

## STUDIES AND ARTICLES

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### The Sudeten Crisis in 1938 and the Problem of the Red Army's Passage through Poland

**Abstract:** W latach pokrywających się z kryzysem międzynarodowym (1934–1938) doniosłe znaczenie uzyskała sprawa przemarszu Armii Czerwonej przez terytorium Polski na wypadek gdyby Związek Sowiecki przystąpił do wojny w sojuszu z Francją (albo Francją i Wielką Brytanią) przeciw Niemcom. Problem ten stanął na porządku dziennym latem 1938, kiedy wystąpił konflikt o Sudety. Artykuł rozpatruje to zagadnienie po raz pierwszy – w osobnym studium – w historiografii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Polska, ZSRR, Francja, kryzys międzynarodowy, 1938.

**Abstract:** A critical issue that arose during the international crisis of 1934–38 was a potential passage of Red Army troops through Polish territory in case the USSR entered war as an ally of France (or France and Great Britain) against Germany. It became especially relevant in the summer of 1938 with the emergence of the Sudeten Crisis. The present article is the first historiographic study to discuss this issue as a separate subject.

**Keywords:** Poland, USSR, France, international crisis, 1938.

The Sudeten Crisis introduced the issue of a potential passage of Soviet troops through Poland as a point of discussion on the European diplomatic scene. The aim of the present paper is to study the presence of this particular

strategic eventuality in international politics during the Sudeten Crisis.<sup>1</sup> Historical research of the international crisis of 1938 – to the extent concerning a potential Red Army passage – has not yet brought us a thorough analysis of the issue of Polish diplomatic actions taken in this regard. It is worth pointing out that the subject has been merely mentioned in passing by Stefania Stanisławska and Henryk Batowski in their seminal works, although, naturally, both studies are clearly permeated by the ideology of the era in which they were written.<sup>2</sup> In the last 25 years, Piotr Majewski has published several influential works on the international position of Czechoslovakia in 1938, but they do not make virtually any reference to the issue discussed in the present paper.<sup>3</sup> Wojciech Mazur's recent preliminary study of the attitude toward Poland displayed by General Maurice Gamelin, Commander-in-Chief of the French Army, does not name the question of a potential Soviet passage through Polish territory among the commander's strategic ideas.<sup>4</sup> It is, therefore, high time to return to this subject. The amount of material found has given the lie to the initial fear of insufficient sources – their amount should be substantial enough to help reconstruct the course of events.

## I. Poland – France – USSR. Beginnings of an International Crisis (Spring 1938)

One of the most consequential questions for international politics during the Sudeten Crisis was the issue of the USSR fulfilling its military commitments towards Czechoslovakia codified in the Treaty of 16 May 1935. Implementing the pact's provisions generated insurmountable difficulties, the blame for which was *ex-post* put on Poland. According to such a line of reasoning, the Czechoslovak state was abandoned, partially stripped of territory, and eventually partitioned due to Poland's obstructionist stance – or, more precisely, the government in Warsaw's refusal to allow the Soviets to pass their troops through the Polish territory.

<sup>1</sup> An introduction to the subject of the present paper's analysis features in the author's article titled: 'Koncepcja przemarszu Armii Czerwonej przez terytorium Polski (1934–1939)', in: *Politycy, dyplomaci i żołnierze. Studia i szkice z historii stosunków międzynarodowych w XX i XXI wieku ofiarowane Profesorowi Andrzejowi Maciejowi Brzezińskiemu w 70. rocznicę urodzin*, ed. by D. Jeziorny, S.M. Nowinowski, and R.P. Żurawski vel Grajewski (Łódź, 2017), pp. 327–45.

<sup>2</sup> S. Stanisławska, *Wielka i mała polityka Józefa Becka: marzec–maj 1938* (Warszawa, 1962), pp. 193ff.; H. Batowski, *Rok 1938 – dwie agresje hitlerowskie* (Poznań, 1985), pp. 257–60.

<sup>3</sup> P. Majewski, *Nierozegrana Kampania. Możliwości ochronne Czechosłowacji jesienią 1938 roku* (Warszawa, 2004); id., *Zmarnowana szansa? Możliwości obrony Czechosłowacji jesienią 1938 roku* (Gdańsk, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> W. Mazur, "'Sentymentu dla niej nie miał i nie ma...". Generał Maurice Gamelin wobec sojuszu Francji i Rzeczypospolitej (1935 r. – wrzesień 1939 r.)', *Dzieje Najnowsze*, vol. 55, no. 4 (2023), pp. 17–41.

In the final period before the Sudeten Crisis, which proved catastrophic for the history of Europe, the issue of the Red Army's passage would occasionally be raised, but only in informal conversations, on the backstage of diplomacy. It would periodically reemerge as part of the larger concept of using Bolshevik Russia as a partner and ally to the West in the name of preserving the European *status quo*.

In a conversation he had in the Russian capital with his British counterpart Lord Chilston, an undoubtedly telling statement came from the American Ambassador to Moscow, William Bullitt. Bullitt said that whenever he had talked to French politicians about potential Soviet support of France – in case of a war against Germany – he had always heard that they were not expecting any help to arrive as Russia was separated from Germany by Poland, but the Treaty of Mutual Assistance of 2 May 1935 'would prevent the Russians from supplying the Germans with raw materials'.<sup>5</sup>

The threat of German domination in Europe, however, prompted many to reevaluate the situation and turn their sights towards Russia, which was supposed to take the side of the West, with the Soviets recognising Hitler's expansionist ambitions and wishing to avoid falling victim to them.

In February 1938, a revealing exchange took place between French Foreign Minister Delbos and the Polish Chargé d'Affaires ad Interim to the embassy in Paris, Feliks Frankowski. The minister warned the government in Warsaw that the fall of Austria and Czechoslovakia would bring an enormous threat to Poland. '[W]hile Soviet Russia may be considered a potential ally to France [...], for Poland, the Russian issue presents itself from yet another perspective, namely as a potential threat, no lesser than the German one', the Polish diplomat explained to his French colleague. 'Because if decisive Russian influences were to prevail in Romania and Czechoslovakia, the danger for Poland would be akin to the one he has talked about, that is, one deriving from these countries being conquered by Germany, especially given the fact that Russia's stance is determined by the will of a single man who has shown so many times that he is ready to take even the most ruthless measures'. In a telling reaction to the Polish diplomat's claims, Delbos pointed out that said ruthlessness applied 'only in the domain of internal politics' and argued that 'the threat to Poland posed by Russia is much smaller than the one posed by Germany, and that a guarantee of Russian assistance is very important for France'.<sup>6</sup> The conversation reflects how little understanding there was in Western capitals (especially in Paris) for Poland's delicate position resulting from its shared border with the Bolshevik state.

