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ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА ПОЛЬШИ НАКАНУНЕ ЧЕТВЕРТОГО РАЗДЕЛА: МЕЖДУ НАЦИСТСКОЙ ГЕРМАНИЕЙ И СОВЕТСКИМ СОЮЗОМ (1938–1939)

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После Первой мировой войны Польша была восстановлена и относилась к средним государствам Европы как по площади, так и по человеческому и экономическому потенциалу. В начале 1920-х гг. Польская Республика смогла присоединить большие территории Западной Украины, Беларуси и Литвы, а также расширилась за счет спорных германских земель, но ее геополитическое положение было очень уязвимым. Германия и Советский Союз постепенно наращивали военную мощь и приобретали все большее значение в европейской политике, а во второй половине 1930-х гг. стали доминирующими силами в Центральной и Восточной Европе. В таких условиях Польша пыталась поддерживать внешнеполитический баланс в отношениях с обоими государствами и маневрировала от нейтралитета к дружбе с этими великими державами (в основном это касается Германии). В то же время она пыталась действовать как региональное государство, стремясь консолидировать вокруг себя более мелкие дружественные страны, что, однако, не увенчалось успехом. Напротив, из-за постепенного ослабления союза с Францией и враждебной политики по отношению к Чехословакии осенью 1938 г. Польша оказалась в значительной степени изолированной. В 1939 г. Польша уже не могла помешать договоренности Берлина и Москвы о ее новом разделе.

Ключевые слова: межвоенная Польша; нацистская Германия; Советский Союз; международные отношения; территориальный ревизионизм; зоны влияния великих держав.

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ЗНЕШНЯЯ ПАЛІТЫКА ПОЛЬШЧЫ НАПЯРЭДАДНІ ЧАЦВЁРТАГА ПАДЗЕЛУ: ПАМІЖ НАЦЫСЦКАЙ ГЕРМАНІЯЙ І САВЕЦКІМ САЮЗАМ (1938–1939)

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Пасля Першай сусветнай вайны Польшча была адноўлена і адносілася да сярэдніх дзяржаў Еўропы як па плошчы, так і па чалавечым і эканамічным патэнцыяле. У пачатку 1920-х гг. Польская Рэспубліка змагла далучыць вялікія тэрыторыі Заходняй Украіны, Беларусі і Літвы, а таксама пашырылася за кошт спрэчых германскіх зямель, але яе геапалітычнае становішча было вельмі слабым. Германія і Савецкі Саюз паступова павялічвалі ваенную моц і набывалі ўсё большае значэнне ў еўрапейскай палітыцы, а ў другой палове 1930-х гг. сталі дамінаваць у Цэнтральнай і Усходняй Еўропе. У такіх умовах Польшча спрабавала падтрымліваць знешнепалітычны баланс у адносінах з абедзвюма дзяржавамі і манеўравала ад нейтралітэту да сяброўства з імі (у асноўным гэта тычыцца Берліна). У той жа час яна спрабавала дзейнічаць як рэгіянальная дзяржава, імкнучыся кансалідаваць вакол сябе драбнейшыя дружалюбныя краіны, што, аднак, не ўвянчалася поспехам. Наадварот, у выніку паступовага паслаблення саюза з Францыяй і варажай палітыкі ў адносінах да Чэхаславакіі восенню 1938 г. Польшча аказалася ў значнай ступені ізаляванай. Такім чынам, у 1939 г. Польшча ўжо не магла перашкодзіць дамоўленасці Берліна і Масквы аб яе новым падзеле.

Ключавыя словы: міжваенная Польшча; нацысцкая Германія; Савецкі Саюз; міжнародныя адносіны; тэрытарыяльны рэвізіянізм; зоны ўплыву вялікіх дзяржаў.

POLISH FOREIGN POLICY ON THE EVE OF THE 4th DIVISION: BETWEEN NAZI GERMANY AND THE SOVIET UNION (1938–1939)

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After the World War I, Poland was restored and within European countries belonged to medium-sized states in terms of its area, but also human and economic potential. Although at the beginning of the 1920s, the Second Polish Republic was able to gain large areas of Western Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania from Russia and also acquired part of the disputed territories with Germany, its geopolitical position was very vulnerable. Initially defeated or the bypassed superpowers of Germany and the Soviet Union gradually gained in importance and military power in European politics, until in the second half of the 1930s they became dominant in dealing with the foreign political affairs of Central and Eastern Europe. Surrounded by these revisionist neighbours, Polish foreign policy tried to maintain a balance towards both and maneuvered from neutrality to friendship with these great powers (mainly towards Berlin). At the same time, it tried to act as a regional power, with the ambition of concentrating smaller friendly states on itself, but without success. On the contrary, by the gradual loosening of the alliance with France or even the hostile policy towards Czechoslovakia in the fall of 1938, Poland became largely isolated. Finally, in 1939, it was no longer able to prevent the agreement of Berlin and Moscow on its new division between the neighbouring powers.

