 211–214). Lipski carried out these instructions on 26 March (report from this date, *ibid.*, pp. 215–219). There is also the Polish version of the memorandum, which the ambassador gave to the Germans on 26 March (*ibid.*, pp. 219–221).

1022 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 567 (note on a conversation with Łubiński dated 21 April 1939).

in the case of the German motorway through Pomerania, Beck, in a conversation with Lipski on 15 May, stated that “it will be necessary to mull this matter over”.¹⁰²³ What did he mean? This statement will likely remain unexplained forever.

Probably the last Polish idea for the future of the Free City of Danzig was that it should be divided between Poland and Germany, an idea broached by Łubieński in Berlin, according to all indications, in May 1939.¹⁰²⁴ His mission in this regard produced no results.

On 28 June 1939 in a conversation with the Italian ambassador in Warsaw, Arone di Valentino, Szembek heard that “if there were talks, the Germans would not demand extraterritoriality for the motorway through Pomerania”.¹⁰²⁵ This statement, like many other such statements at this time, obviously had nothing to do with reality. On 9 May, Ernst von Weizsäcker, the state secretary at the German Foreign Ministry, told French ambassador Robert Coulondre that the offer submitted to the Poles was a “one-time” (*einmalige*) thing.¹⁰²⁶ In April 1939, Hitler told Gafencu that he always wanted to stick to the agreement he made with marshal Piłsudski, so the offer presented to the Polish government was “singular in history”.¹⁰²⁷

After Poland accepted the British guarantees, no agreement with the Third Reich was possible. The German offer of a *Gesamtlösung*, understood by the Germans as a one-off matter, was withdrawn. There would be no return to the negotiating table, even if the Polish government proposed concessions.

In the spring of 1939, Warsaw had yet another unclear “last chance” plan, one which was first revealed by the American World War II historian Gerhard L. Weinberg in his article “A Proposed Compromise over Danzig in 1939”, written nearly 60 years ago.¹⁰²⁸ The Polish plan was to divide the territory of the Free City of Danzig between Poland and the German Reich. It was neither finished, nor announced, nor—even more importantly—submitted for negotiation; but the fact is that such a draft plan existed. On 7 August, the Italian ambassador Arone di Valentino wrote about this plan to foreign minister Galeazzo Ciano in Rome. The dividing line would be marked along the Motława (Mottlau) River, leaving

1023 *Ibid.*, p. 602 (note on a conversation with Ambassador Lipski).

1024 For more, see G. L. Weinberg, “A Proposed Compromise over Danzig in 1939”, *Journal of Central European Affairs* 14 (January 1955), No. 4: pp. 334–338. For Stanisław Biegański’s comments on this article, see “Czy kompromis w sprawie Gdańska był rozważany w roku 1939?” *Bellona* (London) (1956), No. 1–2: pp. 121–122. See also Łubieński’s recollection, “Ostatnie negocjacje w sprawie Gdańska,” *Dziennik Polski i Dziennik Żołnierza* (London), 3 December 1953.

1025 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), MSZ, p. 196.

1026 Bundesarchiv Berlin (Lichterfelde), Botschaft Moskau, R. 9215/442.

1027 Grigore Gafencu repeated this statement to British politicians when he visited London shortly afterwards. National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23073, C.6138/3356/18, Protocol of Gafencu’s conversation in London, 23–23 April 1939.

1028 Weinberg dated the origins of this concept between January and March 1939.

Sopot and Oliwa on the side that was to be part of Poland. The Polish state was to keep Westerplatte and the railway line to the Port of Danzig.¹⁰²⁹ The Italian foreign minister's response to this report was encouraging; he ordered that the concept be further examined in detail.¹⁰³⁰ Soon, however, all these matters became redundant, because, as we know, on 12 August in Salzburg, Ciano learned that Berlin had already made the decision to begin military operations against Poland in the near future.¹⁰³¹ On 15 August, the head of the Eastern Division, Kobyłański, told Szembek that Hitler would likely put forward a plan to divide the Free City between the Reich and Poland, which would probably constitute some kind of compromise on the part of German diplomacy.¹⁰³² Of course, such assumptions were illusions. Ambassador Kennard wrote to Alexander Cadogan on 24 August that Beck, in an effort to not "show weakness", would do something through Lipski to resume dialogue with the Germans,¹⁰³³ but we do not learn from this document any details about any border concessions that the Poles would have considered acceptable. What is worth mentioning here is that we know that the Polish foreign minister did not oppose the idea of a "population exchange" between Poland and the Reich, when such a proposal appeared in the diplomatic correspondence with the British government in the last days of August.¹⁰³⁴

Weinberg's interpretation, supported only by circumstantial evidence, raises doubts that were first addressed by the American historian Harald von Rieckhoff, who argued that such a solution would strike at the foundations of Poland's Baltic policy and would have been difficult for the Polish people to accept.¹⁰³⁵ Therefore, in light of the possibility of a Nazi putsch in the Free City, Polish officials considered "action that would have the purpose the taking and maintaining of Danzig" if an attempt were made to annex this territory to the Reich through armed intervention.¹⁰³⁶ It is significant, however, that on 12 July, Beck recalled that in

1029 "I Documenti diplomatici italiani" (cited hereafter as DDI), Rome 1952, series 8, Vol. 12, doc. 794, pp. 592–593.

1030 Ciano's instructions on 9 August for the ambassador in Warsaw, DDI, doc. 816, p. 609.

1031 G. L. Weinberg, "A Proposed Compromise over Danzig," p. 337.

1032 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 686.

1033 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23073, C.12275/3356/18, Kennard's note dated 24 August 1939.

1034 Beck disagreed only with the idea that it should be the Poles who put forward such a solution.

1035 H. von Rieckhoff, "Continuity and Change in German Détente Strategy towards Poland: Comments on Prof. Weinberg's Paper," in *The Theory of Two Enemies*, p. 29. Rieckhoff referred to Weinberg, "German Foreign Policy and Poland, 1937–1938," in *ibid.*, pp. 6–24.

1036 Quoted here is Colonel Józef Jaklicz. See *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, p. 249.

Berchtesgaden the previous January, von Ribbentrop had spoken of Danzig as a “special territory” in the future—after it had been incorporated into the Reich.¹⁰³⁷

We must mention yet another idea: the concept of a population exchange between Poland and Germany, which appeared in the last days of August 1939. In a conversation with Hitler on 25 August, British ambassador Nevile Henderson raised this issue but Hitler did not take the topic up. Szembek learned of this idea from ambassador Noël.¹⁰³⁸ Interestingly, Beck said that the Polish government would not reject the concept *a limine*, but it would also not take the lead on the matter.

The Polish *Non Possumus*

Was the Polish decision based only on some romantic ethos of a rebellious nation, or was it based on a rational analysis? Did we perhaps “overpay for the right to go down a path that led us to defeat”?¹⁰³⁹ We must reconsider these two important questions, even if every historian who has ever examined the last phase of the Polish-German conflict before 1 September 1939 has already addressed them.

The diplomatic documents of foreign countries doubtlessly have little to offer when we are looking for answers to the question about the limits to possible concessions that Poland could have offered. However, it is worth paying attention to some of them because they shed light on Poland's decision to reject Hitler's demands. I have unearthed interesting documents on this matter in the French Foreign Ministry archives in Paris, which have not yet been published. On 13 December 1938, ambassador Léon Noël, in an extensive report for foreign minister Georges Bonnet entitled “M. Beck et les relations polono-allemandes”, emphasised the bad atmosphere in Polish-German relations, mentioning the difficulties in the protection of German minority rights in Poland, the dispute over Bohumín (defused at the last moment by Hitler's decision in favour of Poland), the intense agitation by anti-Polish Nazis in the Free City of Danzig, the expulsion of Jews with Polish citizenship from the Reich and the Free City, Germany's opposition to the establishment of a Polish-Hungarian border, German propaganda regarding Ukrainians in Eastern Galicia, and finally a potential German protectorate over the Transcarpathian Rus. He mentioned Polish fears and irritation, and the emerging belief in Poland that Germany was diverging from the policy established on 26 January 1934. Noël drew attention to Polish faith in Hermann Göring's goodwill and his importance among Reich elites as a spokesman for Polish-German entente. Noël claimed that the crisis in Polish-German relations was no surprise, because

1037 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Romana Dębickiego, 40/2, 189, R. Dębicki, “Journal,” note dated 12 July 1939.

1038 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, pp. 695–696.

1039 Ambassador Edward Raczyński's words in the introduction to his book *Od Genewy do Jałty. Rozmowy radiowe* [with Tadeusz Żenczykowski] (London 1988), p. 5.

the 1934 treaty was, from the very beginning, a fragile basis for the normalisation of Polish-German relations, and in this case two dynamic nationalisms—Polish and German—were clashing. “I always thought,” the Ambassador wrote, “that cooperation between the Reich and Poland would not be possible other than under the conditions that Poland would become a vassal state, much like the guardianship that the Germans dreamed of holding over the Polish state during the last war [the First World War]. They would not treat a reborn Poland any differently” this time around.¹⁰⁴⁰

Noël wondered if Beck would step down because his policy had failed. He suspected that the Polish foreign minister would not step down because, although his position among the Pilsudski-ites was weakening, concerns about “what will Germany say?” were prevalent. Many hoped that Beck would be able to extend Polish-German *détente* and thus gain time on Poland’s western border. “The foreign minister’s entire career; that is to say, more his career than his policy, is based on good neighbourly relations with Germany. In order to save face and to stay in power, it seems inevitable that he will insist on a new rapprochement with the Reich—paying for it, forcing his country to pay a very high price.” It would thus be no surprise if the Polish government made new efforts to support the Polish-German agreement and make concessions, at least so the ambassador thought.¹⁰⁴¹ In a telegram dated 3 January 1939, Noël once again wrote about Polish-German conversations, adding that there was a “great mystery” behind them. It seemed to him that Poland would not go further in concessions than agreeing to transform Danzig into a separate state, free from League of Nations’ control.¹⁰⁴² These documents seem to indicate that Noël was convinced that Beck was prepared to offer far-reaching concessions, even at the cost of vital Polish interests—but he was wrong. Quite clearly, Noël’s strong “Beckophobia” dictated that he read the Polish foreign minister’s intentions in this way, although the indications are that diplomats from other countries felt much the same way. As a politician involved in Polish-German rapprochement, Beck was widely viewed as a Germanophile.

The Foreign Office was also worried about what Poland would do in the face of German territorial demands. Of course, the British were interested in this issue not because they viewed the fate of Danzig or Polish Pomerania as important from their point of view, but rather because, were Poland to become a vassal state, the Germans would have taken peaceful control of Central Europe. They were also concerned that Hitler’s next expansionist moves would be directed westwards (with the active involvement of Italy against France).

The views and assumptions of certain British diplomats, based on their discussions of these matters, are worth mentioning here. Beck may have wanted to

1040 AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Pologne, Vol. 364 (Interestingly, this document was not published in the series *Documents diplomatiques français*).

1041 *Ibid.*

1042 *Ibid.*

give up Danzig in exchange for German agreement to a common Polish-Hungarian border, which was a thought that emerged in October 1938. However, on 24 October Richard L. Speaight, a British official dealing with Polish affairs, wrote that “paper guarantees” are not enough to protect Poland’s interests, because if it wants to be an industrial state, it cannot allow itself to be blocked from access to the sea.¹⁰⁴³

Sir George Ogilvie-Forbes, the British chargé d'affaires in Berlin, wrote to Halifax on 9 November 1938 that Poland could give up Danzig but it could not give up the “corridor”.¹⁰⁴⁴ His subsequent thoughts are worth recalling in every aspect: “During the European crisis of last September, it appeared to us that Poland’s foreign policy under the direction of Beck was to sit on the fence until the last moment when force of circumstances and the certainty that no effective help or protection from the Western Powers would be forthcoming”.¹⁰⁴⁵ In the margins of this report, Speaight mentioned on 17 November that the possible surrender of Danzig would be a real blow to Poland’s pride as a country, one that wants to be “seafaring” nation. On 22 November, William Strang proposed examining evidence of the chances for Polish-German cooperation against the Soviet Union, in which he apparently saw the key to the further development of Polish-German relations. Deputy undersecretary of state Orme Sargent noted that Poland’s isolated position was very weak and indicated that Poland lacked opportunities to negotiate with Germany. Polish diplomacy was incapable of undertaking equitable negotiations towards a general settlement.¹⁰⁴⁶ On 23 November 1938, that same diplomat noted that Poland’s isolated position was extremely difficult, but he added that Beck was not guided by nerves, that he was looking for a way to rebuild the alliance with France. Were this to happen, Britain would have to analyse its position, to what extent it could undertake obligations to “defend the Versailles system”. Here, Sargent seems to have been indicating that Poland’s isolation was not irreversible.¹⁰⁴⁷

On 15 November, the British ambassador in Warsaw, Kennard, wrote to Halifax that there was no possible compensation for the “corridor” and no equivalent. The possible exchange of populations between Poland and Germany was difficult to imagine in practice. Ukrainian lands, even if they were offered to Poland, would benefit Germany if the Soviets could be overcome. Kennard argued that Poland was convinced that the Western powers had “washed their hands” of Eastern Europe and were permanently withdrawing.¹⁰⁴⁸ The above-mentioned William Strang, in

1043 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 21803, C.12736/197/55, Ambassador Kennard’s note to the Foreign Office dated 18 October 1938. This note was addressed to William I. Mallet, an official in the Central Department and secretary to Alexander Cadogan.

1044 *Ibid.*, 21697, C. 13704/267/18.

1045 *Ibid.*, Sir G. Ogilvie-Forbes to Halifax, 9 November 1938.

1046 *Ibid.*

1047 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 21697, C.13704/267/18.

1048 *Ibid.*

a note dated 12 December, included the thought (in the margin of this report) that Poland undoubtedly wanted to reach agreements with Germany. The latter had alternatives: the implementation of its “eastern plans” either in cooperation with Poland, or without Poland, i.e. only after its destruction.¹⁰⁴⁹

However, Beck made no concessions and he did not base his personal “career” on them, as the French ambassador suspected. Moreover, the position he took among his fellow Polish political leaders did not waver; it was the same from the beginning, and was always *non possumus*. Let us add, finally, that Beck was ready to voluntarily resign from his position were he to decide that the current Polish policy, initiated by the deal with Germany in 1934, was bankrupt.¹⁰⁵⁰ Additionally, after the military defeat in the 1939 September campaign, imprisoned in Romania, he expressed his belief that he was in need of no “moral therapy” for his actions as foreign minister.¹⁰⁵¹

As early as in December 1938, before Beck was convinced whether German territorial claims were based on Ribbentrop’s personal initiative or on Hitler’s decision, the Polish foreign minister considered two things unquestionable. *Primo*, that there was a strict *iunctim* between the motorway issue and Danzig; and *secundo*, that the surrender of the Free City and an extraterritoriality clause in any motorway deal were not acceptable. To put it simply: it could be said that Beck imagined some kind of settlement with the Germans on the basis of a Polish special offer for a motorway through Pomerania, but only after they withdrew their demands regarding Danzig. The question remained, of course, if—were this *iunctim* not formulated and were Poland to “tactically” agree to the extraterritorial motorway but not give up Danzig—anything in fact could be achieved at that point, perhaps the prolongation of negotiations to gain valuable time. In my opinion, the answer is *no*, since the Germans understood their demands as an absolute minimum from which they could not diverge.

Beck told ambassador Kennard on 23 April 1939: “The chancellor has always referred to Danzig as a provincial city, which cannot be a serious object of dispute and it was not until suddenly, in January in Berchtesgaden, that he raised the issue of Danzig as very important. We considered it a change in policy.”¹⁰⁵² Undoubtedly, in January 1939 Beck made sure, after talks with Hitler in Berchtesgaden, that the Third Reich’s demands on Poland would not be accepted, and this position was adopted by the country’s leadership, most importantly president Ignacy Mościcki and marshal Edward Śmigły-Rydz.¹⁰⁵³ This is the strongest evidence supporting the

1049 Ibid.

1050 For more, see my *Polityka równowagi*, pp. 408–412.

1051 AAN, Papiery Wieniawy-Długoszowskiego, p. 33, Beck’s letter to the Ambassador in Rome, Bolesław Wieniawa-Długoszowski, dated 19 February 1940.

1052 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 375.

1053 It has not been conclusively determined whether there was a meeting of the leadership on this matter, or whether Beck conducted a personal consultation with the President and perhaps separately with Marshal Śmigły-Rydz. Beck’s desk

argument that, long before the British guarantee offer (which appeared unexpectedly only at the end of March 1939), the Polish authorities made a definite decision to defend the independence of the Polish Republic, because the Reich's demands were found to run counter to this independence. Deputy minister Szembek gave clear expression to this position in a conversation with the German ambassador to Warsaw, Hans-Adolf von Moltke, on 6 February 1939, in which he stated that the extraterritoriality of a German motorway had to be "categorically rejected" and was a matter "which is worth neither considering at all nor discussing as a topic".¹⁰⁵⁴ The German occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 constituted a psychological turning point in the eyes of Polish leaders. Until then, Polish deliberations over a counteroffer regarding Danzig and transit through Pomerania were carried out as if in the "technical" sphere. From March 1939, they fell in the category of mere imponderables.

With the understanding that the Germans were aiming not so much at a new settlement with Poland as at the domination of Poland, Beck did not take up Łubieński's idea of a citizenship option. Diplomatic documents seem to indicate that ambassador Lipski was clearly involved in studying the issue of a German motorway, but the foreign minister made no decisions on this matter, given that the Poles excluded the possibility of an extraterritoriality clause. On 23 April 1939, Beck told Ambassador Kennard: "We are putting up no obstacles to the facilitation of any transit through our territory, but we cannot hand over the sovereignty of any part of Polish territory. As for Danzig, we recognise full freedom in the lives of Danzig Germans, but we must stipulate that we should maintain full freedom to exercise our rights in the Free City."¹⁰⁵⁵

It is absolutely obvious, and it has been definitively clarified, that the British guarantee offer had no impact on Poland's decision to reject Hitler's demands. This decision had been made earlier. Today, there is no shortage of authors who claim, as Stanisław Cat-Mackiewicz once put it, that "Great Britain drew us into war".¹⁰⁵⁶ But these opinions have little if anything to do with historical reality.

It is true that three days after the British announced their guarantee, on 3 April 1939, Hitler decided to order the preparation of "Fall Weiss," and on 11 April (in a second order) there came the definitive justification of the decision to confront Poland.¹⁰⁵⁷ However, we must recall the facts that clearly indicate that Hitler

diary (*dziennik biurkowy*) from 1939, containing the notes of his secretary Doman Rogoyski on the foreign minister's daily meetings, contributes little to this matter (the *dziennik biurkowy* is kept at the Józef Piłsudski Institute in New York among the Jan Weinstein papers, collection 103/34).

1054 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 75.

1055 *Ibid.*, p. 375.

1056 S. Mackiewicz (Cat), *Lata nadziei (17 września 1939 – 5 lipca 1945)* (London 1945), 20 ff.

1057 It was probably between 1 and 3 April 1939 that Hitler decided finally that war with Poland was necessary.

planned to resort to war with Poland before his demands had been finally rejected. In February 1939, he clearly stated that Poland was to be eliminated as an independent player in international relations. This statement was recorded in notes taken by his aide, Major Gerhard Engel.¹⁰⁵⁸ This document, dated 18 February 1939, testifies to Hitler's conviction that Germany would pursue "further political goals and solutions" through the use of force, and that the Wehrmacht was an indispensable guarantee of success. Finally and most importantly, Hitler spoke about "the liquidation of the Versailles Treaty with reference to Poland, if necessary by means other than diplomacy".¹⁰⁵⁹ This is a clear announcement that Germany was prepared to resort to force.¹⁰⁶⁰ In support of this thesis, we have another document, from source material in Czechoslovak diplomacy, certifying that at the beginning of 1939, military circles in Berlin were clearly in favour of eliminating Poland as an independent factor in European politics. This was the next goal after the Germans had taken the Sudetenland with the consent of the Western powers. But Hitler was in favour of "giving her [Poland] a chance".¹⁰⁶¹ Another no less important source is a *pro foro interno* speech on 22 August 1939, during which, we must recall, Hitler said that he thought that he would turn "first against the West", before moving eastward. He announced that it was clear to him that conflict with Poland must happen "sooner or later". He stated: "My pact with Poland was aimed only at gaining time." Hitler justified the necessity of a pact with the Soviets by indicating that this agreement would be broken in the future, and "after Stalin's death—he is seriously ill—we will destroy the Soviet Union."¹⁰⁶² It was not the March guarantee that brought about his decision to engage Poland in armed conflict; that decision had already been included in his plans. Claims made by some journalists and the interpretations of some historians that Poland's acceptance of British guarantees prompted Germany, which (so the argument goes) had not yet planned on attacking Poland, to plan for armed conflict against its eastern neighbour, are therefore unfounded.¹⁰⁶³

Hitler made the relevant decisions between February and March 1939. At that time, he decided that Poland must accept his "one-time offer": the demands that

1058 *Heeresadjutant bei Hitler 1938–1943. Aufzeichnungen des Major Engel*, ed. H. von Kotze (Stuttgart 1974), p. 45. For more, see Jerzy W. Borejsza, *Antyslawizm*, p. 79.

1059 *Heeresadjutant bei Hitler*, p. 45.

1060 Ambassador Henderson continued to assure the Foreign Office of Hitler's "peaceful intentions" in February 1939; see P. Shen, *The Age of Appeasement*, pp. 219–220.

1061 M. Pirko, "Agresja na Polskę czy wojna na Zachodzie jako dylemat w polityce March Rzeszy po Monachium," in *Polska – Niemcy – Europa. Studia*, pp. 555–564.

1062 T. Cyprian, J. Sawicki, *Agresja na Polskę w świetle dokumentów* (Warsaw 1945), Vol. 2, p. 133; see also *Hitlers Reden und Proklamationen 1932–1945*, Vols. 1–2, ed. M. Domarus (Munich–Würzburg 1963–1965).

1063 This view was formulated by the British historian Alan J. P. Taylor, who saw Hitler as a "political opportunist" and believed that Beck had effectively tricked the British into war. See Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*.

the Free City of Danzig be handed over to the Reich and that an extraterritorial motorway be built to East Prussia. If Poland did not accept these demands, there would be an isolated conflict with Germany, with all its consequences. Józef Beck decided to accept the British guarantee offer. Considering the matter *ex post*, had he decided to reject the British guarantees, Beck *ipso facto* would have appeared to be depending on the good will of Germany and its leader who, after breaking the promises he made at Munich, had lost all credibility as a negotiating partner. Fortunately, the Polish foreign minister did not reject the British offer. Of course, no Polish government could block a scenario that had already become reality, the Hitler-Stalin pact, nor could it know whether France and Great Britain would fulfil their allied military commitments.

At the beginning of 1939, Hitler did not propose to Poland a joint expedition into Soviet Russia, as many journalists and Polish historians, led by Jerzy Łojek, have suggested, and has as often been stated in the broader historiography. He demanded compliance with German concepts and passivity—of course, in an *ad hoc* fashion. There can be no doubt that he would have made more demands later.

As everything indicates, Hitler's plans for 1939 called for war first in the west, not against the Soviets.¹⁰⁶⁴ In Hitler's original plan, Poland was to maintain a friendly neutrality, shielding the Reich from the east during the war in the west. A secret address to high Wehrmacht commanders on 23 May 1939 leaves no doubt about Hitler's war plans against the Western powers: "England will be Germany's main enemy, so Belgium, Holland and France must be taken quickly to prevent England from intervening on the continent, and then England must be defeated by air and a sea blockade."¹⁰⁶⁵ Poland played no particular role in this plan. On 23 May 1939, Hitler said: "Poland sees danger in a German victory in the West and will try to deprive us of the fruits of victory."¹⁰⁶⁶

Alan Bullock's claim that there is no evidence to suggest that Hitler planned to strike west in early 1939 is thus incomprehensible.¹⁰⁶⁷ Additionally, arguments made about a Polish-Soviet alliance that Hitler allegedly proposed to Poland are not convincing (as Rolf-Dieter Müller recently put it), because it was more about Poland's neutrality in the face of war in Western Europe.¹⁰⁶⁸ Finally, it is difficult

1064 "Zagrożenie jest na Zachodzie". Hitler said this to István Csáky, the Hungarian foreign minister, on 16 January 1939. See *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918–1945*, series D, Vol. 5, p. 365.

1065 T. Cyprian, J. Sawicki, *Nie oszczędzać Polski!* (Warsaw 1960), p. 37. There are three consistent versions of this speech recorded in the form of participants' notes (*ibid.*, pp. 42–47).

1066 T. Cyprian, J. Sawicki, *Nie oszczędzać Polski!*, p. 38.

1067 K. Piwarski, *Polityka europejska w okresie pomonachijskim*, p. 122.

1068 R.-D. Müller, *Der Feind steht im Osten*.

to overlook such evidence as Hitler's speech to the Wehrmacht supreme command on 22 August 1939, in which he unambiguously revealed his strategic intentions.¹⁰⁶⁹

The war against the Soviet Union was to be his crowning achievement, but Hitler did not plan that war specifically at this stage of events. He required only two things: that his demands be accepted, and that Poland be made a "younger partner" of the Great Reich and an anti-Soviet "bastion".¹⁰⁷⁰ Therefore, the guarantees were not the driving force behind German aggression against Poland; this decision was already taken into account, were Poland to refuse German demands.

In retrospect, Michał Łubieński stated that he did not know "whether with the mood that prevailed in us, any government could manage to hand over Danzig", because "every concession of Polish rights would be considered a national betrayal".¹⁰⁷¹ But Hitler's demands were not rejected because of anti-German attitudes in Polish public opinion, as was commonly claimed in post-war Polish historiography, and, unfortunately, as some historians still claim today. In the event of war, Poland simply could not fight alongside Hitler—an argument that Beck persistently made long before the events of 1938/1939.

The question whether it was necessary to strike a deal with Hitler in 1938/1939 has been asked more than once (Stanisław Mackiewicz, Jerzy Łojek, Jerzy Giedroyc, Kazimierz Okulicz, Stanisław Żochowski, and Paweł Wieczorkiewicz).¹⁰⁷² It is a question closely related to the search for an alternative course to the policy that the Polish government actually pursued. Arguments put forward by critics of the policy of balance led to the conclusion that German demands should not have been rejected; that in the realities of 1939, Poland should have been looking for something like the "lesser evil", and thus Poland should have accepted German territorial claims regarding the Free City of Danzig and the extraterritorial motorway to East Prussia through Gdansk Pomerania. Had they been accepted, Poland could have avoided the terrible tragedy that the Hitler-Stalin pact brought upon our nation starting from the September catastrophe. In their opinion, such a move would have represented a great political manoeuvre, one worthy of Józef Piłsudski, and would have bought Poland a certain amount of time. Were a Second World War to break out, it would have not started with the partition of Poland, which is what Władysław Studnicki meant when, in his famous letter to Beck dated 13 April 1939, he wrote that "in the face of the approaching war in the West between the Axis states and the Western powers, Poland should remain neutral,

1069 See also Winfried Baumgart, "Zur Ansprache Hitlers vor den Führern der Wehrmacht am 22 August 1939", *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 16 (1968), No. 2: pp. 120–149; and 16 (1968), No. 3: pp. 294–304.

1070 For more, see S. Żerko, *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie 1938–1939*, pp. 360–365.

1071 This quote is taken from a letter from Łubieński to professor Anna Maria Cieniała dated 27 April 1959 (document in the possession of Professor Cieniała; I thank her for making it available to me).

1072 For more on this matter, see Kornat, *Polityka równowagi*, pp. 482–484.

because neutrality is a postulate resulting from both geography and our country's situation".¹⁰⁷³ Avoiding war in 1939, however, was possible in only one way: by accepting Hitler's demands.

Nothing should overshadow the momentous truth about the international realities of 1939 and about the consequences of Poland's possible entry into Nazi Germany's orbit. Poland's participation in a coalition under the Third Reich's leadership would probably have imposed the terrible burden on the Polish state of participating in the extermination of the Jews. We cannot, perhaps above all else, forget this fact. It is difficult to resist the temptation to quote an extraordinary document once again, namely a Polish note based on Beck's conversation with Heinrich Himmler, who was in Poland on 18 February 1939. During the conversation, the "Jewish problem" came up. Himmler had already spoken clearly about the "need to get rid of the Jews", while he treated Poland as a potential German ally. According to the Polish note from this conversation, Himmler emphasised that:

[...] in Poland, this problem is more complicated than in Germany. On the one hand, we have an exogenous Jewish element (mainly from Russia), which has nothing to do with this country and which should be disposed of in the first instance; on the other hand, there are many orthodox Jews whose life flows next to us, but not together with us. Apart from that, of course, there are other categories of Jews, although it should be noted that such exogenous Jewish groups or individuals as in the West of Europe or in America, Poland does not have and has never had. In any case, the need for Jewish emigration, recently hindered, is greater than ever, and we have raised this matter very firmly with the West European states.¹⁰⁷⁴

Thus, had Poland cooperated with the Third Reich over the course of the war, it would not only have had to participate in the attack on the USSR, whose defeat and colonisation was included as a chief motive in Nazism's ideological assumptions, but also would have had to take part in the most inhumane operation of the past century: the crime of the Holocaust.

* * *

The issue of the reborn Poland's access to the sea doubtlessly created a serious problem, indeed a great dilemma, for the international community. Observers were aware of this fact in the interwar period, but it was perhaps stated most accurately by professor of international law at the University of Rome, La Sapienza Amedeo Giannini, who wrote in his booklet *The Problem of Danzig* that Europe has a choice: either 30 million Poles will be subjected to German domination, or the

1073 Quote from "Władysław Studnicki w świetle dokumentów hitlerowskich February wojny światowej," ed. J. Weinstein, *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1967), No. 11: p. 6. See above all W. Studnicki, *W obliczu nadchodzącej drugiej wojny światowej* (Warsaw 1939).

1074 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 103.

population of East Prussia condemned to a separate existence from the homeland, with the possibility of open transit to the Reich.¹⁰⁷⁵ At Paris, diplomats had chosen the second solution, which is why Giannini called it “the most complicated” one. In the Europe of the 1930s, having defined this matter in such undoubtedly realistic terms, Giannini was somewhat alone. It is only from a historical perspective that it is easier to understand the dilemmas the international community faced at that time. As one American historian put it: the desire of one nation to have access to the sea collided with the reasoning of the second, which was based on the principle of self-determination for the residents of Danzig.¹⁰⁷⁶

Due to the problematic nature of its borders, Poland did not appear to be a source of stabilisation and balance in Europe—as the Poles themselves wished it to be. Rather, it was treated as a source of anxiety and fear. Efforts by Polish diplomats, which must not be underestimated in their scope, could not change this state of affairs. In addition, Poland, Germany and Europe in general needed an agreement that put an end to Polish-German antagonism. The German proposal for a “comprehensive solution” (*Globallösung*), had it been presented by the German government with peaceful intentions, would have been worthy of attention, and perhaps even of some sacrifice by the Poles. The matter of Danzig and transit through Pomerania required a settlement, but in the name of peace.

Meanwhile, in the prevailing realities of 1939, the German government was not looking for a formula that would stabilise the Polish-German situation, but rather wanted to turn Poland into a vassal state. It was not about Danzig or an extraterritorial motorway, but about Poland’s independence.¹⁰⁷⁷ And here we approach the problem that the outstanding historian Hans Roos raised more than 50 years ago in his book *Polen und Europa. Studien zur polnischen Außenpolitik 1931–1939* (1957), namely that no German government, created on a democratic basis and founded on the doctrine of popular sovereignty, offered Poland an agreement that would be acceptable to the Polish people and that could be reconciled with the principle of independence for the Polish state. As Winkler put it, a kind of “revisionist consensus” was at work. Hitler made an agreement with Poland in 1934 that only he could do because his government was not based on parliamentary principles and he did not have to worry about losing public support. At the same time, he did it only to use Poland on the path towards realising his great plans for German hegemony in Europe.

Hitler always raised his demands on his victims step by step. Those from 1938/1939 were only the beginning. A nation that had fought for generations to

1075 A. Giannini, *The Problem of Danzig*, 3rd edition (Rome 1933), p. 9.

1076 J. B. Mason, *The Danzig Dilemma. A Study in Peacemaking by Compromise* (Stanford, CA 1946), p. 307.

1077 Alan J. P. Taylor wrote that “the conflict between Poland and Germany was only about Danzig”, but this Oxford historian’s opinion, as well as many of his other judgments, has no basis in verified historical fact.

re-establish its rightful place on the map of Europe could not surrender its independence peacefully. This is an existential issue, one that is not a matter for debate, one that no one has a right to pose as the subject of political discussion. No government that has to decide on such matters can disregard the will of the people—even if such a government has authoritarian characteristics.

Considering the dilemmas of Poland's foreign policy in 1939, we cannot claim that Poland had an alternative—namely a pro-German position—by which it could have solved the emerging threat to Poland's existence and a German-Soviet partition. The Third Reich's unceremonious treatment of its vassal-allies during the Second World War seems to speak strongly against arguments put forward by supporters of the thesis that such a possibility existed at the beginning of 1939. The argument that the Poles could have cooperated with the Germans and then broken off that cooperation, as Piłsudski did during the First World War by separating from the Central Powers in 1917, is mistaken and baseless. No country allied with the Third Reich was able to voluntarily break away from Germany, except in the cases of Finland in 1944, which was located on the margins of Europe, and Italy in 1943, which happened only in the face of the Allied invasion, and which brought in its wake a German occupation.

In 1939, Poland's situation was tied to the fate of peace in Europe like never before or since. Never in the eighteenth century, as the Commonwealth was being partitioned while most of Europe stood by passively, nor in the era of the nineteenth-century national uprisings, which always took place within an unfavourable geopolitical constellation, did so much depend on Polish decisions as it did in 1939. This helps explain why, when discussing Polish foreign policy, Polish historians often attach too great an importance to the notion that Poland fell victim in 1939 to a conspiracy of neighbouring totalitarian powers; those historians lose sight of other great historical truths, namely that in 1938/1939 Poland as a country had space for political manoeuvre; that Poles rejected the possibility of cooperation with Germany even though they received a concrete offer from Hitler; that Poles entered the war well aware of the terrible consequences it would bring, but also with the conviction that it was inevitable; that a loss of independence in order to preserve peace at all costs was out of the question; that Poles are not a victimisation, not a nation which corresponds to the nineteenth-century slogan of the "Poland the martyr" (*Pologne-martyre*), but a nation whose stance was "determined in the crucial moments in history"¹⁰⁷⁸; that the history of Europe would look different had Poland, at the beginning of 1939, become an ally of the Third Reich.

Józef Beck achieved the maximum out of the contemporaneous conditions. He managed to turn the Polish issue into an international issue. Polish diplomacy could not have achieved any more than that. It could not have forced Hitler to deviate from his intentions, it could not have thwarted the Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement, even if the Poles had known that such an agreement was being

1078 Quote from Stanisław Swianiewicz, *W cieniu Katyńia*, p. 243.

prepared. Nor could it have forced the British and French to keep their military commitments. Poland did not enter the war as a victim demanding assistance from the world's powers. As understood under international law, Poland joined the war as a subject.

As with every political decision of great importance, the decision in 1939 to reject German proposals is subject to historical criticism, and such criticism has appeared from time to time. This is not surprising, since, for example, British historians are currently seriously considering the possibility that Britain could have pursued a policy different than Churchill's and come to some agreement with Germany after the defeat of France in 1940. Thus, although historical discussion surrounding Polish-German opportunities for a *Globallösung* in 1939 seem to have ended given that all possible arguments have already been made, it could be that future generations will return to this discussion, indeed many times. Such issues rise to the surface during every anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War. But looking at the question from the perspective of an historian about whether Poland in 1939 had an alternative path to the one it chose, there is (and should be) no other answer than "no". Having said that, nothing can obscure the fundamental truth that Poland completely, invariably and definitively rejected the possibility that it could ever be an ally of the Third Reich. All divagations about the close relationship that the leaders of Poland and Germany had in 1934–1938, about which we read often in historiography, have nothing to do with reality.¹⁰⁷⁹

Would accepting German demands regarding the Danzig issue, an extraterritorial motorway, or the Anti-Comintern Pact, have opened a path to avoiding a terrible disaster? In this case as well, the answer must be a clear "no".

Had Poland accepted Hitler's and Ribbentrop's demands at the beginning of 1939, it would have become dependent on Germany, which would have meant that it had to accept the status of subordinate partner and an absolute decline in its relations with the Third Reich. Anyone who looks at these matters from a historical point of view must take into account the fact that Hitler always played a game of increasing demands. We cannot "prove" this experimentally, but Germany would not have stopped at demands formulated at the beginning of 1939. Once Poland had accepted them, Germany would have subordinated all Central and Eastern Europe to its rule. An attack westward, into France, would then have been possible as early as in 1939. That was Hitler's plan, embedded in his thoughts documented above.¹⁰⁸⁰ His speech of 22 August 1939 is highly significant:

1079 See, for example, Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Der Feind steht im Osten*.

1080 During the conference in the Reich Chancellery on 5 November 1937, from which came the Hossbach Memorandum, the German leader predicted that Poland would remain neutral in the event of a war with France. Feeling a threat from Russia, Poland could enter the conflict against the Germans. *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 3, p. 401 (note from volume editor Tytus Komarnicki).

I wanted to establish acceptable relations with Poland, to take up the fight with the West first, but this plan, which suited me, could not be carried out, because the essential premises have changed. It became clear to me that Poland would attack us in the event of our conflict with the West. Poland demands access to the sea. [...] It is not possible to keep standing eye to eye with an opponent with a weapon ready to fire.¹⁰⁸¹

The acceptance of German demands at the beginning of 1939 would have resulted in Germany turning against the West. It is a fact that after the Munich Conference, Great Britain began an intense rearmament program. In the summer of 1939, the Western powers would have been even weaker than in 1940. It is difficult to imagine how events would have developed had there been an attack against France in 1939, and not a year later, but it seems to be a reasonable assumption that France would have fallen to Hitler's Germany more rapidly than it did. After what would have very likely been a disaster for France, Poland's position would have become truly unenviable. There is no doubt that Germany would have made further territorial demands. A Polish march to the East, alongside Germany, would have been Hitler's next goal.

It is necessary to recall that Polish diplomats gave consideration to various concessions. Polish compromise concepts essentially revolved around three ideas, although they remained only at the stage of reflection: (1) first, Lipski, in a communication with deputy director of the Foreign Ministry Political Department Potocki, seems to have considered the idea of a German motorway that included the principle of extraterritoriality, which is revealed in letters to Potocki; (2) Michał Łubieński drew up a plan for the application of a citizenship option for the people of Danzig and effectively the self-liquidation of the Free City without violating Poland's laws; and (3) Foreign Minister Beck had a different offer: he agreed to the idea of a special motorway which would either be German property or owned by a common investment entity. It was to be an investment separate from Polish territory, but not extraterritorial, and it was a concept that complemented, it would seem, the idea of dividing the territory of the Free City between Poland and Germany as a kind of ultimate solution. The problem was not the motorway itself, but any extraterritoriality clause, to which the Polish government did not intend to agree.

Polish plans to consolidate peaceful relations with Germany by jointly guaranteeing Danzig's continued existence as a Free City, and by granting the Reich government a special motorway through Pomerania to East Prussia, are an indisputable fact. They were never implemented, but of course their implementation was simply not possible in the face of Hitler's ambitions to dominate Europe.

1081 T. Cyprian, J. Sawicki, *Nie oszczędzać Polski!*, p. 43.

Chapter 5. The Alliance with Great Britain: Decisions and Consequences

Near the end of his life, Jerzy Giedroyc proclaimed that “Beck made two mistakes: he overestimated the Anglo-Polish alliance and underestimated the Ribbentrop-Molotov system”.¹⁰⁸² Was the alliance with the United Kingdom a defensible concept? What role did this alliance play in Józef Beck’s political concept? Did the idea make sense? Was there an alternative course?

It is both difficult and risky to write once again about the Anglo-Polish alliance of 1939. There is no topic in the history of Polish diplomacy that has been as thoroughly researched as the origins of the Anglo-Polish alliance, sealed on 25 August 1939. But it is impossible not to return to the above questions and not to consider once again these decisive events of 1939. The further we move away from these events in time, the more source material we have at our disposal; it is worth taking advantage of this opportunity.

The struggle waged by Polish diplomats to set up an alliance with Great Britain, to revive the alliance with France, and to clarify Franco-Polish bilateral obligations in 1939, are matters to which Polish historiography has already devoted much attention. There is no topic in the history of Polish diplomacy that has been so much the subject of study by scholars and so much the object of general reflection on the part of the Polish people. This is quite naturally so, given that this matter is one that is fundamental to the study of Polish foreign policy.

In Polish historiography there are, of course, several well-known studies that have established a solid foundation to our understanding of Anglo-Polish relations on the eve of the Second World War, especially those by Henryk Batowski, Anna Maria Cienciała, Mieczysław Nurek, Henryk Jackiewicz, Michał Zacharias, Jacek Tebinka and Maria Nowak-Kiełbikowa. The last of these published two particularly important and carefully documented volumes of her own studies on Anglo-Polish relations from the perspective of efforts to set up collective security structures in interwar Europe.¹⁰⁸³ The course of events leading to the agreement signed on 25 August 1939 is therefore well known, and nothing new can be added in factual terms. Nonetheless, there is good reason to return to these matters. The above-mentioned studies focused mainly on bilateral relations and sought answers to the question of how the United Kingdom (and France) perceived the Polish ally.

1082 M. A. Supruniuk, *Uporządkować wspomnienia. Nieautoryzowane rozmowy z Jerzym Giedroyciem* (Torun 2011), p. 58.

1083 M. Nowak-Kiełbikowa, *Polska–Wielka Brytania w latach 1918–1923* (Warsaw 1975); and *Polska–Wielka Brytania. W dobre zabiegów o zbiorowe bezpieczeństwo*.

We must reverse the question, and try to show how the Polish political leadership assessed the possibilities that Great Britain offered during the international conflict of 1939, and what was expected of that Great Power in the realities of that time.

At the Foundation of Józef Beck's Pro-British Orientation

There can be no doubt that Britain had a fundamentally important place in Foreign Minister Beck's political thinking. He had been considering establishing closer relations with Britain for a long time. Former foreign minister Aleksander Skrzyński's prediction is well known, namely that "50 years will be required" for the idea to mature of a British policy re-oriented towards recognition of the needs of Poland and the peoples of Central Europe. In 1930, Florian Sokołow—a journalist, a friend of Beck and a *Gazeta Polska* correspondent in London—repeated the same thing.¹⁰⁸⁴ The mocking statements made by British statesmen about Poland seemed to be an additional confirmation of this state of affairs. Lord Balfour once said: "Nobody knows what Poland's policy is".

For historians whose attention has been focused on international relations, it has long been known that Great Britain's position towards the reborn Polish state was characterised from the very beginning by an unfavourable distance.¹⁰⁸⁵ This distance dated back to the Paris Peace Conference, during which, as we know, British diplomacy took a clear stance in opposition to Polish territorial demands, and Poland "owed to" that stance all the doubtful territorial decisions regarding the Free City of Danzig, a seedbed of conflict and anxiety throughout the entire interwar period.¹⁰⁸⁶

In the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s, it was difficult to imagine that the United Kingdom, in the foreseeable future, would take on any commitments towards the "new states" of Central and Eastern Europe. The British *raison d'état* was expressed by Great Britain's participation as a guarantor of the Locarno system, which arose out of the idea that European security was divisible.¹⁰⁸⁷

1084 Quoted in B. Miedziński, "Popioły są jeszcze gorące. Stosunki z Zachodem," *Wiadomości* (London), 9 November 1952, No. 45.

1085 British historians have written widely on these issues: Kenneth J. Calder, *Britain and the Origins of the New Europe 1914–1918* (London–New York 1976); F. S. Northedge, *The Troubled Giant: Britain among the Great Powers, 1916–1939* (London 1966); Keith Nelson, *Britain, Soviet Russia and the Collapse of the Versailles Order, 1919–1939* (Cambridge 2006).

1086 See K. Lundgreen-Nielsen, *The Polish Problem at the Paris Peace Conference. A Study of the Policies of the Great Powers and the Poles 1918–1919* (Odense 1979); and M. Nowak-Kielbikowa, *Polska–Wielka Brytania w latach 1918–1923*. See also Marian H. Serejski, "Jak ważyły się losy Gdańska przed ostatnią decyzją zwycięskich mocarstw", *Dzieje Najnowsze* (1970), No. 1: pp. 73–94.

1087 For more on the British concept for international security, see Anne Orde, *Britain and International Security 1920–1926* (London 1978).

Twisting Bismarck's words, foreign minister Austen Chamberlain wrote in 1925 that the affairs of this part of the continent "are not worth the bones of a British grenadier".¹⁰⁸⁸ The vision of Foreign Office diplomat James Headlam-Morley that territorial changes in Eastern Europe would cause chaos in the entire continent and thus affect the security of the Western powers, proved to be prophetic, but in the 1920s it was a truly isolated speculation.¹⁰⁸⁹ Roman Dmowski was the author of the prophecy from the Paris Peace Conference that England would one day regret that it did not support Poland.¹⁰⁹⁰

In an important note from the French Foreign Ministry dated 7 June 1932 (to the foreign minister) we find a clear statement on Britain's "suspicious reserve" (*réserve méfiante*) towards Polish affairs.¹⁰⁹¹ During Polish foreign minister August Zaleski's visit to London in December 1931, his British counterpart, John Simon, reportedly asked whether, in order to create friendly relations with Germany in the future, Poland would be ready to make territorial concessions, which the Polish minister of course refused, adding that Poland could suffer such sacrifices neither then nor in the future.¹⁰⁹²

British politicians have publicly stated that the border of Great Britain's continental interests was at the Rhine. "Our frontier is on the Rhine", Lord Baldwin told the House of Commons in 1934, shortly before taking office as prime minister.¹⁰⁹³ The balance of power doctrine was to be the cornerstone of all policy. As Konstanty Skirmunt, the Polish ambassador in London, observed: "The vast majority of public opinion is completely opposed to any policy of alliances on the continent". He also pointed out that views are evolving, and "wide circles are arriving at the conclusion that the danger of a future war is coming from the Germans, not the French".¹⁰⁹⁴ It is difficult not to consider this an amazing situation, if we consider the fact that it was Hitler's rise to power that served as the catalyst for this statement, and that it did not come earlier. In this context, we cannot help but emphasise that a significant group of Foreign Office officials, in their internal discussions

1088 A. M. Cieniała, "Wielka Brytania gotowa była bić się za polski Gdańsk'?" *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1978), No. 44: pp. 35–36.

1089 See J. Headlam-Morley, *Studies in Diplomatic History* (London 1930), pp. 183–185. Quote from W. M. Jordan, *Great Britain, France and the German Problem 1918–1939* (London 1943), pp. 229–230.

1090 Ch. Seymour, *Letters from the Paris Peace Conference*, ed. H. B. Whiteman (New Haven–London 1965), p. 223.

1091 AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Pologne, Vol. 430–431.

1092 *Ibid.*

1093 Quote from E. H. Carr, *Britain. A Study of Foreign Policy from the Versailles Treaty to the Outbreak of War*, preface by Lord Halifax (London–New York–Toronto 1939), p. 126.

1094 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Orłowskiego, 78/3, Ambassador Skirmunt to Beck, 20 July 1934 (copy).

in 1936, advocated the idea of handing over Eastern Europe, broadly understood as a sphere of influence, to Germany.¹⁰⁹⁵

We should not think that the Second Republic's foreign ministers were so deprived of knowledge and political imagination that they were not aware of this set of circumstances. Nonetheless, they continued attempts to find new ways to seek support from the British for the interests of the Polish state, given that international politics are such that they had to play with the cards they had been dealt. We find these attempts in statements made by the heads of Polish diplomacy: Eustachy Sapieha, Konstanty Skirmunt, Aleksander Skrzyński and August Zaleski. Authors of superficial journalism and historiography have often ridiculed the pro-British ideas put forward by Poland's interwar foreign policy leaders. The chief argument used by those claiming that pro-British elements of Polish political thought were exotic focuses on the simple fact that Great Britain was far away, and that the British were thus indifferent to Eastern Europe's fate. But the reality was, and is, more complex, and arguments made in Warsaw were not entirely unrealistic. According to foreign minister Zaleski, Piłsudski once declared that "Great Britain, despite all of its pacifist propaganda at home, will not be able to stand aside when France goes to war".¹⁰⁹⁶ Polish politicians dreaming about political dialogue with Great Britain believed that when Poland started to act as a stabilising factor in the geopolitical order of Central and Eastern Europe, London would become interested sooner or later. Moreover, it was clear that France, weakened and lonely, would neither defend the Versailles order nor adhere to its alliance with Poland without the support of the United Kingdom.

Although Beck did not originate Poland's pro-British political concepts, it fell onto his shoulders to implement them in the dramatic circumstances of 1939. A realistic and rational understanding of Poland's national interests demanded that he seek political dialogue with Great Britain, but it is also true that Beck's personal fascination with England, even "a kind of pro-English complex", played a role.¹⁰⁹⁷ He made his first trip to London when he was undersecretary of state (he was appointed to this post in December 1930).¹⁰⁹⁸ He was certainly impressed by the "mystical power of the institution of the English monarchy, which at that time contributed to balance and permanence in its own nation and Empire, and beyond."¹⁰⁹⁹

1095 A. M. Cienciała, "Polityka brytyjska w stosunku do Polski i Europy Wschodniej w latach 1919–1939," *Tematy* (New York) (1969), No. 31–32: pp. 381–383.

1096 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), August Zaleski Collection, A. Zaleski, "Memoirs," 180; quote from P. Wandycz, *Z Piłsudskim i Sikorskim. August Zaleski, minister spraw zagranicznych w latach 1926–1932 i 1939–1941* (Warsaw 1999), p. 52.

1097 Ambassador Edward Raczyński's wording, in "Ambasador Edward Raczyński i jego ocena 'polityki równowagi,'" p. 103.

1098 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Romana Dębickiego, 40/3, R. Dębicki, "Wspomnienia", p. 9.

1099 P. Starzeński, *Trzy lata z Beckiem*, p. 43.

Beck's pro-British sympathies were well known; they were recorded in diplomatic documents, and we can easily find traces of them in diplomatic correspondence. As Sir Howard Kennard, the British ambassador to Warsaw, wrote to Halifax on 30 June 1939: "Beck undoubtedly has a special regard for Great Britain".¹¹⁰⁰

One of the basic obstacles to Anglo-Polish agreement were British political concepts that lacked a certain realism, based as they were on principles of multilateralism. They did little but hamper dialogue on European security with Poland, whose diplomats were tied to bilateralism; indeed, because of its geopolitical position, Poland was condemned to bilateralism.

Beck's personal relationship with John Simon, who headed British diplomacy in Beck's first years as foreign minister, was not good. Simon's involvement in the matter of the Four-Power Pact (1933), his pro-German stance on the Free City of Danzig, and general aversion to Poland, were all quite obvious. Beck's relationship with Simon's successor, Samuel Hoare, was more successful; Hoare represented the "old guard" at the Foreign Office. Beck valued Hoare for his "breadth of views", and no doubt also for his efforts to improve London-Rome relations, to which Beck paid close attention. But Beck was closest to Anthony Eden, with whom he was able to "find a common language"; Beck "regarded him almost as a friend".¹¹⁰¹ But these feelings were not mutual. While Beck felt it was significant that both he and Eden were veterans of the First World War, this shared background was in fact of no significance.¹¹⁰² Attending the coronation ceremony of George VI in May 1937, Beck met the then chancellor of the exchequer, Neville Chamberlain, who soon thereafter would become prime minister. He noted with approval Chamberlain's "great suspicion and critical reserve" towards the Soviet Union. Beck got to know the next head of British diplomacy, Halifax, personally in 1939.

One of Beck's main beliefs was that one should not go to London with the goal of asking for a favour, a belief that the Polish foreign minister emphasised during his first official visit to the British capital in November 1936. In a conversation with British foreign secretary Eden, he asked for nothing. He highlighted Poland's role as a stabilising force and the achievements of his policy of balance. He argued that the basic guarantee of the status quo in Central and Eastern Europe involved peaceful relations between Poland and Germany and the Polish-German agreement of 26 January 1934, which permanently normalised these relations, even if, as was commonly known, the agreement had not confirmed the existing

1100 National Archives (London), Foreign Office 371, 23153, C.10430/10430/55, Ambassador Kennard to Lord Halifax, 30 June 1939 (report entitled "Leading Personalities in Poland").

1101 P. Starzeński, *Trzy lata z Beckiem*, p. 19

1102 Ambassador Edward Raczyński recalled that Eden's "kindness" towards his Polish counterpart "began to cool" after the November 1936 visit. See *W sojusznicy Londynie. Dziennik ambasadora Edwarda Raczyńskiego 1939–1945*, 3rd edition (London 1997), p. 16.

borders. Beck even remarked: “[...] we well understand that England has neither interest nor resources to engage in the details of Eastern European issues”.¹¹⁰³ Beck’s goal was not to obtain Britain’s assistance, but rather to establish a dialogue on the topic. From this point of view, Beck’s visit to London in November 1936 was aimed at gaining some understanding of British views on the situation in Central and Eastern Europe.¹¹⁰⁴

In rapprochement with Great Britain, Beck was rightly looking above all for a way to revive the alliance with France. As we know, in 1934–1936 the Franco-Polish alliance lost most of its value, from the Polish point of view. At the same time, the foreign minister was convinced that, with the support of Great Britain (if such support were possible), Poland might achieve a stronger position in its relations with Germany and thus effectively consolidate normalisation in Polish-German relations. This reasoning seemed rational.

Poland’s reputation in Europe in 1934–1938 clearly improved because of the non-aggression agreements it had concluded with its larger neighbours. The Republic’s strengthened position on the international stage meant that no British politician could repeat the above-cited words spoken by lord Balfour. A measurable increase in Poland’s standing in Central and Eastern Europe after Polish diplomats began proclaiming the policy of balance seems to have turned Poland into a permanent stabilising factor, and it earned Poland political capital in its search for rapprochement with Great Britain. Speaking with Beck in November 1936, Eden “emphasised that times have changed since Lloyd George in terms of England’s views of Poland, its role and significance, that those times have ended definitively, and that new ideas about Poland had matured”.¹¹⁰⁵ Poland, with its pursuit of the policy of balance, had ceased to be a source of anxiety in Europe, as it had been viewed just after the First World War in the time of Lloyd George’s leadership. The Polish ambassador in London, Edward Raczyński, a diplomat particularly devoted to the idea of Anglo-Polish rapprochement, would later put it this way: “As our policy crystallised as a balance between East and West with simultaneous concern for Anglo-Polish rapprochement, the attitude to us in English political circles improved.”¹¹⁰⁶ The British viewed the policy of balance from a perspective that

1103 See the Polish note “Streszczenie dwóch zasadniczych rozmów P. Ministra Becka z Min. Edenem w Londynie 9 i 10 listopada 1936 r.,” AAN, MSZ, 1581 (copy in PDD/1936, 671).

1104 M. Nurek, *Polska w polityce Wielkiej Brytanii w latach 1936–1941* (Warsaw 1983).

1105 PDD/1936, p. 672.

1106 Edward Raczyński’s statement before the Winiarski Commission, in M. Kornat, “Ambasador Edward Raczyński i jego ocena ‘polityki równowagi’,” p. 95. “In general, the British would have preferred a different policy than ours after 1934, but they were aware of our difficulties, they knew that Poland was not lost to them and they referred to us as a client who should be listened to, and who should be treated very skilfully” (ibid.).

lacked French idiosyncrasies rooted both in the *Quai d'Orsay* and in French public opinion.

During the above-mentioned talks in London in November 1936, Beck tried to interest British officials in the assumptions behind Polish policies. According to a Polish note on a conversation between the Polish foreign minister and foreign secretary Eden, Beck said: "[...] there are no compelling reasons to bow to the destructive wave that is visible in European politics today and that is threatening the division of Europe into two hostile camps, either on the basis of combating doctrines or groups or blocs of states with conflicting interests. This is the most important basis for a common language in relations between our two governments."¹¹⁰⁷

In a conversation held in May 1937 with Neville Chamberlain, Beck firmly "emphasised that Poland is not looking for any specific guarantees from England, nor does it strive to increase the number of paper pacts". In response, Chamberlain noted that "he also does not have sympathy for this method". The Polish foreign minister also expressed hope that "diplomatic efforts towards the maintenance of world peace will achieve the desired result, and that conflict, or threatened conflict, can be averted in the current period. If, however, it turns out otherwise, then Britain cannot remain indifferent if, when fulfilling its obligations on the European continent, it finds Poland on its side."¹¹⁰⁸ This statement was warmly welcomed. As the American ambassador in Warsaw, Drexel Biddle, noted in December 1937, Beck "is keeping a close eye on Britain's every move".¹¹⁰⁹

The principles Beck followed in his attempt to strengthen Anglo-Polish relations can be summed up in three most important points: 1) not to demand too much, so that Poland would be *a priori* considered "ballast" for British policy; 2) try to understand British interests, which cannot be the same as Polish interests; 3) try to skilfully sell a new image of Poland as a stabilising factor in Central and Eastern Europe.

A certain minimalism demonstrated by Beck had a deeper justification than one we would find in the sphere of mere diplomatic tactics. The Polish foreign minister opposed new legal-treaty regulations at any price because he was obviously aware that London would not accept such a concept. In an August 1938 conversation with the first lord of the admiralty Alfred Duff-Cooper, Beck spoke about the dangerous inflation in the number of pacts and agreements that only led to disappointment.¹¹¹⁰ Earlier, in a conversation with Eden in Geneva in January 1938, he stated

1107 PDD/1936, p. 670.

1108 AAN, MSZ, 108A.

1109 Quote from M. J. Zacharias, "Józef Beck i 'polityka równowagi'", p. 25.

1110 H. Batowski, "Józef Beck i Duff-Cooper w Gdyni w sierpniu 1938 r. U podstaw angielskiej orientacji Becka," *Dzieje Najnowsze* (1975), No. 3: pp. 107–108.

that “on land, the only country that can come to the assistance of countries that are close to Britain in Europe is Poland”.¹¹¹¹

The more Poland’s position between Germany, whose power was growing, and the USSR deteriorated, the greater was the need to find common ground with England. The problem was that in the autumn of 1938, Poland found itself in political isolation because of its unilateral action against Czechoslovakia. Earlier, British and French diplomats began futile attempts to win Poland over to the anti-German camp in May 1938, during the first phase of the conflict over the Sudetenland. Beck rejected these pressures categorically, viewing them as an attempt to bring Poland and Germany into conflict, and he expected no effective action on the part of the Western powers to stop the Third Reich. The foreign minister probably did not know the actual content of Lord Halifax’s talks with Hitler in November 1937, when the British politician named Danzig as one of the three territories (along with Austria and the Sudetenland) which Germany could take over, as long as it did so without the use of force.¹¹¹² But he was clearly aware that the British were following a policy of appeasement towards Germany (though no longer towards Italy, unfortunately), and the program to be carried out by the new British foreign minister, Halifax, meant “an effort to keep England in a certain state of isolation, by avoiding closer ties with any state or European system”.¹¹¹³

The policy to accept no obligations on the continent (with the exception of the guarantee for France of April 1936) remained the foundation of British policy, even as the progressive breakdown of the European order accelerated rapidly in 1938. A variety of reasons were behind the British government’s position in this regard, and it is difficult to analyse them in detail here.¹¹¹⁴ In any case, Great Britain was unprepared for war. And in the end, an important reason for the policy of appeasement was the position taken by British military officials that it was simply impossible to fulfil military obligations on the continent. Of equal significance was the argument that Hitler’s demands were essentially rational, and that the British political elite and public opinion considered Hitler’s claims to be largely justified.

On 26 January 1938 in Geneva, Beck heard from Eden—who, by the way, did not support appeasement—that “England wants the League of Nations to be preserved because it wants to maintain its relations with Europe, because besides France,

1111 This conversation took place on 26 January 1938. For the Polish Foreign Ministry note, see PDD/1938, p. 15.

1112 Eden twice denied that Halifax mentioned Danzig; in this case, see Raczyński’s report to Beck dated 7 December 1937 (AAN, MSZ, 5098).

1113 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.52/5A, Ambassador Raczyński to Beck, 2 March 1938.

1114 One of the reasons behind Britain’s policy of non-alignment in Europe was the threat that Japan posed to British positions in the Far East. Diplomats in the Polish Foreign Ministry were aware of this fact (ambassador Alfred Wysocki to Beck, 3 January 1938, PDD/1938, pp. 5–7).

Belgium and the Netherlands, Great Britain does not, and cannot have, any other forms of political cooperation, and cannot incur any obligations."¹¹¹⁵ From Poland's point of view, these were pessimistic explanations. They could be read in only one way: in the face of threats to their security, Poland could not expect any real support from Great Britain. In August 1938, Beck received the first lord of the admiralty, Alfred Duff-Cooper, who had travelled through the Baltic Sea to Gdynia, and he undoubtedly overestimated the importance of their conversation by indicating that there was a complete convergence of views between the two parties on security matters in the Baltic Sea region.¹¹¹⁶

At the height of the Sudetenland crisis, the British government was the first to ask the Poles to support efforts aimed at diplomatic intervention in Berlin to stop aggressive action against Czechoslovakia. On 14 September 1938, ambassador Raczyński avoided responding to Halifax's question: "[...] in the event of war, England can count on Poland's help". The Polish diplomat's reply was evasive, but he also gave an assurance that "cooperation with this country (England) is one of the foundations of our policy".¹¹¹⁷ The Poles could declare no more at that time. Given the policy of appeasement, it was necessary to act so as to avoid the slightest mistake that could cause an irreversible breakdown in relations with Germany.

When Poland submitted its demands to Czechoslovakia, first regarding the application of the privileges clause (the same concessions for Poles in Zaolzie that would be enjoyed by Germans in the Sudetenland), and then the territorial cession of this territory, the chances of Anglo-Polish rapprochement and, more broadly, the reconstruction of mutual trust in relations with both of the Western superpowers, seemed more distant than ever. Moreover, the mechanism of international dispute settlement established at Munich seemed to establish durable cooperation between the four powers and ruled out the notion that London would become more interested in the problems of Central and Eastern Europe. Lord Halifax viewed the Munich resolutions as confirmation of a "German predominance in Central Europe", which he had long thought inevitable.¹¹¹⁸ Jerzy Stempowski offered his fresh impression of this revolution in European geopolitics: "Western influence came to an end in 1938 in a way so dramatic that the broadest sections of the European population became aware of this fact, making a great impression. The split of Europe into two parts never seemed so complete."¹¹¹⁹

1115 PDD/1938, p. 38.

1116 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 258 (Szembek's conversation with Beck on 6 September 1938). See also M. Nurek, "Wizyta Alfreda Duff-Coopera w Gdyni i Gdańsku w sierpniu 1938," *Dzieje Najnowsze* (1989), No. 1: pp. 69–79.

1117 *Monachium 1938. Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne*, p. 279.

1118 M. Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler. British Politics and British Policy 1933–1940* (Cambridge 1975), p. 281.

1119 J. Stempowski, "Europa w 1938–1939," *Ateneum* (1939), R. II, No. 3: p. 377.

On 18 October 1938, in a conversation with Raczynski, Halifax complained about the bad impression given by the Polish action against Czechoslovakia. He told the Polish ambassador that this action was “to the detriment of the existing Anglo-Polish collaboration”. Addressing these complaints, Raczynski explained that “in our part of Europe, Poland is probably the only country capable of carrying out an independent policy. One of the principles of this policy is to avoid a path that would lead us to some kind of alliance against England. This principle remains unshakeable. Only if Poland becomes aware that Great Britain is completely giving up any interest in our part of Europe and any contact with us, would there be a need ‘for us to rethink the situation’.” Halifax asked, “does minister [Beck] also adhere to this principle?”¹¹²⁰ The prospect that Great Britain would resign “any interest in our part of Europe” seemed, in the long-term, to be a reality. Accusations against Poland for its behaviour in September 1938 created a perfect pretext for such decisions. From the last quarter of 1938, British policymakers seemed to have no alternative to the policy of appeasement. Prime Minister Chamberlain praised the British-German declaration on consultation and non-aggression made in Munich as an act of the utmost importance. The policy of “limited” concessions to aggressors seemed to be a rational concept to which there was no alternative. On 20 October 1938, one Foreign Office official, William I. Mallet, wrote: “Whether or not Beck remains [in his position] and Poland continues its current policy, or whether or not Beck leaves and Poland either takes the risk of war with Germany, or becomes Germany’s faithful vassal, we should make a rational decision to avoid obligations to Poland.”¹¹²¹ Significantly, the idea would soon take hold in London that if Germany threatened Western interests, Poland would become a useful instrument in the European equilibrium.¹¹²²

In the critical months at the beginning of 1939, Beck was neither resigned nor disoriented. The Polish foreign minister strove persistently to overcome Poland’s post-Munich seclusion. Aware as he was of France’s weakness and its political subordination to Great Britain, he rightly assumed that rapprochement with Britain, if it were possible, would be a decisive step for Poland in the near future. Regardless, on 28 September 1938 Beck said: “[...] the basic guidelines of our foreign policy are always the same and unchangeable.”¹¹²³

A statement made by the Polish foreign minister on 29 November 1938 is highly significant. On that day, ambassador Raczynski wrote a note tied to instructions given to him by Beck for talks with Halifax. Beck told Raczynski to establish

1120 PDD/1938, p. 695.

1121 H. Batowski, *Rok 1938 – dwie agresje hitlerowskie*, 488 (aneksy).

1122 G. L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler’s Germany*, Vol. 2: *Starting World War II, 1937–1939* (Chicago 1980), p. 500.

1123 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Gustaw Potworowski Collection, Box 1, Response to envoy Gustaw Potworowski in the form of a note.

contact with Halifax during the first visit and engage him in “general conversation”, a *tour d’horizon*.¹¹²⁴

The guidelines that Beck formulated for Raczyński are extremely important.¹¹²⁵ The issue of Danzig and the Free City’s future became a platform for contacts between Warsaw and London. In the face of the League of Nations’ bankruptcy, this issue had become truly overwhelming. Beck believed that the worst possible scenario would be the League’s sudden withdrawal from Danzig, which would create a dangerous vacuum. He no doubt believed that it would be possible to bring about a Polish-German agreement that would stabilise the Danzig matter, and in this regard, it was necessary to gain British support. On 29 November 1938, Beck said:

For many years, the presence of the League high commissioner in Danzig was a burden for us. [...] Today we consider this presence a plus. It should be noted that both legally and practically, the position of non-Nazi players in Danzig is less unfavourable than the position of such players in Germany. The League’s stance on the matter of the high commissioner will for Poland be one of the fundamental tests of the usefulness of this institution, determining our attitude towards it. As far as the Polish-German relationship is concerned regarding Danzig, as in the past both sides hold the position that Danzig cannot become a bone of contention between them.¹¹²⁶

The *Balticum* was supposed to be another broader plane for Anglo-Polish rapprochement. Beck pointed to common Anglo-Polish “interests in this area” and referred to his August 1938 conversation with Alfred Duff-Cooper in Gdynia.¹¹²⁷ At that time, it is worth repeating, Beck had got the impression, probably an exaggeration, that in Baltic affairs “Poland and Great Britain’s positions are parallel”.¹¹²⁸ This was not the case, but the minister cautiously asked Duff-Cooper “to check, without forcing the matter in any way, to what extent the above-mentioned appearance suits the English partner. What kind of opportunities, if any, are there for cooperation?” According to common practice at the time, Beck recommended the greatest delicacy in these efforts—not to change the existing line, to not put Poland

1124 PDD/1938, p. 798.

1125 These were verbal instructions, recorded later *pro memoria* by ambassador Raczyński and shared with ambassador Łukasiewicz in Paris (*ibid.*, pp. 798–800).

1126 *Ibid.*

1127 Alfred Duff-Cooper, traveling through the Baltic Sea, visited Gdynia in August 1938 and had a conversation with Józef Beck. We have not found the Polish note from this conversation in the files of the Polish Foreign Ministry. The British note was published. See H. Batowski, “Józef Beck i Duff-Cooper w Gdyni w sierpniu 1938 (u podstaw angielskiej orientacji Becka),” *Dzieje Najnowsze* (1975), No. 3: pp. 99–111.

1128 Beck put it this way in a conversation with the British chargé d’affaires Clifford Norton on 30 August 1938 (PDD/1938, p. 447).

in the position of being either a petitioner or a country that overestimates its own capabilities and seeks unjustified privileges.

In a letter to the foreign minister dated 16 December 1938, ambassador Raczyński wrote that Britain was dominated by “a consistent opinion that ‘Munich’ was the most appropriate, if not the only way out of a desperate situation”. An unnamed foreign office official, “known for his attitude critical of the prime minister’s policy”, expressed the opinion that “for the Western states, the possibility to ‘turn away’ from an extremely difficult situation without war boils down to the Czechs’ decision to surrender without a fight [...]”.¹¹²⁹ Analysing the assumptions behind British policy, Raczyński highlighted the prevailing belief in London “that the prime minister—to use imprecise comparisons from the world of sport—defended the British goal and that he thus transferred the game to the east of Europe. So whatever happens, they have bought time. And *adjournement* is no less popular here, in the homeland of political empiricism, than it is in Geneva.”¹¹³⁰

We find a few other valuable remarks about British policy in the Polish ambassador’s report. “It is difficult for me to fathom,” Raczyński wrote:

[...] what the prime minister is thinking and whether he is less naïve; that is, less sincere than his reputation says. However, I know, based on lengthy observation, the reactions of the people here. They are as vital, spontaneous, solidary, almost physiological as the reactions of ants or bees, and are independent of the phraseology with which the public is regularly fed. Here, the wrangling in the east of Europe, threatening to draw in, in one form or another, Germany and Russia, despite all the declamations of active opposition elements, is commonly and subconsciously treated as a “lesser evil”, which may delay the threat to the Imperium and its overseas components. Such is the background on which one should consider the English attitude to Poland. As for the prime minister, his friends and the press, there is no doubt that we are dealing with a great deal of temperance.¹¹³¹

Nevertheless, the passage of time blurred the very bad impression given by the events of September 1938. “The post-Munich ice has been broken, personal prejudices fall into oblivion, but there is still a reluctance to get involved—especially in the event that it would have an anti-German aspect.”¹¹³² The optimistic aspects of Raczyński’s report are worth emphasising. At that time, at the beginning of 1939, he was working to create a new climate for establishing contacts between Warsaw and London. It is difficult to assess to what extent this “sobering up” in British government circles was associated with growing concerns about possible further offensive actions by Germany. But in January 1939, these fears would be one of the most important motives behind British politics.

1129 PDD/1938, p. 835.

1130 Ibid.

1131 Ibid.

1132 Ibid.

As Raczyński noted, it was significant that he heard, during a “friendly conversation” at the Foreign Office, the opinion that “the British government does not want Poland to abandon the policy of balance as practiced so far”.¹¹³³ The ambassador drew Beck's attention to the “existence, for some time in public opinion and in the press, of a kind of organised campaign, using exaggerated information if not gossip and insinuation, aimed at presenting Polish-German relations in an unfavourable light”, with “the result of this state of affairs being anxiety and emerging pessimistic assessments of the political situation in Poland”. Raczyński ended his observations with the conclusion that “England is gradually emerging from the fetters of defeatism”.¹¹³⁴ The optimistic conclusion of the report of 19 December 1938 no doubt consolidated in Beck's mind the notion that, even if there was no hope of bringing Poland and Great Britain closer together regarding the most fundamental problems of European security, Poland still had to attempt to win over England to Poland's policy of balance and stabilisation.

In December 1938, Beck proposed the idea of traveling to London,¹¹³⁵ a move which was supposed to show, above all, that Poland was not isolated, and could provide an opportunity for a new exchange of views with British leaders. Officials considered February 1939 as a possible date, and rumours to this effect circulated at the time in the offices of European diplomacy. Significantly, on holiday in Monte Carlo, Beck did not seek contact with French foreign policy leaders and did not stop in Paris. Soon, the matter of traveling to London was dropped from the agenda. Beck's visit to Berchtesgaden, his decisive talks with Hitler and von Ribbentrop, and the latter's trip to Warsaw gave rise to a new wave of rumours about an alleged agreement between Poland and the Third Reich, of course on German terms.¹¹³⁶ On 31 January 1939, the French ambassador in London, Charles Corbin, informed foreign minister Bonnet that, according to ambassador Kennard in Warsaw (based on a telegram from 27 January), the aim of Ribbentrop's talks in Warsaw was to gain Poland's neutrality in the event of a German conflict with the Western powers.¹¹³⁷ Everything points to the fact that there were fears in London regarding the possibility of Poland's peaceful, if forced, submission to Germany. In this context, on 1 February 1939, the British government considered the possibility of a German attack on Belgium and the Netherlands, which would have

1133 Ambassador Raczyński's report dated 16 December 1938 (*ibid.*, p. 837). In 1937–1939 William Strang was head of the Central Department in the British Foreign Office.

1134 *Ibid.*

1135 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Romana Dębickiego, 40/2, R. Dębicki, “Journal,” 189 (note from 12 July 1939).

1136 There is even a theory that Hitler and Beck, talking on 4 January, reached a full agreement, implicitly on German terms.

1137 AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Pologne, Vol. 364.

been, for Great Britain, a *casus belli*.¹¹³⁸ What would Poland's position be in such circumstances? No doubt, this question was of the greatest interest to the British.

The idea that Beck should travel to London returned during a conversation between Raczynski and an undersecretary of state at the Foreign Office, Rab Butler, on 4 March; such a trip would offer the opportunity for a *tour d'horizon* of international politics.¹¹³⁹ Of course, at that time Polish diplomacy had not ceased in its efforts to bring about some kind of Anglo-Polish rapprochement, and ambassador Raczynski's role in this effort cannot be underestimated.¹¹⁴⁰

The growing uncertainty surrounding what the Germans would do after their success in the Sudetenland crisis was the factor that probably benefited Poland most. At that time, the British did not know in which direction Germany would expand further: east or west. Various rumours fuelled imaginations and increased fear. The minutes of the Foreign Policy Committee's meeting on 23 January 1939 make it clear that, in the eyes of British policy leaders, Germany posed a threat to the Netherlands and Belgium. At the same time, they recognised the possibility that Foreign Minister Beck and Hitler had come to some agreement during their talks in Berchtesgaden at the beginning of January of that year.¹¹⁴¹ Ambassador Raczynski recalled that for the governments of Great Britain and France, it was "a great mystery what Poland intended, what was happening in Poland, and what relations were between Warsaw and Berlin".¹¹⁴²

The fact that Beck concealed that the Germans were making territorial demands, and that he generally behaved as if he trusted that Polish-German relations would be maintained within the framework and spirit of the 1934 treaty, was not without significance for Poland's position at the time.¹¹⁴³ It played a positive role that Beck perhaps did not realise. Revealing the full truth would have put Poland in an even

1138 M. Zgórnjak, "Brytyjsko-francuskie kontakty sztabowe, próby opracowania wspólnej strategii i utworzenia wspólnego dowództwa (1935–1939)," in *W kręgu polityki, dyplomacji, i historii XX wieku. Księga Jubileuszowa profesora Waldemara Michowicza*, eds. B. Rakowski, A. Skrzypek (Łódź 2000), pp. 223–238.