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<sup>5</sup> The National Archives (Kew, Richmond), Foreign Office 371, 20349, N.2290/307/38, Letter from Lord Chilston, Head of the Northern Department of the Foreign Office Lawrence Collier, 1 May 1936.

<sup>6</sup> *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne. 1938*, ed. by M. Kornat (Warszawa, 2007) (hereinafter: *PDD. 1938*), p. 93, Ministry of Foreign Affairs's note from the conversation between Frankowski and Delbos, 19 Feb. 1938.

On 5 April 1938, Prime Minister of France Paul-Boncour held a meeting with the chief staff of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and selected European ambassadors. A note from the proceedings was drawn up by René Massigli, a senior official at Quai d'Orsay and an opponent of appeasement policy. One of the issues raised in the meeting was the role of Poland in the Sudeten conflict. Ambassador to Moscow Robert Coulondre expressed the opinion that Russia could potentially come to Czechoslovakia's aid, but only if France did the same. He claimed that the USSR had concentrated significant ground and air forces near its western border. However, Poland would not let its eastern neighbour's troops pass through its territory.<sup>7</sup> Ambassador to Warsaw Noël said that if the existence of Czechoslovakia were threatened, Poland – considering it an artificially formed state – would not rush to help and would only protect its eastern border to prevent Russia from entering the Sudeten conflict.<sup>8</sup>

Suffice it to say that in the period directly preceding the 1938 crisis and its aftermath, the Polish government did not make any commitments in case of a potential war between Germany and Western powers allied with the Soviet Union. Poland had a 'clean slate'.

No foreign government made formal demands that Poland allow the Red Army to pass through its territory – not until the summer of 1939, in the critical phase of the crisis preceding the outbreak of the Second World War. It is beyond any doubt, however, that the Polish foreign policy in the years 1934–38 was marred by the horrific possibility of other states forcing Poland's consent to a passage of Soviet troops. Discussing international politics without looking at a map or at least having it in front of one's mind's eyes is impossible. This axiom has proven beyond relevant to the realities of the years 1934–38.

Starting in April 1938, Europe dealt with growing German pressure on Czechoslovakia regarding the Sudeten region. In the spring of that year, the government of the Reich was not yet requesting the cession of the territory, but it was demanding recognising its autonomy. Thus, the question of how Czechoslovakia could be protected in case of an armed confrontation emerged. The eyes of European states turned to Poland – and the Western powers were generally well aware of the poor relations between Warsaw and Moscow and the past resentment which significantly informed them.

It is beyond any doubt that the Polish policy in the 1938 crisis cannot be fully understood or properly interpreted without considering the French efforts (at the time not supported by British diplomacy) to convince Poland to open its borders to the Red Army.

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<sup>7</sup> Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (Paris), Papiers d'agents – Archives privés, Papiers Massigli 217/15, Note from the conference hosted by Prime Minister Paul-Boncour, 5 April 1938.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

## II. French Diplomatic Efforts (May–June 1938)

The possibility of the Red Army passing through the Polish territory to assist Czechoslovakia hinged on the outcome of the session held by the Council of the League of Nations in Geneva in May 1938. The meeting took place in an atmosphere of uncertainty about the future of Poland's southern neighbour. However, Polish Foreign Minister Józef Beck was not in attendance. His choice not to participate in the session was a manifestation of the conviction – which at that point was already very well-grounded – that the League of Nations played only a marginal role in global politics and, in fact, was perceived as a *quantité négligeable*. Another reason for his absence may have been his wish to avoid listening to the representatives of Western powers present their new suggestions concerning Poland's participation in another warning intervention in Berlin. Already signalled by British diplomats in Warsaw in early May, the planned intervention was to dissuade Hitler from engaging in Czechoslovakia.<sup>9</sup> The Polish foreign minister's decision was more than justified. It is important to remember that on 22 May, London admonished the French government 'not to keep their hopes up'. The British were wishing to 'arriver à une solution pacifique'.<sup>10</sup> The option of war was evidently not even taken into account.

Such were the circumstances surrounding a meeting of the Polish Ambassador to Paris, Juliusz Łukasiewicz, with his Soviet counterpart in the French capital, Vladimir Potemkin. The latter preliminarily probed the Polish diplomat by postulating that Poland should make several new commitments towards Czechoslovakia and its other neighbours. Łukasiewicz, wishing to avoid a confrontational tone, changed the subject to 'dodge' the discussion of his country taking on any new obligations.<sup>11</sup>

An event of key significance was a conversation held by French Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet with Maxim Litvinov, the Soviet People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs. It took place on 9 May in Geneva, on the occasion of the session of the Council of the League of Nations.

According to all available data, the question of Soviet support for Czechoslovakia was first raised by Bonnet. He asked Commissar Litvinov how likely his country was to fulfil its commitments. In response, he heard that it would only be possible if the Red Army were able to pass through the territory of Poland and Romania. According to Litvinov's reasoning, it was

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<sup>9</sup> *Monachium 1938. Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne*, ed. by Z. Landau and J. Tomaszewski (Warszawa, 1985), p. 96, Ambassador Łukasiewicz's report submitted to Minister Beck, 1 May 1938.

<sup>10</sup> This is correctly identified by A. Marès, *Edvard Benès. Un drame entre Hitler et Staline* (Paris, 2015), p. 271.

<sup>11</sup> *Diplomat in Paris 1936–1939. Papers and Memoirs of Juliusz Łukasiewicz, Ambassador of Poland*, ed. by W. Jędrzejewicz (New York–London, 1970), p. 15.

the task of the French to resolve this issue diplomatically, since Poland and Romania were France's allies. He thus suggested that the government in Paris use its influence to sway Warsaw and Bucharest. Bonnet reportedly replied that Romania was fundamentally opposed to the idea and that it was utterly pointless even to bring up this issue to Poland.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, Litvinov proposed to have a joint Franco-Soviet staff meeting. Minister Comnen reportedly immediately refused to consent to the Soviet army entering Romanian territory. Minister Beck was not present in Geneva, so Bonnet did not have an opportunity to talk to him in person. The assumption of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs was undoubtedly that it was impossible to convince Poland to change its stance. In a report submitted to Washington on 16 May 1938 after a conversation with Minister Bonnet, William Bullitt declared that both Beck and Comnen had decisively ruled out the possibility of letting Soviet troops cross the territories of their countries.<sup>13</sup> He made this definitive statement before the French even started to probe Poland in this regard.

