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THE RIDDLE OF THE ASSASSINATION OF PYOTR VOYKOV, SOVIET PLENIPOTENTIARY REPRESENTATIVE TO WARSAW, ON 7 JUNE 1927: A NEWLY FOUND DOCUMENT BY THE POLISH MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS CASTS A NEW LIGHT

It happened in Warsaw 90 years ago: "On 7th June 1927 at 9 a.m., the plenipotentiary representative of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics Pyotr Voykov, accompanied by legation official Yuri Grigorovich, arrived at the Central Railway Station to see minister plenipotentiary of the Soviet government to London Arkady Rozenholz, who was returning from London via Berlin.

"Rozenholz and Minister Voykov went together to take coffee at the station's buffet and, having partaken of the coffee, they proceeded to the platform where the fast train was due to leave Warsaw at 9.55 a.m., on which Rozenholz was to travel to Moscow. As Minister Voykov and Rozenholz approached the train's sleeping car, a revolver shot was heard, aimed at Minister Voykov and fired by an unknown male. Voykov stepped back and ran and the attacker kept shooting at him. In response, Voykov took out a revolver from his pocket, turned and fired several shots at his assailant and then staggered and fell against police officer Jasiński, who had arrived on the run. On seeing approaching police, the attacker put his hands up and dropped the revolver as ordered and voluntarily surrendered to the police.

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Pyotr Voykov, Soviet envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to Poland.
Photo NAC

Borys Kowerda in 1927.
www.pl.wikipedia.org

He gave his name as Borys Kowerda and said he had shot to kill Voykov as a minister of the U.S.S.R. as revenge on Russia for millions of people. Minister Voykov was given first aid and then taken to the Infant Jesus Hospital, where he died on the same day at 10.40 a.m."[1]

The Soviet *chargé d'affaires ad interim* promptly issued a note to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MFA] demanding that "attorneys of the Plenipotentiary Mission, the head of which had fallen victim to an unheard-of crime"[2], be given the opportunity to participate in the investigation of the same. At the same time, the press office of the Soviet diplomatic mission in Warsaw prepared a communication on the circumstances of the attack, with a passage reading: "One remarkable circumstance of the assassination is that the telegram, not encoded, advising that *chargé d'affaires* Rozenholz would be passing through Warsaw had arrived only on the preceding day [i.e., on 6 June—SD] at 10 p.m. and only the closest co-workers of the dead minister

[1] "Motion to put Borys Kowerda, aged 19, on a summary trial under Article 453 of the Criminal Code," *Sprawa Borysa Kowerdy. Zabójstwo posła Z.S.R.R. Piotra Wojkowa*, Warszawa 1927.

[2] *Dokumenty Vneshnei Politiki,* Moskva 1965, Vol. 10. Doc. 153.

knew of its arrival. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude already at this point that either the minister had been especially shadowed, or the assassin had been advised of the forthcoming arrival of Rozenholz by an external source"[3]. The attacker surrendered to the police at the place of crime. The public was informed that he had been acting for a political motive, notably out of revenge for the millions of victims of the Bolshevik terror in Russia, and that he had applied for a Soviet visa and had been refused.

On the same day, 7 June, in Moscow, the minister plenipotentiary of the Republic of Poland, Stanisław Patek, received from the minister of foreign affairs instructions to call on the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs to offer the Soviet government, on behalf of the Polish government, an expression of regret and indignation at the terrorist attack on a Soviet diplomatic representative in Warsaw, and to present to the Soviet authorities and to the diplomat's family condolences on his death.

Patek saw Maxim Litvinov, Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs. After hearing the Polish minister, the Soviet commissar put into doubt the findings of the investigation. "Litvinov started throwing political hints to the effect that it was rather unbelievable that a teenager, Borys Kowerda, would kill a man for no other reason than out of personal revenge for having been refused a visa; that the reasons for what had happened should be sought elsewhere; that recent international developments, in the Far East as well as in the West, had prepared the ground for such incidents; and that the signal to blow the embers into flame had come from London. As for Poland, the worst part of the business was not that Voykov had been poorly protected in Poland against fatal accidents, for nobody can be kept safe from these, but that anti-Soviet circles which support and carry out terrorist attacks had come to enjoy impunity in Poland." After these words Litvinov handed Patek a note in which the Soviet government accused Poland of the negligent protection of diplomats of a foreign state and of tolerating the activities of Russian counter-revolutionaries in Poland. Research by Russian historian Oksana Babenko shows that Stalin did not want to use the Voykov assassination to aggravate relations with Poland. Admittedly, he was inclined to regard this tragedy as inspired by Great Britain, but this suspicion was

[3] "Oświadczenie Biura Prasowego Poselstwa ZSRS w Warszawie o okolicznościach zabójstwa posła ZSRS w Warszawie P. Wojkowa, 7 czerwca 1927," *Dokumenty i Materiały do Historii Stosunków Polsko-Radzieckich*, Warszawa 1966, Vol. V, Doc. 84. This source publication should be used with caution because the documents contained therein were subject to editorial and propaganda manipulation.

justifiable only to a certain extent. After all, there was a direct connection between the assassination in Warsaw and Britain's having broken diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and expelled from London the Soviet minister plenipotentiary, Arkady Rozenholz, and other Soviet diplomats. Voykov was killed when he had come to Warsaw's Central Station to meet Rozenholz, who was passing through Warsaw on his way back to Russia. However, Stalin suggested that the Soviet side, rather than involve itself in the Polish investigation of the killing, take advantage of the situation to fight anti-Bolshevik émigrés in Poland.[4] This was duly done: on 11 June, the Soviet government issued another note to the Polish government, demanding that the Soviet *chargé d'affaires* in Warsaw, Aleksandr Ulyanov, be allowed to participate in the investigation and that Poland expel "White" émigrés who conducted anti-Soviet operations from Polish territory.[5]

