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INTRODUCTION

In the final months of peace in 1939, the fate of Europe depended on decisions taken in Warsaw as it never had before or since. After the Munich Conference, Hitler set out to subordinate Poland in his drive to ultimately topple the Versailles order. He intended to neutralise the formal French-Polish alliance and to create a 'buffer zone' dependent on Germany, separating the Reich from the Soviet Union. Poland, isolated and discredited by its role in the partitioning of Czechoslovakia, seemed an easy target. Hitler claimed for the incorporation of the Free City of Danzig into the Reich and an extraterritorial motorway through Polish Pomerania linking East Prussia with the rest of the Reich. Hitler's essential demands, however, were not territorial in nature but political: Poland was to join the Anti-Comintern Pact and commit itself to consulting its foreign policy with Berlin. In exchange, Hitler offered Poland peace, a guarantee of its Western boundary and the role of the Reich's vassal in a new European order based on German hegemony. Warsaw was thus expected to renounce one of the foundations of its foreign policy since 1919—the principle of not entering into any alliance with one of its powerful neighbours against at the other.

Poland's rejection of Hitler's offer to join the new European order, shaped by Berlin, on a voluntary basis took the German Chancellor by surprise. It not only frustrated his plans of expansion in Eastern Europe in search of a *Lebensraum* for the German nation, but it also meant a risk of war on two fronts in case of an armed conflict in the West. Poland's resistance to Hitler's plans also marked a radical change in European politics, signalling the end of the policy of concessions in the face of German demands (appeasement) and the beginning of cooperation between countries interested in halting the expansion of the Third Reich—the emergence of a *de facto* anti-German coalition. Hence an examination of the steps undertaken by Polish diplomacy

in the final months of peace and of the documents it produced at the time is vital to comprehending the new international constellation that determined the destiny of Europe in the years that followed.

The overwhelming majority of those interested in the subject, including historians and other specialists, have no knowledge of Polish, which explains why Polish documents on foreign policy, with a few exceptions, have been practically unknown, or little known at best, beyond Poland's borders. The same can be said about the work of Polish historians. The present volume includes a selection of Polish foreign policy documents from the period between 24 October 1938 and 30 September 1939 in English or, in some cases, in French.

The volume has been compiled on the basis of *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne* [Polish Diplomatic Documents], a series published since 2005 by the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM). It contains a selection of documents already published in three successive volumes of the

Exceptions include the papers of Polish ambassadors: in Berlin (Diplomat in Berlin 1933–1939; Papers and Memoirs of Józef Lipski, Ambassador of Poland, New York–London, 1968), and in Paris (Diplomat in Paris, 1936–1939; Papers and Memoirs of Juliusz Łukasiewicz, Ambassador of Poland, New York–London, 1970), published through the efforts of the Polish emigré community in the West, as well as the memoirs of Józef Beck—a source of lesser cognitive value (Dernier rapport. Politique polonaise, Neuchâtel, 1951).

For many years, the only fundamental works on the subject known in the West were the monographs by Anna Cienciała (*Poland and the Western Powers 1938–1939*; *A Study in the Interdependence of Eastern and Western Europe*, London–Toronto, 1968) and by Marian Wojciechowski (*Die polnisch-deutschen Beziehungen 1933–1938*, *Studien zur Geschichte Osteuropas* series, vol. 12, Leiden, 1971). The state of research in the 1990s is reflected in *Historia dyplomacji polskiej, vol. IV: 1918–1939*, P. Łossowski (ed.), Warsaw, 1995, and *vol. V: 1939–1945*, W. Michowicz (ed.), Warsaw, 1999. New findings in Polish historiography during the last decade and new interpretations can be found in: S. Żerko, *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie 1938–1939*, Poznań, 1998; S. Dębski, *Między Berlinem a Moskwą, Stosunki niemiecko-sowieckie 1939–1941*, Warsaw, 2003 and 2007; M. Kornat, *Polska 1939 roku wobec Paktu Ribbentrop-Molotow*, Warsaw, 2002. It is also worthwhile to mention M. Kornat, *Polityka Równowagi 1934–1939*. *Polska między Wschodem a Zachodem*, Cracow, 2007. The causes of World War II have been examined extensively in historiography, but the editors decided to skip the vast list of these freely accessible publications.

series.³ The editors of the present volume did not undertake any research at the source, capitalising earlier archival research conducted by the Editors of the above mentioned volumes of *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne*. The editors of the present volume would like to thank Marek Kornat, Wojciech Rojek and Stanisław Żerko for their permission to use those documents and some of the accompanying editorial material.