It bears emphasising that the Soviet Union, under the Treaty of 16 May 1935, indeed made a commitment to assist Czechoslovakia in case of a German invasion, but on the condition that France would also come to the country's rescue, as provided in the treaties signed on 25 January 1924 and 1 December 1925.<sup>14</sup> Commissar Litvinov had no way of knowing that the French, fearing it would spark a European war, had strong reservations about fulfilling these obligations and were, to some extent, open to sacrificing Czechoslovakia. However, the Soviet official did not make his own country's actions conditional on France's decision to join the war despite having the possibility to do so.

'Not even for a moment was I under the impression that Minister Bonnet was dissatisfied with the conversation with Litvinov, with the Romanian response, or with the perspective of us taking a similar stance', wrote Juliusz Łukasiewicz in his memoir penned during the Second World War.<sup>15</sup> Years later, his words served as the basis for Henryk Batowski's comment on the conversation between Bonnet and Litvinov. The historian argued that the French diplomat 'may have already suspected that it would be a hopeless case'.<sup>16</sup> Requesting the impossible, he may have been looking for a convenient excuse for France's inaction and the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia as one of its allies. Batowski reasoned that the French minister was making a tactical play for an alibi for France's appeasement of Germany, a policy he had

<sup>12</sup> Stanisławska, *Wielka i mała polityka*, pp. 193ff.

<sup>13</sup> The National Archives (Washington, DC), Department of State, Decimal Files, Mf T.1247, Roll. 1: Soviet Union and the Other States, Ambassador Bullitt's report submitted to the Department of State, 19 July 1935.

<sup>14</sup> The former was concluded without a military alliance, the latter was the Pact of Locarno.

<sup>15</sup> Batowski, *Rok 1938*, p. 259 (the author is citing Łukasiewicz).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

always been a proponent of. In other words, he wanted to hear the Soviet Union declare that it would not be able to fulfil its commitments towards Czechoslovakia and then use it – primarily before the French Council of Ministers – to prove that Czechoslovakia could not count on any military assistance from its other ally. According to Batowski, '[t]he negative outcome of the Geneva talks for Czechoslovakia essentially sealed its fate. France, Poland, and Romania would not waver in their stance, and, due to various additional circumstances, the course of events could not be changed by the positive attitude of the USSR'.<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, Minister Bonnet and Commissar Litvinov's conversation in Geneva did not definitively settle the question of allowing Soviet troops to cross through the Polish territory in aid of Czechoslovakia. The French diplomacy raised the issue once again in late May 1938, with its main argument being that if Czechoslovakia disappeared from the map, Poland could be the next country to suffer a similarly tragic fate.

The crisis of May 1938 blew wide open the question of Czechoslovakia's future.<sup>18</sup> Doubts arose around how the Soviet Union would act in case of an existential threat to Poland's southern neighbour. The outcome was shaping up to be in Czechoslovakia's favour, and a German retreat seemed likely. In the critical phase of the crisis, which undoubtedly constituted the greatest threat to peace in Europe since the end of hostilities between Poland and Bolshevik Russia, British diplomacy staged a warning intervention in Berlin. According to the notes taken by Ambassador Neville Henderson in Wilhelmstrasse on 22 May, the British warned the Reich that its aggression against Czechoslovakia would result in an intervention of France as a Czechoslovak ally, which would consequently prompt Great Britain to declare war.<sup>19</sup> In such circumstances, the French decided that Poland should join the warning intervention in Berlin, even though Minister Beck had refused to accept such suggestions in early May, after having been notified of them by the British ambassador to Warsaw, Howard Kennard.<sup>20</sup>

Talks between Łukasiewicz and Bonnet took place on the initiative of the French foreign minister himself. He wished to make out the Polish policy on

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>18</sup> Worth noting are: G.L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany*, vol. 2: *Starting World War II, 1937–1939* (Chicago, 1980); I. Lukes, *Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler: The Diplomacy of Edvard Beneš in the 1930s* (New York, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Batowski, *Rok 1938*, p. 261.

<sup>20</sup> The French government did not issue a similar *démarche*, see M.J. Zacharias, 'Sytuacja międzynarodowa i polityka zagraniczna Polski w latach 1936–1939 (w związku z publikacją materiałów Juliusza Łukasiewicza pt. *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939* w oprac. Wacława Jędrzejewicza i Henryka Bulhaka, Warszawa 1995, s. 497, Warszawska Oficyna Wydawnicza "Gryf" i Instytut Historii PAN)', *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, vol. 104, no. 3 (1997), pp. 41–69 (at p. 47).

the issue once and for all. An important aspect was also the ambiguous stance of Minister Comnen, who argued that the question needed to be discussed and agreed on with Poland.<sup>21</sup> The French foreign minister met with the Polish ambassador in Quai d'Orsay on 22 May 1938. The course of the conversation has not been documented. Its details are not illuminated by the vague coded telegram sent by the ambassador to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw on 22 May, neither can they be inferred in any significant way from the content of the report sent from Paris five days later, on 27 May.<sup>22</sup>

It is uncertain whether Bonnet raised the issue of granting entry to Soviet troops since it was Łukasiewicz who, on his own accord, asked him 'what role the French government reserved for Soviet Russia in case of a conflict with Germany'.<sup>23</sup> The French minister also introduced a new theme to the talks, suggesting that certain new guarantees could be made for Poland if it let the Red Army enter its territory; we do not know, however, how exactly he formulated these insinuations. In the report of 27 May, Łukasiewicz pointed out that 'M. Bonnet stated that the French government considers Poland its most important ally on the continent, and that therefore in case of our entry on its side, the role of Soviet Russia would be a function of our actions and wishes; possible Russian aid would be geared to our needs, or would not be taken into account at all. On this occasion, M. Bonnet stressed once again that the French government fully realises our possibilities and influence'. Łukasiewicz had the impression that Bonnet 'is aware of the likelihood that we would paralyse possible Soviet Russian actions'.<sup>24</sup> The French Foreign Minister tried to convince the Polish ambassador that the French-Soviet alliance should be in force. It is positive for his country per se, and Poland should contribute to its operativity. This alliance removes the danger of fighting on two fronts (against Germany and the USSR) for Poland. In other words, only in cooperation with France would the Soviet Union adopt a friendly attitude toward Poland in case of war. Moreover, it opens the possibility for the Soviet supply of raw materials.<sup>25</sup> Bonnet's argumentation was based on illusions. Łukasiewicz immediately understood that Poland could not reasonably expect enforceable guarantees that Bolshevik troops, having entered the Polish territory, would ever leave of their own volition.

Łukasiewicz's tone was argumentative but not provocative. The conversation was undoubtedly tense. Reading the Polish diplomatic documents many years later, one does not get the impression that it was a meeting of a foreign minister and an ambassador of two allied countries.

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<sup>21</sup> Batowski, *Rok 1938*, pp. 257–58.