Poland met the Soviet demands and expelled six "White" émigrés. However, Poland emphasised that the decision had been taken "in no connection whatever with the second Soviet note" and without any pressure from the Soviet Union.[6] This was a step of symbolic significance only because initially the Soviet side's expectations had been much greater. As for the investigation, at the request of the Soviet side and in view of the perpetrator having been caught in the act and admitting his guilt, the Court decided to use a summary procedure. An indictment against Kowerda was received at the Circuit Court in Warsaw on 11 June and by 15 June the court announced its unanimous verdict sentencing Kowerda "to life imprisonment in a hard-labour prison." At the same time, the court, in consideration of the perpetrator's young age, "petitioned the President of the Republic of Poland, through the Minister of Justice, to reduce Kowerda's hard-labour prison sentence to fifteen years." The president granted the petition. Kowerda was released in 1937 and went to Yugoslavia, where he obtained his matriculation certificate. In 1944, he moved to Germany and after the Second World War, he emigrated to the United States, where he worked in the New York newspaper *Rossiya* and in the printing press of *Novoye Russkoye Slovo*. He died in Washington in 1987, 60 years after his attack on Voykov.

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4 O. Vasil'evna, *Babenko. Pol'sko-sovetskie otnošeniâ* v 1924–1928 gg. : ot protivostoâniâ k sotrudnicestvu, Moskwa 2007, pp. 177–178.

5 *Dokumenty i Materiały do Historii Stosunków Polsko-Radzieckich*, Warszawa 1966, Vol. V, Doc. 92.

6 M. Gmurczyk-Wrońska, *Stanisław Patek, w dyplomacji i polityce (1914-1939)*, Warszawa 2013, p. 284.

Two months after the Kowerda trial had ended, Poland and the Soviet Union decided that the case was closed. On 31 August 1927, the Soviet side published a communication on the completion of the incident and on the resumption of Polish-Soviet negotiations on a non-aggression treaty and a trade agreement.[7] In the Soviet Union, Voykov became a "secular martyr", a hero of Soviet diplomacy who had laid down his life for the revolution. Streets, squares, and underground stations were named after him. In Poland, the prevailing attitude was that the sooner the Voykov affair was forgotten, the better. The choice of the summary procedure by the Court meant that from the perspective of the Polish law enforcement system, the case had been obvious, with no need for any further in-depth investigation of its circumstances. The court had issued a verdict. *Roma locuta causa finita*.

Today, 90 years after Kowerda's attack on Voykov, we are not much better informed. So far, historical research has focused exclusively on the diplomatic aspects of the "Voykov affair." From the standpoint of the present state of our knowledge, pre-1989 literature did not progress beyond what had been made public already in 1927[8], the authors relying chiefly on collections of documents published in the mid-1960s with the political consent of the Soviet authorities.[9] The latest—and so far, best—discussion of this case is found in Małgorzata Gmurczyk-Wrońska's excellent biography of Stanisław Patek, who in 1927 served as the Polish envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary in Moscow.[10] A monograph on Polish-Soviet relations in 1924-1928[11] by Oxana Babenko, a Russian researcher , is also important. Regrettably, little attention has been given so far to the study of the very circumstances of the Voykov assassination. The court's findings of 90 years ago have been accepted as objective confirmation of the facts of the crime.

For a historian, a judgment made by a court and the reasons given for the same are a source, much like any other, which mean that this source, too, may be criticised and verified against other sources. It must be said that in

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7 *Dokumenty i Materiały do Historii Stosunków Polsko-Radzieckich*, Vol. V, Doc. 113, p. 215.

8 M. Leczyk, *Polityka II Rzeczpospolitej wobec ZSRR w latach 1925–1934. Studium z historii dyplomacji*, Warszawa 1976.

9 *Dokumenty Vneshnei Politiki*, Moskva 1965, Vol. 10; *Dokumenty i Materiały do Historii Stosunków Polsko-Radzieckich*, Warszawa 1966, Vol. V.

10 M. Gmurczyk-Wrońska, *Stanisław Patek …, op. cit.,* pp. 271–289.

11 O. Vasil'evna *Babenko*, *op. cit.*

the case of the Voykov assassination, the court dispensed with an in-depth examination of all the circumstances of the crime, accepting the accused's explanations at face value. Some were corroborated by the testimony of other witnesses.[12] Kowerda stated at his trial: "I came to Warsaw two weeks before the attack, on 23rd May—I believe it was Monday—in the evening. I stayed for one day at the Astoria hotel. On Tuesday, I moved to Ms. Fenigsztajn's [a woman from whom Kowerda rented a room in the Praga district of Warsaw – SD] and I stayed at her place for two weeks."[13] Witness Sura Fenigsztajn testified before the court: "The defendant moved in on Tuesday evening. (...) I asked Kowerda for his identity document, so as to register him, but he refused, saying that he had left his documents at the school where he was to sit his examinations. Kowerda was to stay for two weeks and there was still one day—or one night—left when he said he was going away."[14]

It will be noted that from the quoted testimony it follows that Kowerda moved to Sura Fenigsztajn's place on 24 May 1927, a Tuesday, in the evening and that she already knew he would keep the room for two weeks, that is, until 7 June, and then leave.