Keywords: inter-war Poland; nazi Germany; Soviet Union; international relations; territorial revisionism; great power's zones of influence.

Polish foreign policy in the 1930s

At first glance, the position of interwar Poland in the international political system of Europe could appear to be solid. A relatively large country with 35 mln inhabitants and probably the fifth most powerful army on the continent could (and did) aspire to the position of a regional power. This demographic and military potential (the ability to mobilise up to 2 mln soldiers) supported

the great power ambitions of the Warsaw governments, which for this reason refused to bind themselves in multilateral blocs of collective security. Thus, throughout the interwar period, Poland played the role of an important factor on the European power chessboard, even though the state's economic performance in particular significantly undermined this position [1, s. 15].

In the course of the 1930s and the 1940s the European geopolitical area experienced some significant changes resulted in the limited development of the Republic of Poland within the foreign policy. We primarily mean economic and political strengthening of Germany leading to growing expansive tendencies aimed at the east, and also revisionist plans of the Soviet Union in the context of the results of Polish-Soviet war and the consequent Treaty of Riga signed in 1921. Following development of not only Central Europe but Europe itself was significantly affected by union of three factors mutually influencing – the great depression, the raise of fascist movements across Europe and the raise of international tension. The fact was that the states of Central Europe appeared in the worst situation – surrounded by totalitarian regimes – the fascist regime in Italy, the nazi regime in Germany and the communist regime under the Stalin dictatorship in the USSR [2, s. 423].

Poland, in particular, was in a very unpleasant situation, which was in the sight of the foreign policy of both Nazi Germany and the communist Soviet Union. Both states had territorial claims against Poland, or they expressed displeasure with its restoration after the World War I at the expense of defeated Germany or Russia weakened by the civil war. After the failure of initial efforts to close the so called Eastern Locarno under French patronage, Polish foreign policy began to be oriented towards achieving acceptable relations with both neighbouring revisionist powers and was quite successful in this (in 1932 it signed a non-aggression pact with Moscow¹ and in 1934 similar with Germany). At first glance, the peaceful existence of Poland was largely ensured. However, the reality was that both totalitarian and revisionist regimes never stopped considering Poland as problematic for them. The nazis considered the very existence of the Polish state to be a significant obstacle in achieving German «vital» interests². Moscow, on the other hand, constantly railed against the alleged pro-German policy of Warsaw, criticised the government and foreign policy of Poland, which considered as «anti-people», with insufficient interest in good relations with the Soviets³.

This situation automatically led to need for reassessment of the foreign policy of the Republic of Poland in those days and also creation of such a foreign doctrine that would introduce the possibility of escaping

from the complicated geopolitical situation. At that time there were three basic geopolitical scenarios for the middle-size Republic of Poland: seeking for support of one of the neighbouring powers, an accord with both great neighbours, establishment of the defensive bloc created by small states of the region under the command of Poland aimed against of Germany and the Soviet Union.

When assessing Polish foreign policy in 1930s, or shortly before the outbreak of World War II, it can be stated that the second and third scenario was applied by Polish diplomacy. In the course of the 1930s minister of foreign affairs J. Beck introduced an alternative based on creating the two main powers within the European political scene. The alternative included a coalition of revisionist states led by nazi Germany on one side and a coalition of Western powers led by Great Britain and France on the other one. His idea lay in the necessity of creating another coalition among these two groups that he called Third Europe. That is precisely conception of so called Third Europe, or *Intermarum*, that was supposed to guarantee the sovereignty and safety of the (Second) Republic of Poland in the context of changing geopolitical environment as well as worsening depression on the European continent. This coalition should have been based on cooperation of the Republic of Poland with Hungary and Romania alongside with support of Italy and Yugoslavia [3, s. 134–135].

The basic premise of the J. Beck's conception of so called Third Europe lay in the fact that the geographic and geopolitical area of Central Europe is formed by the bigger number of smaller states that are, in many cases, the tool of foreign policy of the bigger powers. This is the reason to concentrate smaller states into the bloc led by Poland directly⁴.

Taking previous facts into consideration, it is undisputable that the project of Third Europe was a very ambitious but realised with considerable difficulty conditioned by several momentous reasons:

- the Republic of Poland lacked sufficient economic and military potential for realising this idea and this fact showed unreal political ambitions of authorities of the Second Republic of Poland;
- it was a big mistake not to take Czechoslovakia as an important player in Central European geopolitical region into consideration;

¹According to that agreement, both sides officially renounced war as a tool for resolving mutual conflicts and pledged to refrain from any commitment directed against the other side. In addition, all political disputes were to be solved by peaceful and diplomatic means in the future. See: *Materski W.* Poland and the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and early 1930s // *White spots black spots* (difficult matters in Polish-Russian relations, 1918–2008) / ed. by A. D. Rotfeld, A. Torkunov. Pittsburgh : Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 2015. P. 64–67.