* * *

Poland's restoration to statehood in November 1918, following 123 years of partitions, was the result of a synergy of efforts undertaken by Poles in the diplomatic corridors in Paris, London, Washington and Rome, and especially at the Versailles Conference, as well as their own independent struggle back home for a new state and its boundaries.⁴ The 'ethos of action' aimed at regaining Poland's independence irrespective of the existing international situation or the decisions of the Great Powers, exerted a strong impact on Poland's foreign policy during the entire inter-war period, resulting in an ambivalent nature of Poland's approach to the Powers behind the Versailles system. The new Polish state was undoubtedly one of the Versailles Treaty's principal beneficiaries. Aleksander Skrzyński, one of Poland's most outstanding ministers of foreign affairs between the two world wars. described the Versailles Treaty as 'Poland's very existence.' He also noted on many occasions that 'Poland held the key to European security—any combination that would attempt to ignore this fact would be doomed to failure from the very outset.'5 The Polish raison d'état necessitated cooperating with Paris and London for the stabilisation of the Versailles system, and this was the objective of the military treaties that Poland concluded with France and Romania in 1921, Poland's strong determination

Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne 1938, edited by M. Kornat, Warsaw, 2007; Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne 1939, styczeń-sierpień, edited by S. Żerko, Warsaw, 2005; Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne 1939, wrzesień-grudzień, edited by W. Rojek, Warsaw, 2007.

⁴ Among recent works, see *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne 1918*, listopad–grudzień, edited by S. Debski, Warsaw, 2008.

⁵ P. Wandycz, Aleksander Skrzyński, Minister spraw zagranicznych II Rzeczypospolitej, Warsaw, 2006, pp. 47–48 and 141. Skrzyński's successor August Zaleski in turn noted: 'There is nothing for Poland to wage war over,' August Zaleski, Przemowy i deklaracje, Warsaw, 1929, vol. 1, pp. 6 and 16.

to work with Great Britain and its consistent support during the 1920s for the institutions of the Versailles system, especially the League of Nations. The Polish political establishment associated Poland's security at the time with close political and military cooperation with France—the principal architect of the Versailles order.

Until 1925, the French-Polish alliance was a natural consequence of both countries' community of strategic interests, but in mid-1920s this alliance began to erode. France and Great Britain, in their efforts to stabilise the Versailles system, began to search for ways to restore full rights to Germany, to include it in the system and safeguard it an equal party status. Poland's role as a French ally and a pillar of the Versailles system to the east of Germany began to diminish as the tendency strengthened to involve Germany in the main stream of European affairs. This trend resulted in 1925 in the Locarno Treaty, which enhanced the security of Western Europe at the cost of Central Europe, whose relative level of security was undermined by the Treaty. The emergence in Europe of two zones with different levels of security drove a wedge into the French-Polish alliance and into the two countries' community of strategic interests.

Warsaw viewed the Western powers' attempts to reform the Versailles Treaty and their policy to involve Germany in European affairs with great reserve. Poland's political establishment feared that this could conceal plans to revise the system at Poland's expense, the more so as suggestions in this vein were raised during diplomatic discussions. In December 1935, Ralph S. Stevenson, a senior official at the Foreign Office, declared in Geneva to representatives of the Polish Foreign Ministry that 'with regard to Germany, one had to choose between two methods: either to buy peace, or to wage war. England will, to the limit of what is possible, pursue the first course [...] In Europe the Austrian question will end either with an *Anschluss* or with a *Gleichschaltung*. This, however, will not stop German expansion, which could unfold in the direction of Czechoslovakia, and perhaps also Poland. England—Stevenson went on—can intervene only in defence of the *status quo* in the West of Europe, but no House of Commons will accept an intervention in defence of the order in Central and Eastern Europe, for instance in defence of

the Corridor [i.e., Polish Pomerania].'⁶ This fear of the Western Powers' instrumental approach to the security interests of East-Central European countries reinforced Poland's determination to seek for an autonomous and independent foreign policy. Consequently, the main criterion determining Poland's approach to various political projects in foreign affairs during the inter-war era as well as the limits of Polish cooperation with the Western powers was the political impact of those projects on the preservation of the Polish-German *status quo*. As a result of its strive for the greatest possible autonomy and freedom of manoeuvre, however, Poland found itself trapped in 1938, when at the news that a Four-Power conference had been called in Munich to consider German demands towards Czechoslovakia, the Polish authorities decided to act on their own. On 30 September 1938, Kazimierz Papée, the Polish envoy in Prague, submitted an ultimatum to the Czechoslovak government, demanding that it cede to Poland the part of Teschen Silesia known as Zaolzie predominantly inhabited by Poles.⁷