From the above-quoted press communication of the Soviet legate in Warsaw (a document prepared by legation staff working under the influence of strong emotion at the news of their chief having been shot), we know that only the closest associates of the head of the Soviet diplomatic mission knew that Voykov was going to be at Warsaw's Central Railway Station in connection with Rozenholz's passage through Warsaw. The non-encoded telegram from Berlin about Rozenholz's departure was received at the legation on 6 June at 10 p.m. After the Voykov assassination, the authors of the communication were naturally puzzled that Kowerda, instead of lying in wait for the Soviet minister somewhere close to the Soviet legation on No. 15 Poznańska Street (some five minutes' drive from the station), had chosen the Central railway station, where the chance of running into his prey should have been incomparably smaller, unless he had known Voykov was going to be there on that day.

During the trial, the public prosecutor asked Kowerda how he had recognized Voykov and known that he was going to be at the station that

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[12] Testimony before the court, quoted from *Sprawa Borysa Kowerdy. Zabójstwo posła Z.S.R.R. Piotra Wojkowa*, Warszawa 1927.

[13] *Sprawa Borysa Kowerdy, op. cit.*, p. 11.

[14] *Ibidem*, pp. 10–11.

day. The defendant stated: "I knew Voykov from photographs in illustrated magazines and, besides, I had seen him at the consulate. I learned from newspapers that Voykov was going to be at the station, that he was leaving for Moscow. I knew that there was only one fast train to Soviet Russia, the 9.55 a.m. one, and I knew at which platform the train stood. I also want it to be known that I murdered Voykov as a Comintern member, not as an envoy".[15]

The matter of the quality of photographs at that time aside, the 1920s were nothing like the 21 century when the internet makes the faces of diplomats accredited in various capitals or to various international organisations easily recognizable and many of their speeches available on demand. True, Kowerda could have come across a picture of Voykov in a paper and he could have caught a glimpse of him at the consulate when he had gone there to get a visa to travel to Russia. However, it is almost impossible that he had learned from the press of Voykov's proposed trip to the station on 7 June to meet Rozenholz. The Soviet diplomats who drafted the communication on 7 June, immediately after Voykov's assassination, did not allow for that possibility at all. They suspected instead that either Voykov had been followed or someone had learned in some other way of his plan to meet for coffee with Rozenholz at the station. When perusing Warsaw press clippings from the second half of May 1927, I found no mention of Voykov's planned departure for Moscow. Obviously, I could have overlooked something, but if there had been a mention, it was also overlooked by the authors of the Soviet legation's communication of 7 June. It never came into their minds that someone could have learned about Voykov's plans from local press.

Therefore, the question arises: Could Kowerda have figured out Rozenholz's travel agenda from commonly available sources? Well, since mid-May that year, the press throughout Europe had been speculating whether Britain and the Soviet Union would sever diplomatic relations over the Arcos scandal. The All-Russian Cooperative Society (Arcos) was a Soviet company based in Britain. On 12 May 1927, Scotland Yard agents raided the Soviet House at No. 49 Moorgate in London and searched the premises. The things they found there sparked dynamic developments that were covered daily by the British and world press. On 24 May, after two weeks of deliberations, British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin advised the House of Commons of his Cabinet's decision to rupture diplomatic relations with

[15] *Sprawa Borysa Kowerdy, op. cit.*, p. 30.

the Soviet Union.[16] On the same day, Kowerda came to Warsaw presumably with the intent of killing Voykov.

Soviet diplomats were expelled from Britain in late May 1927. Rozenholz left London on 3 June at 11 a.m. from Victoria Station[17]. Three days later, after a short stay in Berlin, he proceeded to Moscow via Warsaw. Theoretically, Kowerda could have known about Rozenholz's journey and could have assumed that when Rozenholz passed through Warsaw, Voykov would meet him. However, during his trial, he never said anything to have plausibly suggested that this was how he had come to the conclusion that Rozenholz and Voykov were likely to meet in Warsaw at the Central railway station.

Following the publication in 1965 in the fifth volume of *Dokumenty i Materiały do Historii Stosunków Polsko-Radzieckich* [Documents and Materials on the History of Polish-Soviet Relations] of a report from the commander of a Border Protection Corps [KOP] brigade, Colonel Józef Olszyna-Wilczyński, to KOP headquarters and dated 18 June 1926, concerning a prepared attack on Voykov, researchers' attention turned to a new direction.[18] Colonel Olszyna-Wilczyński stated that a Łuck-based "Russian Charity Committee" that engaged "under the cover of charity" in "monarchic Russian activities on behalf of Nikolai Nikolayevich" (at that time the prince was the chairman of the Russian All-Military Union, an organisation of former officers of the Russian army living abroad) had received from the prince an order to carry out an attack on Voykov. "The Committee chose a student resident in Łuck", reads the KOP report, "a Russian whose name has not been ascertained so far." It is a fact indeed that in "White" émigré circles, various subversive actions against the Bolsheviks was contemplated; it is also a fact that Soviet intelligence infiltrated these émigré circles quite successfully.[19] During the Kowerda trial, the court established that the defendant had not had a connection with any monarchist organisation, that he "was a democrat, not

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[16] For more on this subject, see the author's: "Zerwanie przez Wielką Brytanię stosunków dyplomatycznych ze Związkiem Sowieckim w 1927 r. Studium przypadku," in: W. Borodziej, S. Dębski (eds.),*Modernizacja-Centrum-Peryferie. Księga jubileuszowa z okazji 70. rocznicy urodzin Profesora Ryszarda Stemplowskiego*, Warszawa 2009, pp. 73–100.

[17] Note from the Soviet *charge d'affaires ad interim* to the Foreign Office, 31 May 1927, FO 371/12592.

[18] *Dokumenty i Materiały do Historii Stosunków Polsko-Radzieckich*, Warszawa 1966, Vol. V, Doc 7., pp. 12–13. W. Materski, *Na widecie. II Rzeczpospolita wobec Sowietów 1918-1943*, Warszawa 2005, p. 317.