²Foreign minister G. Stresemann was also among them. See: *Wandycz P. S.* Poland in international politics // *Canad. Slavonic Rev.* 1972. No. 3. P. 410.

³Archiv Ministerstva zahraničních věcí Praha (A MZV). F. Politické zpravodajství – Moskva. Box 36. Periodická zpráva za měsíc duben – červen 1936 ; *Ibidem.* Box 36. Periodická zpráva za měsíc leden – březen 1936 (At a plenary session of the Central Executive Committee on 10 January 1936, Prime Minister V. Molotov effectively identified Poland as an agent of Germany's expansionist policy towards the Soviet Union, including the support of Polish nationalists for plans to conquer some Russian territories.) ; *Ibidem.* Periodická zpráva za měsíc červenec – září 1936 (Overall, in the Soviet press of the second half of the 1930s, Poland was already presented as a non-independent foreign-political entity that was fully subordinated to German interests.) ; *Ibidem.* Osmý mimořádný sjezd sovětů.

⁴See: *Kornat M.* Realny projekt czy wizja ex post? Koncepcja «Trzeciej Europy» Józefa Becka (1937–1938) // *Spraw. Komis. Środokowo-Europ. Pol. Akad. Umiejętności.* 2007. T. 17. S. 149–187.

- the conception collided with political aims of the Little Entente as well as German Mitteleuropa;
- the Polish expansive effort was perceived negatively by more smaller states in Central Europe;
- the heterogeneity of political, economical, national, cultural or historical perspective was typical of the states intended to be concentrated in this bloc;
- the conception of Third Europe failed in its realisation because Hungary and Romania having their own ambitions joined the side of Nazi Germany shortly before the outbreak of World War II [3, s. 136–138].

At the beginning of 1938 it became clear that power ambitions of Nazi Germany would pose a lot bigger problem as other European powers supposed and would make urgent threats against European democracies. As for the A. Hitler's book «Mein Kampf» it was evident that his expansive ambitions would infringe the revised terms of the Treaty of Versailles. The aggressive behaviour of Germany was primarily focused on the immediate neighbouring states – Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland [2, s. 425].

Nature of Polish-German alliance started changing due to the fact that Germany was obtaining more powerful position within European geopolitical area and it became obvious that the position of the Republic of Poland was considerably weakened by increasing power potential of its Western neighbour. So in the course of the summer 1938 the authorities of the Polish diplomacy were seeking new ways of realising their foreign policy offering an escape from this unfavourable situation primarily in the context of increasing threat of a German possible attack on Poland. The Polish leaders remained hopeful that A. Hitler's anti-Polish statements although becoming more and more intensified would keep the nature of propaganda despite the fact, that at the time a lot of European statesmen were aware of threat of war conflict that became a reality in a few months [4, s. 303].

Events resulting in the outbreak of a world-wide conflict escalated gradually in the course of the years

1938–1939 and reflected the failure of the Treaty of Versailles itself.

At the beginning of 1938 the Soviet attitude towards the crisis on the European continent was relatively vague but in May 1938 Polish ambassador in Moscow W. Grzybowski informed the Polish government that the Soviets were closely monitoring the worsening situation in Central Europe and their strategy was based on playing of a waiting game how the conflict would develop and consequently they would approve the most advantageous strategy for them [5, p. 110].

At that time Moscow went all out to avoid being included in the serious international conflict. In this context it is necessary to comment that in the course of the 1930s the Soviet Union succeeded in overcoming the international isolation and gradually entrenched in the system of international relations⁵. Subsequently, its internal problems resulting in persecution and purges within political⁶ and military structures and affecting also the number of officers of the Red Army, put the Soviet Union in a negative light in the eyes of the international commonwealth [2, s. 424].

In connection with the ongoing «cleansing» processes, it is also necessary to be aware of the changes that occurred in the second half of the years in Moscow's relationship to the Polish question. While before A. Hitler's rise to power and Berlin's evident preparations for war expansion, I. Stalin and his surroundings considered Poland to be the greatest danger to the Soviet Union in the West, the massive onset of the Nazi threat changed these priorities. While in internal Soviet politics the solution to the Polish question was treated as harshly as in the previous period (tens of thousands of Poles on the territory of the USSR accused of spying for Poland fell victim to it), in international Moscow politics already considered Warsaw as a secondary enemy, with which, unlike Germany, it will not be a problem to deal with if necessary [6, s. 218–219].