1139 AAN, Instytut Hoovera, MSZ, I/243 (mf).

1140 For more on this subject, see A. M. Cieniała, "Minister Józef Beck i ambasador Edward Raczynski a zbliżenie polsko-brytyjskie w okresie październik 1938 – styczeń 1939," in *Z dziejów polityki i dyplomacji polskiej*, pp. 348–363. See also H. Batowski, "Polska dyplomacja w walce o niepodległość. Wielka rola Edwarda Raczynskiego," in *Działalność dyplomatyczna i polityczna Edwarda Raczynskiego*, ed. W. Michowicz (Łódź 1994), pp. 31–47.

1141 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 22964, C.1543/15/18. Conclusions from the meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee of 25 January 1939, and the minutes of the Cabinet meeting of 28 February 1939 C.1708/15/18.

1142 E. Raczynski, *Od Genewy do Jalty*, p. 30.

1143 On 10 January 1939, Beck wrote to the diplomatic missions that "talks in Berchtesgaden and Munich were useful for understanding the German political line after the Czech crisis". See PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 17.

more difficult position than it actually was. It would have also put an immediate end to speculations about the direction Hitler would take. Tactics used by Polish diplomacy, which came down to the argument that nothing should be done to indicate that Poland considered itself a threatened country, were justified.¹¹⁴⁴

The Origins and Context of Chamberlain's Guarantee Declaration

In October 1938, when it seemed that the Munich system would remain the new international order for a long time, Hitler had already begun thinking of Czechoslovakia's dissolution.¹¹⁴⁵ He would realise this idea in March 1939; of course, neither Paris nor London took into account the possibility of such a move.

The fact that Germany violated the provisions of the Munich Conference has been examined so often in historiography that there is no reason to give it further consideration here. In any case, it is indisputable that Beck—much like Western politicians and members of the public—was surprised by this action, unable to explain its reasoning other than through Hitler's desire to dominate Central and Eastern Europe. Later, the Polish foreign minister recognised that it was these "easy successes resulting from incompetence and indecision on the part of the opposing parties, great and small" in international politics that explained the method behind Hitler's politics: the escalation of new demands to achieve territorial gains under the threat of the use of force.¹¹⁴⁶

In terms of Poland's situation and interests, the consequences of the break-up of Czechoslovakia on 14/15 March 1939 are clearly described in a note prepared in the Foreign Ministry on 20 March, the day before the British issued their offer regarding political consultations in connection with the newly emerging situation in Europe.

(1) Germany's recent moves have increased immeasurably, and at the same time brought closer, the threat of war. On the whole, these measures have the character of a military operation, threatening in the first place Poland's room for manoeuvre, politically and in terms of mobilisation. (2) Passivity on our part will undoubtedly be an incentive for further steps that paralyse our will and weaken our strength. The routes of particular danger are: 1. Hungary, Romania, 2. Klaipėda, Lithuania,

1144 An expression of this tactic was the conversation Arciszewski had on 4 February 1939 with ambassador Kennard, in which the deputy undersecretary of state in the Foreign Ministry said (contrary to reality) that there was no pressure from the Reich regarding German transportation through Pomerania, let alone an extraterritorial motorway (AAN, MSZ, 5206).

1145 K. Piwarski, *Polityka europejska w okresie pomonachijskim*, pp. 122–123.

1146 Beck to ambassador Wieniawa-Długoszowski on 5 May 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 454.

3. Danzig. (3) The will to resist in Romania and Lithuania may be developed and maintained only if it is certain that these countries will not be isolated in any situation. Effective confidence can be given primarily by Poland. Hence the need to establish far-reaching cooperation with these countries, aimed primarily at temporarily strengthening elements of common security, which is also a lasting step for future relations in this part of Europe based on cooperation between countries with compatible interests. (4) The anti-German mood in western European countries should be exploited for the quickest possible creation of a potentially strong bloc of mutual guarantees, encompassing Poland and countries related to it through closer cooperation, such as Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, etc.¹¹⁴⁷

This document's conclusions are clear: *primo*, it provides unambiguous justification for the rejection of any idea that Poland should be passive; *secundo*, it clearly contains the idea that Poland was key to the geopolitical situation in Central and Eastern Europe, and its capitulation would bring about German domination over the entire region; *tertio*, the document formulates the idea of the creation of a "bloc of mutual guarantees", with some involvement of the western powers on behalf of Poland. The idea of such a bloc is interesting. Attached to bilateralism as it was, Poland had never before formulated such a concept.

Of course, without Great Britain any guarantee system in Europe was doomed to failure. Prime Minister Chamberlain opened the window to a possible change in British policy while speaking in Birmingham on 17 March 1939. In this speech, repeatedly referenced in historical literature, he condemned Hitler's methods, a fact which must have been noted in Warsaw.¹¹⁴⁸ On the same day, ambassador Raczynski wrote to the Foreign Ministry about the "deep shock" that the British leadership had experienced, but he admitted that he lacked information on the real state of affairs and on how British policy might evolve.¹¹⁴⁹ A new wave of speculation about the Third Reich's future aggressive actions circulated throughout Europe. The French ambassador in Warsaw, Léon Noël—under the impression that the German action was a prelude to another move, either towards the West or the East—wrote on 16 March to the Foreign Ministry in Paris that the view in Warsaw was that Hitler would move eastwards.¹¹⁵⁰

A memorandum issued by the General Staff of the British Army on 14 March contains a remarkable statement: "It would be unwise to place any substantial

1147 *Ibid.*, pp. 174–175.

1148 At first news of Hitler's moves towards Czechoslovakia, Chamberlain decided that the continuation of the appeasement policy was nevertheless necessary. On 15 March 1939, the prime minister spoke in the House of Commons in the "Munich tone". See J. Starzewski, *Nowoczesna historia polityczna. Rok 1939 (do wybuchu wojny)* (London 1954), p. 25.

1149 The ambassador's telegram to the Foreign Ministry dated 17 March 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 162.

1150 AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Pologne, Vol. 264, Report dated 16 March 1939.

reliance on assistance, active or passive, from Poland".¹¹⁵¹ However, four days later there was a change of attitude: the British abandoned the argument that Poland could not be relied upon, given that Poland seemed determined not to capitulate in the new and deteriorating situation in which it was practically encircled. "Poland seems to be the key to the situation," Prime Minister Chamberlain said at the cabinet meeting on 18 March 1939.¹¹⁵² There is no reason not to believe that the head of the British government said what he was actually thinking at this time. Meeting a day later on 19 March, the British Cabinet resolved to offer political consultations to a select group of European countries, the aim being to find agreement "against aggression".¹¹⁵³ Countries to be approached were the Soviet Union, Poland, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Greece and Romania.¹¹⁵⁴ Thus, basically only the countries of *Międzymorze* (excluding Hungary and Bulgaria) and the Baltic States were mentioned, although it is significant that, among the countries covered by the offer, Bolshevik Russia was listed first.

The decision to invite the Soviets was incomprehensible; it cannot be interpreted in any other way than as astonishing, since the British should have had sufficient insight into Soviet strategy to see that it would be impossible to bring this country in.¹¹⁵⁵ There can be no doubt that Chamberlain, and the British conservatives in general, were highly suspicious of the Soviet Union.¹¹⁵⁶ The prime minister and Halifax also had little faith in the USSR's military strength.¹¹⁵⁷ In a note dated 3

1151 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 22969, C.5263/15/18, Memorandum dated 14 March 1939.

1152 As noted by Ian Colvin; quote from C. Leibovitz, *The Chamberlain-Hitler Deal* (Edmonton 1993), p. 434.

1153 *The Diplomatic Diaries of Oliver Harvey, 1937–1940*, ed. J. Harvey (London 1970), p. 264.

1154 Quote from J. Stefanowicz, "Gwarancje brytyjskie dla Polski w 1939 r. w świetle narad gabinetu londyńskiego," *Wojskowy Przegląd Historyczny* (1971), No. 1: p. 216.

1155 The failure to take any steps to bring the Soviets around to the defence of the status quo would have no doubt been reason for public criticism of the British government, especially if attempts to preserve peace failed.

1156 We still know very little about how the Soviet Union was perceived in London and how Stalin's foreign policy was interpreted. This is undoubtedly an important issue, worthy of our attention. These matters should be covered in a separate study. Let us note only that the ambassador in Moscow, William Seeds, was unable to grasp the real goals of Soviet policy. In his report of 11 March, he analysed Stalin's speech the previous day at the XVIII Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He drew no conclusions other than that Soviet policy was peaceful. On 20 March in a second report, he took note of Stalin's statement about "pulling chestnuts out of the fire", which he cited in the conclusion (National Archives [London], Foreign Office, 371, 23684, N.1598/233/38).

1157 On 6 March 1939, the Embassy in Moscow put together a memorandum entitled "Political Stability in the Soviet Union", which pointed to the unimaginable passiveness of the nation (society) as the cause of the lack of rebellion against

April, William Strang expressed the opinion that the Soviets were not ready for war, and they would defend themselves effectively only when their country was in danger.¹¹⁵⁸ Colonel Hastings Ismay, secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence, expressed deep distrust of Russia and argued that it was uncertain whether an armed attack against Germany could be mounted from the USSR.¹¹⁵⁹ A Chiefs of Staff subcommittee declared on 24 April 24 that “any substantial Russian military support to Poland is out of the question”.¹¹⁶⁰

However, discussions among those who shaped the decision-making process contained some surprising opinions. For example, on 18 March during the Foreign Affairs Committee’s discussions, lord Chatfield, minister for the coordination of defence, stated that in the Baltic Sea, the Soviet Navy could effectively stop the Kriegsmarine’s actions.¹¹⁶¹ Most importantly, growing pressure on the government in British public opinion overshadowed anti-Communism.¹¹⁶² Churchill, a “dissident” in the Conservative Party, took the firm position that without Russia’s support, not one Central European country would survive a year of war against Germany.¹¹⁶³

“We are being sought out from all sides,” Michał Łubieński (the head of Beck’s cabinet) wrote on 14 March 1939 to the ambassador in Tokyo, Romer.¹¹⁶⁴ “[...] everyone wants to strengthen their position to be able to rely on the fact that Poland is with them. This creates a seemingly beneficial situation for us that is in fact very difficult. Leaning on one side or another compromises us in the eyes of the other, and offers no real benefits, because it is to be expected that, should England, France and Germany come to some agreement, the Great Powers of this

the government of terror (ibid., N.1292/233/38). The author of this document was military attaché Colonel Oliver Firebrace. At a conference in Abbeville on 12 September 1939, the British prime minister stated: “Russia is powerful within its own territory, but it has little capacity for offensive action outside” (see *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, Vol. 1, p. 555). For more on British views of Bolshevik Russia against a broad background, see K. Nelson, “‘Pursued by a Bear’: British Estimates of Soviet Military Strength and Anglo-Soviet Relations 1922–1939,” *Canadian Journal of History* 28 (1993), No: 2, pp. 189–221.

1158 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23016, C.4575/54/18.

1159 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/WB/3B, Ambassador Raczyński’s note dated 17 May.

1160 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23060, C.6207/3356/18.

1161 M. Nurek, *Polityka Wielkiej Brytanii w rejonie Morza Bałtyckiego*, p. 207.

1162 British opinion of the Soviets in 1939 has not been thoroughly analysed. See P. M. H. Bell’s study, which begins in 1941: *John Bull and the Bear: British Public Opinion, Foreign Policy and the Soviet Union, 1941–1945* (London 1990).

1163 AAN, MSZ, 5098, Report by the Polish chargé d’affaires in London Antoni Jażdżewski dated 25 May 1939.

1164 IPMS, Kolekcja 5 (akta Tadeusza Romera), 1 (mf); reprint in PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 152.

world will care less about our interests.”¹¹⁶⁵ Łubieński’s reflections are highly significant as they allow us to get a sense of the many doubts that prevailed in Warsaw at that time. Rapprochement with London could bring a break with Berlin, and the real value of British promises may be problematic—this is the point of Łubieński’s thinking here.

On 20 March, the British ambassador in Warsaw, Howard Kennard, received instructions from Halifax to talk to Beck and present British proposals on political consultations with a group of countries wishing to defend the status quo. A conversation with the Polish foreign minister took place on 21 March. As we know, Beck had a basically negative reaction to the British plan. He presented a counteroffer of bilateral Anglo-Polish consultations. The British ambassador alluded to the possibility of some kind of secret agreement (*d’un accord secret*).¹¹⁶⁶ Beck said imprecisely, so as to leave open the possibility of further talks, that such a deal could be possible, but not only without the Soviets, but also without France, which would mean a strictly bilateral set of commitments.¹¹⁶⁷ The idea of a “bloc against aggression”, as expressed in the above-mentioned Foreign Ministry memorandum of 20 March, was explicitly abandoned. This negative position taken by Poland transpired to be decisive.¹¹⁶⁸

It is worth taking a closer look at the motivations behind Polish diplomacy at the time, the outlines of which clearly emerge from a letter by the head of the Foreign Affairs Western Division, Józef Potocki, to ambassador Raczyński on 23 March 1939. Regarding the Polish offer of a secret bilateral Anglo-Polish agreement, Potocki wrote: “I imagine that in relation to our proposal, the British may have reservations, such as the release of France or the bilateral, confidential nature of the proposed system. As for France, the alliance of 1921 creates a situation in which a new agreement as proposed does not seem necessary at the moment, because under the existing legal relationship between us France *de facto* enters into this scheme, while inviting it now to a new consultative system would emphasise the fact that the USSR has been pushed aside, which we would like to avoid.”¹¹⁶⁹ Beck presented such an explanation of the Polish position towards rapprochement with Great Britain to Kennard in their second conversation, on 22 March.

To summarise, we can say that in response to the British proposals, the Polish position assumed, *primo*, the idea of a strictly bilateral agreement (without the Soviets, France, Romania and other countries). *Secundo*, the agreement was to be

1165 PDD/1939 (styczeń – sierpień), p. 152.

1166 Józef Potocki to ambassador Raczyński, 23 March, *ibid.*, p. 197.

1167 Beck’s instructions for ambassador Raczyński, 23 March, *ibid.*, pp. 196–197.

1168 Romania’s position was no longer so clear. On 1 April 1939, Carol II even said that “in the event of danger, he will accept Soviet assistance”. J. Weinstein, “Scenariusz ministra Gafencu,” p. 154.

1169 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), pp. 197–198.

strictly confidential. Potocki explained that “an open bilateral system of this kind would be more difficult for the English government to accept”. *Tertio*, the consultation offer contained in the British memorandum of 21 March was rejected within the wider circle of vulnerable states. The foggy British offer was met with a clear Polish counter-proposal.

Another question is also important: what did the Polish foreign policy leadership expect from Great Britain?

First of all, through agreement with Britain, the disastrous possibility of being isolated in conflict with the Germans would fall by the wayside. In the above-mentioned letter to Raczynski on 23 March, Potocki wrote: “When assessing this matter clearly and unambiguously, we think that agreement would provide us English support in the situation of the greatest concern to us now, above all in the case of Danzig, in exchange for which we would tie ourselves in relations with England under a framework outlined by the English Government in its memorandum on consultation”. In the light of this statement, the Polish concept is very clear: Anglo-Polish rapprochement was to pave the way for the reconstruction of Polish-German relations in the spirit of the 1934 treaty.

Secondly, there was a belief in Warsaw that Great Britain, having submitted an offer to Poland of political consultations and a secret defensive system, had decided to make a truly revolutionary change in its foreign policy. The argument was that an “extraordinary” development had taken place in British foreign relations by which British leaders had realised that “an exceptional moment” called for the “need for measures that go beyond their current policies”.¹¹⁷⁰ Unfortunately, these arguments had little to do with reality.

Thirdly, Polish political leaders did not lose hope that political dialogue with Germany could resume. They believed that such dialogue would become a reality and there would be some chance of success if Poland’s position were supported by Great Britain. The subject of discussions was to be the future of the Free City of Danzig. Such a concept would automatically collapse “if we were bound at the same time, under similar conditions, to Soviet Russia”, as Potocki put it. Thus, the policy to exclude the possibility of Poland’s participation in a bloc with Soviet participation was means not to antagonise the Germans. Today, it is not difficult to see that these Polish calculations were an illusion. An agreement with Great Britain would not turn into means by which relations with Germany could be revitalised in the spirit of the treaty of 26 January 1934, but rather as a pretext for Hitler’s final break and decision to start the war. It seems, however, that the certain presumption of rationality that Beck attributed to Hitler should not be treated as a *testimonium paupertatis* to the Polish foreign minister. Even then, it was difficult to imagine and recognise that the Germans, under their leader, were prepared to go up against the entire world. Beck no doubt failed to notice Hitler’s maximalism. It is difficult not to admit this and to not criticise the Polish foreign minister for his

1170 *Ibid.*, p. 198.

mistake. However, another question arises: did anyone in Europe at the time fully recognise the German chancellor's true ambitions? There can be no answer to that question other than "no".

Fourthly, Polish policymakers were working under another conviction, namely that Poland was the key to the situation in Central and Eastern Europe. As Łukasiewicz, the ambassador in Paris, wrote to the Foreign Ministry on 23 March 1939: "[...] we are regarded as the country in whose hands lies the fate of the English initiative".¹¹⁷¹ This reasoning stemmed from the belief that without Poland's involvement, it would be impossible to effectively counteract new aggressive actions by Germany. It would not be difficult to argue that this reasoning, although based on an accurate observation, overestimated Poland's capabilities.

The Anglo-Polish consultations of 21 and 22 March (the Beck-Kennard and Halifax-Raczyński talks) resulted in no agreement, but both sides were able to detail their position. The Poles formulated the conditions under which their cooperation with Great Britain seemed beneficial. There was still considerable mutual distrust. Even Ambassador Kennard, who was friendly towards Poland and who knew Poland well, complained about the "Polish mentality", characterised by a tendency to secretive and conspiratorial actions, as if he did not see that minister Beck wanted to maintain Anglo-Polish contacts under a cloak of secrecy so as not to provoke accusations in Berlin that Poland had gone to the "British camp" and was participating in a policy to "encircle" the Reich.¹¹⁷²

The last days of March (25–28) brought a definitive break in Polish-German relations, of which Beck could not yet have been aware when he received ambassador Kennard on 21 and 22 March in Warsaw. What would follow was a clear Anglo-Polish rapprochement. Its conditions must be briefly mentioned.

The affair surrounding the Romanian envoy in London, Viorel Tilea, which has been analysed many times in historiography but never fully explained, gave new impetus to the British government's actions.¹¹⁷³ Tilea had alerted the Foreign Office that Romania was facing a German ultimatum and German aggression. These claims were not true. At this point in time, Germany's goal was economic domination over Romania and access to its oil resources, not military aggression.¹¹⁷⁴ But the increasing pressure of public opinion on the government forced the cabinet

1171 IPMS, MSZ, A.11.49/WB/1.

1172 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23016, C. 5047/54/18, ambassador Kennard's report dated 22 March 1939.

1173 See J. T. Popescu, "Przyczynek do wyjaśnienia okoliczności interwencji posła Rumunii w Londynie Viorela Tilea w brytyjskim Ministerstwie Spraw Zagranicznych w marcu 1939 r.", *Studia z Dziejów ZSRR i Europy Środkowej* 20 (1984): pp. 223–231.

1174 P. Marguerat, *Le IIIe Reich et le pétrole roumain 1938–1940. Contribution à l'étude de la pénétration économique allemande dans les Balkans à la veille et au début de la Seconde Guerre mondiale* (Geneva 1977).

into action, and, as Anna Maria Cieniała argued, even became a driving force.¹¹⁷⁵ In general, public opinion's influence on British diplomacy in March 1939 was significant. British opinion, shaped by humanitarian slogans, forced the government to take specific actions in defence of endangered states. But a certain sense of moral justice and condemnation of violence did not translate into an understanding of the fact that Poland's national interests could not allow for the re-assignment of the Free City of Danzig, and that Poland could not agree to an extraterritorial motorway through Pomerania, one which would condemn Poland to dependence on Germany and the loss of independence.¹¹⁷⁶

The first Pole to study British diplomatic documents declassified in 1970, Janusz Stefanowicz, came to the conclusion that the British did not terribly fear German aggression against Poland, and we should keep this fact in mind when attempting to explain the British cabinet's policy.¹¹⁷⁷ We know, however, that various stories were circulating in London of increased German pressure on Poland to accept territorial demands. The American ambassador in Warsaw, Drexel Biddle, wrote about this matter to the State Department in Washington, and his views were communicated in London through US ambassador Joseph Kennedy.¹¹⁷⁸ A sudden attack on Poland, or Poland's isolated capitulation, emerged as possible scenarios. The British did not know, of course, that in January 1939, the decision had been made in Warsaw to fight in defence of the country's independence, even if Poland was without allies. There were various rumours. On 29 March 1939, Ian Colvin (a journalist working for the *New Chronicle*) telephoned the secretary to Halifax, Oliver Harvey, and reported that "Hitler would attack Poland very shortly unless it was made quite certain that we would then attack him".¹¹⁷⁹ In the memorandum that Halifax drew up on 29 March, he expressed the fear that Poland would fall under foreign domination, but the document does not explicitly state whether this would happen militarily.¹¹⁸⁰ It was probably at this stage that the British considered

1175 The first historian of diplomacy to make this argument was Desmond T. Williams, more than 50 years ago, in "Negotiations Leading to the Anglo-Polish Agreement of 31 March 1939", *Irish Historical Studies* (Dublin) 10 (1956): pp. 59–93 and 156–192. Anna Maria Cieniała, no doubt the most important expert on British policy towards Eastern Europe, reaffirmed this argument in *eadem*, "Wielka Brytania gotowa była bić się za polski Gdańsk?" pp. 32–43.

1176 *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*, p. 104. As far as I know, there is no detailed study of British public opinion towards Poland in 1939.

1177 J. Stefanowicz, "Gwarancje brytyjskie dla Polski," p. 234.

1178 W. R. Rock, *Chamberlain and Roosevelt: British Foreign Policy and the United States, 1937–1940* (Columbus, OH 1988), p. 173.

1179 *The Diplomatic Diaries of Oliver Harvey, 1937–1940*, p. 271. Those in Halifax's circle believed that the generals would either stop Hitler or overthrow him, since news was reaching London that preparations for such activities were underway in September 1938.

1180 Ch. Thorne, *The Approach of War*, p. 119.

various possibilities by which the Third Reich would take over Poland. It is certainly remarkable in this context that the Foreign Policy Committee, meeting on 27 March, decided that the British Empire was facing two options: inaction or a ruinous war.¹¹⁸¹ By offering Poland a guarantee, Britain still faced a possible third scenario by which Germany would not risk a war if it had to face a real coalition (Great Britain, France and Poland).¹¹⁸² In this regard, Beck and British policymakers were clearly of the same mind. Having said that, the Polish foreign minister could not know that during the above-mentioned deliberations of 27 March, Halifax announced that Great Britain probably did not have the wherewithal to protect Poland or Romania from being overrun by Germany.¹¹⁸³

As we know, on 26 March the British cabinet decided to offer the same help to Romania as it would offer Poland.¹¹⁸⁴ The Foreign Office was convinced that Romania should get the promise of British support because the country's importance called for it; after all, Romania was richer in raw materials than Poland.¹¹⁸⁵ The British (and French) were interested in what Poland would do if Germany attacked Romania. As we know, the Romanians wanted to modify the alliance with Poland, which was a defensive anti-Soviet agreement, so that an *erga omnes* alliance would arise. Gafencu was concerned by the fact that Beck had refused to guarantee Romania's interests in the event of a Hungarian invasion.¹¹⁸⁶ The establishment of ties with Poland, along with the lack of specific Polish commitments to Romania, were the source of complaints on the part of certain members of the British cabinet.¹¹⁸⁷

Beck's rational motivation, however, demanded that this solution be rejected. The foreign minister had real fears that Polish guarantees for Romania (as the British government requested), along with the general expansion of the anti-Soviet Polish-Romanian alliance, would definitely tie Hungary to Germany, and in the real circumstances of war, Romanian aid against Germany would be illusory.

1181 M. Zacharias, "Geneza układu o wzajemnej pomocy między Polską a Wielką Brytanią," in *Władze RP na obczyźnie podczas Februury wojny światowej*, ed. Z. Błażyński (London 1994), p. 101.

1182 From 21–22 March 1939, Halifax and Bonnet held talks in London. It was clear that the French government would not withdraw from the alliance with Poland if the latter received British guarantees.

1183 See C. Leibovitz, *The Chamberlain–Hitler Deal*, 443. See also S. Newman, *Gwarancje brytyjskie dla Polski. Marzec 1939*, trans. J. Meysztowicz, trans. (of notes) T. Szafrąński, intro. A. Czubieński (Warsaw 1981), p. 193.

1184 DDF, series 2, Vol. 15, doc. 354, p. 567. See also A. M. Cienciała, "‘Wielka Brytania gotowa była bić się za polski Gdańsk’?", p. 38.

1185 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 22969, C. 4917/15/18, Note from Frank K. Roberts dated 11 April 1939.

1186 *Ibid.*, C. 4920/15/18, Report from the British ambassador in Bucharest, R. Hoare, dated 7 April 1939.

1187 *Ibid.*, "Political Review for the SAC Sub-Committee," dated 17 April 1939.

As French foreign minister Bonnet wrote to his ambassador in London, Charles Corbin: "Beck is trying to play for time, to defer answers to all the questions put to him, to maintain total freedom of movement and try to maintain a neutral position for Poland".¹¹⁸⁸ In the event of war against Germany, regardless of any commitments the Polish government could not count on help from Romania, which was threatened by the Soviets and had to take into account a possible conflict with Hungary, not to mention Bulgaria. It is worth mentioning, however, that on 12 April Beck warned Hungary about the possibility of taking military action against Romania.¹¹⁸⁹

The significance of the threat that Germany posed to British interests should not be underestimated, as London became increasingly aware of this threat in the last days of March 1939. The uncertainty of further German actions was one of the important motives that led to the idea of giving unilateral guarantees to Poland and then negotiating a secret Anglo-Polish system. As Alexander Cadogan, permanent under-secretary of state for Foreign Affairs, wrote in his journal on 31 March 1939: "Hitler may bomb us. But I think we've done right".¹¹⁹⁰ What he was referring to was Chamberlain's decision to offer Poland promises of assistance if her independence were threatened.

We should recall that on 14 March, the British general staff considered the possibility that the Germans would launch an air attack against England. The German military doctrine, it was argued, was subordinated to the principle of the "need for a quick decision".¹¹⁹¹ On 30 March, officials at the Foreign Office produced a memorandum mentioning the possibility of an attack by the German army on the Netherlands and Switzerland.¹¹⁹²

In the last days of March, the British prime minister was undoubtedly convinced that after the Third Reich had turned Poland into a vassal state, and having thus gained control over Central and Eastern Europe, Hitler would direct all his forces westward. He certainly did not think, however, that the path to further Polish-German negotiations would be closed. Moreover, he also thought it would be possible to avoid a war through some kind of peace solution involving concessions

1188 AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Roumanie, Vol. 180 (foreign minister Bonnet's instructions on 24 March 1939 for the French Ambassador in London, Charles Corbin). For more on this matter in light of French documents, see Władysław Żeleński, "Niedoszły sojusz Polski z Rumunią przeciw agresji Niemiec i Węgier w roku 1939," *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1981), No. 56: pp. 210–227.

1189 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 328. On 11 May, Beck told ambassador Noël that if Romania were attacked by Hungary, Poland would not take any action, but if there was a European war in which Romania took part, Poland would remain faithful to the alliance (AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Roumanie, Vol. 181).

1190 *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, 1938–1945*, ed. D. Dilks (London 1971), p. 168.

1191 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 22969, C.5263/15/18, Memorandum dated 14 March 1939.

1192 *Ibid.*, Memorandum dated 30 March 1939.

by Poland, especially involving the Free City, so that Poland could maintain its independence.¹¹⁹³

As we know, on 31 March 1939 Chamberlain issued his famous and unilateral declaration guaranteeing Poland's independence, which was received in Europe at that time as a revolutionary move in international relations, even if, in fact, it was not. Sir Orme Sargent, a senior official in the Foreign Office, called this a completely personal act by the prime minister.¹¹⁹⁴ He decided to issue the guarantee declaration in the face of opposition from the British general staff.¹¹⁹⁵

It was not entirely clear what the guarantee declaration meant, despite the simplicity of Chamberlain's words. The next day, April 1, the *Evening Standard* published an interpretation of the obligations contained in Chamberlain's declaration, according to which the British guarantee covered neither the Free City of Danzig nor the Corridor. On the same day, the conservative *Times*, viewed by Polish diplomats as "a publication close to the prime minister", published a similar interpretation of Chamberlain's guarantees, which referred to the argument that they unquestionably did not encompass "the entire Polish territory, but only the independence of Poland, making clear allusions to the need for negotiations between Poland and Germany" over disputed issues, such as Danzig and the 'Corridor'.¹¹⁹⁶ Ambassador Raczyński's angry protest forced the Foreign Office to issue a correction, but the ambiguous impression remained, so much so that the British press soon returned to a discussion of the need to recognise German demands over Danzig, which would become German "sooner or later".¹¹⁹⁷ Of course, the Poles did not yet realise the nature of the situation they would face later, in the middle of the Second World War; it was then, in the realities of the war, that the true character of Britain's guarantee obligations became important again.¹¹⁹⁸

1193 See also Anna M. Cienciala, "Polska w polityce brytyjskiej i francuskiej w 1939 roku. Wola walki czy próba uniknięcia wojny?" *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] 75 (1985): pp. 152–183, and "Polska w polityce Wielkiej Brytanii," pp. 71–104.

1194 A. J. Foster, "An Unequivocal Guarantee? Fleet Street and the British Guarantee to Poland, 31 March 1939," *Journal of Contemporary History* 26 (1991): p. 42.

1195 R. Manne, "The British Decision for Alliance with Russia, May 1939," *Journal of Contemporary History* 9 (1974): p. 15.

1196 Note from the Polish ambassador in London dated 1 April 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 253.

1197 "Danzig Is Not Worth a War", *Evening Standard* (8 May 1939).

1198 On 4 March 1944, Władysław Kułski prepared the following legal statement for the Foreign Ministry in exile: "The British government did not formally guarantee Poland's borders, but by signing the agreement [of 25 August 1939], it took into consideration Poland's borders at the time the agreement was signed and guaranteed assistance in the event of aggression against these and not other borders. It cannot be argued that the British government made no commitments on this matter. If the British government made no commitments in this regard to any Polish borders, then why did it regard the crossing of the Polish-German border

In this context, Halifax's statement made at a cabinet meeting on 3 May is significant. The alliance with Poland could be applied only in the event of a clear violation of Poland's independence. "[...] we held the view," the British Foreign Secretary continued, "that the mere fact that we had given the guarantee gave us the right to be kept informed as to any situation which arose." And the prime minister concluded that "it was very [difficult] to be sure whether the inclusion of Danzig in the Reich would constitute a threat to Polish independence. The answer to that question really depended on Germany's intentions."¹¹⁹⁹ This interpretation of the alliance with Poland is authoritative and *pars pro toto* reflects the British point of view.

Janusz Stefanowicz expressed the opinion that the Polish government's inclination to accept the guarantee before arriving in London "created a *fait accompli* that limited Poland's room for manoeuvre".¹²⁰⁰ However, could the government in Warsaw have done anything but accept the proposed offer? Essentially, Beck was faced with a dilemma: Should the guarantees offered to Poland be accepted without reservation? The foreign minister had to take into account the possibility that Germany could treat the Anglo-Polish arrangement as a provocation and a challenge. Only theoretically did Poland have the choice to reject the offer. In fact, the Polish government had no choice. Admittedly, even today some commentators and certain historians believe that since in March 1939 Hitler had not yet made the final decision to attack Poland, the guarantee offer should have been rejected. As the British guarantees came "without backing", as Henryk Batowski put it, in accepting them Poland entered on to the path of confrontation with Germany, and could not get real military support when war came.¹²⁰¹

There is only one response to these accusations and doubts. But British guarantees were a better way out than promises and "guarantees" made by Hitler, who repeated that he was not planning to attack Poland, and that, in fulfilling his territorial demands, Poland would take more than it would give because Germany was ready to confirm the existing Versailles border. Let us repeat: a potential rejection of the British guarantees, which was entirely possible in March 1939, would have meant *ipso facto* the acceptance of Hitler's "guarantees". Beck chose rationally.

in 1939 a *casus foederis*?" Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Władysław Kulski Collection, Box 3.

1199 National Archives (London), Cabinet Conclusions, Cab. 23/99, 3 May 1939. Quote from Anita Prażmowska, "War Over Danzig? The Dilemma of Anglo-Polish Relations in the Months Preceding the Outbreak of the Second World War," *Historical Journal* (1983), No. 1: p. 180.

1200 J. Stefanowicz, "Gwarancje brytyjskie dla Polski", p. 234.

1201 Henryk Batowski, *Europa zmierza ku przepaści* (Poznan 1977), p. 324. In a similar vein, Jan Ciechanowski wrote that Beck "did not understand that the guarantees were a gesture with no backing." See idem, "Przystąpienie Anglii do wojny," *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1990), No. 91: p. 21.

Another matter requires comment. As we know, Hitler exploited the fact that an Anglo-Polish alliance agreement had been concluded to announce that the Polish-German Non-Aggression Pact was null and void. A state that cannot conclude alliance agreements is not independent. If, in those circumstances, Beck had accepted as a basis for his actions the thesis that Poland could not enter into a new defence system because he would thus be responsible for the revenge carried out by one of Poland's neighbours, he would then have to acknowledge that Poland was no longer independent, that Poland had already lost its independence—without a fight.

The guarantee declaration seemed to signal the end of appeasement.¹²⁰² In reality, however, there were no grounds for optimism because, as Anna Maria Cienciała rightly maintains, Great Britain continued to pursue a policy of appeasement, using different means in geostrategic realities that were different than they had been in the autumn of 1938.¹²⁰³ Undoubtedly, in the realities of 1939, the British government's political concept came down to a strategy of deterring Hitler with the threat of a war on two fronts; British officials believed that in such conditions Hitler would not risk a conflict on a European (or global) scale.¹²⁰⁴ In August 1939, these calculations proved as we know to be utterly wrong.

None of this means that Beck was unaware of how the views of British officials fluctuated and how they often ran counter to the spirit of the guarantee, becoming an instrument of containment. As many documents indicate, including a Polish note from Beck's conversation with the British ambassador on 23 April 1939, the Polish foreign minister was aware of "the games the Germans were playing to thwart our action", and that "any misunderstandings between us on this subject can be very dangerous".¹²⁰⁵ Thus, "*les bases de l'arrangement*" must be clearly stated.¹²⁰⁶

Beck undoubtedly understood that the British government's intention was to persuade Poland to make concessions to Germany in order to at least postpone the outbreak of war. "However," as Beck told ambassador Kennard on 23 April 1939, "if we went over to Ribbentrop's plan, then we would need no English guarantee, because we would have got the most far-reaching concessions from Germany."¹²⁰⁷ Having said that, Poland did not ask for "a favour", but only benefited from the

1202 K. Kraczkiewicz, "Jesień 1938–jesień 1939 (Narastanie konfliktu polsko-niemieckiego)," *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1984), No. 70: p. 164.

1203 A. M. Cienciała, "Polska w polityce brytyjskiej i francuskiej w 1939 roku," pp. 182–183. Alan J. Foster clearly supported the argument that British policy was marked by continuity; see Foster, "An Unequivocal Guarantee? Fleet Street and the British Guarantee to Poland", p. 46.

1204 See Colonel Hastings Ismay's comments in his letter to undersecretary of state in the Foreign Office Alexander Cadogan dated 20 March 1939, National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 22968, C.4650/15/18.

1205 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 376.

1206 *Ibid.*

1207 *Ibid.*

offer made by the British government. The Polish government's positive reaction to the "English suggestion of collaboration" stemmed from the conviction that German demands were unacceptable, and that Poles would defend their independence even without any allies.

The British concept to save peace—at the price of limited, "controlled" territorial concessions—suffered absolute defeat and transpired to be the "diplomacy of helplessness".¹²⁰⁸ Moreover, the British policy of containment, as applied to Germany after March 1939, suffered a no-less-spectacular defeat, as historian David Reynolds has written.¹²⁰⁹ "The so-called new policy resulting from the British guarantees for Poland was in fact the old policy of 1938 dressed in new clothing." It brought no results because Poland did not accept its designated role, and Hitler's Germany was not interested in limited territorial gains, but rather, as we have known for a long time, in large scale expansion.¹²¹⁰

My conclusions are the following:

Primo, it should be stated categorically that Great Britain issued no guarantee of Poland's borders. What it issued was only a unilateral commitment to guarantee the independence of the Polish state. Unilateral, because it was not supplemented by similar Polish obligations, and because it was issued in London with the knowledge that if the interests of the British Empire were threatened, Poland would be an ally on the basis of its capabilities.

Secundo, the guarantee was to pave the way for Polish-German negotiations conducted under the auspices of the United Kingdom. It is worth mentioning here that on 30 March (that is, on the eve of his historic speech in the House of Commons) Chamberlain wanted to make two declarations simultaneously: a guarantee and a commitment to help Poland and Germany reach a settlement, but Halifax opposed this solution. He was concerned that such a move would be "illegible" to the public, and would remind people of the still vivid events from a year before; that is, preparations for Munich, when the British government declared on several occasions that it would come to France's assistance if the latter were forced to fulfil its allied commitments to Czechoslovakia, and, at the same time, it declared its willingness to assist the governments in Berlin and Prague to reach a settlement regarding the Sudeten Germans. Chamberlain, after thinking over his foreign minister's suggestions, agreed and gave up the idea of two declarations.¹²¹¹

1208 See the study by Lothar Kettenacker, *Die Diplomatie der Ohnmacht. Die gescheiterte Friedensstrategie der britischen Regierung vor Ausbruch des Zweiten Weltkrieges, Sommer 1939*, eds. W. Benz, H. Graml (Stuttgart 1979).

1209 D. Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled. British Policy and World Power in the 20th century*, 2nd edition (London–New York 2000), p. 128.

1210 A. M. Cienciała, "Polska w polityce brytyjskiej i francuskiej w 1939 roku," pp. 182–183.

1211 S. Aster, 1939. *The Making of the Second World War* (London 1973), pp. 271–272; C. A. MacDonald, *The United States, Britain and Appeasement, 1936–1939* (New York 1981), p. 147; Ch. Bohlen, *Witness to History 1929–1969* (New York 1973), pp. 74–75.

Tertio, events surrounding Chamberlain's guarantee declaration circumvented the Soviet Union entirely as a participant in a potential front of peaceful states, defending the status quo. Poles had the right to read this as a Polish diplomatic success. However, in London there was no unanimity as to the correctness of this step. In Western historiography, it is often described as a political error. As one historian wrote: "The prime minister's fury is probably understandable, but the guarantee to Poland prior to the conclusion of an Anglo-Soviet agreement was a rash act."¹²¹² Having said that, if we accept this reasoning, we would have to assume that the British government should have first worked towards a Polish-Soviet agreement, and then submit a guarantee offer to both parties. But this could have never happened because of the obvious differences between Moscow's and Warsaw's interests, in which case the British Government would have remained but a passive observer of events.

Quatro, the guarantee declaration did not mean that a decision on *casus foederis* would be left in Polish hands, as is often assumed in historiography, and not only because "leaving it to any other country to decide whether Great Britain would be drawn into war would never be approved in London, all the more so given that London had not given up hope of reaching agreement with Hitler."¹²¹³ Another reason was that the two sides were to maintain a spirit of agreement in bilateral relations, and at the same time the British Government retained the right to assess independently the situation before recognising that a *casus belli* had arisen.

Quinto, the guarantee offer was accompanied by no specific military commitments supported by a real plan for common action in the event of war. No operational plan emerged from any staff negotiations that could anticipate how obligations would be met. Two British military missions to Poland, led by colonel Emilius Clayton in May and general Edmund Ironside in July, were purely informational.¹²¹⁴ The latter had the quality of a political mission, because the British general's main task was to obtain objective information on whether Poland would inadvertently give Germans a pretext for war. Ironside's job was to do everything possible to caution the Polish military leadership in this regard.¹²¹⁵

1212 S. M. Miner, *Between Churchill and Stalin. The Soviet Union, Great Britain, and the Origins of the Grand Alliance* (Chapel Hill–London 1988), p. 3.

1213 M. Nurek, *Polityka Wielkiej Brytanii w rejonie Morza Bałtyckiego*, p. 213.

1214 M. Zgórnjak, "Sojusz polsko-francusko-brytyjski i problemy jego realizacji w planowaniu oraz praktycznej działalności mocarstw zachodnich w 1939 roku," in *Z dziejów polityki i dyplomacji polskiej*, p. 370.

1215 Such conclusion emerges from the observations of the British commander; see A. Suchcitz, "Wrażenia generała Ironside'a z wizyt w Polsce w l. 1925 i 1939," *Mars* (1993), No. 1: pp. 55–63. For more on Ironside's mission to Poland, see Chapter 7 below.

Beck's Talks in London in April 1939

The British prime minister's guarantee declaration of 31 March paved the way for Józef Beck's visit to London. From the Polish point of view, the foreign minister's trip to the British capital was necessary; it was about gaining insight into British views on Poland's position and the international situation, and above all about establishing mutual obligations in the event of war.

Beck visited London on 3–7 April 1939. He had been invited by the British, who were no doubt very interested in this visit because they wanted to assess the Polish leadership's determination to resist German demands (the status of the Free City of Danzig and the extraterritorial motorway through Polish Pomerania). Beck's visit was a working visit as, given protocol requirements, the British foreign minister was supposed to have come to Warsaw because, as I mentioned before, Beck had already visited London in November 1936 and the Poles were now supposed to host the British.

The Polish foreign minister arrived in London in the afternoon of 3 April and was greeted at Victoria Station by Halifax. In the morning of 4 April, a conversation took place at the Foreign Office between the two foreign ministers, attended on the Polish side by ambassador Edward Raczyński and the head of the Western Division and deputy director at the Foreign Ministry Józef Potocki, and on the British side by the permanent under-secretary of state for Foreign Affairs Sir Alexander Cadogan, and the head of the Department of Eastern Europe at the Foreign Office William Strang.¹²¹⁶ On the same day in the afternoon, prime minister Neville Chamberlain received Beck in his offices in the House of Commons. Also on the same day, the Polish foreign minister held a private visit with former foreign secretary Anthony Eden, and was officially received by the British government. Based on his conversation with Beck, Eden drew up a note, which he immediately sent to Halifax, and in which he quoted the Polish foreign minister saying that "Poles are by nature soldiers and they are convinced that a 35-million strong nation cannot be easily wiped off [the map of Europe]. Nothing will direct them to repeat the experience of the partitions, [because] Marshal Piłsudski's greatest accomplishment was the resurrection of the state and Poles would defend it at any price".¹²¹⁷

On 5 April, Beck was received by King George VI. On that day, private political talks continued in the House of Commons with Prime Minister Chamberlain. Beck received US ambassador Joseph Kennedy separately. At the end of Beck's visit, a joint press release was agreed and published. The penultimate day of the minister's

1216 Strang described his activities in the British Foreign Service in his book *Home and Abroad* (London 1956). He described his work in the Soviet capital in *Moscow Negotiations* (Leeds 1968).

1217 This note was dated 5 April, National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23016, C.5029/54/18.

stay in England was purely private. The foreign minister visited the naval base at Portsmouth, where he attended an event organised by the supreme command of the Royal Navy. On 7 April, Beck received ambassadors of allied states: the French ambassador Charles Corbin and the Romanian envoy Viorel Tilea, after which he left London.¹²¹⁸

Visiting the British capital, Beck no doubt wanted to check the attitudes and intentions of the leaders in British politics. Many questions arise here: should he have asked for clarification regarding military obligations? Was it a political mistake that he did not? Did he detect signs of French defeatism and British disarmament? Was he aware of Poland's military weakness? Regarding the Soviet Union and its possible participation in an anti-German defence alliance, did he take the right position? To what extent did Beck's London talks influence opinions among the Polish leadership about the value of the British alliance? Not all of these questions can be answered fully, but their consideration once again seems justified in every respect.

The focal point of Beck's visit was his talks with British prime minister Neville Chamberlain and foreign secretary Lord Halifax concerning the political situation in Europe and the entirety of Anglo-Polish bilateral relations.¹²¹⁹ Above all, however, they focused on the crisis in Polish-German relations, which threatened to escalate into armed conflict. The role that the Soviet Union would play in events, and the clearly diverging opinions on this topic among British and Polish officials, was not without special significance in these talks. The protocols of Beck's conversation with British politicians allows us to re-examine this issue. Until now, these documents have not been subject to detailed analysis; only their publication by Stanisław Żerko as part of a series put out by the Polish Institute of International Affairs (*Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych*) introduced them into academic circulation.¹²²⁰

When British leaders received the Polish foreign minister, they were not entirely convinced that the Polish decision to reject German demands was final and irrevocable. Various cabinet documents indicated that Poland would fight to defend its independence, and that Polish leaders viewed German demands as an assault on their country's rights. Ambassador Kennard confirmed these indications

1218 Ambassador Raczyński's report on Beck's visit to London (as a political report dated 14 April 1939), PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), pp. 330–334.

1219 Notes on the conversations that Józef Beck held on 4 April 1939 with the British prime minister and foreign minister, were prepared by both British and Polish officials in accordance with common diplomatic practice. The British text on these conversations has been known for quite a long time, because this document was included in a multi-volume series of British documents (DBFP, series 3, Vol. 5, doc. 3). And it is from this source that we have the Polish translation of this document, published in a collection of documents by Włodzimierz T. Kowalski regarding Poland's international situation in 1939 (*Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, Vol. 1).

1220 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), pp. 266–274, 276–287, 293–298.

with his superiors in London. A military memorandum dated 30 March and entitled “Germany’s intentions regarding Danzig”, submitted to the Foreign Policy Committee, concluded that Poland would fight not only in the event of a German ultimatum, but also if a Nazi putsch took place in Danzig or if the Germans encroached on Polish territory in the “corridor”.¹²²¹

In his first conversation with Halifax on the morning of 4 April, ambassador Kennard asked “whether [Poland] will defend its political and economic independence”. Beck considered the question rhetorical and replied briefly that “it would be different if he were not in London”. On the basis of a Polish note from this conversation, probably written up by either ambassador Raczynski or Józef Potocki, who participated in these talks, we know that three issues were the subject of the British proposal: “1) Soviet Russia, 2) the Danube Basin, 3) the Baltic States”.¹²²²

As we know, the Polish foreign minister opposed the British proposal to issue a guarantee to Romania. In London he steadfastly maintained this position. “As for the Danube basin,” he stated:

[...] we have two countries close to each other: Romania and Hungary, an ally and friend. The Polish-Romanian alliance comes into play only in the event of an attack from the east. The Polish government is pursuing a policy of preventing conflict between Romania and Hungary and believes that limiting our influence towards Romania would drive Hungary into Germany’s embrace. For this reason, he considers this kind of action to be premature. Besides, since Romania is Poland’s ally, any extension of Poland’s obligations towards Romania would require negotiations between Warsaw and Bucharest directly, because only along those lines could the interests of both countries be discussed.¹²²³

Beck’s reluctance to further embrace Romania raised eyebrows among British officials, who failed to understand the Polish foreign minister’s stance. After talking with Beck on 4 April, Eden wrote to Halifax: “Perhaps the Poles want Romania [without guarantee] to become the first victim of the war in Eastern Europe?”¹²²⁴ On 13 April, Chamberlain decided to issue a guarantee for Romania and Greece, without mentioning the Soviets and without consulting Poland, which was not well received in Warsaw.

One topic of the Beck-Halifax conversation on 4 April involved the potential consequences of an agreement on Anglo-Polish bilateral obligations. First, Halifax asked whether “a system of mutual assistance between Poland and Great Britain would somehow provoke the Germans”. It is beyond discussion that the British

1221 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23016, C.4622/54/18, General Beaumont-Nesbitt’s (War Office) memorandum to Strang dated 31 March 1939.

1222 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 266.

1223 Conversation with Halifax, *ibid.*, p. 267.

1224 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23016, C.5029/54/18. Letter dated 5 April.

wanted to avoid provoking war at all costs. Beck evaded the question. "A system of this kind," he said:

[...] would be very important for Germany, although it would not have the effect that a Polish-Soviet agreement would. He thinks that an Anglo-Polish agreement could be kept within the bounds of the Franco-Polish treaty, and reminded his interlocutor that Hitler had said he had nothing to say against this treaty in view of the fact that he had no intention of attacking France or Poland. The same could apply to the Polish agreement with Great Britain.¹²²⁵

Beck stated categorically that "German policy has lost all moderation in recent times. The Polish government is still ready to seek peaceful solutions, but it cannot close its eyes to dangers that have become obvious."¹²²⁶ The claim that the Polish foreign minister at this time did not take into account the possibility of war does not correspond to reality.

In the afternoon of 4 April, Beck was received by Prime Minister Chamberlain in his offices at the House of Commons. The conversation served as a continuation of the conversation with Halifax held that morning at Downing Street. Chamberlain began with comments about German policy, stating that:

[...] if the German government wishes to pursue such a policy as previously mentioned, namely of gradually attacking one country after another, it would have to end with the destruction of Polish independence and would constitute the most serious attack on the British Empire ever made, an attack that could even achieve its goal. In these circumstances, Poland and Great Britain's interests are the same. Neither country wants war or to impose unjust restrictions on Germany. On the other hand, however, [our two countries] cannot allow this kind of policy to progress without active opposition. It seems to His Majesty's Government that the most effective way to hinder such a policy would be to explain unambiguously that if the Germans were to go in this direction, they would have a war on two fronts.¹²²⁷

In this way, Chamberlain clarified the main reason behind the talks with the Polish government and the reason it issued Poland a guarantee on 31 March 1939. The prime minister specified that "his declaration of 31 March 31 was made to prevent some sudden strike" by Germany, adding that "currently, His Majesty's government's intention is to reach agreement with the Polish government in the sense that its declaration would be one aspect of this agreement, whereas the Polish government, on its side, would offer mutual obligations."¹²²⁸ This represented an offer to transform the British government's unilateral guarantee into a bilateral mutual assistance agreement.

1225 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), pp. 271–272.

1226 *Ibid.*, p. 266.

1227 *Ibid.*, pp. 277–278.

1228 *Ibid.*, p. 278.

It should be clearly stressed that the Polish foreign minister could not imagine talks with the British government that did not end in reciprocal mutual assistance guarantees. In his talks in London, from the beginning Beck emphasised that it was necessary to establish reciprocity in Anglo-Polish commitments, adding that “the Polish government never envisioned the possibility of a unilateral agreement”; that is, a unilateral guarantee by a protector for the protected.¹²²⁹ We must remember, however, that the British Foreign Office also explicitly formulated the need to set up a reciprocal system of obligations. Just before Beck’s arrival in London, a note dated 4 April was written up by Gladwyn Jebb in which the British government would consider withdrawing the guarantee if the Poles did not provide Great Britain with similar obligations. Were this to happen, of course, the British policy of deterrence would fail, because its essence as Jebb put it was “to make certain of Germany fighting on two fronts”.¹²³⁰

Beck insisted categorically that “this obligation must be mutual”¹²³¹ because a unilateral guarantee would place Poland in a position resembling that of Slovakia, whose boundaries and political existence had been guaranteed by Germany unilaterally under a treaty concluded on 23 March 1939.¹²³²

On 4 April, the British presented Beck with a draft proposal on mutual obligations. Chamberlain suggested that two documents be drawn up: one in a confidential form, the other one open and intended for the press.¹²³³ It should be emphasised that Beck was not a supporter of the open form of the Anglo-Polish system. He believed that it could provoke Germany. He judged, not without reason, that the reality of obligations was more important than public declarations. Chamberlain, however, warned that “a written agreement will come about only after a certain period,” so “if in the meantime there would be only England’s one-sided guarantee for Poland, then His Majesty’s Government would certainly be criticised.” He asked “if, in this light, the foreign minister could ensure that at that time Poland’s obligation to reciprocate would also be in force.”¹²³⁴ Beck’s answer was in the affirmative. The Polish foreign minister declared not only that “he can give such an assurance,” but also “that he has the authority of the [Polish] head of state in this respect.” In his opinion, the most appropriate solution would be a statement by the British prime minister in the House of Commons confirming the reciprocity of

1229 Ibid.

1230 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23016, C.7458/54/18.

1231 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 266 (quote from the conversation with Halifax on 4 April 1939).

1232 The government of Slovakia signed this agreement on 18 March, but von Ribbentrop signed it in the name of the Reich government only on 23 March, the date attached to its conclusion. See H. Batowski, *Między dwiema wojnami*, p. 343.

1233 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 286.

1234 Ibid., pp. 286–287.

mutual obligations with Poland.¹²³⁵ Under these conditions, the Polish government would not be forced to conclude a written agreement, public or secret.

During the Beck-Chamberlain conversation, participants discussed various kinds of possible German aggression, and it was in this context that they defined the scope of mutual obligations. The prime minister said that "in the event of a direct German attack in the UK, the significance of Poland's mutual commitment would be clear. After all, there is a series of other circumstances in which there would be no direct attack on Great Britain", He was referring here to rumours that German aggression could occur first in the West, specifically "in France through one of the neutral countries, e.g. Belgium, the Netherlands or Switzerland".¹²³⁶ Chamberlain asked Beck to address this issue, to which Beck did not speak concretely, though he made it clear that "if Britain and Poland came to a permanent and binding agreement, the Polish government would not rule out friendly discussions on this subject. If the principle of permanent cooperation is adopted, Poland is ready to talk about it."¹²³⁷ The Polish foreign minister evidently did not want to accept any additional obligations towards Great Britain at that stage.

Chamberlain expressed his general satisfaction with Beck's declaration. Beck stipulated that at that moment he could not adopt specific obligations in the event of German aggression in the West, but he added that this ought not to be considered evidence of a lack of goodwill on his part. Beck made it clear that "matters being discussed are of great significance and Poland's existential interests are in play. For this reason, he must weigh his words as carefully as possible. He does so to ensure that what he promises will be fulfilled."¹²³⁸ Chamberlain agreed that "matters of the utmost importance are in play, namely the future of both countries. The main thing," he said, "is not to expose oneself to both bad events, namely to not find oneself in a situation in which the Germans will be provoked and not to be without effective defence."¹²³⁹

Not surprisingly, British leaders wanted to know as precisely as possible the limits of concessions that Poland might extend to Germany, should the German leadership accept an offer to return to negotiations regarding the future of the Free City of Danzig. Halifax even asked Beck: "[...] what kind of settlement for the Danzig problem does Poland have in mind?" The foreign minister replied that he was considering "a bilateral Polish-German guarantee arrangement, one which would guarantee freedom for the local population to govern itself, and at the same time would ensure the protection of Poland's existing rights in Danzig. The German government has never denied Polish rights in Danzig and has recently

1235 *Ibid.*, p. 287.

1236 *Ibid.*, pp. 280–281.

1237 *Ibid.*, p. 281.

1238 *Ibid.*

1239 *Ibid.*

confirmed them.”¹²⁴⁰ Such a concept precluded the elimination of the Free City through incorporation into the Reich.

On the British side, opinions about the talks with Beck were very positive. Previous beliefs about “Beck’s selfish policies” were replaced with extremely different opinions. Chamberlain expressed *pro foro interno* admiration for the Poles, “this great virile race.”¹²⁴¹ On 4 April, Alexander Cadogan described the talks with Beck as “[...] quite fairly satisfactory,” although he added immediately that “it remains to be seen whether he will move in the event of an attack on Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, etc.”¹²⁴² As Strang wrote in a personal letter to Ambassador Kennard, “Beck is a valuable safety factor in the new situation with which we are now faced.”¹²⁴³ Harold Nicolson, a well-known diplomat, historian, opponent of appeasement, and a member of the House of Commons, wrote in his diary on 23 April 1939: “We misunderstood Beck since we thought him unreasonable. True, it was that in the old days he had been obliged to adopt a pendulum policy. All that was over now. He will fight for the right.”¹²⁴⁴ But perhaps the most significant of all these opinions was ambassador Kennard’s statement that Beck was “the only genuinely non-anti-German element in Poland”.¹²⁴⁵ In yet another valuable document, a Foreign Office note entitled “Danzig” and dated 18 March, we read: “Unlike his compatriots, Beck is aware of his country’s weaknesses in the military and diplomatic sense”.¹²⁴⁶

During his London conversations, could Beck have achieved more, or did he achieve all that was possible? Should he have not, above all, striven to establish all possible bilateral commitments?

It is worth recalling that Józef Potocki, a participant in the London talks, wrote *ex post* that Beck did not try too hard to clarify his obligations, because he assumed that any alliance agreement would effectively function as a deterrent, and therefore would be more political than military. Suggestions and assumptions made by historians that create the impression that the Poles neglected the significance of lower level negotiations, in which bilateral obligations would be specified, miss the point. I want to emphasise this, because it is very important. As early as 14 April, Beck offered the British the possibility of staff negotiations according to the principle of “reciprocal assistance”.¹²⁴⁷ But demands to specify military guarantee

1240 [note 159, p. 343] *Ibid.*, 284–285.

1241 Quote from P. Neville, *Hitler and Appeasement. The British Attempt to Prevent the Second World War* (New York 2006), 162–163.

1242 *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, 1938–1945*, p. 169.

1243 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 32016, C.5032/54/18.

1244 H. Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters 1930–1939*, ed. N. Nicolson (London 1970) (1st edition 1966), p. 393.

1245 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23016, C.50032/54/18, ambassador’s report for the Foreign Office dated 4 April 1939.

1246 *Ibid.*, C. 5047/54/18.

1247 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 22969, C.5322/15/18.

obligations could not it seems be met. The circumstances were not favourable as the Polish government was simply not able to force the British to make the decisions that they, the Poles, wanted.

The Polish foreign minister was aware of the provisional nature of the agreement that was concluded on April 6 and announced a day later. Speaking with Ambassador Noël on April 12, Beck admitted that “of course, the details could not be discussed within 48 hours, though it is important that the public declaration happened right away.”¹²⁴⁸

The “Scoring” of 7 April 1939

Beck’s visit resulted in a bilateral declaration of mutual guarantees given on 7 April 1939 and a joint press release (April 6) revealing the alliance to which Beck agreed, having found himself in a truly difficult situation, even though such a deal had not been agreed to by the Polish head of state or marshal Śmigły-Rydz. From that moment on, the Anglo-Polish alliance was *de facto* in force, having replaced Chamberlain’s unilateral guarantee declaration of 31 March 1939, although a formal treaty was signed only on 25 August 1939, in the shadow of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and in the face of inevitable war.

The 11-point protocol, which the Poles called the “Scoring” (*Punktacja*) and which summarised the conversations in London, was initialled by ambassador Raczynski and Foreign Office undersecretary of state Cadogan. It was entitled “Conclusions from minister Beck’s talks in London” and was dated 7 April 1939. The document was secret.¹²⁴⁹ It is worth taking a closer look at it.

Point 2 of the protocol, the most important, declared that both governments expressed their willingness to conclude a definite alliance agreement in the future, and for now they “decided to base their cooperation on a permanent foundation by exchanging mutual assurances of assistance”. Specifically, this meant that “if Germany attacks Poland, His Majesty’s Government will immediately come to Poland’s aid,” and “if Germany tries to undermine Poland’s independence through economic penetration or in any other way, His Majesty’s Government will support Poland in its resistance to such attempts.” Additionally, “if Germany attacks Poland, then the stipulations of point (a) will be applied.” Further findings of the “Scoring” specify that “in the case of another German action that would clearly threaten Poland’s independence and would be such that the Polish Government considered it a vital interest to oppose it with armed force, His Majesty’s Government would come to Poland’s aid without delay.” *Casus foederis* was thus defined to include

1248 Biblioteka Polska (Paris), Akcesja, 4610.

1249 This document was published as an annex to Vol. 4 of Jan Szembek’s *Diariusz*, then provided in full by Henryk Batowski in his monograph *Europa zmierza ku przepaści*. For the British version of the “Scoring”, see DBFP, series 3, Vol. 5, pp. 47–49.

only various possibilities and forms of German aggression. Threats by other states that could take action against the Polish Republic, such as the Soviet Union, were not addressed in this protocol.

Point 5 of the agreement defined the two parties' additional obligations, according to which, if it happened that "the United Kingdom and France will resort to war with Germany to oppose German aggression in Western Europe (Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark)," then "Poland will provide them with assistance." Beck made certain commitments on this matter essentially on his own, without authorisation from the Polish government, so the protocol contained his unilateral statement that the Polish government would "take [this matter] under serious consideration". Beck interpreted these commitments narrowly and told Szembek that he "did not make any commitments regarding the defence of Switzerland, the Netherlands and Belgium".¹²⁵⁰

Point 5 also brought France into this system of Anglo-Polish mutual obligations in that it emphasised that certain guarantee obligations had already been agreed to by the French government.¹²⁵¹ Starting from this premise, it was decided that commitments made by the United Kingdom under a future definitive and formal arrangement on mutual assistance with Poland should also be accepted by France, and "the manner of dealing with this matter would be discussed with the French Government".¹²⁵²

Point 6 concerned Romania, and it talked about the fact that the British government considered it appropriate to propose that Romania be included in the mutual obligations agreed to by Poland and the United Kingdom. But as the Polish government considered it "premature," this matter—according to Poland's wishes—was to be left for direct talks (and thus without Great Britain's participation) with the governments of Romania and Hungary. However, if it transpired that this position needed to change as a result of developments, the Polish government would take action against these states only in agreement with the British government.

Point 7 of the protocol states that its provisions could not constitute an obstacle to either party concluding "further agreements with other states in order to secure their own independence or the independence of other states". This provision should be understood as opening the possibility for the United Kingdom

1250 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 552 (note dated 8 April).

1251 This happened on 13 April based on prime minister Daladier's declaration in the Chamber of Deputies. On 20 April 1939, minister Bonnet repeated these commitments before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies. For more on this matter, see H. Batowski, "Polska w polityce Francji w przededniu drugiej wojny światowej," *Dzieje Najnowsze* (1991), No. 4; K. Mazurowa, *Europejska polityka Francji 1938–1939* (Warsaw 1974), 382 ff; M. Gmurczyk-Wrońska, *Polska – niepotrzebny aliant Francji? (Francja wobec Polski w latach 1938–1944)* (Warsaw 2003), p. 85.

1252 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 717.

to agree to obligations in possible agreements with other countries in Eastern and Central Europe, including the USSR and Romania. In point 10, however, the Polish Government introduced a highly important reservation, namely that “if His Majesty’s Government makes further commitments in Eastern Europe, these commitments would in no way extend the commitments accepted by Poland”.

In point 8, the British government declared that it would continue exchanging views with the Romanian government and the Balkan Entente countries on matters involving European security. Wording that was more important to Poland can be found in item 9, which stated that “His Majesty’s Government, although it is aware of the difficulties that stand in the way of including the Soviet Union in the action as described above, is nevertheless convinced of the importance of maintaining the best possible relations with the Soviet Government, whose position in this matter cannot be overlooked”. Point 11, the final point, contained a laconic statement that “in considering attempts to develop cooperation, the Polish Government stresses the importance of taking into account the position of the Eastern Baltic States”. As for the security of these countries, Great Britain took on no obligations, which meant that these matters were referred back for further talks necessary for the preparation of a definitive mutual assistance agreement.

In addition to the provisions included in the “Scoring”, it was agreed that the contracting parties would exchange information about the ongoing situation and its development. British diplomats insisted that they be “given information so that Britain would not be surprised by accidents”.¹²⁵³ The British treated this wish as one of their priorities, by which they primarily meant the fear of the possibility of unforeseen events in the Free City of Danzig.

The content of these arrangements was not revealed to the public, so on 9 April the Polish Foreign Ministry sent a circular to diplomatic missions stating that “Chamberlain’s declaration of the 6th of this month, the text of which was agreed and which should be regarded as a declaration of both governments, should be viewed as the basic interpretation of the agreement reached with England”.¹²⁵⁴ The issue here was a new declaration made by the prime minister in the House of Commons, in which he confirmed the principle of reciprocal obligations between his country and Poland.

The Poles treated the secret protocol drawn up on 7 April 1939 with particular discretion. In a conversation with ambassador Noël on 12 April, Beck announced that the essence of the Anglo-Polish agreement was the formula according to which “Poland and Britain do not accept peace at all costs [*la Pologne et la Grande Bretagne n’acceptent pas la paix à tout prix*]”.¹²⁵⁵ When Noël referred to the Anglo-Polish arrangement as an “interim agreement [*accord provisoire*]”, Beck suggested that it

1253 Ambassador Raczynski’s report dated 27 June, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 631.

1254 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 310.

1255 Biblioteka Polska (Paris), Akcesja, 4610.

should rather be called an “immediate agreement [*accord immédiat*]”.¹²⁵⁶ Receiving the French ambassador, Beck was under the distinct impression that the British had not informed the French government of the “Scoring”, which was a *résumé* of the London conversations and a detailed summary of the mutual obligations. However, the Polish foreign minister told Noël that the “official agreement is [what] Chamberlain announced in parliament”.¹²⁵⁷ The failure to inform the French of the “Scoring” was no doubt a tactical mistake.

Moreover, the Poles remained reluctant to disclose the content of this document to the French despite the fact that on 13 April, Prime Minister Daladier filed a declaration of guarantee towards Poland in the Chamber of Deputies, one that resembled the British guarantee. And he did so without prior agreement with the Polish government, but in agreement with the British government, which the Polish foreign minister resented, albeit quietly.

In Warsaw, officials feared that Poland’s actions could be interpreted as anti-German in the sense that they represented the encirclement of the Reich. Clearly, there was also concern that details about the London arrangements could be leaked, which could offend the French. On 19 April, a draft instruction for ambassador Łukasiewicz was drawn up in the Polish Foreign Ministry to translate and send the Anglo-Polish protocol (“Scoring”) to the French, but Beck rejected this proposal.¹²⁵⁸ Significant in this context is the letter that ambassador Łukasiewicz sent to the head of Beck’s cabinet, Łubieński, dated 25 April 1939: “Since then, Bonnet has asked me several times when I would deliver the promised copy of the protocol and pointed out that ambassador Corbin has also not received it from the English. I covered myself by the fact that my trip to Warsaw was still postponed, but the situation became unpleasant. I am quite sure,” the ambassador considered, “that I was not mistaken in my understanding of the minister’s instructions and I think that since the French know about the existence of the protocol, not showing it, or rather not providing a copy, may arouse unnecessary suspicions and cause a conflict that may affect my negotiations”.¹²⁵⁹ In view of planned Polish-French negotiations, it was necessary for the French Foreign Ministry to be well informed.

Returning from London, Józef Beck had a sense of real success, which today may seem to be at least unfounded, if not his *testimonium paupertatis*. First, the Polish-German conflict had been internationalised; second, the Polish government had not yielded to the dubious offer to participate in consultations with the Soviets; third, Beck had the right to believe that an alliance with Great Britain would open the way to rebuilding Poland’s alliance with France; fourth, by rejecting the idea to provide a guarantee for Romania, Poland avoided becoming entangled in a dubious configuration, the result of which would likely have been a violation of the

1256 Ibid.

1257 Ibid.

1258 Ibid.

1259 Ibid.

traditional Polish-Hungarian friendship.¹²⁶⁰ Fifth and finally, opportunities opened up for a return to negotiations with Germany regarding the future of the Free City of Danzig, and possibly German transport through Polish Pomerania.

Anna Maria Cienciąła was right to argue that Beck obtained a great deal during the London negotiations.¹²⁶¹ From the dubious original British offer, addressed initially to Moscow, he drew guarantees of independence for Poland. Acting with prudence and determination, he transformed the unilateral guarantee into bilateral mutual obligations. “He clearly reserved for Poland the right to determine if and when the conditions would exist in which the system could be set in motion.”¹²⁶² The draft instructions for ambassador Łukasiewicz on 19 April set forth: (1) a broader definition of *casus foederis* covering not only the violation of the territorial integrity of one of the contracting parties, but also any action “threatening the independence” of those parties; (2) a recognition that a judgement of *casus foederis* belongs to the invaded (threatened) state, and its expression “triggers action on the part of the other party”; and 3) regarding *casus foederis*, the injured party is to be assisted “completely and immediately”.¹²⁶³

The final communiqué, based on Chamberlain’s proposal, contained the statement that “both countries will take on a permanent commitment of mutual assistance in the event of an action threatening their independence, and they will continue to consider specific circumstances in which a threat to their independence could arise”.¹²⁶⁴ But the “Scoring” was a precise and concrete document, which formally offered much more. In addition, with the exception of Turkey, other countries that received guarantees did not conclude bilateral agreements with the United Kingdom.

In the spring of 1939 the Polish foreign minister doubtlessly still believed that war could be avoided. Analysing Hitler’s policy, Beck became convinced, based (as he put it) on personal contacts with Germany, that Germany would not decide lightly to wage war against Poland.¹²⁶⁵ He repeated his well-known thesis that “an

1260 Beck was highly dissatisfied with the fact that on 14 April, the British government extended a unilateral guarantee to Romania without consulting Poland. See *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 558 (note on a conversation with Łubiński on 14 April).

1261 In her opinion, this was a “great diplomatic success”, see A. M. Cienciąła, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938–1939. A Study in the Interdependence of Eastern and Western Europe* (London–Toronto 1968), p. 236.

1262 *Ibid.*, p. 552 (note on a conversation with Beck dated 8 April).

1263 Biblioteka Polska (Paris), Akcesja, 4610.

1264 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Władysław Kulski Collection, Box 2, Polish note dated 5 April 1939 (written by Potocki).

1265 It is interesting that in a statement he made at a November 1938 meeting of the senior Foreign Ministry leadership, Beck estimated Germany’s strength as being quite low, although he believed that what had ensured that the action against Czechoslovakia would be successful was the leadership principle. “[...] Germany itself,” he said, “has less internal discipline in a difficult situation than might

agreement between Poland and Russia could perhaps speed up such a decision". At that stage, he no doubt wanted at any price to avoid the impression that Polish diplomacy was building an anti-German coalition. "I understood then," ambassador Raczynski recalled in 1941, "that Beck hoped to the very last moment that by bringing England to our side, he could still avoid war through some sort of arrangement. He imagined that he could offer the Germans that he would not enter into a joint declaration with the Soviets, which he considered Germany's mortal enemy. In his opinion, while a joint declaration with the Soviets meant war, a declaration without the Soviets would allow for talks, since the Germans had no argument against the Polish agreement with the French, which led Beck to believe that it would be possible to join with the English without causing a war."¹²⁶⁶

Beck's statement of 5 April 1939 is significant in terms of the foreign minister's state of mind. In a conversation in Warsaw with the American ambassador to London, Joseph Kennedy, Beck heard that one should avoid "a policy of despair". Unfortunately, Chamberlain "cannot speak with Hitler and there is no 'bridge of understanding' between Great Britain and Germany". In these circumstances, "Minister Beck is perhaps the only person who could possibly initiate warmer relations". The Polish foreign minister confessed that "he was always looking for the simplest methods in politics. He used his best efforts to maintain good relations with Germany and, as far as Poland is concerned, the same relations would continue. If there were any possibility of agreement, he would certainly notify 'our friends from today—the English, and our friends forever—the Americans.'¹²⁶⁷ Ambassador Noël's reports contain information that Beck directly expressed the thought that, after returning from London, he would negotiate with Germany about the Danzig issue.¹²⁶⁸

As we can presume, Beck was still attached to the thesis that, from Germany's point of view, Poland played an important role; it provided cover from the east and was thus an important geopolitical player. This fact was repeatedly mentioned

have been expected. Discipline was maintained because decision-making power remained in one hand; the strength of that decision was sufficient to carry out the action and the technical means were sufficient for it, but insufficient preparation on personnel matters and the lack of the former pre-war restraint by the Germans to speak to foreigners were significant" (*Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 340). Similarly, in January 1939 colonel Pelczyński made the argument that "the weak point in Germany's internal situation is the clearly insufficient psychological resistance of German society in relation to the threat of the outbreak of war" ("Stosunki polsko-niemieckie przed Februarij wojną światową. Dokumenty z Archiwum Generalnego Inspektora Sił Zbrojnych," p. 261).

1266 "Ambasador Edward Raczynski i jego ocena 'polityki równowagi'," p. 106.

1267 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/WB/3B.

1268 DDF, series 2, Vol. 15, doc. 149, p. 205 (telegram from ambassador Noël dated 24 March 1939).

by Nazi policymakers in 1934–1939, and it was not until Hitler’s speech in the Reichstag on 28 April 1939 that these assumptions lost their value.

Between April and July 1939, Beck made various efforts to resume political dialogue with Germany. On 15 May, he instructed ambassador Lipski to “look for channels to reach Göring and Goebbels”.¹²⁶⁹ At the same time, he ordered envoy Komarnicki to invite Carl-Jakob Burckhardt to Warsaw, whom he did not trust but whom he wanted to use as a contact to initiate talks with Berlin.¹²⁷⁰ On 30 May, the Polish foreign minister said: “The last five years have shown that it is impossible to live with the Germans, but one can still try to make a reasonable compromise”.¹²⁷¹ Continuing this thought, he stated on 20 June that he was “not under the impression that military conflict is inevitable, which naturally does not suggest that all possible war preparations need not be made”.¹²⁷² In June, Deputy Minister Szembek wrote to envoy Dębicki that “he personally did not believe that Germany would start a war”—“except in the case of unforeseen events or circumstances [*sauf incident ou circonstance imprévue*]”. “All logical reasoning compels me towards such a belief. Although they are militarily prepared, except in terms of their reserves, they will not be able to sustain a longer campaign economically, and their international political situation is clearly shrinking. They are worse off today than three months ago, and better off than [they will be] in three months. Each day makes their situation more difficult. They are entering a period of political defence.”¹²⁷³ As early as 13 July, Beck did not rule out the possibility of Polish–German talks.¹²⁷⁴ On 21 July, he stated that “every great man can step back, which marshal Piłsudski often proved during his rule”, thus hinting that Hitler may withdraw his demands.¹²⁷⁵ The Poles seemed to have faith in the possibility of using Göring, who seemed to be the antithesis of the “anti-Polish” Ribbentrop—which, as it turned out was an illusion, since Göring had by spring come to believe that a tactical alliance with the Soviet Union was necessary to carry out a “new partition of Poland”.¹²⁷⁶

Wishing to give the Anglo-Polish agreement the proper interpretation, as a purely bilateral defensive system, Beck did what he could to make sure this message reached Berlin. No doubt with this thought in mind, on 12 April he talked in Warsaw with Japanese Ambassador Shuichi Sakoh, stating at the time that he did not think “that the English government is going to go too far for now. Poland has

1269 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 602.