<sup>22</sup> Łukasiewicz's report submitted to Beck, 27 May 1938, in *Diplomat in Paris*, pp. 81–85.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>25</sup> *Dokumenty i materiały do historii stosunków polsko-radzieckich*, vol. 6, ed. by E. Basiński et al. (Warszawa, 1967), p. 404.



The Polish diplomat decided to bring up the recent troubles marring Polish-French relations. He mentioned the hostile actions taken by the 'French [diplomacy] in view of the considerable complications' which – as he stated – 'Poland experienced when dealing with the Lithuanian matter'.<sup>26</sup> 'We also remember – he continued – the terrible (*néfaste*) behaviour of the French diplomacy in this affair, which was of great significance for Poland'. In the context of the present paper, however, of particular interest is the statement which immediately followed those words: 'We remain under the justified impression – said Łukasiewicz – that in that consequential moment, France not only failed to stand by our side but glossing over our interests, it became engrossed in the issue of a potential passage of Soviet troops through foreign territory in case of a war against Germany'.<sup>27</sup> It is nigh impossible to confront the citation provided above with other sources. No insights on this matter are offered by Polish or French diplomatic documents.

According to Ambassador Bullitt, on 21 May 1938, Łukasiewicz was to talk to him and confirm that a military confrontation between Poland and the USSR would be unavoidable if the Red Army breached the Polish territory without permission. Similarly, Soviet planes would be targeted upon entering Poland's airspace. The American diplomat wrote that 'if the Soviet Union should attempt to send troops across Polish territory to support Czechoslovakia' – 'Poland would declare war'. As for Romania, Łukasiewicz was reportedly of the opinion that it, too, would refuse to let the Red Army enter its territory and declare war on the Soviets in case of a lawless breach of its borders. However, it would not stop Soviet planes since it did not have the resources to do so, but Poland was willing to send its aircraft to the ally in order to protect it.<sup>28</sup> Łukasiewicz met with Bullitt after returning from a consultation in Warsaw.

Beck shut down the discussions around Poland's cooperation with France and the USSR with the instruction he issued to the ambassador in Paris on 24 May 1938.<sup>29</sup> He wrote the following: 'I have no choice but to remind you that at the very beginning of the Franco-Soviet negotiations, the Polish Government formally renounced the possibility of collaborating in such a pact, limiting its position towards Russia to a non-aggression agreement'.<sup>30</sup> When implementing the instruction, the Polish ambassador noted on 26 May that in the reported conversation from two days before, Bonnet 'spoke extensively of Soviet Russia, constantly and categorically repeating that he was considering us [France's] first and most important ally, that he was wishing to

<sup>26</sup> Note from a meeting of Łukasiewicz with Bonnet, 27 May 1938, in *PDD. 1938*, pp. 298–99.

<sup>27</sup> *PDD. 1938*, p. 299.

<sup>28</sup> Bullitt's report submitted to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, in *Foreign Relations of the United States. 1938* (Washington, DC, 1955), vol. 1, pp. 507–08.

<sup>29</sup> *PDD. 1938*, pp. 278–79.

<sup>30</sup> Beck to Łukasiewicz, instruction from Berlin (the minister was travelling to Sweden), 24 May 1938, in *PDD. 1938*, p. 279.

make our relations and cooperation closer, and that it was the condition on which the relations with the USSR hinged, as a closer cooperation with us would make [the relations with Russia] of secondary importance to him'.<sup>31</sup>

Łukasiewicz was rather laconic when relating the exchange about a potential passage of Soviet troops. One may get the impression that the issue was barely tackled at all. Conversely, Bonnet's description of the conversations with Łukasiewicz, which he included in his journal, aligned with Ambassador Bullitt's reporting. The French politician wrote that on 27 May, Łukasiewicz had announced to him that Soviet ground troops or air forces entering Poland's territory without its consent would mean war.<sup>32</sup> Polish diplomatic documents (those which are available to us and regard the Sudeten Crisis) do not make note of such blatant Polish threats, although it is evident that a state protecting its sovereignty has the duty to issue an armed response in case of an invasion of its territory by foreign armed forces.

The issue of the Red Army's passage through Polish territory reemerged for the final time in mid-June 1938. Minister Bonnet once again invited Ambassador Łukasiewicz to Quai d'Orsay. Łukasiewicz later penned an excessively succinct report from the meeting, writing that the French foreign minister had disclosed to him that the Fraco-Soviet pact, 'which he had not signed, was not compatible with the alliance with Poland'. More than likely, the French diplomat promised that if Poland were to consent to the Red Army entering its territory, it would receive a guarantee of territorial integrity. Łukasiewicz reacted to this offer by remarking that he considered 'any guarantees from this source absolutely illusory, because there are no means of putting pressure on Moscow, and because of the peculiar aims of Soviet foreign policy, which are opposed to any real relaxation of tensions anywhere in the world, and especially in Europe'. The ambassador pointed out the 'absolute impossibility of any cooperation with Russia in the area of Central Europe and the Baltic and the damage that this cooperation had done to the situation as a whole and especially to French policy'.<sup>33</sup>

After this series of talks between Łukasiewicz and Bonnet, the Polish senior diplomatic staff was convinced that France – ignoring Poland's fundamental demands to ensure its safety – was trying, at all costs, to convince its ally to let Soviet Russia pass troops through its territory. It may seem a very categorical statement, but it is hard to arrive at any other conclusion without considering the repercussions of such a decision. The ultimate consequence of these events was further exacerbating the conflict between Poland and Czechoslovakia.

<sup>31</sup> *PDD. 1938*, p. 288.

<sup>32</sup> G. Bonnet, *Le Quai d'Orsay sous Trois Républiques* (Paris, 1961), p. 195.

<sup>33</sup> Coded telegram from Łukasiewicz to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw, 15 June 1938, in *Diplomat in Paris*, pp. 112–13.

The stance of Polish diplomacy under pressure (exerted by an ally, no less) boiled down to following a hard line on refusing to negotiate opening its borders to any foreign states – just as one does not negotiate territorial concessions. Regardless of their outcome, agreeing to enter such talks degrades the state in the international hierarchy.

Warsaw did not consider using the situation as an opportunity to demand new guarantees of territorial integrity for Poland by making them a necessary condition for agreeing to a Red Army passage. We may suppose that such guarantees – even if receiving them had been feasible – would be considered null and void from the outset. This was because, as Marshal Piłsudski often repeated, Poland was able to win itself allies (in the West) against Germany but not against Russia.