[19] *Ocherki Istorii Rossiiskoi Vneshnei Razvedki*, J. Primakow (ed.), Moskva 1996, Vol. 5, *passim*.

a monarchist", and that he had perpetrated the attack single-handedly—in today's parlance, he was a "lone wolf."[20]

In an official historical account of Russian intelligence published in Moscow in 1996, the attack on Voykov earned one short paragraph stating laconically that the attack on Voykov had been perpetrated by a "monarchist émigré". It is puzzling that in this chronicle of Soviet foreign intelligence in which several chapters are devoted to the struggle against "White" émigrés, the description of the attack on Voykov should be so terse. Why would an institution that bragged about its successes infiltrating the "Whites" suddenly go mum about a spectacular assault on a Soviet diplomat carried out by the very same "Whites"? The killing of Voykov was as bad a setback as could be, and yet we are told nothing about either why it had happened or who within the top leadership of Soviet intelligence had been called to account for this tragedy. Presumably, had any "calling to account" taken place at all, this fact would be known to historians now that many decades have passed, if only because the Russian services would have turned this failure of theirs to an educational use, as a warning to young officers. In time, the case would have acquired the status of an "in-house legend", but nothing of the kind happened. Silence reigned. In the same work, we find a brief note about a "success" of Soviet intelligence agents who had prevented another "White" attack in Warsaw: "White émigrés attempted to blow up the building of the Soviet legation in Warsaw; a powerful bomb was found in the building's chimney stack."[21]

An interesting story about explosives found in the Soviet legation in Warsaw is in the memoirs published in Paris in 1931 of former Soviet diplomat Grigori Besedovsky, who defected to the West in 1929. Between November 1922 and September 1925, Besedovsky had been stationed in Warsaw in various diplomatic jobs, first as the representative of Soviet Ukraine and later as a Soviet diplomat.[22] This is how he remembers the arrival in Warsaw

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[20] Policeman Alfons Nowakowski testified: "In connection with Borys Kowerda's attack on Minister Voykov, I searched Borys Kowerda's flat in Vilnius. The search produced no results. In political terms, Borys Kowerda had a good reputation, he did not belong to any political organisation. The search had been ordered to establish whether Kowerda belonged to a monarchic organisation. He had no contact whatsoever with local political activists and belonged to no organisation." *Sprawa Borys Kowerdy*, p. 25. See Kowerda's testimony therein, pp. 29-30.

[21] *Ocherki Istorii Rossiiskoi Vneshnei Razvedki, Vol.* 5, p. 84.

[22] Besedovsky filled the position of counsellor at the Soviet legation on 6 September 1923, *Oboleński do Koppa, 11 IX 1923, Wyciąg z interceptów rosyjskich. Referat Rosyjski dla Pana ministra*, "top secret", AAN, MSZ, file No. 6853 a, k. 381.

in the autumn of 1924 of a new, dynamic GRU head: "Immediately on his arrival in Warsaw, Orlovsky set out to clean the Augean stables inherited from his predecessor. This was hard work indeed. The fireproof safes in secret rooms were chock-full of explosives, bombs, hand grenades. Somewhere in the legation attics there were several containers with poisonous gases hidden there—for an unknown purpose—still at the time of [Mechislav] Loganovsky[23]. This inheritance had to be disposed of as soon as possible and Orlovsky did the job indeed. Most of the explosives were sent back to Berlin, to the GRU headquarters for Europe (*Glavnoye Politicheskoye Upravlenye*) headed by one Michał Gorb; the rest was sunk in the Vistula from a motor boat purchased by Voykov."[24]

The Besedovsky memoirs provide very rich anecdotal material on the work of Soviet diplomats in Warsaw. Before 1989, his narratives were not quoted by Soviet or communist Poland's historians, the reason being that he had defected to the West in 1929 after having been ordered from Paris back to Moscow in connection with an enquiry into his having overstepped his political instructions. Also, much of his information was difficult to verify. Now, Besedovsky's accounts have been confronted with other sources and found credible. This is what he wrote about Voykov's appointment to Warsaw: "The Polish government very grudgingly acknowledged Voykov as the Soviet minister. His involvement in the Yekaterinburg deed (i.e., in the execution of Tsar Nikolai II and his family on 17 July 1918) having already been known, the press in Poland launched a fierce campaign against his nomination. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs sourly advised Moscow that they'd rather have a different candidate, but the Politburo dug in its heels. People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Georgy Chicherin was instructed to write a personal letter to the Polish minister of foreign affairs (the office was then held by Count [Aleksander] Skrzyński) in the matter of the Voykov nomination."[25] Besedovsky's account of the Polish government's reluctance to have Voykov appointed the Soviet envoy in Warsaw is corroborated by

[23] Mechislav Loganovski was a Pole. Connected with the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) before the First World War, after the Bolshevik coup in Russia he became involved with the Bolsheviks. In 1921-1923, he was second secretary at the Soviet legation in Warsaw and thereafter, in 1925-1927, a member of the council of the People's Secretariat of Foreign Affairs (Narkomindel) of the USSR and the head of the Political Department and the Department of the Baltic States and Poland.

[24] G. Biesiedowskij, *Pamiętniki dyplomaty sowieckiego*, Katowice, bdw., p. 127–128.