1270 *Ibid.*, 603 (note on a conversation with Komarnicki on 16 May).

1271 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 615.

1272 *Ibid.*, p. 633.

1273 Szembek letter dated 13 June 1939, *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka. Materiały uzupełniające*, p. 91

1274 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 655.

1275 *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 679.

1276 S. Żerko, *Niemiecka polityka zagraniczna*, p. 374. The author refers to the diary of Alfred Rosenberg, *Das politische Tagebuch Alfred Rosenbergs aus den Jahren 1934/35 und 1939/40*, ed. H.-G. Seraphim (Göttingen 1956), p. 72.

not descended from its basic principle that if the Germans will be reasonable, and the minister he hopes they will be, then the 1934 agreement can be maintained. The situation has forced the Polish Government to extend the scope of our policy. However, as always we remember where we are geographically and the two neighbouring problems we face".¹²⁷⁷ On 23 April, Beck told ambassador Kennard that perhaps the Danzig problem would "work itself out between Poland and Germany". "And what will then be left of the Anglo-Polish collaboration? Only our dangerous, far-reaching commitment to England's security in the West."¹²⁷⁸

The policy of balance would not change—this was Lubiński's message to ambassador Łukasiewicz on 29 April in response to doubts expressed by Romanian foreign minister Gafencu about whether this matter was finally resolved.¹²⁷⁹ Was it a realistic position? Criticism of the Polish foreign minister's bilateralism, as manifested in March and April 1939, has dominated Polish historiography for many years. The scholar of the Anglo-Polish alliance, Jan Linowski, wrote that "Beck's theory of the balance of powers was already an anachronism by that time".¹²⁸⁰ Another historian of diplomacy, Henryk Jackiewicz, criticised Beck for "deceiving himself that he could alleviate Hitler's rage," while "these were all just hopes. The fact was that, by accepting mutual guarantees, he created a new situation in Europe in which it was obvious that Poland would stand up against the Reich in the event of its aggression in the West, he impinged upon its plan for the gradual conquest of the world but created no force capable of creating an effective barrier to Hitler's criminal intentions. He thus drew the first outbreak of anger upon himself."¹²⁸¹ The author of these words does not even mention what "force" in those conditions could have been put up against Germany.

However, contrary to various examples of over-simplification, at this time Beck took seriously the possibility that war would break out. As he stated in a conversation with Szembek on 21 July 1939, the possibility of war "entered seriously into his calculations after Berchtesgaden"—i.e. after talks with Hitler and von Ribbentrop at the beginning of January that year.¹²⁸² His assessment of the international situation, along with the *résumé* of Polish foreign policy that he formulated for Neville Chamberlain during his talks with the British prime minister, bring no dishonour on the Polish foreign minister. He said that Poland would not give up its independence without a fight, but:

1277 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Romer Collection, 5/1 (mf), Note on a conversation between Beck and Ambassador Sakoh dated 12 April 1939.

1278 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 376.

1279 AAN, MSZ, 6652A, Lubiński to Łukasiewicz, 29 April 1939.

1280 J. Linowski, *U źródeł sojuszu polsko-brytyjskiego (marzec 1938 – kwiecień 1939)* (Łódź 1985), p. 71.

1281 H. Jackiewicz, *Brytyjskie gwarancje dla Polski w 1939 roku* (Olsztyn 1980), p. 155.

1282 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 679.

[...] on the other hand, it would make the greatest efforts to spare its people a military disaster. We are looking for the right path between these two difficulties. Although it is impossible to predict if and when conflict will break out, this is not yet a reason for the Polish government to deprive itself of political means that would postpone the conflict.¹²⁸³

As if continuing his lecture on the principles of Polish policy, Beck told ambassador Kennard on 23 April that the Polish government had taken a negative position towards unilateral German demands “even before the matter of the Anglo-Polish guarantee came up. We have rejected and will continue to reject such negotiations, no matter what Britain intends to do.” This was an entirely dignified position far from any servile, desperate plea for help on the part of a state under threat.

The record of that conversation with Kennard, which gave Beck an extremely important opportunity to express his views on international politics, contains the following argument: “However, we must realise that it is one thing to make a bluff decision against the weak, and quite another thing to decide to start a war. We must make it clear that Germany will either accept *une convenance internationale* or risk war. Rejection by Germany of the former without a reaction on our part would be dangerous.”¹²⁸⁴ This statement clearly shows that the Polish foreign minister believed that the world faced an alternative: either peaceful containment of the Third Reich or war, with the capitulation of Poland being unlikely. It is true that Beck interpreted German diplomacy’s tactics at the time as “an attempt to bluff us”.¹²⁸⁵ He did not believe in the effectiveness of such actions when applied to Poland, because “it is extremely rare in history that someone disposes of the territory of another state without a single shot being fired”.¹²⁸⁶ Such an action could be taken against Poland. Beck did not lose sight of the possibility that war could break out, and he did everything in his power to make sure it would be a European war and not a local armed conflict between Poland and Germany.

Claims made by a significant number of historians, both Polish and non-Polish, that because he did not consider war possible, Beck failed to take advantage of opportunities for Poland to join an effective anti-German system alongside Great Britain, France, and the USSR (and possibly Romania), have no basis in reality.

At the beginning of April 1939, Polish diplomacy was confronted with yet another proposal, one which is hardly mentioned in historiography: a French offer regarding a tripartite agreement submitted by ambassador Noël on 3 April to Deputy Minister Szembek. Acceptance of this proposal would have resulted in the signing of a single Polish-British-French defensive alliance.¹²⁸⁷ Guided primarily by

1283 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 279.

1284 *Ibid.*, pp. 376–377.

1285 *Ibid.*, p. 377. Evidence of a bluff was supposed to be the Hitler-Gafencu conversation in Berlin as reported to the Polish foreign minister. For more, see J. Weinstein, “Scenariusz ministra Gafencu,” pp. 140–161.

1286 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 340 (statement from 4 November 1938).

1287 *Ibid.*, pp. 544–545.

the assumption that one should not build an anti-German bloc and should avoid such an impression at all costs, Beck rejected this concept. In a report dated 12 April, ambassador Raczyński explicitly stated that “the bilateral form imposed by the Poles did not fully meet the needs of the ‘new British foreign policy,’ which seeks to establish mutual assistance pacts with all countries threatened by Germany.”¹²⁸⁸

Contrary to what some scholars have argued, the Poles were far from passive in the March-April negotiations with the British. Polish diplomacy emerged victorious from the international shock that came with the destruction of the Munich system and the definitive rejection of German demands. The Polish ambassador in Tokyo, Romer, wrote to Szembek on 5 April: “Poland has gained a key position in Europe—which is due not only to its difficult and fully responsible stance, but also to its correct foreign policy”.¹²⁸⁹ It is debatable whether Poland had acquired a “key position in Europe”, but it had acquired a guarantee that the conflict with Germany would be internationalised. Any other solution, both passively waiting to see how events developed and relying on Hitler’s mercy, would have been worse.

Could the Soviets Be Counted on?

So much has been written about political relations between Great Britain and the Soviet Union in the pivotal year of 1939 that it may seem unnecessary to take up this topic again; the diplomacy conducted between these two countries has already been studied in detail.¹²⁹⁰ A great number of works have also been published about political and military negotiations in the summer of 1939 over a tripartite Franco-British-Soviet pact. After all, scholars always raise this matter when considering the origins of the Second World War, and Russian historiography has once again raised the claim that the Soviet leadership did everything possible to provide Europe with “collective security”.

From the moment Anglo-Polish rapprochement took shape, British-Soviet relations exerted an increasing influence on Warsaw-London relations. The policy taken by the Soviet Union in events at the time could seriously facilitate the outbreak of the Second World War, just as it could significantly impede it.

The fact that the guarantees for Poland opened up new opportunities for the Soviets internationally has long been undisputed. The Polish-German conflict had been internationalised and there was no chance of settling it diplomatically. “On its face, the British government’s pledge guaranteed Poland,” historian and

1288 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 324.

1289 IPMS, MSZ, A.11.E/1495.

1290 It is sufficient to mention here Gottfried Niedhart’s study *Großbritannien und die Sowjetunion 1934–1939. Studien zur britischen Politik der Friedenssicherung zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen* (Munich 1972), pp. 390–425.

Sovietologist Adam B. Ulam wrote, but “in fact, *its timing and circumstances* provided a guarantee to the U.S.S.R. and doomed the Polish state.”¹²⁹¹

The British political concept, which took shape in the spring of 1939, was as follows: Poland was to play a crucial role without which there could be no second front in Central and Eastern Europe. The Soviets were to support Poland in the supply of raw materials and possibly “war materiel”. As assumed in London, the very idea of a second front was supposed to act as a deterrent. Soviet Russia was therefore required in two respects. The belief was that Germany would not decide to take military action alone. However, if war broke out, Poland would fight and, having to hold the front for some time, would receive Soviet supplies. Everything indicates that, at that stage, the idea that the Soviets would enter Polish territory so that the Red Army could engage in combat with German armed forces did enter into calculations.

Guided by this motivation, the British government, which after the Munich Conference treated the Soviet Union as a country *de facto* excluded from great European politics, began in March-April 1939 to consider the need to establish contact with the Soviet government. As ambassador Raczyński wrote on 29 March: “[...] the English already placed great stock in political cooperation with the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the Soviets were acting as if they had no real interest at all.”¹²⁹² Before the ground-breaking events of March 1939, Robert Hudson went to Moscow with a special mission, stopping along the way in Warsaw. British-Soviet trade talks had been established, but the level of mutual distrust was high. In the London talks, Chamberlain and Halifax had tried to convince Beck that it was in Poland’s interest to appreciate the importance of a Soviet role. The Polish foreign minister did not reject this idea *a limine*. However, he did not want to accept any obligations towards the Soviets. He also excluded the possibility of negotiations with the USSR.

Explaining *ex post* his thoughts at the time in diaries dictated in Romania, Beck argued that “in the face of the German threat, there was no interest [in] discouraging Russia and it [would have been] better at least to secure [for ourselves] its neutrality. We did not believe in Soviet commitment *au fond* on our side and the side of our allies. We would have liked this player to not be hostile.”¹²⁹³ In connection with this, “we would have been pleased, practically speaking, if our allies came to an agreement with the Soviets that would allow us, in the event of war with Germany, to make use of the transit of Allied war materiel through the USSR and Soviet raw materials and other items that we needed to wage war.”¹²⁹⁴ On the one hand, this reasoning was realistic given that the Soviet Union’s involvement

1291 A. B. Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917–1973* (New York–Washington 1974), p. 267 (emphasis in original).

1292 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 238.

1293 Quote from *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*, p. 246.

1294 *Ibid.*

on the side of the Allied powers was out of the question. On the other hand, the very idea of Soviet supplies in support of Poland at war was not at all realistic.

Most importantly, however, Beck acted as if Soviet Russia's foreign policy was static, as if Stalin had no room for strategic manoeuvre between London and Berlin. Failure to consider these possibilities proved to be a mistake. As Jan Ciechanowski put it: Beck "underestimated the possibility and power of the USSR and did not grasp that the key to the Polish cause was once again in Moscow".¹²⁹⁵ It is difficult to disagree with this claim. However, could recognition that the USSR's importance on the international stage was increasing have significantly changed anything? If we attempt to understand Poland's international situation as comprehensively as possible in the spring and summer of 1939, it is difficult to give a positive answer to this question.

On 1 March 1939, Halifax told Raczyński that Russia was an important player in Europe, a fact that should not be underestimated.¹²⁹⁶ Stalin's speech at the XVIII Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on 10 March raised questions about the USSR's willingness to assist the West, despite some encouraging signals from Soviet diplomats.¹²⁹⁷ There is no doubt that, from the perspective of Poland's security, the USSR's stance towards the new configuration of forces in Europe in March 1939 was extremely important, the problem being that there was no indication that that country had decided to support Poland, which Soviet Russia considered a ruthless enemy and geopolitical "obstacle" to the implementation of plans to bring Central and Eastern Europe under its control.

We should recall that in his memorandum of 29 March, Halifax expressed his faith in the need to look for Polish-Soviet rapprochement. "Poland is no longer in a position to sit comfortably on the fence between the Soviet Union and Germany."¹²⁹⁸ The British foreign secretary thought that "circumstances would seem to dictate closer association with Russia, but there is much anti-Soviet feeling in Conservative and Catholic circles, and the Poles have not forgotten the Soviet invasion of 1921."¹²⁹⁹

In historical literature, we sometimes read the accusation that Beck took an inflexible position; that he adhered rigidly to the principles of the Anglo-Polish bilateral alliance; that he did not see how important the USSR was for both Poland and Great Britain in the event of war.¹³⁰⁰ I cannot agree with this argument: in light

1295 J. Ciechanowski, *O genezie i upadku February Rzeczypospolitej* (London 1981), p. 24.

1296 AAN, MSZ, 5098, Raczyński's report on that day.

1297 On 18 March 1939, ambassador Edward Raczyński wrote in an encrypted telegram to the embassy in Ankara that "members of the Soviet Embassy [in London], citing Stalin's latest speech, eagerly speak here of Soviet assistance to neighbours in the event of a German attack" (The Józef Piłsudski Institute [New York], Kolekcja Michała Sokolnickiego, 91/11).

1298 Quote from Ch. Thorne, *The Approach of War*, p. 119.

1299 Ibid.

1300 One example, among others, is Henryk Batowski.

of our knowledge of the realities of the time, there is no doubt that the British concept was hardly realistic.

To understand this, it is necessary to reconstruct the exchange of views on the Soviets that took place in London between Beck and Chamberlain on 5 April. The conversation was dominated by the subject of the USSR's role in Europe, its stance towards a possible conflict, and, naturally, Polish-Soviet relations in this context. The British prime minister agreed that in the case of Soviet Russia "one should be careful. [...] On the other hand," he continued:

[...] although he hopes an agreement that will eventually be reached will help preserve peace, we must remember that we are dealing with a state which, to put it mildly, is subject to strong reactions, and for this reason one must be prepared for the possibility that a conflict could be triggered even by the mere fact that an agreement between Great Britain and Poland was concluded. If Britain, France and Poland were at war with Germany, then one must ask how Poland for its part will conduct the battle. It has a beautiful army and some air resources. However, one understands that Polish artillery is not very strong and that there are no fortifications similar to those that exist in the West. Polish armed forces would undoubtedly fight with great courage, but if they ran out of ammunition, how could they fill these deficiencies, if not from Soviet Russia, as long as supplies from Soviet Russia were possible?¹³⁰¹

When considering the significance of the Soviet Union as a factor in the events taking place, and especially in the realities of a possible war, there was a clear and significant divergence of views between the Polish foreign minister and his British interlocutors. The exchange of opinions on these matters is worth recalling in detail, because this matter would weigh heavily on the further development of Anglo-Polish relations.

The Polish Foreign Ministry note outlining the negotiating position taken by the British in talks with Minister Beck, entitled "The Main Points of the British Proposal", was written up during the London talks and contained the following wording regarding Soviet Russia: "participation in the second order or friendly neutrality with the possibility of supplying war equipment. Halifax would be willing to inquire in this regard [participation en second lieu ou neutralité bienveillante avec possibilité d'obtenir matériel de guerre. Lord Halifax serait disposé de s'informer la-dessus]."¹³⁰² The Poles were not opposed to this formula *a limine*, although we must state clearly that it was based on highly dubious assumptions.

On the matter of the Soviets, Beck immediately told Chamberlain that "Poland attaches great importance to maintaining proper relations with Soviet Russia. It has a non-aggression pact with that country. After a period of tension last autumn, appropriate steps were taken to reduce them. The two countries have

1301 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 280.

1302 AAN, MSZ, Gabinet Ministra, 108A. Text unsigned, but most likely put together by Józef Potocki, head of the Western Division at the Foreign Ministry.

recently concluded a satisfactory trade agreement. For these reasons, the Polish Government understands that His Majesty's Government also attaches importance to maintaining good relations with Soviet Russia.¹³⁰³ At the same time, the foreign minister explained that in his opinion:

[...] any arrangement of mutual assistance between Poland and Soviet Russia would immediately cause an unfriendly reaction in Berlin and would probably accelerate the outbreak of a conflict. In 1934, Poland was able to set its relations with Germany on a normal and satisfactory foundation, despite the existence of a Franco-Polish alliance that was never a secret. However, the Polish government is aware that if similar obligations were made towards its eastern neighbour, it would undoubtedly cause a crisis.¹³⁰⁴

Beck's arguments about the Soviet Union doubtlessly did not satisfy the British; all indications are that British leaders viewed them as unconstructive. But differences of opinion had no impact on the course of the conversations, which were conducted in a matter-of-fact atmosphere. Lord Halifax, Beck's position notwithstanding, maintained his view that if "Poland, Great Britain and France were to be involved in conflict together [...] it would be important for Poland to be able to use the Soviet route to receive war materiel". In other words, in the event of war, the USSR would according to this concept become Poland's resource base. In response, Beck referred to an argument he had made in the last days of March 1939 during talks with ambassador Kennard. He noted that "the purpose of our current efforts is to maintain peace and one should be careful not to do anything that could increase the threat of war. For its part, Poland is ready to improve relations with the Soviets without expanding their scope. It is not easy to tell if conflict is inevitable. However, it is very important not to provoke it."¹³⁰⁵

Minister Beck again expressed his view that a Polish-British-Soviet agreement would accelerate the outbreak of war. The British prime minister noted that "he fully understands the expressed view and is not pressuring the minister to bring in Russia in an open manner. After all, it seems necessary to keep the practical side of the issue in mind. If, despite all efforts," Chamberlain continued, "war would break out, then what?" In response, Beck said that "as far as the talks between His Majesty's government with the Soviet government are concerned, Poland will not get mixed up in them and will not join them; it will leave this matter to the judgment of His Majesty's government and will maintain a certain scepticism towards them." Chamberlain argued that in the event of war between Germany and Poland, "the danger of introducing Russia into the discussion would no longer exist," and he therefore asked "if His Majesty's government were able to arrange aid in the form of war materiel from Soviet Russia, would Poland welcome such aid with

1303 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 271.

1304 Ibid.

1305 Ibid., p. 272.

satisfaction?" Beck responded by saying that "this matter is completely beyond Poland's control and Poland therefore has nothing to say on the matter." He then warned again that engaging in talks with Soviet Russia would accelerate the war. He also expressed the opinion that, as a result of his own efforts, Polish-Soviet relations were "correct in both political and economic terms".¹³⁰⁶ Thus, in his London talks with British leaders, Beck explicitly spoke out against attempts to engage in talks with Soviet Russia.

It seems that Beck was aware that the USSR could not possibly be interested in defending the status quo in Europe, which was the decisive motive here. But Beck did not undertake a broader analysis of Polish-Soviet relations. He referred to only one argument: that the proclamation of an anti-German bloc with Soviet participation would make war in Europe imminent, because Hitler would view such an agreement as a challenge and would thus initiate military action, calling it a preventive war. Beck did not discuss another, truly fundamental question: would the Soviet Union really want to participate in any true anti-German coalition, created to defend Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries?

During talks in London in April 1939, Beck seems to have had essentially two options regarding the Soviet Union and its policy. First, he could declare that the Polish government was ready to talk to the Soviets about collective security in Europe. However, such a statement would have put Polish diplomacy in a difficult position. The British would have probably tried to bring about a direct exchange of views between Warsaw and Moscow, and such talks were doomed to fail because the Soviet leadership was not interested in defending Poland's independence or its borders. It can be argued that in any case, sooner or later, Soviet diplomacy would have set forth the kinds of demands on Warsaw that were revealed during military talks in Moscow in August 1939. Negotiations with Soviet Russia would have inevitably pushed the Polish government onto a downward slope. Perhaps Beck did not see this dangerous eventuality at the time, but by showing great reserve towards the Soviets, he acted rationally.

The second option left to Beck was to emphasise that Polish-Soviet relations were on a fully correct and stable foundation, and that Poland's foreign policy would stick to the principles of balance. The Polish foreign minister chose this solution. Therefore, he merely stated that he was not obligated to "express an opinion on possible relations between Great Britain and Russia, and is not ready to accept any agreement that would, in effect, tie Poland with Russia indirectly".¹³⁰⁷

Lord Halifax, speaking with ambassador Ivan Maisky about the results of the Beck's trip and talks with the Polish foreign minister on 6 April, asked if the USSR could support Poland by, e.g. providing ammunition.¹³⁰⁸ Maisky refused

1306 Ibid.

1307 Ibid., p. 279 (conversation with Chamberlain on 4 April).

1308 I. M. Maisky, *Dniownik dyplomata. London 1934–1943*, book 1: 1934–3 *sientiabria 1939 goda*, ed. A. O. Czubarian (Moscow 2006), p. 370.

to answer.¹³⁰⁹ The Polish argument that the Soviet Union was not interested in defending the status quo—especially at its own expense—was grounded in reality. This argument also had its supporters beyond Warsaw,¹³¹⁰ although Poland's British partners were not convinced.

After the London talks, British diplomats constantly returned to their argument that there needed to be some kind of Polish-Soviet agreement. These efforts continued between April and August 1939.

On 17 April, the Soviet government submitted an offer to Great Britain and France for a tripartite defence pact on mutual assistance, as its own counter-proposal to offers of cooperation made earlier by both powers.¹³¹¹ The terms of the Soviet offer were included in a memorandum put together by the Soviet government.¹³¹² In the margins of this document, sent to the Foreign Office by the ambassador in Moscow, William Seeds, under-secretary of state Alexander Cadogan noted that this proposal is “extremely inconvenient”, because it would alienate Poland.¹³¹³ As expected, on 18 April, the Polish government expressed its negative stance towards the Soviet proposals, as reported by London's ambassador, Kennard.¹³¹⁴ A day later on 19 April, the Foreign Policy Committee convened, with Prime Minister Chamberlain in attendance, and expressed a negative opinion towards the Soviet concept, given that unwanted assistance to Poland would

1309 Ibid., p. 363 (note dated 22 March 1939). In his diary, this Soviet diplomat, who hated Poland, did not hesitate to comment negatively about Poland; he described his Polish counterpart in London as “Beck's two-bit representative”.

1310 While the French Foreign Ministry consistently advocated the search for an ally in the East, the Deuxième Bureau judged the situation more soberly. “*La méfiance de la Pologne envers l'URSS se base non sur ces agissements, mais surtout sur l'appréciation de l'URSS en qualité d'État. Nonobstant les relations aujourd'hui négatives entre Moscou et Berlin il est clair pour la Pologne que la politique de l'URSS reste basée sur des principes révolutionnaires immuables envers toute l'Europe occidentale. Il en résulte que Moscou cherchera toujours à gagner la partie en se créant la meilleure conjoncture tant au point de vue gouvernemental qu'au point de vue révolutionnaire.*” For this, see the report entitled: “Agissement de l'URSS en territoire polonais” dated 8 May 1939 (Archives Nationales [Paris], 7N 30024).

1311 On 14 May, the Soviet ambassador in Paris, Jakow Suric, received the French proposals from Minister Bonnet. Ambassador Maisky received British suggestions, which were submitted by Halifax (in particular, see H. Bartel, *Frankreich und die Sowjetunion 1938–1940. Ein Beitrag zur französischen Ostpolitik zwischen dem Münchner Abkommen und dem ende der Dritten Republik* [Stuttgart 1986], p. 164. See also ambassador Seeds' report dated 18 April, National Archives [London], Foreign Office, 371, 22969, C.5460/15/18).

1312 For the content on the Soviets' counter-proposal dated 17 April, see Henryk Batowski, *Europa zmierza ku przepaści*, 2nd edition (Poznan 1989), pp. 346–347.

1313 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 22969, C.5460/15/18.

1314 Ibid., 23064, C.5682/3356/18.

alienate allies.¹³¹⁵ However, the French government came to a different decision. It accepted the Soviet offer, in the opinion that Russia could support the defence of the status quo in Central and Eastern Europe.

Meanwhile, at the end of April the Soviets directed their first informal demands at Poland, which if implemented would have threatened its security. In contacts with France, the Soviet government made two demands in particular, the fulfilment of which would determine whether or not the USSR joined a mutual assistance pact with the Western powers: (1) the inclusion of the Baltic States in the definition of *casus belli*; and (2) the abrogation of the Polish-Romanian alliance, which was allegedly aimed at the interests of Bolshevik Russia.¹³¹⁶ The implementation of these demands would have undoubtedly brought the Baltic States, Poland and Romania into the Soviet sphere of influence.

It was easy for the British to proclaim the need in theory for “Soviet assistance” to Poland in its battle with Germany, because they would not have to pay for this “assistance” with their own interests, nor did they have their own interests at stake in the Soviet state’s geopolitical sphere.

Not surprisingly, after a month’s delay and intense deliberations, the British government accepted the Soviet offer of April. In May 1939, the decision was made in London about the need to set up an alliance with the USSR.¹³¹⁷ Halifax defended his government’s policy to “seek an agreement with Russia, stressing again and again that ‘it is in your interest, although as long as war does not break out, you do not want to admit it’.”¹³¹⁸ Significantly, even such an ardent advocate for appeasement as the prime minister’s adviser and chief confidant, Horace Wilson—who in 1938 thought that even if Great Britain was better prepared for war, it did not make sense to fight to defend Czechoslovakia’s integrity—became in June 1939 a supporter of efforts to establish an alliance with the USSR. It was the only way to realistically consider the possibility of stopping Hitler.¹³¹⁹ General Ironside told Prime Minister Chamberlain in June 1939 that “a Soviet alliance is essential”. Chamberlain replied that it was “the only thing we cannot do”.¹³²⁰ Winston Churchill, who thought that “an effective defensive front in Eastern Europe is

1315 Ibid.

1316 Ambassador Łukasiewicz was informed of these demands by foreign minister Bonnet on 25 April and immediately forwarded them to the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw. See PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 378.

1317 R. Manne, “The British Decision for Alliance with Russia,” pp. 3–26.

1318 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 717 (Ambassador Raczyński’s encrypted telegram dated 2 August).

1319 See G. C. Peden, “Sir Horace Wilson and Appeasement”, *The Historical Journal* 53 (2010), No. 4: pp. 983–1014. Wilson pointed primarily to the importance of Soviet economic resources (pp. 1013–1014).

1320 P. Neville, *Hitler and Appeasement. The British Attempt to Prevent the Second World War* (New York 2006), p. 175 (quote from *Time Unguarded: The Ironside Diaries, 1937–1940*, eds. R. MacLeod, D. Kelly [London 1962], p. 77).

unthinkable without Russia's involvement", did not doubt the need to win over the Soviets.¹³²¹

On 14 May, ambassador Raczyński informed the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw of the idea of an alliance declaration put forward by the Foreign Office, writing: "Anglo-Soviet relations as viewed from here look as follows: the Soviets, as the price for their collaboration with England, put up an alliance with England, France (and possibly Poland?). Chamberlain's government, not inclined to agree to this alliance, put forward an alternative declaration, which in the event of war would more or less be the same as an alliance, but which in peace is less troublesome for England and its diplomatic activity."¹³²²

"Chamberlain will sign an agreement with the Soviets," Ambassador Raczyński said at the end of May.¹³²³ At the very end of that month, William Strang, head of the Department of Eastern Europe at the Foreign Office, travelled to Moscow. On 31 May, he stopped briefly in Warsaw.¹³²⁴ On 15 June 1939, he was received in Moscow by Vyacheslav Molotov (the head of Soviet diplomacy since 3 May 1939). Strang presented the Soviets with the idea of "full guarantees" for Poland; i.e. from the Western powers and the Soviets. The British proposal operated on the basis of a very general formula of obligations and read as follows: "if one of the signatory powers is threatened by an attack from any third country, then the three signatory powers will consult one another, and if one of them is forced into war, the two others will provide assistance."¹³²⁵ Earlier, on 3 May 1939, William Strang informed ambassador Raczyński that "Russia is expected to declare collaboration with England and France only after these countries find themselves at war".¹³²⁶ The goal of this concept was to not give the Soviets the opportunity to make initial demands whose implementation would lead to the domination of countries receiving assistance before war broke out.

Obviously, the Polish government could not stop the British from seeking additional guarantees of assistance from the Soviets. In May 1939, the Foreign Ministry explanation of the Polish government's position was: "Poland cannot and does not

1321 Raczyński's encrypted telegram dated 17 May, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 488.

1322 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 471.

1323 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 609 (note on the conversation with Raczyński on 23 May).

1324 See also Paweł Starzeński, *Trzy lata z Beckiem*, p. 134. On his mission to Moscow, see Strang's "The Moscow Negotiations, 1939", in *Retreat from Power. Studies in Britain's Foreign Policy of the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 1: 1906–1939, ed. D. Dilks (London 1981), pp. 170–186.

1325 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/WB/3C, Instructions from the head of the foreign minister's cabinet, Michał Łubieński, to the missions dated 16 June 1939.

1326 "Przyczynki i materiały do historii kampanii wrześniowej 1939 r. Akty dyplomatyczne polskie odnoszące się do rokowań brytyjsko-francusko-sowieckich w okresie przed wybuchem drugiej wojny światowej," *Bellona* (London) (1955), No. 1: p. 6 (ambassador Raczyński to the Foreign Ministry, 3 May 1939).

intend to restrain the freedom of movement for England and France in matters that do not involve Poland and do not conflict with Poland's rights and interests. Each state has the right to enter into defensive alliances with whomever it wants. It is obvious, however, that Poland would always reserve the right to oppose any attempts to make it an object of any kind of deal. It is also clear that when it comes to Poland's relations with the USSR, they can be established only between Warsaw and Moscow.¹³²⁷ The Polish Foreign Ministry's position also assumed that a Soviet unilateral guarantee was not an option, nor was Poland's inclusion in a tripartite agreement on mutual assistance.¹³²⁸

Beck did not change his belief that it was impossible to abandon the principles behind the policy of balance and seek assistance from the Soviets. He also tried to persuade his British partners that "an alliance with the USSR will not only hinder all talks with Berlin, but will also reduce the popularity of English policy in a number of countries in Central, Northern and Eastern Europe"; such were his words in a conversation with ambassador Kennard on 22 May 1939.¹³²⁹ He maintained that the Allies had the right to seek additional security guarantees for themselves, but by necessity this could not create new obligations for Poland. On 15 May, he wrote to the Polish ambassadors in Paris and London:

Our position on the Soviet-French-English negotiations can be neither negative nor positive, because we are not participating in these negotiations, and it is not our job to restrain the policy of any of these three countries in this regard. We would have reservations only if Polish matters were settled in these negotiations (e.g. assistance for Poland), according to the principle of *nothing about us without us*. As for our participation in this type of agreement, we maintain that a Polish-Soviet mutual assistance agreement may provoke Germany and could accelerate a conflict. As for the extension of the Polish-Romanian alliance, we also maintain that such a review prejudices Hungary's position, and therefore immediately exposes Romania. We also see neither the need nor the benefits of renouncing the eastern alliance with Romania, because this purely defensive system has no element of moral aggression.¹³³⁰

In the Polish Foreign Ministry, officials repeated again and again that "the constant demands from Western states for a Soviet declaration of assistance for Poland are being made completely without our participation."¹³³¹ Nor could they impose any new obligations on Poland. One of Polish diplomacy's most important tasks in the summer of 1939 was not to allow Polish commitments to the Soviets to turn

1327 AAN, MSZ, 8099, "Polska Informacja Polityczna" (*Tygodniowy Biuletyn Informacyjny*), No. 13/99 dated 28 May 1939.

1328 H. Batowski, *Między dwiema wojnami*, p. 362.

1329 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/WB/3B.

1330 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 475.

1331 *Ibid.*, p. 468 (Beck's instructions to the diplomatic missions dated 13 May 1939).

into the price paid for Poland's connection with the West, and as a political plan, it succeeded.

Historians often think that words alone create history. But this is not the case. They believe that one or other verbal declaration or tactical move by the Polish Foreign Ministry might have changed the Polish Republic's catastrophic situation. There was a great deal that divided Poland and Soviet Russia in 1939. Poland's political imperative was to defend the *status quo*, while Stalin was betting on war. No statement by Beck could have changed that, and Beck knew it. In talks with British statesmen, Beck chose the best possible option. Therefore, despite everything, it would be difficult to maintain the view put forward by Henryk Batowski that while conducting talks in London, "the Polish foreign minister chose a worse option instead of a better one".¹³³² The bilateral agreement was not a worse solution compared to a four-party agreement, because the latter was impossible and pointless.

As Jan Karski, whose opinion we cannot help but view as balanced, wrote convincingly about Beck: "Not only did he not believe that Russia would fight to defend Poland or, for that matter, any country, he was convinced that if efforts were not made to secure Soviet *neutrality* in the event of war, the Soviets might actually invade their western neighbours. He recommended seeking a specific agreement with Moscow to allow Western powers to send war matériel to Poland through Russia and to secure Soviet deliveries to Poland in the event of German aggression. Warsaw would not oppose any understanding among London, Paris and Moscow as long as it did not impose new obligations upon Poland vis-à-vis Russia."¹³³³

The British plan to informally bind the Soviet Union to the West and to have the Soviets on their side in the event of war was completely in ruins.¹³³⁴ It had no chance, regardless of Poland's position. As one British scholar put it, the Foreign Office's argument assumed that Poland would be the basis of the eastern front and the USSR would provide Poland with material support.¹³³⁵ The Soviets had no intention of accepting this role. They demanded a specific payment in return for supporting the Western powers. It was easy for them to negotiate, because they had an alternative, namely rapprochement with Germany, which was unimaginable for many, but increasingly possible.

Another assumption, one that was adopted in silence, transpired to be greatly mistaken: namely that Russia, in the coming realities, had a choice either to remain neutral in a way that was favourable to the Western powers, to take on the role of an ally, or, in the worst case, to assume a position of strict neutrality.¹³³⁶ The

1332 H. Batowski, *Między dwiema wojnami*, p. 353.

1333 Jan Karski, *The Great Powers and Poland*, pp. 213–214.

1334 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.42/6, ambassador Raczyński's report dated 26 April 1939.

1335 R. Manne, "The British Decision for Alliance with Russia", p. 16.

1336 *Ibid.*

expectation that the Soviets would assist Poland in battle by selling raw materials and “war matériel” for free was a massive illusion. It was not Polish diplomats, but rather British diplomats, who came up with this idea.

Poland's Diplomatic Battle over an Alliance Treaty with Great Britain

After the guarantee was received and the “Scoring” of 7 April 1939 was signed, Polish diplomats faced the final task: the battle to define British obligations towards the Polish Republic under the planned mutual assistance agreement. It was to be signed immediately, but its conclusion was postponed mainly due to protracted and fruitless British-Soviet and Franco-Soviet negotiations.

Waiting for the results of negotiations with the Soviets—first there were political consultations, and then military negotiations—the British showed no enthusiasm for finalising the matter of an alliance treaty. Under these conditions, a Polish initiative emerged at the beginning of June 1939. An additional justification for the need for Polish diplomatic activity was the failure in efforts to specify Polish-French obligations, which were to come in the form of an interpretation protocol to the military convention. This document was prepared on 19 May following talks between general Tadeusz Kasprzycki and general Maurice Gamelin on 12–19 May in Paris, but it could come into force only after a political protocol was signed. In a letter to ambassador Łukasiewicz dated 28 May, foreign minister Bonnet refused to sign a political protocol because he could enter into no commitments regarding Danzig in the face of British opposition. It is highly probable that, guided by the illusory hope of winning over the Soviets, the French foreign minister wanted to maintain pressure on Poland in order to impose additional obligations on it in connection with an agreement with the USSR, which he assumed had some purpose. Delay in the signing of a political protocol was part of this tactic.¹³³⁷

Recalling the saying that “the road to Paris leads through London”, Beck instructed the Polish ambassador in London to take the initiative in turning Anglo-Polish commitments into the definitive form of a treaty. Ambassador Raczyński did this on 1 June in a conversation with Halifax, who replied that he welcomed the Polish ambassador's wish and had “intended to raise the subject himself” by sending his own draft treaty to Warsaw, conceived as a basis for negotiations. He explained the currently slow pace of British diplomacy in this matter very openly, by tying it to the desire to “properly clarify Anglo-Russian relations”.¹³³⁸ It was evident that previous consultations with the Soviet government had not moved the

1337 Such is the interpretation (not without reason) of Małgorzata Gmurczyk-Wrońska in *Polska – niepotrzebny aliant Francji?*, p. 100.

1338 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 559.

matter forward.¹³³⁹ And although Halifax did not mention this fact in his conversation with Raczyński, it is clear that this motive played an important role in British government decisions at this time.

A claim made *ex post* by diplomat Władysław Kulski, a participant in negotiations for the alliance treaty in August 1939, is not accurate, namely that he felt that the Polish foreign minister treated international agreements lightly. In his opinion, “Beck was in no hurry to conclude a formal alliance arrangement”. Kulski added that it was the British who took the first steps in this direction in June 1939, and that “an agreement could have been concluded shortly after April 6”.¹³⁴⁰ The historian cannot fail to conclude that there were no such possibilities. The British were involved in talks with the Soviets. On 9 June, ambassador Raczyński wrote to the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw that the Foreign Office wanted Kulski to be sent to London to negotiate with (Herbert) William Malkin, legal advisor to the British Foreign Ministry.¹³⁴¹ However, Beck’s reply of 11 June was negative, arguing that there was simply no need for such a move, that these were political matters and not legal matters, and that Malkin was “the least qualified” for such work.¹³⁴² In this light, Lubiński’s letter to Raczyński of 22 June explains a great deal:

Initially, the [Foreign] Minister wanted to finish negotiations with England as soon as possible, so that Anglo-Polish affairs would be completed before a deal with the Soviets. At present, when, as you can see, the English are up to their ears in Soviet negotiations, slightly negating us, we think it is advisable to wait and see the outcome of these negotiations and not to synchronise our agreement with the Soviet one.¹³⁴³

The reason for the delay in finalising negotiations over the Anglo-Polish alliance treaty thus involved not some kind of Polish calculation, but rather the British approach to this issue, which called first for a positive result in talks with the Soviets. It could have been anticipated *a priori* that a possible British-Franco-Soviet treaty on mutual assistance would have imposed certain additional obligations on Poland that the Warsaw government would not want to accept. In this case the British, most likely in agreement with the French Government, would have demanded acceptance of these commitments towards the Soviets as a precondition for signing a treaty between the United Kingdom and Poland.

1339 Strang arrived in Moscow on 31 May and began fruitless negotiations with the Soviet government. Ambassador Raczyński was kept generally informed about them by the Foreign Office.

1340 W. Kulski, “Pamiętnik b. polskiego dyplomaty,” part 1, *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1977), No. 42: pp. 167–168. Kulski was the main legal advisor to the Polish Foreign Ministry in negotiations over a definitive alliance treaty with Great Britain.

1341 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Władysław Kulski Collection, Box 2.

1342 *Ibid.*

1343 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/WB/3B.

In June 1939, both sides—the Foreign Office and the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw, prepared their own draft treaties. It would have been reasonable and logical to think that the treaty should be an extension of the protocol of 7 April 1939, but this did not happen.

The British government submitted its draft mutual assistance treaty to the Poles on 24 June 1939. According to Halifax, this British draft “stuck to the extent possible” to the “Scoring” of 7 April 1939, but it in fact he departed considerably from this document, a fact which agitated ambassador Raczyński. He immediately and correctly detected the reasons behind the introduced changes, and in his report to Beck on 27 June he wrote the following:

This circumstance is undoubtedly related to the arduous negotiations going on between London and Moscow, especially to the fact that the English would like to introduce some of the proposed modifications into agreements with both Moscow and Warsaw, while others are put forward to justify the British government's refusal to accept certain Soviet demands and make that refusal all the more firm so that it would extend to other diplomatic documents.¹³⁴⁴

The Polish ambassador in London was convinced that “these circumstances put pressure on our talks with England and will continue to complicate the negotiations, which are already doomed to a slow pace due to the persistent discussions between London and Paris.”¹³⁴⁵ The negative impact of Anglo-Soviet negotiations on Anglo-Polish talks cannot be over-emphasised; in this regard, historiography so far has been left wanting. It was impossible to reconcile Soviet demands with Poland's desire to preserve its independence, and no diplomacy could overcome these difficulties.

First, the British draft introduced the concept of aggression, not present in the “Scoring”, which was understood as a violation of the framework of the League of Nations pact, which was in turn a formula copied from the Moscow negotiations.¹³⁴⁶ Secondly, the submitted text did not mention the name of either the German Reich or any other country from which the contracting parties could expect an assault. The definition of aggressor state allowed for the possibility that the assailant could be Italy, which was not mentioned at all in the London negotiations in April. The draft did not mention guaranteed countries, while the “Scoring” included the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Denmark, but not Romania. The British text was also silent on a matter covered by the talks in London, during which it was agreed that the Polish commitment to provide assistance to the United Kingdom in the event of its involvement in a battle against Germany in defence of “Germany's western neighbours” would be met by a British agreement to assist Poland if it were

1344 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 629 (report dated 27 June).

1345 Ibid.

1346 This concept for the term *aggression* was used by British negotiators in talks with the Soviet government.

forced to “put up an armed defence of Lithuania”. Thirdly, the draft provided for the need for consultation between the contracting parties in the face of “circumstances that could trigger the entry into force of a mutual assistance commitment”, which was difficult to call the same as the April formula for a “comprehensive and rapid exchange of information between the parties in the event of any incidents that would threaten their independence”. Given the particularly problematic issue of Danzig as a possible reason for war, these differences were extremely important to the Poles. Fourthly and finally, Raczyński saw in the draft one modification that was favourable compared to the April “Scoring”: a clarification of the concept of aggression through the inclusion of words indicating that the independence of one of the contracting parties could be threatened “directly or indirectly”.

As he handed Raczyński the British draft of the future treaty, Halifax commented that it might be necessary to change the text if the British-Franco-Soviet treaty being negotiated in Moscow by Molotov, ambassador William Seeds and Paul-Émile Naggiar came to fruition.¹³⁴⁷ Halifax also proposed London as the location for Anglo-Polish negotiations.

The Polish ambassador in London suggested three corrections to the British draft, which he immediately submitted in a report dated 27 June 1939. First, he called for the inclusion of Lithuania in the negotiated treaty as a country covered by Poland’s “vital interests”, and he proposed in this regard either an additional protocol or agreement through an exchange of notes. He also suggested the “possible extension of mutual obligations *per analogiam* to Latvia and Estonia”, which had not been mentioned in April 1939. This postulate put forward by Raczyński was motivated by “far-reaching claims in relation to the Baltic section” by the USSR. Secondly, the ambassador considered it necessary to “clarify our interests in Danzig”, which should happen either in the form of a declaration or a protocol, or an exchange of notes. Thirdly, he was convinced of the need to introduce a clause in the treaty that, while at war, “the contracting parties not enter into a separate peace or truce”. This suggestion was motivated by the need to establish a counterpart to the wishes submitted by the Soviets to the British in the Moscow negotiations. Ambassador Raczyński concluded that “such a clause, if adopted, would have great political and practical significance”.¹³⁴⁸

Michał Łubiński wrote to ambassador Romer on 28 June 1939: “Let us wait a little for the results of the Britain-Moscow talks.”¹³⁴⁹ But the months of June and July brought no substantial progress in Anglo-Polish negotiations for an alliance treaty. As ambassador Łukasiewicz viewed the matter on 6 June 1939: “The Soviet government either wants to complicate negotiations and remain on the side-lines

1347 An analysis of subsequent phases of these negotiations is clearly not the purpose of my study here. For one of the most accurate discussions of the Moscow talks, see Gottfried Niedhart, *Großbritannien und die Sowjetunion 1934–1939*, pp. 390–425.

1348 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 632.

1349 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Tadeusz Romer Collection, 5/1 (mf).

for as long as possible, or it counts on France and England succumbing to pressure from within and accepting a compromise in line with Soviet policy, and in turn compromising themselves with a number of countries with which they are cooperating.”¹³⁵⁰

During talks in London, British Prime Minister Chamberlain and commander-in-chief of the French army General Gamelin agreed that, as ambassador Raczyński wrote on 9 June 1939, “Russia will not emerge on a grand scale”.¹³⁵¹ If you trust information provided by the Polish diplomat, Chamberlain was convinced that “Russia will be increase conditions step by step, and if so, it will demand the inclusion of negotiations over the Far East” so that negotiations will never be finally concluded.¹³⁵² The British were bitter and disappointed with this state of affairs. Orme Sargent told ambassador Raczyński that “the Soviets, having received valuable security for their borders and at zero cost to them thanks to the Anglo-Polish commitment on mutual assistance, are now committing political blackmail even more boldly.”¹³⁵³ Halifax confessed to the Polish ambassador in London in June that “Moscow is indifferent [...] to Poland’s security!”¹³⁵⁴ On the Soviet side, a significant summary of the progress made to date on talks with the Western powers was an article by Andrei Zhdanov entitled “The governments of England and France do not want an equal agreement with the USSR”, which was published in the Soviet newspaper *Prawda* on 23 June 1939. Neither in London and Paris, nor unfortunately in Warsaw, did officials take note of the dynamism of Soviet policy; rather, they continued to view it as static vis-à-vis the forthcoming conflict.

To continue talks that were doomed to failure but were required as a way to apply pressure on Hitler, the Soviet government proposed the suspension of political talks and the start of military negotiations in which the activation of an eventual military agreement would depend on the signing of a political pact (on mutual assistance). As Raczyński wrote to the Foreign Ministry on 14 July, the French government in particular was opposed to such a solution out of “fear that the Soviets will drag out negotiations indefinitely”.¹³⁵⁵ To bring about staff negotiations, the Soviets seemed to suggest new possibilities to solve the difficulties, the largest of which involved the lack of a definition of “indirect aggression”; that is, the terms on which conditions the Soviets could consider the Baltic States as in the sphere

1350 Ambassador Łukasiewicz to ambassador Raczyński, 6 June 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 564.

1351 AAN, Ambasada RP w Berlinie, 929, Ambassador Raczyński to Beck, 9 June 1939.

1352 Ibid.

1353 Raczyński to Beck, report dated 26 June 1939 (the conversation took place the day before). The ambassador wrote that “the French are unhappy that we are not taking part in the consultations.” See PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 627.

1354 Ibid.

1355 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 682.

of their interests.¹³⁵⁶ Moscow tried to “not make this a fundamental issue now, as long as staff talks were promptly initiated as evidence of good will”. As Raczyński learned, Soviet diplomats had suggested a solution to the problem of Poland which was not mentioned in the draft agreement, but which “would not preclude its mention in a secret additional protocol”.¹³⁵⁷ Based on information from the Foreign Office, the Polish ambassador informed Beck in detail of all of these difficulties. On 1 July, Western governments agreed “in principle” to the Soviet proposals of 21 June regarding guarantees to the Baltic States against “indirect aggression”, but until a tripartite mutual assistance treaty was signed, this statement had no value.

On 28 July, the head of the Foreign Ministry’s Eastern Division, Tadeusz Kobylański, wrote to the embassy in Moscow that the theory of “indirect aggression” applied to Poland, but on 2 August he claimed that it did not.¹³⁵⁸ Such was the state of affairs between Poland and the USSR: there were no signals then from Moscow that the Soviets would make specific demands on Poland, at least not demands presented directly.

In early August, expectations that negotiations with the Soviets might be finalised rose again in London, but the overall lack of real progress led Halifax to express scepticism about their success in a conversation with the Polish ambassador on 2 August. The British foreign minister mentioned that “he expected Molotov to raise the question of what England’s position would be in the event of a conflict between Moscow and Poland, but so far this has not happened”. He had little hope in connection with the announced tripartite (British-French-Soviet) staff talks, anticipating *a priori* that they would “give Moscow an excuse for further delays”.¹³⁵⁹

Despite the real situation at the beginning of August, Anglo-Polish negotiations intensified. On 2 August, Raczyński wrote: “Halifax is ready to finalise a political agreement with us”.¹³⁶⁰ In Warsaw, this was understood as a decision to conclude an agreement with Poland without waiting for the result of talks with the Soviets, indeed “at an accelerated pace”. The British foreign minister also expressed the wish that final negotiations be carried out in London. It should be mentioned here that the Poles received British assurances that after negotiations had been

1356 The idea of “indirect aggression” was not born in 1939, but arose earlier. As an initial stance towards war with Germany, in 1936 the French General Staff considered, for example, entering Luxembourg militarily, if the government of that country agreed.

1357 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.53/25, Report from Raczyński dated 27 July 1939.

1358 AAN, MSZ, 6652A.

1359 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 717.

1360 Ibid.

finalised, the agreement would be signed without waiting for the result of talks with the Soviets.¹³⁶¹

On 10 August, Beck instructed Raczynski to finalise negotiations with the British government as soon as possible.¹³⁶² On that day, Poland also noted further progress in the matter of the alliance treaty with Great Britain. In a conversation with ambassador Raczynski, Halifax agreed to conclude this agreement "regardless of negotiations with the Soviets".¹³⁶³ On the same day, Poland submitted its counter-proposals, giving British partners a few days to study them. On 16 August, Władysław Kulski (head of the Foreign Ministry's Legal-Treaty Department) was sent to London to enter into final talks with the British in consultation with Raczynski. Before leaving Warsaw, Beck gave Kulski instructions calling for the rejection of a Polish-British-French tripartite agreement, opting instead for a strictly bilateral agreement with the United Kingdom.¹³⁶⁴

In a letter to ambassador Raczynski dated 17 August, the head of the Western Division at the Foreign Ministry, Józef Potocki, mentioned that no one could tell how long these negotiations would last, but he believed that if they succeeded, "finalising the interpretation of our alliance with France based on a formula similar to that which will be accepted between us and England should not be difficult".¹³⁶⁵ Polish diplomats could have no doubt that London was waiting for the results of negotiations with the Soviets in Moscow.

It is significant that the intensification of Anglo-Polish negotiations was the result of stagnation and unproductivity in the British-Soviet talks. The latter entered their second phase on 1 July 1939. The Soviets wanted to define "indirect aggression", demanding that the British government agree to allow their troops into Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Finland. In this way, Soviet diplomacy made use of a new political concept, one that had been unknown in the hitherto history of diplomacy and the law of nations. Its content came down to one state forcing another independent state to accept assistance, whereby the latter would be deprived of voluntary consent and would *ipso facto* lose its independence.

To save the situation, British negotiators offered their consent, but without mentioning the names of the countries included in this British-Soviet deal, and with the provision that they themselves should first request assistance.¹³⁶⁶ In *The Origins of the Second World War*, A. J. P. Taylor complained that the British "genuine respect

1361 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Władysław Kulski Collection, Box 2, W. Kulski, "Punktacja do pierwszego posiedzenia w rokowaniach polsko-angielskich o traktat polityczny," undated.

1362 Ibid., "Instrukcje ustne przywiezione przez Ambasadora Raczynskiego z Warszawy do rozmowy z lordem Halifaxem 10 sierpnia 1939 r."

1363 PDD/1939 (styczeń-sierpień), p. 725.

1364 Kulski was to start talks in London on 18 August.

1365 PDD/1939 (styczeń-sierpień), p. 761.

1366 M. Nurek, *Polityka Wielkiej Brytanii w rejonie Morza Bałtyckiego*, p. 213.

for the independence of small states” became an obstacle to reaching agreement with the Soviets, who only “wanted an alliance which would defend themselves.”¹³⁶⁷

The Soviets rejected the proposed formula. Military negotiations initiated under these conditions on 12 August had very limited chances of success. At the same time, Soviet-German trade talks were underway, and the Soviets repeated their offer to establish a “political basis” for such an agreement.¹³⁶⁸ We can easily get the impression that the British did not want to intensify talks with Poland so as not to weaken their hand in the Moscow negotiations. Officials in London believed they needed to continue these talks not only as a result of public pressure demanding that everything be done to save peace, but also because of the belief that Hitler would not start military action until the Soviet position was clarified.

The complications in the Moscow talks transpired to be the motive for accelerating the finalisation of negotiations over an alliance with Poland. In a report dated 20 August, ambassador Raczyński stated that the British willingness to offer concessions was greater than would have been the case after the April talks. The failure of talks with the Soviets was a “blow to the prestige of British diplomacy”. The main subject of negotiations was a secret protocol to the Anglo-Polish alliance treaty. The British government adopted the draft secret protocol based on the Polish proposal; there was no British proposal, but each point was edited after “tedious negotiations”.¹³⁶⁹

However, once the German-Soviet rapprochement was made public, the British response could have been different. Even on the day the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the USSR was concluded on 23 August, it was not yet clear how the Anglo-Polish negotiations over a mutual assistance treaty would end. Halifax “showed a tendency to drag things out”.¹³⁷⁰ He also supported French “last resort” efforts to persuade the Polish government to change its position regarding the Soviet demand that the Red Army be allowed to march into Polish territory. But he had greater hopes for “renewal by us of direct contact with Berlin”. He trusted the “*bons offices* of Italy”.¹³⁷¹ The Halifax-Raczyński conversation of 23 August 1939 was a critical point in Anglo-Polish relations in those last days of peace; it was received in Warsaw as the worst signal: recognition that Poland’s fate was a foregone conclusion.¹³⁷² The Poles focused on this conclusion as the most ominous signal.

1367 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, p. 236.

1368 These efforts had been going on since April 1939. See *Nazi-Soviet Relations 1939–1941. Documents from the Archives of the German Foreign Office*, eds. J. S. Beddie, R. J. Sontag (Washington 1948). See also “Dokumenty vneshney politiki SSSR”, 1939 god, Vol. 22, books 1–2 (Moscow 1992).

1369 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Władysław Kułski Collection, Box 2.

1370 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 788 (Raczyński report dated 23 August).

1371 *Ibid.*

1372 See J. Tebinka, *Polityka brytyjska wobec problemu granicy polsko-radzieckiej 1939–1945* (Warsaw 1998), p. 55.

Ambassador Raczyński was afraid that the British might “come apart”.¹³⁷³ He repeated that if the Anglo-Polish alliance broke down, the Soviet-German alliance would become closer and would offer Germany a unique strategic opportunity to deal with France.¹³⁷⁴ In any case, the events of 1940 would be telling in this regard. The Polish ambassador presented Halifax with a call to “immediately finalise our mutual assistance agreement as the most emphatic answer to the war of nerves”. Raczyński insisted that negotiators enter the final editing phase of the treaty text, because the situation could only be saved by a “method of firmness”.¹³⁷⁵ He recalled in 1941: “[...] in the first moment of 23 August, London received news of the Soviet-German trade and political agreement, and the English hesitated before signing the treaty with us. Then I went to Halifax, explaining that if there was to be relaxation in the German situation, it could only happen by signing a treaty with us [...]”.¹³⁷⁶ In these critical hours following the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a final decision was made in London, one which resorted once again to the deterrent effects of a new and solemn confirmation of commitments towards Poland. The initiative once again belonged to Polish diplomats and once again proved to be effective.

In the morning of 25 August 1939, Ambassador Raczyński sent the last encrypted telegram to Warsaw, and its contents were as follows: “The English informed me today that the only changes they would like to make to the text adopted by the minister are: point 2b, a concise mention that the case provided for in Article II § 1 of the agreement refers to Danzig, and § 2 to Belgium, the Netherlands and Lithuania. In view of the failure of the Anglo-Soviet agreement, they want to delete Latvia and Estonia from the list, except that they will be included in the list ‘as soon as the obligation of mutual assistance between the British Government and a third country which covers these countries enters into force’. Finally, they want to mention Romania. Yesterday, their lawyer and Kulski prepared wording (to be included in point 2b): ‘as regards Romania, the British Government refers to guarantees given to that country, and the Polish Government to the mutual obligations included the Polish-Romanian Alliance, which it never treated as contrary to its traditional friendship for Hungary’. They are giving up on other changes presented to Kulski yesterday. For political effect, they want to sign today at five-thirty. I request consent, if possible by phone.”¹³⁷⁷ Beck accepted the proposed changes.

1373 Ambassador Raczyński's words in a report dated 24 August, PDD/1939 (styczeń-sierpień), p. 790.

1374 These were Hitler's essential intentions, revealed in his famous speech to Wehrmacht generals on 22 August 1939. See also Ernst von Weizsäcker's journal entry of 24 August (*Die Weizsäcker-Papiere 1933–1950*, ed. L. E. Hill [Frankfurt am Main 1974], p. 160).

1375 PDD/1939 (styczeń-sierpień), p. 790 (conversation with Halifax on 23 August).

1376 “Ambasador Edward Raczyński i jego ocena ‘polityki równowagi’”, p. 109.

1377 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.53/25.

He also authorised the ambassador by phone to sign the treaty text and the accompanying secret protocol.

The mutual assistance agreement was concluded on 25 August at 16.00 in London. It consisted of a political treaty and a secret protocol; it included no military convention. Due to the intense time pressure, ratification procedures were abandoned. The two parties decided that the agreement would enter into force immediately upon signing. Lord Halifax and ambassador Raczynski signed the public political treaty and the secret additional protocol. The text of the obligations enshrined in the treaty has already been the subject of repeated analysis. No new detailed discussion is needed. It should only be said that the inclusion in the text of the concept of "territorial inviolability" in Article 3 of the secret protocol was a success for the Poles, although during the Second World War it would not provide the Polish nation with protections against territorial transactions in the Soviets' favour and at Poland's expense.

It is worth emphasising: all indications are that without a new confirmation by Great Britain of its obligations towards Poland, the French government would probably not have accepted those obligations, citing the principle in international law of *rebus sic stantibus*.¹³⁷⁸ The fact is that there was a belief in Paris that it would be impossible to successfully defend Poland. But France's dependence on Great Britain was so strong that in the end, it did not withdraw from its commitments.

There is no dispute over the fact that the provisions of the treaty and secret protocol largely reflected the demands made by ambassador Raczynski on 27 June, which can only be considered a success for the Poles. The Anglo-Polish Agreement did not expressly include the concept of "indirect aggression", but it referred to the concept. The violation of the interests of one of the contracting parties by actions against a third country provided sanction for the concept of "indirect aggression". Mutual obligations recorded in the secret protocol covered Lithuania, the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland. Should Germany take aggressive action against Lithuania, and Poland deemed it necessary to join the war because of this aggression, Great Britain would accept the obligation to help its ally. Beck considered the omission of Romania and the inclusion of Lithuania a success for Polish diplomacy, and in return he was "ready to take into account British interests in Western Europe". He believed that there had to be a clear division of commitments between the two contracting parties, based on a recognition of Britain's preponderance of power in Western Europe, but without the British being able to define Polish interests in Central and Eastern Europe, because "we decide about Eastern Europe and in this region we allow no policy to be imposed on us".¹³⁷⁹ According to these assumptions, Poland accepted a balance of obligations in the secret protocol if an attempt were made to take control of the Netherlands, Belgium or Switzerland,

1378 K. Mazurowa, *Europejska polityka Francji*, 445 ff. See also E. du Réau, "Frankreich vor dem Krieg," in *1939. An der Schwelle zum Weltkrieg*, pp. 173–195.

1379 This is what Beck told Szembek on 21 July (*Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 679).

and if this brought the United Kingdom to war. The inclusion of Switzerland was a *novum* compared to the "Scoring" of 7 April. Other aspects of the protocol were only a repeat of the April arrangements.

In accordance with Polish wishes, the treaty contained a consultative clause by which neither of the contracting parties would make peace on their own without agreement from the other. This meant that events such as the Tehran Conference in November 1943, during which Britain ceded half of Poland's territory to the Soviet Union—without consulting the Polish government in London—did not fit into the logic of the alliance.

The alliance treaty of 25 August contained no provisions regarding Soviet aggression against Poland. Jerzy Łojek believed that it was possible to extend the alliance provisions to cover a case in which Poland were invaded by the USSR. He argued that in return for such provisions, Poland should have committed to declare war on Italy if that country, as Germany's ally, took up arms against Great Britain. British diplomats sought such a commitment with great consistency.¹³⁸⁰ Kulski's note of 24 August would appear to indicate that Łojek's argument is legitimate. Kulski wrote that, in the text of the agreement with Poland, the British did not want to limit *casus foederis* to Germany, but rather to use a very broad concept: to "all countries that have not been given a guarantee".¹³⁸¹

However, there is in fact nothing to indicate that this argument is accurate. The entire sense of the alliance with Poland was based on the British belief that Poland would be able to fight Germany for some time and would thus open up an eastern front. It should be emphasised that on 25 August, the Foreign Policy Committee resolved that no guarantees were possible against the threat posed by the Soviets.¹³⁸² It was decided that limiting the *casus foederis* to Germany should be kept secret, because otherwise "we should be guaranteeing Poland against aggression by Russia".¹³⁸³

The Poles made no demands regarding this matter, one of their motives probably being their lack of concern that the Soviet Union would strike Poland in the first phase of the European war. But it was also significant that the Polish government could not tell its partners that Poland needed a guarantee against an attack from the east, because such a revelation would put Poland in a hopeless position—and

1380 J. Łojek (Leopold Jerzewski), *Agresja 17 września 1939. Studium aspektów politycznych*, 3rd edition (Warsaw 1990), pp. 41–43.

1381 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Władysław Kulski Collection, Box 2.

1382 In this regard, see Michał Zacharias, "Geneza układu o wzajemnej pomocy", p. 110. For the protocol of this session, see Henryk Batowski, "Podpisanie i tekst układu polsko-brytyjskiego (Na podstawie dokumentów Foreign Office)", in *Władze RP na obczyźnie podczas February wojny światowej*, pp. 120–141.

1383 National Archives (London), Cabinet Papers, Cab. 27/625, protocol of a session of the Foreign Policy Committee on 25 August 1939. See also H. Batowski, "Podpisanie układu polsko-brytyjskiego z 25 sierpnia 1939 r.," *Dzieje Najnowsze* (1971), No. 4: pp. 1–22 (which includes a Polish translation of this document).

an indefensible one. By the same token, it would from the beginning ruin Poland's value as a country capable of creating an eastern front. In other words, it would involve a diplomatic game played with very weak cards. Poland, threatened from the east, lost its ability to play the role of an effective ally.

On 19 August, the British government decided to appeal to the Italian government, undoubtedly thinking that Mussolini would accept the role of mediator in the Polish-German conflict.¹³⁸⁴ In this way, they recalled the events of the year before, crowned by the Munich Conference. The new conference now being planned would take place with the participation of the four powers, but would necessarily also include Poland and Russia. Of course, Germany was not interested in any such solution.

In light of various evidence, it is beyond dispute that Hitler did not believe that the countries that had given Poland a guarantee would really come to its aid. He had secured for himself the optimal conditions for the commencement of hostilities, having entered into a political agreement with the Soviet Union on 23 August 1939. The day before, the French ambassador in Moscow, Paul-Émile Naggiar, informed minister Bonnet that Hitler would not wait passively as events unfolded, "like Beck armed with our guarantees", but setting past experience aside, he was quite ready to compromise in relations with the "new Russia"—"like one power with another power".¹³⁸⁵

Nevertheless, armed with his pact with the Soviets, on 25 August Hitler took one last initiative conceived as an attempt to break up the Anglo-Polish alliance. It proved ultimately ineffective. Two days earlier, ambassador Henderson had given the Reich chancellor a personal letter from Chamberlain containing a "last chance" offer for negotiations.¹³⁸⁶ On 24 August, the German ambassador in London, Herbert von Dirksen, produced a note entitled "The emergence of the British government to a constructive policy [*Der Entstehung der Britischen Regierung zu konstruktiven Politik*], in which he pointed to the possibility of German-British rapprochement."¹³⁸⁷ Ambassador Henderson began a vigorous campaign to establish contact with the Reich government. As ambassador Lipski wrote to the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw on 25 August, "Henderson was invited today to the chancellor, who proposed to England an offer to reshape relations between the German Reich and Great Britain, stating that it had always been his constant pursuit. Henderson asked about conditions, indicating at the same time that there would need to be a peaceful settlement of Polish-German relations. Hitler said that he could guarantee nothing in these tense relations. In addition, his arguments indicated a desire to

1384 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 22976, C.11617/15/18, Foreign Office instructions for the Ambassador in Rome (*Quirinal*), Percy Loraine.

1385 In the margins of the copy of this report received from Paris, ambassador Noël added a handwritten note: "*Finis Poloniae!*" (AMAE, Papiers Naggiar, 199, carton 10).

1386 For more on this issue, see S. Żerko, *Niemiecka polityka zagraniczna*, 395 ff.

1387 Bundesarchiv Berlin (Lichterfelde), Nachlass Dirksen, N.2049/58.

improve Anglo-Polish relations".¹³⁸⁸ A day later, ambassador Lipski learned that "German suggestions for England included the issue of disarmament. Regarding colonies, the chancellor noted that this matter is not urgent. In addition, he stated that the colonies to be returned to Germany would not necessarily be the same colonies Germany had in 1914".¹³⁸⁹

The Germans no longer needed any agreement, because the decision to initiate war against Poland had already been made, and the agreement with the USSR created the best possible conditions to beat Poland in an isolated war. Thus we cannot help but be surprised by the view expressed by Hitler's biographer, Alan Bullock, that Hitler would have accepted a "new Munich".¹³⁹⁰ The attempt to resume Berlin-London dialogue was a sham. On 25 August, the German leader decided to make an alliance offer to the British government.¹³⁹¹ Earlier, in a speech to senior Wehrmacht personnel on 22 August, he had announced that the Allies would not enter the war.¹³⁹² It is difficult to assess whether this was indeed his conviction, given that it was in his interest to assure the German army command that a two front war, the catastrophic scenario for Germany, would not be repeated.¹³⁹³

Unfortunately, the British hesitated, a fact that is well-known and described in historiography; they threatened to take the path of forcing concessions from Poland. As ambassador Raczyński reported to Warsaw, Halifax insisted "on the need not to close the door to direct negotiations".¹³⁹⁴ British (and French) pressure on Poland not at all costs to give Germany an excuse to start a war transpired to be extremely expensive for the Poles, a fact about which Western historiography is usually silent.¹³⁹⁵ For political reasons (and that alone), the Polish order

1388 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 802.

1389 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.53/25.

1390 A. Bullock, "Hitler and the Origins of the Second World War", *The Origins of the Second World War. Historical Interpretations*, p. 215.

1391 For more on the German proposal of an alliance with Great Britain on 25 August 1939, see S. Żerko, *Wymarzone przymierze Hitlera. Wielka Brytania*, p. 394.

1392 "[D]er F[ührer] nicht mehr ganz sicher ist, ob England diesmal nicht Ernst macht [the führer is no longer entirely certain that the English this time are not serious]", general Jodl wrote on 24 August in his *Tagebuch*, p. 235. Quote from "Hitler und England im Mitte August 1939", ed. J. Henke, *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* (1973), No. 2: pp. 231–242. See also W. Baumgart, "Zur Ansprache Hitlers vor den Führern der Wehrmacht", p. 147.

1393 G. R. Überschar, "Der Pakt mit dem Satan, und den Teufel auszutreiben". Der deutschowjetische Nichtsangriffsvertrag und Hitlers Kriegsabsicht gegen die UdSSR," *Der Zweite Weltkrieg. Analysen*, pp. 568–585.

1394 Ambassador Raczyński's encrypted telegram dated 28 August 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 818.

1395 Allied power ambassadors Noël and Kennard demanded the cancellation of mass mobilisation, intervening on this matter with marshal Śmigły-Rydz on 30 August.

for mass mobilisation, announced on 29 August, was delayed.¹³⁹⁶ Under strong pressure from Allied ambassadors, the order was cancelled and mobilisation was announced again at noon on 31 August—undoubtedly too late. This move resulted in very serious delays, especially involving the transport of military units to the front, and the disorganisation and confusion among troops already concentrated on the front.¹³⁹⁷

On 27 August, Hitler received ambassador Henderson and stated in a conversation with him that there were no problems between the German Reich and the United Kingdom that could not be ironed out. Henderson took him at his word.¹³⁹⁸ The thought that peace, already threatened, could be saved by satisfying Hitler's territorial claims following the Munich model of 1938 seemed to be gaining currency in London again. Those who believed in such a possibility, in London as

Western historiography views this matter in an extremely one-sided manner. See, for example, J.-B. Duroselle, *L'abîme 1939–1944* (Paris 1986), p. 23.

- 1396 On this matter, see Szembek's conversation on 29 August with the Allied ambassadors and the earlier statement on universal mobilisation, which was scheduled to start at 14:00 the next day (30 August), in *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 702. Important as well are General Stachiewicz's clarifications in *Wierności dochować żołnierskie*, pp. 346–366. After the secret mobilisation of August 23/24, about three-quarters of reservists were mobilised, of which Beck notified diplomatic missions on 25 August. Estimates of the progress of German mobilisation were roughly correct in Polish intelligence reports (See M. Cieplewicz, M. Zgórniak, *Przygotowania niemieckie do agresji na Polskę w świetle sprawozdań Oddziału February Sztabu Głównego WP (dokumenty)* [Wrocław 1969], p. 16).
- 1397 The chief of General Staff of the Polish Army (1935–1939), general Waclaw Stachiewicz, connected this Allied move with the British Government's entry into fruitless correspondence with Hitler in the last days of August: *Wierności dochować żołnierskiej*, 656. Mobilisation came a couple of days too late, as judged by General Stanisław Kopański, *Moja służba w Wojsku Polskim 1917–1939* (London 1965), p. 297. Regardless of allied interventions, universal mobilisation should have been ordered earlier, wrote general Kazimierz Grabisz, "Wrzesień 1939 roku. Klęska haniebna czy nieuchronna?" *Dziennik Polski i Dziennik Żołnierza* (London), 4 September 1971. In the spring of 1940, colonel Jaklicz noted the following thought on this subject: "If we had managed to mobilise and concentrate with all our strength, if the supreme commander had the planned defences and put them into combat mode, then there is no doubt we would also have been beaten, losses would have been ten times greater, but what does human sacrifice and bloodshed mean for the soldiers' honour, which would shine with radiant light today?" (J. Jaklicz, "Żołnierzy 2-giej Rzeczypospolitej," *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1976), No. 35: p. 165).
- 1398 Frank Roberts, head of Polish affairs in the Foreign Office, commented years later: "Henderson had almost become Hitler's ambassador to us, rather than ours to Hitler" (quote from D. Faber, *Munich, 1938*, p. 24). The biography penned by Peter Neville is an attempt to rehabilitate this diplomat (see idem, *Appeasing Hitler: The Diplomacy of Sir Neville Henderson*).

well as in Paris and Rome, could not imagine that there was no place for a “new Munich” because, having a pact with the Soviets, and Central and Eastern Europe having been divided between two totalitarian powers, Hitler could not be interested in any new corrections to the Versailles system. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact had destroyed that system.

It is important that Beck resisted the increased pressure on Poland. Expressing readiness for talks with Germany, the Polish foreign minister instructed ambassador Lipski to contact von Ribbentrop, who demanded the arrival of a special representative in Berlin.¹³⁹⁹ Lipski's visit in the evening of 31 August could not possibly have brought any results, because he was not the representative that German officials expected in the capital of the Third Reich. Thus, the thought that Poland could be forced to surrender before firing a shot definitely fell by the wayside.

* * *

This chapter has been an attempt to answer questions about how the Polish leadership perceived Great Britain, its political goals and its foreign policy in the crucial last months before the outbreak of the Second World War. In light of available source material, I wanted to describe how Polish assessments of British policy developed in the summer of 1939. Polish historiography has not paid much attention to the Polish view of Great Britain. Another issue involves Polish matters that were strongly present in British-Soviet relations in 1939 and which have been repeatedly analysed in literature—often in a highly biased way and without a proper understanding of the mechanisms of Soviet policy, which were consistently calculated to trigger a European war and not to defend the status quo. Finally, an important purpose behind these considerations was to show that the alliance of 25 August 1939 was not an incidental gift of history, that Polish diplomats waged a persistent struggle for an alliance with Great Britain, guided by a specific political programme and pursued through their own proposals for bilateral commitments, roughly 90 percent of which was introduced into the negotiation process.

Instead of a concluding paragraph or two describing my considerations, it seems appropriate to lay out my conclusions individually:

1. Long before the pivotal month of March 1939, Great Britain was at the heart of Beck's political concepts, although there was no indication that Britain would be able to take on specific commitments towards Poland. A peripheral, medium-sized state, surrounded by two totalitarian powers, and having been an independent country with its own policies for only 20 years, Poland was challenged to attract the United Kingdom as a partner, although officials on the Thames eventually began to view the policy of balance as a serious factor in European stability. Polish foreign policy's main goal at first was to lead dialogue on European security (without thinking about an alliance), and Beck, an

1399 Henryk Batowski discusses these events in detail, pointing to the inflexibility of Polish diplomacy: *Między dwiema wojnami*, pp. 392–396.

Anglophile, gave this task priority. Poland's efforts had no chance of success as long as Great Britain followed the doctrine of appeasement and until it began considering Central and Eastern Europe part of its geopolitical interests. An unusual set of coincidences led the United Kingdom in March 1939 to extend a guarantee to the Polish government, which Poland accepted, although it demanded modifications to the original concept; that is, the abandonment of the idea to consult a select group of countries in favour of bilateral obligations, entirely separate from France.

2. Both sides made concessions. The British government abandoned the idea of consultations within a bloc of states interested in defending the status quo (with the participation of the Soviets). The Poles withdrew from the idea of a secret reinsurance agreement, agreeing to disclose the fact of the mutual assistance agreement, which took place in the form of communiqué on 6 April, while the "Scoring" of 7 April, though provisional, was kept top secret. The Polish government accepted the British demand that Poland's obligations be fulfilled if the United Kingdom were forced to defend the independence of Switzerland, Belgium or the Netherlands, which was a serious response to British interests. In turn, the British withdrew their demand that Poland cover Romania with its guarantees, and agreed that an attempt to subjugate Lithuania would be a reason to activate the alliance, if the government in Warsaw deemed it necessary to go to war. Therefore, Poland did not receive the alliance with Great Britain "as a gift"; rather, it was largely the result of the efforts of Polish diplomacy, as we can easily see through a comparison of the original Polish draft with the final text of the treaty and the secret protocol.
3. There is no evidence to support the theory, which we see recur in Polish historiography but mainly in journalistic commentary, that Great Britain intended for there to be a Polish-German war and wanted to direct the Third Reich's attention eastward.¹⁴⁰⁰ There is also no reason to consider "revisionist" ideas about the "unnecessary war" of 1939, about the reckless way in which the British Empire handed decisions about peace and war over to the Poles.¹⁴⁰¹ Not one of the British government documents disclosed since 1969 contains argumentation in this direction. These ideas are as false as A. J. P. Taylor's famous thesis that Beck cynically dragged the British Empire into war, and that Chamberlain's and Halifax's diplomacy passively succumbed to his insidious tactics.¹⁴⁰² Both

1400 Among others, the British "revisionist" historian Simon Newman made this argument in his work *March 1939: The British Guarantee to Poland. A Study in the Continuity of British Foreign Policy* (Oxford 1976). This book's thesis was criticised intensely by Anna M. Cieniła in her "Wielka Brytania gotowa była bić się za polski Gdańsk?", pp. 32–43. "Newman's thesis, even if it is not devoid of logic, has no foundation in British documents" (p. 39).