Poland's reserved stance on Czechoslovakia has been harshly criticised in historical research, but it is important to remember that it resulted largely from Prague's willingness to cooperate with the USSR. It was apparent to not only Polish but also Western diplomats. 'The fall of Czechoslovakia would put a definitive end to the Soviets in Europe', said Anthony Joseph Drexel Biddle, US Ambassador to Warsaw, in a conversation with Vice-Minister Szembek on 11 June 1938.<sup>34</sup> We can confidently conclude that these words did not come as a reaction to Polish senior diplomatic staff's bitter hatred of Czechoslovakia (an accusation repeatedly waged against the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw), but were rather rooted in the deep fear of Western powers coercing Poland to let Soviet troops into the country.

An extremely important aspect which cannot go unmentioned is the fact that Poland did not conclude any bilateral arrangements with Germany which would include provisions on blocking Soviet troops from passing through Polish territory. The two states merely exchanged information on the subject. An appropriate occasion to do so came with the meeting of Ambassador to Berlin Józef Lipski with Marshal Hermann Göring, which took place on 17 June 1938. The Polish diplomat merely communicated to the German politician that Poland ruled out the option of allowing Soviet Russia to pass its land forces through its territory or fly its planes through its airspace. However, Göring mentioned that the passage of the Red Army through Romania is possible.<sup>35</sup>

It is vital to mention reports from meetings with Deputy Undersecretary of State Mirosław Arciszewski penned by Juraj Slávik, the head of the Czechoslovak diplomatic mission to Warsaw. Held on 17 and 24 September 1938,

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<sup>34</sup> Szembek's note from the meeting, *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka (1935–1945)*, vol. 4: 1938–1939, ed. by J. Zdrański (Londyn, 1972), p. 184.

<sup>35</sup> M. Wojciechowski, *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie 1933–1938* (Poznań, 1980), p. 411. See also my new study: M. Kornat, *"Tymczasowy przyjaciel". Józef Lipski – ambasador Polski w III Rzeszy (1933–1939)* (Warszawa, 2024), pp. 268–69.

the talks seemed to have suggested a change of course in Polish policy on Czechoslovakia in case the Soviet-Czechoslovak pact fell through. Arciszewski explained that once the alliance between Prague and Moscow was broken, Poland would reach an agreement with Czechoslovakia.<sup>36</sup>

A separate issue – which will not be closer examined here – was Polish diplomatic mail sent to the government of the allied state of Romania, encouraging it to resist the French pressures to allow Soviet Russia's troops to cross through its territory and air force to enter its airspace.<sup>37</sup> Suffice it to emphasise that Warsaw feared an eventuality in which the USSR would take advantage of Romania's weak position and enter the country without its consent. Beck explained to German Ambassador von Moltke that Soviet forces passing through Romania would completely reorganise the situation in Europe.<sup>38</sup> As Poland suspected, the reaction of the Romanian government in such an eventuality would be limited to a formal written protest, as the country 'would not dare go to war with Russia'.<sup>39</sup> Polish fears were exacerbated by news coming from Prague, even more so since the Czechoslovak foreign minister himself delivered them.

Vice-Minister Szembek noted as early as June 1938 that Foreign Minister Krofta 'even confessed to Papée that they had signed an agreement with Romania regulating these flights. In this matter, Romania is playing a bit foul with us, and therefore – in addition to the interventions we have already made – it seems that we will have to take a harder stance on this issue'. He added that 'Moscow is once again seeking to obtain permission to pass its troops through Romania in exchange for guarantees concerning Bessarabia'.<sup>40</sup>

It is reasonable to question whether such actions were appropriate in the context of Polish interests. However, our opinion on the matter is unambiguous. The measures taken by the Polish government were definitely suitable and constituted a logical consequence of the country's objection to opening its territory to the Soviets and their troops.

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<sup>36</sup> Hoover Institution Archives (Palo Alto, CA), Juraj Slavik Papers. It is worth mentioning that Slávik assuredly ruled out the eventuality of a Red Army passage, M. Zgórnjak, *Sytuacja militarna Europy w okresie kryzysu politycznego 1938 r.* (Warszawa, 1979), p. 285.

<sup>37</sup> 'Polska korespondencja dyplomatyczna na temat wojskowej pomocy ZSRR dla Czechosłowacji w 1938 r. przez terytorium Rumunii', ed. by J. Tomaszewski, *Z Dziejów Rozwoju Państw Socjalistycznych*, vol. 1 (1983), pp. 159–84.

<sup>38</sup> Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (Berlin), Botschaft Warschau, Karton 50, Ambassador von Moltke's report submitted to Minister von Neurath, 19 April 1937.

<sup>39</sup> Expression used by Szembek in his conversation with Minister Comnen, 26 July 1938, in *PDD. 1938*, p. 384.

<sup>40</sup> *PDD. 1938*, p. 346 (Szembek's letter to R. Dębicki, head of the diplomatic mission to Belgrade, of 18 June). Papée had earlier reported on the same to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw.

Finally, it should be emphasised that from the perspective of the Polish government, Soviet policy towards the Czechoslovak crisis was an explicit reflection of the USSR's own expansionist goals and its attempts to take advantage of a conflict between capitalist states.

In a report sent to Warsaw on 25 May 1938, Ambassador to Moscow Waclaw Grzybowski assessed that 'apart from moral support, the Soviet stance did not show any willingness to take an independent, active approach to the Czechoslovak question. From the start, their position depended on the French and English stance on matters in Central Europe. There was still a clear reluctance to become involved in any significant way or to clarify their position'.<sup>41</sup> A note produced in July 1938 by the Eastern Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs states the following: 'In case that the Czech issue comes down to a direct confrontation between Berlin and Prague, the Soviets will avoid getting involved. This stance is a logical consequence of the USSR's overall political line, which, given the country's present internal instability, does not see any benefit from engaging in European conflicts, which could only be profitable to more expansionist states – and these states are considered the enemy by the USSR. On the other hand, they believed they could benefit from a pan-European – if not global – conflict, which would eliminate two greatest threats to the Soviets at once – namely Germany and Japan. Soviet foreign policy has set its course on the active involvement of Western powers in guaranteeing Czechoslovakia's integrity against an armed intervention of the Third Reich. The USSR's efforts have exploited various methods to provoke and animate anti-German sentiments in Western societies and governments and to prompt them to defend Czechoslovakia against threats to its integrity. Moscow continues to stoke the fire under Czechoslovak protests against German claims and expressly supports any actions of the government in Prague which could exacerbate and potentially trigger a conflict'.<sup>42</sup> Finally, it needs to be added that on 19 June, Beck explained to Ambassador Drexel Biddle that Stalin was seeking to undermine the policy of appeasement to stop conflicted European powers from reaching an agreement and to 'keep open the Czechoslovak wound in the heart of Europe'.<sup>43</sup>

In light of the above, it is reasonable to assume that the Soviet declarations of being ready to fulfil the USSR's obligations towards Czechoslovakia

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<sup>41</sup> *PDD. 1938*, p. 286.