[25] *Ibidem*, p. 122.

a report by Sir William G. Max Müller, a British minister in Warsaw, for the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Austen Chamberlain, of February 1927: "Owing to his alleged connections with the assassination of the Russian royal family, the Polish government felt some hesitation about receiving him and the minister for Foreign Affairs went so far as to consult me on the propriety of doing so, but his majesty's government naturally refused to express an opinion on such a subject."[26] The hesitation of the Polish government and its desire to sound British diplomacy on this matter should be seen as understandable in the context of a snub Soviet diplomacy received about the same time from the British royal family. It is a known fact that in August 1924, the government of Ramsay MacDonald decided to recognize the Soviet Union *de jure* and to establish diplomatic relations with it, but King George V refused to accept credentials from representatives "of the murderers of my cousin", Tsar Nikolai II. For this reason, British-Soviet relations were established only on the level of *chargé d'affaires*, who present no credentials but merely notify the receiving state of their arrival.[27] In his memoirs, Besedovsky portrayed Voykov as an uncouth commoner whose "chief fault (...) was an excessive affection for the female sex. I even think it was pathological. (...) A senior [Polish] Ministry of Foreign Affairs official told me once, in a most delicate form, that Voykov roamed back streets of Warsaw's right-bank district called "Praga" at nights and often idled on park benches in the company of some ladies; the official added that the Ministry did not intend to interfere with the minister's private life but it was warning us that since in these back streets one could easily get stabbed, Voykov's life could be in danger. (...) We had to have a very unpleasant conversation with Voykov on this subject, the upshot of which was that he gave up hanging around in parks at night and rented a room in a hotel instead."[28] Besedovsky described also a conflict Voykov got into with the Polish MFA immediately on his arrival in Warsaw. "Voykov's wife insisted on being brought into the diplomatic society. However, to get her wish, she needed first to call on the most senior lady of the diplomatic corps—but the latter kept evading

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[26] *Sir W. Max Muller to Sir Austen Chamberlain, February 14, 1927, Report on the Heads of Foreign Missions at Warsaw*. FO 371/12578, p. 225.

[27] See: S. Dębski, *Zerwanie przez Wielką Brytanię stosunków dyplomatycznych ze Związkiem Sowieckim w 1927 r.*, pp. 74-76.

[28] G. Biesiedowskij, *Pamiętniki …*, *op. cit*., pp. 124–125.

acquaintance with Madame Voykov under the most fantastic pretexts. Finally, an MFA official personally notified Voykov that the lady in question would receive his spouse. Voykov was beside himself with joy—but to his disappointment and fury, his wife returned from the visit empty-handed. She was told the lady was not at home because she had gone to a summer resort (in the middle of November!)."[29] Confirmation of Besedovsky's poor opinion of Voykov's personal and diplomatic culture is found in a report by a British diplomat who wrote about Voykov in February 1927: "He had no knowledge of either diplomatic or social etiquette and resented bitterly the very natural desire both of his colleagues and of Polish officials to limit their intercourse with him to the strict requirements of diplomatic courtesy. He has, however, learnt wisdom in time, and now makes no attempt to force his unwelcome presence on society beyond attending strictly official entertainments."[30]

I believe this longish introduction enables the reader to verify the credibility of Besedovsky's narratives and is relevant to his account of Voykov's troubles, which ended with the attack on him. Besedovsky wrote in his memoirs: "After I had left Warsaw, Voykov's flirting proclivities grew even stronger. He took to roaming Nowy Świat street, scoring easy successes with streetwalking 'ladies'." To top it all, there was a mysterious affair of several thousand dollars missing from the minister's safe. Voykov avowed that he had accidentally burned the money when destroying secret papers in the presence of the secretary of the legation, Mikhail Arkadyev. However, Arkadyev denied having been party to the destruction of papers. The matter was submitted to the Central Control Commission, which charged the minister with, besides the wrongful acts quoted above, negligence shown by keeping Politburo transcripts in his desk drawers. Voykov stood in danger of being expelled from the party and recalled from Warsaw. Kowerda's shot spared him this unpleasantness and caused party authorities not only to forget his misdeeds but to "honour" him with burial within the Kremlin walls. Obviously, this "honour" for political reasons was for the outside world's eyes only. In Moscow, all party officials aware that the Central Control Commission had inquired into Voykov's affairs spoke with a smirk about his inclusion among the "heroes".[31] Besedovsky had left Warsaw in October

[29] *Ibidem*, pp. 125–126.

[30] *Sir W. Max Muller …, op. cit.*

[31] G. Biesiedowskij, *Pamiętniki* …, op. cit., pp. 156–157.

1925 and was not an eyewitness to the events that took place in Warsaw 18 months later, but—knowing all Voykov's faults—he easily grasped the context of the inquiry into Voykov's embezzlements in progress in the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs. Who knows, perhaps he even testified before the audit commission. This brings us to the key question: What does all this have to do with the assassination of Voykov?

Well, the document quoted below will cast a new light on the matter. It is a memo from Stefan Litauer, at that time an official with the Polish MFA's Eastern Department, to the minister of Foreign Affairs. It was submitted via the head of the Eastern Department and concerns a conversation Litauer had on 20 November 1926 with two Soviet diplomats, members of the Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative of the USSR in Warsaw—Mikhail Grigorevich Molotkovsky and Mikhail Efimovich Shusterov. On the staff roster of the office as of 1 February 1927, Molotkovsky and Shusterov are mentioned as second secretaries of the Soviet legation in Poland (the legation staff consisted of 15 diplomats and six auxiliary personnel; the consular department had a technical staff of eight and, at the consulate in Gdańsk, there were four diplomats and an auxiliary staff of 11—altogether 45 people).[32] Interestingly, in the next Poland's MFA roster of Soviet diplomats drawn up in February 1928 (i.e., a year later) Molotokovsky and Shusterov no longer appear, which means they both left Poland in 1927.[33]

The author of the memo, Litauer, is himself an intriguing figure. Until 1932, he worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a counsellor in the Press Department. After Colonel Wiktor Drymmer, formerly the deputy director of the Press Department, had taken over as the head of the Personnel Department, Litauer was discharged from the MFA for "misinforming foreign journalists".[34] Subsequently, he became the London correspondent for the Polish Press Agency and, after the outbreak of the Second World

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[32] *Spis składu osobowego Pełnomocnego Przedstawicielstwa ZSSR w Polsce, stan na dzień 1 luty 1927* r. AAN, MSZ, Wydział Wschodni, file No. 6823, k. 2-3.