1401 For example J. Mordal, *La guerre a commencé en Pologne* (Paris 1968).

1402 A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (Piotr Wandycz criticised this argumentation in idem, "Polska między Wschodem a Zachodem," pp. 101–118).

concepts were only amazing confabulations conceived *ex post*. It seems that if the British government had really wanted to direct German expansion eastward, then in the spring of 1939 it would not have offered its guarantees to the Poles, and moreover it would not have agreed to an alliance with Poland, but would rather have wanted only to ascertain whether the Polish political leadership would accept or reject German territorial demands. Having made sure that the Polish decision in this case was negative, it would have likely adopted a wait-and-see approach, without having to do anything. After all, in April and especially in May 1939, it was absolutely clear that these demands would not be accepted, and yet the British government did not withdraw its guarantee.

4. The acceptance of British guarantee obligations was the obvious consequence of the Polish "no" to Hitler's demands. These obligations were to bring about one of two things: they would allow Poland, thus strengthened in negotiations with Germany, to either re-establish normal bilateral relations or to internationalise the Polish-German conflict in the reality of the war. Jan Ciechanowski, an expert in British politics, argued that the guarantees had accelerated war, but the question must arise, can we be sure? It is undisputed that they gave Hitler a good alibi so that he could tell his own people that a British "policy of encirclement" had forced Germany to bet everything on one card. It is unacceptable and contrary to our current knowledge that the acceptance of British guarantees provoked the Germans to carry out a strike that they had not planned beforehand. As early as in February 1939, Hitler's thinking clearly crystallised that Poland must be treated in such a way that, if it did not accept his demands, Poland would cease to be an independent player in international politics for many years. It is impossible not to see here an explicit announcement of the intention to use force. Thus, no guarantees caused Hitler to decide to deal with Poland militarily; this decision was included in his plans before the pivotal month of March 1939.
5. Should the phase of British policy that followed 31 March 1939 be treated as a radical shift in British diplomacy, or should it be seen as just a new tactic? This question is yet another momentous one which has been considered many times in historiography. Alan Palmer argued that the policy of appeasement ended in March 1939,¹⁴⁰³ but a re-evaluation of the various historiographic assessments leads to a new vision of British policy after 31 March, and one expert in this matter, Anna Maria Cienciała, rightly argued that the most fundamental goal guiding the Chamberlain government was to strengthen Poland in its negotiations with Germany. Great Britain guaranteed Poland's independence, but not territorial integrity, while the British cabinet did not consider the survival of the Free City of Danzig necessary in order to save the independence of the Polish state. In London, neither the cession of the Free City nor an extraterritorial motorway through Polish Pomerania was perceived as a blow to Poland's

1403 A. Palmer, *Północne sąsiedztwo*, p. 353.

independence. This British plan was not realised primarily due to the determination of the Poles, who ruled out such concessions and formulated their foreign policy so that it was one not marked by passivity and accommodation.

6. The Polish foreign minister was undoubtedly convinced that the Anglo-Polish agreement could become an effective deterrent that would make war impossible, and that Hitler, realising the impossibility of winning a war against a large coalition, would withdraw his demands on Poland. One thing that gives us an opportunity to criticise Beck's diplomacy is the lack of specificity with regard to British military commitments, but this does not mean that the Poles were not at all interested in the military aspect of the agreement. In any case, Polish efforts did little good and it is highly doubtful whether, by being even more categorical in their demand for specifics, Polish diplomats could have achieved more.
7. The theoretical possibility of obtaining British guarantees, not only against Germany but also against the Soviets, is another issue that troubles historians. There is no reason to believe that such a chance existed. It is interesting, however, that the Polish government did not ask this question in August 1939. It is true that Beck did not believe that Bolshevik Russia posed a real danger to Poland in the first phase of the coming war, which was supposed to be a Polish defensive campaign. But it should be added that if it had been different, and if the Polish foreign minister had announced in talks with the British that his country also expected an attack from the east, that would have represented an admission that Poland was in a hopeless situation, which would have seriously weakened its negotiating position.
8. An alternative solution to the acceptance of British guarantees was not possible unless Hitler's offer was instead deemed acceptable, along with the additional proposals, e.g. recognition of Polish interests in Slovakia, but this solution could not realistically be applied. It would have meant the surrender and acceptance of Poland's vassal-state status vis-à-vis the Third Reich and the terrible prospect of participating in Germany's pursuit of hegemony with all its potential and real consequences. *Tertium non datur*. Rejection of the demands made by the German leadership and a decision not to take advantage of the British offer would have been a true path to nowhere. Even if the military value of the commitments that Poland received was problematic, the Polish decision could not have been different. Today, 70 years after the fact, there are no grounds to undermine this fundamental view of the matter. *Summa summarum*, Poland could theoretically have chosen one of three options other than the one Beck chose: not to accept British guarantees, and thus remain in isolation and succumb to Germany in a short-lived armed struggle; to accept Germany's demands, and thus become its vassal; and finally, to attempt to search for some form of cooperation with the Soviet Union, which could not have ended in any way other than with demands against Poland's independence. Each of these options was unacceptable.

9. The transformation of unilateral guarantees into a bilateral Anglo-Polish alliance is something that Beck had the right to regard as a personal task, but he was in fact following beliefs that were common in Polish society. "In accordance with this policy," Paweł Starzeński wrote, "the nation went to battle in order to reject any other [policy]. It did so with faith that our allies would keep their commitments."¹⁴⁰⁴ Another diplomat, Jan Bociański, noted in his unpublished memoirs that "every normal person must admit that it was a huge success for Beck, who won over to Poland's side the most powerful country in the world as an ally. Not only that, this country gave Poland a blank cheque, handed the decision as to the moment England would enter the war over to Poland."¹⁴⁰⁵ Of course, Poland did not receive a blank cheque allowing for a unilateral ruling over how the alliance would be used, but all indications are that without an agreement with Great Britain, Poland's fate in 1939 would have been sealed in a local war, ending with partition. The extent to which the process by which French foreign policy towards Poland was shaped as a reflection of British policy can be seen by everyone who knows the realities and events of the last months of peace and the circumstances around which war was declared on Germany on 3 September. Undoubtedly, even France's declaration of war on the Third Reich would have been problematic if Great Britain had not become Poland's partner. So Beck had the right to hold the view that "the alliance with England has more weight for Poland than our alliance with France. Because although English policies can be the result of opportunistic calculations, unlike France England has always been an enemy of Russia, and thus a traditional enemy of Russia."¹⁴⁰⁶ Speaking on the radio on 3 September 1939 and emphasising the great importance of Britain's declaration of war on Germany, he expressed his conviction that "we have found ourselves in good, decent company."¹⁴⁰⁷ During his internment in Romania, he maintained these views about Britain. "The English will wage war with the steadfast decision to achieve total victory. In the current coalition, England will play a leading role."¹⁴⁰⁸ He reportedly said in the spring of 1939: "England is the only power in this world, next to the Vatican, that is convinced of its eternity."¹⁴⁰⁹

1404 P. Starzeński, *Trzy lata z Beckiem*, p. 158.

1405 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (London), KOL. 85, J. Bociański, "Wspomnienia" (mps), p. 56. Jan Bociański was Polish consul in Marseille in the 1930s.

1406 W. Pobóg-Malinowski, "Na rumuńskim rozdrożu (Fragmenty wspomnień)," *Kultura* (Paris) (1948), No. 9–10: p. 83

1407 "Mowa Ministra Becka," *Gazeta Polska*, 4 September 1939. See also W. Lipiński, *Dziennik. Wrześniowa obrona Warszawy 1939 r.*, ed. J. M. Kłoczowski (Warsaw 1989), p. 219.

1408 W. Pobóg-Malinowski, "Na rumuńskim rozdrożu", p. 175. For this reason, Beck believed at the time (at the end of 1939) that the new Polish government in exile "should seek a *droit de résidence* in the British Isles" and not in France.

1409 P. Starzeński, *Trzy lata z Beckiem*, p. 52.

10. The optimal solution would have been to obtain credible commitments in the military sphere. Beck did not get these commitments, but it is extremely difficult to blame him. He was playing with weak cards from the outset, although it is a matter of discussion whether and to what extent he was aware of his own country's military weakness.¹⁴¹⁰ The internationalisation of the Polish cause was a true achievement for Beck's diplomacy, although to some this statement may appear to be an attempt to justify the path to defeat. No Polish policy could have thwarted the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, nor could any policy have ensured that Poland would receive active assistance from its Western allies in September 1939.¹⁴¹¹ If we believe that politics is the art of achieving the possible, then Beck's diplomacy reached the maximum of what was possible because, although the Polish state temporarily lost territory, its legal status was saved, and the government, as a depository of rights and obligations as understood in international law, could continue the war.

Despite everything, through the Anglo-Polish alliance it was possible to a certain extent to thwart Hitler's original plans. Hitler was able to implement neither his first scenario: the peaceful mastery of Central and Eastern Europe followed by a turn against the Western powers, nor his second scenario: the defeat of a completely isolated and lonely Poland in a short military campaign. The day 1 September 1939 became the first day of the Second World War.

1410 "The West is not aware of Poland's weakness," Beck reportedly said in spring 1939. Letter from Bohdan Podoski to Professor Piotr Wandycz in 1972 (I was given access to these words by Professor Wandycz, for which I am grateful).

1411 See Piotr Wandycz, *Z dziejów dyplomacji*, p. 49.

Chapter 6. Berlin-Moscow Rapprochement and Soviet Demands on Poland

Is it worth studying the matter of German-Soviet rapprochement in 1939 as an issue in Polish foreign policy? Since Poland had no power to oppose such a strategic solution with any effective policy, marshal Piłsudski argued that it would be “senseless” to consider the possibility of a “war on two fronts”.¹⁴¹² Generally, this matter could be closed with these few words. But the historian does not enjoy such a luxury. Every rational policy must have underlying assumptions about the near and distant future, and the formulation of political goals is usually accompanied by exercises in the realm of political imagination. Since the author of any well-conceived history of diplomacy cannot simply set this matter aside, it seems necessary to provide here a complement to the large number of existing studies on Poland’s place in international relations in 1938–1939, some of which I have written myself.¹⁴¹³

The title of this chapter is not a mistake: first there was German-Soviet rapprochement, and only then did the Soviets address their demands to Poland regarding the march of Red Army troops onto Polish territory. When the Western powers could not give a positive answer to these demands, Moscow had the perfect excuse to justify the previously planned agreement with the Third Reich, an alliance of two totalitarian powers.

Was German-Soviet Rapprochement Possible? Polish interpretations

The idea of partitioning Poland (Polish lands) was an important part of Bolshevik political thinking going back to the Treaty of Riga, which, in the wake of the 1919–1920 Polish-Soviet War, seemed to have stabilised a peaceful Polish-Soviet neighbourhood. To be sure, Germany during the Weimar era was fertile ground for the idea of partitioning Poland, but the German state, due to its military weakness, was in no position to implement any large-scale plans in the east.

1412 Compare J. Kowalewski, “Cykl rumuński,” *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1964), No. 6: p. 117.

1413 Anna Maria Cieniał’s study, written a few years ago, deserves special attention as a thorough approach to the problem of the Moscow negotiations from the Polish perspective: “The Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 23, 1939: When Did Stalin Decide to Align with Hitler, and Was Poland the Culprit?” in *Ideology, Politics and Diplomacy in East-Central Europe*, ed. M. B. Biskupski (Rochester 2003), pp. 147–226.

It is not my task here to point to specific ideas which were expressed in German-Soviet contacts, and which were at the root of the thinking behind plans to strike Poland using the combined forces of the German Reich and the USSR. Undoubtedly, this was the dream of the head of the Reichswehr, general Hans von Seeckt.¹⁴¹⁴ The undersecretary of state in the German Foreign Office, Ago von Maltzan, warned the Polish chargé d'affaires in January 1923 that any Polish action against Germany would result in an armed attack by the Soviets.¹⁴¹⁵ A more concrete example is the ultimately unproductive conversations mentioned by historian Francis Carsten 50 years ago. He established that in 1928, general Werner von Blomberg, during talks with marshal Kliment Voroshilov in Moscow, was surprised by the latter's proposal that in the event of the outbreak of a German-French or Polish-German war, the Soviet Union would take military action against Poland from the east. As von Blomberg did not have the authority to engage in such far-reaching negotiations, Voroshilov received no affirmative answer.¹⁴¹⁶ At the time, Soviet diplomacy was operating along the lines of "reducing Poland to ethnographic boundaries", a concept it was in no position to implement at the time.

"By destroying the Polish army, we are destroying the Versailles Peace, which maintains the entire system of current international relations. If Poland becomes Soviet, the Versailles Peace will be destroyed and the entire international system, achieved through victories over Germany, will be destroyed ... The Versailles Peace oppresses hundreds of millions of people."¹⁴¹⁷ These famous words, spoken by Lenin in 1920 and which historians have cited many times, are an expression not of some temporary feeling felt by the Russian-Bolshevik leader, not simply of the kind of language he used; rather they demonstrate a basic feature of an anti-Polish political program that would remain in force until after 17 September 1939, when they found their ultimate expression. The common theme of a struggle against the Versailles system, or the Versailles-Riga system, shaped political concepts in both Moscow and Berlin, although it seems that while the Germany of Rathenau,

1414 For more, see J. Centek, *Hans von Seeckt. Twórca Reichsheer*, (Krakow 2006). To Martin Broszat, von Seeckt was a true symbol of the German version of "negative Polish policies"; see idem, *Zweihundert Jahre deutsche Polenpolitik* (Frankfurt am Main 1981) (first published in 1963).

1415 T. Komarnicki, "Nieudana obrona polityki February Rzeszy," *Bellona* (1959), No. 3: p. 294 (comments on Ch. Höltje, *Die Weimarer Republik und das Ostlocarno-Problem 1919-1934* [Würzburg 1958]).

1416 F. L. Carsten, "Reports by Two German Officers on the Red Army", *The Slavonic and East European Review* 41 (1962), No. 4: pp. 217-244. German historiography strongly emphasises the thesis that Stresemann did not take into consideration the use of force against Poland to achieve the desired territorial changes.

1417 B. Andreus [actually J. Niezbrzycki], *Polska a "kapitalistyczna interwencja" w stosunku do ZSRR* (Rome 1945), p. 34 (Lenin's statement quoted from the collective work: W. I. Lenin and J. W. Stalin, *Sbornik proizvedenij w izuczeniju istoriji WKP(b)*, Vol. 2 [Moscow 1937], p. 331).

Stresemann, Brüning and Curtius never dreamed of the total destruction of the Versailles order, but rather of its correction, the Kremlin persisted in its unchanging desire to bring about its total collapse.

It would be difficult to say that the political imagination of Soviet leaders anticipated the reality of the Second World War as a total war and a “war of annihilation”, but it is beyond dispute that the Soviets believed in the possibility (or even the inevitability) of a “second imperialist war”, one which would open up remarkable expansion opportunities for their country, and which would above all cause the collapse of capitalism as a political system. At a secret conference of the Russian Communist Party at the beginning 1925, Stalin said, among other things: “[...] if a war begins, then it is not proper to sit with arms folded, we will emerge last. And we will come out to throw the decisive weight on the scales, a weight that could prevail.”¹⁴¹⁸ War among the “capitalist states” would serve as an opening to new opportunities for socialism, as Stalin would tell Comintern leader Georgi Dimitrov on 7 September 1939.¹⁴¹⁹

The possibility of rapprochement between Germany and Soviet Russia, with the goal of destroying Poland, was inscribed in the logic of the geopolitical balance of power that had developed in Europe after the First World War. The German-Soviet treaty of 23 August 1939 should be considered the fulfilment of a scenario about which European politicians commented throughout the entire 20 years of peace. Among Polish leadership elites and within Polish interwar political thought, the Polish Republic’s geopolitical location was widely analysed, taking into account the worst possible constellation of forces. It can be said that the main, but unrealistic, task of Polish foreign policy was to prevent such a scenario from ever being realised. Unable to deviate from the doctrine of equilibrium; that is, unable to choose “Germany” or “Russia”, Poland could do little to prevent Soviet-German rapprochement.

Openly known, not too dangerous in its content, and lacking any secret clauses, the German-Soviet agreement of 16 April 1922 was a kind of prelude to what was to come. As marshal Piłsudski put it during a conversation with Michał Kossakowski, then head of the Eastern Division of the Foreign Ministry: “The Rapallo treaty should have made it obvious to everyone: Russian-German agreement has gone so far that it is not only an accomplished fact supported by excellent knowledge on both sides, it is also an irreparable fact.”¹⁴²⁰

1418 Stalin’s statement at a Russian Communist Party conference in January 1925 in idem, *Dzieła*, Vol. 9 (Warsaw 1951), p. 320. The text was published in Moscow in 1946. For more, see R. Raack, “Stalin’s Plans for World War II”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 26 (1991): pp. 215–227.

1419 G. Dimitrov, *Journal 1933–1949*, ed. G. Moullec (Paris 2005), p. 340.

1420 Biblioteka PAN (Warszawa), sygn. 4 (Rok 1922), „Diariusz” Michała Kossakowskiego, t. 1, Notatka z 5 czerwca 1922 r.

It is beyond dispute that for Polish officials, the Soviet Union remained a power materially interested in the destruction of the Versailles system. Leaders in Warsaw took note of the fact that the USSR was trying programmatically to create the premises for a conflict between two antagonistic blocs of “capitalist powers”. This program was long-term and reflected unchanging goals and aspirations. It would be extremely difficult to point to any statement by a Polish politician or diplomat who thought that Bolshevik Russia had definitively come to terms with the Versailles (Versailles-Riga) order,¹⁴²¹ that it was a peaceful state requiring security guarantees and interested in stabilising post-war international relations. In assessments and opinions of various kinds, we hear it repeated again and again: this empire’s goal was the destabilisation of Europe, war between the capitalist countries and, above all, the fall of Great Britain as a world power. The argument could also be heard that the “limitrophe states” remained in the orbit of Moscow’s partitioning interests, though this was mainly related to the Baltic States.

Having said that, the 1930s was marked by a climate of ideological Soviet-German warfare, one which was created not by Moscow, but by the National Socialists. Hitler’s anti-communism seemed so intense that it was highly difficult to think that one day there would be even momentary reconciliation between the two sides, and that Poland would have to pay the price for this alliance. “Both of these nations are guided by doctrinal premises,” Beck once told Eden during a conversation in April 1935.¹⁴²² There were other opinions on the subject in the Polish Foreign Ministry which I described in chapter one. But they were not part of “mainstream” thinking in Warsaw about international relations. The basic, more quiet than prominent, assumption in the Polish political leadership was that lasting improvement in Berlin-Moscow relations was impossible.

The ideological dispute between the Bolsheviks and the Nazis weakened the vigilance of the Polish political elite, which lost sight of the “second Rapallo” scenario. A statement by Polish diplomat Roman Knoll on the possibility of a Berlin-Moscow alliance should be considered unique in the context of broader Polish political thought. Knoll, who had no official position at the time, put it this way at the beginning of 1939: a German-Soviet agreement “may occur irrespective of the political issues of concern to each partner at any moment, provided that the interests of the two powers prove convergent, and such convergence would be easy to achieve over the Polish matter, which has long been the basis for fruitful cooperation.”¹⁴²³ The authors of the “Study of Poland’s Strategic Plan against Germany” [*Studium planu strategicznego Polski przeciw Niemcom*] from the end of

1421 Such opinions found expression only in political journalism, e.g. that of Włodzimierz Makar (previously dedicated to the Promethean idea), who until his death in 1933 published the Warsaw magazine *Przegląd Wschodni*. Such views, however, were very isolated in Polish public opinion.

1422 *Dokumenty z dziejów polskiej polityki zagranicznej 1918–1939*, Vol. 2, p. 93.

1423 R. Knoll, *Uwagi o polityce polskiej* (Warsaw 1939), p. 38.

1937, general Tadeusz Kutrzeba and colonel Stefan Mossor, took a similar position; they believed that in the event of war with Germany, Poland would be at a huge disadvantage. In addition, there was the possibility that Poland would be “crushed” by the Germans and Soviets acting in concert. Diplomacy’s task was to prevent this worst-case scenario.¹⁴²⁴

Despite the occasionally good relations between the Third Reich and Poland, rumours circulated in the European press and among diplomats about a possible rapprochement between Moscow and Berlin, involving various territorial benefits and despite the ideological differences. The view could often be heard that Poland would be the first country to pay a high price for this rapprochement. These opinions reached Warsaw, and although they were registered in the Foreign Ministry, they were generally not trusted.¹⁴²⁵ The fact that the predicted scenario was not becoming reality seemed to determine their inaccuracy. According to colonel Władysław Michniewicz, the head of the “East” Division Second Department of the General Staff and a known intelligence officer, captain Jerzy Niezbrzycki filed “on a monthly basis” at the behest of marshal Śmigły-Rydz a report for intelligence officers entitled “How will Moscow behave in the event of a Polish-German war?” His conclusion seldom changed, namely that the ideological divide made it impossible to bring these two powers together. For Poland, the USSR would even be a market for the purchase of raw materials if Poland had to fight Germany.¹⁴²⁶

As we know, in 1934 marshal Piłsudski ordered the formation of a special group for security studies in Poland, called the “Laboratorium”, which functioned alongside military intelligence in order to develop material on the internal situations of Poland’s two totalitarian neighbours. One question was: which of the two would first be ready for war with Poland? The fear was that an internal crisis inside either of these two countries would give impetus to unpredictable external action. After Piłsudski’s death, the Laboratorium’s work lost its priority status. Marshal Śmigły-Rydz did not seem to appreciate the advantages that came with it.

Colonel Jan Kowalewski recalled that the signing of the non-aggression pact of 25 July 1932 “did not prevent Stalin from seeking an alliance with Germany and not with us”. In his opinion, “since 1936; that is, since before the purges, Stalin was clearly oriented towards Germany, and not in a defensive or protective sense, but in the sense of joint action. The purges were the result of these preparations, because Stalin had to cleanse the entire Soviet arena and the communist international of elements that could rebel against the combination with Hitler. As for us,

1424 *Studium planu strategicznego Polski przeciw Niemcom*, p. 59.

1425 For more, see my study: M. Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop-Mołotow*, pp. 314–327 and 351 ff.

1426 W. Michniewicz, *Wielki bluff sowiecki* (Chicago 1991), p. 284. Perhaps the personal conflict between Michniewicz and Wraga (Niezbrzycki) influenced Michniewicz’s opinions, but his account is nonetheless worth quoting.

Poland was not meant to exist.”¹⁴²⁷ But this opinion was created years after the fact, and we cannot judge to what extent it is a faithful reflection of his views from the times I am trying to describe, or an accumulation of thoughts expressed *ex post*, after the catastrophic partition of the country in September 1939.

The same can be said about the considerations of ambassador Grzybowski included in his final report, prepared for minister August Zaleski after leaving Moscow and dated 6 November 1939, in which he wrote:

Whoever thinks that the system of government in the Soviet Union comes only from ineptitude and primitivism would be making a fundamental mistake. In addition to these two psychological motives, the invariable features of the Eastern mentality and Stalin’s half-mystical stance towards the doctrine of world revolution have no less impact. The structure of this pseudo-socialist state is noteworthy. No other totalitarian system has achieved such full absolutism.”¹⁴²⁸

At the end of the 1930s, in their reports to Warsaw, Polish diplomats stated that the Soviet regime had departed significantly from Lenin’s universalism and revolutionary maximalism in favour of realpolitik. They hardly mentioned the ideocratic nature of the Soviet system. They talked more about the continuity of the “Great Russian” state, whose new historical manifestation was the Stalinist Soviet Union.

Referring to this theory on 27 March 1939, ambassador Grzybowski characterised Stalin as a “pragmatic” politician and a ruthless dictator, one who always put the interests of his state above ideological slogans, and who interpreted the Leninist heritage very freely. “I think Stalin is a realist, inclined to opportunism rather than to the outdated communist program”, the ambassador wrote to Beck on 12 April 1937.¹⁴²⁹ In early 1939, Grzybowski wrote: “As a strictly realistic and even opportunistic mind, Stalin arranges party and state life according to the needs of everyday life, regardless of the doctrine. On the contrary, the doctrine is interpreted in one way or another depending on the daily needs of government.”¹⁴³⁰ A few months later, in July 1939, Michał Łubieński made a statement that corresponded to Grzybowski’s: The “Sov[iet Union] is developing into a state-national movement. Litvinov has lost everywhere, the Czech Republic, Spain, the League of Nations.”¹⁴³¹ Similar thoughts were formulated by Stanisław Zabiello, head of the Soviet Department at the Foreign Ministry. The Polish envoy

1427 Studium Polski Podziemnej, Kolekcja 13, t. 85, Col. J. Kowalewski to Gen. T. Pełczyński, 4 September 1964.

1428 See “Raport końcowy byłego ambasadora RP w Moskwie W. Grzybowskiiego do ministra spraw zagranicznych A. Zaleskiego,” in *Dokumenty z dziejów polskiej polityki zagranicznej 1918–1939*, Vol. 2, p. 274.

1429 IPMS, Kolekcja Szembeka, 85/48.

1430 AAN, MSZ, 6670.

1431 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Romana Dębickiego, 40/2, R. Dębicki, “Journal”, p. 190 (note dated 12 July 1939).

in Belgrade, Dębicki, recorded in July 1939 the following thoughts about the Soviet state's situation: "Stabilisation after purges. Internal calm at the lower level. There are no layers sincerely following the regime. Emphasis on uniting intelligentsia. Beria [is] an intelligentsia-gendarme in gloves. They didn't slacken, but they didn't roil. The Soviet homeland, i.e. revolutionary enthusiasm changed into patriotism—strikes at the intelligentsia. Terror has been at work for several years. Personification of the state is Stalin. The tendency towards [a] protectorate on the Baltic [...]"¹⁴³² The "world revolution" was to be the final goal of Soviet strategy, because only then "[will] Stalin be safe, once the bourgeoisie has disappeared."¹⁴³³

Ambassador Grzybowski wrote in early 1939: "The most puzzling of the paradoxes of the Russian psyche was undoubtedly the outstanding ability of this nation to build a vast state with partitioning ambitions. It seems that once again, we are witnessing an emphasis placed on this most ancient of all Russian instincts over all other factors." But this statement does not indicate that he expected the Soviet Union to militate against Poland, or that he thought a "reversal of alliances" possible in Europe; i.e. a Berlin-Moscow alliance. It should be noted that at the end of the 1930s, experts on Soviet affairs emphasised how the Soviet regime had transformed itself. Under Stalin, it had lost its "Old Bolshevik" character in favour of a bureaucratic-military dictatorship based on a single-leader system. Grzybowski also mentioned a renaissance in Great Russian imperialism and how it shaped Soviet foreign policy. The Ambassador was correct when he wrote that "when concluding a specific agreement with this country, one should only assess the fact of its conclusion, and not the benefits that may flow from its implementation."¹⁴³⁴

Undoubtedly, members of the Polish foreign policy leadership in the 1930s perceived the Soviet Union as a "new type" of state with an interest in the outbreak of a European war, one that would last as long as possible and would exhaust the global capitalist system. Officials in Warsaw were thus looking at this matter realistically. They viewed the "popular front" idea proclaimed in Moscow in August 1935 as a departure from the Leninist program, thus suggesting the possibility of other similar departures in the future.¹⁴³⁵ They recognised the fact that ideology had been programmed into Soviet foreign policy, but they did not lose sight of its pragmatism in terms of methods of action. Under no circumstances was Bolshevik Russia able to permanently identify its interests with détente and the overall stability of the current territorial order in Europe. "The more friction there is in Europe, the easier the situation is for the Soviet Union, which hopes that any war in Europe will unleash a global turmoil, from which sooner or later a revolution led by Moscow may emerge. The more agreements and treaties there are, the

1432 Ibid.

1433 Ibid.

1434 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, pp. 735–736.

1435 This was pointed out above all by ambassador Grzybowski in the cited letter to Beck dated 12 April 1937, IPMS, Kolekcja Szembeka, 85/48.

worse are communism's chances and the more bitterness there will be in Moscow." These were the words written by Tadeusz Jankowski, chargé d'affaires of the Polish Embassy in Moscow, to Beck on 6 April 1937. His arguments seem to express *pars pro toto* the guiding theme in Polish assessments of Soviet policy at the time.¹⁴³⁶

The belief that Russia was seeking war was common in Polish political thought in the 1930s. In a widely-read book from 1934 entitled *Przyszła Wojna* (The Future War), general Władysław Sikorski stated that Soviet Russia would be "the only beneficiary of armed conflict if it occurred in Europe".¹⁴³⁷ We find more such assessments and opinions in Szembek's invaluable *Diariusz*. However, in the statements made by Polish politicians, military leaders and diplomats, we do not find the thesis formulated in February 1936 by the British Foreign Office political advisor Robert Vansittart, who argued that Germany's eastern expansion did not have to clash with Russia; rather, it could also act in agreement with Russia, despite the fact that the two countries had radically different political orders.¹⁴³⁸

Discussion in historiography about the origins of the German-Soviet rapprochement in 1939 has been continuing for a long time. Over the last two decades, this dispute has reached no final conclusions. While John Lukacs argued categorically that it was, at its core, a Soviet initiative,¹⁴³⁹ Ingeborg Fleischhauer attributed the initiative to German diplomacy.¹⁴⁴⁰ It seems that the idea to establish contact with the Soviets emerged in Berlin not earlier than April 1939. Göring was one of its advocates.¹⁴⁴¹ In the first quarter of 1939, German diplomacy had considered a variant of the anti-Soviet alliance with Japan. The fall of the cabinet (5 January) of Prince Fumimaro Konoe, an ardent supporter of a close alliance among anti-Comintern powers, weakened the chances that this idea could be implemented. Not before June 1939, Hitler accepted the possibility of rapprochement with the Soviets, in the belief that there was no other way to avoid war on two fronts, and to achieve Poland's isolation.

In the historiography which seeks to explain the origins of the Nazi-Soviet rapprochement, we find many seemingly rational and justified opinions which are, in fact, simplifications. For example, British (Chinese-born) historian Peijian Shen recently argued that Munich marked the beginning of the process of improved German-Soviet relations, at a time when Moscow began to "look for German

1436 AAN, MSZ, sygn. 6653, chargé d'affaires T. Jankowski to Beck, 6 April 1937.

1437 W. Sikorski, *Przyszła wojna, jej możliwości i charakter oraz związane z nim zagadnienia obrony kraju*, 2nd edition (Warsaw 1984), p. 41.

1438 DBFP, series 3, Vol. 15, Vansittart's memorandum dated 3 February 1936, p. 780 (appendix).

1439 J. Lukacs, "The Coming of the Second World War," p. 171.

1440 I. Fleischhauer, *Der Pakt. Hitler, Stalin und die Initiative der deutschen Diplomatie*.

1441 Göring made a statement in this regard on 14 April. M. Zgórniak, "Rozmowy wojskowe niemiecko-włoskie 1939 r. i 'pakt stalowy'," in *Polska w Europie i świecie w XX stuleciu. Prace ofiarowane Panu Profesorowi Marianowi Leczykowi w 75-lecie urodzin*, ed. H. Parafianowicz (Białystok 2001), p. 300.

friendship” and Hitler needed to “avoid war on two fronts” and obtain raw materials for warfare.¹⁴⁴² All of this is true, except that nothing like this could actually be programmed if the Polish government did not reject the German offer of territorial concessions in exchange for an alliance. If Hitler and von Ribbentrop’s demands had been accepted, a completely different scenario would have developed and shaped the international situation in 1939. Hitler would have probably obtained a free hand in a war against the Western powers, to eliminate France as a European power and to impose a “forced alliance” on Great Britain, which would then withdraw from Europe.

Many arguments have been made regarding the origins of the German-Soviet pact, one of which involves the legend of a secret Politburo meeting on 19 August 1939, during which Stalin allegedly made the decision to enter into an agreement with the Third Reich.¹⁴⁴³ In fact, the German-Soviet rapprochement, as Donald Cameron Watt explained almost 40 years ago, grew out of the breakdown in relations between Poland and Germany in March 1939.¹⁴⁴⁴ It was a new reversal of geopolitical vectors, just as the Polish-German rapprochement in 1933/1934 was the initial consequence of the collapse of Berlin-Moscow cooperation. This clear vision of the origin of events from late spring and summer 1939 not only deserves attention; it is also an interpretation that cannot be called into question. Unfortunately, it is undisputedly true that officials in Warsaw did not notice that German-Soviet rapprochement was taking shape as a geopolitical option in Central and Eastern Europe as an alternative to the Polish-German détente, which in March 1939 passed irrevocably into history.

It is a fact confirmed by diplomatic sources that at the beginning of 1939, new rumours spread about the possibility of a Soviet-German agreement, which were studied carefully in the offices of European diplomacy. This has been confirmed by documents from various countries. As the Polish ambassador in Bucharest, Roger Raczyński, wrote to the deputy undersecretary of state Miroslaw Arciszewski on 14 January 1939, a démarche on this matter had been put together by the minister at the royal court, Ernest Urdăreanu, on behalf of King Carol II. “The question [was asked] about attempts to establish some contact between Berlin and Moscow

1442 National Archives (London), Foreign Office 371, 22979, C.12341/15/18. See also A. Adamthwaite, *The Making of the Second World War*, pp. 89–90; P. Shen, *The Age of Appeasement*, p. 225.

1443 The text of this alleged statement was published under the title “Une séance secrète du Politbureau du parti communiste de l’URSS (19 août 1939),” in *Révue de droit international, de sciences diplomatiques et politiques* (Genève) (1939), No. 3: pp. 247–249. For more, see S. Slutsch, “Stalins ‘Kriegsszenario 1939’: Eine Rede die es nie gab. Die Geschichte einer Fälschung,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* (2004), No. 4: pp. 597–636.

1444 D. C. Watt, “The Initiation of the Negotiations leading to the Nazi-Soviet Pact: A Historical Problem,” in *Essays in Honor of E.H. Carr*, ed. C. Abramsky (London 1974), p. 165.

against the background of the Ukrainian problem. Perhaps the question was not very well formulated in this message. I suppose," the ambassador wrote, "that the King meant our opinion, whether in spite of all recent events, Berlin views it as possible to get along with Moscow and whether against this background there could be unforeseen changes in the overall situation, although this is a highly unlikely event and contrary to all known official statements. I think," Raczyński reported further, "that the Romanian question is an echo of old, mainly French insinuations that Rapallo could be revived in a certain constellation. Regardless of these vague motives, I think it would be better if I could answer Urdăreanu on the basis of instructions, rather than fend him off with only my own arguments based on the logic of generally known facts."¹⁴⁴⁵

In response to this report, the ambassador in Bucharest received instructions from the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw, signed by Arciszewski, which stated "Hitler's uncompromising position towards Bolshevism and the USSR", and "even in the economic field there is a systematic decline in German-Soviet trade. The National Socialist doctrine seems to tend towards the concept of the national dismemberment of Russia, although no more precise information has been revealed so far."¹⁴⁴⁶

On 10 January 1939, after talks with Hitler and von Ribbentrop in Berchtesgaden and Munich, Beck sent a short telegram to diplomatic missions in which he argued that these talks showed "Germany's unchanging will to continue its policy of good neighbourliness with Poland". The foreign minister noted "exaggerated rumours of [Germany's] intentions in Eastern Europe", and he perceived in its "Eastern policy" a "still extremely anti-Russian attitude".¹⁴⁴⁷ Tadeusz Kobylański confirmed this view by writing that there had been no change in "the fundamental direction of Berlin's anti-Comintern policy".¹⁴⁴⁸ We cannot judge these assessments as being somehow mistaken; after all, at that time the Third Reich had no alternative for its eastern policy.

Historians of diplomacy are aware that hearsay and rumours play a role in international relations. A convincing interpretation of the wave of rumours about the ongoing Berlin-Moscow discussions cannot be easy. As we know today, Germany and the Soviet Union made no diplomatic arrangement either immediately after the Munich Conference or in the first quarter of 1939, nor did either party submit such proposals. It seems that these rumours were mainly inspired by Soviet diplomats wishing to draw the attention of Western governments to the notion that Moscow had political choices, that it was not condemned to the role of being the Third Reich's next victim.

1445 AAN, MSZ, 6655.

1446 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Bukareszcie, A.26 I/9, Arciszewski to R. Raczyński, 27 January 1939r.

1447 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 17.

1448 *Ibid.*, p. 53 (Kobylański's instructions for the ambassador in Berlin dated 27 January 1939).

Sources confirm statements made in September and October 1938 by deputy foreign minister Potiomkin to ambassadors in Moscow, Robert Coulondre and Augusto Rosso, about a “fourth partition of Poland” (*quatrième partage de la Pologne*),¹⁴⁴⁹ which we should treat primarily as part of the game the Soviet Union was playing with France and the Western powers, because after Munich, officials in Paris were considering the termination of not only the alliance with Poland, but also with the USSR. Statements made by representatives of Soviet diplomacy in the wake of the Munich Conference about the division of Poland cannot be interpreted as anything but wishful thinking. In the autumn of 1938, such a move would not happen. All available sources argue that at that time, the German political leadership believed that Poland would accept the status of a “subordinate partner”.

At the beginning of 1939, there was no basis for a Berlin-Moscow agreement, but rumours of an approaching “reversal of alliances” suited the Germans because they could exploit those rumours as part of a pressure campaign to force Poland to accept Berlin’s demands for a “comprehensive solution”.

On 19 December 1938, German and Soviet negotiators agreed to extend the Berlin-Moscow trade agreement, which had been about to expire.¹⁴⁵⁰ But in February 1939, the first concrete fact developed that could be interpreted as a step on the road to improvement in Berlin-Moscow relations. The Auswärtiges Amt representative Karl Schnurre travelled to Moscow to enter into further trade negotiations with the Soviet government.¹⁴⁵¹ These negotiations were the result of a decision made in Berlin for which Moscow had long been waiting, but it was the Soviets who pressed for a definition of the “political foundations” for a possible economic agreement. In his commentary on this subject, ambassador Grzybowski noted that “while Germany has a tendency to downplay this fact, the Soviets are trying to interpret Schnurre’s arrival in the context of German-Soviet rapprochement. This is reflected both in suggestions made by Potiomkin [...] and in rumours promoted discreetly by the NKID among members of the diplomatic corps in Moscow.”¹⁴⁵² The Soviet ambassador in Paris, Jakow Suric, also hinted that, as a possible alternative

1449 See R. Coulondre, *De Staline à Hitler. Souvenirs de deux ambassades 1936–1939* (Paris 1950), p. 165 (this conversation took place on 4 October 1938). Rosso wrote to Minister Ciano on 22 September 1938 (Archivio Storico Diplomatico, Ministero degli Affari Esteri [Rome], URSS, 30/7). Hungarian envoy Mihály Jungerth-Arnóthy reported hearing similar statements from Potiomkin (see J. Tomaszewski, *Warianty dyplomacji*, p. 419).

1450 M. Mieltjuchow, *Upuszczennyj szans Stalina. Sowietiskij Sojusz i borba za Jewropu: 1939–1941 (Dokumenty, fakty, sużdzenija)* (Moscow 2000), p. 59.

1451 S. Żerko, *Niemiecka polityka zagraniczn*, p. 373. For documentation, see “Dokumenty vneshey politiki SSSR”, 1939 god, Vol. 22, book 1. On 6 February, the Germans cancelled Schnurr’s trip to Moscow, planned for 13 February, informing Soviet chargé d’affaires Astachow that he would first go to Warsaw, which was a manifestation of an ongoing psychological game (*ibid.*, p. 103).

1452 Kobyłański’s instructions dated 27 January 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 53.

to rapprochement with the West, the Soviets had a free hand on the matter of an agreement with Germany against Poland, about which Ambassador Łukasiewicz wrote to Warsaw.¹⁴⁵³

An experience that was most certainly deceptive involved a political “opening” at the beginning of 1939, one of many in the history of interwar Polish-Soviet relations, which was to last six months. It was started by a series of talks between the Polish ambassador in Moscow, Waclaw Grzybowski, and Litvinov and Potiomkin in October 1938, and it was sealed not only with a joint communiqué on 26 November 1938, but also with a trade treaty signed on 19 February 1939. It calmed the Poles surprisingly easily, as evidenced by categorical statements made by Polish foreign policy leaders at the beginning of May 1939. In his instructions to diplomatic missions on 5 May, Szembek wrote that “Polish-Soviet relations are now perfectly correct, which does not mean we intend to abandon our current policy towards the Soviets”.¹⁴⁵⁴ In a telegram to the Polish ambassador in Ankara, Michał Sokolnicki, Beck wrote: “[...] our relations with the USSR are completely correct and are developing on the principle of friendly neighbourliness.”¹⁴⁵⁵ At the same time, Soviet espionage in Poland continued to intensify, although Stalin’s destruction of the Communist Party of Poland in the summer of 1938 severely depleted the Soviet “foothold” in the Republic.¹⁴⁵⁶

Significantly, based on assessments and opinions expressed during discussions within the Polish Foreign Ministry at the beginning of 1939, thoughts about the Soviet threat vanished completely. There was talk instead of Bolshevism’s bankruptcy, the USSR’s military weakness, the possible emancipation of enslaved nations (ideas raised by “Prometheans”), and finally the general collapse of Soviet policy, which was to have been sealed by Munich. There was no question of any unending danger.

The Polish ambassador in Moscow, correct though he was in terms of general trends giving shape to the Soviet system’s new face, was unable to convincingly explain various specific moves being made by the Soviet government. Among other things, he downplayed Litvinov’s dismissal and his replacement as foreign minister by Vyacheslav Molotov on 3 May 1939. He thought that “Molotov, still standing on the ground of decisive hostility towards the so-called fascist countries, will approach the issues of European policy more realistically [...]”. Grzybowski also noted Molotov’s “overriding scepticism” above all in relation to “current methods of collective security”.¹⁴⁵⁷ In a more comprehensive commentary on Soviet

1453 Ambassador Łukasiewicz’s report dated 25 April 1939, *ibid.*, p. 379.

1454 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 429.

1455 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Michał Sokolnicki Collection, Box 1 (instructions dated 8 May 1939).

1456 Archives Nationales (Paris), 7N 30024, Raport Deuxième Bureau entitled “Agissement de l’URSS en territoire polonais” dated 8 May 1939.

1457 AAN, MSZ, mf 120, W. Grzybowski, “Rosja na początku 1939 r.,” *Polska a Zagranica* (Foreign Ministry internal bulletin) 1939, No. 1, undated.

policy, Grzybowski said: "This may be a sign of nervous fatigue, but the mess here is filling me with increasing pessimism. One cannot resist the impression that the Soviets are increasingly willing to make gestures and less and less able to act".¹⁴⁵⁸ On 16 May, Grzybowski formulated the argument that "the interests of the Soviet Union as a state coincide in the current international situation with the interests of democratic states".¹⁴⁵⁹ Earlier, on 2 May, the ambassador also confirmed the significant "lack of a direct attack on the Soviets in Hitler's speech" of 28 April, which "is being strongly emphasised in conversations among officials here".¹⁴⁶⁰ Beyond that, in a note to Szembek on 9 May, Grzybowski expressed himself absolutely clearly: "Personally, I am convinced that in their present condition the Soviets must above all avoid the possibility of a common Soviet-German border and from this thesis I draw all of the associated consequences."¹⁴⁶¹ Soviet policy still had an anti-German face. The USSR "wants to regain recently lost positions in Europe" in the sphere of international politics. Litvinov's departure was motivated by "personal disfavour" but had no deeper reason. Not surprisingly, Grzybowski's arguments were warmly received at the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw. Szembek wrote to ambassador Sokolnicki on 15 May, repeating those arguments approvingly.¹⁴⁶² Unfortunately, these views were fundamentally wrong.

We find no source evidence which indicates that the foreign minister considered Berlin-Moscow rapprochement as an international policy scenario in the spring of 1939. "I do not believe that Germany and Russia can enter into a permanent agreement," Beck stated, according to his secretary Paweł Starzeński, in April 1939.¹⁴⁶³ On 19 April, the foreign minister conveyed to ambassador Grzybowski that in relations with the USSR, "generally, he would maintain an atmosphere of relaxation".¹⁴⁶⁴ Whether or not Beck thought that such a policy was possible, despite the Polish government's rejection of the British offer to start political consultations with the Soviets, it is difficult to say unequivocally. Deputy foreign minister Vladimir Potiomkin's visit to Warsaw on 11 May was a tactical move by Soviet diplomacy to show Poles that relaxation could not be ruled out. Beck informed ambassadors in London and Paris on 15 May: "All of our arguments are known to the Soviets, who lend them an understanding that was confirmed in my talks with Potiomkin".¹⁴⁶⁵ In a letter to ambassador Raczyński on 18 May 1939, the head of Beck's cabinet, Lubiński, wrote: "[...] the Potiomkin talks in Warsaw were very positive."¹⁴⁶⁶ In reality, Potiomkin was trying to strengthen Polish determination in

1458 Ibid.

1459 AAN, MSZ, 6696, Report for Beck dated 16 May.

1460 IPMS, MSZ, A.11E/1502.

1461 Ibid.

1462 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Michał Sokolnicki Collection, Box 1.

1463 P. Starzeński, *Trzy lata z Beckiem*, p. 111.

1464 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 565.

1465 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 475.

1466 Ibid., p. 494

the face of German demands.¹⁴⁶⁷ Undoubtedly, as officials in Warsaw learned, it was Soviet sources who were spreading rumours about plans for a Black Sea pact as a stabilising agreement in the region, and about “anticipated Russian guarantees for the countries of this region”.¹⁴⁶⁸

Under the influence of this new, improved atmosphere in Polish-Soviet relations, ambassador Grzybowski wrote to Szembek on 23 May: “To the extent that it is implemented, the Anglo-Soviet Alliance will be a fantastic bluff, but who knows if setting up the Soviets as bogeymen is not the only real benefit that can be derived here? At times I have the impression that in our hard pursuit of concrete things, we miss this country’s capabilities. It looks like, when concluding a specific agreement with this country, one should only assess the fact of its conclusion, and not the benefits that may result from its implementation.”¹⁴⁶⁹

A report from this period written up in the French Deuxième Bureau contains the claim that the Polish-German conflict was in the Soviets’ favour. “Poland’s firm stance towards Germany reassures Moscow, which is now to have an excellent political and strategic shield. This does not prevent the USSR from seeking, in the current situation, to maintain the political tension necessary to implement the Stalinist revolutionary program [*La position ferme de la Pologne envers l’Allemagne tranquillité Moscou, qui est sur maintenant d’avoir un excellent bouclier politique et stratégique. Cela n’empêche acunement l’URSS de chercher dans la situation actuelle à soutenir une tension politique, indispensable pour la réalisation du program révolutionnaire Stalinien*].”¹⁴⁷⁰ There was a kind of consensus in European assessments of Soviet policy that was expressed by the thesis that a potential war was in the hands of the Soviets. But from the reflections and statements of European diplomats at the time, it appears that Poland’s role as a stabilising force suited Soviet interests. Polish beliefs in this regard were not isolated; they represented opinions broadly shared at the time on the international stage. And it was this premise that formed the basis for Western hopes to win over Soviet Russia to a “peace front”.

Polish Calculations, Opinions and Expectations (May–August 1939)

There is no reason to show once again that Polish views were that Nazi-Soviet ideological antagonism was great, and that these views did not change in 1939. However, did the fact that Poland had obtained (British and French) guarantee obligations, which meant that the Polish-German conflict was now internationalised, have a

1467 S. Gregorowicz, M. J. Zacharias, *Polska–Związek Sowiecki*, pp. 189–190.

1468 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Michała Sokolnickiego, 91/11.

1469 IPMS, MSZ, A.11E/1502.

1470 Archives Nationales (Paris), 7N 30024, Rapport Deuxième Bureau pt. “Agissement de l’URSS en territoire polonais” dated 8 May 1939.

significant impact on Polish views of Soviet policy and its capabilities in the event of war? In our search for answers to this and other similar questions, we enter the sphere of reflection on interwar Polish leaders and their political imagination on the eve of catastrophe, which by the way is a subject of historical investigation that is by no means entirely new.¹⁴⁷¹

We should pay close attention to a statement made by Szembek in his instructions to embassies and legations on 5 May 1939. The undersecretary of state in the Foreign Ministry wrote: "Insinuations regarding the possibility of an agreement between axis states and the Soviets are also being made by certain German officials. Even the Soviets can frighten people with the possibility of a return to the Rapallo concept".¹⁴⁷² He added: "In the event of an armed European conflict, the Soviets would like to avoid a situation in which they would be immediately and directly involved with all their forces and want to maintain the maximum of undeployed forces for the war's critical moment. At the same time, however, not wanting to remain outside of the parameters of a counteraction now taking shape against the axis states, they are offering assistance to the attacked, which is the subject of Moscow's negotiations with Paris and London."¹⁴⁷³ This statement contains a specific and in-depth interpretation of the issues that are the subject of my thoughts below.

The rumours about a possible reversal of alliances in Europe that circulated from time to time in the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw were attributed to German diplomats or, as the ambassador in Ankara, Michał Sokolnicki, put it in one of his encrypted telegrams, to "actors inspired by Germany".¹⁴⁷⁴ On 28 June 1939, this same diplomat wrote about "rumours here about an emerging German-Soviet rapprochement", in which he saw only German inspiration; Reich diplomats were using the Foreign Services of third countries to spread these sensational stories. Characteristically, Sokolnicki also noted that "the Germans [are taking] steps in various areas" against Russia, and that Germans "are not being discouraged by the Soviets". He noted that in Ankara "specific facts and details are being offered up" in favour of this thesis, but the Turkish government "does not seem to give much

1471 See, above all, Roman Wapiński, "Wzajemne oddziaływanie polityki zagranicznej i wewnętrznej Polski wiosną i latem 1939 r.," *Dzieje Najnowsze* (1992), No. 1–2: pp. 39–58; idem, "Rezultat kalkulacji czy chciejstwa? Kwestia współdziałania Niemiec i ZSRR przed 17 września 1939 roku w wyobrażeniach polskich środowisk przywódczych (Zarys problematyki)," *17 września 1939. Materiały z ogólnopolskiej konferencji historyków, Kraków 25–26 października 1993 r.*, ed. H. Batowski (Kraków 1994), pp. 75–90. For a comparative analysis, see Michał J. Zacharias, "Kwestia spodziewanej wojny w ocenie władz i opinii publicznej Polski, Czechosłowacji i Jugosławii w okresie międzywojennym," *Przegląd Historyczny* 83 (1991): pp. 107–123.

1472 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 429.

1473 *Ibid.*, p. 429.

1474 *Ibid.*, p. 644.

credence to these rumours, viewing them as attempts to apply pressure or as propaganda manoeuvres".¹⁴⁷⁵

Noteworthy is a personal letter from Tadeusz Kobylański to ambassador Tadeusz Romer, written on 12 June 1939. Its author characterised Soviet policy generally with the following words: "[...] its internal situation remains in a state of pseudo-stabilisation at a very low level. On the one hand, this weakness means that, in anticipating the long-awaited conflict between the capitalist states that it [the USSR] had wanted, in line with its old doctrine, it wants to preserve its strength to play a revolutionary role in the critical moment of armed conflict. On the other hand, a self-preservation instinct pushes it to take maximum advantage of the economic situation in order to gain the furthest-reaching guarantees and regain the international influence and prestige it lost in 1938."¹⁴⁷⁶ There is not the slightest difference between this analysis and Szembek's instructions of 5 May.

However, in the same letter to Romer, Kobylański also attempted a more detailed and in-depth assessment of the potential effects of Soviet policy from the point of view of the international balance of power and British-French endeavours to establish an alliance with Bolshevik Russia.

A divergence of intentions and a lack of sincerity and goodwill causes the use of tactics known to the ambassador in negotiations with England and France—marked by the highest measure of blackmail. Russia's stance and tactics, although they do not make it impossible, undoubtedly hinder the organisation of a peace front and offer the axis states many advantages. Russia's attempt to obtain not only an automatic guarantee from France and England, but also the right to automatically intervene in defence of any neighbouring countries against a possible aggressor, was met with a definite refusal, not only from these countries, but also from England and France. London and Paris understood Moscow's ill will and its unwillingness to take into account the interests of third parties, and in fact a reluctance to clearly engage. It should be anticipated that the Anglo-Soviet negotiations will continue for some time and will lead at best to a limited agreement.¹⁴⁷⁷

Yet another characteristic document, albeit one that is not as concise as Szembek's instructions, is a letter from Michał Lubiński to ambassador Romer on 28 June 1939. The head of Beck's cabinet wrote:

We believe that there is no rush or enthusiasm from the Soviet side to engage in an alliance with Western countries. Rather, it is blackmail, calculated to increase the Soviets' prestige in the West. On the one hand, Moscow plays to excite English opinion (especially the opposition) to the idea that without the Soviets, it is impossible

1475 Ibid.

1476 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Tadeusz Romer Collection, 5/1 (mf), note on Beck's conversation with Ambassador Sakoh dated 12 April 1939.

1477 Ibid.

to keep Germany reined in, and on the other hand to make difficulties for the English government. In this way they increase their market value. In the West's opinion, the Soviets go hand in hand with Germany in terms of reducing Poland's value. It is convenient for both. My thesis is as follows: 1. if Poland engages on the side of Germany against the Soviets, the Soviets are blocked and have no freedom to manoeuvre, therefore they cease to be an interesting partner for the West, 2. if Poland does not engage on the side of Germany against Moscow and maintains at least neutrality, the Soviets feel safe and have no special interest in engaging in an alliance with the West.¹⁴⁷⁸

A "sense of their own weakness" was what reportedly characterised the Soviet's position. "The Germans [are] the most serious enemy that must be destroyed, but with others' hands"; this, according to Stanisław Zabięło, was "the essence" of Stalin's policy.¹⁴⁷⁹ As deputy undersecretary of state in the Foreign Ministry, Mirosław Arciszewski wrote to the diplomatic missions on 28 June 1939:

The Soviets are capable of only defensive combat on their own territory. Therefore, they will avoid getting involved in any European conflict until the last minute, reserving a possible entry for when the players are weakened sufficiently on other fronts to be able to sell their share as a country and as an ideology on the eve of making peace. For countries with a European civilization bordering Russia, it [the Soviet Union] is more dangerous as an ally than as an enemy, because powerless as the latter is, as experience teaches us it dangerously affects the internal relations of friendly countries, even in peace (the Popular Front in France, the moral-political decadence of Czechoslovakia).¹⁴⁸⁰

The thought that rapprochement between the Soviets and Germans would mean the collapse of the Third Reich's system of alliances was one of the most important motifs in the Polish interpretation of the international constellation of forces. Szembek expressed this fact clearly when he wrote to ambassador Sokolnicki on 23 May 1939: "In connection with the thesis promoted by Germany about the possibility of a Soviet-German agreement, I communicate that these rumours have made a great impression in Japan, forcing Germany to issue official denials."¹⁴⁸¹ This thesis would be repeated many times—for the last time (it seems) in ambassador Grzybowski's famous and truly amazing letter to Beck on 29 August 1939.¹⁴⁸²

1478 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Tadeusz Romer Collection, 5/1 (mf, roll 1). Published in M. Łubieński, *Refleksje i reminiscencje*, pp. 186–188, annex).

1479 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Romana Dębickiego, 40/2, R. Dębicki, "Journal," 190 (note dated 12 July 1939).

1480 M. Arciszewski to the diplomatic missions, 28 June 1939, in M. Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop–Molotow*, p. 603 (annex).

1481 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Michał Sokolnicki Collection, Box 1, Szembek to Ambassador Sokolnicki, 23 May 1939.

1482 Document published in *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, pp. 771–772. For more on the role played by the Polish ambassador in Moscow, see Olgierd Czarlinski, "Wspomnienia attaché Ambasady Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w Moskwie," ed.

In June 1939, Grzybowski believed that two things about Soviet policy could be taken for granted: “(1) Russia cannot allow Germany to come out victorious; (2) Russia cannot agree to a shared border with Germany”.¹⁴⁸³ He concluded that “Moscow will undoubtedly bluff the world with some semblance of talks with Germany, but no real German-Russian agreement will come out of it”. Germany would also pursue a policy of bluff because “they know that if they agree with Russia, they will lose Japan”. He believed that “the Soviets first of all want a war between the capitalist states”. When asked about the course of Soviet-German trade negotiations, he said that “no such talks are taking place,” it was only that “the press is exaggerating”.¹⁴⁸⁴

Officials in the Polish Foreign Ministry considered it an established and unchanging fact that the Soviets had no interest in standing on the side of the Western powers. As Beck put it on 21 July: “[...] it is clear that they do not want to get involved and that they want others to fight with each other”.¹⁴⁸⁵ At the same time, it was thought that Soviet diplomats were trying to promote the USSR as a Great Power and to increase the prestige of their own country, which had suffered severely during Stalin’s criminal purges.

Several individual statements contained characteristic elements. Namely, Kobyłański argued that Soviet diplomacy was rendering real services to Germany in a game aimed at thwarting the efforts of Western powers to defend the status quo, while Łubieński noted that in the battle to undermine Poland’s international position, Soviet diplomats were working hand in hand with the Germans, which is certainly noteworthy.

Summarising Polish policy towards the Soviets in 1939, Beck stated in his memoirs dictated in Romania: “[...] Soviet tactics were clear and in no way built trust. [...] We Poles have no confidence in Russia or in its policy goals. Based on experience, we see two imperialisms, ‘tsarist’ and communist. In practice, when it comes to our matters, it comes down to practically the same thing”.¹⁴⁸⁶ These words seem to be a faithful summary of the Polish foreign minister’s views, and at the same time a generalised description of the opinion prevalent among Polish diplomats in the summer of 1939.

An important role in providing reassurance that there was no threat from Poland’s east was played by evidence of the threat posed by Japan to the Soviets’ position in the Far East. Japan was supposed to check the USSR, as the ambassador in Tokyo, Romer, put it to Szembek on 14 July:

A. Szczepańska, *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego*, no. 140, *Szczecińskie Studia Historyczne* (1994), No. 8: pp. 119–133.

1483 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 641. Conversation on 26 June.

1484 *Ibid.*

1485 *Ibid.*, p. 679.

1486 See *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*, p. 245.

[...] Japan's check of Russia in the event of a conflict in Europe would not be inadvisable for us, because it could stop the Soviets from potential, untimely actions. This approach seems quite right to me. I would personally go a little further in this argument. We need the reinsurance of a strong Japan ready both in the event of a European war (in which the USSR either would take a wait-and-see position or would even participate in our camp), and in the event of a diplomatic compromise postponing war. In all these eventualities we face the phenomenon of Russia returning again to the international arena, artificially regaining external authority and ready to exploit it with their methods and for their specific purposes. The Polish-German contrast paralyses the most powerful anti-Soviet forces in Europe.¹⁴⁸⁷

Voices could be heard betraying a certain anxiety over the fact that some sort of settlement between Germany and Soviet Russia could indeed happen. Ambassador Romer expressed his concerns in a report to Beck dated 26 June 1939, in which Romer asked: "Will Germany not feel threatened by British policy in Europe enough to seek rapprochement with Soviet Russia at the expense of ideology?"¹⁴⁸⁸ Apparently he did not receive a specific answer to that question.

Rumours from Germany about the possibility of a Berlin-Moscow rapprochement were interpreted in Warsaw as part of the psychological warfare being waged against Poland by German propaganda in May 1939. Such rumours thus did not impress ambassador Noël, who said that "Germany will direct all its propaganda efforts now towards demonstrating the possibility of agreement with the Soviets."¹⁴⁸⁹ We might assume that the June report drawn up by the Polish military attaché in Berlin, colonel Antoni Szymański, was interpreted in a similar way; Szymański had been alerted by a close associate of Göring, General Karl Bodenschatz, who was acting either on his own or on Göring's request.¹⁴⁹⁰

At the same time, there were also unjustifiably optimistic assessments (from the Polish point of view) claiming that Germany was "on the defensive", and that Hitler was:

[...] surrounded by harmful advisors, mainly Mr Ribbentrop, because it was he who explained to the chancellor that England is a colossus with clay legs, which is no longer able to do anything. He also did not believe in Poland's reaction, of which he gave proof a few months ago in a conversation with Burckhardt, in that he did not believe that Poland would respond with armed force to German demands. An error in the opponent's assessment led Germany to today's situation where its demands

1487 IPMS, MSZ, A.11E/1495, Letter from ambassador Romer to Szembek dated 14 July 1939.

1488 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Tadeusz Romer Collection, 5/1 (mf).

1489 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 597 (note dated 12 May).

1490 See A. Szymański, "Rozmowa z Bodenschatzem," *Wiadomości* (London), 18 October 1953, No. 394; and idem, *Zły sąsiad. Niemcy 1932–1939 w oświetleniu polskiego attaché wojskowego w Berlinie* (London 1959), 140 ff.

were suspended in air, the whole world is mobilising against it, and it is increasingly turning to a defensive policy.

The above words were those that Szembek wrote to ambassador Romer on 13 June 1939.¹⁴⁹¹ In these arguments, there are two statements which undoubtedly do not correspond to reality: that Hitler was motivated to act by his advisers, and that the Third Reich was moving into “defensive policy”.

Ambassador Grzybowski stated his view on 13 June that “an agreement cannot be finalised before the military aspects are strictly defined, and it will take a long time before they are finalised.”¹⁴⁹² While Polish Foreign Ministry officials interpreted Allied efforts to win over the Soviets as doomed to failure, they did not anticipate the possibility of a reversal of alliances in part because they did not take into consideration the possibility that the trade negotiations were an omen of political talks.

Speaking with Japanese foreign minister Hachirō Arita, ambassador Romer expressed the Polish position as follows: “We have always been of the opinion that Soviet Russia will avoid participating in a possible war, at least in its first phase, but that its outbreak between both countries depends on it.”¹⁴⁹³ On 12 July in his private journal, the envoy in Belgrade, Dębicki, recorded Beck’s arguments as delivered during a conversation in Warsaw:

We are talking about the English activity in Moscow. We put it this way: we do not give up the basic principles of our policy. We regulate relations with our neighbours. We do not criticise English policy, but we proclaim the same thing that was said in the context of Laval’s trip to Moscow: no new obligations for Poland. A good neighbourhood is our principle. Russia [is] weak as a source of assistance and dangerous as a partner. It will not relinquish its aims internationally, and there is no interest in prematurely engaging in conflict. Russian-German “collusion”, which is the argument, is not very likely. [...] We do not complicate the situation.¹⁴⁹⁴

On the same day, Dębicki articulated another one of the foreign minister’s thoughts: “Far more difficult moments might come. But if G [Germany] arrived at the end, they would find a wall [Russia] in front of them.”¹⁴⁹⁵

In July 1939, Soviet diplomats took actions that pretended to be “orientated towards the West” and to present a generally conciliatory attitude towards the Western powers. As ambassador Raczynski informed the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw on 27 July, the Soviet government said it was ready for a “flexible”

1491 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 592.

1492 IPMS, MSZ, A.11E/1502.

1493 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Tadeusz Romer Collection, 5/1 (mf), Romer’s note on a conversation with Arita on the international situation, 23 August 1939.

1494 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Romana Dębickiego, 40/2, R. Dębicki, “Journal,” 189 (note dated 12 July 1939).

1495 Ibid.

compromise approach to the definition of “indirect aggression” if, “as proof of the good will of both parties, staff discussions were initiated immediately”.¹⁴⁹⁶ There was also talk of general Ironside making a trip to Moscow, which the British government eventually decided against. Most importantly, in the British draft of the tripartite agreement (British-French-Soviet) on mutual assistance, Poland was not mentioned, which, however, “would not preclude its mention in a secret additional protocol”.¹⁴⁹⁷ If officials at the Foreign Office believed at that time that Soviet diplomacy would back down in its demands regarding the definition of “indirect aggression” and would make no demands on Poland, we cannot help but think that this would have been a great mistake.

On 9 August, ambassador Lipski took note of a statement made by marshal Śmigły-Rydz, with whom he had spoken the day before in Warsaw. “It is not known what the German plan is,” the marshal reportedly said, who added, however, that after “beating Poland, Germany would find the USSR in the east, and find itself at war with the Allies in the West. Given this reality, a war with Poland will not bring them a solution”.¹⁴⁹⁸

These statements clearly show that Polish foreign policymakers did not expect a threat from the east. And their position on this topic did not change between June and August 1939.

All of the documents cited above allow me to state four things: *primo*, in them we have rumours about the Berlin-Moscow rapprochement unambiguously attributed to German diplomacy, along with indications of the possibility that, through these rumours, the Soviets may have been manipulating Poland; *secundo*, this reasoning assumes that in the coming war, which promised to be a lengthy conflict, the Soviet Union would initially remain neutral and wait to strike at a decisive (final) moment as “the rejoicing third” (*tertius gaudens*), to Sovietise Europe; *tertio*, we have the argument here that Soviet diplomacy was not interested in defending peace, but rather in a new war, although it pretended to be prepared to offer assistance to potential victims of German aggression; *quatro*, it was no doubt impossible to imagine a situation in which the Soviet Union, using armed force, would occupy any foreign territory without entering into a (*de jure* or *de facto*) war.

Officials in Warsaw received no indication that British-French efforts to win the Soviets over to a “peace front” were developing successfully; indeed, they viewed such efforts as being doomed to failure. As Szembek wrote to ambassador Sokolnicki on 17 July: “Anglo-Soviet negotiations are limping along. The Soviets are constantly raising new demands and objections. The English are highly irritated and even count on the possibility of failure. According to Grzybowski, results

1496 For the British, the definition of “indirect aggression” was based on the assumption that a country covered by this definition must voluntarily express the wish to accept foreign troops in whose area of interest it is located.

1497 AAN, Hoover Institution, MSZ, I/243 (mf).

1498 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Józefa Lipskiego, 67/11.

will partly benefit Berlin (only as an effect, because I still do not believe in the possibility of Soviet-German political collaboration) [...]”.¹⁴⁹⁹

It was widely believed that the Soviets would no doubt act as though they were engaged in ongoing talks, just as it was broadly noted that Bolshevik Russia was trying to seize the opportunity, with the consent of Western governments, to expand its sphere of influence in eastern Europe by subjugating the “limitrophe states” (primarily the Baltic States). What went unnoticed, however, was the fact that talks with Western powers were a means for the Soviets to pressure the Germans to force them to return to “the Rapallo road”.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the arguments made by Polish diplomats and laid out in the above-cited documents remained in force until 23 August—unchanged. There were virtually no opinions, either from the top Foreign Ministry leadership or from Polish diplomats in general, which conflict with the theses contained in Szembek’s instructions of 5 May 1939.

Confronted by the Pact of 23 August 1939

Until mid-August 1939, there were no changes in international policy that could have undermined the current arrangements and concepts put forward by Polish foreign policy. Talks between the governments of Great Britain and France and the government of the USSR continued, but they produced no results in the face of various demands made by Soviet diplomats, the most serious of which involved the theory of “indirect aggression”, which was completely contrary to the principles of international law.¹⁵⁰⁰ These demands—it bears repeating—were not directed against Poland, but against the Baltic States. At the same time, Soviet-German economic negotiations remained ongoing, with no specific agreement in sight.

Admittedly, Soviet diplomacy managed skilfully to calm Polish fears of a threat from the east. Unfortunately, officials in Warsaw took at face value Soviet assurances that for the USSR, a neighbourhood with a “totalistic power” (the German Reich) was not desirable. Diplomats at the Polish Foreign Ministry also welcomed cynical assurances offered first by Potiomkin in May 1939, and then by the new (officially at the end of June) Soviet ambassador Nikolai Sharonov. “The Soviets have come forward with certain schemes,” Szembek told the head of the Soviet Department at the Polish Foreign Ministry. “They deal with current affairs fairly smoothly, but they don’t want to talk to us about economic issues and transit. They want to draw us into staff talks—that much is clear.”¹⁵⁰¹

1499 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Michał Sokolnicki Collection, Box 1.

1500 For more on this subject, see E. Ceginskas, “Die baltische Frage in den Großmächteverhandlungen in 1939,” *Commentationes Balticae* 12–13 (1967), No. 2: pp. 31–103.

1501 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, 689 (note dated 18 August).

Three events in the middle of August introduced new elements into the assessment of the international situation:

1. On the night of 11/12 August, Allied military delegations came to Moscow for talks with the Soviets (the British under admiral Reginald Drax, and the French under general Aimé Doumenc), which meant that efforts for an alliance treaty were entering a decisive phase.
2. On 14 August, the chairman of the Soviet delegation in the Moscow negotiations, marshal Voroshilov, demanded that Polish and Romanian territory be used to fight Germany, because otherwise, given that the USSR and Germany shared no border, the Red Army could not participate in a war and fulfil its obligations. On 18 August, the ambassadors of France and Great Britain in Warsaw submitted the matter in this form to the Polish government in Warsaw, while two days earlier minister Bonnet had mentioned the issue to ambassador Łukasiewicz, who immediately sent the appropriate encrypted telegram to Warsaw. A day later, in turn, Allied military attachés informed general Stachiewicz in detail of Soviet expectations.¹⁵⁰²
3. On 19 August, a German-Soviet economic treaty was signed in Berlin, and von Ribbentrop received an invitation to visit Moscow a week later, which was then accelerated based on Hitler's request to Stalin.

Nonetheless, there is no indication that officials in Warsaw drew the proper conclusions from these events.

Soviet demands on the matter of indirect aggression and marching rights through Poland and Romania seemed to be unequivocal proof that the Soviets wanted to break off negotiations with the Allied powers, since there could be no doubt that the Polish response would be negative. The Polish position in this regard was communicated to Allied ambassadors several times on 18–22 August. As marshal Śmigły-Rydz put it: “The Allied countries of England and France, which recklessly entered into negotiations with the Soviets, are now only saving face. Their action centres on hindering Germany's actions in Moscow.”¹⁵⁰³

Undoubtedly, Soviet demands for the right to march Red Army troops through Polish territory, which is the subject of discussion below, should have seriously increased the vigilance of Polish diplomats, raising as they did the spectre of danger from the east. But this did not happen, which is puzzling. Unfortunately, officials

1502 Ambassador Kennard's report on this matter dated 19 August, see National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23073, C.11583/3356/18 (see also note dated 21 August and sent by the British ambassador to the Foreign Office on 24 August, C. 120130/3356/18).

1503 Statement made by marshal Śmigły-Rydz on 23 August, quoted in E. Kwiatkowski, “Dziennik czynności ministra skarbu,” ed J. Rakowski, *Zeszyty Historyczne* [Paris] (1991), No. 96: p. 78 (the book edition was published by Marek Marian Drozdowski: E. Kwiatkowski, *Dziennik: lipiec 1939 – sierpień 1940* [Rzeszów 2003]).

in Warsaw put too little effort into reading Soviet intentions behind demands to include the Baltic States in the formula of “indirect aggression”. Most importantly, however, they seemed blind to the fact that Soviet territorial demands undermining the independence of the Baltic States were only a test case before making similar demands on Poland and Romania.

The German–Soviet Credit Agreement, concluded on 19 August, seemed to herald at least the possibility of improved Berlin-Moscow relations. At the time, ambassador Grzybowski concluded that this development would “raise German spirits, encourage them [the Germans] to engage in conflict, and may upset our allies”.¹⁵⁰⁴ In European capitals, officials were clearer in their commentary that this event signalled a far-reaching political rapprochement between the two powers. At present, no one was able to determine with certainty what shape this rapprochement would take and what consequences it would have for Poland. The argument could have been made that since economic matters were never of intrinsic significance to the Soviets, but were rather a policy instrument in international relations, the agreement should have been seen as an indicator of a coming political rapprochement.

Having heard on 22 August 1939 that a German Soviet non-aggression treaty was being developed, Beck gave ambassadors Edward Raczyński and Juliusz Łukasiewicz the following assessment (known to historians for years) of the current international situation:

The Polish government has not believed in the sincere intention of the Soviets to engage fully in developing a conflict with Germany. Consequently, the Polish Government does not consider the situation to have materially changed. [...] Today’s announcements about the intended non-aggression pact clearly prove that the Soviet government has long played a double game, deliberately seeking to break negotiations with Paris and London, so that our negative position on the right of Soviet troops to march [through foreign territory] cannot hold us responsible for the situation created. In view of the psychological significance of today’s events, I believe that the only answer is to reconfirm the strong stance taken by England, France and Poland.¹⁵⁰⁵

In these same instructions, the foreign minister expressed another thought: “Germany will certainly encounter the same difficulties in negotiations with the Soviets, and a German-Soviet pact will certainly represent a further breakdown in Hitler’s ideology, the anti-Comintern pact [and] the mood among the Soviets. In addition, it creates a new situation in the Far East. In these conditions, much depends on the decisive attitude of governments and the press in our three countries.”¹⁵⁰⁶

1504 Ambassador Grzybowski to Beck, 21 August 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 779.

1505 Beck to the missions in Paris and London, 22 August (at 4:00 a.m.), *ibid.*, p. 780.

1506 *Ibid.*

This interpretation clearly indicates that on the eve of the Hitler-Stalin pact, Beck still counted on basic Soviet hostility towards the Polish Republic, but he did not believe that the USSR would actively stand up against Poland, which after all was not alone in confronting the Germans; rather, it was working in coalition with Great Britain and France. Having said that, Beck was worried about the possibility that the German-Soviet treaty of 23 August would weaken the determination of the Western powers to fulfil their allied commitments.¹⁵⁰⁷ This thought stands out as undoubtedly important.

Ambassador Lipski, recalling the experience of receiving news about the German-Soviet pact, wrote about his fear that France and Great Britain would withdraw the guarantees they had extended to Poland: “This was a terrible moment for me. The two adversaries shook hands against us. [...] My greatest concern was that in the face of the German-Soviet pact, the West might weaken and start to withdraw the support it had hitherto shown to us.”¹⁵⁰⁸ It is difficult not to recall that the Allies had continued to repeat to the Poles that cooperation between Poland and the Soviet Union was necessary for the effectiveness of an eastern front. Once the Soviets’ pact with Germany was announced, all such reasoning—dubious from the very beginning—lost all significance.

Officials in Warsaw received news of the breakdown in the Moscow negotiations and the departure of the Franco-British military mission from Moscow as real “relief” for Poland’s position, which does not indicate confusion. With this breakdown, the Kremlin’s demands threatening Polish territory fell away. Had a British-French-Soviet mutual assistance pact been signed, Anglo-Polish and Franco-Polish commitments would have had to be reconciled with the provisions of this alliance.