<sup>42</sup> Note of Deputy Director of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Tadeusz Kobyłański on the international position and politics of Russia (July 1938), cited after L. Mitkiewicz, 'Polska akcja przeciwko Czechosłowacji celem odzyskania Śląska Zaolziańskiego w jesieni 1938 roku', Polish Library in Paris, Accession Collection, ref. no. 3178 (unpublished, manuscript), p. 48.

<sup>43</sup> *Poland and the Coming of the Second World War. The Diplomatic Papers of A. J. Drexell-Biddle Jr., United States Ambassador to Poland 1937–1939*, ed. by P.V. Cannistraro, E.D. Wynot, and T.P. Kovaleff (Columbus, OH, 1976), p. 223.

under their mutual assistance agreement – but only if the country could pass its troops through Poland and Romania – were perceived by the Polish diplomacy as an element of a diplomatic game aimed at pushing the government in Prague to resist Germany.

Was this reasoning correct?

It is beyond doubt that the Soviet Union could not afford to play the waiting game and merely observe the conflict in Europe. The country ran the risk of direct confrontation with Germany – as opposed to the image painted by the Soviet, and now the Russian, historiography. Gerhard Winberg wrote that for Germany, ‘the prospect of war with the Soviet Union was still remote’ since the two countries did not share a border.<sup>44</sup> Poland separated the Soviet empire from the Third Reich. The only potential threat to the USSR was the fall of the country, which constituted a geopolitical boundary between the two totalitarian powers.

### III. Soviet Military Demonstration (September 1938)

September 1938 marked the final stage of the Sudeten conflict. On 12 September in Nuremberg, Hitler demanded territorial cessions from Czechoslovakia. He also gave a deadline – until the end of the month. Prime Minister Chamberlain conducted several direct talks with Hitler in which he managed to reach an agreement staving off the threat of a European war.

The government in Prague accepted the Franco-British ultimatum of 21 September, the so-called London Plan, drawn up by Prime Ministers Chamberlain and Daladier at a conference held on 19–20 September.<sup>45</sup> It effectively meant that the country agreed to cede the so-called Sudetenland region – its exact boundaries yet undefined – in case the diplomacy of Western governments exhausted all other means of protecting Europe from war.

Stalin’s stance in these circumstances may confidently be described as rational power politics.<sup>46</sup> He wished to avoid leading his country to the front line in a confrontation against Germany, seeking instead to act for some time as a *tertius gaudens*, to initially observe from a distance the destructive conflict between ‘capitalist countries’, which was to pave the way for spreading communism to ever more extensive areas. This assumption – a generally valid one – shaped the Polish interpretation and perception of Soviet politics.

<sup>44</sup> Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler’s Germany*, vol. 2, p. 190.

<sup>45</sup> Marès, *Edvard Benès*, p. 289. See also: P. Majewski, *Nierozegrana Kampania. Możliwości ochronne Czechosłowacji jesienią 1938 roku* (Warszawa, 2004); id., *Zmarnowana szansa? Możliwości obrony Czechosłowacji jesienią 1938 roku* (Gdańsk, 2016).

<sup>46</sup> This excellent term has been introduced to historiography by Ernst Topitsch in: *Stalins Krieg. Die Sowjetische Langzeitstrategie gegen den Westen als rationale Machtpolitik* (Herford, 1990).

However, the last ten days of September saw a military demonstration staged by the Soviets.<sup>47</sup> The matter is complex and requires a great deal of explaining. On 23 September 1938, First Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the USSR Vladimir Potemkin addressed a note to the Polish government, handing it to Chargé d'Affaires ad Interim Tadeusz Jankowski, who headed the Polish representation to Moscow in the absence of Ambassador Waclaw Grzybowski.<sup>48</sup> Its contents are worth citing in their entirety:

The Soviet government received news from various sources that Polish troops were concentrating near the Czech border in preparation to cross it and seize a part of the Czechoslovak territory by force. Despite the wide circulation of these news and their mortifying nature, the Polish government is yet to deny their veracity. The Soviet government is hoping that such a statement will be issued without delay. Nonetheless, in case a statement of denial is not issued and Polish troops cross the border to occupy Czech territory, the Soviet government sees it fit and expedient to caution the Polish government that under Article 2 of the Non-Aggression Pact of December 1932, in the event of an act of aggression against Czechoslovakia, the government of the USSR would be forced to renounce this pact.<sup>49</sup>

Potemkin closed his *démarche* with a request to 'immediately communicate' the content of the message to Minister Beck.<sup>50</sup> The Polish response essentially boiled down to only two statements: '1) Directives associated with state defence are determined exclusively by the Polish Government, which is not obliged to explain itself to anyone. 2) The Polish Government is well aware of the contents of the pacts which it has signed'.<sup>51</sup>

The Red Army High Command mobilised western military districts (Byelorussian and Ukrainian) and initiated the dislocation of troops towards the Polish border. The mobilised forces were not large enough for a full-blown war but still quite substantial, as, in total, they comprised over 300,000 soldiers. The telegram sent by the People's Commissariat of Defence of the USSR to the Soviet military attaché at the embassy in Paris gives 30 divisions – including air force and tanks – as the overall number of mobilised troops deployed to the border.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>47</sup> My new reassessment of the Polish-Soviet relations in 1938 in M. Kornat, *Poland and the Origins of the Second World War. A Study in Diplomatic History (1938–1939)*, transl. by A. Shannon (Bern, 2021), Chapter IV.

<sup>48</sup> On the circumstances, see M. Kornat, *Waclaw Grzybowski. Ambasador w Moskwie (1936–1939). Biografia polityczna* (Warszawa, 2016), pp. 187–90.

<sup>49</sup> Note to Jankowski – most recently published in *PDD. 1938*, pp. 545–46.

<sup>50</sup> *PDD. 1938*, pp. 545–46.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 549–50.

<sup>52</sup> Zgórniak, *Sytuacja militarna Europy*, pp. 252–54. The second publication by Zgórniak – *Europa w przededniu wojny. Sytuacja militarna w latach 1938–1939* (Kraków, 1993) – does not revise these conclusions in any significant way (pp. 204–27).