Poland's single-handed step was meant as an act of protest against the idea—revived in Munich—of a directorate of European powers. But, as Polish historians have justly pointed out, 'this diversion from the spirit of Munich' was very convenient for Hitler. 'By undermining Western politicians' preferred method of resolving Central European disputes solely by the Munich directorate, Poland made it possible for the Chancellor to definitely turn his back on the need to consult London and Paris about the Reich's demands—a need that had greatly hampered Germany's freedom of action.' The reasons for Warsaw's reserve about the concept of a directorate of Powers and Poland's efforts to preserve the autonomy of its foreign policy in rapidly

⁶ Quoted after Marian Wojciechowski, Die polnisch-deutschen Beziehungen 1933–1938..., op. cit., pp. 212–213.

⁷ See the ultimatum note handed by the Polish envoy in Prague to the Czechoslovak Minister of Foreign Affairs on 30 September 1938, *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatczne* 1938, *op. cit.*, doc. 353, pp. 640–642. Under pressure from Hitler, in 1938 the Western Powers decided to give precedence to ethnic considerations over historical ones in the matter of Czechoslovakia's boundaries. This immediately opened up the problem of equal treatment of all Czechoslovakia's neighbours and of its minorities. In 1919–1920 the Western Powers, by recognising Czechoslovakia's annexation of Teschen Silesia, supported Prague's arguments that this area had historically been part of the Crown of St. Wenceslaus.

⁸ S. Żerko, *Stosunki polsko niemieckie..., op. cit.*, p. 96. A similar conclusion in S. Stanisławska, *Polska a Monachium*, Warsaw, 1967, p. 263.

changing conditions are easy to understand, yet this does not alter the fact that Poland's policy in September 1938 was misguided. Contrary to the Polish authorities' expectations, it did not improve Warsaw's position. Quite the opposite, it led to its isolation in Europe, significantly complicating its situation when in the second half of October 1938 Poland found itself under pressure from Hitler.

The second factor that affected Polish foreign policy during the inter-war period was Poland's location between two powers revisionist with respect to the Versailles order: Germany and Soviet Russia. Moreover, the Polish state had re-appeared on the map of Europe also as a consequence of the collapse of the two neighbours responsible for Poland's disappearance from the map 123 years earlier. Poland was striving to keep a balance in the face of the revisionism of its two powerful neighbours, although the expression 'policy of equilibrium' used by Polish diplomacy at the time remains controversial even today. Poland's location between the two Powers entailed two mortal dangers: that Poland would become dependent on one of them or that they would once again cooperate against Poland.

In 1919, Józef Piłsudski, one of the co-founders of the restored Polish state and the author of guidelines of its foreign policy, said: 'If we were forced to link our destiny with either Germany or the Bolsheviks, this would mean that our task had not been completed. Poland's civilisational mission would remain unfulfilled.' Poland's Foreign Minister Józef Beck in turn, talking about the guidelines of Polish foreign policy with British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Lord Halifax on 4 April 1939, observed: 'As far as Poland is concerned, two truths due to its geographical situation are vital, namely for its policy not to rest either on Germany or on Russia. Should Poland make its policy dependent on either of those powers, it would cease being an element of peace, and would become a factor capable of provoking conflict. [...] this principle has vital significance for Poland.' 11

⁹ S. Żerko, 'Polska polityka zagraniczna w styczniu-sierpniu 1939 r.,' Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny, vol. 5, no. 5/27, 2005, p. 22, ft. 5. For polemics with his statements and a defense of the 'policy of equilibrium' see M. Kornat, Polityka równowagi..., op. cit.

¹⁰ J. Piłsudski, *Pisma zbiorowe*, Warsaw, 1937, vol. 5, p. 111.

¹¹ See doc. 84, p. 180. See also: doc. 82, p. 166: 'Two things are impossible from the Polish point of view, namely making Poland's policy dependent on either Berlin or Moscow.'

Cooperation between Germany and Russia—two neighbours with a hostile approach to the newly restored Polish state—constituted a threat to Poland's very existence from the very outset. Kazimierz Świtalski, Speaker of the Polish Parliament, noted the following observation made by Piłsudski to his closest collaborators on 7 March 1934: 'During its history, at the time of Catherine [the Great] and Frederick of Prussia, Poland found out the hard way what it meant when two powerful neighbours reached an understanding. Poland was torn to shreds then. This is a permanent danger for Poland. After the Great War this danger diminished because Germany had been beaten by the Entente and Russia by the Commandant [i.e., Piłsudski]. Those two countries were thus less powerful. They did, however, conclude the Rapallo accord which, although not directed against Poland as much as against the entire world, was nonetheless dangerous for Poland.'