On 23 August, Beck formulated his well-known assessment of the German-Soviet agreement in an encrypted telegram to diplomatic missions, which we need to cite once again even if only out of a sense of obligation: “The Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact: 1, does not change Poland’s actual position in any way, since Poland never counted on Soviet assistance; 2, does not change the line of Polish policy in any way, nor does it affect its mutual relations with allies; 3, offers proof of the double game played by the Soviets, who certainly want to avoid full involvement on the side of any group of bourgeois states, while gladly anticipating the possibility of a European war.”¹⁵⁰⁹ One day earlier, the foreign minister told ambassador Kennard the same thing: the pact did not change much, because Russia had been playing “a double game for a long time”.¹⁵¹⁰ Interestingly, Minister Bonnet

1507 Above all, information from Ambassador Raczyński in London provided a strong basis for this kind of fear.

1508 *Diplomat in Berlin 1933–1939. Papers and Memoirs of Józef Lipski, Ambassador of Poland*, ed. W. Jędrzejewicz (New York 1968), p. 566.

1509 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 786.

1510 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 22976, C.11780/15/18.

assessed the situation in much the same way, saying that the Soviets had been “unreliable” towards both Great Britain and Germany.¹⁵¹¹ There was no sign of anxiety in this reasoning regarding a possible threat from the east. When reading the content of Beck’s telegram, we must remember that it was a *pro foro externo* assessment, which does not allow us to fully judge his state of mind at this critical moment.

Unfortunately, we only have extremely unreliable sources on the thoughts and feelings of the Polish leadership on 23 August.¹⁵¹² Some documents contradict the image of calm with which Beck and the people around him received the news from Moscow. Ambassador Kennard wrote on 22 August that the German-Soviet agreement was received as a “complete surprise”.¹⁵¹³ In this context, one amazing document illuminating Beck’s position is Kennard’s encrypted telegram to the Foreign Office on 23 August. Reporting on conversations he and ambassador Noël had had with the Polish foreign minister, the British ambassador wrote: “Beck clearly does not exclude the possibility of von Ribbentrop reaching agreement for a partition of Poland and I emphasised this as an argument for Poland yielding on the question of the passage of troops, but it did not shake him.”¹⁵¹⁴ The gist of this British diplomat’s report corresponds with ambassador Lipski’s notation of 23 August indicating that Beck was “distraught”.¹⁵¹⁵

In light of these documents, Michał Zacharias’s reflection does not seem unfounded: “It cannot be ruled out that the real nature of German-Soviet relations was already sensed on Wierzbowa Street [inside the Polish Foreign Ministry] and that subconscious fears that are difficult to find in earlier opinions may indeed have arisen. They were understandable psychologically, just as it was understandable that they were left unsaid.”¹⁵¹⁶ The mere announcement of the non-aggression pact, on 22 August, was a shock.¹⁵¹⁷ However, there followed a political rationalisation of

1511 *Ibid.*, encrypted telegram from the chargé d’affaires in Paris, Ronald Campbell, to the Foreign Office on 22 August.

1512 I tried to reconstruct this issue in my *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop–Molotow*, pp. 419–434.

1513 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 22976, C.11710/15/18.

1514 *Ibid.*, 23073, C.11814/3356/18.

1515 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Józefa Lipskiego, 67/11, “Odpis luźnych kartek odręcznych,” undated, probably a copy made by W. Jędrzejewicz in the 1960s from Lipski’s papers.

1516 M. J. Zacharias, “Polska wobec zbliżenia niemiecko-sowieckiego w okresie międzywojennym (ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem układu z 23 sierpnia 1939 r.),” *Rola i miejsce Polski w Europie 1914–1957. W 75 rocznicę odzyskania niepodległości. Materiały z sesji naukowej w Instytucie Historii PAN 8–9 listopada 1993 r.*, ed. A. Koryn (Warsaw 1994), p. 118.

1517 This was emphasised in reports from Warsaw by the Italian ambassador Arone di Valentino (report to foreign minister Ciano dated 22 August 1939), see J. W. Borejsza, “Włochy wobec wojny niemiecko-polskiej w 1939 roku,” in *idem, Mussolini był pierwszym*, p. 261.

the new situation and the Polish leadership persisted with the argument that there was no direct threat from the east.

“There is a new fact,” Beck stated at a cabinet meeting, “the announcement of the Nazi-Soviet pact.” And deputy prime minister Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski wrote in his diary on 23 August. “One should not overestimate the effects of two contradictory worlds like this getting along. However, it cannot be denied that the Reich, with its Nazi ideology, invested as much effort as it could muster. There must therefore be an important purpose tied to this policy change that will have negative effects, including within this axis.”¹⁵¹⁸ Undoubtedly, the purpose that Beck guessed was a declaration of war.

Marshal Śmigły-Rydz made essentially the same argument, though with different emphases, when he spoke with Poland’s top leadership, including the country’s president, at the Royal Castle on 23 August. As Kwiatkowski noted, Śmigły-Rydz “does not underestimate the German and Soviet announcements about the Germany-Soviet non-aggression deal. Such a demonstration is ideologically costly for both sides. In these conditions, it is difficult to believe that this is happening without a deeper purpose. Apart from causing great surprise and having a depressing influence on the reputation of France and England, Hitler certainly has an eye on intimidating us and possibly preparing for war against us.”¹⁵¹⁹ This statement contained no supposition about either a possible partition of Poland by its two neighbours or any possible Soviet support of Germany in the latter’s battles against Poland in the event of war. In the same statement, Śmigły-Rydz stated that “from the point of view of their goal—to weaken Europe’s bourgeoisie and fuel conflict—the Soviets are acting logically. Who knows if they will not encourage Germany to stand against Poland?”¹⁵²⁰ This entire statement indicates very clearly that Śmigły-Rydz expected Russia’s Bolshevik leaders to do everything in their power to push Germany against Poland and thus bring about war. However, there is no indication that he considered the possibility that Moscow would use any means other than diplomatic means.

It was on practically identical premises that Michał Łubieński based his assessment of the Soviet-German pact. Beck’s closest associate, Łubieński recognised on 22 August that this arrangement did not substantially alter Poland’s position, because “Rapallo has always remained in force, and our non-aggression pact with Soviet Russia is still in play”.¹⁵²¹ Łubieński’s stance was based on the belief that Soviet Russia remained systematically interested in starting a war on a European scale, within the camp of “imperialist countries”, and tactical cooperation with Germany was to be the means to this end. Other assessments formulated in Warsaw of Poland’s situation went no further than the above.

1518 E. Kwiatkowski, “Dziennik czynności ministra skarbu,” p. 80.

1519 *Ibid.*, p. 77

1520 *Ibid.*, p. 78.

1521 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 689.

According to Szembek's note of 22 August, Łubieński highlighted two other elements of the German-Soviet pact: that the agreement was evidence of the "duplicity of Soviet policy, about which we have long warned Western Europe," and "the complete collapse of Nazi doctrine".¹⁵²² The head of Beck's office believed that in the light of Soviet-German rapprochement, Polish arguments that it was impossible to win the Soviets over to a "front in the defence of peace" were taken more seriously "in the eyes of the West". He also expected a split in German-Japanese relations, and he appears to have believed that Nazism was weakening within Germany, since the pact undermined the movement's underlying anti-communism. In Łubieński's view, the pact "brought closer the possibility that war will break out". The first thesis was true, but Polish diplomacy could not draw any major benefits from this state of affairs. The second thesis transpired to be incorrect, and Łubieński underestimated the ideological flexibility of National Socialism, which allowed Hitler to make certain tactical compromises even with regimes that qualified as "objective enemies". The third thesis was true and would be confirmed by the course of events in the coming days.

The ambassador in Moscow, Waław Grzybowski, ruled out the possibility of close cooperation between the USSR and Hitler's Germany. In a report to the Foreign Ministry dated 24 August, he wrote that "opinion in diplomatic circles here is that the non-aggression pact is a great success for the Soviets, because it can give them a free hand at the beginning of a conflict. However, nobody believes that the Soviets would engage more deeply in collaboration with Germany."¹⁵²³

Ambassador Grzybowski's opinions were of particular importance. The fact that his base was in Moscow predestined him for the role of the first interpreter of Soviet foreign policy. This diplomat's views on the Soviet Union's strategy were a mixture of highly accurate observations and certain assessments that were questionable and misleading.

Above all, the ambassador seemed to overestimate his country's possibilities. In a conversation with his Italian counterpart in Moscow, Augusto Rosso, on 6 August 1939, Grzybowski reportedly said: "We are aware of the critical situation in which we may find ourselves in the event of a German attack, but we believe that we will be able to defend ourselves with our own strength".¹⁵²⁴

In an encrypted telegram dated 21 August, Grzybowski speculated that Stalin was implementing a policy of intimidation directed against the Western powers and Poland. The ambassador wrote: "The formula for blackmail will probably involve leading England and France to believe that the USSR's imperialist goals with regard to the Baltic States and other neighbours can also be achieved through a potential

1522 Ibid., pp. 689–690.

1523 Ambassador Grzybowski to the Foreign Ministry, 24 August 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 793.

1524 Archivio Storico Diplomatico (Rome), Polonia, 1939, 15. See also S. Sierpowski, *Stosunki polsko-włoskie*, p. 586.

agreement with Germany.”¹⁵²⁵ This reasoning was accurate, although Grzybowski did not believe in the real possibility of such an agreement. Having said that, he held a different opinion the next day.¹⁵²⁶ Writing to the Foreign Ministry on 22 August, the ambassador stated that “the Soviets want to encourage Germany to get into a war, reserving for themselves [the right to make] a decision later” over what stance to take to the conflict.¹⁵²⁷ This argument was also based in reality. In this light, it is difficult to defend Henryk Batowski’s view that Grzybowski’s reports, which were “well received at the Polish Foreign Ministry, could not arouse greater vigilance regarding the possible threats to Poland from the USSR”.¹⁵²⁸

Ambassador Grzybowski believed that both before and after 23 August, Soviet policy was characterised by the notion of “sitting on two stools”.¹⁵²⁹ In this light, he stated that “the non-aggression pact of 23 August was of limited political significance”, and that “it was triggered on both sides by tactical considerations”.¹⁵³⁰ The Ambassador still regarded “Soviet engagement on the side of the Germans” as “improbable”.

Grzybowski considered von Ribbentrop’s trip to Moscow and the signing of the non-aggression pact as being “calculated primarily for its effect in the West”. In other words, Germany wanted to put Poland in a hopeless military position through agreement with the USSR. Hitler hoped that under these conditions Great Britain would withdraw from its guarantee obligations. Such reasoning was sound. Moreover, Grzybowski repeated once again that “the Soviets are anticipating the possibility of maintaining for themselves a free hand and total English and French agreement with their military goals”.¹⁵³¹

But what is most important is the fact that Grzybowski learned nothing of the secret protocol. Doubtlessly he did not imagine that the provisions of the Hitler-Stalin agreement would represent a strike at Poland’s independence. On 29 August, he expressed the view that “the pact says little about the position the Soviets will take in the event of a conflict and is only a starting point for further games”.¹⁵³² In a letter to Beck on that day, the ambassador argued that the Soviet-German pact

1525 Ambassador Grzybowski to the Foreign Ministry, 21 August 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 779.

1526 Ambassador Grzybowski to Kobyłański, 22 August 1939, *ibid.*, p. 781.

1527 Ambassador Grzybowski to the Foreign Ministry, 22 August 1939, *ibid.*, p. 782.

1528 H. Batowski, “Antecedencje 17 września 1939 r.,” in *17 września 1939. Materiały z ogólnopolskiej konferencji historyków*, p. 23.

1529 AAN, MSZ, 6655, ambassador Grzybowski to the Foreign Ministry, 27 August 1939.

1530 Ambassador Grzybowski to the Foreign Ministry, 28 August 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 827.

1531 AAN, MSZ, 6655, Summary of arguments by ambassador Grzybowski in a document from T. Kobyłański to General Waclaw Stachiewicz (Chief of the General Staff), 24 August 1939.

1532 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 771. Chargé d’affaires T. Jankowski made a similar argument in his letter to S. Zabiello on 29 August 1939, AAN, MSZ, 5357.

brought Poland “relief” because, as he reasoned, it would put an end to Allied pressure on the Polish government to agree to Soviet demands that the Red Army be allowed to march through Polish territory.¹⁵³³ Beck’s statement of 28 August that “the Soviets seemed quite confused after signing the non-aggression pact with Germany” should be regarded as an indication that the foreign minister largely shared the interpretations submitted to him by his ambassador in Moscow.¹⁵³⁴

The belief that the Soviet Union could not be interested in having the Third Reich as a neighbour was one held not only by ambassador Grzybowski, but also by Polish diplomats in general. Immediately after Potiomkin’s visit to Warsaw on 13 May, Beck wrote to the diplomatic missions that “the Soviets are aware that the Polish government will make no deal with either of the great neighbours against the other, and they understand the benefit they enjoy from Poland’s position”.¹⁵³⁵ As the Polish envoy in Budapest, Leon Orłowski, assured Regent Horthy on 10 May 1939: “Russia, moreover, is doing nothing to hide its drastic anti-German attitude and understands that Poland is not plotting with Germany against it, just as it is not plotting with it against Germany. On the contrary, Russia is aware that Poland protects it [Russia] against far-reaching German plans. In these conditions, we do not think it is possible for a German-Soviet agreement to be reached.”¹⁵³⁶ This reasoning led to the conviction that independent Poland, in a specific way shielded Soviet Russia from the danger of a German attack. Szembek uttered this thought emphatically in a letter dated 17 July to ambassador Sokolnicki. The collapse of the plan to establish cooperation between the Western powers and the USSR would “increase our value not only in England, but also in the Soviet Union, because then Russia will have only Polish armour in its defence against Germany.”¹⁵³⁷ With these calculations, Polish officials overestimated the importance of the Polish Republic as a geopolitical “barrier”.

Ambassador Edward Raczyński did not share this way of thinking. Soberly analysing demands put forward by the Soviets during the Moscow negotiations with France and Great Britain, he suspected that the Soviets were trying, with the permission of London and Paris, to gain control over Polish territories, about which they could also strike a deal with Germany.

In conclusion, we can say that in the wake of the German-Soviet pact, it was clearly established opinion in the Polish Foreign Ministry that Bolshevik Russia, despite its interest in bringing about war, could not in its own interests actively support the Third Reich militarily if war broke out.

1533 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 830.

1534 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 701.

1535 Beck’s encrypted circular for diplomatic missions, 13 May 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 468.

1536 Report (sent after a long delay) from 31 May 1939, *ibid.*, p. 535.

1537 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Michał Sokolnicki Collection, Box 1.

Officials in Warsaw viewed the pact of 23 August 1939 as an agreement motivated by a policy of blackmail and bluff whose goal was to strike at Poland's independence by intimidation, i.e. without the use of force. Polish officials regarded the Soviet pact as this goal's culmination. Had they received, in one way or another, news of the secret protocol, they would most certainly have viewed it as just another aspect of the policy of bluff and blackmail.

We should not isolate these Polish assessments from broader European commentary on the event; rather, we should view them from within a comparative perspective, taking into account the many similar statements made by politicians, diplomats and policy commentators in other countries. On 24 August 1939, Romanian foreign minister Grigore Gafencu expressed the opinion that "Germany intends to continue the game of intimidation".¹⁵³⁸ Likewise, officials in Western European capitals also commented on the potential effects of the Moscow pact. Envoy Michał Mościcki, for example, reported on 23 August from Brussels that the signed agreement, although it was a "moral success for Hitler, [...] in practice it does not change the balance of power in Europe".¹⁵³⁹ Deputy Dębicki wrote to Szembek on 23 August about the "massive commotion" in Belgrade caused by news of the Hitler-Stalin pact, although he offered no details about the significance of the agreement, indicating only that there had to be serious reasons that forced the German government to "so radically abandon its doctrinal guidelines".¹⁵⁴⁰

The Vatican secretary of state, cardinal Luigi Maglione, was of the opinion that Soviet Russia "would have nothing to gain by eliminating the Polish state".¹⁵⁴¹ A common border with Hitler's Germany could not be an advantage. In turn, the Latvian foreign minister Vilhelms Munters, commenting on the concerns within "certain English circles" in the face of the agreement between Russia and Germany, considered this idea "completely fantastic". He told Polish envoy Jerzy Kłopotowski: "It is stupid to allow for such a thing [*C'est idiot de pouvoir supposer une chose pareille*]"¹⁵⁴² The Turkish Foreign Ministry attributed to the Soviets the desire to save their country from being drawn into war, adding that they would maintain neutrality "in order to get all the benefits of the crisis".¹⁵⁴³ "At present, Russia is not capable of offensive action on foreign territories, it can only defend

1538 Ambassador Roger Raczyński to the Foreign Ministry, encrypted telegram, 24 August 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 798.

1539 Envoy M. Mościcki (Brussels) to the Foreign Ministry, 23 August 1939, text published in M. Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop–Molotow*, p. 577.

1540 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Michał Sokolnicki Collection, Box 1.

1541 Ambassador F. Charles-Roux to Bonnet on 12 June 1939, AMAE, Europe 1918–1940, Pologne, Vol. 366.

1542 Envoy J. Kłopotowski (Riga) to Beck, 12 August 1939, text published in M. Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop–Molotow*, p. 572.

1543 Ambassador in Ankara René Massigli to Bonnet, 23 August 1939, DDF, series 2, Vol. 18, p. 340.

itself on its own territory.”¹⁵⁴⁴ The Japanese ambassador in Warsaw, Shuichi Sakoh, viewed Soviet policy in a similar way. In a conversation with Tadeusz Kobyłański on 28 August, he expressed the view that “the Soviets are as insincere towards Germany as they were towards England and France [...]”.¹⁵⁴⁵ He also predicted that the Soviet Union would remain neutral when war broke out.

On 26 August 1939, exiled in London, former Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš offered his assessment of the Hitler-Stalin pact. In his view “we cannot yet say whether Russia is associated with Germany to such an extent that it wants to divide Poland. Of course, the Russian Pact, which has caused so much confusion, was meant by Moscow to accelerate the course of events and trigger a war.”¹⁵⁴⁶ Fundamentally, this assessment is no different than Beck’s.

Belief in Soviet neutrality was shared, by way of an unwritten *consensus omnium*, among political elites across Europe at that time. By no means can we consider errors committed by the Poles in their assessments of Soviet imperialism to be a unique phenomenon. Foreign interpretations of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, collected by members of the Polish Foreign Service and included in Kobyłański’s instructions to diplomatic missions of 26 August, give us no reason to believe that Polish interpretations deviated from assessments that prevailed at the time in the offices of European diplomacy.¹⁵⁴⁷ On the contrary, they largely coincided with views reaching Warsaw from European capitals as gathered by Polish officials on 22–25 August 1939.

Polish Diplomacy and “Leaks” about the Secret Protocol

The Polish foreign minister had no certain knowledge of the secret protocol attached to the publicly announced non-aggression treaty between the USSR and the Third Reich, a fact about which we have known for a long time. Archival searches that I conducted in connection with the book *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop–Molotow. Problem zbliżenia niemiecko-sowieckiego w polityce zagranicznej II Rzeczypospolitej* brought to light no new materials to challenge this fact.

Of course, the Polish Foreign Service (both diplomatic and consular) registered and forwarded to the Foreign Ministry headquarters in Warsaw information and rumours being collected on a regular basis. On 22 August 1939, Ambassador

1544 Ambassador Michał Sokolnicki in his diary at the date 9 September 1939 (see M. Sokolnicki, *Dziennik ankarski 1939–1943* [London 1965], p. 22).

1545 AAN, MSZ, 5948, Kobyłański’s note on a conversation with ambassador Sakoh, 28 August 1939. Ambassador Romer wrote extensively on Japanese views on the significance of the pact (report dated 23 August 1939), AAN, MSZ, 5948.

1546 See P. Wandycz, “Benesz o pakcie Ribbentrop–Molotow,” *Przegląd Wschodni* (1992/1993), No. 4: p. 893.

1547 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), pp. 813–815.

Edward Raczyński sent Beck a report on “leaks” about a secret German-Soviet agreement, which was to be concluded during von Ribbentrop’s visit to Moscow the next day. Raczyński had apparently obtained this information that same day “from an unofficial, but quite serious source”. It is difficult to say anything about this source, but the wording suggests that it was information obtained from within the London diplomatic corps. Soviet-German arrangements reportedly contained four points: (1) “a mutual commitment not to interfere in the internal affairs of the other party, [and] in particular Germany will not interfere in the Ukrainian question”; (2) “Latvia, Estonia and Finland fall within the sphere of Soviet interests”; (3) “the Germans leave Bulgaria under Turkish influence,” to which the ambassador attached the suggestion that perhaps “they will not encourage its revisionist tendencies?”; and (4) “the former Anti-Comintern pact has lost its anti-Soviet edge.”¹⁵⁴⁸ In addition, the agreement between the two powers was to enter into force “with the active participation of Italian diplomacy”. Clearly, the only truth to be found in the above list involved the inclusion of the Baltic States in the Soviet sphere of influence.

Information from Romanian sources reached Warsaw that “German-Soviet talks about the non-aggression pact lasted two-and-a-half months, with all the pact’s details having been agreed in advance,” and that the Romanians had reportedly found out about this from the Reich envoy in Bucharest. On 29 August, Szembek informed ambassador Grzybowski of this fact, recommending that he “exploit [it] in the context of Voroshilov’s statement that it was Poland’s negative attitude towards Soviet staff talks with England and France that resulted in the agreement with Germany.”¹⁵⁴⁹

On 31 August 1939, in the final hours of peace, ambassador Juliusz Łukasiewicz sent to Warsaw a very short but particularly important encrypted telegram. He reported that “in the Soviet-German talks, the issue of the Baltic States was dealt with. Bonnet, based on his own information, confirmed this to me, adding that in the event of a Polish-German war, the Soviets are supposed to take Latvia, Estonia and Finland. In both reports there was no news about us or Romania.”¹⁵⁵⁰ Naturally cautious in this context, the author of this telegram did not provide the informant’s name. But in his memoirs from 1946, Łukasiewicz admitted that the information

1548 Ambassador Raczyński to Beck, 22 August 1939, *ibid.*, p. 783.

1549 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 831. This document referred to an interview with the Western press given by marshal Voroshilov on 27 August 1939. The fact that the Soviets were playing games to reassure the Polish leadership about the lack of danger from the east is evidenced by the fact that the Soviet ambassador approached Beck on 2 September and asked (as Beck wrote to the diplomatic missions): “Why are we not negotiating with the Soviets on the issue of supplies, the possibilities for which were opened by Voroshilov’s interview?” IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.53/26.

1550 Ambassador Łukasiewicz to Foreign Ministry, encrypted telegram, 31 August 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 855.

had come from William Bullitt, a friend of the Polish diplomat and the US ambassador in Paris, who had forwarded it to French foreign minister Bonnet.¹⁵⁵¹

Bonnet certainly had quite specific information regarding Poland and the secret German-Soviet arrangements of 23 August from other sources, namely reports by French ambassadors Robert Coulondre in Berlin and Paul-Émile Naggiar in Moscow. In a telegram dated 21 August, the latter informed the foreign minister that the secret obligations between the governments of the Third Reich and the USSR would provide for “the partition of Poland and Romania [*partage de la Pologne et de la Roumanie*]” and “the abandonment of certain parts of the Baltic States to Soviet control [*l’abandon ou contrôle soviétique de certaines parties des états baltes*].”¹⁵⁵² On 24 August, Naggiar assessed the effects of von Ribbentrop’s visit to Moscow and hypothesised the existence of a secret protocol attached to the non-aggression system. The subject of this agreement was reportedly the fate of the Baltic States and Poland.¹⁵⁵³ When the French ambassador in Moscow asked Molotov about secret clauses attached to the Soviet-German agreement, and the response he heard was that the Soviet government did not inquire into the secret obligations made by Western powers, it became clear that the agreement of 23 August was no ordinary agreement.¹⁵⁵⁴ In turn, ambassador Coulondre obtained information about the secret protocol “from people around” Hans Lammers, Chief of the Reich Chancellery. In this way, messages from the two French embassies about the secret Moscow-Berlin system arrived at Quai d’Orsay. Henryk Batowski believed that French officials were obliged to inform the Polish government of what they knew.¹⁵⁵⁵

Whether the French considered these reports credible is another open question, because on 12 September, at a conference of the Supreme Council of the Allied Powers in Abbeville, Daladier judged that “it would be better if Russia switched over to the allies and came to Poland’s aid”.¹⁵⁵⁶ In any case, the French government refused to provide Warsaw with the information it had obtained on Poland. Its motivations are debatable, but it is most likely the case that the French did not want to weaken Polish determination in resisting Germany.¹⁵⁵⁷ In a later report on his conversation with the French foreign minister on 31 August, Łukasiewicz

1551 J. Łukasiewicz, *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939* (1989), p. 333.

1552 DDF, series 2, Vol. 18, doc. 183, pp. 233–234.

1553 AMAE, Papiers d’agents, p. 199, Ambassador Paul-Émile Naggiar’s correspondence, Vol. 7–9, Ambassador Naggiar to Bonnet, 24 August 1939. See also J. Zay, *Carnets secrets* (Paris 1942), p. 68. For more on French policy at this time, see H. Bartel, *Frankreich und die Sowjetunion 1938–1940*, pp. 258–262.

1554 On the Naggiar–Molotov conversation, see Ambassador Phipps’ encrypted telegram from Paris on 26 August to the Foreign Office, National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23073, C.12108/3356/18.

1555 H. Batowski, “Polska w polityce Francji,” p. 51.

1556 *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, Vol. 1, p. 555.

1557 H. Batowski, “Polska w polityce Francji,” pp. 39–51.

stated that Bonnet was certain that Germany had agreed to incorporate Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania into the USSR, and that this was to be the price paid for the USSR’s friendly neutrality in the event of a Polish-German war. He wondered, however, why it was that, in the above-cited telegram of 31 August, there was no mention of Lithuania, but rather of Finland (next to Latvia and Estonia).¹⁵⁵⁸

Another source worth considering at this point is the diplomatic correspondence of the newly appointed Polish ambassador to the Holy See, Kazimierz Papée. Twelve days before the Hitler-Stalin pact was concluded, Papée reported to Warsaw that “the Vatican is concerned about Hitler’s communication with Stalin”.¹⁵⁵⁹ Other documents show that Pope Pius XII tried to find out what the Polish leadership’s position was on the matter of the 23 August pact, presuming that this was an agreement containing secret clauses in addition to its public provisions. “The Vatican cares about our assessment of the draft non-aggression pact between Germany and Soviet Russia,” Papée wrote to the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw on 22 August.¹⁵⁶⁰ Through French ambassador François Charles-Roux, the Holy See tried to direct the attention of Polish diplomats to these concerns. In one report based on a conversation between the Polish ambassador and the Pope, we see the term “German-Soviet alliance” (*sojusz*) used several times, which is something we do not see used by other Polish diplomats from that period.¹⁵⁶¹ Signals from the Vatican, however, did not give a clear message about the content of any secret Soviet-German agreements. Even if such a message reached Warsaw, it would probably have not been considered credible, given Beck’s suspicious attitude towards the diplomacy of the Holy See, whose unsuccessful attempts to broker peace threatened a “second Munich” and could not have been warmly received by the Poles. Officials in Warsaw viewed Vatican diplomacy as supporting Italy’s efforts to resolve the European crisis as it had been resolved in September 1938.

Thus we know that Polish authorities were not able to obtain reliable information from, or were not properly informed by, any foreign government regarding the content of the secret protocol. In connection with their allied commitments, Great Britain and France were no doubt obliged to do so. The Polish Foreign Ministry received official warnings from neither London nor Paris.¹⁵⁶²

1558 It is impossible to resolve these inaccuracies. Perhaps the ambassador’s memory momentarily failed him.

1559 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 683 (note on a conversation with Szembek on 11 August).

1560 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Watykanie, A.44.53/1.

1561 Rather than “*sojusz*” (alliance), the term “*zmowa*” (conspiracy or collusion) was commonly used.

1562 For more, see M. Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop–Molotow*, 405–419, and idem, *Polityka równowagi*, pp. 449–453. See also H. Batowski, “‘Przecieki’ o tajnym protokole z dnia 23 sierpnia 1939 r.,” *Polityka* (1989), No. 10.

There is no doubt that the French Foreign Ministry was well informed. It is not entirely clear what the British Foreign Office knew of this matter.¹⁵⁶³ Nevertheless, it is practically an indisputable fact that the British knew that, in the event of Berlin-Moscow rapprochement, Poland would be one of the first victims of resulting events.¹⁵⁶⁴

What is particularly astounding is the fact that, during a British cabinet meeting on 24 August, the prevalent view was that the Soviets could be won over to an “anti-German front”, and that possible Turkish or American mediation could be useful.¹⁵⁶⁵ Major Sidney Kirkman, a representative of the Intelligence Service, indicated in a memorandum for the Foreign Office dated 4 July that a Berlin-Moscow rapprochement was not impossible.¹⁵⁶⁶ However, in the opinion of ministerial specialists for Eastern European affairs, the Soviets were not faced in July and August 1939 with a choice between establishing cooperation with the Third Reich and participating in an anti-German coalition, but rather with a choice between an alliance with Great Britain and France and voluntary isolation and withdrawal from an active policy in Europe. Laurence Collier (head of the Northern Section at the Foreign Office) expressed this view in an extensive memorandum which was dated 26 August 1939, but which was perhaps written a little earlier.¹⁵⁶⁷ “[...] and

1563 Maurice Cowling adds nothing to the explanation of these matters, although his study is perhaps the most erudite of works so far on British policy in the 1930s. See M. Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler*, p. 361.

1564 When ambassador Kennard informed the Foreign Office on 9 May 1939 that deputy foreign minister Potiomkin was going to visit Warsaw, one Foreign Office official wrote on the margins of this report: “If the Soviet Government were contemplating a deal with Germany, Warsaw would presumably be the first to feel the change in the wind, so this is distinctly reassuring.” National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23699, N.2375/2306/38.

1565 W. Rojek, “Pierwsze oceny i komentarze dyplomatów brytyjskich na temat paktu Ribbentrop–Mołotow, sierpień 1939,” in *W kręgu polityki, dyplomacji, i historii XX wieku*, 237. See also R. Manne, “Some British Light on the Nazi-Soviet Pact”, *European Review* 9 (1981): pp. 83–102. An important study is Lothar Kettenacker, “Der Haltung der britischen Regierung zum Hitler-Stalin-Pakt”, in *Der Hitler-Stalin-Pakt 1939 in den Erinnerungskulturen der Europäer*, eds. A. Kaminsky, D. Müller, S. Troebst (Göttingen 2011), pp. 393–408.

1566 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23686, N.3335/243/38. Document published in M. Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop–Mołotow*, pp. 626–628.

1567 In a note dated 26 August 1939, the head of the Northern Department of the Foreign Office, Laurence Collier, referred to four separate sources of information about “German-Soviet rapprochement.” He wrote: “Our secret information on German-Soviet relations comes from four sources: (1) direct German sources, (2) direct Soviet sources, (3) third parties in touch with German sources, and (4) third parties in touch with Soviet sources.” He continued: “It is notoriously difficult to obtain reliable information direct from Soviet sources. We have had very little information direct from them on German-Soviet relations; and such information as we have

from an impartial consideration of Soviet interests, as far as we could estimate them by trying to put ourselves in the position of the Soviet government, it seemed likely to us that they were reliable—at least to the extent that isolation, rather than a rapprochement with Germany, seemed indicated as the probable alternative policy to one of agreement with France and this country [Great Britain].¹⁵⁶⁸

On 17 August, the British ambassador in Washington, Ronald Lindsay, learned from American sources that two days earlier on 15 August, Molotov and the Reich ambassador in Moscow, Friedrich-Werner von der Schulenburg, had established the basis for an agreement between the two countries defining their spheres of interest in the Baltic area and the terms of a non-aggression pact.¹⁵⁶⁹ The Foreign Office’s undersecretary of state Orme Sargent guessed that there might be a secret agreement attached to the non-aggression pact, but he wrote in his memorandum: “As for me, I rather doubt that something as ruthless as the partition of Poland and the disappearance of the Polish State would become fact. Stalin, perhaps, is thinking of re-establishing the pre-war western border line, although this will again make Russia a neighbour of Germany. Until Stalin joins a war as Hitler’s ally, it will be difficult for both dictators to divide the spoils.”¹⁵⁷⁰ In the diplomatic correspondence between the British Ambassador in Moscow, William Seeds, and the Foreign Office, we also find nothing indicating the possibility of a secret German-Soviet alliance and a partition of Poland.¹⁵⁷¹ On 23 August, Seeds sent an encrypted telegram to London containing the message that the pact contained an agreement on the two powers’ mutual interests, but that Poland was not mentioned in a secret document, if any such document existed at all. Reportedly, Germany had

had tended to show that a Soviet-German political rapprochement was unlikely.” See M. Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop–Molotow*, pp. 629–630.

1568 “We had no indications that these attempts were in general any less reliable than those in a contrary sense; and from an impartial consideration of Soviet interests, as far as we could estimate them by trying to put ourselves in the position of the Soviet Government, it seemed to us likely that they were reliable—at least to the extent that isolation, rather than rapprochement with Germany, seemed indicated as the probable alternative policy to one of agreement with France and this country.” Collier note dated 26 August 1939 (published in the original English in M. Kornat, *Polska 1939*, p. 630). Document text: National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23686, N.4146/243/38.

1569 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 22976, C.11723/15/18.

1570 Quote from M. Nurek, “Dyplomacja brytyjska wobec militarnej i politycznej agresji ZSRR,” in *17 września 1939. Materiały z ogólnopolskiej konferencji historyków*, p. 167. See also idem, “Dyplomacja polska i brytyjska wobec agresji Niemiec i ZSRR we wrześniu 1939 roku,” in *Z dziejów polityki i dyplomacji polskiej* (Warsaw 1997), pp. 382–396.

1571 William Seeds’ reports for Halifax on 9–10 September 1939 also contain no information about a possible threat to Poland, National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23699.

promised not to support Japan in any actions against the Soviets, and the decision had been made to maintain the status quo in the Baltics. On 28 August, Frank Roberts (a Polish specialist) included on the margins of the document a “minute” suggesting that perhaps a secret protocol or “gentlemen’s agreement” had in fact been signed.¹⁵⁷² The day before, in another note, Roberts wrote that “it is difficult to believe that there were no secret clauses [attached to the German-Soviet pact]”.¹⁵⁷³

In this context, it is also worth quoting from a telegram from ambassador Seeds dated 10 September, in which the ambassador drew attention to the call-up of Red Army reservists and to statements in the Soviet press about the bankruptcy of the Polish state, which the British diplomat read as an announcement of action to be taken against Poland to take control of what the Germans had “promised” the Soviets.¹⁵⁷⁴ These words suggest that their author must have at least guessed the existence of secret German-Soviet obligations.¹⁵⁷⁵

As is well known to historians of diplomacy, those Western countries that knew the contents of the secret protocol attached to the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty of 23 August 1939 did not disclose this information to the Polish government; except for France, they had no obligation to do so. Those Western countries included the United States and, at least to some extent, Italy.

It is also known that the nature of the secret German-Soviet commitments came to the attention of the US ambassador in Moscow, Laurence Steinhardt, a fact which was the result not of his political perspicacity, but rather of information he had received from the German diplomat Hans von Herwarth (first secretary of the Embassy of the Reich in Moscow), who was making a desperate attempt of his own to prevent the outbreak of a new and massive war.¹⁵⁷⁶ As early as 17 August, von Herwarth familiarised his American colleague Charles Bohlen with the contents of political demands that Molotov, two days earlier on August 15, had presented to the German ambassador in Moscow, von der Schulenburg, and on whose fulfilment further progress in negotiations with Germany over the “political” foundation of mutual relations depended. These demands were: (1) Berlin’s consent to sign a political agreement (and not only the economic agreement that was already being negotiated); (2) an end to Germany’s support—in any form—for Japan’s aggressive policy in the Far East; and (3) agreement on mutual interests in the Baltic region.

1572 *Ibid.*, 22976, C.11823/15/18.

1573 *Ibid.*, 23073, C.12108/3356/18, Roberts’ note on the margins of Ambassador Phipps’ report dated 26 August.

1574 *Ibid.*, 23699, N.4295/4030/38, encrypted telegram from ambassador Seeds to the Foreign Office dated 10 September 1939.

1575 However, ambassador Seeds did not necessarily regard such rumours as verified information.

1576 In this way, he violated the oath taken by all employees of the Embassy of the German Reich in Moscow (information from Dr Sergiej Słucz).

As yet there was no mention of Poland.¹⁵⁷⁷ From then on, contact between von Herwarth and Bohlen continued. Before the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact was concluded on 23 August, ambassador Steinhardt informed secretary of state Cordell Hull in Washington of the contents of the secret protocol.¹⁵⁷⁸

In connection with the information provided by ambassador Steinhardt, assistant secretary of state Adolf Berle recorded words in his notebook of some significance. Poland found itself in such a position that, trying to avoid a catastrophe, it “can only commit suicide”; that is, capitulate without a fight. Another high-ranking official, the head of the State Department’s Western European Division, John Pierrepoint Moffat, briefly noted that the German-Soviet treaty represented a “new partition of Poland”.¹⁵⁷⁹ But in a conversation with the Polish ambassador in Moscow on 27 or 28 August, ambassador Steinhardt confined himself to a vague statement about the “profound disgust” (*dégout le plus profond*) he felt, about which Grzybowski wrote to Beck on 29 August.¹⁵⁸⁰

The Italian ambassador in Moscow, Augusto Rosso, also learned about the Soviet-German negotiations of August 1939, of which he informed minister Galeazzo Ciano in Rome.¹⁵⁸¹ However, it is not clear whether the Italians received information about the contents of the secret protocol itself. In a telegram of 25 August 1939, ambassador Rosso informed his Foreign Ministry of the existence of a secret additional protocol, but he provided no details.¹⁵⁸²

In private conversations between Polish diplomats and foreign diplomats, suggestions of danger appeared, although they were not highly specific in nature. For example, the French ambassador in Berlin, Coulondre, reportedly warned his Polish colleague, Lipski, that the switch in relations between the Third Reich and the USSR was leading in a dangerous direction for Poland; it was therefore necessary to intensify efforts to “pull” the Soviets towards the West.¹⁵⁸³ However, in

1577 See H. von Herwarth, *Między Hitlerem a Stalinem. Wspomnienia dyplomaty i oficera niemieckiego 1931–1945*, trans. and ed. E.C. Król (Warsaw 1992), p. 251.

1578 *Foreign Relations of the United States* (cited hereafter as FRUS), 1939, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C. 1956), docs. 464, 465, 468, 480, pp. 342–348; see also C. Hull, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull* (London 1948), Vol. 1, pp. 656–657; Ch. Bohlen, *Witness to History*, pp. 69–83; and Bogusław Winid, *W cieniu Kapitola. Dyplomacja polska wobec Stanów Zjednoczonych Ameryki 1919–1939* (Warsaw 1991), pp. 232–234.

1579 *The Moffat Papers, Selection from the Diplomatic Journals of Jay Pierrepoint Moffat 1919–1943*, ed. N. Harvison Hooker (Cambridge, MA 1956) (quote from B. Winid, *W cieniu Kapitola*, pp. 232–234).

1580 IPMS, MSZ, A.11E/1502.

1581 For an in-depth examination of this subject, see Giorgio Petracchi, “Pinocchio, il Gatto e la Volpe: l’Italia fra Germania e Unione Sovietica (1939–1941),” idem, *Da San Pietroburgo a Mosca. La Diplomazia italiana in Russia 1861–1941* (Rome 1993), pp. 339–373.

1582 DDI, series 8, Vol. 13, doc. 264, pp. 171–172.

1583 Ambassador Lipski testified on 28 February 1941 before the Winiarski Commission: “In the summer, Coulondre told me that a German-Soviet agreement

the light of our current knowledge, it is certain that neither ambassador Jerzy Potocki in Washington, nor ambassador Grzybowski in Moscow, nor ambassador Wieniawa-Długoszowski at the Quirinal, were familiarised with information on this matter, whether from the Americans, French, or Italians. Only “Ciano tried to frighten the Polish ambassador in Rome with the German-Soviet pact and with how the English and French were shaken”.¹⁵⁸⁴

According to Polish Foreign Ministry documents, Beck ordered diplomatic missions to seek information in European capitals on all possible interpretations of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. It seems that he attached particular importance to the possibility of obtaining information in Turkey, apparently guided by the conviction that the diplomacy of this country might have a particularly valuable perspective given its good relations with the Soviet Union.¹⁵⁸⁵ In one of his instructions to Ambassador Sokolnicki immediately before war broke out, Beck ordered: “In the light of the Soviet-German non-aggression pact, please immediately communicate all information about Turkey’s position, and, if possible, about the interpretation of the pact given by the Soviets on Turkish soil.”¹⁵⁸⁶

Certainly noteworthy here is the statement from the General Inspectorate of the Armed Forces (GISZ) of 30 August in the *Przegląd Prasy Zagranicznej*, which stated that in Paris and London “there is a belief that the officially published text of the pact is incomplete, that there is an additional secret arrangement behind it [...]. The Western European press clearly emphasises that this pact is directed primarily against Poland, and that Hitler and Stalin agreed on the division of Europe”.¹⁵⁸⁷ This document, published by Piotr Stawecki, contains nothing that allows us to conclude what position GISZ took regarding these claims.

According to an account by the American military attaché in Warsaw, major William Colbern, officials in the Polish General Staff considered the most dangerous negative consequence of the Soviet-German rapprochement to be its psychological effect, which “the Germans may use in their current attempts to discredit the British and French guarantees to Poland”.¹⁵⁸⁸

is expected, so the Franco-English-Soviet talks in Moscow must be accelerated. He had mentioned to me before that there were opportunities for Soviet-German talks” (IPMS, MSZ, A.11E/144/264).

- 1584 Kobyłański to the embassy in Moscow, 26 August 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 813.
- 1585 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Michał Sokolnicki Collection, Box 1, The Foreign Ministry to the ambassador in Ankara (28 August 1939).
- 1586 [note 175, p. 434] Ibid., encrypted telegram dated 24 August.
- 1587 P. Stawecki, “Opinie władz wojskowych o położeniu politycznym February Rzeczypospolitej,” in *Od Wersalu do Poczdamu. Sytuacja międzynarodowa Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej 1918–1945*, ed. A. Koryn (Warszawa 1996), 85.
- 1588 W. H. Colbern, *Polska. Styczeń–sierpień 1939. Analiza i prognozy. Komentarze do wydarzeń attaché wojskowego ambasady USA w Warszawie*, ed. B. Grzełowski (Warsaw 1986), doc. 10, p. 70.

Considerations about the extent to which Polish diplomats were informed of the secret Hitler-Stalin agreement lead to the unequivocal conclusion that they were, in fact, poorly informed. Polish intelligence services also failed in this case.¹⁵⁸⁹ Having said that, when we ask ourselves how Poland’s situation would have changed had the Polish government possessed solid information on a secret agreement, the answer is straightforward. We come to the conclusion that, even if they had been informed by foreign diplomats, Polish officials would either have not considered the material credible, or if they believed it to be credible, they would have called for general demobilisation. It is difficult to imagine that possession of such information would have resulted in more effective preparation for war on two fronts.

One more hypothesis requires consideration. It is evident in Polish diplomatic sources from the end of August 1939 that Polish officials believed that matters were not entirely settled, and that, despite the severe blow to peace that the Hitler-Stalin agreement represented, a Polish-British-French tripartite coalition held out certain possibilities. In a way, this view provides a key to understanding the state of mind among Polish foreign policymakers on the eve of war.

On the day of von Ribbentrop’s departure to Moscow on 23 August, ambassador Raczyński went to talk to Halifax. Their conversation left no doubt that the British intended to “try once again to find a compromise”. However, as the Polish diplomat put it, “a pessimistic assessment of the Soviets’ real intentions, based on information received from various sources”, played a decisive role in shaping the British leadership’s views.¹⁵⁹⁰ Defeatism and doubt in Paris and London were strong. At a meeting of the French cabinet on 23 August, Prime Minister Daladier stated that the Poles “must sacrifice Danzig. They ought to have done so earlier”.¹⁵⁹¹ The idea of saving peace through some kind of gesture was a last resort. But two days later, British leaders decided that it was necessary to finalise the alliance with Poland, which meant that France would not back down from its commitments. However, the fact was that nothing could reverse the effects of the German-Soviet agreement.

As we know, when news circulated about a German Soviet rapprochement, Poland’s allies, as ambassador Edward Raczyński put it, “came apart”. On 23

1589 See A. Peplowski, *Wywiad polski na ZSRR 1921–1939* (Warsaw 1996). For further critical commentary on this subject, see Ryszard Szawłowski, “Wywiad polski na Związek Sowiecki w 1939 r.,” in *Europa nieprowincjonalna*, pp. 905–922. A new study by Piotr Kołakowski is an attempt to synthesise the problem, taking into account the current state of research: *Czas próby: polski wywiad wojskowy wobec groźby wybuchu wojny w 1939 roku* (Warsaw 2012).

1590 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 788 (encrypted telegram from Raczyński dated 23 August).

1591 Quote from A. P. Adamthwaite, *The Making of the Second World War*, p. 93. For more, see Gabriel Gorodetsky, “The Implication of German-Soviet Pact on the Western Democracies Reconsidered”, in *The Opening of the Second World War*, ed. D. W. Pike (Paris 1991), pp. 179–187.

August, in this depressing atmosphere and climate of great anxiety, Raczyński had a conversation with Halifax. That day, he wrote to the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw:

[...] I stated that I had no illusions about Soviet ethics and intentions. [...] However, I am convinced that the Soviet agreement with Germany cannot be the foundation of a friendship that is either sincere or long lasting. On the Soviet side, it is the result of fear combined with a desire for selfish benefit. If the Western powers stand up bravely and, if necessary, go to war with us, the Soviets (who will gain politically from it) will not “compromise themselves” with Germany [...]. If, however, Poland were to defend itself alone in the midst of “diplomatic surrender”, German-Soviet collusion would play itself out fully with the greatest damage done to England and France, who would then be directly threatened.¹⁵⁹²

This is a highly significant argument, giving us the opportunity to formulate a few conclusions. According to this reasoning, an anti-German coalition (Poland, Great Britain and France) still had a chance to block the effects of the Hitler-Stalin pact, and this could happen in one way only: by the Western powers fulfilling the obligations made to Poland in the spring of 1939. In such conditions, it seemed impossible for the Soviets to fight alongside Germany in an ongoing war. On the other hand, if the Western powers stood by passively, the strange Soviet-German alliance had every chance of cementing itself and succeeding. Above all, Poland could be its first victim. The perspicacity of Raczyński’s observations was great. Unfortunately, his reasoning proved to be sound.

From today’s perspective, it is worth emphasising the logic of Raczyński’s argumentation in the key issue: Poland’s changed geopolitical situation after 23 August. Lord Halifax asked: would a revolution in Europe’s geopolitics weaken Poland’s strategic position? In response, Halifax heard the following from the Polish ambassador:

Whatever one says about undisclosed clauses of the Soviet-German agreement, it seems obvious that in their desire to benefit, the Soviets were guided above all by fear of the Third Reich’s dynamism. The agreement protects the Soviets and guarantees them undoubted “benefits”, whether they come in the event of some international conference or a localised war. However, in a general war in which the Western allies stand with Poland, the Soviets’ greatest interest would come in maintaining neutrality, and it is unthinkable that they would be eager to help Germany.¹⁵⁹³

Several conclusions can be drawn from this argument: (1) that Raczyński seriously considered the existence of secret additional agreements attached to the public non-aggression pact; (2) that in the event of a “localised war” (Polish-German), Bolshevik Russia could take advantage of the situation by engaging on Germany’s

1592 Ambassador Raczyński’s report dated 23 August 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), pp. 788–789.

1593 Ambassador Raczyński to Beck, 24 August 1939, *ibid.*, p. 790.

side; (3) however, were a “general war” to break out, such Soviet involvement had to be ruled out, and that country’s neutrality assumed.¹⁵⁹⁴

The historian can no doubt afford one more observation. There was one positive result for Poland from the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, though it was a side effect, and that was—might confidently state—the Anglo-Polish mutual assistance treaty of 25 August 1939. This treaty was a response to Soviet-German rapprochement, which put an end to hopes that the Soviets could be won over to the cause of peace. The pact brought an end to the Moscow talks, which had been conducted under the illusion that the Soviets might join a “peace front”. Had these talks continued until 1 September, it would be difficult to imagine that Anglo-Polish negotiations could have led to an alliance treaty. In his summary of efforts to fulfil military obligations as early as September 1939, ambassador Raczyński wrote: “As soon as Soviet Russia dropped out of the equation, the English lost their original faith in the possibility of building a fully-fledged Eastern defence system. This does not mean, as my comments quoted above indicated, that they would want to move away from their commitments, to change to another policy on German claims to hegemony in Central Europe. Such a path would not be in line with the dignity of the British Empire and would also be too dangerous in the last consequence.”¹⁵⁹⁵ The Hitler-Stalin agreement was a true *sine qua non* of a definitive Anglo-Polish agreement, which was Poland’s main guarantee when war broke out on 1 September. Knowing the diplomatic realities in the summer of 1939, we can imagine that without the events of 23 August, Anglo-Polish negotiations could not have been concluded before the outbreak of war.

At the same time, we must recall another, negative result for Poland tied to the Moscow agreement of 23 August: that Soviet-German rapprochement weakened Britain and France’s commitment to Poland because it undermined their faith in the effectiveness of the Polish front.¹⁵⁹⁶ It put Poland in a very difficult geopolitical situation by the very fact that the Bolshevik state had refused to play the role that strategists in London and Paris had assigned it: the provider of economic support for Poland.

On 23 August, the basic argument made by Polish diplomacy had lost its value, namely that Soviet-German rapprochement was impossible because of extreme ideological differences. Now, a new concept emerged: that despite the spectacular settlement reached by the two totalitarian powers, it was possible to secure Soviet neutrality in the first phase of a European war, which could happen only if Poland’s allies fulfilled their obligations. In this way, the worst-case scenario (that is, the partition of Poland) could occur only if Britain and France did not join

1594 Kobyłański summarised Raczyński’s arguments in a circular for the Polish missions (instructions dated 26 August 1939), AAN, MSZ, 6655.

1595 Ambassador Raczyński’s report for the Foreign Ministry dated 16 September 1939, AAN, MSZ, I/243.

1596 For more on this topic, see Chapter 7 below.

the war on the western front after Germany attacked Poland. In a coalition war against the Third Reich, ambassador Raczyński assumed the USSR's neutrality. He could not imagine Bolshevik Russia taking action against an effective coalition. He allowed for this possibility only if Poland were isolated.

Raczyński wanted to show that the Western powers' behaviour towards Poland could be decisive in preventing war, and if that transpired to be impossible, in determining how war would begin. By choosing firmness, London and Paris could loosen the apparent ties between the Third Reich and the USSR. Raczyński's reasoning, which assumed that Soviet intervention against an isolated Poland was becoming real, but which in the realities of a European war had to prove unprofitable for Stalin, was fully confirmed by the events of September 1939. It was only Britain and France's inaction in the West that gave Stalin a unique opportunity to annex almost half of Poland without entering into conflict with the two Western powers, with whom Poland was, after all, an ally. As one officer in the Second Department wrote: the view that "action against Poland is out of the question, has managed to consolidate itself and survive throughout the period of political tension with Germany, despite all information and facts".¹⁵⁹⁷

It is difficult to deny the logic of this reasoning.

The sense of deputy minister Szembek's 2 September 1939 instructions for the ambassador in Bucharest, Roger Raczyński, is similar. Szembek wrote:

According to our assessment, the Soviets' motive was to accelerate war in accordance with their old political plan and to secure in such a possibility a position creating room for manoeuvre in accordance with their interests depending on changes in the economic situation. Against this background, the Soviets want to avoid the impression that they are turning their backs on European affairs, which is why they have issued a message about the intended increase in strength in the West. They have not done this so far, but they have to take into account the possibility of an appropriate demonstration if the Soviets' plan requires it. We do not expect German-Soviet cooperation to exceed the supply of raw materials. At the same time, however, the Soviets are currently implementing a trade treaty with Poland with greater goodwill. We do not anticipate any mistaken [*błędny*]¹⁵⁹⁸ aggressive actions by the Soviets against our country or Romania. The Soviets have secured the possibility of certain revindications in the event of our complete military defeat in Romania.¹⁵⁹⁹

In the Polish Foreign Ministry, it was impossible to imagine a scenario that could offer the Soviet Union an opportunity to strike Poland in cooperation with Germany without having to come into conflict with Poland's Western allies.

1597 IPMS, B.I.6a–6b, *Elaborat płk. Sadowskiego "Rosja"*.

1598 Such was the word (*błędny*) used in the document's text.

1599 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Bukareszcie, A.26 I/9, Szembek to ambassador Roger Raczyński, 2 September 1939 (encrypted telegram No. 161). Published in M. Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop–Mołotow*, p. 599.

The Lack of Alternative Political Options

Officials in Warsaw did not view German-Soviet rapprochement as an absolutely unavoidable scenario in world politics, although when we look at this issue today, from a distance in time, there is an increasing number of signs suggesting that such a scenario had the air of inevitability.

The assumption according to which Germany—within the framework of a potential division of Central-Eastern Europe into spheres of influence—would have to pay the Soviets a disproportionately high price for the diplomatic benefits derived from such an agreement was of considerable importance in the Polish foreign policy leadership's calculations. By allowing the Soviet border to move westward, the Reich would seriously weaken its strategic position in the east. Polish officials thus thought that Hitler would not take such a serious risk; they recalled the führer's numerous statements in July 1935 in which he expressed his belief that the Soviet Union posed a threat to all of Europe, and especially to Germany.¹⁶⁰⁰

At the beginning of October 1939—in the realities of close cooperation between the Third Reich and the USSR, which makes this situation all the more amazing—colonel Leon Mitkiewicz noted in his diary: "Hitler understands well Germany's extremely dangerous position in the face of the enormous activity and successes of the Soviets, who, it must be admitted, took advantage of their situation extremely efficiently and have taken the Baltic States and southern Europe in one go. In the event of further war, Germany will have two fronts: a western one with war and an eastern one which is unclear. A military alliance has not yet been concluded between the Germans and the Soviets."¹⁶⁰¹

In an interview with the American journalist Artur Waldo in Romania in January 1940, Beck expressed almost identical thoughts.¹⁶⁰² He said that he only "later understood" the meaning of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact. "The Germans sacrificed their interests in Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and they sold the interests of their own state in order to defeat the Polish army."¹⁶⁰³ Polish diplomats expressed the view quite often that in the long term, the only real beneficiary of the Hitler-Stalin agreement would be the USSR. This view was not merely rhetoric.

Hitler's concept of a temporary, tactical alliance with the USSR could, in the summer of 1939, be considered realistic only on the assumption that Germany's goal was to completely destroy the current international order in Europe, to determine the fate of entire nations, to redraw borders, and to use unlimited force. All

1600 In a conversation with Beck in Berlin on 3 July 1935 (see *Dokumenty z dziejów polskiej polityki zagranicznej 1918–1939*, Vol. 2, p. 107).

1601 IPMS, Kolekcja 50, L. Mitkiewicz, "Dziennik," 52 (note dated 4 October 1939).

1602 This interview appeared on 31 January 1940 in the Polish newspaper *Nowy Świat*. See "Działania dyplomacji amerykańskiej na rzecz uwolnienia Józefa Becka (1940–1941)," ed. M. Kornat, *Zeszyty Historyczne* (Paris) (2008), No. 164: p. 156.

1603 *Ibid.*

this would become reality in 1940–1941, but it was difficult to imagine in August 1939. No doubt, Beck did not think that Hitler was entertaining such maximalist goals, which would require a new world war, and in so doing the Polish foreign minister was certainly not alone in Europe at that time.

The belief, clearly established in the Polish Foreign Ministry, in the ideological contradictions inherent in the Nazi-Soviet relationship was not shaken in the summer of 1939. In the view of Beck and his associates, the doctrinal contrasts between the two systems—condemned by nature to expansion and *ipso facto* competition—were more important than geopolitics. It should be added, however, that this belief was shared not only by Polish leaders, but also by politicians and diplomats in other European capitals, including in the Baltic States, and by the Third Reich's allies in Rome and Tokyo.

In the last weeks of peace in 1939, Polish diplomats and military representatives emphasised the ideological barriers dividing the Bolsheviks from the Nazis. According to Szembek, the chief of the Polish Army's General Staff, general Stachiewicz, wondered on 19 July about the potential effects of the fall of Hitler's regime. He concluded that such a development would be unfavourable for Poland, since a "new Reich" could easily reach a settlement with England and the Soviets.¹⁶⁰⁴

The German-Soviet Pact of 23 August 1939 invalidated the argument that the antagonism between the two totalitarian powers could not be overcome. It served as proof that the convergent geopolitical interests of both powers and the common desire to overthrow the Versailles (or Versailles-Riga) system in Central and Eastern Europe transpired to be more important than ideological considerations. None of this means, however, that Stalin ceased to be guided by ideological motivations. The diary of Comintern leader Georgi Dimitrov states that on 7 September 1939, Stalin judged that the fall of the Polish state was a highly desirable event and gave new possibilities for expanding the "socialist system".¹⁶⁰⁵ Hitler also retained the principles at the root of his ideology, and on 23 August 1939 he gave up none of his plans for war against the Soviet Union, the crowning achievement in his vision to gain "living space" for Germany. The collapse of Sovietology in the face of this situation turned out to be total. Trotskyite prophecies from the late 1930s that Stalinism ("Soviet fascism") was moving closer to Nazism, and that an alliance between the two regimes would conclude this process, were not taken very seriously in Europe, particularly in Poland.

Polish Sovietologists, who emphasised above all the ideological determinants of Soviet policy, were unable to perceive this condition. One of the most prominent among them was Wiktor Sukiennicki, who on 22 July expressed the view that

1604 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 676.

1605 G. Dimitrov, *Journal 1933–1949*, p. 340.

[...] the Soviets declare [...] their peaceful nature, but they also say that communism would be possible only after the destruction of the capitalist environment. Opposition to the danger posed by aggressive states, i.e. the negative goals [of the powers negotiating in Moscow] seem to be something shared by France and England on the one hand, and the Soviets on the other. But the political goals are clearly different. England and France do not want change. Therefore, temporary interests lead to the conclusion of a pact, but essential interests pull them apart. A pact, therefore, will not happen because the differences between the essential interests of the negotiating parties are too great. The Soviets could be judged as wanting war, seeing in war the possibility to conquer Europe by turning an imperialist war into civil war.¹⁶⁰⁶

The available sources clearly indicate that Polish policy elites, including diplomats and military leaders, felt great anxiety as a result of developments on 23 August 1939. The very thought of a German-Soviet alliance represented a disaster scenario.

On 24 August 1939, colonel Stefan Rowecki, commander of the newly formed Warsaw Armoured Motorised Brigade, wrote in his diary:

What I feared and what I almost expected has happened. [...] The USSR tricked the English and French because it has concluded a “non-aggression pact” with Germany. Ribbentrop flew to Moscow yesterday and today is there to “negotiate” (I wonder at what price for the Germans) conditions and to sign a pact. Undoubtedly, this is some diplomatic and political success for the Germans. They want to intimidate us with the spectre of the return of “Rapallo”. But at a price. The creator of the anti-communist bloc, Hitler, “the leader of the struggle” against the “reds” in Europe, makes friends with Bolshevik Russia. This will have far-reaching consequences, and above all it reveals ultimately the moral physiognomy of the brown Reich. This will not be without impact on Japan, which will turn its back on Germany, now pressed for sure by Russia, which in this way gains freedom of action in the East. This can lead to the re-location of war in the Far East to Russia and China with Japan, and in Europe to leave England free to act against Germany and Italy. [...] It could be worse, however, if the Germans were able to extend the non-aggression pact to a mutual assistance pact like “Rapallo”. Now we can expect anything. Then, however, our situation—Poland’s—would simply be hopeless. We would only have to fight and die with honour, so that Poland would be able to rise again at the right moment, to live.¹⁶⁰⁷

This note by the future chief commander of the Home Army is significant.

1606 Biblioteka Litewskiej Akademii Nauk in Vilnius, group “Instytut Naukowo Badawczy Europy Wschodniej w Wilnie,” f. 233, protocol of a seminar by Wiktor Sukiennicki at the Eastern European Research Institute in Vilnius. The author plans to publish this document in its entirety in the second edition of the monograph and anthology *Polska szkoła sowietologiczna 1930–1939* (first edition, Krakow 2003).

1607 S. Rowecki (Grot), *Wspomnienia i notatki, czerwiec-wrzesień 1939* (Warsaw 1957), pp. 76–77.

Even more moving is the statement that Waclaw Żyborski, a high-ranking official in the Interior Ministry, made on 12 August in a conversation with a representative of the German minority in Poland, Senator Erwin Hasbach. "After all," Żyborski said, "Poles knew very well what Berlin's intentions were. They had long ceased to be concerned with the questions of Danzig and the Autobahn [through the Pomeranian Voivodship] which the führer had once broached." Using a map of Poland that included areas inhabited by individual national minorities, Żyborski explained German intentions regarding the partition of Poland, according to reports arriving in Warsaw. He stated that "Berlin intended to carry out a new delimitation by a curved line running from East Prussia to Upper Silesia and passing close to the gates of Warsaw; after that Galicia, as one of the old Austrian Crown Lands and naturally the Duchy of Teschen were the German objectives. [...] The Germans were prepared to hand over the remaining territories to Russia." When Hasbach denied that this was the case, stating that despite everything, about 20 million Poles had to be guaranteed the right to political existence (*politische Existenz lassen müsste*), Żyborski replied that he was convinced that "in agreement with Moscow, it was planned to resettle the Poles in Siberia [*die Aussiedlung dieser Polen nach Sibirien geplant werde*]." Żyborski also stated that Hasbach "must surely realise that, in face of the fourth partition of Poland started by the Reich, the Polish people would defend themselves with all the means at their command [*stehenden Mitteln zur Wehr setzen würde*]."¹⁶⁰⁸

Characteristic are comments in the Polish press from the last days of August 1939; that is, after the catastrophic news of the Moscow pact. Editors generally downplayed the importance of the signed agreement and promoted opinions put forth by government officials. On 23 August, the conservative daily *Czas* published an editorial declaring that "no one has any illusions about the proper assessment and importance of the current German-Soviet diplomatic manoeuvres. In no way do they change the existing political situation or the real balance of power. Both in our country and in the West, no one attaches great significance to the new agreements." The German-Soviet pact concluded that day was commonly called "a refreshed post-Rapallo German-Soviet deal".¹⁶⁰⁹ The government daily *Gazeta Polska* wrote that it was a "bluff that will not affect the balance".¹⁶¹⁰ *Wieczór Warszawski* on 24 August was probably the only outlet in the Polish press that

1608 Letter from Erich Kraemer-Möllenberg, head of the Deutsche Stiftung (German Foundation) in Poland, to the Auswärtiges Amt about a conversation that Senator Erwin Hasbach (representative of the German minority) had with the director of the Political Department of the Interior Ministry in Warsaw Dr Waclaw Żyborski, 12 August 1939 (*Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, pp. 749–750). Published previously in *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918–1945* (Washington, D.C. 1956), series D, Vol. 7, pp. 38–39.

1609 *Czas*, 23 August 1939.

1610 *Gazeta Polska*, 24 August 1939.

reprinted information from the foreign press about the content of a secret protocol, including news about the division of Eastern Europe into the spheres of interest by the two contracting parties.¹⁶¹¹

Politician, publicist and the head of Radio Free Europe's Polish Section Jan Nowak-Jeziorański recalled that, as a soldier during the military campaign in September 1939, Polish soldiers, having caught sight of the Soviet army, experienced a "joyful revival", believing at first that the Red Army's entry into Polish territory was a prelude to Hitler's imminent clash with Stalin. It was only after defeat and the partition of their country that Poles realised that Germany's invasion, followed by the Soviet invasion, without a declaration of war, was the result of the agreement finalised in Moscow on the night of 23–24 August 1939.

On 29 August 1939, ambassador Grzybowski wrote: "There are very few elements [of this situation] about which I can be certain, but I am succumbing to high optimism. I cannot help but feel that Hitler is going to lose."¹⁶¹² Sovietologist Stanisław Swianiewicz recalled the strange state of Polish thinking in the summer of 1939, inexplicably full of unjustified optimism. In his well-known work *W cieniu Katynia*, Swianiewicz recalled the uncritical faith that many Poles felt in the strength of Western powers, the general increase in sympathy for the Soviets (despite historical realities and the Polish antipathy toward Bolshevism), and general ignorance about the differences between German and Polish military potential. There was a widespread view that "Russia is big and does not need any additional territories."¹⁶¹³ With the benefit of hindsight, Swianiewicz wrote that "the mentality of Polish society immediately preceding the war of 1939 could be the subject of very interesting sociological and psychological studies."¹⁶¹⁴ Other sources indicate a mood in Poland at the time that did not differ from the opinion expressed by the Polish Sovietologist.¹⁶¹⁵ However, against this backdrop the position of the country's political and military elites was undoubtedly subdued; they were not without fear and were aware of the emerging threat, although in this context we should also mention thoughts expressed at the time by colonel Stanisław Kopański in the General Staff, according to which Poland's retention of Ukraine was beneficial for Russia.¹⁶¹⁶

1611 This text was quoted *in extenso* by Michał J. Zacharias, "Polska wobec zbliżenia niemiecko-sowieckiego w okresie międzywojennym", p. 117.

1612 IPMS, MSZ, A.11E/1502.

1613 Swianiewicz, *In the Shadow of Katyn*, p. 19.

1614 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

1615 On 19 July, French military attaché general Musse wrote that everyone in Poland was convinced of the need to obtain supplies from Soviet Russia in the event of war. See P. Le Goyet, *France-Pologne 1919-1939. De l'amitié romantique à la méfiance réciproque* [Paris 1990], p. 240.

1616 S. Kopański, *Moja służba w Wojsku Polskim 1917-1939* (London 1965), pp. 286-287. "Memoriał do opracowania dalszego planu wojny" appeared in the summer of 1939.

The attitude of a society convinced that it had to defend its independence excluded any possible concessions to either Germany or the Soviet Union. Any Polish government that would have decided to move towards the Third Reich would have had no chance of survival. At the same time, any government that decided to allow Soviet armed forces onto the Republic's territory would have faced such serious social opposition that it could not have continued to exercise power.

After war broke out on 1 September, the leadership of the Polish Foreign Ministry still did not anticipate the threat from the east. The failure of Western powers to fulfil allied obligations to Poland did not suggest that this fact could have had a significant impact on the continued position taken by the USSR. Admittedly, as I have already mentioned, deputy minister Szembek suggested on 2 September that a threat from the east was possible if the September campaign ended in absolute defeat,¹⁶¹⁷ but in a letter to marshal Śmigły-Rydz dated 11 September 1939, Beck did not adopt this line of thought, even if it was likely then—much more than on September 2—that the Polish army would be defeated.¹⁶¹⁸

All of that having been said, Beck and his team's room for manoeuvre was non-existent. Questions about what could have been done if the Polish government had known of the German-Soviet secret arrangement of 23 August 1939 seem pointless, in large part because the historian should never be tempted to answer the question "what would have happened if [...]". In Polish journalism and historiography, such speculation occupies considerable space. But in the realities of 1939, Polish diplomats had no chance to thwart German-Soviet rapprochement. Poland's worst-case scenario, as anticipated in Polish Foreign Ministry documents throughout the interwar period, now became real.

Polish diplomats could no longer change, fix or decide anything in the face of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. The American historian Gerhard L. Weinberg correctly recognised this fact in his monograph *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany. Starting World War II 1937–1939* (1980):

When the agreement was announced, the Polish government could point out to their Western allies the correctness of their own doubts about Soviet intentions—they had been asked to allow the Red Army into Poland at the very time that Moscow and Berlin were negotiating about an agreement obviously directed against them. As for adjustments in policy, there appeared to be no room for any at all. If the Russians stood aside when Germany attacked, little would change from what the Poles had expected anyway. If the Russians went beyond this to a breach of their non-aggression treaty with Poland, there was still very little that Warsaw could do about it. In the choice between surrender and a desperate fight, the experience of Poland from 1772 to 1919 suggested that fighting was the only, even if hopeless, alternative.¹⁶¹⁹

1617 M. Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop–Molotow*, p. 599.

1618 *Polska polityka zagraniczna 1926–1939*, dok. 30, pp. 408–411.

1619 Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany, Vol. 2: Starting World War II, 1937–1939* (Humanities Press, 1994), p. 627.

In the last days of peace at the end of August 1939, there was nothing Polish diplomats could do to save their country and its independence, or to defend Poland's territorial integrity. The fascinating question about whether and how Poles perceived the growing threat becomes, in these circumstances, more of an academic exercise in the history of Polish political imagination than a search for the answer to the greater question about what chances the Polish state had to rescue itself.

Faced with Soviet Demands, August 1939

In the face of the Soviet demands of August 1939, could a Polish decision to cooperate with the Soviets have changed anything during the critical days of 16–22 August? What alternative scenario could have played itself out if Polish leaders had accepted Soviet proposals submitted to Allied military delegations?

During the Politburo session of 7 August, Soviet officials drew up instructions for marshal Voroshilov stating that if it transpired that “the free march of our troops through the territories of Poland and Romania is ruled out”, then it should be stated that any agreement with Great Britain and France is also to be ruled out. The Soviet government could not participate in actions that were doomed to failure.¹⁶²⁰

Voroshilov issued Soviet demands regarding the Red Army's march through Polish territory on 14 August, when the outlines of the USSR's rapprochement with Germany were already very clear, although strictly confidential.¹⁶²¹ These demands were never communicated to the Polish government. It is clear from Soviet documents that leaders in Moscow were aware that Poland would not accept these demands. Under this perception, the chief of the Red Army General Staff, Boris Szaposznikow, wrote in a note dated 10 August 1939 about Poland and Romania's “foggy position”.¹⁶²² However, in Warsaw there was no doubt that with their territorial demands, the Soviets wanted only to complicate matters and torpedo Allied plans.

From the Polish point of view, successful Moscow negotiations never appeared to be a positive solution. Józef Potocki, head of the Foreign Ministry's Western Division, put it this way: “[...] or an agreement will be reached and then Poland will become a *quantité négligeable* and then we will be left without a *hinterland*. There is pressure from Eng[lish] pub[lic] opinion. Is it about not allowing a Berlin-Moscow agreement? No, because that's unlikely. Rather, it is a mirage of power.”¹⁶²³

1620 “Dokumenty wniejszniej politiki SSSR,” Vol. 22, kn. 1, p. 584.

1621 The first to point this out was Aleksander Bregman, *Jak świat światem? Stosunki polsko-niemieckie wczoraj, dziś, jutro* (London 1964).

1622 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 220, Szaposznikow's note dated 10 August 1939.

1623 The Józef Piłsudski Institute (New York), Kolekcja Romana Dębickiego, 40/2, R. Dębicki, “Journal”, 189 (note dated 12 July 1939).

According to a note by Gustaw Potworowski dated 13 July 1939, Beck believed that “it is possible to reach some relatively insignificant agreement. In any case, Poland will not take the lead on the issue because (1) he [Beck] does not believe in its effectiveness and (2) he wants to continue the current political line with the Soviets. Anyway, our relations with the Soviets are within the limits we have outlined, completely normal. All stories about Rapallo are not real.” From the foreign minister’s point of view, the USSR’s “disturbing” moves indicated “a desire to extend some kind of ‘protectorate’ over the Baltic States”.¹⁶²⁴

As available British sources indicate, general Stachiewicz clearly stated that he had no faith in the Soviets’ sincerity, because their armed forces could cross the Polish border and not have to fight the Germans at all, but rather occupy certain territories, primarily Vilnius and the neighbouring region.¹⁶²⁵ With the same motivation, Minister Beck refused to agree to the desired conditions in a conversation with ambassador Kennard on 18 August. Two days later, talking with ambassador Noël, he argued that the risks of allowing the Soviets into Poland were as great as the risk of losing independence through a rejection of these demands.¹⁶²⁶

Aware as he was that Soviet propaganda was exploiting Polish opposition to the issue of troops marching through the Republic’s territory, Beck agreed to a flexible formula in a declaration that allowed for possible agreement in the future on some form of cooperation between the Polish and Soviet armies. On 19 August, the foreign minister issued a statement to the British ambassador in Warsaw that if hostilities broke out, it would certainly be possible to agree on the principles of cooperation with the Soviets.¹⁶²⁷ In a conversation two days earlier on 17 August, ambassador Kennard had suggested that after the Moscow negotiations broke down, a Soviet-German agreement would become real at the expense of Poland and Romania.¹⁶²⁸

On 22 August, Beck offered the Allies a new formula. According to a short statement issued by the Polish Foreign Ministry to the Allies on 23 August: “The French and English staffs are certain that in the event of joint action against the aggressors, cooperation between the USSR and Poland is not excluded under conditions to be determined. Therefore, the staffs consider it necessary to carry out all hypotheses with the Soviet staff.”¹⁶²⁹ However, none of this meant that the Polish government was withdrawing from its previous negative stance towards the Red Army entering Polish territory during peacetime; this position was to remain final, and

1624 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Gustaw Potworowski Collection, Box 1.

1625 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23073, C.11581/3356/18, Kennard’s telegram dated 18 August.

1626 *Ibid.*, C.11580/3356/18, ambassador Kennard’s reports dated 18 and 20 August.

1627 *Ibid.*, C.11776/3356/18, Kennard’s report dated 19 August, National Archives, Foreign Office, 371, 23073.

1628 *Ibid.*

1629 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 787.

instructions for diplomatic missions remained unchanged. Parenthetically, Beck spoke to the French and British governments about the “impropriety of the Soviets addressing our affairs with France and England without involving us”.¹⁶³⁰ Beck’s statement no longer mattered. Nothing could reverse the course of events, the end of which was the German-Soviet agreement concluded on the night of 23–24 August. This statement was issued not to reorient Soviet policy, but to weaken the anti-Polish campaign of accusations according to which Poland was blocking possibilities to save peace.

Soviet propaganda nonetheless managed to place the blame for the collapse of the Moscow negotiations on Poland: it was all Poland’s fault—was the message disseminated by Soviet diplomacy from 24 August.¹⁶³¹ Two days earlier, Voroshilov had told general Doumenc that if the Poles wanted to cooperate with the USSR, they themselves would have sought to participate in the talks in Moscow.¹⁶³² In an interview with the foreign press on 27 August, Voroshilov accused the Polish government of having worked effectively to block a positive result in the Moscow negotiations. During the First World War, Voroshilov pointed out, British and American armed forces fought on French soil, so now the Soviet army should be given the right to use Polish territory.¹⁶³³ Given that the Poles had refused permission, negotiations with Great Britain and France on a mutual assistance pact lost their meaning. This narrative would eventually be accepted in a significant part of Western historiography, and it remains in place to this day, even since the Soviet state collapsed in 1991.¹⁶³⁴ As American historians Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott wrote in their well-known book *The Appeasers*: “The Polish refusal to allow Soviet troops to enter Poland destroyed any chance of Anglo-French agreement with Russia.”¹⁶³⁵ The authors continued: “Denied a democratic ally, Stalin accepted a totalitarian one. [...] Britain had lost an ally for a two-front war. Poland had lost an ally on her eastern front.”¹⁶³⁶ Unfortunately, such a position is not a rarity in Western historiography. After the Soviet Union’s collapse, when Robert Tucker reiterated his thesis that Soviet policy was consistently German-oriented, he

1630 *Ibid.*, p. 787; National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23073, C.11814/3356/18, Ambassador Kennard’s report on the conversation of 24 August.