Czechoslovak crisis of 1938 and Poland

The greatest failure of the European powers was a long-term acceptance of German revisionist effort in revising the Versailles system for the purpose of avoiding the outbreak of World War II known as the policy of appeasement of the Western powers. The policy of appeasement resulted in several following events that foreshadowed the development in Europe for the

following period. The crucial reason was unwillingness of Great Britain to be too closely engaged in European affairs as well as the effort to avoid an international conflict within Europe. Last but not least, it was also an approach of British diplomats performing various prejudice against the representatives of succession states.

⁵In this context it means establishing diplomatic relations, including the USA, Czechoslovakia or Romania. In 1933 the Soviet Union became a member of the League of Nations. See: *Křen J. Dvě století střední Evropy*. Praha : Argo, 2019. P. 424.

⁶MZV. F. Politické zpravodajství – Moskva. Box 36. Proces proti trockistům – zinovievcům 24.8.1936 (Even the highest representatives of the Communist party, especially open or potential party competitors of I. Stalin, did not escape the accusations. G. Zinoviev, L. Kamenev and many others were accused of planning assassinations of I. Stalin and his entourage, for which they were supposed to join forces with Trotskyists in exile and even with the German gestapo. Their first victim was supposed to be S. Kirov, who, according to the indictment, was murdered on the direct instructions of L. Trotsky and G. Zinoviev.) ; Ibidem. Box 37. Nový proces s trockistami v Moskvě (New and new processes with the so called Trotskyists, Zinovievists, etc. they also had their foreign political context, when they took into account the creation of the Pact against the Comintern and the connection of domestic vandals with foreign agents sent or financed by Germany and Japan.).

The expansionist efforts of nazi Germany were first fully manifested in March 1938, when Austria was annexed to the Third Reich. This violated the Versailles peace treaty of 1919, which expressly forbade the union of these nations. Despite the fact that the former countries of the Entente were directly responsible for observing the rules and principles of the Versailles system, apart from diplomatic notes of protest, there were no fundamental steps taken by them that would in any way sanction Germany for violating the peace treaties. However, the Anschluss of Austria represented only the beginning of events that escalated over the following months to such dimensions that they finally plunged Europe into war.

Another and perhaps the most striking manifestation of the failure of the foreign policy of the Western democratic powers was the convening of a conference of four decisive European powers (Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy) in Munich at the end of September 1938. The conference was supposed to resolve the issue of ethnic Germans living in the border areas of Czechoslovakia. Indeed, A. Hitler's Germany persistently claimed that citizens of German nationality living in the Sudetenland region were discriminated by the Czechoslovak government, and for the sake of their protection they demanded the annexation of the mentioned regions to the German Empire. Based on the negotiations of the Munich conference, a decision was made, on the basis of which Czechoslovakia had to cede approximately 30 % of its territory, almost 1/3 of the population and 2/5 of the important industrial infrastructure to A. Hitler. Not to mention the fatal losses on the military defense infrastructure in the border area. The Western powers counted on the fact that these territorial gains would satisfy A. Hitler's demands and that no armed conflict would occur. In reality, however, the outcome of the Munich conference was a huge victory for A. Hitler, as he achieved territorial gains without using of military force, and with the approval of the Western powers. For that reason, Munich is still today a symbol of the failure of the policy of appeasement, as an example of the wrong approach of democratic countries towards dictatorships [2, s. 442–446].

As far as Poland and the USSR are concerned, both countries were on the fringes of the interest of the Western powers in the matter of the Munich agreement. Moscow was bypassed in deciding the fate of Czechoslovakia and very disillusioned with the new European «concert of great powers». Ultimately, the retreat of the West and the abandonment of Central Europe to A. Hitler caused a divergency of Soviet foreign policy from the promotion of collective security to an inclination towards the purpose-built superpower agreements [7, p. 251–252].

In the case of Poland, the reason for its bypass was mainly the conclusion of the Polish-German agreement of 1934, so it was assumed that the Poles would take a friendly approach to German claims. Overall, however, it can be concluded that in this period Warsaw tried to resolve its territorial disputes with Czechoslovakia without direct dependence on the Munich agreement. Shortly after the announcement of the results of the Munich conference, Poland took separate steps to assert its own interests. As early as 30 September 1938, the Polish ambassador in Prague submitted an ultimatum to the Czechoslovak government demanding the withdrawal of territory inhabited by ethnic Poles [8, s. 116]. Due to its unfavourable foreign policy situation, the Czechoslovak government accepted the ultimatum, thus giving its consent to change the Czechoslovak-Polish borders. This step of the Polish government was also a kind of protest against the Munich conference of the great powers, because through it the territorial organisation of Central Europe was revised, but without the participation of Poland [5, p. 110]. On the one hand, it can be concluded that J. Beck's Polish foreign policy was successful in the case of gains at the expense of Czechoslovakia, but at the cost of considerable isolation of Warsaw. Poland got into the role of the European «jackal», which fed on the remains of Czechoslovakia after this state had already been «torn apart» by the much more powerful nazi Germany. This participation in the German anti-Czechoslovak policy did not bring Poland any better position even from the point of view of Berlin, let alone from the West and especially from Moscow [9, s. 287–288].