[33] *Spis składu osobowego pełnomocnego przedstawicielstwa ZSSR w Polsce, Konsulatu Generalnego w Gdańsku, Konsulatu we Lwowie i Przedstawicielstwa Handlowego ZSSR w Polsce z Odziałami i Agenturami*, AAN, MSZ, 6824, 15 January 1928. k. 21-25. The rotation of Soviet diplomats in Poland must have been significant because, at the suggestion of the Polish envoy in Moscow, Stanisław Patek, who cited the principle of reciprocity, the drawing up of lists of Soviet diplomatic staff came to be done on a monthly basis. *Nota słowna MSZ do Poselstwa ZSSR w Warszawie*, 21 February 1928, AAN, MSZ, Wydział Wschodni, file No. 6824, k. 31.

[34] W. Drymmer, "Wspomnienia," *Zeszyty Historyczne,* No. 31, Paris 1975, p. 84.

War, became the head of the agency. He was removed from this position by the Polish government in London in April 1944 for conducting propaganda hostile to Poland's interests (this included promoting the Soviet version of the Katyń crime, according to which a number of Polish prisoners, including officers, had been murdered by the Germans). After the war, he returned to a Poland ruled by agents of the Soviet Union and re-joined the MFA. Most probably he collaborated with Soviet intelligence. While it is difficult to establish when this cooperation began, Litauer's involvement in a spectacular fiasco of Polish intelligence in mid-1923 is certainly suspect. Soviet counterintelligence, the OGPU (*Obedinnoye Gosudarstvennoye Politicheskoe Upravlenie*), exposed a Polish espionage network known as the Zielińska group and arrested its members. "The majority of people arrested in connection with this affair had regularly visited the press desk officer" of the Legation of the Republic of Poland in Kharkov—Stefan Litauer.[35] At that time, no connection had been made between Litauer and the Zielińska affair. In 1924, Litauer returned to the MFA headquarters in Warsaw, again to the Eastern Department.

Was he a Soviet agent in 1925? This is of rather secondary importance to the subject matter of his memo about the conversation with Molotokovsky and Shusterov. In this case, Litauer was merely a go-between, passing on information important from the perspective of the conduct of foreign policy and which rightly ended up on the desk of the minister of Foreign Affairs. It was possible that only later did Litauer's evident preference for meeting Soviet diplomats in restaurants and cafes, one-to-one, get him into trouble.

According to the memo, during the meeting, which took place in a Warsaw restaurant, the Polish diplomat's interlocutors suggested that Voykov's mission in Warsaw might end soon. They also tried to sound out Litauer on whether the Polish government would accept Stanisław Pestkowski, a Pole who had been the Soviet envoy in Mexico and had just completed his mission there, in Voykov's place. Further into the conversation, Shusterov attempted to make it understood that Arkadyev, the legation secretary, played an important political role in the plenipotentiary representative office in Warsaw. In the context of the Soviet representatives' earlier confidences concerning Voykov, it can be assumed that their object was to convince their Polish interlocutor that Arkadyev's position was stronger than Voykov's—or

[35] W. Materski, *Na widecie. II Rzeczpospolita wobec Sowietów 1918–1943,* pp. 224–225.

at least that his prospects were better. It was Arkadyev, not Voykov, who was to return to Moscow to fill an important place in the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. It will be remembered that the same Arkadyev appears in the Besedovsky memoirs as Voykov's alleged "witness" to the "accidental burning" of several thousand dollars from the legation coffers and who was said to have denied Voykov's story. Unfortunately, we do not know when this incident took place, before or after Litauer's conversation with the Soviet diplomats late in November 1926.

It will be seen that the topic of the conversation was quite out of the ordinary. Two formal subordinates of the plenipotentiary representative of the USSR in Warsaw initiated a conversation with a Polish diplomat on the future of their chief who had begun his mission in Poland only two years before. His various "quirks" notwithstanding, Voykov was regarded by Polish authorities as a useful channel of communication with the Kremlin. After the May 1926 *coup d'etat*, Józef Piłsudski had two extremely important political conversations with Voykov concerning the future of Polish-Soviet relations.[36] At the end of the day, an ambassador's position is determined—and his or her performance judged—by the ability to be an effective intermediary of communication between his government and the authorities of the receiving state, i.e., to effectively bring the political messages of his host state's authorities to the attention of key decision-makers in his home state. Voykov was a Bolshevik activist and a longstanding member of the Communist Party. He belonged to the group of Lenin's closest co-workers whom German intelligence had sent in April 1917, together with Lenin, from Switzerland via Germany and Sweden to Petrograd. Because of his involvement in the murder of the royal family, he was a well-known figure in Soviet Russia. Accordingly, from the point of view of the Polish authorities, he had all the attributes necessary for effective communication with the Soviet government. This was important insofar as just at that time Poland was seeking to strengthen relations with the USSR. It was with this mission that Patek, the member of Poland's parliament, was sent to Moscow as the new Polish envoy. Patek was a seasoned diplomat and a Warsaw lawyer who at one time had defended before tsarist courts members of the Polish Socialist Party and of the Socialist Democracy of the Polish Kingdom and Lithuania,

[36] P. Wandycz, J. Borzęcki, "Rozmowy Piłsudskiego z Wojkowem. Fragmenty Raportów," *Zeszyty Historyczne*, z. 149/2004.