1631 Molotov stated this to ambassador Naggiar. See also an encrypted telegram from Phipps in Paris dated 26 August, National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23073, C.12108/3356/18.

1632 RGASPI, f. 558, op. 11, d. 220, Note on the Voroshilov – Doumenc conversation of 22 August 1939.

1633 S. Sierpowski, *Źródła do historii powszechnej okresu międzywojennego*, Vol. 3: 1935–1939 (Poznan 1992), p. 458.

1634 See M. J. Carley, 1939: *The Alliance that Never Was and the Coming of World War February* (Chicago 1999).

1635 Martin Gilbert, Richard Gott, *The Appeasers* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1963), p. 258.

1636 *Ibid.*

was met with criticism, according to which the pact with Germany was a “bitter alternative” for the Soviets.¹⁶³⁷ Polish diplomacy was to remain the destroyer of “hope for a Franco-Soviet Grand Alliance [l’espoir d’une Grande Alliance franco-soviétique]”,¹⁶³⁸ and it was forced to play this role on a permanent basis.

In this context, the logic of the arguments put forward by German diplomat Karl Schnurre during his conversation on 26 July with the Soviet chargé d’affaires in Berlin, Georgi Astachow, are significant: “England can offer the Soviets only participation in a European war and German hostility.”¹⁶³⁹ The Third Reich offered them the division of Eastern Europe into zones of interest and a postponement of participating in conflict. It is not difficult to say which offer the Kremlin would view as most favourable.

The claim that the Polish government’s refusal to allow the Red Army onto its territory forced the Soviet government to turn to Germany is simply the product of the USSR’s skilful manipulation of history. The admission of Soviet troops onto Polish territory—even with the paper guarantees provided by the Western powers—would have meant the irrevocable end of Polish independence, just as it did in Lithuania after its government allowed the Red Army to enter Lithuanian territory according to an agreement signed on 10 October 1939.¹⁶⁴⁰ The theory that by offering concessions to the USSR, the Polish government could have prevented the partition of its country, is an *ex-post* construction. The Baltic States, whose governments chose differently in October 1939 than Poland by allowing the Soviet army to use their territory as a base, neither saved their independence nor ensured their survival.

As we know, French ambassador Noël attributed to marshal Śmigły-Rydz the statement that in the battle against Germany, Poles would lose territory, but in the battle with Russia it would lose “its soul”.¹⁶⁴¹ It is not entirely clear whether the marshal ever made such a statement, but it is undisputed that in the post-war discourse in Western historiography, this statement has served as the main evidence of alleged Polish Russophobia, which prevented Hitler from being stopped in 1939. Beck reportedly told Noël that “they are demanding that we sign the fourth partition; if we are threatened with a partition, at least we will defend ourselves.” The Poles also repeated that there were no guarantees that, once on Polish territory, the Soviets would actually take part in the war.¹⁶⁴²

1637 T. Uldricks, “Stalin and Nazi Germany,” *Slavic Review* 36 (1977): p. 603.

1638 See Elisabeth du Réau, *Édouard Daladier 1884–1970* (Paris 1994), p. 347.

1639 Z. Mazur, “Niemiecko-radzieckie porozumienia z sierpnia i września 1939 r.,” *Przegląd Zachodni* (1989), No. 4: p. 137.

1640 For a new view, see Piotr Łossowski, “Układ litewsko-sowiecki z 10 października 1939 r.,” *Polska w Europie i świecie w XX stuleciu*, pp. 306–317.

1641 L. Noël, *Polonia Restituta. La Pologne entre deux mondes* (Paris 1984), p. 232, note 15.

1642 *Sprawa polska w czasie drugiej wojny światowej w pamiętnikach*, ed. M. Tomala (Warsaw 1990), p. 39.

As the Poland-friendly ambassador Kennard wrote on 21 August: “[...] to win the war, Russian help is virtually essential”.¹⁶⁴³ Therefore, the Polish refusal to fulfil the Soviets’ demands had a negative impact on the Western powers’ attitude to Poland regarding the fulfilment of guarantees and allied obligations, even if it eventually led to the decision to sign an alliance treaty in a definitive form. As Yves Beauvois put it, “the humiliation that the Franco-British mission took (its members deemed it appropriate to remain in Moscow until 25 August) obviously did not contribute to an improvement in Poland’s image in the eyes of part of French public opinion. Poland not only rejected direct assistance from its eastern neighbour, but also deprived France of an ally, leading to the failure of negotiations. So, why then fight for Danzig?”¹⁶⁴⁴ Considering what Poland’s fate could have been if its government had agreed to allow the Soviet army to enter Polish territory, Jonathan Haslam wrote: “Whether Poland’s fate would have been something similar to that of Czechoslovakia in September 1938 is impossible to say”.¹⁶⁴⁵ However, it is difficult to doubt that the Polish state would have been, from that point on, incapacitated.

It is also difficult not to note that, had the Polish leadership allowed the Soviet army onto Polish territory, it would have been completely contrary to the logic of Polish policy at the time. As Poland had already rejected Germany’s limited demands—despite the risk of war that this rejection entailed—it would have been highly irrational for Poland to voluntarily give up its independence to a second neighbour without a fight. As ambassador de Saint-Aulaire wrote *ex post* in his *Confessions d’un vieux diplomate*: “You would have to have no idea about Europe, born in the war of 1914–1918, to suppose that Poland or Romania would ever agree to allow Russian troops to march across their territories ... unless, like France, they had succumbed to suicidal mania.”¹⁶⁴⁶

These rational thoughts came a certain time later. In the heated days of August 1939, Polish motivation could not be understood in the West. When the Polish government rejected Soviet demands for the Red Army to march through Poland, undisguised irritation reigned in Allied capitals. Prime Minister Daladier even spoke about the “Poles’ madness”.¹⁶⁴⁷

As we know, the official historiography of the Polish People’s Republic (under Soviet domination) emphasised again and again that Beck had been “guilty” of

1643 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23073, C.11837/3356/18.

1644 Y. Beauvois, *Stosunki polsko-francuskie w czasie ‘dziwnej wojny’*, trans. I. Kania (Krakow 1991), p. 11.

1645 J. Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933–39* (Macmillan 1984), p. 227.

1646 De Saint-Aulaire, *Confessions d’un vieux diplomate* (Paris 1953) (quote from M. Sokolnicki, “Spowiedź St.-Aulaire’a,” *Kultura* (Paris) (1954), No. 7–8: p. 189).

1647 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23073, C.11815/3356/18, chargé d’affaires in Paris R. Campbell to Foreign Office, 23 August 1939.

failing to accept the alleged Soviet offer of assistance. Henryk Batowski wrote: to avoid a catastrophe “at the cost of victims of one kind or another”, it required a decision in Warsaw.¹⁶⁴⁸ I do not see that there were any such opportunities.

Had the government in Warsaw allowed the Soviet army to enter Polish territory, it would have meant the establishment of two special operational zones for Soviet forces: in the Vilnius and Lwów regions. As diplomat Feliks Frankowski put it, these areas would have been “condemned to something of a preventive occupation by Russia, necessary for the creation of Russian bases there”.¹⁶⁴⁹

“Poland was itself guilty”—this is one of the fundamental arguments made in Western historiography, one proclaimed repeatedly despite progress we have made in understanding the criminal nature of the Soviet system.¹⁶⁵⁰

British historian Jonathan Haslam wrote that the Russians, abandoned by the West, were forced to choose an agreement with Germany that established a “condominium in Eastern Europe”. But this was the second option in their plans. Their first option was to (allegedly) participate in an alliance with the Western powers against Germany.¹⁶⁵¹ It was only after this option vanished that the Soviets had to make a “forced choice”. In 1977, Anthony Adamthwaite tried to show that the Moscow negotiations were not faked by the Soviet delegation. Stalin, the argument goes, did in fact seek to strengthen security for his country, but his offer of a conference of six countries was rejected both in Western capitals and in Warsaw. Specific counterproposals from Western governments could have reversed the course of events and could have saved peace.¹⁶⁵²

It is also worth mentioning the argument that Stefania Stanisławska made in 1979, according to which Poland, had it agreed to Soviet demands, would have received international legal guarantees from the Western powers for its eastern border. This, in turn, would have put the government-in-exile in a much better position if war could not have been avoided and Soviet aid had not proven real. This interpretation is a typical example of an *ex-post* judgement. It is easy for historians to form such opinions, but their cognitive value is highly problematic because they are based on knowledge about later events which those obliged to cast their decision in the moment could not possibly have had.

1648 H. Batowski, *Między dwiema wojnami*, p. 363.

1649 IPMS, MSZ, A.11/144E, nr spr. 270, F. Frankowski’s testimony before the Winiarski Commission on 31 March 1941.

1650 For more on the matter of the Polish stereotype as the country that stood in the way of establishing a “Grand Alliance” in 1939, see Anna Maria Ciencała, “The Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 23, 1939: When Did Stalin Decide to Align with Hitler, and Was Poland the Culprit?” *Ideology, Politics and Diplomacy in East-Central Europe*, pp. 150–152.

1651 J. Haslam, *The Soviet Union and the Struggle for Collective Security in Europe, 1933–1939* (New York 1984), p. 231.

1652 A. Adamthwaite, *France and the Coming of the Second World War*, p. 91.

We might risk the opinion that even if the Polish government had agreed to allow the Soviet army to march its troops onto the Republic's territory, such a move would not necessarily have resulted in the conclusion in Moscow of a tripartite British-French-Soviet treaty on mutual assistance creating the "peace front" about which British diplomats were talking.¹⁶⁵³ In any case, it is doubtful whether, from Stalin's point of view, confrontation with Germany was a reasonable option in the reality of those times, even if it involved giving him the right to seize the Baltic countries and a part of Poland.

* * *

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was a disaster for Poland; an event that gave Poland no opportunities to make decisions that could change its fate. Among historians there is a *consensus omnium* on this matter. In my opinion, it is necessary to add that this disaster was inevitable. No Polish diplomacy could have changed matters. Anyone who would like to believe that this event was the result of faulty Polish policy assumes that political decisions made in Warsaw could have shaped the reality of international relations and blocked the plans of the totalitarian powers. Historiography cultivated in this way is a road to nowhere. It is, of course, a fact that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact would not have happened had the Polish government accepted German territorial demands six months earlier. However, that would have meant the irreversible loss of independence.

In Polish political thought throughout the entire interwar period, a Berlin-Moscow rapprochement was considered to be the most tragic of all possible outcomes. On 23 August 1939, that scenario became a reality. Officials in Warsaw did not foresee this variant of history, and the same can be said of officials in other Eastern European capitals threatened by the German-Soviet collusion, in Kaunas, Riga, Tallinn, Helsinki and Bucharest.

In 1933–1939, the Polish political leadership's basic premise was that lasting improvement in Berlin-Moscow relations was not possible. At the same time, officials in Warsaw believed that Stalin would not act as a German ally in the face of an effective anti-German coalition that encompassed the Western powers and Poland, whose foundations Beck managed to create by accepting the British guarantee offer and by making a trip to London in April 1939. It should be emphasised once again that since the conclusion of the Anglo-Polish alliance agreement on 7 April in Warsaw, the Poles believed that if war broke out, it would not be a localised Polish-German conflict, but a European war similar to that which ended on 11 November 1918.

Officials in Warsaw did not expect the Soviets to engage in armed conflict against Poland in agreement with Germany; rather, the Poles expected them to remain neutral in a Polish-German conflict—this despite the fact that Polish society

1653 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23073, C.11694/3356/18, Strang's note dated 21 August 1939.

was strongly distrustful of its eastern neighbour. Beck and other Polish diplomats viewed a Hitler-Stalin pact as unthinkable. The Polish leadership believed that it was impossible not only because the two totalitarian powers were ideological opposites, but also because, according to the assessment of the Polish government, Soviet Russia was planning to wait and see how war would develop and to join only later as “third force”. All of this meant that Poland would be able to count on a period of peace on its eastern border, which might last a few months or perhaps longer, depending how events in the new European war developed.

Many assessments put forward by diplomats at the Polish Foreign Ministry deserve recognition for their accuracy in diagnosing reality. Beck’s associates did not imagine that the USSR could actively support the Reich in a coming war, but they clearly noted and emphasised the causative role played by Soviet diplomacy in provoking the conflict. They also assumed that Soviet Russia was attempting, with the consent of London and Paris, to gain control over Polish territories, which Hitler ultimately ceded to the Soviet Union in parallel negotiations, a development that was widely considered impossible.¹⁶⁵⁴

There can be no doubt that the creators of Polish foreign policy failed to recognise the real significance of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. On 28 August 1939, Beck assessed Poland’s situation as “not the worst”. Various opinions put forward by diplomats, civil servants and military officials help us to imagine how tense and dramatic the last week of peace was (24–31 August). However, there is no evidence-based statement by Beck or Śmigły-Rydz that indicates they had given this catastrophic eventuality great credence. In the last days of August 1939, many more fears were associated with the threat that the Western powers, given their failure to win the Soviets over to an anti-German bloc, would withdraw from their obligations to Poland.

The reality was that the alliances with Great Britain and France brought only defensive guarantees against Germany, and the problems in this regard were not sufficiently appreciated. In the east, both alliances remained useless instruments. Additionally, the fact is that even if the Soviet Union became an ally of the Western powers, Poland could not benefit from this situation in any way, although officials in Warsaw entertained an illusory hope that Poland could purchase raw materials and “war material” in Russia, should a Polish-German war break out. When we see in Polish diplomatic documents signs of hope among Polish leaders that Poland, when fighting against Germany, would be able to use Soviet supplies of strategic raw materials, we cannot help but feel surprised and ask ourselves the question: how could anyone have succumbed to such illusions? Having said that, we must add that these Polish calculations were a function of the basic argument, mentioned above, that the Soviets would remain neutral in the first period of the

1654 This is the undoubtedly far-sighted way in which Edward Raczyński read Soviet intentions.

European war. This was to have been determined by guarantees internationalising the Polish-German conflict.

Polish officials did not take into consideration the possibility of a “phony war” (in Polish, a *dziwna wojna*, or strange war), meaning inaction on the western front despite declarations of war on the Third Reich on 3 September 1939. They did not think that the Soviet Union could intervene militarily against Poland or participate in the division of Polish territories. Such an action would put the Soviets, it was believed, in a state of war with the Western powers, allies of Warsaw; in the opinion of Beck, Łubieński, Łukasiewicz, Lipski and Raczyński, Stalin wanted to avoid engaging in war until its decisive moment, which would come after the belligerents had exhausted themselves, and which would give Stalin a unique chance to extend the USSR’s borders and further expand the communist system.

Polish documents from this period contain assessments and hypotheses suggesting that it was expected that Russia would join the war, but certainly not during the Polish campaign, which was to be the war’s first stage. Officials in Warsaw rightly thought that the Soviets’ tactical alliance with the Third Reich was directed against the West, and not only against Poland; that the Bolshevik state wanted to alter the territorial status quo; and that Soviet diplomacy wanted the capitalist countries to plunge into a lengthy and ruinous war. These beliefs, it is straightforward to admit, were rational, but they were seriously challenged by reality. Once again, Henryk Wereszycki’s thinking is confirmed, namely that “one can have this or that theory of the future development of political relations, but the historian knows that not even the most thorough analysis of the present has ever made it possible to predict the future in a concrete and comprehensive way.”¹⁶⁵⁵

The difference between how Polish leaders and French and British politicians perceived the Soviet Union was fundamental. In Western capitals, until the end officials believed that it was possible to win the USSR over to a peace bloc. They failed to perceive that the Soviets were pursuing their own policy directed against both Germany and the Western powers. In Warsaw, on the other hand, officials were absolutely clear about this state of affairs, although as I mentioned they assumed that Poland, allied with the Western powers, could not be threatened by aggression from the east in the first weeks or months of a European war.

The Polish drama in 1939 requires a greater understanding of the circumstances and attitudes of the Polish political leadership than we find in non-Polish historiography, which contains numerous unjustified accusations. It is extremely easy to express *ex-post* judgments, but a political leader makes decisions based only on the knowledge he possesses at a given time.

1655 H. Wereszycki, “Wstęp,” in W. Karpiński, M. Król, *Sylwetki polityczne XIX wieku* (Krakow 1974), p. 7.

As Piotr Wandycz noted: “The ability to predict is a feature of a great statesmen”.¹⁶⁵⁶ However, it is not difficult to admit that it was truly unimaginable what Stalin did in 1939 by entering into a tactical alliance with Germany and annexing half of Poland’s territory, but avoiding at the same time conflict with the Western powers, who had previously guaranteed Poland’s independence.

It is impossible to resist the impression that in the 1930s, the causative forces of international relations were acting against the newly rebuilt Poland, including forces such as attempts by the neighbouring totalitarian powers to dominate Central Europe, the policy of appeasement, and the collapse of the international system (the Versailles order). Diplomacy as a method of resolving international conflicts failed, and it entered its twilight phase. It is thus no surprise that the editors of the important collective work *The Diplomats 1919–1939*, Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert, included a chapter entitled simply “The Twilight of Diplomacy”.¹⁶⁵⁷ The historian cannot see opportunities for Polish diplomacy in 1938–1939 that would have caused a change in the course of events that led to catastrophe.

The Hitler-Stalin Pact was not some by-product of the special political situation in Europe in 1939, but rather the true culmination of Soviet long-term policy directed against the outside world broadly understood as the “capitalist system”.¹⁶⁵⁸ As Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski wrote: “In Stalin’s view, Hitler and Mussolini were the most effective battering ram for breaking up communism’s biological arch-enemy; that is, the Western democracies and their socio-political institutions. In August 1939, this concept was realised, not only because the new partition of Poland laid the foundation for the construction of a permanent—as both dictators proclaimed—Soviet-Nazi friendship, but also because it brought into view the annihilation by war of the Western democracies.”¹⁶⁵⁹ In 1938, this plan did not succeed. In 1939, it did.

It is remarkable that each phase of improved Polish-Soviet relations between 1921 and 1939 ended with a crisis and an escalation of conflict. The first phase, initiated by minister Konstanty Skirmunt and expressed in the Dąbski-Karakhan Protocol of 7 October 1921, was followed by the Rapallo agreement of 16 April 1922. The second phase, opened by Georgy Chicherin’s visit to Warsaw in September 1925, was interrupted by the German-Soviet Treaty of Berlin of 24 April 1926. The

1656 P. Wandycz, “U progno wojny. Próba nowego spojrzenia,” *Zeszyty Historyczne* (Paris) (2002), No. 142: p. 175 (review of M. Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop–Mołotow*).

1657 This work was first published in 1953. The essay on Beck by the American historian Henry L. Roberts remains an interesting interpretation: “The Diplomacy of Colonel Beck,” in *The Diplomats 1919–1939*, pp. 579–614.

1658 The Soviets’ long-term strategy was directed against both Germany and the Western powers; see the interesting study by Fritz Becker, *Im Kampf um Europa. Stalins Schachzüge gegen Deutschland und den Westen* (Graz 1993).

1659 E. Kwiatkowski, “Józef Stalin,” in idem, *W takim żyliśmy świecie. Sylwetki polityków*, ed. A. Romanowski (Krakow 1990), p. 179. Author’s emphasis - M. K.

third phase, whose beginning was marked by the Polish-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 25 July 1932, lasted two years and ended when differences between Moscow and Warsaw emerged in connection with the draft Eastern Pact. The fourth and most spectacular opening in Poland's relations with Bolshevik Russia came as a result of the communiqué of 26 November 1938, after talks between ambassador Grzybowski and Litvinov and Potiomkin. Its finale came with Soviet demands regarding the march of Red Army troops through Polish territory. The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact was a kind of recapitulation of bilateral relations throughout the 20-year period of Polish-Soviet "armed peace".

In August 1939, the Polish policy of balance ended in complete defeat. In a letter to ambassador Romer dated 13 July 1939, deputy minister Szembek wrote that that page in Polish politics had been turned, and he admitted that "we are standing on the threshold of two epochs in our post-war diplomatic history".¹⁶⁶⁰ However, Poland would not allow itself to come under foreign rule without a fight, and it would not allow itself to be the object of a foreign dictate on the path to some agreement. Poland held one last card in its hand.

With the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Polish state was doomed. It was deprived of any possibility to influence its own fate. No potentially new historical arguments can change this fact. Once again, it should be emphasised that after the conclusion of the German-Soviet agreement, no Polish foreign policy could either save Poland's independence or even slightly change the scenario written in Moscow and Berlin to divide Central-Eastern Europe into the totalitarian powers' zones of interest. Beck's team had no room for manoeuvre. Of course, the situation would have been different if capitulation to Germany had been considered an alternative. In any case, Hitler's original offer, submitted as a *Gesamtlösung*, did not return in August 1939.¹⁶⁶¹ After 23 August 1939, only the Western powers could have changed the political course adopted in the spring of 1939 (e.g. by withdrawing the guarantee for Poland), but Poland enjoyed no such possibility. No Polish decision could have changed the course of events. This is not only a historian's statement, it was the view of officials witnessing events. Probably with this belief in mind, the head of the Polish military mission in Paris, general Stanisław Burhardt-Bukacki, reportedly said on 17 September: "And so now we are at the point where we were when the fighting started in 1914".¹⁶⁶²

However, it is worth asking ourselves what Poland could have been done within its own capabilities? Perhaps if Polish officials had been aware of the Soviet threat, it would have been possible to avoid such moves as colonel Roman Umiastowski's appeal on 8 September ordering men of conscript age to move to the eastern regions

1660 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 592.

1661 Hitler viewed his offer, related to various compensation proposals, as an absolutely once-only offer. On 23 May 1939, in a well-known speech, the führer announced that an agreement with Poland was no longer an option.

1662 G. Łowczowski, "Przymierze wojskowe polsko-francuskie", p. 54.

of the Republic.¹⁶⁶³ Perhaps it would have been possible to avoid the tragic mistake of allowing the Soviets to seize a large part of the Polish intelligence archives. Perhaps the following error could have been avoided, one which was tied undoubtedly to an order given by marshal Śmigły-Rydz on 17 September: “Don’t engage in battle with the Soviets.”¹⁶⁶⁴ We could add to the list of such examples of speculation, but none of it would change reality, which was Moscow’s verdict against Poland. The historian can indulge in only one speculation: whether or not offensive actions by the French and British armed forces on the western front in the first days of September could have changed the course of events, and could have prevented the provisions of the Hitler-Stalin Pact from being implemented. We can only assume that in such a situation, the Soviets would not have risked taking a stand against battling Poland, especially if that battle did not appear to be a rapid military defeat. There can be no certainty in this matter.

What happened on 23 August 1939 was the crowning achievement of two decades of Soviet foreign policy. Paul Kennedy wrote that Stalin wanted to avoid war and buy time to better prepare his country for war.¹⁶⁶⁵ In my opinion, two other goals were more important: to trigger a European war and, above all, to achieve territorial gains so that Bolshevik Russia could re-take its role as the most important actor in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Soviet minimum plan, the recovery of territories lost as a result of the decay of the Russian Empire in 1917–1920, was largely implemented in 1939. The maximum plan, mastering and dominating Central and Eastern Europe, was to be achieved in conditions created by the new world war. One move was required to implement this plan: tactical rapprochement involving a deal with Germany. Stalin said something significant to British ambassador Stafford Cripps when he received him on 16 June 1940 in Moscow. In 1939, the Soviet Union and Germany had wanted to change the “old balance of power”, while France and Great Britain wanted to maintain it—this was what had determined the USSR’s rapprochement with the Third Reich.¹⁶⁶⁶ And this was the real meaning of Soviet policy in 1939, as Stalin expressed it in his *interpretatio authentica*. Any artificial meditation by historians, arguing that the Soviet leader somehow hesitated in the summer of 1939, will never be able to undermine this basic truth.

1663 For context, see Leszek Moczulski, *Wojna polska* (Warsaw 2009), pp. 735–736.

1664 See “Rozkaz Naczelnego Wodza do wojsk po przejściu granicy”, *Zeszyty Historyczne* (Paris) (1976), No. 37: pp. 224–225.

1665 P. Kennedy, *Mocarstwa świata*, p. 334.

1666 G. L. Weinberg, “The Nazi-Soviet Pact: A Half-Century Later”, *Foreign Affairs* 68 (1989), No. 4: p. 185.

Chapter 7. September 1939: The Polish Experience of Being Abandoned by its Allies

How are we to explain the behaviour of the Polish political leadership in 1939? Does this explanation involve only the ethos of an unruly nation? Does it involve a rational calculation of goals? Both? Was Polish policy the product of intellectually justified reasoning, or was it merely a reflection of the emotional attitude of a defiant nation? Does the Polish decision to accept confrontation with the Third Reich fit into the history of Polish uprisings and the tradition of hopeless resistance to foreign oppression, or was it based on a political plan with a rationale? As the entire Polish political plan—such as it was—was based on the assumption that Poland would receive Allied assistance, another question must be asked: was this assumption realistic? Were promises accepted as ironclad, or were there doubts in the Polish political and military leadership in this regard? What was the strategic plan of the Allied powers (if any existed)? How were Great Britain and France's actions received in Warsaw? Was it inevitable that the allies would abandon Poland, or could the course of events have been changed, despite everything? These are important questions, ones that return again and again in the minds of many Poles.

Since the experience of being abandoned by allies in September 1939 was recorded in the collective memory of the Polish nation, one of the most frequently asked questions, primarily in endless political-historical debates but also in historiography, is whether Poland was betrayed in 1939. This matter is exceptional, and one of the most complicated: what converges here are politics, international law, military strategy and ethics. It is the object of insatiable discussion, revived again and again, most recently in 1999 thanks to two texts: (1) an article (interview) by Jagiellonian University professor Marian Zgórniak entitled “Did they betray us, did they not betray us? Could France and England have effectively helped Poland in September 1939? [*Zdradzili, nie zdradzili? Czy we wrześniu 1939 roku Francja i Anglia mogły skutecznie pomóc Polsce?*]”, and (2) an article written by journalist, lawyer, and anti-communist opposition activist Artur Hajnicz entitled “Betrayal by the West—fact or obsession? [*Zdrada Zachodu—fakt czy obsesja?*]” published in connection with the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War and Poland's partition.¹⁶⁶⁷ Both authors argue that the Polish belief in a “betrayal by the West” is a “national myth” generating anti-occidental attitudes, and that it should be abandoned as a harmful obstacle to the modernisation of the Polish historical

1667 M. Zgórniak, “Zdradzili, nie zdradzili? Czy we wrześniu 1939 roku Francja i Anglia mogły skutecznie pomóc Polsce?,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 6 October 1999; A. Hajnicz, “Zdrada Zachodu – fakt czy obsesja,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 30–31 January 1999.

consciousness. The Allies did everything in their power for Poland—they declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939, thus fulfilling their political obligations. Due to their own weakness, they could not possibly have satisfied Polish military expectations. According to the Roman principle *impossibilitas abrogat obligatio*, we cannot speak of “betrayal” and abandonment. These are Hajnicz’s main theses, who deemed it appropriate to mention neither the Franco-Polish and Anglo-Polish staff negotiations in 1939 nor the Kasprzycki-Gamelin protocol. Should we accept his revisionist judgement? The following examination is an attempt to deal with all of these matters once again, to the extent possible; not by a military historian, but by a diplomatic historian.

There is no need to return again to the issue of the Polish alliances of 1939. The extensive literature on the subject shows us, in all their complexity, the Polish-French negotiations for a military interpretation protocol in May 1939, the two British military missions to Poland, and the matter of the French refusal to sign a political interpretation protocol. But the lack of a detailed study on Polish expectations from the Allies justifies the need to examine this matter sufficiently. How Polish leaders perceived policies being pursued by the Western powers, along with their assumptions and goals, is an extremely interesting question. Comments made so far in this regard have often been superficial or poorly documented. Various details can be added to the mix, but what is most important here is that we take a fresh look at this matter, more than 70 years after the fact.

In writing about Poland’s experience of being abandoned by its allies, I refer to debates that are already well known to Poles, rooted in our social consciousness. This is a highly complex historical problem, one that still attracts public attention and engages the historical imagination of the so-called ordinary person. Perhaps more than any topic in Polish history, the subject of 1939 remains a matter of public interest, even if the importance of academic history in shaping social awareness is undoubtedly weakening.

Polish Expectations

In 1943 in Savoy, cardinal August Hlond, the primate of Poland, told the former ambassador to Moscow, Waław Grzybowski, about a conversation he had had with marshal Edward Śmigły-Rydz in Częstochowa in autumn 1938, in which Śmigły-Rydz reportedly stated that there was no doubt that the Germans would attack Poland because Poland stood between them and the implementation of their plans. Poland would be beaten because of its enemy’s superior strengths and Poland’s isolation. France would not come to Poland’s aid because it was undergoing a process of inner decay; it too would succumb to Germany.¹⁶⁶⁸ In the coming war imposed upon Poland, the Polish Army, after initial losses, would go into a guerrilla war, if possible. Like all accounts, this one can be met with scepticism.

1668 W. Pobóg-Malinowski, “Na rumuńskim rozdrożu,” p. 87.

However, if we consider the planning for a future war put in by the Polish General Staff, it appears that we cannot regard this story as just another *ex-post* creation.

Preliminary studies conducted in 1936–1938 on plans for a defensive war in Poland’s western regions leave no doubt that officials in Warsaw questioned whether the French would actually provide allied assistance, and if they did, whether it would be too late. In his study in the first half of 1936, general Tadeusz Kutrzeba at the General Inspectorate of the Armed Forces adopted the initial thesis that “France will come forward, but delayed”.¹⁶⁶⁹ He summed up his analysis of potential war between Poland and Germany by saying that the Germans could start a war only with such forces that would allow them to successfully fight both Poland and France—on two fronts. His view, however, was that such a war would start in 1940 at the earliest.¹⁶⁷⁰

No earlier than that would Germany be able to consciously risk war on two fronts, i.e. to attack two allied countries simultaneously. Rather, it would attempt to beat them individually in isolated military campaigns. The Germans would choose Poland first because, as general Kutrzeba put it, Poland had a small and poorly equipped army, a weak air force, and few armoured weapons; because it was “not self-sufficient industrially”; and because of “its easily accessible borders, its unfavourable geographical position vis-à-vis Germany, and its presumed isolation at the beginning of the war”.¹⁶⁷¹ In his reflections, Kutrzeba also expressed his thoughts on how the Germans might assess Poland’s military potential: “[...] morale: high; technical equipment: weak; industry: insufficient; delivery of raw materials and weaponry: difficult; long and open borders; geographical location: unfavourable (East Prussia), poor OPL [*Obrona Przeciwlotnicza*, Anti-Aircraft Defence], weak offensive capabilities in the air”.¹⁶⁷²

The fundamental assumption behind general Kutrzeba’s thinking was the thesis that an isolated Poland would not be able to cope with a confrontation with Germany or Russia, not to mention with the worst option: a confrontation with these two powers cooperating against it. He supposed that French mobilisation would start only after the German army entered Poland. He therefore calculated that Poland would be forced to fight alone for up to six weeks. In this time, Poland alone could wage neither an offensive nor defensive war against Germany. On the other hand, in an alliance with France, Kutrzeba assumed, Poland “could wage a victorious war against Germany, provided France enters from the west within eight weeks”.¹⁶⁷³

1669 *Wojna obronna Polski 1939*, 34. See also P. Stawecki, “Studia i plany operacyjne Polski w latach 1921–1938,” *Polska w Europie i świecie w XX stuleciu*, 209–223.

1670 [note 4, p. 462] *Wojna obronna Polski 1939*, 33–34, 37.

1671 *Ibid.*, 39.

1672 *Ibid.*, 34.

1673 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

In his examination, General Kutrzeba considered two variants for a defensive war in the West: “a) France enters [the war] simultaneously with Poland—[then] the chances for victory are high; b) France enters late—Poland must fight for survival.”¹⁶⁷⁴ If Poland put up a defence east of the Vistula, there would be greater chances of surviving alone for six to seven weeks. However, “natural resources, industry and local Polish personnel reserves” located west of the Vistula dictated that Poland would fight a defensive battle there and not to surrender these territories without a fight.¹⁶⁷⁵ In this light, it is not accurate to claim, as we often read in Polish historical thought, that it was only for political reasons that Marshal Śmigły-Rydz decided it was necessary to wage a defensive battle west of the Vistula.

Kutrzeba’s general thinking, as characterised in his considerations in 1936, is significant in part because it accepts the thesis that Germany “will start a war with Poland only if it has reason to suspect that France will enter late”.¹⁶⁷⁶ In other words, the premise of Poland’s isolation was to be a central factor in Berlin’s decisions regarding war. Only if abandoned and devoid of allies could Poland be easily defeated. Thus, diplomacy’s task had to be to create a situation in which the Allies would provide help as soon as possible by opening a western front.

Summa summarum, General Kutrzeba’s most important conclusion was that the Polish army’s main task was to avoid being beaten during the six to eight weeks it was fighting alone, in anticipation of French-British assistance in the West. We should recognise in the General’s reflections the fundamental argument underlying not only the later plan “Z”, but generally Poland’s entire military strategy in 1939. Kutrzeba’s study was presented to the General Inspector of the Armed Forces in June 1936,¹⁶⁷⁷ and it was on this basis that work began in 1938 on plan “Z”, the plan for the defensive war against Germany, which was not completed when war broke out. The Polish campaign was to be the first stage of the European war, the decisive battle in which was to take place outside Poland. It was taken for granted that the enemy in the Polish campaign would have a significant advantage. This was the essence of the Polish defensive war strategy.¹⁶⁷⁸

As we know, British guarantees and the Anglo-Polish alliance allowed Poland to re-evaluate its alliance with France. On these foundations, the argument that a Polish defensive campaign would not be an isolated military operation, but rather the first stage of the European war, became rational. And in this context, the guiding idea behind plan “Z” was the assumption that for a period of six to eight weeks, the Polish army would be forced to withstand the enemy’s offensive alone.¹⁶⁷⁹ This challenge had to be met, and its motivation was expressed clearly by

1674 *Ibid.*

1675 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

1676 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

1677 *Historia Polski*, Vol. 4: 1918–1939, part 4, p. 251.

1678 T. Kutrzeba, “Wojna bez walnej bitwy,” *Wrzesień 1939 w relacjach i wspomnieniach*, ed. M. Cielewicz, E. Kozłowski (Warsaw 1989), pp. 359–387.

1679 *Wojna obronna Polski 1939*, p. 44.

Marshal Śmigły-Rydz in instructions issued on 25 April 1939 to General Tadeusz Kasprzycki in connection with staff negotiations over a military interpretation protocol to the Franco-Polish Alliance. The main goal of the Polish defensive war plan was to be such that, according to the Polish commander-in-chief:

[...] by inflicting the greatest possible losses on Germany, defending certain areas necessary for warfare, and taking advantage of opportunities for counter-strikes using reserves, [Poland] will not be beaten before allied operations in the West begin. I have to count on the inevitable loss of some parts of Polish territory at the beginning of the war, which will later be retaken. After the allies commit themselves in a decisive and serious way, and when German pressure on the Polish front weakens, I will act depending on the situation.¹⁶⁸⁰

As later reported by Colonel Józef Jaklicz, the second deputy head of the General Staff and head of the Third Department (operational), Marshal Śmigły-Rydz “counted on the fact that the greater part of German forces would be thrown at Poland”, and the German command’s main goal was to “render Poland unable to wage further war, then to turn against France and England”. Under this assumption, the Polish operational plan was intended to be defensive in nature, its purpose being to conduct military operations in such a way as to “inflict the greatest losses on Germany and not be beaten before the start of allied operations in the west”.¹⁶⁸¹

Colonel Jaklicz wrote: “The last element of the general war that had an impact on operational decisions made by the Supreme Commander was the assistance promised by the Allies.”¹⁶⁸² While reconstructing the thinking within the Polish Supreme Command at the time, General Waclaw Stachiewicz stated *ex post* that the basis of the Polish defensive plan consisted essentially of three assumptions: (1) that the French would be able to break the Siegfried Line, as from the entire *Ordre de Bataille* of the German army 70 to 80 divisions (including all armoured and motorised divisions) were to be directed to the Polish front, while only 20 German divisions would remain in the west;¹⁶⁸³ (2) that the French army would mobilise three quarters of its armed forces against Germany; that is, about 80 divisions;

1680 “Instrukcja marszałka E. Śmigłego-Rydza dla rozmów z francuskim sztabem generalnym,” *Zeszyty Historyczne* (Paris) (1988), No. 84: p. 208.

1681 *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, Vol. 1, p. 249. Account by the Second Deputy Chief of the General Staff, Colonel J. Jaklicz regarding instructions received by the Polish delegation for Polish-French and Anglo-Polish staff talks from the General Inspector of the Armed Forces. The assumptions behind the Polish concept of a defensive war were reconstructed by the authors of *Polskie Siły Zbrojne w drugiej wojnie światowej*, Vol. 1, part 1, p. 257 ff. See also Colonel Henryk Piątkowski’s thoughts in “Polski plan operacyjny zachodni w 1939 r.,” *Bellona* (London) (1949), No. 3: pp. 6–20.

1682 Biblioteka Polska (Paris), the Papers of Józef Jaklicz, Akcesja, 3346, p. 21a.

1683 W. Stachiewicz, *Wierności dochować żołnierskiej*, p. 674.

and (3) that Germany's advantage in the air would be offset by joint (coordinated) offensive actions by the French and British air forces.

It thus appeared that decisive questions revolved around what territorial and military losses Poland would incur in the first period (six to eight weeks) of the defensive struggle, and whether those losses would allow the Polish army to continue fighting in the second stage of the European war. These were the most important military questions facing the Polish General Staff on the eve of September 1939.

However, two more questions emerge here: what was to be expected from Poland's other great neighbour, the Soviet Union, and was French assistance definitely a foregone conclusion?

The answer to the first question is quite easy, but it unfortunately provides no great revelation. It might seem surprising, but the fact is that Poland's commander-in-chief (like Poland's foreign policy leaders) viewed the Soviet Union as a fundamentally static player in the international crisis of the time; he no doubt failed to take into account the dynamism of Soviet policy, thinking that the USSR would meet the requirements of neutrality in a possible Polish-German war. He even considered Polish-Soviet "cooperation regarding equipment and raw materials", about which, as he wrote on 19 May 1939 in his instructions for Polish negotiators engaged in staff negotiations with France on the military interpretation protocol, "we will decide for ourselves in the future".¹⁶⁸⁴

The answer to the second question requires quoting the opinion put forward by General Waław Stachiewicz, Chief of the General Staff, who wrote: "In assessing the attitude of allied France, the General Inspector of the Armed Forces remained concerned, until the outbreak of war, about France's political position".¹⁶⁸⁵ According to this reasoning, it had to be expected that the French would possibly delay military operations but not that it would abandon actions on a western front altogether. In this context, Stachiewicz made the argument that Great Britain was to ensure France's operability, a canon of Polish foreign policy. In his view, "the General Inspector of the Armed Forces realised that England's position would predominate, and that its involvement in April [1939] was decisive. However, England's and France's delay in signing final political agreements sustained his concern."¹⁶⁸⁶

The alliance with Great Britain played a key role in shaping the beliefs of the Polish leadership regarding the reliability of a western front. Beck had a right to view the transformation of the British guarantee into an Anglo-Polish alliance not only as work of personal importance, but also as one that was tantamount to obtaining French assistance, even if delayed.

1684 The Marshal stated: "[...] I have no other plans for Russia at the moment". See "Instrukcja marszałka E. Śmigłego-Rydza", p. 210.

1685 W. Stachiewicz, *Wierności dochować żołnierskiej*, p. 675.

1686 *Ibid.*

It should be emphasised once again that in March 1939, a fundamental revolution took place in the way Poles perceived the West. Beck's London trip and talks with British statesmen caused a significant change in the Polish leadership's views of British policy, with all its consequences. There was a significant evolution in how diplomats in the Polish Foreign Ministry estimated British policy, which is a fact we should note because it is not only interesting but also significant.¹⁶⁸⁷

At the beginning of March 1939, officials in Warsaw were highly sceptical toward British policies. The "Munich syndrome"; that is, awareness of the short-sighted policy involving concessions made to the Third Reich, which ended with the lack of opposition to the Anschluss in Austria and with Czechoslovakia endangered, was still alive. In a report for Beck dated 29 March 1939, the ambassador in Paris, Łukasiewicz, formulated a highly pessimistic assessment of the value of allied guarantees offered to Poland by the Western democracies. Łukasiewicz aptly wrote: "After the experience of the last 20 years, during which England and France not only failed to fulfil a single international commitment, but were never able to properly defend their own interests, it is absolutely impossible for any of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and for those on the opposite side—Berlin and Rome—to take seriously any English proposal before England brings itself to take actions that would establish clearly and categorically a change in its relations with Germany."¹⁶⁸⁸ Łukasiewicz had reasonable doubts as to whether the Western powers had an alternative to the compromised line of appeasement, or whether they would be able to oppose Hitler with an effective policy of containment instead of appeasement. Simply put: were the given guarantees real? Michał Łubieński viewed Great Britain in a similar way: "England is baring its teeth, but it will actually try to make a deal with Germany". In a letter to Ambassador Romer on 14 March 1939, Łubieński confided that the game being played then "could end in a new Munich".¹⁶⁸⁹ There was certainly a great deal that was correct in these assessments and, we might add, much that was politically realistic, especially when viewed with the benefit of hindsight.

Understandably, British policy and its transformations were the subject of reflection and careful study at the Polish Foreign Ministry. Of greatest value were the thoughts of Ambassador Raczyński, whose reports from March and April 1939 are characterised by a clear awareness that the policy of appeasement was bankrupt, and by great caution when predicting how British diplomacy would develop.

On 29 March, Raczyński wrote to Beck:

1687 For more on British policy and the views of the Polish ambassador in London, see Krzysztof Kania, *Wielka Brytania 1918–1939 w świetle polskich źródeł dyplomatycznych* (Torun 2007). His coverage of the reality of 1939 is, however, rather brief (pp. 220–225).

1688 [J. Łukasiewicz], *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939* (1989), pp. 235–236.

1689 [note 23, p. 468] PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), 152.

The rapid course of the last phase of the Czech crisis caused a profound shock in opinion here and an evolution in the government's position. For determined opponents of Nazi Germany, recent events were only a confirmation of predictions and one more argument in favour of undertaking vigorous preventive action. However, Czech events were of greater significance because of the impact they had on the "conciliatory" camp, whose supporters have as a rule avoided revealing their predictions and hopes too widely. They have generally been limited to the statement that Great Britain should constrain itself to defending Western Europe and of course the British Empire and imperial transit. Central and Eastern Europe, on the other hand, would serve as an area for German expansion from which England could withdraw without great loss. Arguments made quietly in this milieu but which are probably the most important, could be found in the expectation that the Germans will face many difficulties in dealing with their new sphere of influence, and that thanks to these difficulties and antagonism with Russia, they will lose their resilience and dynamism. It has been predicted that there will be a Russian-German war that would weaken both sides, not without indirect benefit for the Western powers. The rapid course of events, giving Germany valuable, bloodless gains, showed the weaknesses of this reasoning and the fact that it was essentially an excuse, allowing responsible statesmen in the West to act along the path of least resistance. Serious concern has arisen given that so far, instead of losing strength as a result of its eastern actions, Germany has experienced a positive increase.¹⁶⁹⁰

All of this paved the way for Anglo-Polish rapprochement. Raczyński continued, explaining the genesis of the British consultation and guarantee offer: "Poland, apart from the Soviets, is probably the only country in Eastern Europe with full political independence with external and internal conditions that allow for an independent decision".¹⁶⁹¹ This was not a realistic view of the situation.

Even less realistic was much of the Polish political thought from that period devoted to the declaration made by the British prime minister on 31 March 1939. There were no differences between comments made by governmental insiders and those made by oppositionists; the dominant theme was optimism and faith in the fact that, in its conflict with the Germans, Poland benefitted from having acquired Britain as a great ally. The *Zielony Sztandar*, a publication by the Polish People's Party, expressed full support for Foreign Minister Beck's policy. An editorial on 16 April entitled "The Temporary Anglo-Polish Alliance [*Tymczasowy sojusz polsko-angielski*]" stated: "We know that the English are reluctant to make alliances with other countries, but once they have established an alliance, they stick to it honourably". The convictions of those on the Polish national right, who were in political opposition, were similar. One politician from the Stronnictwo Narodowe, Zygmunt Berezowski, wrote in April 1939 for the monthly *Polityka Narodowa*: "Prime

1690 Ibid., p. 237.

1691 Ibid., pp. 237–238.

Minister Chamberlain's declaration calling for immediate assistance from England and France in response to a threat to Poland is an event of historical significance". Berezowski argued that the declaration was "testimony not only to Great Britain's understanding of the danger of an aggressive German policy and the importance of Poland in Europe's balance and its freedom, but also to English readiness to wage war. It is clear that Anglo-French assistance given to Poland, once invaded, would have to lead to a general European war".¹⁶⁹² Unfortunately, without any risk of contradiction, we can say that these arguments *pars pro toto* are meaningful indicators of the mood prevailing in Poland at that time, and it should not be forgotten of course that Berezowski represented those in national circles battling the government at that time.

The Polish government was determined to reject Hitler's demands, which in effect targeted Poland's independence, even if Poland would have to fight alone and face the enemy's undoubtedly great military superiority.¹⁶⁹³ "In accordance with this policy," Paweł Starzski wrote, "the nation went to battle in order to reject any other policy. It did so believing that our allies would keep their commitments".¹⁶⁹⁴ Even if Poland had not received the guarantees, Polish decision-makers would not have wavered from their commitment to the idea that capitulation was impossible. In a conversation with Prime Minister Chamberlain, Beck emphasised that "if Poland were to be attacked, it would defend itself, even if half of the country were occupied".¹⁶⁹⁵ These words were both clear and necessary; they drew the British statesman's attention to the fact that the Polish foreign minister had not come to London to ask for a favour. It should also be added that British politicians wanted to hear these words, because for them the most important thing was to secure a second front in Germany's east, if Germany attacked first in the west. In a conversation with Ambassador Kennard in Warsaw on 23 April, Beck would repeat the same thing no less emphatically: "For Germany it is about pushing Poland from the Baltic Sea, to prevent us from cooperating with the West, and to push us into a conflict in the East. My government decided to oppose this by all means [...]".¹⁶⁹⁶

Beck's visit to London and the conversations he had there with British policymakers were of great importance in shaping the Polish leadership's views regarding Poland's strategic position. Unfortunately, this visit brought in its wake unjustified optimism in the possibilities Great Britain could offer. After Beck

1692 Z. Berezowski, "Pakt polsko-angielski," *Polityka Narodowa* (1939), No. 3: p. 156.

1693 This assumption was the basis for the "operational plan study" for a possible war with Germany put together by General Kutrzeba (in cooperation with Colonel Stefan Mossor). It was taken for granted that Germany would enjoy a significant advantage. The document was written up at the end of 1937. With this in mind, on 4 March 1938, work began on plan "Z".

1694 P. Starzeński, *Trzy lata z Beckiem*, p. 158.

1695 PDD/1939 (styczeń-sierpień), p. 279.

1696 *Ibid.*, p. 376.

returned to Warsaw, the conviction grew that the alliance with Britain not only offered Poland real political benefits, but also ensured effective assistance from the Western Allies through the establishment of a western front if, as expected, the Third Reich attacked Poland.

Commitments obtained from France, along with the general resuscitation of the Polish-French alliance in 1939, were possible only because on 31 March 1939 the British government, based on its own initiative (and of course out of its own interests) granted Poland a guarantee of independence. As Szembek wrote to Dębicki on 15 May 1939: "Daladier's speech [on 13 April] and Chamberlain's latest statement show that the game is not yet over. England seems to be convinced that this is not just about one or another object, but in fact about dominance over the continent".¹⁶⁹⁷ This statement, like many others, shows an overestimation of Britain's determination to stop Hitler.

On 23 May 1939, Ambassador Edward Raczyński wrote: "English military preparations are very intense, but the English are of the opinion that they will not be the first to bomb open cities."¹⁶⁹⁸ In a letter dated 13 June to Ambassador Romer, Deputy Minister Szembek noted with undisguised satisfaction that "our contacts with the West are developing very successfully".¹⁶⁹⁹ He also wrote optimistically: "All German hopes for loosening these bonds are failing".¹⁷⁰⁰ Equally significant are the remarks in Michał Łubieński's *tour d'horizon* to Ambassador Tadeusz Romer dated 28 June: "Relations with Great Britain are developing slowly but steadily and without breakdowns. Today, [Adam] Koc is going to London as a private representative of the Polish Government. We had an English military mission in Warsaw, a similar mission is going from us to London. Idyllic with France, although as always some minor short-term difficulties in talks."¹⁷⁰¹

Despite doubts regarding the Allied strategy between June and August 1939 (which can be traced in Szembek's notes) and especially in the last days before war broke out, Beck returned to the belief that cooperation with the Allies was "developing properly". At the cabinet meeting on 23 August, he stated that Poles could be "assured that the Allies' attitude is firm and full of trust. There was some confusion in the Soviet case when it came to the issue of the march of Soviet troops through Poland, but that has not affected relations overall, especially since it demonstrated our knowledge of the Soviets".¹⁷⁰² On 28 August, Beck said: "France has put in a great deal of military effort and today has a two-million-strong army massed on the Maginot Line."¹⁷⁰³ From this he drew the decisive conclusion that

1697 *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka. Materiały uzupełniające*, p. 89.

1698 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 609 (note from a conversation with Raczyński on 23 May).

1699 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 593.

1700 *Ibid.*

1701 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Tadeusz Romer Collection, 5/1 (mf, roll 1).

1702 E. Kwiatkowski, "Dziennik czynności ministra skarbu", p. 80.

1703 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 701.

“if there is war, it will not be possible to stop halfway.”¹⁷⁰⁴ In an encrypted telegram to the ambassador in Ankara, Michał Sokolnicki, Beck stated that “Poland benefits from the Allied guarantee”.¹⁷⁰⁵ These were probably his last words on allied cooperation before 1 September. There are no documents from the last days of August 1939 that indicate Beck experienced any change of heart. As Ambassador Sokolnicki recorded in his *Dziennik* on 12 September 1939, Beck reportedly said on 31 August: “It would not be the first time that I have been disappointed with the English. Public opinion was not convinced of this at all; thus the outburst of sincere joy and sympathy was spontaneous [...]”.¹⁷⁰⁶

Apparently, Łubieński began to have doubts as to whether Great Britain would keep the promises it had given to Poland. Szembek’s note of 27 August states that Łubieński assessed Poland’s situation “as very serious. The news from London is not good”. The head of Beck’s cabinet reportedly said that “it indicates some defeatism within the cabinet”.¹⁷⁰⁷ These doubts did not overshadow the belief that allied commitments would be fulfilled. We might ask whether they reveal changing moods, or perhaps a mixture of fears and doubts with optimism and calm.

Contrary to disturbing reports, Beck assessed Poland’s general international position as “not the worst”. In a well-known statement confirmed by Szembek, the foreign minister emphasised “the great military preparations that we are continuing [and that] are putting us in a good position militarily today”.¹⁷⁰⁸ This statement does not necessarily mean that, according to the foreign minister, Poland’s military situation created opportunities to successfully thwart Germany’s plans, rather that it was “good” in the context of available options and current conditions.

It is also worth quoting a statement made by Polish President Mościcki on 6 August 1939. If we trust one account, the president reportedly recognised that war was inevitable and that “the country would experience terrible damage and great suffering. [...] In this war, industry will be decisive. [...] We have nothing, we don’t even have enough ammunition.” Nevertheless, “In ten or 100 years, Poland may not enjoy the favourable international situation that it does today. England, France and America will follow us. We cannot take the Czech example. We cannot cut and run. A nation can physically die, but its spirit cannot die. This is our only chance. This is why we will have war.”¹⁷⁰⁹

1704 Ibid.

1705 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Michał Sokolnicki Collection, Box 1 (copy of encrypted embassy correspondence from the period April 1938–August 1939).

1706 M. Sokolnicki, *Dziennik ankarski*, p. 25.

1707 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 699.

1708 Ibid., p. 701.

1709 Note from a conversation between Ziemowit Śliwiński (head of Water Plant Construction in Rożnów) with Polish President Ignacy Mościcki on 6 August 1939, as told in Ankara on 29 November 1943 to Captain Włodzimierz Ledóchowski, an officer assigned to Division VI (special) of the Commander-in-Chief. Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Michał Sokolnicki Collection, Box 2.

Polish Ambassador Edward Raczyński would later recall: "I had no doubt that England and France would declare war on Germany immediately and automatically, and that there would be quick action by our allies on the western front".¹⁷¹⁰ Stanisław Zabięło wrote: "We could not imagine that France and Great Britain would start war and at the same time not come to our aid. Their interest in maintaining two fronts against Germany seemed indisputable. This is why we did not lose hope that as soon as our allies declared war on the Third Reich, we would come out of it successfully, improving even our international situation, although the first few months would be extremely difficult."¹⁷¹¹

The thinking of former Czechoslovakian President Edvard Beneš was not shared by Polish political elites; in exile, Beneš said on 26 August 1939 that "the Western powers will of course immediately enter the war, but their assistance will not be entirely effective. This is why one should expect the rapid occupation of a significant part of Poland."¹⁷¹²

Polish public opinion succumbed to the claim the British-French-Polish coalition had a material advantage over Germany. We find such thinking in many statements from the Polish press in August 1939. Antoni Słonimski included these words of significance in his *Chronicles* written during the last days of peace and entered under the date 3 September 1939: "Poland is not just not a dwarf, but rather normal growth, unlike our western neighbour who suffers from political elephantiasis. Poland is a country of normal growth and by no means isolated. A simple summary of the military and economic powers of England, France and Poland indicates the right proportions. In this light, a powerful Germany with its uncertain Italian ally appears much more modest."¹⁷¹³

In his incisive memoirs *W cieniu Katynia*, economist and Sovietologist Stanisław Swianiewicz wrote about the strange nature of Polish public opinion, marked as it was by the belief that, despite everything, morality must prevail; Swianiewicz viewed this matter as an interesting psychological problem. Practically every Pole in 1939, he emphasised, believed in French power.¹⁷¹⁴

It would be fair to criticise this state of affairs. However, we should remember what Michał Łubieński wrote just after the defeat of September 1939 in his bitter attack on pre-war Polish policy:

If we had taken the position ahead of time that we would not be able to resist Germany, that the German army's advantage would be devastating, how much harder would it have been to find allies, how much more hopeless would our case have looked after losing the September campaign. Inside and outside, we had to give the impression of a

1710 E. Raczyński, *W sojusznicy Londynie*, pp. 38–39.

1711 See *Wrzesień 1939 r. w relacjach dyplomatów*, ed. A. Skrzypek (Warsaw 1989), p. 40.

1712 P. Wandycz, "Beneš o pakcie Ribbentrop–Mołotow," p. 893.

1713 A. Słonimski, *Kroniki tygodniowe, 1936–1939*, ed. R. Habielski (Warsaw [2004]), p. 391.

1714 S. Swianiewicz, *W cieniu Katynia*, p. 35.

spry and confident opponent, because only then could we count on foreign assistance. For the outside and inside, we say that although you often hear the opinion today that the Polish Government did not properly warn the public about the danger of war, we do not think that the Polish Government is being fairly accused. I suppose that in our society, despite its many strengths, we still have shortcomings in discipline, and moreover it is lined with the Jewish masses, it would be easy to cause panic that would only enable preparation for war. As it was even in society, with all its ardour for war, there was still a glimmer of hope that it would be possible to avoid war. That is why I think that Beck's optimism was partly well-reasoned, intended *pro foro ex et interno*. Something of this optimism, something of the subconscious faith in the possibility of battle, however, must have been in his psyche, and here we approach the very complicated issue of rulers' psyches."¹⁷¹⁵

None of the above, however, means that there were no doubts as to what the allies would do when Poland was invaded. It should be mentioned in this context that on 1 June 1939, Szembek took note of Beck's evocative words, expressed in a rhetorical question: "Can one be so completely sure that England and France will not just play around with us?"¹⁷¹⁶ On 12 August, the foreign minister spoke of a "suspicious Franco-English intrigue" in connection with a trip by the High Commissioner of the League of Nations in Danzig, Carl-Jakob Burckhardt, to Berchtesgaden.¹⁷¹⁷

The entire Polish strategy in 1939 was based on one assumption: that the allies would fulfil their obligations. If war broke out, Germany would fight on two fronts. Were these rational and realistic beliefs? Was anyone aware that these allied commitments might be ineffective?

Although it is not easy to answer these questions, it is possible.

First, the Poles received no information about the Franco-British staff provisions that had already been made in May 1939 and predicted that Poland would be sacrificed as a necessary victim to buy time, so that the British and French could enjoy the opportunity to make long-term preparations for war with Germany ("three years" is a number Prime Minister Daladier used), and could promise the Poles the West's undefined participation in some ultimate victory.

Second, the highest Polish authorities had no real influence over the strategic planning of allied Western governments. Warsaw could do nothing to ensure that the precise military commitments provided for by Polish-French political and military agreements would be implemented. Obviously, the Polish military staff was not party to the process by which the operational assumptions of the British and French military staffs were shaped.

1715 M. Łubieński, *Refleksje i reminiscencje*, p. 129.

1716 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 617.

1717 *Ibid.*, p. 684. See also A. M. Cieniwała, "Misja pokoju Carla J. Burckhardta," *Dzieje Najnowsze* (1974), No. 4: pp. 83–106.

Third, there was absolute certainty in the Polish Foreign Ministry that fulfilment of allied obligations was in the vital interest of the Western powers themselves, because it gave them the opportunity to conduct a major military operation on a western front when the main German forces were occupied with the campaign against Poland. At this point, it is difficult not to quote Anna Maria Cienciała's opinion in this regard: "A sober assessment of German forces on the French border, the unfinished work on the 'Siegfried Line', and a frank assessment of the combined Franco-British forces, led to the conclusion that they were able to put up a fight against Germany. Not only that, but it seemed to be in their best interests to start the offensive when the main German forces were tied up in Poland."¹⁷¹⁸ The fulfilment of allied agreements was not to be based on altruistic motives, but rather on the economy of military forces. This assumption was rational, but it took little account of the defensive nature of France's military strategy and Britain's military weakness.

Fourth, the secret French-British staff arrangements made on 4 May 1939 (discussed below), which set forth that a western front would not be opened to relieve Poland in its battle in the east, were not known in Warsaw. The question remains open whether it was possible for the Poles to obtain information on this subject other than through official intergovernmental channels.

Fifth, after Britain issued guarantees to Poland, which were later transformed into a bilateral alliance, the Republic's international position changed significantly. Beck thus had the right to argue that he had internationalised the conflict with Germany, even if, as Piotr Wandycz aptly wrote, "neither Western power considered Poland to be an equal ally, but rather as a substitute ally—'*une alliée de remplacement*'—instead of Russia."¹⁷¹⁹ France and Britain had failed to bring the latter around.

In fine, it must be said that the Polish political leadership's assumptions were rational, but when confronted with reality they were not realistic.

General Kasprzycki's Mission to Paris and French Military Commitments

It was not Poland but France that initiated the renewal of allied commitments in 1939. On the second day of von Ribbentrop's stay in Poland on 26 January, Prime Minister Daladier publicly confirmed in the Chamber of Deputies that the Franco-Polish Alliance was still in force, although in a conversation with the German ambassador in Paris, Johannes von Welczeck, on 18 February, Bonnet tried to weaken the obligations Daladier had spoken about on 26 January.¹⁷²⁰ In a report

1718 A. M. Cienciała, *Józef Beck (4 October 1894–5 June 1944). Szkic biograficzno-polityczny*, p. 47 (a typescript provided to me by the author).

1719 P. Wandycz, "Polska w polityce międzynarodowej," in *idem*, *Z dziejów dyplomacji*, p. 15.

1720 Bundesarchiv Berlin (Lichterfelde), Botschaft Moskau, R. 9215/442.

to Warsaw on 1 February, Ambassador Łukasiewicz noted that “the real *nowum* was therefore the statement maintaining commitments towards Soviet Russia and Poland, with a clear shift of focus on relations with Poland, which have recently developed in the form of friendly and informative contact against the backdrop of talks and negotiations with Germany.”¹⁷²¹

As early as 19 February, as evidenced in Polish diplomatic files, Beck raised the idea of Polish-French “technical” staff negotiations. On that day, Ambassador Łukasiewicz provided Bonnet with the Polish government’s note on this matter,¹⁷²² which was a move that brought no results but which confirms how consistent the Poles were in attempting to specify French military commitments, and in turn British military commitments. This is a fact that has received too little attention in historiography so far.

When on 13 April 1939 Prime Minister Daladier, speaking in the Chamber of Deputies, gave Poland the same guarantees that Neville Chamberlain had given on 31 March in the House of Commons, Daladier presented a formula prepared and approved by the cabinet the previous day in Paris. It now became necessary to enter into Polish-French negotiations to obtain a bilateral agreement establishing mutual obligations in the case of war. In the Polish view, the Anglo-Polish agreement of 7 April 1939 (the “Scoring”) seemed to prejudice the success of talks with the French, because the dependence of French strategy on British policy seemed a foregone conclusion, as confirmed by experiences in 1938. Unfortunately, this Polish view transpired to be too optimistic.

Arguments emerged regarding the need to adapt Polish-French relations to the Anglo-Polish alliance. The military convention of 19 February 1921 was outdated and its provisions required modification. Polish-French staff talks in 1923–1925, which resulted in various protocols, could not be used as a basis for negotiations, because they had taken place in different strategic realities. Either a new military convention or an annex to the previous convention, in the form of a protocol, had become necessary. The decision was to follow the latter solution.

In his report dated 15 April, Ambassador Łukasiewicz described the climate in France surrounding the Polish question as “remarkably and definitely positive”. He urged Polish diplomacy to go into vibrant and immediate action. He himself suggested that Polish officials “attempt not only to bring the alliance with France to the level of our agreement with England, but also to turn it into an instrument for our constructive policy in that part of Europe in which we are most interested.” Łukasiewicz continued: “I do not think that the initiative in this direction could come from the French government and I am of the opinion that it would be much more useful if we undertake it, because it will allow us to have better control over possible negotiations and to direct them in accordance with our interests.”¹⁷²³ In

1721 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 62.

1722 DDF, series 2, Vol. 14, p. 253.

1723 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), 335 (report dated 15 April 1939).

addition, Łukasiewicz informed Bonnet of the existence of the secret protocol (the “Scoring”) as a real Anglo-Polish alliance agreement. He also announced that he would communicate its content to the French. Bonnet stated that, on his initiative, he received Łukasiewicz on 10 April and proposed cooperation to clarify mutual obligations.¹⁷²⁴

It was first agreed that the two parties would begin negotiations on two new agreements in the form of protocols: one political and public, the other military and secret. The usefulness of a political protocol seems doubtful, since the two countries were already bound by the alliance treaty of 19 February 1921, which was never revoked, although the fact was that the actual state of bilateral obligations had been unclear since the signing of a second Franco-Polish treaty in Locarno on 16 October 1925; the latter was a guarantee agreement which made the use of the alliance dependent on League of Nations’ mechanisms. Such a situation could not be beneficial to Poland. Therefore, the new political protocol was to separate Polish-French commitments from the League system, which in any case was already practically bankrupt.

Beck decided not to travel to Paris. Negotiations over the political protocol were to be led by Ambassador Łukasiewicz with French Foreign Minister Bonnet. The two sides decided to conduct political and military negotiations simultaneously, apparently in an effort to not waste time. On 28 April, Ambassador Łukasiewicz gave Minister Bonnet a Polish draft version of a political interpretation protocol, dated 25 April.¹⁷²⁵ Conversations went smoothly and ended with an initialled text.

The Franco-Polish mutual assistance protocol began with a preamble stating that this document represented no new alliance agreement. Rather, it was a confirmation of the alliance that was already in force and which had never been revoked.

Article 1 stipulated that the contracting parties “shall give each other all possible assistance and support immediately and from the time warfare commences between one of the signatories and a European country”, which was understood as Germany. The agreement extended similar bilateral obligations to include “any action by a European state which clearly, directly or indirectly, threatens the independence of one of the contracting parties and is of such a nature that the party concerned deems it necessary to resist aggression using armed force”. Article 2 of the protocol provided that “the manner in which the mutual assistance commitment provided for in this Agreement would be applied will be determined by the appropriate military, maritime and aviation authorities of both contracting parties”. Article 3 contains a bilateral commitment for the signatories to provide each other with all necessary information on mutual assistance commitments

1724 G. Bonnet, *Défense de la paix*, Vol. 2: *De Munich à la guerre* (Paris 1967), pp. 217–219. For passages in Polish translation, see Stanisław Zabiełło, *Sprawa polska podczas Februariusz wojny światowej w świetle pamiętników* (Warsaw 1958), pp. 124–126.

1725 For the Polish draft of the protocol, see Juliusz Łukasiewicz, *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939* (1989), p. 245.

entered into with other countries that had already been contracted or would be contracted in the future. This provision obviously worked in favour of Poland, as it obliged the French to inform the Polish government of any commitments to the USSR, if they were made.¹⁷²⁶ The text of paragraph 3 of the same article worked even more in favour of Poland; it stated that “any obligation that will be granted in the future by the contracting parties may neither limit their obligations under this agreement nor indirectly create new obligations between a contracting party not participating in these agreements and a third concerned state”. As in any alliance agreement, it was also decided in Article 4 that neither of the signatories would conclude either a ceasefire or a peace without agreement with the other party. The protocol was called “an integral part of the Franco-Polish agreements of 1921 and 1925”. Its provisions were to remain in force for as long as these agreements remained in force. The protocol was to be valid immediately, upon signing, without going through ratification procedures. It is beyond discussion that this represented a favourable arrangement for Poland. Feliks Frankowski, a witness to events at the time working as chargé d'affaires in Paris, called it a “concrete alliance”, the first worthy of the name.¹⁷²⁷

Military talks were to be initiated at the staff level in the French capital. The Polish military mission would be headed by General Tadeusz Kasprzycki, acting not as the Polish Minister of War Affairs but as the personal representative of Marshal Śmigły-Rydz. Kasprzycki's negotiating partner was General Maurice Gamelin, commander-in-chief of the French Armed Forces.

Prime Minister Daladier agreed to military negotiations with the Poles regarding the specification of allied obligations, which was decisive. As we know today, General Gamelin was clearly against starting negotiations with the Polish staff. He “preferred not to have talks with the Poles and to specify the terms of cooperation before talks with the Soviet staff, because it was clear to him that the Poles could not resist long without Russian assistance.”¹⁷²⁸ Obviously, the Poles did not know of the French commander-in-chief's views. We can confidently assume that the start of staff negotiations was based on political considerations; for the French military leadership, these negotiations remained problematic.

General Kasprzycki arrived in Paris on 14 May and negotiations began two days later. They were attended on the Polish side by Colonel Józef Jaklicz as head

1726 “Should one of the contracting parties intend to grant such a commitment after the entry into force of this agreement, the other contracting party should be notified of this fact in order to ensure the proper functioning of the agreement”, as described in paragraph 2 of Article 3.

1727 IPMS, MSZ, A.11/144E, nr spr. 270, Feliks Frankowski's testimony before the Winiarski Commission on 31 March 1941.

1728 Quote from K. Glabisz, “Krytyczna monografia o generale Gamelin,” *Zeszyty Historyczne* (Paris) (1976), No. 35: p. 233. See also the highly critical study by Pierre Le Goyet, *Le mystère Gamelin* (Paris 1975).

of the Third Department (operational) of the General Staff and second deputy head of the General Staff, along with the Polish military and naval attaché in Paris, Colonel Wojciech Fyda; the air attaché Lt. Col. Franciszek Piniński; and Colonel Otton Łoyko-Rzędziejowski, head of the purchasing mission at the Polish military attaché in Paris. The French delegation was led, of course, by General Gamelin, acting as the Chief of the General Staff of National Defence. On the French side, the following also took part in the talks: Vice Admiral François Darlan, Chief of the General Staff of the French Navy; General Alphonse-Joseph Georges, member of the Supreme War Council, expected to be the commander of the anti-German front in the coming war; General Felix Musse, military attaché in Warsaw; General Henri Dentz, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Land Forces; General Louis Jamet, Secretary General of the Supreme Council of National Defence; and Colonel Aymé, an officer from the General Secretariat of the Supreme Council of National Defence in Paris.

There is no doubt that during negotiations in Paris, the Polish delegation took great pains to achieve concrete results both in terms of information on the French military and, most importantly, in terms of the final provisions of an interpretation protocol to the military convention. Proof of Polish determination in these negotiations comes in the instructions of 25 April given by Marshal Śmigły-Rydz to General Kasprzycki. This document is a concise outline of what the Poles expected from their French ally. It is therefore necessary to examine its contents.

In the light of the instructions of 25 April, the Polish delegation required answers to two questions. first: at what point could Poland expect “serious action” from the French army against Germany? Second: “what are France’s initial operational intentions? Will it move beyond its borders and strike Germany?”¹⁷²⁹ Polish desiderata from France were expressed in Marshal Śmigły-Rydz’s instructions: “1. The earliest and most solid action by France, so that the time in which Poland will have to fight alone is as short as possible; the less Poland bleeds and weakens, the greater and more effective its participation in the war will be. 2. France’s earliest activity should be in the air: a) when the French air force becomes operational; desired action immediately after Germany’s first military move, b) determining the means and objectives of the French air force and ours, c) the issue of the cooperation of the French air force from our bases and from our territory.”¹⁷³⁰

The *ex-post* account of Colonel Józef Jaklicz (from 1940) indicates that the Polish commander-in-chief expressed his expectations in four points: “1. Endeavor to ensure that France’s operations come as early as possible in order to shorten Poland’s isolation. 2. French air operations. The French air force is to act against

1729 Colonel Jaklicz’s account of the instructions issued by Marshal Śmigły-Rydz regarding negotiations over the Franco-Polish military interpretation protocol (completed in 1940). See *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, Vol. 1, p. 249. This document was first published in London in *Bellona* (1958, No. 2).

1730 “Instrukcja marszałka E. Śmigłego-Rydza”, p. 209.

Germany immediately after the first military move. Determine the means and objectives of French air forces and ours, possibilities for cooperation with French air forces from our territory. 3. Navy. Discuss the possibilities of cooperation with the French fleet. What are the possibilities for France (other than a blockade) to interrupt communication between the Reich and East Prussia. 4. French assistance to further arm Poland.¹⁷³¹ As part of this last point, the Poles formulated expectations regarding material support for Poland. In this context, the Polish leadership proposed the “extension of the Rambouillet agreement tied to the devaluation of the Franc”. The instructions also mentioned the possible supply of tanks and heavy artillery for the Polish army, as well as a general consideration of “the extent to which France can give us material assistance”.¹⁷³²

Marshal Śmigły-Rydz's instructions, with the agreement no doubt of the Foreign Ministry, clearly indicate that the main goal of negotiations with the French was “to define and establish *casus foederis* (the Danzig issue) and to establish the principle behind the alliance's direct action after the fact of German aggression”.¹⁷³³

According to the Polish expectations that I briefly reconstructed above, Marshal Śmigły-Rydz had no doubt that immediately after the start of hostilities, “the bulk of German forces, with some forces left at the Western fortifications, will be thrown at Poland. In addition to the political motives which in the current situation speak in support of this hypothesis, motives of a military nature are of greatest importance here”. What the Polish commander-in-chief had in mind was “the length of our border, its course and its vulnerability due to the terrain and the lack of any fortifications”.¹⁷³⁴ As Ambassador Łukasiewicz recalled, the Poles were eager to obtain from the French supreme command a clear promise that the main French forces would be directed against the front with Germany, if it turned out that the French had to fight on two fronts, i.e. in the event of an Italian strike in agreement with the Third Reich.¹⁷³⁵

As he admitted later in his memoirs entitled *Servir*, General Gamelin was “very dissatisfied with the arrival of General Kasprzycki”. He wrote: “I did not want concrete talks with the Poles before we were able, in accordance with the resolution of the ‘Standing Committee’ of 9 April, to negotiate with the Russian staff. It was clear that an extended defence of Poland was unthinkable without Soviet assistance. And I knew very well that the Poles would never agree to start even initial discussions on this subject with the Soviet Union”.¹⁷³⁶ Nonetheless, the talks took

1731 *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, Vol. 1, p. 249.

1732 *Ibid.*

1733 “Instrukcja marszałka E. Śmigłego-Rydza”, p. 207.

1734 *Ibid.*, p. 208.

1735 [J. Łukasiewicz], *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939* (1989), pp. 255–256.

1736 M. Gamelin, *Servir*, Vol. 2: *Prologue du drame* (Paris 1946), pp. 414–415 (quote from *Sprawa polska podczas February wojny światowej w świetle pamiątek*, p. 119; all of the following quotes are from the translation by Stanisław Zabiełło, who edited this volume).

place in a generally favourable atmosphere and, we should emphasise, could not be interpreted in any other way than as constructive. On 16 May, General Gamelin assured the Poles that “France will do everything possible to attract the maximum of German forces to its borders”.¹⁷³⁷ In reality, he gave no serious consideration to offensive action on a western front, but he kept that fact secret. According to his biographer Martin S. Alexander, Gamelin also opposed the supply of weapons to Poland.¹⁷³⁸ Gamelin later recalled that “General Kasprzycki began by expressing his satisfaction that the conference had started on the basis of a political agreement already achieved”. He claimed that he had warned the Polish delegation at the time “that the discussion would not go astray with promises that we could not keep [...]”.¹⁷³⁹ According to the French General, the essence of bilateral military obligations was to be common agreement that whichever country, “France or Poland, that will not be facing the essential core of German forces, will attempt to immobilise as much of them as possible on its own front”.¹⁷⁴⁰

Issues discussed in great detail included the anticipated order of battle of the German armed forces in the coming war, the order of battle of the Polish and French armies, and the conditions under which the French army would take offensive action on a western front. This was the agenda Poland proposed. Colonel Jaklicz presented the Polish estimate regarding the level of mobilised German armed forces, which was between 110 to 120 divisions, a realistic calculation. He also accurately predicted that the first German strike would be against Poland—“to destroy it and to prevent it from playing any role later in the decisive phase of the war”—and then to proceed with operations against France. General Gamelin replied that “this is not the only hypothesis to be taken into account; one should not forget about the Italian efforts to persuade Germany to attack France above all”.¹⁷⁴¹ During the Paris negotiations, the French military leadership argued that war could begin with an Italian strike against France supported militarily by Germany. Jaklicz estimated that Germany would attack Poland with 70–80 divisions, leaving 20 divisions on the border with France, 8–10 on the border with the Netherlands and Denmark and on the German coast, and 10 on the borders with Switzerland, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. General Gamelin’s response is interesting, namely that that 20 German divisions on the western front were not enough for Germany,

1737 “Przyczynki i materiały do historii kampanii wrześniowej. Protokoły polsko-francuskich rozmów sztabowych w Paryżu w maju 1939 r.,” *Bellona* (London) (1958), No. 2: p. 167. For the Polish translation of this document, see *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, Vol. 1, pp. 250–255.