The decision made by the Republic of Poland about the territorial intervention against Czechoslovakia went according to A. Hitler's plans, and so Germany gave its support to Poland in this case. But regarding the Czechoslovak crisis the USSR supported the Czechoslovak government and before Poland annexed the region of Cieszyn, the USSR had warned the Polish government that in case of the Polish aggression towards Czechoslovakia the Soviet-Polish non-aggression pact from the year 1932 would be considered null and void⁷. In the end, Moscow did not carry out the threat and reassessed its participation in regulating the crisis in Czechoslovakia [10, p. 131–132].

From that moment on, Poland oscillated between the two camps contrary to each other formed on European continent. On the one hand it was nazi Germany pushing its expansive claims forward and on the other Great Britain and France trying to keep peace in Europe. In the context of following event it was clear that also in this case Polish diplomacy would not succeed in keeping balance [5, p. 111].

⁷In addition, there were occasional reports from third countries that Moscow was ready to respond with its own military action against Poland in the event of a Polish military intervention. Compare: Monachium 1938. Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne / ed. by Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski. Warszawa : PWN, 1985. S. 482.

The satisfaction of Poles from the conquest in Czechoslovakia was soon disturbed by the public in Poland criticising readiness of the Polish army for possible military conflict and subsequently also by worsening

strategic position of Poland within the reassessed system of the balance in Central Europe after the Munich agreement⁸. It became clear that Poland would be another target of A. Hitler's aggression [11, s. 465].

Poland between two millstones

It would be very important to emphasise the fact that the Polish diplomacy (based on the course of events) tried to improve international relations even with the USSR. Bilateral negotiations concluded that both countries would follow the path of mutual friendly relations under the terms of existing treaties, including the Polish-Soviet Non-aggression pact of 1932. In essence it was based on «policy of equilibrium» or «equal distance» promoted by J. Piłsudski although at the time it sided a bit more with Germany [10, p. 135].

Based on the Versailles system logic and principles, created without participation of the USSR, the Western powers had not consider the USSR to be an equal player of the European politics. It is also necessary to point out that at the time the Western powers (especially Great Britain and France) believed they would rectify the failures of the Versailles system and satisfy revisionist tendencies of Germany without any support by the USSR.

At that time, the USSR focused mainly on its own interests and played a specific role in the ongoing processes of grouping states in the international system. The specificity of the USSR's status at that time consisted mainly in the fact that, even though it was a significant political, economic and military power, its influence on the European political scene was largely delimited by isolation, stemming from the nature of the regime and the country's position outside the Versailles system. The unfavourable position of the USSR was partly influenced by the numerous anti-bolshevik attitudes of European politicians, most prominently A. Hitler. It was no coincidence that during the Munich crisis, A. Hitler probed with the Polish ambassador in Berlin about the possibilities of joining Poland to the so called Pact against the Comintern, directed against the USSR [5, p. 108–109].

In the context of the above-mentioned events it is important to answer the question what the real consequences of the Munich conference were. We believe that the Munich conference represented one of the most considerable consequences of the appeasement policy promoted by the Western powers. In addition it was also the example of the Versailles system failure as a whole.

The Munich agreement foreshadowed a new nature of the European political order and was also seen as the catalyst for destabilisation of Europe before the outbreak of the World War II.

As a consequence of the Munich agreement Great Britain and France suffered a political defeat. Thanks to the failure of the appeasement policy France became «the second category power». On the other hand Munich certainly represented a great victory of nazi Germany. They strengthened their geopolitical and strategic position in the region and increased their military capacity. The Munich outcomes had serious consequences for Polish and (mainly) Soviet foreign policy.

From the perspective of the USSR the Munich conference became the example of the failure of the Western democracies and so one of the causes for the gradual rapprochement of the USSR with nazi Germany [7, p. 252–253] and consequently, also so called the fourth division of Poland. This hypothesis could be proved by records of French ambassador in Moscow R. Coulondre. Shortly after the Munich conference he was approached by Soviet diplomat V. Potemkin who said the following: «My dear friend. What have you done? Now I do not see any other option for you, except the 4th division of Poland»⁹ [12, s. 354].