French diplomat Jean Payart, who since 1931 served as a counsellor and chargé d'affaires in Moscow and whom historians consider a reliable source of knowledge on Soviet politics, argued in the autumn of 1938 that although the Russians had decided not to intervene in Lithuania in March of the same year, they were planning 'to support Czechoslovakia in September of this year' to avoid losing this country as a valuable outpost in Central Europe.<sup>53</sup>

French diplomatic sources unequivocally indicate that the Polish General Staff was aware of the threat from the east. On 21 September, the French military attaché to Warsaw, General Félix Musse, wrote the following to the Ministry of War in Paris after a conversation he had with the Chief of General Staff of the Polish Army, General Waclaw Stachiewicz: 'He strongly fears a possibility of Russian intervention [*possibilité d'intervention russe*] infringing on the Polish territory'.<sup>54</sup> It would seem that the Soviet mobilisation aroused more anxiety among military (staff) agents than it did in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Minister Beck offered a telling summary of Poland's international position, which the Polish envoy to Stockholm Gustaw Potworowski recorded with the date 25 September 1938.<sup>55</sup> According to Beck,

Our situation is further complicated by being a neighbour of the Soviets, who continue to play the role of a protector t[owards] Cz[echo]slo[vakia]. As he argued, 'Soviet planes with Soviet personnel are stationed [in] Cz[echo]sl[ovakia]. Several divisions have made ostentatious movements at our border, which the military circles have deemed a total bluff of no military significance. The Soviet démarche addressed to us was rather humorous [...]. However, if a conflict were to break out and spread *à la longue*, the Soviets would be forced to join it (be dragged into it?) in this way or another.'<sup>56</sup>

The Polish diplomat's words clearly show that he thought little of the Soviet military manoeuvres but also that he was convinced that a European war – potentially a long one – would necessarily need to involve the USSR, which would join the armed conflict in a premeditated moment.

Arising here is a weighty question of what goal stood behind this manifestation of military power. This matter is open to various historical interpretations.

British historian John Erickson – a well-esteemed researcher of the history of the Soviet military – wrote the following: 'If the Poles had actually attacked Czechoslovakia, the Red Army could have moved against Poland

<sup>53</sup> P. de Villelume, *De Munich à Dantzig. Journal (20 août 1938 – 18 août 1939)*, ed. by S. Catros (Paris, 2015), pp. 69–71. Note from 22 Oct. 1938.

<sup>54</sup> *Documents diplomatiques français* (Paris, 1977), series 2, vol. 11, doc. 274, p. 430.

<sup>55</sup> Hoover Institution, Gustaw Potworowski Papers, folder 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*



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 the Ukraine and probably make some territorial acquisition at the expense of Poland'.<sup>57</sup> Hugh Ragsdale followed Erickson's lead when discussing the thesis of the eastern threat to Poland in September and went on to express an even more categorical view, but his theory is far from popular in modern historical research.<sup>58</sup>

As for Polish historiography, Marian Zgórniak has offered the most influential analysis of military aspects of the Sudeten Crisis. In 1979, he wrote that the Red Army's military preparations 'seem to suggest the Soviet Union's readiness to fulfil its obligations towards Czechoslovakia and France'.<sup>59</sup> However, he did not answer the question of whether, consequently, we should assume that the General Staff in Moscow was considering the variant of coercing Poland to allow Red Army units to pass through its territory to help Czechoslovakia. What he did conclude was that the large-scale exercises of the Polish armed forces in Volhynia were an attempted warning against the Soviets in case they (without permission) attempted to pass their troops through Poland. He also drew a connection between the Soviet manoeuvres with the Polish decision to form Gen. Władysław Bortnowski's Corps.<sup>60</sup>

The USSR put four army groups on alert by virtue of military decrees of 26 June and 21 and 23 September.<sup>61</sup> The Soviets were also considering transporting ca. 550 fighter aircraft to Czechoslovakia.<sup>62</sup>

Arguably, the most comprehensive analysis of the Soviet policy in the autumn of 1938 has been put forward by Igor Lukes, who discussed the outcome of his research in the book titled *Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler*. In his work, he argued that the Soviet threats directed at Poland were a mere bluff. In fact, the country was opting for an expectant policy towards the Sudeten Crisis.

Wojciech Materski interpreted the Soviet military preparations as a show of strength, not deriving from any real plans to engage in an armed confrontation with Poland. 'Not actually planning to take military action in defence of Czechoslovakia's integrity, the Soviet authorities were giving off the impression of considering such an eventuality. A number of war games was carried out

<sup>57</sup> J. Erickson, *The Soviet High Command. A Military-Political History 1918–1941* (London, 1962), pp. 503–04.

<sup>58</sup> H. Ragsdale, *The Soviets, the Munich Crisis and the Coming of the World War II* (Cambridge, 2004).

<sup>59</sup> Zgórniak, *Sytuacja militarna Europy*, p. 227.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 284, 295.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 225–54.

<sup>62</sup> My detailed study of Polish-Czechoslovak conflict 1938, see M. Kornat, *Poland and the Origins of the Second World War*, Chapter III.

near the border with Poland, including a particularly impressive series which took place in late September 1938 in the Kiev Military District – in the area of Volochisk, Proskurov, and Kamenets Podolskiy. In addition, the western military districts were put on high alert, with 30 infantry divisions as well as cavalry dislocated to the border zone – of which the French authorities were ‘loyally’ notified.<sup>63</sup>

Despite the research cited above, it remains a challenge to interpret the Soviet mobilisation of 1938. First and foremost, it is important to emphasise that the warning intervention of the Soviet diplomacy and the mobilisation orders of the Red Army only happened after Czechoslovakia had already capitulated, that is after it had accepted the London Plan. This puts into question the actual purpose of taking such actions.

Everything points to the USSR not ever planning to engage its army in the Czechoslovak territory. It is indirect proof that the Soviet Union never intended to stage an armed intervention to defend Czechoslovakia, despite several times expressly attesting to its readiness to fulfil its obligations towards the ally. The decision to put up a military demonstration in the form of a mobilisation and concentration of Red Army troops near Poland’s border constituted an attempt to dissuade the latter from reclaiming the Trans-Olza region through gunboat diplomacy. This rationale seems the most convincing, although it certainly leaves some issues unexplained.

On a final note, it bears pointing out that no documents regarding the mobilisation order have been released from Soviet archives, even though over thirty years have passed since the USSR’s dissolution.<sup>64</sup>

Let us once again refer to Łukasiewicz’s memoir published in 1943, *Z doświadczeń przeszłości*. The book includes a brief comment on the present paper’s subject matter. ‘In 1938, in the last phase of the Czechoslovak conflict and before Munich, the Soviet government made fulfilling its obligations towards France and Czechoslovakia conditional on the Red Army being granted free access to certain territories and air zones in Poland and Romania. Consequently, the pacts on mutual assistance concluded with France and Czechoslovakia not only did not help find a positive solution to the Czechoslovak issue but also became a weapon in the hands of Soviet diplomacy, which used them as an instrument for exerting pressure on France’s eastern allies – Poland and Romania.’<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> W. Materski, *Na widecie. II Rzeczpospolita wobec Sowietów 1918–1943* (Warszawa, 2005), p. 505.