1738 M. Alexander, *The Republic in Danger: General Maurice Gamelin and the Politics of French Defence, 1933–1940* (Cambridge 1992), pp. 320–322.

1739 *Sprawa polska podczas February wojny światowej w świetle pamiętników*, p. 120.

1740 *Ibid.*

1741 *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, Vol. 1, p. 251 (statement according to the protocol of the session on 16 May 1939).

because "our presence alone should tie up greater forces"¹⁷⁴² Events would prove that the Polish officer was right, not the French commander.

The Polish delegation at the Paris negotiations consistently repeated the claim that the main German military operations would no doubt be directed against Poland. As Gamelin put it *ex post*, Kasprzycki asked the French if "the main mass of our [French] forces would be able to take offensive action within two weeks"? Gamelin gave the confusing answer that "that is indeed a date we must take into account". General Georges, who anticipated becoming the French commander on the northern front, "went further" than Gamelin had probably wanted, assuring the Poles that the Siegfried Line would be broken using heavy artillery, although the strike would occur no earlier than "17 days" from the first day of universal mobilisation. Gamelin explained these assurances by referring to a "desire not to discourage our allies", who "were concerned" by his "restraint".

Colonel Jaklicz reportedly asked General Gamelin: "If a major German strike is directed at Poland, can Poland count on French forces crossing the border for an offensive against Germany?" He also asked: "What will be the number of divisions taking part in the offensive against Germany?" In response, the French commander-in-chief announced that "three quarters of the French troops will be located along the entirety of our north-eastern front. Half of these forces can take part in the offensive." In his memoirs, the French general referred to this issue as follows: "We offered the Poles that, generally speaking, we would employ the equivalent of 100 divisions. I did not want to be more exact than necessary: half of three-quarters came to around 33–38 divisions. This corresponded to what we could actually have on the front line or in reserve between the Rhine and Belgium, including the manning of the Rhine and the Belgian border."¹⁷⁴³ Gamelin recalled that "in the area of land forces, the Polish Minister of War Affairs wanted to impose on us the obligation to attack the Siegfried Line and to introduce 'the core of our forces' into the battle." Reporting on these conversations, he claimed to have caught the attention of his Polish partner, that there could be no question of "the main French forces, though about a third of them."¹⁷⁴⁴ According to the French commander, the concentration of French forces was to take place in the northeast. Poles also reportedly heard that "in the event of the Netherlands and Belgium not being attacked, the area of possible offensive would be limited. The French command will operate within its capacity and in accordance with the circumstances."¹⁷⁴⁵

An important part of the Paris negotiations was the question of the use of air bombardment against Germany. In this case, misunderstandings emerged between the two delegations. In Gamelin's opinion, the commander of the French Air Force, General Joseph Vuillemin, went further with promises than just "possible and

1742 Ibid.

1743 *Sprawa polska podczas February wojny światowej w świetle pamiętników*, p. 121.

1744 Ibid., p. 122.

1745 Ibid., p. 120.

desirable”, given that he reportedly expressed the opinion that “at the beginning of the war, he could take vigorous action to relieve Poland”. There was also mention of assurances that French air forces could be moved to Poland, provided that the appropriate bases were prepared.¹⁷⁴⁶

The most controversial issue in the Polish-French negotiations involved a misunderstanding regarding the phrase “the main force” (*les gros*), those which the French army would employ in order to go on the offensive against Germany on the western front. Polish negotiators probably did not understand that they were misled through the use of a certain refined wording, despite General Kasprzycki’s excellent French, a fact which General Gamelin recognised. Gamelin claimed that the term “*les gros*” meant part of the main forces, not necessarily most of them. Only the word “*le gros*” would mean the “main force” of the army. So Gamelin believed that he had committed himself to carrying out a “preparatory action”, and not an offensive to break the Siegfried Line.¹⁷⁴⁷ In his memoirs, he argued that he had fulfilled this promise to the Poles. He also stated that the 17-day deadline promised to Poles to prepare the French army for the offensive “concerned in any case the principle of readiness to prepare for the attack, not the operation itself”.¹⁷⁴⁸ Gamelin considered it “certain” that “with the resources at our disposal, we could have designed a quick operation only if the Germans employed insufficient forces for an effective defence”.¹⁷⁴⁹ But he did not make this view known to the Polish delegation in May 1939; rather, he waited to include it in his post-war memoirs.

Thus, remarkably, General Gamelin tried to disavow *ex post* all of the promises which allegedly could not be reconciled with each other. But what is important is not what was going through the French commander’s mind, but rather the mutual arrangements as contained in the final protocol.

Kasprzycki ended his talks with Gamelin in the evening of 17 May.¹⁷⁵⁰ On 19 May 1939, a Franco-Polish military interpretation protocol was initialled in Paris.¹⁷⁵¹ The document contained wording describing precise mutual obligations. First, “in the event of German aggression against Poland or in the event of a threat to Poland’s vital interests in Danzig, which would trigger an armed response from Poland, the French Armed Forces will automatically start acting as follows: 1. France will immediately take air action in accordance with the previously agreed plan. 2. As soon as part of the French forces are ready (around the third day), France will gradually initiate an offensive with limited objectives. 3. As soon as Germany’s main effort against Poland becomes clear, France will start its offensive

1746 Ibid.

1747 Ibid., p. 122.

1748 Ibid., p. 121.

1749 Ibid.

1750 [J. Łukasiewicz], *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939* (1989), p. 260.

1751 For the text in its entirety, see *Dokumenty z dziejów polskiej polityki zagranicznej 1918–1939*, Vol. 2, pp. 235–236.

against Germany (on the fifteenth day).” Secondly, “in the first phase of the war, Poland will engage all of its forces in defence activities against Germany, moving to offensive actions as soon as circumstances permit, on general terms agreed by both Commands.” Thirdly, “on the contrary, if the majority of German forces attack France, in particular via Belgium or Switzerland, which would entail the initiation of military action by the French Army, the Polish Army will make every effort to tie up as much of the German forces as possible on general terms agreed to by both Commands.” Fourthly, it was considered “necessary, in the common interest, for France to come forward immediately with material and financial assistance to the Polish government” in order to increase the real strength of the Polish army.

The adopted resolutions offered the French the opportunity to open a front in the west on the third day after the declaration of war on Germany. “Partial actions” (*actions partielles*) could involve a wide range of offensive actions if this were the will of the French Army’s supreme command. The most important decision included in the Franco-Polish interpretation protocol provided for a general offensive on the western front, which was to take place on the fifteenth day after the first day of universal mobilisation, which the French promised to announce immediately after the declaration of war on Germany. This stipulation was not realistic in the light of the realities of the blitzkrieg, when it transpired that Poland’s armed forces could not stand alone for two weeks under the massive German offensive. Diplomat Feliks Frankowski argued *ex post* that the Kasprzycki-Gamelin agreement of May 1939 was “not worth much”. He believed that “the deadlines set were very optimistic”, but “no joint operational plans were set”, although these were necessary.¹⁷⁵² Later, talks took place involving loans and credit. No further joint staff studies were conducted.

The military interpretation protocol could not come into force because it depended on the prior signing of a political protocol, which was not concluded because the French government decided at the last moment to refuse to sign the negotiated agreement, first playing for time, then claiming that the British objected to its content. The French reasoning, as given to the Polish ambassador in Paris, did not seem convincing. Minister Bonnet argued that the French government’s final decision required consultation with the British Government. In particular, the Danzig matter required the agreement of the governments of both powers, which could at any time become a reason for starting military operations, and which would thus require that Poland’s allies apply their alliance.

If we are to believe the not-always-reliable Ambassador Noël and his memoirs, Bonnet “learned about the existence of this document”; that is, the Franco-Polish military interpretation protocol, “by accident”. The foreign minister reportedly made the argument during a cabinet meeting in Paris that “any military agreement should be subordinated to the prior conclusion of a new political agreement”.¹⁷⁵³

1752 IPMS, MSZ, A.11/144E, nr spr. 270, Feliks Frankowski’s testimony before the Winiarski Commission on 31 March 1941.

1753 *Sprawa polska podczas February wojny światowej w świetle pamiętników*, p. 126.

The French government did not reject outright the military agreement signed on 19 May 1939, but it could not be activated given the failure to sign the political protocol. Thus, Poland's entire effort to establish concrete alliance commitments with France came to nothing. Having said that, the French did not withdraw from the guarantee declaration made by Prime Minister Daladier on 13 April, even if, as the Polish ambassador mentioned, Bonnet engaged in a failed attempt to do so. The issue of the Franco-Polish political interpretation protocol reached an impasse that was to last until the first days of September 1939.

What motivated the French foreign minister is a matter of historical debate.

The explanation that Bonnet gave for his conduct at that time, in his memoirs entitled *Défense de la Paix*, contains the argument that the French government could "under no circumstances" have accepted "commitments that were not agreed to by the English". The French foreign minister wrote: "I needed to keep thorough track of what was happening in London. It seemed to me that Beck's subtle game was to use Franco-British solidarity to gain one or another increasingly specific commitment."¹⁷⁵⁴ But the French Foreign Ministry's real motives were certainly different and more complicated than such an explanation indicates.

Calculations being made in Paris for some kind of settlement with Germany were no doubt of some significance; diplomatic documents make it clear that this was the case. On 20 May, the German Ambassador in Paris, Johannes von Welczeck, after talking to Bonnet, wrote that according to the foreign minister, a return to the Munich-style solutions of the autumn of 1938 was necessary.¹⁷⁵⁵ Of course, Bonnet did not understand that it was the Germans above all who were not interested in such solutions.

It is highly probable that, guided by the illusory hope of winning over the Soviets, the French foreign minister wanted to maintain some pressure on the Poles in order to impose any additional obligations on Poland in connection with an agreement with Bolshevik Russia. Delays in concluding a political protocol were to serve this purpose.¹⁷⁵⁶ Nevertheless, it is also possible that Bonnet did not want to be bound by specific political commitments to Poland so as not to complicate France's ongoing negotiations with the USSR and not to restrict his actions vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. The Franco-Polish political protocol, with its references to the signatories' obligation to consult each other, seriously tied the hands of the French in their efforts to establish rapprochement with the USSR and to attract this country to the "peace front". French reluctance to incur obligations with Poland could have been conceived, and was probably intended, as an expression of

1754 Ibid., p. 125.

1755 Bundesarchiv Berlin (Lichterfelde), Botschaft Moskau, R. 9215/442.

1756 "Bonnet would have been ready to agree to any Soviet demand involving Poland in exchange for an agreement with Moscow", such is Małgorzata Gmurczyk-Wrońska's (justified) interpretation. See eadem, *Polska - niepotrzebny aliant Francji?*, p. 110.

such aspirations. What no doubt guided French diplomacy in this regard was the possibility that, if France succeeded in its efforts with the Soviet Union, it could then confront Poland with accomplished facts. Henryk Batowski wrote aptly: "As of June, both France and Great Britain seem to have lost interest in deeper relations with Poland, engaged as they were in negotiations with the Soviet Union". In the British and French view, Poland simply had to adapt to this situation and not hinder their actions.¹⁷⁵⁷

In a report on 22 May, Ambassador Łukasiewicz gave some consideration to French motivations, writing to Beck:

It is extremely difficult to be sure of what influenced Min. Bonnet's withdrawal from the ready-to-be-signed protocol and his acceptance of my declaration on Danzig. Putting the facts together, I suppose that this is really about agreement with London, a decision which must have been made under the influence of Ambassador Léger after Minister Bonnet got involved with me and set the date of signing on Friday 19th of this month. As Min. Bonnet was not familiar with the text of the London protocol, he might have hoped that the Danzig issue would be included in a manner analogous to the draft of my statement and that he would therefore not need to inform me about the London consultation at all. It was probably for this reason that he did not inform me on Friday that acceptance of my declaration depended on the outcome of this consultation.¹⁷⁵⁸

Perhaps, therefore, the unfortunate fact that the French had not been notified of the content of the Anglo-Polish "Scoring" of 7 April 1939 played a role in shaping the French government's tactics, as this fact heightened distrust of the Poles.

"All of the above prompts me to conclude," Łukasiewicz wrote to Foreign Minister Beck on 27 May:

[...] that further negotiation must be conducted in a very firm and precise manner, or it should be transferred to London, which is the centre of decision-making, and then the French Government should be given to sign what you will have agreed with London. As for the text of the protocol, I am asking the Minister [Beck] to draw Minister Bonnet's attention to my letter, because it contains a number of important arguments which do not settle the matter, but may prove helpful in further negotiations. The fact is that in his last proposal, Minister Bonnet withdrew from the statement of Prime Minister Daladier, which he considers to be currently in force. For the full picture of our political negotiations, it should be added that the military treaty signed by General Kasprzycki is in suspension because it depends entirely on the conclusion of a political treaty.¹⁷⁵⁹

1757 H. Batowski, *Polska w polityce Francji*, p. 49.

1758 PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 503.

1759 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/6/I.

On 26 May, Minister Bonnet informed Łukasiewicz that he would refuse to sign the political protocol. Two days later, he sent a letter to the Polish ambassador explaining the reasons behind his decision. This letter contains two declarations of fundamental importance. First, the French foreign minister informed Łukasiewicz of the British government's objection to bilateral commitments regarding Danzig. The French Government could not accept Polish demands directed at France without jointly studying the matter in consultation with the British Government. Bonnet thus wrote that the right formula needed to be found that could reconcile Polish demands with allied expectations and would bring French and British obligations into full agreement.

It seems above all that the English cannot accept the formula closing the draft French-Polish protocol in the form that you proposed to me, because it risks straying too far from the basic elements already agreed to by Mr Beck and Lord Halifax. At this critical moment, I sought to reduce the differences between the English and French designs and I was pleased to be able to formulate a new conclusion in the Anglo-French text, which deviates as little as possible in content and form from the text you proposed; the main terms you proposed have been put in a different order. This new formula is currently subject to approval by the British Government, which in turn will familiarise me with the other provisions of the Anglo-Polish Agreement. Even without waiting for London's findings and not to waste time, which could further delay the signing of the Franco-Polish protocol, I believe that I should now, unofficially, help you draw independent conclusions from my official proposal, and personally convey the formula that was provisionally agreed to in Geneva with the British lawyer [*Cette étude a fait apparaître tout d'abord l'impossibilité pour le rédacteur anglais d'adopter, dans les termes que vous m'avez proposés, la formula de conclusion du projet de protocole franco-polonais, sous peine de trop s'écarter des éléments de base déjà arrêtés entre M. Beck et Lord Halifax. M'attachant du moins, sur ce point capital, à réduire toute divergence entre conceptions anglaise et française, j'ai été heureux de pouvoir réussir à faire dégager de l'étude francoanglaise une nouvelle formula de conclusion qui s'écarte le moins possible, sur le fond comme dans la forme, de la rédaction que vous m'aviez proposée, les termes essentiels de votre rédaction étant repris eux-mêmes dans un autre ordre. Cette formula nouvelle est en ce moment soumise à l'approbation du Gouvernement Britannique, qui me fera connaître d'autre part les autres dispositions du projet d'accord anglo-polonais. Sans même attendre les conclusions de Londres, et pour éviter toute perte de temps qui puisse retarder encore la signature du protocole franco-polonais, je crois devoir dès maintenant, à titre officieux, et pour vous faciliter d'avance l'étude que vous aurez à faire vous-même de ma proposition officielle, vous communiquer personnellement la formule qui a été provisoirement arrêtée à Genève d'accord avec le juriste britannique*].¹⁷⁶⁰

1760 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/6/I.

This statement no doubt surprised the Poles because during earlier talks, the French Foreign Ministry had raised no objections regarding the Danzig matter and 19 May had been set as the date for signing the protocol. The Poles also knew that when, in London on 6 April, “the final protocol text was approved, the *fait accompli* case in Danzig was mentioned during the discussion by both Lord Halifax and Foreign Minister Beck as being simply covered in Part I (and thus the binding) of the protocol”, as the Polish Foreign Ministry note read.¹⁷⁶¹

Secondly, the French foreign minister unambiguously confirmed that until the conclusion of the Polish-French negotiations over an interpretation protocol, the French Government's obligations towards Poland, which Prime Minister Daladier formulated in the declaration of 13 April, would remain in force. Bonnet wrote:

Until the signing of the Franco-Polish interpretation protocol, which after all clearly confirms the extensive scope of commitments already made public about mutual assistance between France and Poland, can I just remind you of the legal and real situation that already exists between Poland and France, in order to dispel any of the Polish government's concerns: the immediate and direct assistance that France will provide to Poland remains fully guaranteed by the solemn declaration of the head of the French government on 13 April [*En attendant la signature du protocole d'interprétation franco-polonais, qui ne fera que confirmer explicitement la portée extensive déjà donnée publiquement aux engagements d'assistance mutuelle existant entre la France et la Pologne, je ne puis que vous rappeler la situation de droit et de fait qui couvre déjà, entre la Pologne et la France, toutes préoccupations possibles du Gouvernement polonais: à savoir que la garantie d'intervention immédiate et directe de l'assistance française à la Pologne lui a été, et lui demeure, pleinement assurée par la déclaration solennelle du Chef du Gouvernement français, à la date du 13 avril dernier*].¹⁷⁶²

This statement is clear and it is in this light that the possibility falls away by which historians interpreting Polish-French relations on the eve of war can conclude that, because the two sides failed to sign a military protocol, no French obligations were in force.

In a letter dated 28 May, Ambassador Łukasiewicz suggested to Bonnet that he consent to a separate Polish unilateral declaration on Danzig when signing the political protocol, which would read as follows: “At the time of signing the protocol of ... 1939, the Ambassador of the Republic of Poland declares on behalf of his government that the unilateral change to the International Danzig Charter and the rights guaranteed to Poland by treaties tied to the Free City constitute a clear threat to Poland's independence. The French Government takes note of this declaration [*Au moment de la signature du Protocole en date ... 1939 l'Ambassadeur*

1761 AAN, MSZ, 108A, note by Józef Potocki “*Pro memoria w sprawie Gdańska w związku z rozmowami w Foreign Office w dniu 6 kwietnia 1939, po południu i wieczorem.*”

1762 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/6/I.

de Pologne déclare, au nom de son Gouvernement, qu'une modification unilatérale du Statute International de Dantzig ou des droits garantis par les traités à la Pologne dans la Ville Libre, représenteraient une menace manifeste de l'indépendance de la Pologne. Le Gouvernement Français prend acte de cette déclaration].¹⁷⁶³ According to Bonnet, the reason for this dispute was that "Beck sent Łukasiewicz instructions for him to request permission from us for an additional article, which is to remain secret".¹⁷⁶⁴ From that day on, the Poles would treat the inclusion of Danzig in the *casus foederis* provisions as a *sine qua non* condition for any new alliance agreements.

In turn, Bonnet's letter of 28 May contained an annex with a proposal for a bilateral political declaration for a transitional period, until French doubts about the political protocol were resolved. The very short text states: "At the same time, they (the French and Polish Governments) declare that from now on, they will consider these agreements as France and Poland making commitments to provide immediately all assistance and support in their power if one of the two states becomes the object of activities that clearly threaten its independence, directly or indirectly, and if that country, in order to defend its vital interests, takes up arms to oppose those activities [*En même temps, ils (les Gouvernements français et polonais) déclarent entendre désormais les dits accords comme comportant l'engagement pour la France et la Pologne de se prêter sur le champ toute aide et assistance en leur pouvoir si l'un des deux pays est l'objet d'une action menaçant manifestement son indépendance directement ou indirectement et si ce pays, pour la défense de ses intérêts vitaux, résiste par les armes à cette action*]."¹⁷⁶⁵ This statement did nothing more than uphold the commitments towards Poland that Prime Minister Daladier made publicly on 13 April.

In a letter to Bonnet, Łukasiewicz summarised the history of negotiations over the interpretation protocol. He also took note of the French foreign minister's statement. The Polish diplomat wrote: "I have taken note of the reference you make in your letter to the solemn declarations by the Président du Conseil, Mr Edouard Daladier, dated 13 April, and the resulting commitments, on the basis of mutual assistance obligations, for the French Government. The foreign minister of Poland cited this declaration, *inter alia*, in his speech of 5 May. I will not fail to bring to my Government's attention your findings on this matter [*J'ai pris bonne note de la référence que vous faites dans votre lettre aux déclarations solennelles du Président du Conseil, M. Edouard Daladier, en date du 13 avril et aux engagements qui en résultent, sur la base des obligations d'assistance mutuelle, pour le Gouvernement Français. Le Ministre des Affaires Etrangères de Pologne a confirmé pour sa part cette déclaration, entre autres, dans son discours du 5 mai. Je ne manquerai pas de porter à la connaissance de mon Gouvernement vos constatations à ce sujet*]."¹⁷⁶⁶

1763 Ibid.

1764 *Sprawa polska podczas February wojny światowej w świetle pamiętników*, p. 124.

1765 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/6/I.

1766 Ibid.

On 1 June, Beck sent Łukasiewicz clear instructions indicating the unprofitability of accepting any changes to the negotiated political protocol. He rejected the option of modifying the accepted wording, and he pointed out that including Danzig in the alliance terms was a *sine qua non* condition for Poland.¹⁷⁶⁷ All indications are that the Polish foreign minister's lack of flexibility here resulted from his conviction that the Polish government had every right to demand from the French precisely what the Poles had received from the British in the "Scoring" of 7 April, where Danzig was not mentioned *expressis verbis* as a *casus foederis* object, although Beck had made a statement in this regard, of which the British had taken note.¹⁷⁶⁸

Acting without delay, immediately on 1 June the Polish ambassador in Paris had another conversation with Bonnet, and we know its content from the encrypted telegram Łukasiewicz sent to Beck two days later. The conversation brought no ground-breaking results. But no doubt the confidential French-British consultations on the matter of obligations towards Poland was a new fact. Łukasiewicz wrote to Beck on 3 June: "To sum up, the matter of the political protocol between us and France is already quite clear today and there is no doubt that the formula to be proposed to us will be a Franco-English formula that the English Government will probably want to introduce in a future agreement with us. As [Foreign Minister] Bonnet could not yet make a binding offer, I did not think it advisable to propose to him new changes to our statement on the Danzig matter."¹⁷⁶⁹

On 22 June, Bonnet informed the Polish ambassador in Paris of the Franco-British consultations regarding the Franco-Polish interpretation protocol, and on 24 June, Łukasiewicz received a new French draft protocol which was to be agreed with the British government. In a letter to the Polish ambassador that day, the French foreign minister referred to the need to "coordinate mutual obligations between Poland, England and France". Three days later, Łukasiewicz forwarded both documents to Beck in Warsaw. The new draft protocol differed from previous arrangements determined in Polish-French negotiations. Łukasiewicz wrote: "I should point out that [...] Bonnet did not even let me know that this draft would differ from the text communicated to me semi-officially a month ago. This is the usual method employed by Bonnet, who always lacks the courage to communicate directly with me regarding unexpected changes to a position already taken."¹⁷⁷⁰

The new French draft was based on formulas used in the Anglo-Polish agreement of 7 April 1939. Ambassador Łukasiewicz drew significant conclusions from this set of circumstances:

1767 For the text of these instructions, see Łukasiewicz, *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939* (1989), p. 266.

1768 See Henryk Batowski, *Europa zmierza ku przepaści*, p. 388.

1769 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/6/1.

1770 Ibid.

[...] French policy and diplomacy are, at this moment and probably for a long time, completely subordinated to the principle of not doing anything without London's approval, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. The centre for decision-making on a shared Anglo-French policy is clearly in London, both regarding substantive decisions and the texts of agreements signed by England and France. It should be assumed that this situation will have substantial duration, because those in authoritative French circles consider it to be the most convenient, as it creates a situation in which France bears no individual risk, and in which it is certain that England will always give France cover in matters on the European continent. Moreover, such a policy is extremely popular in the broad and decisive circles of the French bourgeoisie, which, it seems, has given up all ambitions as to France's independent role in Europe and is looking for a policy which is most convenient, and therefore burdened with the fewest moments of individual risk.¹⁷⁷¹

The new version of the protocol, corresponding to French wishes, did not become the basis for definitive Polish-French negotiations. No new facts emerged that would lead to finalised negotiations.

Henryk Batowski argued that, from the point of view of "agreement on cooperation between the three allied armies", staff negotiations "brought almost nothing".¹⁷⁷² General Gamelin viewed the fact that a protocol had not been signed as essentially positive. As he later wrote in *Servir*, his view was that since a political protocol had not been signed, "our military protocol has no value and puts us under no obligation. In fact, I was internally satisfied with it, especially regarding the issue of air forces, because when it came to land forces, I limited myself to formulations to which I could always give a logical effect."¹⁷⁷³

As we know, the political protocol would not be signed until 4 September 1939, with no changes to the text that had been prepared and initialled in May of that year.¹⁷⁷⁴ The battle on the Polish-German front had been going on for four days. The political protocol, and with it the military protocol, now entered into force immediately, without following a ratification procedure.

The question then arises, what was the legal status of France's commitments to Poland between 19 May and 4 September? This is an important question not

1771 Ambassador Łukasiewicz's report for Beck dated 27 June 1939, PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 634.

1772 H. Batowski, *Między dwiema wojnami*, p. 357.

1773 *Sprawa polska podczas February wojny światowej w świetle pamiątek*, p. 124.

1774 Ambassador Łukasiewicz, who signed the protocol, wrote to the Foreign Ministry on 5 September that this act's most important political resolution was the clause that the contracting parties would make no separate peace and that Franco-Polish and Anglo-Polish obligations would be identical. See *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne, 1939 (wrzesień–grudzień)* [cited hereafter as PDD/1939 (wrzesień–grudzień)], ed. W. Rojek, with P. Długołęcki, M. Konopka-Wichrowska & M. Przyłuska (Warsaw 2007), p. 26.

only because decisive war preparations took place in this period, but also because Poland entered the war on 1 September 1939 in this unclear legal atmosphere.

When answering this question, we cannot say that due to its refusal to sign a political protocol, because of which fact the military protocol of 19 May 1939 was not binding, France was not bound by allied obligations towards Poland. The above-mentioned alliance agreements of 1921 and 1925 were not abrogated. However, even General Gamelin, who believed that the military interpretation protocol was not binding because the political protocol necessary for its operation had not been signed, maintained that the Franco-Polish alliance was binding “in itself” (*alliance elle-même*), as confirmed by Prime Minister Daladier’s declaration of 13 April 1939.¹⁷⁷⁵ Based on these premises, France declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939.¹⁷⁷⁶

The Clayton and Ironside Missions to Poland

The British public and political leaders in London viewed Poland in the 1930s with a certain ambivalence, one that the historian of international politics cannot help but sense. While on the one hand they highlighted “Polish militarism” and Poland’s “military outlook”, they also noticed, on the other, how far the Poles were from reaching the level of armaments necessary to provide a minimum of confidence in a rapidly deteriorating external situation. Significant here are notes (the minutes of senior Foreign Office officials) about Polish military preparedness that we find in the margins of Ambassador Howard Kennard’s report of 7 February 1938: “Poland has certainly taken the maximum steps to strengthen her defences”. According to Kennard, Poland was spending as much as 50 percent of its national income on military needs, although this did not change the obvious truth, which was that these were unsatisfactory sums because Poland was a “manifestly poor country”. The above-mentioned 50 percent of national income allocated to armaments represented only 6.7 percent of what the Soviet Union was spending for the same purposes.¹⁷⁷⁷ In this climate of opinion along the Thames, there could be no doubt that Poland needed outside support to increase realistically its defence capabilities. Having said that, when this assistance became possible; that is, after 31 March 1939, it was already too late to achieve a real effect in the increase in Poland’s military potential.

Immediately after the agreement of 7 April (the “Scoring”) came into force, purely military talks were supposed to follow. Polish diplomats considered them

1775 General Stachiewicz refers to this matter; see *idem*, *Wierności dochować żołnierskiej*, p. 676.

1776 M. Gamelin, *Servir*, Vol. 3: *La guerre (Septembre 1939–19 mai 1940)* (Paris 1947), p. 45.

1777 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 21806, C.989/585/55, Ambassador Kennard to Eden, report dated 7 February 1938.

necessary. No question, the Poles were far from negligent in this respect; their actions were guided by clearly defined goals that resulted in specific actions.

Above all it was Józef Beck who pointed to the need for staff talks, although so did Marshal Śmigły-Rydz. As early as 16 April, noting the military implications of mutual political guarantees, Beck submitted to the British ambassador in Warsaw a proposal to begin staff talks as soon as possible. These proposals were confirmed by a letter from General Hastings Ismay to William Strang, available in the Foreign Office files.¹⁷⁷⁸ Significantly, on 18 April Strang acknowledged that staff negotiations might not satisfy the Poles. Somehow in anticipation of the Polish offer, the Chiefs of Staff Committee prepared a memorandum on 3 April which formulated a proposal to transfer military negotiations to the French, leaving it to the leadership of the French army to define obligations towards Poland, albeit in consultation with the leadership of the British army. This concept was motivated by the fact that the French knew the countries in question which had either already been offered, or would be offered, guarantees (Poland, Romania and Greece).¹⁷⁷⁹

At this point it is worth recalling that in the instructions for General Tadeusz Kasprzycki (summarised above) dated 25 April and tied to the talks in Paris, Marshal Śmigły-Rydz stated that it was he who had “proposed to England the idea of military talks”, but also that “it is not yet clear [...] what effort England can make on the continent”. The marshal continued: “I assume that England will get involved as soon as possible”.¹⁷⁸⁰ This was a *pium desiderium*, and for Polish staff members this matter, more broadly, represented a great unknown.

The first Anglo-Polish staff level contact was established at the end of May 1939.¹⁷⁸¹ In the wake of the decision in London to send a military-informational mission to Poland, a British staff delegation arrived in Warsaw, headed by General Emilius Clayton. In the 1920s, Clayton had served as military attaché in Warsaw and understood to some extent the reality of the Polish army. Between 23 and 30 May, Anglo-Polish military talks took place in Warsaw, headed by the Chief of the General Staff, General Waław Stachiewicz,¹⁷⁸² who was joined by Air Force General Stanisław Ujejski, Rear Admiral Jerzy Świrski, and Colonel Józef Jaklicz, who had participated in the Polish-French talks in Paris. On the British side, General Clayton was joined by Air Force Colonel Alexander Paul Davidson and Commander Henry Bernard Rawlings.

The Committee of Imperial Defence met on 15 May in London, where members adopted a memorandum stating that due to transportation difficulties, direct assistance to Poland during war would not be possible, either from the French or British

1778 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 22969, C.5041/15/18.

1779 Ibid.

1780 “Instrukcja marszałka E. Śmigłego-Rydza,” p. 210.

1781 For more on the Anglo-Polish talks in 1939, see Zgórniak, *Europa w przededniu wojny*, pp. 441–443.

1782 S. Kopański, *Moja służba w Wojsku Polskim 1917–1939* (London 1965), p. 293.

armed forces. However, this document stated clearly that wherever these forces were engaged, “they will indirectly help Poland by tying up enemy forces”.¹⁷⁸³ Commenting on these provisions, Włodzimierz Tadeusz Kowalski concluded: “The British delegation thus went to Poland with nothing to offer”. This statement is not precise, because the quoted conclusions of the Committee of Imperial Defence resolution do not prejudice the abandonment of actions on a western front.

Detailed minutes of the meetings conducted in Warsaw have been preserved. They indicate that the talks were purely informative.¹⁷⁸⁴ At the end, no formal agreement was signed that could be called an inter-state agreement.

First, General Clayton caught the attention of his Polish partners when he stated that the process of forming new British land divisions would be lengthy, and that it would be impossible to complete that process before the outbreak of war. However, the British offered the Poles specific promises. Clayton assured General Stachiewicz that the British army would send six divisions to the front in France “as soon as possible”. At the same time, he warned that he had no way of knowing how units of the British Expeditionary Force would be employed “because it is difficult to predict what the situation will be when they are ready”.¹⁷⁸⁵ In fact, only two British divisions were ready to be eventually sent to France.¹⁷⁸⁶

Second, General Clayton asserted that “the British air force would be used for defence, but defence should not be understood as adopting a passive attitude. On the contrary, efforts will be made to reduce enemy forces through attacks on air bases and factories”.¹⁷⁸⁷ Poles had the right to understand this statement as a declaration that Britain would join the air offensive against Germany immediately after the start of hostilities. General Clayton informed the Polish delegation of the existence of an “Anglo-French air group that could act in the event of a German attack on Poland”. He declared that bombings would be directed only at military facilities, but if Germany took action against civilian facilities, the British air force would retaliate in kind, adding that “Britain has the necessary means to respond”. Therefore, “as soon as any civilians are killed in Poland, the Royal Air Force will have a free hand and respond with the bombing of German civilian facilities”. To General Stachiewicz’s additional question about whether British aircraft would act if “Germany bombs Polish cities without bombing English cities”, General Clayton responded clearly that “in this case, the Royal Air Force, after consulting other

1783 W. T. Kowalski, *Ostatni rok Europy (1939)* (Warsaw 1989), p. 231.

1784 “Przyczynki i materiały do historii kampanii wrześniowej. Protokoły polsko-brytyjskich rozmów sztabowych w Warszawie w maju 1939 r.,” *Bellona* (London) (1957), No. 3–4: pp. 25–57.

1785 Quoted from the Polish translation, in *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, Vol. 1, p. 271. For the original French version, see *Bellon* (London) (1958), No. 2.

1786 M. Zgórniak, *Europa w przededniu wojny*, p. 443. See also A. M. Cienciała, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938–1939*, p. 242.

1787 *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, Vol. 1, p. 273.

Allies, will bomb all enemy objects without exception". This statement was consistent with the one made by Colonel Ismay, secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence, who on 17 May assured Ambassador Raczyński that the Royal Air Force would take action, but would not at first bomb "open cities".¹⁷⁸⁸ After these talks with General Clayton, General Stachiewicz concluded, as stated in the Polish protocol, that the matter of the bombing of enemy military facilities was resolved and thus undoubted.

Third, the chief of the Polish General Staff asked about the possibility of British aid to Poland. He also proposed that consideration be given to the establishment of bases in Poland for the Royal Air Force. In response, General Clayton stated that "it would require special organisation. You would need to have technicians in Poland who know English planes, as well as stores of English bombs. At the beginning of the war, this type of action will not be possible, but it can be considered later. This matter should be examined by air force experts on both sides." The head of the British military mission added that "The Royal Air Force is not yet strong enough, but he thinks that this is a matter to be analysed."¹⁷⁸⁹

In this light, the claims made by some historians that Poles were informed in staff talks that they would receive no help from their allies, because a western front would not be opened, and that the allied air forces would not be used in an offensive, to relieve Poland under attack, do not correspond to reality.¹⁷⁹⁰

The Poles asked the British delegation other questions, above all about the chances that the Polish and British navies could cooperate in the Baltic region. The idea was put forward to establish an operational base for the Royal Navy on Hel.¹⁷⁹¹ However, Polish suggestions did not coincide with the priorities of the British army; thus, no agreement could be reached.

British officials must have produced a final report based on General Clayton's talks intended for the British military leadership in London, but no such report has surfaced. No formal Anglo-Polish staff negotiations followed Clayton's discussions in Poland. We cannot view General Ludomił Rayski's mission to London as representing such negotiations, given that his discussions focused only on British material aid for Poland.¹⁷⁹² Similarly, the military mission of General Mieczysław Norwid-Neugebauer, who was sent to London in September, was aimed only at establishing communications between the two countries' military commanders.

1788 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/WB/3B.

1789 *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, Vol. 1, pp. 276–277.

1790 A. J. Prażmowska, "Poland," in *The Origins of World War Two. The Debate Continues*, eds. R. Boyce, J. A. Maiolo (London 2003), p. 161. Instead of mentioning the source, the author refers to her monograph *Britain, Poland and the Eastern Front*, pp. 94–95.

1791 See in particular Teresa Skinder-Suchcitz, *Rok 1939. Polsko-brytyjska polityka morską* (Warsaw–London 1997), p. 68.

1792 For more, see *ibid.*, 99 ff.

In July 1939, a second informational mission took place, led by General Edmund Ironside, Inspector-General of Overseas Forces. On 4 July, he was instructed to travel to Poland.¹⁷⁹³ The British general arrived in Warsaw on 17 July 1939 and his stay lasted until 21 July.¹⁷⁹⁴ During his visit, the two sides once again discussed the state of military preparations, but no detailed talks were held to agree on joint military operations, the kind that would have been included in a jointly signed final protocol.

General Ironside repeated General Clayton's assurances about British readiness to send several divisions to France and to provide Royal Air Force support for Poland. These promises were in line with the content of the conversation held on 13 July between Ambassador Raczyński and Lord Leslie Hore-Belisha, the British War Secretary, in which, as Raczyński's note confirms, the British offered assurances that British troops would be sent immediately to Poland and France, if it transpired to be necessary.¹⁷⁹⁵

General Ironside made certain promises to Polish military leaders that need to be mentioned here. First, he promised that after the German armed forces struck Poland, the Royal Air Force would not remain idle, but would commence bombing military facilities on German territory, excluding of course civilian facilities. Second, he made it clear that it could not be ruled out that British squadrons would be sent to Poland. Third, he spoke about the intense armament program and military preparations going on at home and in the dominion. Fourth, he emphasised that the mistakes of World War I would not be repeated and that immediately after joining military operations, a joint ground forces command would be established. As General Ironside explained to his Polish partners: "[...] in military terms, there is close communication between England and France. The situation from 1914 will not develop again. The French will take over the supreme strategic command." A joint supreme command would be established and he himself would be "subordinate to General Gamelin. Such a decision was not an easy one to make, because the central government had to find agreement with the dominions, but the latter also understood the situation."¹⁷⁹⁶

Importantly, Ironside spoke about the great significance of the Mediterranean in Britain's interests, which Poland noted without drawing the conclusion that this region represented one of the most important operational theatres for British strategy. Ironside said that an "Egyptian army" was being prepared, meaning

1793 A. Suchcitz, "Wrażenia generała Ironside'a z wizyt w Polsce", p. 60.

1794 Marian Zgórniak mistakenly stated that Ironside arrived in Poland on 19 July. See idem, *Europa w przededniu wojny*, p. 442.

1795 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/WB/3B. At this time, the idea of Hore-Belisha visiting Poland was also considered, but the British withdrew this suggestion. For Beck's instructions to Raczyński dated 20 July, see PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 687.

1796 *Dariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, pp. 676–677.

significant forces in the Middle East making up a second expeditionary army in the Middle East—independent from the army in Europe. Foreign Minister Beck thought that “this army could possibly be a source of assistance for us.”¹⁷⁹⁷ After the war, reading the typescript of Paweł Starzeniński’s diary *Trzy lata z Beckiem*, Michał Lubiński noted in the margins: “Beck was very interested in General Ironside’s statement that in the event of war, the English army would not be sent in its entirety to France, but that on the contrary, large forces and imperial staff would be concentrated in the Middle East. We considered this confirmation of England’s sincere willingness to come to our aid.”¹⁷⁹⁸

In Ironside’s Warsaw talks, the issue of directing Royal Navy submarines to the Baltic Sea was left as a matter “to be discussed” in the future. Ironside asked the Poles from which direction the Polish Main Staff expected the enemy’s main strike. The Polish protocol of these talks states that “air defences will be deployed wherever they are needed”. There is also a statement in this document about the need to develop a way to transfer squadrons of British aircraft to Poland.¹⁷⁹⁹ Such assurances must be combined with the message offered by Lord Halifax at the Royal Institute of Foreign Affairs in London on 29 June, in which he declared that England would “stand by Poland” over the Danzig matter.¹⁸⁰⁰

It was precisely the Danzig matter that was of greatest interest to Ironside. His conversations with Marshal Śmigły-Rydz and General Stachiewicz show that he was interested in only one question in particular: what would Poland do if it came to a Nazi coup in the Free City, or to a limited military action by Germany to incorporate the city into the Reich, or to another scenario of events directed against Polish rights? Ironside’s interlocutors offered assurances.¹⁸⁰¹

The nature of Anglo-Polish talks was strictly informative, and Britain had “nothing to offer” Poland, according to one historical assessment.¹⁸⁰² However, it is not inexplicable that, to some extent, the talks with General Ironside raised considerable hopes among the Poles, even if today we know very well that they were not justified.

1797 *Ibid.*, p. 679.

1798 P. Starzeński, *Trzy lata z Beckiem*, p. 235.

1799 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/WB/3B, Ambassador Raczyński’s note from a conversation with General Ironside, who would leave for Poland on 14 July 1939. A few weeks later on 3 August 1939, the British Air Ministry sent a letter to the Polish General Staff proposing the creation of a special base for the Royal Air Force on Polish territory. This could not but indicate that the British intended real action, and it was interpreted thus in Warsaw. See B. Stachiewicz, *Generał Waclaw Stachiewicz. Wspomnienie* (Warsaw 2004), p. 138.

1800 IPMS, Kolekcja Edwarda Raczyńskiego, 23/H/348. In a letter dated 29 June, Ambassador Raczyński thanked Lord Halifax for this declaration.

1801 A. Suchcitz, “Wrażenia generała Ironside’a z wizyt w Polsce”, p. 62.

1802 P. Stawecki, “Opinie władz wojskowych o położeniu politycznym II Rzeczypospolitej”, p. 84.

On 18 July, Beck informed his Foreign Ministry deputy that General Ironside was talking primarily about the need to synchronise a possible war between Poland and England against Germany.¹⁸⁰³ This statement was not baseless, but it was in fact an interpretation of the talks that had taken place with the British mission in Warsaw. In a conversation with General Stachiewicz on 19 July, Szembek heard that Ironside's statements had made a great impression on Polish staff members. "England is determined to finish off Germany and Hitler"—this was the conclusion that the Polish military leadership drew from the British commander's statements. Stachiewicz stated: "General Ironside has emphasised to everyone England's readiness to fight".¹⁸⁰⁴

There would be no more Polish-German negotiations, and for Hitler time was playing a decisive role; if the führer was planning to start a war, he would start one, although since March 1939 "the other side [the allies] have made tremendous progress". Thus was Poland's situation as assessed by Marshal Śmigły-Rydz on 19 July.¹⁸⁰⁵ Ironside reportedly told Szembek on 19 July: "[...] now the hesitation is over". Under that date in the Polish deputy foreign minister's diary, we read: "England has understood the situation and Prime Minister Chamberlain will not repeat the Munich mistakes". Ironside had spoken "with the greatest admiration" about the Polish army, "about the calm and lack of nervousness in Polish society, which amazed the English, who thought that the Polish nation is an easily excited nation".¹⁸⁰⁶ After talking to General Adrian Carton de Wiart, who visited Warsaw in July 1939 and who would head a British military mission to Poland during the September campaign, Szembek had the impression that "England is determined to take the ultimate step".¹⁸⁰⁷ Marshal Śmigły-Rydz noticed, however, that "there is [...] a certain lack of consistency in English behaviour, because if it is as I say, why are they conducting financial negotiations so foolishly?"¹⁸⁰⁸ This was no doubt a very sober judgment.

Nonetheless, optimism prevailed in the Foreign Ministry, as indicated by the following assessments. On 21 July, Beck acknowledged that Ironside had "made an excellent impression" on Polish officials.¹⁸⁰⁹ However, on 13 July the foreign minister expressed the following to envoy Dębicki: "We count in the first place on our

1803 *Dariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 674.

1804 *Ibid.*, p. 675.

1805 *Ibid.*, p. 676.

1806 *Ibid.*

1807 *Ibid.* For more on Carton de Wiart's visit to Poland in September 1939, see M. Nowak Kielbikowa, "Działalność Brytyjskiej Misji Wojskowej w Polsce od 3 do 18 września 1939 r. w świetle dokumentów brytyjskich," in *Polska w Europie i świecie w XX stuleciu*, pp. 331–338. De Wiart recalled: "I found that Śmigły-Rydz had no illusions as to the imminence of war [...]" (*Happy Odyssey* [London 1950], p. 155).

1808 *Dariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 676.

1809 *Ibid.*, p. 679.

own strength and readiness, in the second place on reinsurance from the Western Powers, and in no way on the Soviets". He noted that "relations toward England are developing quite successfully and meet our expectations in the political and diplomatic sphere".¹⁸¹⁰

"The English have now understood the essence of the current situation", Szembek said in a conversation with the Hungarian envoy in Warsaw, András Hory, on 21 July.¹⁸¹¹ It seems that this opinion went undisturbed until the last days of peace. On 18 August, Adam Koc maintained that British war preparations were "very powerful".¹⁸¹² On 28 August, deputy head of the Legal-Treaty Department Michał Potulicki believed that for Poles the worst event would be "some kind of effort toward compromise" and international pressure to force concessions.¹⁸¹³

As Michał Zacharias aptly put it: "It is difficult to assess to what extent the opinions expressed by Beck and his colleagues in the summer of 1939 were the result of an earlier, real belief, or opinions with which they merely masked helplessness in the face of the country's hopeless situation".¹⁸¹⁴

However, in the light of the above-mentioned promises and assurances, could Polish leaders have felt anything but strengthened in their hopes? Could they have foreseen that allied commitments were not fully sincere? Could the Polish leadership have possibly fathomed the allies' real intentions and to grasp that their commitments were problematic, or even fictitious? It is difficult to answer these questions other than in the negative.

Officials in Warsaw could not bring themselves to interpret statements made by high representatives of the British Army as empty promises. Unfortunately, the fruitless credit negotiations did not open their eyes fully; those negotiations could well have indicated that the British government was treating its newly acquired ally in Eastern Europe instrumentally. As I mentioned, only Marshal Śmigły-Rydz noticed the negative impact they had on the parties' preparation for war.¹⁸¹⁵ We know that the Poles attached great importance to the issue of obtaining a loan to purchase arms; they thus requested such a loan for military purposes.¹⁸¹⁶ As Ambassador Łukasiewicz wrote to the Foreign Ministry on 6 July, the British-French loan offer totalled 1.5 billion Francs, of which the French government guaranteed 600 million for the purchase (supply) of weapons.¹⁸¹⁷ Negotiations in London, led by the Polish delegate Adam Koc, stalled. The amount offered had been

1810 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Gustaw Potworowski Collection, Box 1.

1811 *Dariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 678.

1812 *Ibid.*, p. 688

1813 *Ibid.*, p. 701.

1814 M. J. Zacharias, "Polska wobec zbliżenia niemiecko-sowieckiego w okresie rmiędzywojennym," p. 118.

1815 A. Prazmowska, "War Over Danzig? The Dilemma of Anglo-Polish Relations," p. 82.

1816 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23016, C.5047/54/18.

1817 Biblioteka Polska (Paris), Akcesja, 4610.

reduced many times. Beck, sensitive to issues tied to Poland's sovereignty, bristled at Britain's initial demand that Poland first devalue its currency.

It would not be historically accurate to ignore the fact that the Foreign Ministry in Warsaw received commentary and reports questioning the generally accepted thesis that the British would fulfil their military obligations. The Polish Ambassador to the United States, Jerzy Potocki, wrote to Beck at the beginning of June that officials in Washington were convinced that England would fulfil its guarantees in some form, but it was not known exactly how they would be fulfilled because it was difficult to suppose that Britain (alongside France) would want to attack the Siegfried Line. Therefore, the dominant opinion was that Great Britain would first blockade the German ports as part of a strategic war of attrition.¹⁸¹⁸

From the highly optimistic conversations with General Ironside, there came a slightly worrying thought. The British commander informed the Poles that after leaving Warsaw, he was planning a last-resort mission to Berlin, which was supposed to represent a final warning to Hitler so that the führer would have no doubt that, were Germany to start a war, Great Britain would fulfil its obligations towards Poland. General Carton de Wiart informed Szembek about this fact on 18 July. Chamberlain was determined that time for "joking" was over. Therefore, Ironside "will discuss the entire situation with our military authorities and establish a plan of action". When the plan was ready, he would send a personal message to Hitler, indicating that Great Britain would irrevocably join the war on the Polish side.¹⁸¹⁹ These statements seemed to prove that General Ironside's mission was, as conceived by the British, another manifestation of their "deterrence policy".

In this light, it was wrong for the Poles to accept the notion that the British "understood the essence of the situation". In London, the thought kept returning that some kind of new Polish-German negotiations should start. On 3 August, Ambassador Kennard wrote to Orme Sargent at the Foreign Office: "People here are calm but apprehensive as to how the situation may develop. Beck will have to make up his mind at some point as to where he is going to make a definite stand regarding Danzig".¹⁸²⁰ The British and French governments clearly tried to persuade the Poles to accept in principle concessions regarding the Danzig matter, an idea raised in the exchange of correspondence between Daladier and Hitler on 17–20 August.¹⁸²¹ The essence of British political plans at the time was not based on a decision to deal with the Germans militarily, but rather on the tactic of deterrence, understood in terms of a last resort. These calculations failed, but as the Dirksen-Halifax conversation of 9 August indicates, the latter gave assurances that neither Beck nor Śmigły-Rydz wanted a confrontation with Germany, and that

1818 Raport polityczny z 2 VI 1939 r., PDD/1939 (styczeń–sierpień), p. 541.

1819 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 672.

1820 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23144, C.10891/842/55.

1821 AAN, MSZ, Gabinet Ministra, 108A, Łubieński's conversation the British Embassy counsellor Robin Hankey on 13 August 1939.

Great Britain was doing everything possible “to encourage the Poles towards moderation [*um die Polen zur Mässigung zu veranlassen*]”.¹⁸²²

In retrospect, the political background of Ironside’s mission becomes increasingly clear. Unfortunately, its goal was not to reach an agreement on the staff level over cooperation in military matters. The goal was actually quite different—it was about reassuring the Poles that there was no reason to be concerned or to take precipitous action, because Great Britain would fulfil its obligations. The astounding report submitted by Clifford Norton, the British chargé d’affaires, to Alexander Cadogan on 10 July indicates that the political leadership in London was concerned that Poland would take preventive military action against Danzig, which was “within the reach of Polish artillery on Hel”. The army could do it, Norton claimed, contrary to what Beck was maintaining.¹⁸²³ In this context, it is not difficult to interpret the real reasons behind Ironside’s visit, which were to achieve a specific political goal through diplomacy.¹⁸²⁴

Given our current knowledge about the Ironside mission to Poland in July 1939, we can draw several key conclusions: (1) its ultimate purpose was deterrence—it was intended as a kind of demonstration, highlighting the British government’s determination to stand by Poland if attacked; (2) it was supposed to strengthen morally the Polish military leadership in its decision to defy aggression and take defensive action; (3) it was intended as an informational mission designed to gain knowledge regarding the state of Polish war preparations; and (4) it served to draw the attention of the Polish supreme command to avoid at all costs any move that would give Germany a pretext for military action.¹⁸²⁵

Ironside’s journey to Warsaw also gave British officials some insight into the state of Polish military preparations, and the conclusions drawn were not very optimistic for Poland. On 28 July, the British general prepared a final report summarising the results of his trip, intended for the British General Staff, whose content was then communicated to the French General Staff.¹⁸²⁶ This document leaves no doubt as to the general’s pessimistic assessment of the state of the Polish army. Ironside even stated that “the eastern front does not actually exist”, and that Poland would be defeated quickly.¹⁸²⁷ On 16 August, the French gave Colonel Gustaw Łowczowski,

1822 Bundesarchiv Berlin (Lichterfelde), Nachlass Dirksen, N.2049/58.

1823 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23023, C.10102/54/18.

1824 Anna M. Cienciała emphasised this clearly in “O polityce angielskiej,” *Bellona* (1959), No. 3: p. 298.

1825 Before Ironside left Poland, Chamberlain told him about the British plan to achieve a Polish-German settlement on Danzig, which assumed the Free City’s return to the Reich. See A. M. Cienciała, “Polska w polityce brytyjskiej i francuskiej w 1939 roku,” p. 167.

1826 Andrzej Suchcitz analysed this document carefully in “Wrażenia generała Ironside’a z wizyt w Polsce,” pp. 55–63. See also T. Piszczkowski, *Anglia a Polska 1914–1939*, p. 449.

1827 See Brian Bond, “Ironside,” in *Generałowie Churchilla*, ed. J. Keegan, trans. J. Kozłowski (Poznan 1999), p. 27.

appointed on the order of the Chief of the General Staff as a liaison officer at the Deuxième Bureau headquarters in Paris, access to Ironside's assessment of the Polish army, which according to Łowczowski was the following: "The soldier is well-trained. Material equipment is poor. Senior commanders underestimate the quality of the German army and equipment".¹⁸²⁸

Considering these matters from the historian's point of view, it can be concluded that in terms of how Poles and Britons viewed each other in the summer of 1939, serious errors occurred on both sides. Polish policymakers did not recognise that their newly acquired ally would not be able to engage in warfare and successfully conduct offensive operations immediately after war began. And the British, having decided on a deterrence strategy, did not recognise that the Polish government and nation would accept no forced territorial concessions, and that therefore any consideration of such concessions was pointless.

British officials were ambivalent regarding the Polish determination to make no concessions that would compromise Poland's independence. On the one hand, they clearly viewed it as an obstacle on the path to a "new Munich", in which Hitler was not at all interested, but which in London would certainly be considered a better solution than a European war under the sign of the silent German-Soviet alliance. On the other hand, they viewed Polish determination in light of the experience of the previous year, i.e. the defeat of Czechoslovakia in the wake of Beneš' decision to fulfil Hitler's demands, backed by the Western powers, over the Sudetenland.

Most importantly, it was impossible for the British concept of deterrence, based on threatening Germany with a second front in Eastern Europe, to be effective.

Given the possibility of a tactical agreement with the Soviets, Hitler had no fear that a conflict with Poland would embroil him in a protracted war on two fronts, although he gave this eventuality at least theoretical consideration. Moreover, Germany's political leadership and its military command assumed, long before the Berlin-Moscow rapprochement had entered its decisive phase, that Great Britain would not stand up against the Germans after their attack on Poland. In June 1939, during a lecture for senior officers as part of the Wehrmacht Akademie, General Franz Halder put it unequivocally:

I am not speaking here about the English who "guaranteed" Poland. But there is probably no one here who thinks that England will fight in any way on the eastern front. When war comes, the English guarantee will be of little help to Poland and above all will not prevent us from crushing it [Poland]. England, if it has an impact at all, will be occupied in the West, and especially in the Mediterranean.¹⁸²⁹

1828 G. Łowczowski, "Przymierze wojskowe polsko-francuski," p. 50.

1829 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), August Zaleski Collection, Box 1. This document was obtained by the Polish mission to the League of Nations in Geneva in the summer of 1939, but it was sent to Foreign Ministry headquarters (in France) only in May 1940.

In a note to his superiors at the Auswärtiges Amt dated 18 August, Ambassador Dirksen wrote about the weakness of “decadent England”.¹⁸³⁰ On 10 August, Ambassador Lipski noted that those in Germany’s leadership circles were convinced of the West’s weakness, and this conviction signified the inevitable approach of war.¹⁸³¹

As we know, in a speech on 23 May to his military command, Hitler raised the possibility of a war on two fronts. He stated that if Allied armies struck from the west, the Wehrmacht’s task would be to wage war there and deal with Poland at the same time.¹⁸³² In a second and secret speech to senior Wehrmacht officers on 22 August, the führer maintained this argument no longer. He shared the conviction that in the defence of Poland, the Allies would do nothing more than set up a blockade of Germany.¹⁸³³ He said: “It may not end with a blockade, but with a break in diplomatic relations”,¹⁸³⁴ adding that he had seen “in Munich these wretched vermin, Chamberlain and Daladier. They will certainly not have the courage to attack and will go no further than a blockade against which we have our self-sufficiency and Russian resources”.¹⁸³⁵ In a conversation with Foreign Minister Ciano on 12–13 August in Salzburg, Hitler stated that the Western powers would not even be able to provide Poland with military equipment.¹⁸³⁶

All of these statements show clearly that the British concept of the alliance with Poland—understood in London above all (if not exclusively) as a deterrent to discourage Germany from starting a new war—suffered a complete failure even before the first shots of the Second World War had been fired.

Against the backdrop of these illusions, Józef Beck’s realism seems unmistakable. As the Polish foreign minister told envoy Gustaw Potworowski on 13 July: “War is not inevitable, but we must reckon with it as a reality—and it would be reprehensible not to prepare for an eventuality in which we would be forced to take part”.¹⁸³⁷

Allied Strategy and Poland

So much has been written about the strategy of the Western powers—Poland’s allies in 1939—that a return to this topic might involve a repetition of matters already explained and examined, or a slightly different emphasis in the interpretation of old facts. Nonetheless, we cannot avoid looking at this topic again, to at

1830 Bundesarchiv Berlin (Lichterfelde), Nachlass Dirksen, N.2049/58.

1831 IPMS, MSZ, Ambasada RP w Berlinie, p. 930.

1832 T. Cyprian, J. Sawicki, *Nie oszczędzać Polski!*, p. 37.

1833 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

1834 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

1835 T. Cyprian, J. Sawicki, *Agresja na Polskę w świetle dokumentów*, Vol. 2, p. 142.

1836 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

1837 Hoover Institution (Palo Alto, CA), Gustaw Potworowski Collection, Box 1.

least ask certain questions once more, and to confront the various opinions and assessments that have been at work in historiography.

Is it possible to speak of a specific Allied strategy in the realities of 1939? Or was it perhaps rather a matter of unplanned improvisation subordinated to the inept implementation of the deterrence policy, combined with a false belief that war would not break out? To dispel doubts, we would have to give broader consideration to these questions than space allows in this chapter. However, they cannot be left unasked if we want to understand what position Poland occupied in Allied political plans of 1939.

In 1914, everyone expected a short war to bring decisive results in weeks or months, much like the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. On the eve of the Second World War, the situation was completely different; as American historian John Lukacs correctly pointed out, almost no one except Hitler assumed that the war would be short.¹⁸³⁸

Undoubtedly, both French and British military leaders accepted the idea that Germany could not be beaten in a short military campaign. They made no attempt to establish a war doctrine based on the Polish concept that an offensive on the western front was likely to succeed if it occurred while the main Wehrmacht forces were engaged on the eastern front, against Poland. It is not my task, as a historian of diplomacy, to consider whether the Polish concept was realistic, although the fact is that there is a long and unfinished discussion in historiography on this subject, one which began in the 1950s. It was at that time that Colonel Adolphe Goutard's widely-read work *1940. La guerre des occasions perdues* was published in which the author articulated an extremely critical judgment against the French military doctrine of 1939 and 1940 and against General Gamelin's overall command and approach to the war.¹⁸³⁹ This doctrine was to be the main source for the 1940 defeat, and at the heart of the French catastrophe was the passivity that marked the month of September 1939. Was 1939 one of "lost opportunities", as Colonel Goutard argued?

It will be no great discovery if I remind the reader that France's interwar military strategy was based on defensive assumptions, although French leaders repeatedly considered various offensive actions, including the occupation of Belgium and Luxembourg to improve France's strategic position and to prevent Germany from encircling France from the north. Such ideas were contained in an offensive plan put forward by Marshal Foch, which had been updated many times,¹⁸⁴⁰ for the last time in General Gamelin's directive of 8 June 1938, when it was called "the only offensive action that can be taken". This plan also assumed an offensive operation

1838 J. Lukacs, *The Coming of the Second World War*, p. 174.

1839 A. Goutard, *1940. Wojna straconych okazji*, trans. J. Gerhard (Warsaw 1959), p. 89 (French edition: *1940. La guerre des occasions perdues* [Paris 1956]).

1840 A. Beaufre, *Le drame de 1940* (Paris 1940).

in the area between the Moselle and Rhine, with a view to the possible occupation of Mainz.¹⁸⁴¹

The reduction of compulsory military service to one year, implemented in 1928, further weakened the French armed forces. A year later, with considerable effort, the construction of the Maginot Line began, a system of fortifications on the Franco-German border that did not extend to the French-Belgian border, which in turn meant that the French could not fully protect their country against aggression from this direction. The construction of the Maginot Line was not treated as a defensive system from which offensive operations could be launched on a serious scale, but rather as a purely defensive and static embankment. The concept behind this construction was in line with the basic political thesis that the French Republic's security was based on the durability of the Locarno system (1925–1936), in whose effectiveness the French undoubtedly believed.¹⁸⁴² It is not an easy thing to rapidly change an entrenched military doctrine. General Gamelin and the French supreme command inherited a certain system of thinking; they did not create one of their own.

A well-set item of dogma in French military strategy was the assumption that it was necessary to have Great Britain as an ally in any future defensive war. French foreign policy leaders wanted to ensure that the British Empire would stand by France when needed. This strategic assumption was fundamentally rational and could not be challenged by any alternative future scenario. However, it transpired to be extremely expensive. After the French failure in 1923, when their operation to occupy the Ruhr faced London's opposition and ended in defeat, France could carry out no military action without the British government's support. Although everything in 1936 seemed to indicate the need to exert force to defend the demilitarised Rhineland zone, the French balked in part because they lacked British permission.

After the spectacular and severe defeat it suffering during the remilitarisation of the Rhineland on 7 March 1936, Paris found itself completely subordinated to British political strategy. The entire sense of French foreign policy now centred on the argument that France could effectively defend itself only with British assistance.¹⁸⁴³ However, London was already setting its sights on a policy of appeasement, and the French response was passive accommodation.

In the 1930s, it was not only Polish Foreign Minister Beck who spoke about the "moral crisis" in the French Republic, but also the French themselves, e.g. the director of the Political Department at Quai d'Orsay, René Massigli.¹⁸⁴⁴ France was

1841 Quote according to L. Moczulski, *Wojna polska*, p. 476.

1842 There were exceptions to this rule in French political thought: Georges Clemenceau, André Tardieu, ambassador de Saint-Aulaire, and political writer André Fabre-Luce.

1843 Of course, earlier (before 7 March 1936) French policy was based on the need to obtain British support at all costs, so that in the face of a new war, France would not be alone.

1844 G.-H. Soutou, "La perception de la puissance française par René Massigli," pp. 11–22.

the only European country in this period that recorded a decrease in its birth rate, which is worth emphasising.¹⁸⁴⁵ It is a common view in historical literature that the Popular Front's social reforms prevented revolutionary shocks, but that they also weakened the competitiveness of the French economy, although it must be admitted that the French extended extensive credit totalling 14 billion Francs for rearmament, and they granted a large armament loan to Poland.¹⁸⁴⁶ In 1939, the French armed forces had a negligible number of modern combat aircraft, and the process of replacing 75 mm cannon with 105 mm howitzers had not yet been completed. We cannot ignore such a significant fact as the weakness of the French Air Force, of which its commander General Joseph Vuillemin was aware, writing in January 1938 that the French Air Force could be "wiped out" in two weeks.¹⁸⁴⁷ It is not my intention here to analyse French war preparations, but these basic facts, well known to researchers of international relations, are worth recalling.¹⁸⁴⁸

As long as the Franco-Belgian Military Accord, concluded on 7 September 1920, remained in force, it could at least be assumed that in the face of a perceptible threat, Belgium would invite French armed forces onto its territory. However, in May 1936 the Belgian government cancelled the alliance and in October that year proclaimed neutrality, which greatly complicated the French General Staff's operational planning and to some extent questioned the very significance of the Maginot Line.¹⁸⁴⁹

It is undoubtedly true that by building the Maginot Line, the French intended to conduct a defensive war, but this fortification complex also created opportunities for offensive action, had the political will existed. Not without reason, the long-time Polish military attaché in Paris, Colonel Gustaw Łowczowski, thought that "the Maginot Line could facilitate offensive operations, allowing France to save the forces needed to man passive sections of the front".¹⁸⁵⁰ We do not need to be specialists in military matters to see that the Maginot Line could have not only served its purely defensive strategic functions, as intended French Supreme

1845 K. Mazurowa, *Europejska polityka Francji*, p. 359.

1846 *Ibid.*, p. 374. A fundamental monograph on these matters is the study by Nicole Jordan, *The Popular Front and Central Europe*.

1847 R. J. Young, "The Strategic Dream: French Air Doctrine in the Inter-War Period, 1918–1939," *Journal of Contemporary History* (1974), No. 4: p. 72.

1848 For more, see K. Mazurowa, *Europejska polityka Francji*, pp. 349–381; L. Moczulski, *Wojna polska*, pp. 472–476; and M. Zgórnjak, *Europa w przededniu wojny*, 472 ff. In Western literature, see above all R. J. Young, *In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning 1933–1940* (Cambridge, MA 1978). See also the new study by M. S. Alexander, *The Republic in Danger*, *passim*.

1849 For more on sources in this context, see *Documents diplomatiques belges 1920–1940. La politique de sécurité extérieure*, eds. Ch. de Visscher, F. Vanlangenhove (Bruxelles 1964), Vol. 4.

1850 Letter from General Gustaw Łowczowski to Jerzy Giedroyc in May 1966, *Kultura* (Paris) (1966), No. 10: p. 236.

Command, but it could also have become a system protecting the concentration of the French army for offensive operations on a large scale. However, such an eventuality would have required more imagination on the part of the French supreme command than it had at its disposal, along with a fundamentally different doctrine of warfare. The 1936 decision to organise two large tactical Panzer units did not change this state of affairs.¹⁸⁵¹

The only positive consequence of the disastrous humiliation that France experienced in March 1936 was the initiation of French-British staff talks, which had been discontinued after the end of World War I and the breakup of the Entente. On 15–16 April 1936, the first such consultations took place in London. At that time, the idea was discussed for the first time to send a British expeditionary corps to France if such a move would be necessary to conduct a defensive war against Germany. No doubt, these staff talks came too late. Although the fact that they were successful must be considered a development of great importance, this success did not compensate for the indisputable reality that Germany enjoyed a distinct military advantage in Europe.

In April 1938; that is, immediately after the Anschluss with Austria, French-British staff talks resumed.¹⁸⁵² However, no written arrangements were made, especially regarding the size of the British expeditionary corps that would be directed to the continent in the event of war. The results of the first joint staff planning initiatives were extremely limited. In March 1938, Prime Minister Chamberlain had declared that Great Britain would stand by France only within the framework of the Locarno system and within the obligations stemming from the Rhineland Pact, even if this treaty was no longer in force after it had been unilaterally broken by Germany.¹⁸⁵³

On 12 October 1938, General Gamelin submitted a program memorandum to the Supreme Council of National Defence, the key concept of which was the “war of long duration” (*la guerre de longue durée*). The French armed forces were to prepare for a war understood in this way. The thought of an offensive on the western front, designed to take advantage of the possible fact that German forces would be tied down on the eastern front, appeared nowhere in this document. As British historian Anthony Adamthwaite rightly noted (in his monograph *France and the Coming of the Second World War, 1936–1939*), unlike in 1914, the generals of the era of appeasement did not want war; indeed, they wanted to avoid war at all costs.¹⁸⁵⁴ In General Gamelin’s defence, it can only be said that the two armoured-motor divisions in the French Army’s possession, created in 1936, did not constitute a strike force of sufficient strength for use in a large-scale offensive.

1851 K. Mazurowa, *Europejska polityka Francji*, p. 374.

1852 For more, see M. Zgórniak, “Brytyjsko-francuskie kontakty sztabowe,” pp. 223–238.

1853 M. J. Zacharias, “Józef Beck i ‘polityka równowagi,’” p. 25.

1854 A. P. Adamthwaite, *The Making of the Second World War*, p. 68.

As the Canadian historian Talbot Imlay convincingly reconstructed in his book *Facing the Second World War. Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France 1938–1940*, by the end of 1938 no strategic concept had been created that assumed a war on two fronts, and that gave Central and Eastern European countries an important role in tying down significant German forces so that the French army could take advantage of this situation and open an offensive in the West.¹⁸⁵⁵ Never in their military calculations did British and French staff officials consider military operations in the Baltic region or in Central and Eastern Europe.¹⁸⁵⁶ It was not until March 1939 that they drew conclusions from their experience with abandoning Czechoslovakia as an ally. On 15 March, General Gamelin told the famous French journalist André Géraud (“Pertinax”) that the Czechoslovak army, had its leaders decided to fight, would have been able to tie down 50 German divisions, which would have given the Western powers considerable advantages in a possible European war.¹⁸⁵⁷ Thus, Western leaders were becoming increasingly aware that appeasement was leading to defeat, and that an eastern front was necessary in a war against Germany. The problem was that this correct understanding of strategic realities came too late.

After the ground-breaking events of March 1939, French-British staff talks continued, including during French President Albert Lebrun’s stay in London.¹⁸⁵⁸

The defensive strategy that prevailed in the French and British military leadership can be summarised in three points: (1) it was assumed that the western front against Germany would be defensive in nature until, as Marian Zgórnjak put it, “their own forces were further developed”; (2) it was considered a strategic necessity to maintain communication routes in the Mediterranean and Red Seas to secure supplies and to apply an effective economic blockade of Germany; and (3) in the second phase of the war, if circumstances allowed, Western leaders intended to go on the offensive, but first against the Italians to eliminate them as an ally of the Third Reich.¹⁸⁵⁹ A large-scale offensive against Germany would come with time, probably in the last and decisive phase of the war, planned for a minimum of three years.

Polish political and military authorities were not informed of all this. The Polish historian, when confronted by claims made by historians and commentators that “Western betrayal” is a Polish myth, must take note of the fact that the real

1855 T. C. Imlay, *Facing the Second World War. Strategy, Politics, and Economics in Britain and France 1938–1940* (Oxford 2003), pp. 355–356.

1856 A. Palmer, *Północne sąsiedztwo*, p. 353.

1857 J. Starzewski, *Rok 1939 (do wybuchu wojny)* (London 1954), p. 25.

1858 For more, see N. H. Gibbs, “Rearmament Policy,” in *History of the Second World War. United Kingdom Military Series*, ed. J. R. M. Butler (London 1976), Vol. 1, pp. 653–684.

1859 M. Zgórnjak, “Sojusz polsko-francusko-brytyjski i problemy jego realizacji,” p. 367.

intentions behind Allied military operations were deliberately hidden from the Polish government.

On 4–5 May 1939, at a joint conference in London, French and British army staff members made the decision not to open a western front immediately after a possible German attack on Poland, but to continue preparations for hostilities, remaining on the defensive.¹⁸⁶⁰ “[...] Our initial effort and our strategic action will be defensive in nature, and the fate of Poland would be determined by the final result of the war”; such is how French and British leaders conceived their main strategy for the first stage of the European war.¹⁸⁶¹ So when General Kasprzycki arrived in Paris, it had already been decided that Poland, having been invaded, would not receive active assistance in the West, though the decision not to open a western front did not prejudice the possibility that the Allies would take other actions, including air operations against Germany. The decision was that the British Royal Navy would not intervene in the Baltic. The British and French considered sending 60 Amiot bombers to Poland and possibly bombing Germany. From that moment on, it was already decided that if war could not be avoided, the two allied powers would not fulfil their military guarantee obligations towards Poland.

The Committee of Imperial Defence, meeting in London on 5 May, adopted a resolution, contained in a memorandum that day, declaring the West’s “inability” to take military action on the western front to fulfil its guarantee obligations towards Poland.¹⁸⁶² Thus, when Beck delivered his famous speech in the Sejm on 5 May, allied staffs had already made irreversible decisions. The British and French would leave Poland to its own devices in the first phase of war, promising at the same time to take into account Poland’s interests in the end, when the European war was over.

During inter-Allied staff conferences on 6–9 June in London and 21 July 1939 in Paris, the only matters discussed involved material aid for Poland.¹⁸⁶³ No consideration was given to the cooperation of the allied armies: French, British and Polish. In July, during a conversation with Lord Gort, General Gamelin stated that since

1860 J. Kimche, *The Unfought Battle* (London 1968), 44 ff (Polish edition: *Bitwa, której nie było*, trans. I. Bukowski [Warsaw 1970]). See also *La stratégie secrète de la drôle de guerre. Le Conseil Suprême Interallié, septembre 1939 – avril 1940*, ed. F. Bédarida (Paris 1979), p. 79; Anita Prazmowska, *Britain, Poland and the Eastern Front*, pp. 83–86; see also eadem, *Britain and Poland 1939–1943. The Betrayed Ally* (Cambridge 1995), p. 33; T. Nowacki, “O Polsce, Francji i wojnie,” *Zeszyty Historyczne* (Paris) (1969), No. 16: pp. 191–208.

1861 Quote from J. R. M. Butler, *Grand Strategy. September 1939–June 1941* (London 1957), p. 10. In Polish historiography, Mieczysław Nurek, *Polityka Wielkiej Brytanii w rejonie Morza Bałtyckiego*, p. 210.

1862 National Archives (London), Cabinet Papers, Cab. 53/49, Protocol of the meeting of 5 May 1939. See also A. Prazmowska, “War over Danzig? The Dilemma of Anglo-Polish Relations”, p. 182.

1863 M. Zgórnjak, “Sojusz polsko-francusko-brytyjski i problemy jego realizacji”, p. 371.

war could not be avoided, it would be best if it started from the east and expand gradually. This would certainly give the French army time to better prepare for war.¹⁸⁶⁴

It is reasonable to suppose that British and French pessimism about the Polish army's capabilities had a significant impact on the assumptions underpinning Western strategies. In this context, it is difficult not to mention that in a report in early April 1939, the British military attaché in Warsaw, Colonel Edward Roland Sword, expressed the view that during war, Poland would be cut off from the outside world, while the Polish army would probably be forced to withdraw behind the Vistula. It would have to abandon the corridor as soon as possible to avoid being encircled and cut off. Sword wrote that the Polish military had 54 divisions and 600 aircraft, but three-quarters of them were no match for Germany's modern aircraft.¹⁸⁶⁵

Another thoughtful assessment came from the former French military attaché in Warsaw, General Henri Niessel, in an article published in *Le Capitale* on 12 May 1939.¹⁸⁶⁶ "Poland's military strength is considerable, but in order for it to resist aggression, it is necessary in particular to ensure supplies from Russia [*La puissance militaire de la Pologne est considérable mais pour pouvoir résister à une agression, elle a besoin notamment d'être assurée de son ravitaillement par la Russie*]." Poland, as throughout all of its history, faced a double threat: from the east and the west, from Germany and Russia. Niessel wrote: "The country's security, in spite of the support promised to it by England and France, depends above all on its military strength. Let us see what this is made of [*La sécurité de ce pays, malgré l'appui qui lui est promis par l'Angleterre et la France, dépend donc avant tout de sa force militaire. Voyons en quoi consiste celle-ci*]." He gave a positive assessment of the Polish Supreme Command, the General Staff, and most of the officer staff. However, he pointed out that Poland's armaments industry had been developing only since 1936. Since Poland wanted no assistance from the Red Army, which was but a tool for world revolution, and it rejected permission for the Soviets to enter Poland, what remained was only the possibility of air support. Niessel concluded that Poland would resist Germany effectively only if Russia remained neutral in the east. General Maxime Weygand assessed the issue a little more realistically: he said that Poland would receive no assistance from Russia, but that the alliance with France should be maintained at all costs, because in this way Germany's efforts to win over the Soviets would be neutralised.¹⁸⁶⁷

1864 M. S. Alexander, *The Republic in Danger*, p. 294. In September 1939, Lord Gort was named commander of the British Expeditionary Force.