But the Munich conference did not appease the Germany pursuits of expansion as it was wrongly expected by the Western powers. A. Hitler kept on increasing his influence within Central Europe, especially in Hungary and Romania. This political development did not please the Poles who tried to reach treaties with both countries (Hungary and Romania) in accord with the conception of the Third Europe. The alliance of this kind should have helped Poland in their aspiration to earn status of an independent power in Central Europe.

During the following period A. Hitler gradually increased pressure on Poland. In October 1938 J. von Ribbentrop introduced his idea of an official agreement between Germany and Poland concerning moot questions. With an aim to keep correct relations with nazi Germany official talks were held between Polish ambassador to Germany J. Lipski and J. von Ribbentrop in October

⁸There were not many voices in the Polish government camp criticising Poland's anti-Czechoslovak policy in the fall of 1938, but they were also here and not insignificant. One of them was e.g. an important pre-war and especially later military leader of the Polish exile after the death of general K. Sikorski – general K. Sosnkowski. He criticised not only the participation in the division of Czechoslovakia alongside Germany, but rather advocated the creation of a closer Polish-Czechoslovak-French alliance, which would pacify Germany's aggressive plans, but also the increase in the importance of Soviet politics in territory, as this would divert Prague and Paris politics from closer cooperation with Moscow. See: *Miszewski D. Poglądy generała Kazimierza Sosnkowskiego na temat strategicznego znaczenia Czechosłowacji dla bezpieczeństwa Polski w latach 1938–1943 // Między przymusową przyjaźnią a prawdziwą solidarnością. Cześć – Polacy – Słowacy 1938/39–1945–1989 / ed. by P. Błażek. Warszawa : Inst. Pamięci Narodowej, 2007. S. 77.*

⁹Hereinafter translated by us. – M. K., M. S.

1938. The talks were focused on redefining principles of the Polish-German alliance.

New conditions of the mutual relations guaranteed Poland the status quo in their border definition and the German-Polish non-aggression pact of 1934 was extended to further 25 years. But none of those was for free. The German claims were as follows:

the incorporation of the Free City of Danzig into the Third Reich;

the construction of an extraterritorial traffic line between Poland and Germany (motorway and railway) through the Polish corridor in Pomerania [13, s. 854].

At the time Polish foreign minister J. Beck expected that the agreement would guarantee some balance in the Polish-German relations as well as it would work to Polish advantage. From today's perspective it is obvious that exactly from this period on we could recognise beginning of change of German representatives' attitude towards Poland. Since this moment it became more and more aggressive. So the Polish political representatives had to seek an answer to the question of credibility of the alliance with Germany and find out to what extent the Germans act against the Polish interests. The Germans emphasised that the refusal of such an agreement and failure to accept the German conditions would lead Germany to reappraise a guarantee of Poland's borders. The unenviable position of minister J. Beck in the course of negotiations was later described by a Polish historian S. Żerko as follows: «It would be very difficult to find a better example of disorientation, unconcern and overestimation of the role of (his) own country» [10, p. 137].

The final decision – not to accept German claims – was reached at the conference of political leaders of the Republic of Poland on 8 October 1938. It is necessary to emphasise that the decision to refuse German claims significantly influenced the future development of Polish-German relations and, in essence, it changed the dynamics of crisis within the European continent. Even from today's point of view it is questionable if that decision by the Polish government to refuse German claims was the right one. In any case we could assume had the Republic of Poland accepted these claims, Poland would have become a vassal state of the Third Reich and lost its sovereignty and independence even earlier than it really happened [10, p. 137].

After the Munich conference A. Hitler gained sufficient self-confidence to continue in policy of the Nazi Third Reich *lebensraum* diffusion. As a consequence, in November 1938, Poland lost its hopes to reach an agreement to make an alliance with Hungary. Hungary, together with Germany and Italy cooperated in organisation of the Vienna award which led to annexation

of some parts of Southern Slovakia and Carpathian Ruthenia by Hungary [13, p. 857–858].

Later on, in March 1939, after division of Czechoslovakia¹⁰, the Western powers realised that the further concessions would not guarantee peace in Europe. Based on the rapidly changing events the geopolitical area, including the Polish territory, became the matter of interest of all European powers. Great Britain became the most active player and together with France, at the beginning of August 1939, they guaranteed economic and military support to Poland as well as military aid in case of German attack. The leaders of Great Britain and France were well aware of importance to establish the system of security guarantees with an aim to prevent German hegemony in Europe. In the context of break up of Czechoslovakia it became obvious that the appeasement policy promoted by Western powers would not be tenable any more and had to be changed for a different strategy based on creation of military alliances [14, p. 203–204].

All this resulted in the growing importance of the USSR, not only from the perspective of Western democracies but also from the point of view of Nazi Germany. As the threat of war was rising the governments of Great Britain and France were pressed to change their perception of the USSR and consider it a factor of a broader anti-Hitler coalition. On the other hand Germany felt the danger of possible alliance of the Western democracies and bolsheviks and it sought its own way to reach an agreement with the USSR.