<sup>64</sup> Not a single document has been included in *Sovetsko-pol’skiye otnosheniya v 1918–1945 gg. Sbornik dokumentov*, vol. 3: 1932–1939 (Moskva, 2017).

<sup>65</sup> J. Łukasiewicz, *Z doświadczeń przeszłości* (Jerozolima, 1943 – booklet published by the Bureau of Propaganda and Culture of the Command of the Polish Armed Forces in the East).

## Conclusion

Polish-French relations survived the test of time brought by the year 1938. The alliance remained in force, but the level of distrust between the two parties was strong. The French diplomacy was considering denouncing treaties with Poland, with the postulate expressed by none other than the Ambassador to Warsaw, Leon Noël, in a report of 25 October 1938 submitted to Minister Bonnet. France's failure to find support for the idea of cooperation between its three eastern allies (USRR, Poland, and Czechoslovakia) served the country as a pretext for adopting an appeasement policy, which found its reflection in the controversies surrounding Poland after the Munich Conference.<sup>66</sup>

To conclude the above deliberations as concisely as possible, one should emphasise the five key aspects of the discussed issue, namely the potential passage of Soviet troops through the Polish territory:

(1) Any Polish concessions in the matter of letting the Red Army into the country's territory would lead to its factual suicide, no less sanctioned by its own government. It was beyond any doubt that Bolshevik troops would not exit Polish lands if Warsaw had opened its border to them. The government conditioning its consent on new guarantees of territorial integrity would not be of much help, as these would remain purely declarative.

(2) Poland resisted French diplomacy's efforts to coerce its consent to a Soviet military passage. Warsaw's opposition to the idea was not burdened by a threat of direct consequences, as the French government had very limited means of exerting its influence on Polish politics. Most importantly, the pressure coming from Paris never escalated into threats of sanctions in case Poland refused to allow Soviet Russia to pass its forces through its territory. The French government used diplomatic measures to change Warsaw's stance, never resorting to coercing its permission. No threats were made. There were only suggestions and questions, accompanied by the repeated rationale that the fall of Czechoslovakia would damage Poland's geopolitical position – which, admittedly, was true. In the summer of 1939, the situation would be radically different.

(3) The dignitaries in Paris were blind to the fact that the USSR's internal politics – including Stalin's bloody rule of terror – was a clear sign indicating that the country would not maintain a peaceful policy. From today's perspective, it is hard to understand France's stance, as neither its government nor its Ministry of Foreign Affairs exhibited pro-Soviet leanings, and yet the obliviousness prevailed.

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<sup>66</sup> More on these issues, see M. Gmurczyk-Wrońska, 'Kontrowersje wokół Polski w opiniach politycznych i prasowych Francji (październik 1938 – marzec 1939)', *Dzieje Najnowsze*, vol. 31, no. 3 (1999), pp. 139–58.

(4) The capitulation of the Czechoslovak government on 21 September 1938 (by accepting the provisions of the London Plan) and the subsequent 'death sentence' which the country received eight days later in the form of the Munich Agreement did not bring with themselves negotiations between the Western powers and the Soviet government. These only happened a year later and resulted in a new wave of pressure exerted on Poland to consent to the Red Army entering its territory.

(5) Moscow's postulates – which later turned into demands – of being granted the right to pass its troops not only through Poland but also through Bessarabia did not have any strategic or military validity. They only reflected the country's bad will and questionable intentions. While marching through the Vilna region to reach East Prussia could be rationally justified, the opposite was true for entering Bessarabia, which could in no way be upheld as a necessary condition for engaging with the German army. The only goal in the mind of Soviet high officials was to annex the province at the first opportunity.

(6) Although in the summer of 1938, a tripartite alliance between London, Paris, and Moscow was out of the question, the events triggered by the Sudeten Crisis undoubtedly constituted a prefiguration of what would happen in August 1939. At that point, the Soviets formally put forward the postulate of Poland, allowing them to pass their army through the Polish territory as a *sine qua non* condition for the USSR's participation in an anti-German coalition. And when the Polish government declined, Soviet Russia used it as a pretext to break off military negotiations with representatives of the British and French armies.

*Translated by Natalia Kłopotek*

## Summary

The paper discusses the issue of a potential passage of the Red Army through the Polish territory during the Sudeten Crisis (1938), which ended with an agreement signed in Munich by four European powers. The crisis saw French diplomacy's attempts to persuade the Polish government to allow Soviet Russia to pass its troops through the country so that it could come to the rescue of Czechoslovakia and thus fulfil its commitments deriving from the pact signed in May 1935. France's efforts, however, were unsuccessful. They never escalated into outright threats but rather consisted of repeated probing of the Polish stance. Warsaw refused to consent to the passage, believing that opening the country's border to its untrustworthy neighbour would result in loss of sovereignty even before any armed confrontation had taken place. The efforts to convince Poland to allow the Red Army into its territory taken in the summer of 1938 were a prefiguration of the formal demands on the same matter which the allied Western powers (Great Britain and France) made to the Polish government a year later; the only difference was that the ultimate goal was not helping Czechoslovakia (which had been partitioned in March 1939) but enabling the USSR to assist the Allied forces in the looming war against Germany. The Polish position remained negative.

## Kryzys sudecki a sprawa przemarszu wojsk sowieckich przez Polskę (wiosna–lato 1938 r.)

Artykuł traktuje o sprawie przemarszu armii sowieckiej przez terytorium Polski podczas kryzysu sudeckiego (1938), który zakończył się ugodą czterech mocarstw w Monachium. Miały wówczas miejsce starania dyplomacji francuskiej o wymuszenie na rządzie polskim zgody na przemarsz Armii Czerwonej przez terytorium państwa polskiego, aby Związek Sowiecki mógł udzielić pomocy Czechosłowacji, z którą Francja związana była sojuszem zawartym w maju 1935 r. Wysiłki te nie dały rezultatu. Nie przybrały formy żądań, ale miały charakter sondażu. Rząd polski odmówił swej zgody, gdyż udostępnienie terytorium państwa sąsiadowi, do którego nie można żywić zaufania, oznacza utratę niepodległości i to przed rozpoczęciem jakichkolwiek działań wojennych. Starania o przemarsz Armii Czerwonej przez Polskę latem 1938 r. były prefiguracją formalnych żądań skierowanych do rządu polskiego w tej samej sprawie przez sojusznicze mocarstwa zachodnie (Wielką Brytanię i Francję) latem rok później, z tą tylko różnicą, że nie chodziło już o pomoc sowiecką dla Czechosłowacji (której rozbiór dokonał się w marcu 1939 r.), ale o udział ZSRR po stronie Zachodu w nieuchronnie nadchodzącej wojnie przeciw Niemcom. Stanowisko Polski pozostało niezmiennie negatywne.

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