1865 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23144, C.4898/1110/55, Ambassador Kennard's report on Poland's military problems dated 5 April 1939.

1866 Archives Nationales (Paris), 7N 3027, Papiers de Deuxième Bureau.

1867 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 22969, C.5261/15/18, note from the British embassy in Paris dated 11 April 1939.

Another factor played a decisive role in the mentality in Allied decision-making circles. The ominous possibility of a Berlin-Moscow alliance doubtlessly became increasingly real as events developed in 1939, which in London and Paris could not help but mean that Poland's chances of effectively resisting in the long-run would be reduced to a minimum. The Hitler-Stalin Pact put Poland in a truly hopeless strategic position, which all political leaders and Allied staff members could not fail to realise, regardless of whether or not they guessed the existence of the secret protocol of 23 August. Thus, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact's influence on Western strategy was significant, and probably greater than the Poles expected. This pact was a convenient excuse and justification to abandon the idea of any military engagement in the West and, under the doctrine of *rebus sic stantibus*, not to fulfil obligations.

It is a fact that the French Supreme Command calculated that, once invaded, Poland would be able to defend itself for at least three months. Privately, General Gamelin estimated that it could hold out for up to six months. The French staff believed in the strength of the Polish army. William Strang mentioned that in 1939, British and French staff members underestimated the strength of Russia and overestimated Poland's military capabilities.¹⁸⁶⁸ Admittedly, in this respect General Ironside's predictions transpired to be more realistic; he saw no way for the Polish army to put up an effective defence without Soviet support.

Although the French mobilisation plan, implemented in five stages ending in general mobilisation, assumed that as many as 4,660,000 soldiers would be called up by the end of September 1939, the question of whether it would be possible for the French to break through the Siegfried Line has long been the subject of lively discussion among historians, one which is impossible to summarise in the form of clear conclusions. Adolphe Goutard and Jon Kimche saw such a possibility, but Marian Zgórniak calculated that only 29 divisions of French forces were combat ready; fortress troops intended for defensive battles on the Maginot Line were unable to carry out offensive operations. The French lacked heavy artillery, and it was only in November 1939 that plans developed to form two armoured divisions. According to the country's outdated war doctrine, modern tanks at France's disposal, numbering over 2,200, were "dispersed between individual corps and armies", while the German army had independent armoured groups to break through front lines. Similarly, German war doctrine assumed the use of combat aircraft for intense bombardment of enemy positions, while French aircraft were dispersed among individual divisions. The Germans had about 1,000,000 soldiers on the western front and 1,332 aircraft. According to the principle that in order to ensure success, an attacking force should have a three-to-one advantage, French forces would not be able to break through German fortifications.

Zgórniak wrote: "Taking everything into consideration—French and German war capabilities, the French supreme command's mobilisation plans, its operational

1868 R. Manne, "The British Decision for an Alliance with Russia", p. 6.

plans, and (we must remember) France's defensive military doctrine—I believe that in practice there was no chance for the West to come to Poland's assistance [after war broke out] in any great way. [...] We might add that Great Britain had only six divisions of regular troops and 13 divisions and two brigades of territorial troops at that time, and the first four British divisions were not transported to France until October 1939. At the beginning of September, the West was simply weak, and its defensive doctrine was the external manifestation of this weakness. Germany surpassed all European countries in armaments and war preparations."¹⁸⁶⁹

It is worth recalling another statement by a man on whose thinking many depended: General Gamelin. At a meeting of the Supreme Council of National Defence on 13 March 1939, he explicitly supported the argument that the shortage of forces dictated that the French military refrain from striking at Germany. "Modern war requires such power and such money that small nations can play no great role, only an auxiliary role. They are not of great military significance. Therefore, these forces in the east will be able to do nothing more than keep the opponent's forces in front of them."¹⁸⁷⁰

As that was the reality, why did the allies make promises that they would not keep in September 1939? This question must remain rhetorical.

September—Abandoned by an Ally: Myth or Reality?

In an encrypted telegram to diplomatic missions on 1 September at 14.20, Beck announced that Germany had attacked Poland without warning, stating that "today at dawn, Germany invaded Poland through a sneak attack. We will fight until the end. Please inform the government."¹⁸⁷¹ In a telegram to the ambassadors in the capitals of the allied powers, also on 1 September, the foreign minister expressed the belief that "in accordance with existing treaties, [Poland] will receive immediate assistance from the Allies in this battle."¹⁸⁷²

As historians have already explained, between 1 and 3 September another diplomatic action took place, namely the Italian initiative to convene a conference to resolve the Polish-German conflict along political lines. Mussolini and Ciano's initiative led to the concept of a "second Munich" and was received with keen

1869 M. Zgórnjak, "Zdradzili, nie zdradzili?" *passim*.

1870 Speech text in *Les Événements survenus en France de 1933 à 1945. Rapport* (Paris 1947), Vol. 2, p. 255. See also J. Ciałowicz, *Polsko-francuski sojusz wojskowy*, p. 396.

1871 IPMS, Poselstwo RP w Madrycie, A.45.53/8, copy of the encrypted telegram from the foreign minister on 1 September 1939. In another version, the same message was contained in Beck's encrypted telegram to the ambassadors in London and Paris on that same day, see PDD/1939 (wrzesień–grudzień), p. 3.

1872 S. Stanisławska, *Sprawa polska w czasie drugiej wojny światowej na arenie międzynarodowej. Zbiór dokumentów*, PISM, ed. S. Stanisławska (Warsaw 1965), p. 53.

interest in Paris, primarily by Minister Bonnet. France's military inaction was associated with these "last resort" hopes. Bonnet, as the Polish chargé d'affaires in Paris Frankowski would recall, "wanted to bring about an end to hostilities, obtain concessions from Poland for Germany, and then deal with the larger problem in international talks".¹⁸⁷³

Faced with inaction on the western front, Beck had more reservations and concerns about France's conduct than he did about Great Britain's. On 2 September, he wrote to the ambassadors in Paris and London: "I take note of England's correct position and detect intrigue between Italy and [Foreign Minister] Bonnet, as a result of which we are battling against the devastating advantage of the German air force and the majority of the forces of the German land army. I told the French ambassador today that the [Polish] army and society are already talking about France's betrayal."¹⁸⁷⁴ In the end, the campaign to convene an international conference failed, for two reasons: Germany was not interested in any "second Munich", and the British government categorically demanded the withdrawal of German troops from Poland.

On 2 September, the governments in London and Paris sent an ultimatum to Germany demanding the withdrawal of the German army from Poland. The ultimatum was rejected. On 3 September, both powers allied with Poland declared war, the French government three hours after the British, which left a bad impression among Poles.¹⁸⁷⁵ Deputy Minister Szembek wrote on 3 September: "There is a general belief that a page has been turned and that the English will now start bombing German cities." Beck reportedly said: "[...] how good it is that after returning [from London] one did not engage in grubby talks with Germany: perhaps we could have postponed the outbreak of war, but we would have it in the spring and we would be alone."¹⁸⁷⁶

In the wake of France's declaration of war on Germany, Minister Beck recommended to the ambassador in Paris, Łukasiewicz, on 3 September: "Please ask Bonnet to deliver our thanks to the government for speeding up the decision, and add that based on Hitler's statement, the main pressure will continue on Poland, so the speed with which England and France make further military decisions is of paramount importance."¹⁸⁷⁷ The Allied powers had fulfilled their political

1873 IPMS, MSZ, A.11/144E, nr spr. 270, Feliks Frankowski's testimony before the Winiarski Commission on 31 March 1941.

1874 W. Pobóg-Malinowski, *Najnowsza historia polityczna Polski*, Vol. 3: 1939–1945 (Gdansk 1990), p. 39.

1875 Bonnet thus left himself one last chance to possibly take advantage of the Italian mediation initiative.

1876 J. Szembek, *Diariusz, wrzesień–grudzień 1939*, p. 25. In the circle of senior officials at the Foreign Ministry, there was even talk of the need for the immediate "seizure of Königsberg" in order to gain the advantage of possessing East Prussia in the event of peace negotiations.

1877 AAN, Hoover Institute, MSZ, I/243(mf).

commitment to recognise *casus foederis* and to declare war. It can be argued that although France had land forces that could have been used to strike on the western front, Polish leaders expected that the decision for the Allies to engage in military operations could only be made in London, and France must follow Great Britain. This belief was confirmed by the events of the first three days of September.

While the Polish army fought alone against overwhelming enemy forces in the first three days of war, Poland's key diplomatic goal was to get its allies to fulfil their promises. On 8 September, Ambassador Raczyński wrote to Beck: "The English decision to wage war with all energy until the final victory is an undeniable fact".¹⁸⁷⁸ This conclusion was not unfounded, but allied military inactivity was a reality.

The lack of any Allied air force activity appeared to be particularly surprising. Beck expressed his surprise in an encrypted telegram to Ambassador Raczyński on 11 September:

For two days, the Germans have methodically bombed defenceless cities in the deep rear of the fighting armies. The method by which they have striven to paralyse the country's internal life is beyond doubt. Among others, Lublin, Janów, Zamość, Chełm, Kowel, and Lutsk were bombed, bombs dropped in the centre of the city from a low altitude. I informed the ambassadors here, I issued an official protest to the Dutch government, confirming a clear breach of German statements. Please declare that the anger of the civilian population, which has suffered enormous losses in terms of wounded and killed, publicly accuses England and France of failing to meet their obligations, reasoning correctly that the more serious involvement of Allied air forces, even if only on military facilities and industry, would compel Germany to withdraw the majority of its air force from Poland. The moral condition of our troops is good, the fighting is fierce, despite the numerical superiority of the enemy. All those familiar with the matter claim that only the inaction of allied air forces, along with the slowness of French land action, creates a dangerous situation for us resulting from the loss of too much territory and the destruction of our war industry.¹⁸⁷⁹

Beck instructed the ambassador to intensify his activities "towards members of the opposition and the press". He believed that appealing to British public opinion could change something. Ambassador Łukasiewicz received the same orders. On that same day (11 September), the foreign minister reported the following in a private letter to Marshal Śmigły-Rydz, who was at the Headquarters of the Supreme Command in Brest: "For my part, I burdened the Allied ambassadors with responsibility for the fact that the Germans felt free to use almost any air power against Poland, which is a decisive moment in our grave situation".¹⁸⁸⁰ The allied response

1878 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.53/26.

1879 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A. 12.53/26. Encrypted telegram from Beck to Ambassador Raczyński on 11 September 1939.

1880 *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926–1939*, p. 411 (annex).

to Poland's insistence that the air war be joined was that such operations would only take place in connection with ground operations.

In those critical days of September 1939, responsibility for Polish diplomatic action in Allied capitals fell largely on the shoulders of the ambassadors in Paris and London, Łukasiewicz and Raczyński. The latter wrote to the Foreign Ministry on 5 September: "For two days, in contact with Łukasiewicz, I have been working continuously on bringing about action in the west. I find the most energetic support from Churchill. This afternoon I will be with Halifax, I will telegraph right away".¹⁸⁸¹ Such formulations, confirming with their conciseness the seriousness of the moment, are common in reports from both ambassadors, who were faced, through the turn of events, with an unusual, indeed impossible challenge. The first days of war were the tensest. Feliks Frankowski recalled: "These three days involved the most difficult diplomatic struggle I have ever experienced. Every hour brought new alarming news from Poland, where the Germans were pushing forwards, and we all fought with the utmost effort to ensure that France would fulfil its obligations".¹⁸⁸² Ambassador Raczyński described *ex post* a sense of helplessness that was "almost unbearable".¹⁸⁸³

Frankowski's recollection indicates that, in the face of the vigorous demands by Polish Ambassador Łukasiewicz, Prime Minister Daladier "stopped receiving him", and switched to communicating only through written correspondence.¹⁸⁸⁴ Actually, it would be more accurate to say that the French prime minister tried to avoid the Polish ambassador.¹⁸⁸⁵ On 13 September, in an extremely dramatic letter to Daladier, Łukasiewicz first of all asked that targets on German territory be bombed, in accordance with the provisions of the interpretation protocol of 19 May 1939, which had entered into force unconditionally on 4 September. "The absence of any action in the air by our Allies against military objectives inside Germany facilitates the Hitler regime's maintenance of the morale among the German population which, according to our information, is already precarious [*L'absence de toute action de l'aviation de nos Alliés contre les objectifs militaires à l'intérieur de l'Allemagne facilite au régime hitlérien le maintien du moral de la population allemande par ailleurs, suivant nos informations, déjà précaire*]." The Ambassador referred to the Franco-Polish interpretation protocol tied to the military convention of 4 September: "The French-Polish military convention contains the assurance that the French army would carry out air force operations as soon

1881 AAN, Hoover Institute, MSZ, I/243 (mf).

1882 IPMS, MSZ, A.11/144 E, nr spr. 270, Feliks Frankowski's testimony before the Winiarski Commission on 31 March 1941.

1883 E. Raczyński, *Od Genewy do Jalty*, 129.

1884 IPMS, MSZ, A.11/144 E, nr spr. 270, Feliks Frankowski's testimony before the Winiarski Commission on 31 March 1941.

1885 As Polish documents indicate, Daladier received Łukasiewicz on September 4, 5 and 11. See PDD/1939 (wrzesień–grudzień), 38 and 60.

as possible [*La convention militaire franco-polonais contient l'assurance qu'il sera procédé à une action d'aviation de l'Armée française aussitôt que possible*].¹⁸⁸⁶

Polish appeals proved unsuccessful.

In his memoirs, General Gamelin defended himself against the “judgment of history”, responding to allegations that the French army had not fulfilled its military commitments towards Poland.¹⁸⁸⁷ He claimed that he had done everything in his power to keep promises made to Poland. As we know, on 7 September the French commander gave the order to initiate limited military operations and enter Reich territory. He later called the actions taken that day *L'Offensive pour la Pologne*—the “offensive for Poland”—which must have been irritating to Polish witnesses of events.¹⁸⁸⁸

Military operations initiated by the order of the French army commander corresponded to recommendations contained in his order of 31 May 1939 regarding the “offensive to relieve Poland”. These actions were to be taken by the forces of the Second Army Group on the front between the Rhine and the Moselle. Further orders related to this action were issued by the French commander on 4 September. Three days later, the French army began a “slow march”, as Marian Zgórniak put it, towards the German border by troops from parts of the 3rd, 4th and 5th armies. The Germans put up weak resistance at the foreground of the Siegfried Line on 9–10 September. As Zgórniak calculated, “a total of 11 infantry divisions, two brigades and several independent tank battalions crossed the German border”.¹⁸⁸⁹ The French did not plan to attack the German fortification system after reaching the Siegfried Line, but rather to regroup and strengthen French units with forces drawn from the Franco-Belgian border if there turned out to be no threat of a German offensive there.

Diplomat Anatol Mühlstein wrote in his diary on 8 September: “Activities on the French front will start tomorrow or the day after. There have been no clashes so far. The Germans did not shoot at French patrols”.¹⁸⁹⁰ Foreign Minister Beck had high hopes for the French army’s actions, which began on 7 September. In the above-mentioned letter to Marshal Śmigły-Rydz on 11 September, he confirmed reports from Paris about fighting on the western front. He wrote: “The French began fighting after crossing the border in front of the Siegfried Line. [...] Germany is putting up strong resistance, engaging in counter-strikes. The arrival of new large

1886 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.49/6/I.

1887 M. Gamelin, *Servir*, Vol. 3, pp. 46–77 (chapter entitled “*L'Offensive pour la Pologne*”).

1888 *Ibid.*, pp. 45–93. The author further defended himself by developing this claim during the Riom Trial in 1941. For remarks directed against General Gamelin’s claims, see General W. Stachiewicz, *Wierności dochować żołnierskiej*, pp. 668–699 (this text was first published in *Kultura* [Paris] (1951), No. 4).

1889 M. Zgórniak, *Europa w przededniu wojny*, p. 482.

1890 A. Mühlstein, *Dziennik, wrzesień 1939 – listopad 1940*, trans D. Zamojska, intro. by J. Zamojski (Warsaw 1999), p. 31.

units on the front has been confirmed. On both sides, a significant number have been killed and wounded. Small battles in the air.”¹⁸⁹¹ On 16 September, Ambassador Łukasiewicz informed the Foreign Ministry of the reported “success of the French offensive in several places”.¹⁸⁹² In fact, there was no heavy French-German fighting at all; only small-scale clashes took place on 8–9 September. The French advanced about 30 km into Reich territory, encountering German counterattacks.

On 9 September, the *Offensive pour la Pologne* was halted; it was on that day that General Gamelin defined Poland as a “beaten” country. The entire offensive consisted only of a brief advance toward the Siegfried Line. The Allies took no other military action. According to Marian Zgórniak, the *Offensive pour la Pologne* cost the lives of 1,575 French soldiers and a dozen or so planes, with German losses reaching about 700 troops.¹⁸⁹³

As a result of the Kasprzycki-Gamelin negotiations in Paris, the interpretation protocol stated that France would assume the obligation to attack on the western front with the “main force” (*le gros*) of its army. As already mentioned, the distinction in French between *les gros* (most of the army) and *le gros* (the main force) was not something that Polish negotiators understood.¹⁸⁹⁴ “Most of the army” is not the same as the “main force”. General Gamelin explained *ex post* that he had done everything possible for France’s Polish ally, indeed more than what was contained in the written commitments, because on 7 September he took action against Germany with a “main force”, although not with most of the troops at his disposal. Of course, General Gamelin’s twisted explanations change nothing regarding what is entirely clear to historians, namely that the Western powers negotiated obligations toward Poland knowing that they would not be kept.

In a certain way, the fate of the “offensive for Poland” resembles decisions tied to offensive air actions against Germany. The order was issued to bomb military facilities in the German Reich, without the involvement of the British Royal Air Force, but after a few hours that order was withdrawn.

On 12 September, General Gamelin issued an order to discontinue hostilities on the western front, because he considered the Polish army’s resistance to have been broken, and he argued that the enemy had regained its ability to immediately transfer significant forces westward. On 21 September, French forces received a new order: to withdraw from all territory taken during the “offensive for Poland”.

The French historian Colonel Pierre Le Goyet believed that a French entrance into Belgium was the only way to save Poland. The French General Staff considered such a plan on 25 April 1938, but in the realities of 1939 its implementation was

1891 *Polska polityka zagraniczna 1926–1939*, pp. 409–410.

1892 PDD/1939 (wrzesień–grudzień), pp. 87–88.

1893 M. Zgórniak, *Europa w przededniu wojny*, p. 482.

1894 M. Zgórniak, “Sojusz polsko-francusko-brytyjski i problemy jego realizacji,” p. 370.

impossible because it required the violation of Belgium's neutrality, with all the propaganda consequences that this step would entail on the international stage.¹⁸⁹⁵

The Anglo-French Supreme War Council, created at the start of the war, had decision-making powers on how the Allies would proceed with the conflict. In the spirit of equality among alliances, it would no doubt have been proper to invite a representative of Poland to the first meeting of the Council in Abbeville on 12 September 1939, even if that representative were not necessarily granted a permanent seat on the body. But this did not happen. The record of the Council's first meeting is a telling document. Prime Minister Daladier declared that events were playing themselves out "as predicted and calculated by the French General Staff. The current situation is very different from that of 1914. Germany is seeking to conquer Poland, while striving to maintain an unchanged position in the West."¹⁸⁹⁶ Prime Minister Chamberlain said that abandoning large-scale operations on the western front had been a "wise" decision because "there is no reason to hurry when time is on our side. In addition, the allies need time to gather all of their resources, and in the meantime Germany's morale may break down." Daladier concluded that in such realities, "large-scale offensive operations undertaken at the very beginning would be a mistake."¹⁸⁹⁷

General Gamelin, who took part in the deliberations of the Supreme War Council, emphasised that "the underlying goal of ongoing operations is to help Poland by distracting Germany". He admitted that "his offensive", which began on September 7, "is limited to operations in no man's land" and that he did not intend to throw his army up against Germany's main defence forces. In fact, he gave special orders forbidding anything of the kind. The French army commander agreed with the opinion put forth by the British Air Force Staff that no air action should be taken against Germany so that unnecessary losses could be avoided. General Gamelin stated that "the Poles want the French to do more, but the French are aware that they are doing everything in their power".¹⁸⁹⁸ Chamberlain expressed acceptance of "every inch" of this motivation. "It is clear," he said, "that the allies cannot do anything that would prevent Poland from being overtaken. Sending military reinforcements to the extent possible will certainly give her the spirit to fight, but the only real help for Poland lies in winning the war. One should appreciate the fact that at present, Germany is leaving France and Great Britain alone. British factories are probably more vulnerable to air attacks than plants in Germany," and "extending our existing air operations will inevitably lead to civilian casualties."

1895 M. Gamelin, *Servir*, Vol. 3, pp. 23–26. For more, see P. Le Goyet, *France-Pologne 1919–1939. De l'amitié romantique à la méfiance réciproque* (Paris [1991]), p. 286.

1896 National Archives (London), Cabinet Papers, Cab. 66/1, k. 318–322. Polish version: *Polska w polityce międzynarodowej*, Vol. 1, p. 552, quotes below based on this translation.

1897 *Ibid.*, p. 553.

1898 *Ibid.*

Summing up, the British prime minister stated that time was working in favour of the allies and against Germany. Daladier, for his part, argued that it was important, if possible, to “maintain the Polish front”. He believed that the Polish army’s retreat had “slowed down”. He also expressed hope that “perhaps the Poles will be able to hold out like Spanish Republican forces in Madrid.”¹⁸⁹⁹

Lord Chatfield, the British Minister for the Coordination of Defence, asked if the French Supreme Command was considering the possibility of changing war plans on the western front “if Poland could hold out longer than originally anticipated”. General Gamelin replied that he was not considering such plans, because extended Polish resistance would only buy “more precious time for France and Great Britain to prepare and prevent Germany from shifting its forces from the eastern front to the west”.¹⁹⁰⁰ Probably the same desire (taken as reality) was what General Ironside had in mind when he said on 11 September that the Poles were “fighting well” and their “main forces were still intact”.¹⁹⁰¹

From the minutes of the Supreme War Council meeting in Abbeville, it is clear that it was not the French, as is sometimes assumed in historiography, but the British who argued that plans to bomb German military facilities should be abandoned, an idea which was eagerly accepted by the French leadership. Ambassador Łukasiewicz was aware of this fact when on 16 September he wrote to the Foreign Ministry informing his superiors in Warsaw that, the day before, he had delivered to Prime Minister Daladier a “comprehensive letter demanding air action based on the military convention”.¹⁹⁰² In his encrypted telegram, he continued: “In view of London’s position, I would not count on a positive result.”¹⁹⁰³

The conclusions reached by Prime Ministers Daladier and Chamberlain at the Abbeville conference on 12 September determined that Poland would receive no assistance in battle, although after the final victory, which was the allied powers’ main goal, it would be rebuilt as part of a new peace order. Let us add here that the British Committee of Imperial Defence decided that “the art of the strategy is to concentrate decisive forces for the decisive moment”.¹⁹⁰⁴ This rationale was used to justify inaction.

The Allied powers’ war doctrine claimed that Poland could be saved, as Churchill’s secretary John Colville wrote in his diary, only “in the long run”.¹⁹⁰⁵ Such concept was closely related to the British assumption of what would be, as

1899 *Ibid.*, pp. 554–555.

1900 *Ibid.*, p. 556

1901 N. Bethell, *Zwycięska wojna Hitlera*, trans. J. Z. Bielski (Warsaw 1997), p. 90.

1902 AAN, Instytut Hoovera, MSZ, I/243 (mf).

1903 *Ibid.*

1904 Quote from J. Colville, *The Fringes of Power. Downing Street Diaries 1939–1945* (London–Sydney–Toronto 1985), p. 25.

1905 *Ibid.*

Daladier put it, a “three-year war”.¹⁹⁰⁶ As Anthony Adamthwaite François Bédarida argued, generally speaking and in the realities of that time, “military arguments were merely a consequence of political choices”.¹⁹⁰⁷ This was the case in both 1938 and 1939. Military factors played no role that was independent of political influence; the former were subordinated to the latter.

The Poles were not informed of the decisions made by the Supreme War Council in Abbeville, a fact which is itself sufficiently telling. In this light, the content of the encrypted telegram sent by Ambassador Łukasiewicz to Foreign Minister Beck on 13 September is significant: “In view of yesterday’s meeting between Chamberlain and Daladier, I think it is necessary: I. To demand precise information about what cooperation with us would look like in practical terms. II. To continue to demand action in the air. III. In the face of Halifax’s statement that air engagement will only be related to broader military operations, consider the possibility of demanding engagement in the air at Germany’s rear and on German industrial centres at our border with land-based weapons or seaplanes.”¹⁹⁰⁸ There were no indications that these expectations would be fulfilled. The Polish government received no information about the contents of the resolutions adopted by the Supreme War Council in Abbeville.

Ambassador Raczyński and his memory are powerful here; he once recalled hearing directly from Lord Halifax that Great Britain could not afford to “disperse its forces”.¹⁹⁰⁹ War Secretary Hore-Belisha stated: “Well thought-out considerations for winning the war require that England stand up with all its strength”. Hore-Belisha was aware of the sacrifice that the Poles had made, and that “victory over Germany, despite various examples of hesitation by other countries, must be England’s goal, and Poland’s sacrifice and persistence has contributed significantly to this”.¹⁹¹⁰ In a conversation with one of the officers in the British military mission, Colonel Jaklicz asked: “What can England do to help Poland?” To which the response was: “nothing”, because it was “too late”.¹⁹¹¹ These statements showed how instrumentally the British government treated the alliance with Poland. On 21 October 1939, F. K. Roberts, a Foreign Office official and specialist in Polish affairs, suggested that information about Polish appeals for assistance not be entered

1906 AAN, Hoover Institute, MSZ, I/243 (mf), Ambassador Łukasiewicz to Foreign Ministry, report dated 13 September 1939.

1907 A. Adamthwaite, “Le facteur militaire dans la prise de decision franco-britannique avant Munich,” *Revue d’Études slaves* 52 (1979), No. 1–2: pp. 59–66. See important commentary by François Bédarida in this volume on p. 69.

1908 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.53/26.

1909 P. Starzeński, *Ostatni polscy rycerze* (London 1968), p. 13.

1910 *Depesze wojenne Attachatu Wojskowego RP w Bukareszcie 1939–1940*, eds. T. Dubicki and A. Suchcitz (Tarnowskie Góry 2006), pp. 11–12 (dispatch from the military attaché in London to the staff of the Commander on 19 September 1939).

1911 Biblioteka Polska (Paris), Akcesja, 3346, J. Jaklicz, „Diariusz z września 1939“ (mps), p. 52.

into the British Blue Book, because it could be “embarrassing” for the British and French. In a note on that same day, Roberts wrote: “Unfortunately, I see little prospect of those sections of the Polish people included in the areas taken by Russia ever being given such an opportunity”.¹⁹¹²

Today, there can be no doubt that if the allies were to fulfil their military commitments to Poland effectively, then French armed forces needed to engage in land operations and a joint allied air operation at once, in the first days of September, preferably immediately after the declaration of war on Germany in the afternoon of 3 September. Events could have turned out differently only through an offensive in the first three or four days after Germany’s invasion of Poland, and not 15 days after war was declared – as had been decided in the military interpretation protocol without taking into account the dynamics of the blitzkrieg.¹⁹¹³ It was Krzysztof Sójka-Wilmański’s judgment that “if the date of the Allied offensive were set not on 15 September but rather on 3 September, and then was executed with all power and firmness, the course of the war would have been different [...]”.¹⁹¹⁴ The problem was that “such a stipulation was neither in the agreement of May [...]”¹⁹¹⁵, nor in the agreement of 4 September 1939. Given the German blitzkrieg doctrine, the creators of the interpretation protocol were not sufficiently imaginative. Even if its provisions had been literally carried out, it would not have changed Poland’s situation a great deal or the course of the European war. It should be added, however, that during the May negotiations in Paris, the Poles insisted on an earliest-possible deadline for French land engagement after the first day of universal mobilisation. The French Supreme Command rejected this demand.¹⁹¹⁶ At the same time, it was out of the question that France would announce universal mobilisation before declaring war on Germany. The French public, remembering the events of August 1914, when Russia’s announcement of universal mobilisation brought a German ultimatum and determined the outbreak of war, would not allow such a move.

Of course, the creators of the Franco-Polish military interpretation protocol did not take into account yet another factor of decisive importance: the Soviet position on the Polish-German war.¹⁹¹⁷ As it transpired, Poland received none of the deliveries from Russia and made none of the purchases in Russia that the

1912 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23135, C. 16572/123/55.

1913 Krzysztof Sójka-Wilmański defended this argument in “Czy ofensywa francuska mogła uratować Polskę?”, *Zeszyty Historyczne* (Paris) (1980), No. 53: pp. 90–109.

1914 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

1915 *Ibid.*

1916 [J. Łukasiewicz], *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939* (1989), p. 261.

1917 In the available protocols of the Kasprzycki-Gamelin negotiations, there are no references indicating any reflection on the Soviets’ position towards the coming war. It was tacitly assumed that the USSR was a kind of passive object in international politics.

allies continued to assume at Abbeville. Instead, Poland was attacked from the east on 17 September with no declaration of war.¹⁹¹⁸ On this day the Polish argument was confirmed, one which the Poles had repeatedly communicated to the Allies, namely that German-Soviet cooperation, initiated by the agreement of 23 August 1939, was about to take on, in the face of Western inaction, the features of a *de facto* alliance.¹⁹¹⁹ Polish leaders could not have imagined that Poland, tied to the Western powers, would be invaded from the east as early as in the first stage of the European war, one which was to become a military campaign on Polish territory. But abandoned by its Allies, Poland was threatened by just such a possibility. The validity of the Polish argument, which appeared in diplomatic documents from the end of August and the beginning of September 1939, was confirmed.

We do not know if Stalin knew about the decisions made at the Abbeville conference.¹⁹²⁰ Certainly, in light of the Third Reich's invasion of Poland, the Soviet leader, "while closely watching the real dimension of the French military effort and the inaction of the Allied air forces, could assume", as Eugeniusz Duraczyński put it, "that his own strike against Poland, agreed to with Germany, would not cause the USSR too much trouble".¹⁹²¹ Important in this regard are the reflections of the British Ambassador to Moscow, William Seeds, of 10 September: "The apparent inaction on the western front and Germany's rapid progress [in Poland] may tempt the Soviet government to secure everything that Germany promised it".¹⁹²²

In the realities of the "phony war", Soviet Russia gained extraordinary opportunities for easy territorial expansion and to become a "third-party beneficiary". As Andrei Zhdanov would cynically state at the Politburo meeting of 20 March 1940: "Our neutrality is peculiar. We are not fighting, but we are receiving

1918 On 7 September 1939, a Polish-British-French financial agreement was concluded offering Poland 5 million Pounds and 600 million Francs, of which, as Ambassador Raczyński wrote to the Foreign Ministry that same day: "1 million Pounds and 175 million Francs are immediately available for purchases in the USSR. Further sums for purchases in Russia will be made as necessary" (IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.53/26).

1919 From 22/23 August, Polish diplomacy repeatedly told the Allies that the only thing that could loosen German-Soviet collaboration would be allied firmness in the fulfilment of Western obligations towards Poland.

1920 An answer to this question could be provided only through a detailed analysis of Soviet documents. We can assume that Stalin received some information about the conclusions drawn by the Supreme Allied Council on 12 September, but there is no evidence. The Soviet attack on Poland on 17 September was surely a "by-product of the phony war" (see my reflections on this matter in M. Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop-Mołotow*, p. 480).

1921 E. Duraczyński, "Polska w polityce Moskwy latem 1939", in *17 września 1939. Materiały z ogólnopolskiej konferencji historyków*, p. 48.

1922 National Archives (London), Foreign Office, 371, 23699, N.4295/4030/38. Ambassador Seeds' encrypted telegram to the Foreign Office dated 10 September 1939.

some territories there". This statement is sufficiently eloquent.¹⁹²³ It can be assumed that Stalin would not have decided to attack Poland, as he did on 17 September, had it not been for the inaction of Western powers on the western front.

Historical Interpretations

Was this turn of events—Poland's experience of being abandoned by its allies—an immutable certainty? Could anything have changed this situation? By way of answers to these questions, the reflections of the Polish ambassadors in Paris and London, eyewitnesses to events, offer significant insights.

Most important in this regard are the thoughts of Ambassador Łukasiewicz, who wrote: "Declaring war against Germany (on 3 September 1939), France mustered its maximum psychological effort and overcame her own pacifist attitude, but in order for her to be able to overcome her defensive attitude as well, new facts and new conditions were needed". The ambassador believed that such an impulse could be either "a German offensive in the West", "an English offensive against Germany", or "a significant prolongation of our war with Germany and results that are satisfactory for us". Łukasiewicz thought that "a sense of allied solidarity itself played almost no role" in France's attitude towards Poland.¹⁹²⁴ Lengthier resistance by the Poles could have prompted some kind of action—this was the Polish ambassador's thinking, as expressed in 1943. But the fact is that Poland's violent defeat, the Soviet attack from the east, and the subsequent partition of Poland, provided the French with a convenient excuse to take no action, and to passively wait for their own defeat, which would come in June 1940.

It was Feliks Frankowski's view that Daladier was "an honest but weak man".¹⁹²⁵ Bonnet, who was dismissed as foreign minister on 14 September, remained a dedicated spokesman for the appeasement doctrine. General Gamelin was a commander unwilling to make a decision. He thought in terms set by the First World War, a fact discussed by historians many times.

Only more advanced British war preparations could have led to decisions that would break the Allies' passivity. As Polish Ambassador Raczyński in London put it in his report dated 16 September 1939 summarising Western efforts to carry out military obligations: "If the British believed in the relative durability of the Polish front, then their inclination to sacrifice for that front would increase accordingly". He continued:

1923 Quote from B. Pasierb, "Polityka i dyplomacja radziecka wobec Niemiec w przededniu drugiej wojny światowej," in *Studia historyczne nad polityką, gospodarką i kulturą*, p. 138.

1924 [J. Łukasiewicz], *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939* (1989), p. 381.

1925 IPMS, MSZ, A.11/144 E, nr spr. 270, Feliks Frankowski's testimony before the Winiarski Commission on 31 March 1941.

Conversely, as confidence has decreased as a result of developments on the ground, the willingness to provide effective assistance has steadily decreased. They express their concern about the use of accumulated forces “in sections and in a strategically decisive way”, along with a fear that if they make a deep and highly visible commitment which is followed by failure, then they will suffer an ever greater loss of prestige. This is the background to the difficulties we are constantly confronting here, which would be incomprehensible to anyone who did not know this background, just as they are highly irritating and inconsistent with the clear and simple text of the alliance commitments contained in the first and subsequent articles of our agreement of 25 August 1939.¹⁹²⁶

Is it in fact true that if the Polish defensive campaign had lasted longer, then the French and British armies would have gone into action on the western front? A diplomat might be able to offer an answer to this question, but quite clearly a historian cannot.

“A more serious attack on the Siegfried Line could have really started in the second half of September at the earliest. By that time, the campaign in Poland had long been settled and any local success would have given the Allies nothing.” Such was the fundamental conclusion drawn by Zgórniak based on his many years studying the issue of Allied preparations for the war in September 1939.¹⁹²⁷ However, statements made by General Gamelin at the Abbeville conference, discussed above, seem to contradict this presumption. The French commander admitted at the time that he did not intend to launch his army’s main forces at the German army, even if the Poles managed to survive in defensive positions for an extended period of time and could make use of their eastern territories (which they were prevented from doing in the wake of the Bolshevik attack).

The impulse to create a completely new situation in the West could have been brought on by an Italian attack, which in autumn 1939, as Stanisław Sierpowski rightly suspected, could only have been directed at France. In such conditions, the French army could no longer have remained idle, although its situation would not have been easy, given the resulting need to fight on two fronts and weak British support. In any case, Britain’s involvement in hostilities would have become imminent; thus there would have been no “phony war”. However, as we know, contrary to the provisions of the Pact of Steel signed on 22 May 1939, Mussolini proclaimed his policy of *non beligerenza* on 1 September 1939.¹⁹²⁸ Additionally, today we know that the British considered the possibility that Italy would take military action, and they did so assuming that in such circumstances, Great Britain’s “maximum effort” would be “immediately directed against Italy”—in the Mediterranean.¹⁹²⁹

1926 Instytut Sikorskiego, Ambasada Londyn, sygn. A.12.53/26.

1927 M. Zgórniak, “Zdradzili, nie zdradzili?” *passim*.

1928 S. Sierpowski, *Polityka zagraniczna Polski międzywojennej* (Warsaw 1994), p. 73.

1929 IPMS, Ambasada RP w Londynie, A.12.53/26, Ambassador Raczyński’s encrypted telegram dated 8 September 1939.

It is worth referring once again to Ambassador Łukasiewicz's thoughts recorded during the war. Britain's stance determined that France would declare war on Germany, which meant that both powers fulfilled their political commitments towards Poland. However, British policy also determined that war would be waged "in a purely defensive direction".¹⁹³⁰ The British decision to issue an ultimatum to Germany on 2 September and then to announce that Great Britain was at war with this country (as of 2:00 p.m. on 3 September) was a *sine qua non* condition for similar French decisions. However, had the war begun with an invasion of Great Britain, Łukasiewicz wrote, no one would have proposed "fictitious measures", and France would have been forced to act with all its might.¹⁹³¹ Unfortunately, in September 1939 the war was about a second-class ally, one that could be abandoned.

One particularly puzzling matter involves the total inaction of Allied air forces during the September campaign. General Paul Armengaud, an officer in the French military mission to Poland (commanded by General Louis Faury), offered the following reflections on this matter: the May 1939 arrangements provided that "as soon as warfare began, France would send a certain amount of bombing units to Poland with old material, which will then be strengthened by units armed with new material, if the situation in the West allows it. As soon as I was informed of this task", Armengaud wrote, "I protested against the anticipated plans, emphasising their unrealistic nature. This project was absurd. How could the German air forces be destroyed in East Prussia, which could be strengthened or replaced as needed by new units sent from deep within Germany, where air forces were sufficiently large"?¹⁹³²

Nevertheless, can obligations regarding air operations on the western front also be called "absurd"? I do not think so. There can be no doubt that in September 1939, the French army was not prepared for large-scale offensive operations. But military weakness cannot explain Allied inaction. While German forces were tied up in Poland, the French army had certain operational opportunities, despite the lack of armaments and a neglected air force. Allied inaction on the western front in September 1939 posed a problem "above all for France, which had given promises to provide its ally with specific assistance but did not intend to keep them".¹⁹³³

Fighting alone, Poland gave the Allies eight months of time, a point which was made again and again in Polish political thought both during the Second World War and in post-war historical and political-historical calculations. "Unfortunately", General Władysław Sikorski pointed out in a speech to his countrymen on 1 September 1941, "France did not take advantage of this time". The general added

1930 [J. Łukasiewicz], *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939* (1989), p. 385.

1931 *Ibid.*, pp. 387–388.

1932 Quote from *Sprawa polska podczas Februury wojny światowej w świetle pamiętników*, p. 128.

1933 A. M. Cienciała, "Minister Józef Beck i ambasador Edward Raczyński a zbliżenie polsko-brytyjskie", p. 361.

that no joint operational allied commander was appointed after September 1939, one who “would not have allowed the serious strategic mistake to be made that 40 Polish infantry divisions were fighting in complete isolation, while Europeans stood by, watching and waiting for their own turn”.¹⁹³⁴

In discussing the meaning of the Polish military campaign of September 1939, Józef Jaklicz recalled that the Polish strategy had been supported above all by the “imperative of simultaneous effort” on the part of the allies in the name of a common goal, so as not to be beaten one by one in isolated clashes.¹⁹³⁵ “Where on earth is the military logic, where is the imperative at the heart of military principle, proven practically by all great past leaders and by the victor in the last war—Foch—proclaimed by all the schools of war headed by the *École Supérieure de Guerre*: the imperative for simultaneous action, to not allow the enemy to pick off weaker forces one by one?”¹⁹³⁶

Post-war Polish historiography in exile, whose contributors constantly reviewed matters surrounding the September defeat, argued that the French supreme command did not take advantage of opportunities created by the Polish defence campaign. German divisions withdrawn from Poland could not be transferred to the western front until the second half of October. There was no threat that the Germans would strike through Switzerland or Belgium because they lacked sufficient forces. General Kazimierz Głabisz wrote: “Gamelin did not use this transition to his advantage, either because he firmly believed in the advantage of a defensive strategy, or because he overestimated the resistance of German fortifications (he did not even consider pushing to the Rhine), or perhaps because he did not believe in the combat readiness of the French soldier and airman”.¹⁹³⁷ General Waław Stachiewicz claimed that “the French commander did not understand the interests of his own country, which paid for its inertia with defeat in 1940”.¹⁹³⁸ These statements helped shape the canon of Polish thinking about the experience with Allied abandonment in September 1939.

Understandably, Polish arguments formulated in this way found no supporters in Western historiography. However, harsh criticism in French historiography of France’s military strategy in 1939 provided arguments that could be used in Polish historiography.

The key issue was and remains the question of whether during the Polish campaign, German forces in the west could have been successfully attacked along the Siegfried Line. “In 1939, undoubtedly by reaction and impressed by the bluff

1934 IPMS, Kolekcja Gen. Sikorskiego, 1/1, General Sikorski’s unpublished “Dziennik” from 1940 (zeszyt).

1935 Biblioteka Polska (Paris), Papiery gen. Józefa Jaklicza, Akcesja, 3346, Plk dypl. J. Jaklicz, “Kampania Wrześniowa 1939 r. w Polsce”, Grenoble 1942 (mps), p. 146.

1936 Ibid.

1937 K. Głabisz, “Krytyczna monografia o generale Gamelin,” p. 234.

1938 W. Stachiewicz, “Marszałek Śmigły,” *Kultura* (Paris) (1972), No. 5: p. 108.

that accompanied German remilitarisation, our General Staff exaggerated the power of the enemy, the number and value of its divisions, especially its reserve divisions, tanks, aircraft, etc. It must be admitted, however, that even if our Second Department had provided a highly accurate picture of German preparations, our supreme command certainly would not have given up its 'resolutely defensive' attitude." These are the words of Adolphe Goutard, whose canonical book contained the argument that an aggressive allied strike on the western front was possible.¹⁹³⁹ Goutard and the Swiss journalist and historian Jon Kimche agreed that the Allies could have inflicted heavy losses on Germany as early as autumn 1939, because the German army, engaged in Poland, was unable to repel a possible attack from the West.¹⁹⁴⁰ Kimche even called September 1939 "the most important battle of the Second World War" because it was precisely then that chances were missed to stop Germany. Lord Nicholas Bethell supported this argument when in the 1970s he wrote his famous monograph *The War Hitler Won*.¹⁹⁴¹ In his opinion, "all he [Hitler] needed was for the British and the French to allow him breathing space"—and this is what Hitler got through Allied inaction in the West.¹⁹⁴² In the historiography of the 1990s, these views were questioned and largely abandoned, although they still have their advocates. Hopes for breaking the Siegfried Line remained a thing of dreams, as Colonel Le Goyet put it in his book *France-Pologne 1919–1939. De l'amitié romantique à la méfiance réciproque*, published in 1990.¹⁹⁴³

There is no doubt that official historiography, political journalism and propaganda in the post-war Soviet domination of Poland exploited in many ways the distrust of the West that had been created in Polish society both by the experiences of the Second World War and by the fact that the nation had been abandoned by its allies (in 1939 and again in 1944).¹⁹⁴⁴ In school books, academic monographs, and above all countless journalistic articles, especially those that were military in nature, authors spoke about betrayal by the Western Allies. The confidence that the Polish supreme command had had in the Allied guarantees was caused by "blindness".¹⁹⁴⁵ Such writers as Stanisław Mackiewicz, who put forward theories about interwar Poland's "exotic alliances" with Western powers, alliances established in the face of the geopolitical logic dictating that Poland choose between

1939 A. Goutard, 1940. *Wojna straconych okazji*, p. 89.

1940 Most estimates are that on 9 September, Germany had 7–11 regular divisions and 20 reserve divisions in the West.

1941 N. Bethell, *The War Hitler Won* (London 1972), p. 97 (Polish edition: *Zwycięska wojna Hitlera*).

1942 N. Bethell, *Zwycięska wojna Hitlera*, p. 83.

1943 P. Le Goyet, *France-Pologne 1919–1939*, p. 293.

1944 An example here is Włodzimierz T. Kowalski, *Zachód a Polska (XVIII–XX w.)* (Warsaw 1984).

1945 Propaganda phrases about communist Poland's alliance with the Soviet Union were repeatedly put up as an alternative to a policy of seeking allies in Western Europe.

Russia and Germany, played an influential role in shaping Poland's historical consciousness.

Realities were different after 1989, when scholars and publicists once again discussed topics related to the question of whether the Western powers had "betrayed Poland" by not fulfilling their military alliance obligations. As I mentioned above, publicist and expert on German matters Artur Hajnicz came out in January 1999 in opposition to the argument, well established in Polish political thought, that Poland had been "betrayed" by its Western Allies in September 1939.¹⁹⁴⁶ In his view, Poland in fact received the support of Western powers in 1939, which meant that "the September defeat was not the final defeat" that was, in the end, "decisive for Polish fate". Hajnicz concluded: "The persistence of the emotionally understandable, but historically unreasonable belief in Western betrayal has now taken on a new meaning. It is an expression of anti-occidental xenophobia. When in a few months Poland becomes a full member of NATO, we should not demand from the West repentance and repayment for alleged harm, but rather seek to free ourselves from our obsession."¹⁹⁴⁷

Marian Zgórnjak spoke in a similar vein.¹⁹⁴⁸ He put forward the thesis that claims of "Allied betrayal", as they appear in Polish historiography, are a Polish "national myth", one which should be abandoned, in part because this myth intensifies Poles' distrust of the West, but also because it is based on dubious historical interpretation. As the author of numerous studies on European military history in the twentieth century, above all his extensive *Europa w przededniu wojny*, Zgórnjak argued that in 1939, the Western powers, above all France, "lacked not only a leader" who was ready to risk taking the offensive on a western front, "but also military strength". He pointed to the outdated French military equipment and the Wehrmacht's undisputed advantage. He also drew attention to the fact that an effective strike against fortified positions requires a 3 to 1 advantage for the attackers, and that the French did not enjoy such an advantage against the Germans and their Siegfried Line.¹⁹⁴⁹ The main point here is that the Allies could not have done more for the Poles. On 17 September 1939, a new situation arose, one that had not been taken into account; the Polish campaign was lost, and a general offensive in the West could not have helped the Poles. Hajnicz has claimed that cultivating the myth of a betrayed Poland has only helped revive anti-Western complexes in Polish society. Zgórnjak argued that the Allies could not have helped Poland because they were in no position to break the Siegfried Line, and that

1946 A. Hajnicz, "Zdrada Zachodu – fakt czy obsesja."

1947 Ibid.

1948 M. Zgórnjak, "Nawet Aleksander Wielki by nie wygrał," *Gazeta Wyborcza* (pp. 28–29 August 1999), and *idem*, "Zdradzili, nie zdradzili?," *passim*.

1949 Zgórnjak considered the conclusions drawn by General Adolphe Goutard (in his monograph 1940. *La guerre des occasions perdues*) obsolete and inconsistent with reality.

Adolphe Goutard's conclusions are now obsolete. At the same time, statements made by German generals at the Nuremberg trials, who claimed that the Third Reich was weak on the western front, are a questionable source.

Zgórniak did not claim that the Western powers and their behaviour was above criticism. He emphasised that "it is difficult to explain the passive behaviour of the French and British air forces in September 1939. Contrary to assurances given earlier to Poles, they took no serious action against Germany, motivated by its possible retaliation. The English even presented understated data on their air force's capabilities, and inflated data on German capabilities." Zgórniak also speculated that "French assistance would have been possible if Poland's resistance had lasted not three to four weeks, but, as initially assumed, about three months".¹⁹⁵⁰

Without settling the matter of whether or not the French army could have done something for Poland, we cannot deny that the Allies did not fulfil their commitments. It is thus my view that there are no grounds for revising the position that Polish historiography has taken in these matters.

The guarantees that the West offered Poland were, as French author Jacques Mordal put it, "immoral" because they were unfeasible.¹⁹⁵¹ In a devastating criticism of General Gamelin for his conduct in 1939, military historian Colonel Pierre Lyet, editor-in-chief of the *Revue historique de l'Armée*, argued that the French should not have made empty promises; rather, they should have told the Poles the truth during Paris talks with General Kasprzycki in May 1939. It was necessary to reveal at that time that France lacked sufficient resources to commence air bombing immediately, and that it could start any land offensive only on the thirtieth day of the war and within 20 kilometres of the Siegfried Line.¹⁹⁵² I see no reason that scholars should not refer to this opinion and not recognise its important significance.

In the light of what we know today, there is no doubt that the promises that the West made to the Poles were meant to provide Poland with moral support, and to prevent Poland from capitulating without a fight. They were not offered with a view to keeping their commitments. The Kasprzycki-Gamelin protocol was signed 15 days after the resolution produced by French and British staff officials on 4 May, which anticipated that a western front would not be opened to support Poland.

Significantly, French foreign policymakers, returning years later to the events of September 1939, could find no rational interpretation for their behaviour, as evidenced by countless recollective documents, including statements gathered by Kazimiera Mazurowa in *Skazani na wojnę*. For example, René Massigli, in response to a question about the reasons behind France's military inactivity in September 1939, could only say that the French government had no confidence in Beck, and

1950 M. Zgórniak, "Zdradzili, nie zdradzili?," *passim*.

1951 See J. Mordal, *La guerre a commencé en Pologne*.

1952 Quote from "Orzeł Biały," *Syrena* (Paris), 3 September 1959 (article-commentary *Bierność Francji we wrześniu 1939 r.*).

that Poland had harmed itself by having acted against Czechoslovakia a year earlier.¹⁹⁵³ Such narrative was canonical for many years in French discussions of the “phony war”.

There is no doubt that even without Allied commitments, Poland would have defended its independence. This was the position taken by the Polish government and Poland’s military high command. Above all, this was, practically speaking, the unanimous will of the Polish nation.

We can therefore imagine a situation in which, on the eve of war, the Western powers would have offered the Poles guarantees, but would have also warned them that those guarantees were, for the immediate future, militarily impracticable. They could have merely recognised Poland as an ally whose fate would be decided by the events of war, but who would receive no military assistance. In other words, they could have stated openly what had been decided (and hidden from the Poles) in Abbeville. It would have been more rational and less questionable in human terms, although it would not have changed decisions made by Polish leaders, in accordance with the will of the nation, to defend the country’s independence at all costs. Such a decision had been made in January 1939, at a time when it seemed more than problematic to count on any outside assistance, and this decision was maintained on 1 September 1939. Having said that, all of the facts indicate that leaders in London and Paris feared that Poland, lacking promises of assistance, would succumb to the Germans without a fight and would then join them.

Another thought emerges from consideration of this issue. Just as the Poles did not grasp the sense of the Allies’ defensive strategy, Western leaders could not fully comprehend the Polish collective psychology, which excluded the possibility of capitulation without a fight, even if there was no hope for victory. Ambassador Kennard represented a unique view when he wrote to London in a report on 30 August 1939 that Beck would not go to Berlin, and that “Poles will certainly fight and prefer to die rather than surrender to the kind of humiliation experienced especially in the examples of Austria, Czechoslovakia and Lithuania”.¹⁹⁵⁴

Without settling the matter of how much the French and British armies could have done for Poland in September 1939, it is undisputed that Allied commitments and promises were not fulfilled. There is no reason to revise this page in Polish history. The idea that we must battle against Polish “anti-occidental myths” cannot be implemented at the price of historical truth.

Another issue, one that is highly complex and has been considered in historiography many times, involves the question of what the Poles expected from Western commitments; no doubt, these expectations were excessive and unrealistic, all the more so in broader Polish society and public opinion than among Poland’s political and military leaders. It is difficult not to revisit this matter without repeating the fact that, although Polish assessments of France’s and Britain’s potential long-term

1953 K. Mazurowa, *Skazani na wojnę* (Warsaw 1979), p. 212.

1954 Quote from S. Sierpowski, *Między wojnami 1919–1939*, part 2, p. 322.

military capabilities were largely correct, they lacked realism in the short term and disregarded the actual state of military preparations. Poles were not fully cognisant of the West's well-thought-out strategic assumptions; for the West, the results of the Polish campaign were ultimately a function of the concept of a "three-year war" against Germany and its allies.

Polish policymakers in 1939 were well aware of France's decline in international significance, and they were quite negative—and realistic—about the significance of its military potential.¹⁹⁵⁵ However, experience had taught them that the British had decisive influence in shaping France's conduct, even if they did not have at their disposal the kind of land forces that could be deployed in the first phase of a continental war. What France had lacked over the previous 20 years of peace was England's support. Allegations made against Beck that he did not realise that Great Britain did not have significant ground forces fall as if into a vacuum. The entire significance of Polish strategy came down to the thesis that London would provide the decisive impetus behind "launching" France in military terms. However, this calculation was a failure. British and French military concepts converged on the plane of a defensive war; the British not only did not force the French to draw up offensive plans, but also provided them with a convincing justification for joint passivity, in theory to buy time and wage a war of attrition until victory. The actual fact is that it was at Britain's behest that planned air operations against Germany were abandoned.

Michał Łubieński wrote:

[...] one can criticise our entire foreign policy in that we neither knew about our Allies' resources and preparations for battle, nor did we have a precisely agreed-upon plan of operations with them. I have the impression, and I gathered as much based on a number of Beck's statements, that he believed that it was not worth agreeing on war cooperation plans during peace, because conditions of war are so different than times of peace that such plans, arranged in advance, become practically impossible to execute. He rather anticipated an agreement of views during operations. This would be possible in a normal war, in which decisions fluctuate for several months or at least weeks. He did not anticipate the pace of the Blitzkrieg.¹⁹⁵⁶

In his memoirs written in 1940, Łubieński stated: "[...] Beck was most blind towards our military weakness".¹⁹⁵⁷ Tytus Komarnicki believed that Beck had been misinformed by the Polish Main Staff about the state of the German armed forces. Equally mistaken was his generally optimistic knowledge of "our defence capabilities".¹⁹⁵⁸ Łubieński stated that "Beck was not informed about the real situation

1955 He did not try to hide his beliefs.

1956 M. Łubieński, *Refleksje i reminiscencje*, p. 156.

1957 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

1958 IPMS, MSZ, A.11/144 E, nr spr. 500, Tytus Komarnicki's testimony before the Winiarski Commission.

and this was undoubtedly a huge mistake". In his opinion, "Beck's health was not good for two years—he was not able to make big decisions".¹⁹⁵⁹ In autumn 1939, such important Polish policymakers as Ambassadors Lipski and Łukasiewicz made similar statements.¹⁹⁶⁰

It is undoubtedly true that in the realities of 1939, Poland could not expect much from the Western powers in terms of military support. Starting from this belief, Ryszard Zieliński wrote in 1969 that the Polish commander had a "naive faith" in the relief that would come from a French attack on the western front. "For if he believed [in such an eventuality], he was blind. There was infinite evidence from staff contacts and political statements, enough [...] to raise doubts in the Polish leader's mind" and to allow him to "make decisions correcting plans for the coalition war."¹⁹⁶¹ Referring to these claims, General Waław Stachiewicz allowed himself the following reflection: "If we call it naive to believe that one should keep solemn alliance commitments, agreed to in light of mutual interests, then what significance and purpose is there in any international alliances and pacts?"¹⁹⁶² It is difficult to add anything to these views. Together, they illustrate *pars pro toto* the fundamental significance of this dispute, which is essentially inconclusive.

We could go even further and say that this is the fundamental difficulty and tragedy behind Poland's independent policy in the late 1930s, namely that while Poland could not give up the notion of solidarity with the West, the West could easily give up on Poland.¹⁹⁶³ While Poland had no options, the West did—either in the form of an agreement with Germany or rapprochement with Russia, paid for with concessions. The first option was symbolised by Munich, the second by Yalta. The fact that each of these transactions was carried out at the expense of the nations of Central and Eastern Europe is both obvious and banal.

The West's defensive military strategy meant that despite specific Allied commitments, there was no way that Poland would receive real military assistance from France. Minister Beck assumed, however, that providing support to Poland in a war with Germany was not a matter of moral obligations that could be honoured or not honoured, but rather a matter of well-understood self-interests on the part of the Western powers. Therefore, what motivated Polish policymakers at the time was not a continuation of the Polish uprising tradition. Attempts to draw comparisons between Polish leaders' expectations in 1939 and nineteenth-century

1959 J. Szembek, *Diariusz, wrzesień–grudzień 1939*, pp. 124–125.

1960 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

1961 R. Zieliński, "Wojna straconych złudzeń," *Więź* (1969), No. 10: p. 101. In another study, this author wrote: "Śmigły could not help but believe that the alliance with the West was effective." See "Edward Rydz – Marszałek Śmigły," *Więź* (1971), No. 11: p. 118.

1962 W. Stachiewicz, *Marszałek Śmigły*, p. 108.

1963 Ignacy Matuszewski pointed this out in his penetrating essay "Pamięci Józefa Becka," in *idem, Wybór pism* (New York 1952), p. 195.

Polish beliefs that France should support the Polish cause offer very dubious results. In 1939, Poland had a rational political plan, one which nonetheless collapsed in confrontation with reality. Events on the eve of war brought various psychological misunderstandings: the Allies did not understand Poland's determination to defend independence and its full territorial integrity at any price and under all conditions. And Poland failed to recognise that the allies would not be able to take advantage of the situation created by the German army's engagement against Poland in the East. Both lacked sufficient imagination to predict the unpredictable—the phenomenon of total, lightning-fast war.

Poland's Four Decisions, 1938–1939: A Summary

Four momentous decisions were made in Polish foreign policy during the pivotal years of 1938–1939. The reasons behind those decisions, along with their motivation and justification, have been the main subject of this book.

- (1) In the autumn of 1938, the decision was made to refuse to cooperate with the Western powers and to use the Sudetenland crisis and the disintegration of Czechoslovakia both to take Cieszyn Silesia and to build a *Międzymorze* bloc on that country's ruins.

In theory, the Polish government had five solutions to choose from, but in reality there were only three. The first was strict neutrality and *désintéressement* in Zaolzie's fate. The second was to support Czechoslovakia, but this option could be rational only if the Czech government decided to reject German demands on the Sudetenland and to fight; no such decision was taken in Prague, and Czech acceptance of the British-French plan on 21 September meant that Czechoslovakia went down the path of surrender. The third option was a close alliance with Germany, combined with readiness to participate in a European war on Germany's side if such a conflict broke out. This solution had to be rejected because it ran contrary to the principles behind the policy of balance. Another option involved diplomatic support for the Western powers (Great Britain and France) in their efforts to stop Germany. However, Beck decided that nothing could be achieved through diplomatic means and categorically rejected this possibility. One final option remained for Beck: not to stand with Germany and not to fulfil the wishes of London and Paris, but rather, acting alone, to take Zaolzie and to exploit the disintegration of Czechoslovakia as part of an effort to create a Central European bloc. Beck chose this option, although it was implemented only in the narrow case of Zaolzie.

- (2) In January 1939, the Polish political leadership definitively rejected German territorial demands submitted to Ambassador Lipski for the first time on 24 October 1938. The fact that those demands were moderate and formulated in such a way that Warsaw could accept them is beyond dispute. But their acceptance would have put Poland in the position of being a *Juniorpartner* of Greater Germany, without any possibility of improving this position by political means. Theoretically, it could be argued that Poland should have accepted this solution, and in this context it is difficult not to recall that German diplomacy offered the Poles compensation for concessions (an extension of the non-aggression agreement, extra-territorial access to the Port of Danzig, joint guarantees for Slovakia's existence, and a most-favoured-nation clause in trade relations). But the apparent advantages of such a strategic variant in

Polish policy are questionable, and nothing can change the essential truth that accepting German demands would for Poland have been a path to nowhere.

- (3) In March 1939, Polish leaders made the third key decision: they accepted the British guarantee offer made by the Chamberlain government. Although the British guarantee might rightfully be called an “empty promise” because Great Britain lacked the military means to fulfil its obligations, Polish rejection of this strategic option would have put Poland at the mercy of its western neighbour. Had Poland both rejected Hitler and Ribbentrop’s demands and refused to accept British guarantees, Polish diplomacy would have started along the path of total defeat; it is easy to argue that the Polish state would have quickly been defeated in an isolated armed conflict with the German Reich. Such a move was therefore out of the question, and even if Warsaw had had more realistic views regarding Britain’s military capabilities, Polish leaders could not set the decision to accept the British guarantee offer against any other solution. The time that has passed since the events of 1939, rather than undermining this argument, strengthens it. At the time when the decision was made in Warsaw to reject German demands, there was no hope either that the Polish-German conflict could be internationalised or that Poland could obtain external assistance commitments. It is therefore untenable to argue that British guarantees caused the Polish-German conflict. Hitler and Ribbentrop forced Poland to choose: accept or reject territorial demands. The use of force against Germany’s eastern neighbour was, so to speak, baked into German policy. National socialist leaders were not guided by sentiments. Rejecting their demands meant that Poland faced the inevitability of war, one which Poland could fight either isolated or in a coalition. By accepting the guarantee offer, Minister Beck brought Poland into a broad coalition. The British offer was preceded by a proposal to bring four countries into consultation: Great Britain, France, Poland and the USSR, which Beck rejected as being incompatible with the policy of balance. The Polish counter-proposal was to submit to a proposal the British for a bilateral alliance agreement that would take effect on 6–7 April 1939.
- (4) Poland’s fourth and final decision was to reject Moscow’s demands regarding Red Army access to the Republic’s territory. The Soviet government had formulated these demands during the Moscow negotiations for a tripartite mutual assistance pact connecting Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union. Minister Beck rejected them, considering it unthinkable to give up Poland’s independence without a fight. He was propelled by the same motivations that had guided his rejection of Hitler’s demands. Simply put, it would have been incredible if the Polish government had rejected German demands on the Free City of Danzig and the extraterritorial motorway through Pomerania only then to accept Soviet demands and allow Soviet troops onto Polish territory, which would have meant the prospect of irrevocable Sovietisation. It is very difficult to argue that Polish leaders had any other option in this regard.

In all four cases, Polish foreign policymakers had the opportunity to make a sovereign decision, despite the highly difficult constellation of external forces. Having said that, they had no such opportunity regarding two other landmark developments: the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 23 August 1939 and the Allies' military inaction on the western front after 3 September of that same year. In other words, even if the government in Warsaw had knowledge of the secret provisions of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, it could have pursued no strategic option that would have denuded the Pact's effects. At the same time, the Polish leadership could not force the Allies to join the war before the Polish army was defeated; no move by Polish diplomats could have thwarted decisions made at the Abbeville conference of 12 September 1939.

* * *

The year 1939—that *annus terribilis* in Polish history—can be seen as an unprecedented moment of defeat. Poland fell victim to two totalitarian powers. It could not have changed its fate. It stood in the path of both the Nazi and Soviet pursuit of dominion over Europe. Poland was defeated, a fact which was determined by the disproportion in military power. This is the prevalent historical narrative about Poland's fate in 1939. However, it requires some correction.

I will immediately point out that it would be nonsense to say that Poland decided its own fate; that Poland could have chosen solutions that would have saved its independence; that political leaders in Warsaw missed the opportunities that were available to them. Not only is it impossible to maintain such beliefs, but in the light of the knowledge we have today, it would also be a monumental waste of time to debate this topic.

Poland was of major importance on Europe's path to the Second World War, though of course it was not because of Poland's interests that war broke out.

Acceptance of Hitler's and Ribbentrop's demands could have changed the course of events. It could have led to Germany attacking the West as early as the spring of 1939. With access to Polish territory within its 1939 borders, the Germans would have had more favourable opportunities to strike at the Soviet Union than they in fact had in June 1941. The negative example of the Baltic States, whose leaders agreed to Soviet demands for the establishment of Red Army garrisons in October 1939, tells us that the approach taken by Polish leaders was by no means irrational. After Soviet troops entered Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, these countries found themselves incapacitated, and in June 1940 they could do nothing but passively surrender to a fate prepared for them by the enemy.

When explaining Polish foreign policy, historians often overemphasise the notion that in 1939 the Polish nation fell victim to a conspiracy of neighbouring totalitarian powers. In so doing, we lose sight of other great historical truths, namely that in 1938/1939 Poland as a country had space for political manoeuvre; that Poland rejected the possibility of cooperation with Germany even though it received a concrete proposal from Hitler containing compensation. Poles went to war well aware of the terrible consequences it would bring, but also with the conviction

that it was inevitable, aware that a loss of independence in order to preserve peace at all costs was out of the question. Poland is not just a nation-victim, not a nation which corresponds to the slogan of the *Pologne-martyre*, but rather a nation whose stance was “determined in the crucial moments in history.”¹⁹⁶⁴ Poland’s opposition to German territorial demands brought an end to the period of the Third Reich’s peaceful conquests. The history of Europe would look very different today had Poland, at the beginning of 1939, become an ally of the Third Reich.

The nineteenth-century Polish politician Agaton Giller—debating with Ignacy Kraszewski, who spoke often about Poland’s “martyrdom”—argued that such an approach to Poland’s fate was “improper and non-political” since “a policy of martyrdom is not a good policy at all [...]” because “martyrdom can never be understood as a systematic work with a well-defined goal.”¹⁹⁶⁵ Using Giller’s reasoning, we can say that Polish policy in 1939 was not a “martyrdom policy” at all. Rather, it was a well-thought-out and rational concept, one which recognised the existence of *imponderabilia*, but which was also based on a rational balance of profits and losses.

* * *

The foreign policy enunciated by Marshal Piłsudski, and especially the views expressed by Minister Beck, contained many false assumptions and incorrect predictions, of which the historian must be aware. Their belief that the “Nazi revolution” would be directed inwards, and would thus give Poland a period of relative international and political stability, proved incorrect. Beck’s presumption that Hitler would exhibit a certain rationality in his approach to international politics, of which the Polish foreign minister was convinced at the beginning of 1939, also transpired to be wrong. The belief that the USSR would remain neutral in the first stage of a European war in Europe turned out, in reality, to be baseless. The Poles were mistaken in thinking that the Western powers, allied with Poland in 1939, would come to Poland’s aid militarily in their own interests, to shorten the war and defeat Germany on two fronts. It was also wrong to conclude in August 1939 that since “France has made great strides militarily and today has a two-million-strong army gathered on the Maginot Line,” then “if there is war, it will not be possible to stop halfway,” and Poland would receive real assistance.¹⁹⁶⁶

As Michał Zacharias rightly noted, “Beck’s predictions on Hitler’s inevitable defeat, although rational at their base, could only prove true in the distant future [...]. The foreign minister’s calculations lacked the understanding that logical premises, accurate in the long term, were not enough to ensure Poland’s security

1964 See *W cieniu Katynia* (p. 243), in which Stanisław Swianiewicz relates his conversation with Ksawery Pruszyński in the summer of 1942 in Kujbyszew on Polish foreign policy on the eve of war.

1965 Quote from H. Florkowska-Frančić, *Emigracyjna działalność Agatona Gillera po Powstaniu Styczniowym* (Wrocław, etc. 1985), pp. 20–21.

1966 *Diariusz Szembeka*, Vol. 4, p. 701.

[...].”¹⁹⁶⁷ The belief that the Soviets were allegedly interested in Poland's continued existence as a geopolitical “barrier/shield” (*Vorposten*), one that would protect the Soviet Union against German expansion, was also unrealistic.

It is very possible that Beck believed that Poland, even if it succumbed to overwhelming enemy forces as Serbia and Belgium had during the First World War, would regain its independence as a final result of a war which could not be lost by a coalition formed with Great Britain. This belief also transpired to be wrong.

Despite all that, the decisions made in Warsaw were good. An alliance with the Third Reich would have led Poland into the abyss. In the wake of a German victory, there would be no place for the Polish nation in a Europe controlled by the Nazis, even if in 1939 Hitler probably had no well thought-out concept of what to do with Poland after the conquest of Europe. Beck, interned in Romania, was aware of this, and he returned to this matter with the following words: In alliance with Germany, “[...] we would beat Russia, and then we would be grazing cows for Hitler in the Urals”.¹⁹⁶⁸ Having said that, Germany's victory in the next war did not seem possible, all things considered, because what would decide the war was economic power, a fact which did not play in Germany's favour given the powerful grand coalition that was established, as we know, not in 1939 but in 1941.

Had Poland been an ally of a defeated Germany, it would have been in no position to make demands regarding changes to the Polish-German border, the kind which General Władysław Sikorski made while in exile. Such changes were realised through the Potsdam Conference resolutions of August 1945, which marked Poland's western border at the Oder-Neisse line, imposed by Stalin and his policy of *fait accompli*.¹⁹⁶⁹ Had Poland stood alongside the Third Reich in the Second World War, it would have become a very different nation than it is today, a nation with a different psychology, a nation with a sense of deep guilt, burdened by the traumatic experience of having participated in an evil cause, which in our times, marked as they are by the growing significance of history in social life, would allow us to look into our past with no feeling of justified satisfaction.

We know from world history how it looks when a country surrenders part of its territory in order to achieve a greater good. The prime minister of Piedmont, Camillo Cavour, did this in 1859 when he handed over Savoy and Nice to the French Empire in return for assistance against Austria. The battles of Magenta and Solferino paved the way for the unification of Italy. By renouncing part of his homeland, Cavour achieved a great goal: unification.

1967 Zacharias, “Józef Beck i ‘polityka równowagi’”, p. 31.

1968 Beck's statement in a conversation with diplomat Jan Bociański. Quote according to his unpublished memoirs, The Józef Piłsudski Institute (London), kolekcja 50, p. 57.

1969 On Sikorski's efforts in this regard, see S. M. Terry, *Poland's Place in Europe: General Sikorski and the Origin of the Oder-Neisse Line, 1939–1943* (Princeton 1983).

Other examples can be found in the history of twentieth-century diplomacy. The fate of Finland and the case of Romania in the Second World War are particularly telling.

Soviet territorial demands on Finland, first raised as an issue in 1938 and then pursued in 1939, were certainly moderate.¹⁹⁷⁰ Decisive talks on this matter began on 12 October 1939.¹⁹⁷¹ In Helsinki, the logic against offering territorial concessions won the day, and in the end the Finns rejected Soviet demands. They had no doubt that territorial concessions would lead to the loss of independence.

Romania took a different approach in the summer of 1940. King Carol II, in consultation with the Crown Council, acquiesced to the Soviet ultimatum on Bessarabia. Faced with the Hungarian ultimatum on Transylvania, he turned to Germany for arbitration and, in the end, acquiesced again. He did the same regarding the Bulgarian ultimatum on South Dobrogea. Each time he chose to acquiesce in order to avoid war. But did he achieve anything significant? Ultimately, Finland saved its independence, while Romania did not.

* * *

The decisions that determined Poland's fate took place in March 1939, with Poland's participation. The Polish government made three momentous decisions: *Primo*, it rejected Hitler's demands based on the argument that they were incompatible with the maintenance of Poland's independence. *Secundo*, it accepted the British Government's guarantee offer and proposed, in addition, a bilateral mutual assistance agreement, one which would exclude a broad agreement involving the Soviets. *Tertio*, it refused participation in a bloc of states that included the USSR and rejected Stalin's demand that the Red Army be allowed to march through Polish territory. These decisions had serious consequences for Poland, and for Europe.

Polish foreign policy of the interwar era is a thing of the past; it is part of our history. Nonetheless, it provides lessons for the present day which are continually being updated.¹⁹⁷² First of all, the principle "*nic o nas bez nas*" (nothing about us without us) still offers the basis for an effective policy to be pursued by medium-sized countries that find themselves in a difficult geopolitical position. Second, there is a lesson to be drawn from the allied powers having abandoned Poland by not fulfilling their military obligations in September 1939, a lesson which shows that no alliance or agreement is fully reliable and unproblematic. Thirdly, the principle of *imponderabilia* in international relations has retained its value, a principle

1970 M. Jakobson, *The Diplomacy of the Winter War. An Account of the Russo-Finnish War, 1939–1940* (Cambridge, MA 1961). See also B. Piotrowski, *Wojna radziecko-fińska (zimowa) 1939–1940. Legendy, niedomówienia, realia* (Poznan 1997); and A. Kastory, *Finlandia w polityce mocarstw 1939–1940* (Krakow 1993).

1971 V. Tanner, *The Winter War*.

1972 For a recent example, see Sandra Cavallucci's *Polonia 1939: sfida al Terzo Reich. Illusioni, inganni e complicità alla vigilia della seconda guerra mondiale* (Soveria Mannelli 2010).

which is no mere romantic illusion, but rather an important card in Realpolitik; although politics is the art of compromise, not everything can be the object of compromise.

It would be a mistake and an over-simplification to conclude, based on the reality of 1939, that Poles do not recognise the importance of compromise in international relations, but rather put at the centre of their philosophy an “all or nothing” principle based on the insurgent tradition of hopeless struggle and resistance.¹⁹⁷³ We hear such arguments from critical foreign commentators, who are part of a tradition that reaches back to the nineteenth century, according to which Poles are viewed as a revolutionary nation, as the “arsonists” of Europe. But such thinking is unjustified; indeed, it is one of many stereotypes about the Polish people.¹⁹⁷⁴

Situations such as that which Poland faced in 1939 are rare in the history of nations. They are characterised primarily by the fact that there are no solutions leading to compromise, that everything depends on a “single roll of the dice”. The stakes are a country's independence; a nation's long-term fate hangs in the balance. This reality explains why the vast majority of Polish historians believe, for instance, in the correctness of Józef Beck's decision to reject German demands, and why this belief is solid. We cannot help but think that it will not be undermined in the future, as to do so would represent a road to nowhere. Let us trust that the propaganda of “historical revisionism”, carried out at a pathetic level, will not damage the Poles' healthy historical awareness.

1973 The German interwar journalist Friedrich Wilhelm von Oertzen entitled one of his books on Poland: *Alles oder Nichts. Polens Freiheitskampf in 125 Jahren* (Breslau 1934).

1974 J. W. Borejsza, “Sprawa polska w XIX i XX wieku,” *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny* (2001), No: 4: pp. 247–262.