The alliance of the three totalitarian regimes – Nazism, fascism and Bolshevism – would have represented sufficient opposition to Western democracies [15, s. 4].

The representatives of the USSR were well aware of their advantage based on the period imbalance of powers in Europe and they used it during the ongoing negotiations in the process of political and military alliances creation. M. Litvinov in his correspondence with the Soviet ambassador in Berlin wrote: «It is quite clear to us that German aggression in Europe could not be stopped without us. The later their request for our help the higher price they would have to pay» [10, p. 141].

It emerged that his words were not too far from reality. As early as in the spring of 1939 Great Britain introduced a proposal of an agreement of mutual assistance between France, Great Britain, the USSR, Poland and Romania. I. Stalin, well aware of his importance played for time before taking decision who he would finally side with in the emerging conflict. In this context it is important to mention that peace in Europe was not the aim of the Soviet leadership. I. Stalin favoured a war because due the Peace of Riga of 1921 bolshevik revolution could not be exported to West. Russians, as well as

¹⁰To Poland itself the break up of Czechoslovakia brought the opportunity to improve its own strategic position in the region by spreading the Polish influence to the areas of Carpathian Ruthenia and Ukraine. Similar to previous foreign-policy conceptions also this idea failed in conditions then. See: Prazmowska A. J. Poland's foreign policy: September 1938 – September 1939 // The Hist. Journ. 1986. No. 4. P. 854.

Germans, longed for world dominance in accordance with their ideas. In the summer of 1939 a diplomatic play was initiated by the USSR in which the Soviet diplomats approached the Western democracies with a proposal of an agreement concerning mutual cooperation and, at the same time, they attended secret negotiations with representatives of Germany. The proviso that all signatories would provide immediate aid in case of German attack should have been included in the agreement with Western powers. To meet requirements of that proviso I. Stalin requested that affected countries of the so called buffer-zone would accept Red Army presence on their territories [15, s. 4–5].

Despite this requirement asked for a radical change in Great Britain and France foreign policy it was apparent to both governments that its approval would de facto represent their acceptance of a later occupation of those buffer-zone countries. The countries situated in the immediate vicinity of the USSR maintained the same position. The Polish government representatives were not only afraid of Soviet occupation but also of deteriorating relations with nazi Germany. Besides Poland never pursued agreements conducted on a multilateral basis in solving European security issues, but rather favoured bilateral accords. Concerning the stance of the USSR the first outlines of the Soviet strategy in foreign

politics were formed in April 1939. At that time the Soviet representatives understood that they would have to choose just one of two options – either they would side with the Western powers in their intention to maintain the status quo or join nazi Germany in its pursuit to destroy it [5, p. 122].

Due to all aforementioned factors the negotiations were lengthy, unambiguous and vague. Often the participating parties could not come to consensus in partial formulations of the agreement. This led to ceaseless prolongation of the negotiations without ever reaching any tangible results. Among the representatives of those three powers climate of mistrust and reluctance to accept an agreement which could be some disadvantage to them prevailed [10, p. 142–143]. Even in course of negotiations it became obvious that I. Stalin's intention was to spread his influence on the Baltic countries so the fear for possible Soviet revisionism prevailed among those countries. It was quite difficult for these countries, including Poland, to accept any security guarantees by the USSR owing to their past experience when the Soviets posed the biggest threat to their sovereignty and independence [4, s. 303].

All in all the talks between the Western powers and the USSR, even after prolonged negotiations once again came to a standstill.

Nazi-Soviet solution of the Polish question

In addition, at the time of negotiations, British and French delegates were not provided with information that, at the same time, Soviets went on secret negotiation with nazi Germany¹¹. Before the negotiations with nazi Germany started, People's commissar for foreign affairs M. Litvinov had been removed from his position. Because of his slight favour of Western politics and due to his Jewish origin M. Litvinov was dismissed and replaced by V. Molotov who assumed the position of People's commissar for foreign affairs and symbolically opened the door to negotiations with nazi Germany. In mid-July 1939 V. Molotov evaluated ongoing negotiations with representatives of the Western powers as follows: «All these endless negotiations will apparently come to nothing. Then they'll have to take the consequences» [15, s. 5–6].

The Soviets already assumed at that time that the Western powers would not be willing to give the Soviet Union permission to carry out expansionist plans and spread the bolshevik revolution. One can fully agree with the statement that «Stalin and Molotov played a cynical game on two chessboards at the same time» [15, s. 7]. In addition, the unnecessary dragging out of mutual talks and lengthy negotiations between the European powers gave A. Hitler enough time to plan a German attack on Poland. Information and instructions regarding the plan for the future attack on Poland were already published by A. Hitler in April 1939, under the name «Fall Weiss» [16, s. 254].