Pyotr Voykov, Soviet envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to Poland, during his visit to Kraków.
Photo NAC

including prominent Bolshevik activists such as Felix Dzerzhinsky, Iosif Stanislavovich Unshlikht and Yakov Hanetsky.[37] In such circumstances, two members of the Soviet legation staff suggested to a representative of the Polish MFA that the future of the Soviet envoy to Warsaw was questionable.

It does not take access to the archives of Soviet intelligence to establish that in fact Litauer's interlocutors were not Voykov's subordinates. They obviously represented an institution other than the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs. It is hardly imaginable that Voykov's subordinates—even if resentful of him and disloyal—would have gone as far as to discuss the future of their chief with a Polish diplomat. The risk of disgracing themselves and, therefore, putting an end to their carer in Soviet diplomacy would have been too great. Since Molotokovsky and Shusterov were obviously not worried about this risk, they can be assumed, with much probability, to have been Soviet intelligence officers working under diplomatic cover, and since they were unlikely to have risked a conversation of this kind unbeknown to their real superiors, there is good reason to believe they represented Soviet military intelligence (Fourth Directorate of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army [RKKA] General Staff, or *Razvedyvatelnoye upravleniye*). Indeed, as mentioned above, the two second secretaries of the Soviet legation, Molotkovsky and Shusterov, left Poland in 1927. We do not know whether this happened before or after the Voykov assassination, but their positions in the legation were scrapped. In the Polish MFA's rosters of Soviet legation personnel, drawn up at the beginning of 1928, new functions appeared in the place of those of the second secretaries, one a "secretary to the military attaché" and the other an "assistant to the military attaché."[38]

Litauer's sceptical reaction to the suggestion that Voykov could be replaced by Pestkowski is less relevant. His answer, that the Polish authorities would rather have a Russian than a Pole, was in line with the general attitude evolving at the time in the MFA.[39]

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[37] M. Gmurczyk-Wrońska, *Stanisław Patek …, op. cit.*, p. *238;* On Patek's mission to Moscow read: pp. 231–413.

[38] *Spis składu osobowego pełnomocnego przedstawicielstwa ZSSR w Polsce, Konsulatu Generalnego w Gdańsku, Konsulatu we Lwowie i Przedstawicielstwa Handlowego ZSSR w Polsce z Odziałami i Agenturami*, 15 January 1928, AAN, MSZ, 6824, k 2 i n.

[39] A year later, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) sent to the MFO a letter concerning communist Poles serving in Soviet diplomatic missions in Poland. H. Kawecki, a department head in the MIA, wrote: "The Ministry of Internal Affairs received from the Office of Province Governor in Lvov information from a confidential and trustworthy source that recently there had been several vacancies in the

Litauer's memo of 22 November was delivered to the minister of Foreign Affairs with an annotation by an Eastern Department official that the subject conversation could have been intended to find out the Polish side's reaction to the possibility of Arkadyev's replacement with the head of the Political Department for the Baltic States and Poland in the Narkomindel, Mechislav Loganovsky, who had served in Poland in 1921-1923 in a diplomatic capacity (as the second secretary of the Soviet plenipotentiary representative office in Warsaw). Judging by the annotations added by MFA officials, the memo was sent back from the minister's secretariat to the Eastern Department on 1 December 1926, and two days later marked "*ad acta*". The signal had been noted, but it required no response from the Polish side other than that Litauer gave to his Soviet hosts at the dinner.

Still, this document is interesting in the context of the attack on Voykov six months later. It suggests that Soviet military intelligence was interested in replacing the Soviet minister in Warsaw. This interest could have been serious enough to have prompted an unofficial test of the Polish side's reaction to the sudden absence of Voykov, "who, after all, won't be staying in Warsaw forever". With the Litauer memo, a new hypothesis about the 7 June 1927 attack on Soviet minister in Warsaw Voykov can be added to the stock of interpretations long established in the literature on the subject: that Soviet intelligence (possibly military intelligence) was involved in it,

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Consulate of the USSR in Lvov, of which one, an auxiliary press clerk, was filled by Nikolai Stronsky, a well-known communist activist in Drokhobych and another, a press officer, was to be given to Vasyl Kossak, who is the real editor of Svitło, the official paper of the Communist Party of Western Ukraine. Bearing in mind that the staffing of Soviet missions in Poland with prominent communists holding Polish citizenship could considerably facilitate contacts between the communist organisation in Poland and the All-Union Communist Party and the Comintern and its sections, as well as influence the development of communist organisations in Poland, the Ministry of Internal Affairs asks the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to consider the advisability of influencing the Soviet Representation in Poland, in such a form as the MFA sees fit, so that holders of Polish citizenship are not accepted for service in Soviet diplomatic missions" (AAN, MSZ, Wydział Wschodni, file No. 6824, k. 20.) The MFA resolved to investigate the situation on the Soviet side and asked the representation in Moscow on 10 November 1927 whether the Polish side employed Soviet citizens in its missions in Russia, warning that the MFA was considering a ban on the employment of Polish citizens in Soviet missions in Poland (AAN, MSZ, Wydział Wschodni, file No. 6824, k. 21). The legation in Moscow answered only on 17 March 1928: "Further to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' letter of 10 November, [19]27 No 13362, I am on principle and absolutely against employing in state service Poles who remain Soviet citizens. Exceptions, strictly temporary, may be made if justified by short-term expediency or by strictly exceptional considerations, but the programme should be to completely get rid of Soviet citizens serving in Polish diplomatic missions in the Soviet Union. Practice shows that one of the characteristic traits of the Soviet government is extreme ruthlessness, grasping and inquisitive. Even those who are above ordinary succumb to it. It takes an exceptional character to resist it. Our missions must not be put to such tests." Patek do MSZ, 17 March 1928, AAN AAN, MSZ, Wydział Wschodni, file No. 6824, k. 48.