The reasons for which the Soviets started negotiations with Germany resulted mainly from the implementation of the foreign policy of the USSR, which primarily followed the achievement of Soviet state interests, i. e. expansion of communist power. I. Stalin was not really interested in keeping the peace in Europe, his goal was rather to undermine the Versailles system and expand his sphere of influence [17]. At the same time, he wanted at all costs to prevent the question of Poland from being resolved in a similar way to the question of Czechoslovakia in 1938, that is, without the participation of the USSR. Taking these factors into account, Stalin finally rejected cooperation through the alliance of Great Britain, France, and Poland, and decided to cooperate with nazi Germany [5, p. 123].

As the negotiations started both parties learnt that their territorial claims and national interests were quite congruent which opened the doors towards further cooperation. The only vexed question remained the Baltic states being considered by both participants a legitimate part of their territories. J. von Ribbentrop finally came up with a compromise involving partition of those territories along the Western Dvina [15, s. 7].

A significant breakthrough for all players of this diplomatic game finally came on 19 August 1939. On the same day J. Beck, Polish minister of foreign affairs delivered to British and French diplomats accredited to Poland the final Poland's refusal to let Red Army troops pass through its territory. On that occasion he said:

¹¹The Polish diplomacy found out this information via the well informed papal diplomacy. See: *Kosman M.* Dziejny Polska. Praha : Uniw. Karlova, 2021. S. 303.

«Currently, marshal Voroshilov clearly intends to reach a peaceful settlement of his 1920 objectives» [15, s. 9]. Subsequently, in Berlin the trade and credit agreement between Soviets and Germany was signed and V. Molotov sent to Berlin his proposal of the non-aggression pact with Germany.

J. von Ribbentrop flew to Moscow on 23 August and the non-aggression pact between Germany and the USSR was signed afterwards. This pact became known as the Molotov – Ribbentrop pact and it could be considered as the starting point of the fourth division of Poland.

The non-aggression pact was to be in force for both sides for the period of 10 years and, at the same time both parties agreed not to enter any alliance which could be aimed against their counterpart, either directly or indirectly¹². In the light of later events, which shaped geopolitical area of Central Europe in following months, it is important to discuss the secret proviso concerning division of the sphere of interests in East Europe between A. Hitler and I. Stalin. They agreed that Poland would be divided along the rivers Narva, Visla and San. Based on the agreement the USSR sphere of interest would cover the territories of East Poland, Es-

tonia, Latvia, Finland and Bessarabia and, on the other hand Germany would take over territories of Western Poland and Lithuania. Poland itself would be divided by the river Vistula. Warsaw, the Polish capital would also be divided into two parts – German and Soviet ones [15, s. 10].

The outcome of the German-Soviet agreement concerning division of the sphere of interests was the outbreak of the war in Europe. By signing the non-aggression pact A. Hitler was given a free hand in invasion of Poland, he avoided war on two fronts and thanks to the trade agreement got access to strategic natural resources in the USSR. I. Stalin got his portion too, spreading his sphere in influence within the buffer-zone.

Thus, returning to the original consideration of the position of interwar Poland between the two millstones represented by the revisionist nazi Germany and the communist Soviet Union, one can agree with the words of the French historian L. Eisenmann that Poland was too weak to become a great power, but on the other hand too strong to agree with the role of client of its more powerful neighbours [18, s. 213]. The result of this fateful geopolitical situation was the further division of Poland at the beginning of the World War II.

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¹²The signing of the pact between Moscow and Berlin caused a shock not only in Poland and the West, but significantly weakened the perception of the Soviet Union in Czechoslovakia as well. While until the summer of 1939 the Soviet consul general in Prague could inform Moscow of great pro-Soviet sympathies towards the Soviet Union for its stance during the Munich crisis or its refusal to liquidate Czechoslovakia, after the signing of the pact was published, it was clear to the Czechs that the Soviets had allowed A. Hitler to control Central Europe for a long time. See: *Marjina V. V. Pakt Ribbentrop – Molotov: česko-slovenský ohlas // 1939 – Rok zlomu* / ed. by M. Syrný. Banská Bystrica : Múzeum SNP, 2019. S. 56–57. Of course, the direct participation of the Soviet Union in the German liquidation of Poland based on the pact was perceived even worse. Even some leading Slovak communists had problems with accepting such a great power policy of Moscow, despite party loyalty and purposeful propaganda of the Comintern. E. g. the respected deputy V. Clementis, who was in French exile, publicly spoke out against the alliance with A. Hitler. See: *Syrný M. Slovenskí komunisti 1939–1944*. Banská Bystrica : Uniw. Mateja Bela, 2013. S. 23–24.