whether directly or indirectly. Perhaps, and contrary to the version of events accepted since 1927, Kowerda, rather than acting alone in revenge on the Bolsheviks for the destruction of Russia and the murder of the Tsar's family, was inspired (or controlled) by Soviet institutions interested in liquidating Voykov. The document published below shows that 90 years after the 7 June 1927 attack, it is worthwhile to undertake a new search of archives, Polish and foreign alike, to verify this new hypothesis. On leaving prison, Kowerda went to Yugoslavia and, from there, to the United States, where he lived and worked for decades. His past must have been known to the FBI. The prospects of further research certainly look promising.

The coffin with Pyotr Voykov's body. Aleksandr Ulyanov, secretary of the Soviet legation to Poland, visible in the photo.
Photo NAC

Top Secret

REPORT FOR THE MINISTER
via Head of the Eastern Department

On 20 November, Saturday, I was invited to dinner by the Secretaries of the Soviet Legation, Messrs. Molotkovsky and Shusterov. In the course of conversation, Shusterov mentioned that on the last Tuesday, 16 November, Mr. Pestkowski, erstwhile Soviet envoy in Mexico now replaced with Mrs. Kollontal, had passed through Warsaw. Stressing that Pestkowski had been his closest friend since they had served time together in hard labour camp, Shusterov asked suddenly whether Pestkowski's candidacy would please the Polish government and be acceptable should the Soviet government intend to appoint Pestkowski as the envoy in Warsaw in the event of Mr Voykov's resignation.

I expressed great astonishment that Voykov's resignation should be considered at all, to which Mr Shusterov answered that it was early days yet, but this way or other Mr Voykov would not be staying in Warsaw forever.

I said that I believed the Polish officials felt more comfortable with a Soviet envoy extraordinary who was a Russian than they would if he were a communist Pole. However, I stressed that to my knowledge those in Poland who knew Mr. Pestkowski respected him for his strict idealism. Even so, I strongly emphasised that I did not believe anybody could achieve a better standing in Warsaw than Mr. Voykov had earned and I closed the subject with some kind platitudes about Mr. Voykov.

Further during the conversation, Mr. Shusterov stressed the importance of Mr Arkadyev as a political force and suggested that he could be transferred to the Narkomindel. At the same time, he was sounding out Polish officials' attitude towards Mr Loganovsky.

This conversation left me with an impression that Mr Voykov's position was not very strong and that following the appointment of a new Polish envoy in Moscow, the Bolsheviks were also likely to do some reshuffling.

/signed/ *Stefan Litauer*

AAN, MSZ, 6639c, k. 322.

PIII 12364/26 322 55

Numer PIII aa Ivwbjir

Warszawa, dnia 22.XI.1926 r.

Ściśle Tajne.

RAPORT DO PANA MINISTRA

na ręce Pana Naczelnika Wydziału Wschodniego.

W sobotę 20 listopada zaproszony byłem przez Sekretarzy Poselstwa Sowieckiego, pp. Mołotkowskiego i Szusterowa na kolację. W toku rozmowy p. Szusterow wspomniał, że w ubiegły wtorek 16.listopada przez Warszawę przejeżdżał p. Pestkowski, dotychczasowy poseł Z.S.R.R. w Meksyku, który ustąpił miejsca p. Kołłątajowej. Podkreślając, że p. Pestkowski jest jego najbliższy przyjacielem, jeszcze z czasów wspólnie odbytej katorgi, Szusterow nagle spytał, czy n.p. kandydatura Pestkowskiego byłaby przyjemną i do przyjęcia dla Rządu Polskiego, gdyby Rząd Sowiecki zamierzał mianować go posłem w Warszawie w razie ustąpienia p. Wojkowa.

Wyraziłem moje wielkie zdziwienie, że wogóle może być mowa o ustąpieniu p. Wojkowa, na co p. Szusterow odpowiedział mi, że to coprawda nie jest jeszcze aktualne, ale że przecież wiecznie p. Wojkow w Warszawie siedzieć nie będzie.

Zaznaczyłem, że moim zdaniem czynnikom polskim łatwiej jest rozmawiać z posłem sowieckim o ile nim jest rosjanin, aniżeli gdyby nim był komunista polak. Podkreśliłem jednak, że o ile mi wiadomo, p. Pestkowski szanowany jest przez tych w Polsce, którzy go znają, ze względu na jego czysty idealizm. Z całą jednak jaskrawością podkreśliłem dalej, że nie wydaje mi się, ażeby ktokolwiek mógł sobie zdobyć w Warszawie lepszą pozycję od tej, którą zdobył sobie p. Wojkow i zakończyłem ten temat szeregiem życzliwych ogólników pod adresem p. Wojkowa.

W dalszej rozmowie p. Szusterow m.i. sprawami podkreślał znaczenie p. Arkadjewa jako siły politycznej i wysuwał możliwość przeniesienia go do Narkomindiełu, sondując jednocześnie stosunek czynników polskich do p. Łoganowskiego.

Z rozmowy wyniosłem wrażenie, że pozycja p. Wojkowa nie jest zbyt silną i że w związku z nominacją nowego posła polskiego w Moskwie możliwe są również przesunięcia u bolszewików.

Stefan Litauer

S.2

aa 3/12

Czy nie chodzi o próbę przysłania Łoganowskiego do Warszawy na miejsce Arkadjewa? 22/XI

Vidi 22/XI