The Polish policy of 'resting on neither Germany nor Russia' was always meant to counteract the possibility of anti-Polish cooperation between Poland's two neighbours and, at the same time, to maintain broad autonomy in foreign policy. This required, however, tight cooperation with the Western Powers, France in particular. Given the evolution of British and French policy toward Germany from mid-1920s, this was becoming more and more difficult for Warsaw to achieve. At the same time, there was a danger that the Versailles system would be substituted by a directorate of Powers disregarding the interests of Central European states. The precedent of the Locarno conference of 1925, and especially the so-called Four-Power Pact (embracing France, Germany, Great Britain and Italy) proposed in 1932, reminded the Polish political establishment that such a possibility should not be ruled out.

The situation in Europe changed, however, when Adolf Hitler assumed power in Germany, as his aim was not to revise the Versailles system, but to destroy it altogether. Consequently, he was not interested in Germany's participation in a European directorate of Powers.

In contrast to his predecessors at the post of chancellor, he did not initially aim to 'finish off' Poland unconditionally, and this led Warsaw to view him as a moderate and reasonable politician. In his plans, the Führer first saw Poland in the role of Germany's outpost (*Vorposten*) in the East and as a 'bastion of

¹² Kazimierz Świtalski, *Diariusz 1919–1935*, edited by A. Garlicki and R. Świętek, Warsaw, 1992, p. 658.

civilisation' protecting Germany from the Bolshevik threat on the one hand, and from potential French attempts to exert pressure on the Reich on the other. In the long-term perspective, Hitler expected to subjugate Poland and subordinate it to German aims on the international arena. He was preparing first and foremost for a confrontation with France and thus sought to deprive it of potential allies. It was only after a victory in the West that he intended to turn against Russia. In this latter project, he did not rule out collaboration with Warsaw. Hence 'the role of Poland in Hitler's long-term plans in the East depended on the evolution of Germany's relations with the Western Powers.' Warsaw in turn, coming under mounting pressure from the Western Powers to accept a peaceful revision of the Versailles system at Poland's expense, decided to counter the potential threat by seeking to normalise its relations with Germany, if only provisionally.

On 26 January 1934, Poland and Germany signed a Declaration renouncing the use of force that was to remain in force for 10 years. Through this Declaration, Warsaw postponed for several years the threat that the Western Powers might treat Poland as currency in buying peace from Hitler, while Germany was able to escape isolation following its withdrawal from the League of Nations. This Declaration together with the 1932 Polish-Soviet non-aggression pact constituted the foundation of Poland's above-mentioned policy of 'equilibrium' or 'equal distance' during the 1930s.

Commitment to this policy was reflected, on the one hand, in Polish politicians' consistent rejection of Berlin's oft-suggested need for Poland and Germany to cooperate against the USSR and, on the other, it their reiterated readiness to take a stand in defence of the Versailles system should the Western Powers ever opt for such a policy.

The most evident manifestation of this approach was Poland's position on the remilitarisation of the Rhineland. Having heard of the entry of German troops into the Rhineland on 7 March 1936 and following consultations with the Polish President, Prime Minister and Chief of General Staff, Beck declared to the French ambassador in Warsaw that should Paris decide to

¹³ M. Wojciechowski, Die polnisch-deutschen Beziehungen 1933–1938..., op. cit., p. 105.

react, Poland would meet its obligations under the 1921 alliance treaty. France, however, remained passive in the face of the German steps.

Thus, despite the *rapprochement* with Germany after 1934, the Polish authorities consistently held the view that in an armed confrontation between Germany and the Western Powers defending the Versailles system, Poland had to side with the West. In March 1937, during a conversation with Winston Churchill, a staunch opponent of appeasement, Józef Beck made it clear to the British politician that should there ever be war in connection with Germany's violation of the order in Europe, Poland would side with Great Britain. ¹⁵

At the same time, Polish diplomacy anxiously followed all Soviet attempts to enhance Moscow's influence in Central Europe. In May 1938, Wacław Grzybowski, the Polish Ambassador in Moscow, warned that Moscow's aim was not to support Czechoslovakia in its conflict with Germany, but to spark off a European war: 'The attitude of the Soviets in the Czechoslovak affair is very similar to their position on the Spanish question. Besides general assurances of allied solidarity and a declared will to cooperate in the peaceful resolution of the Czechoslovak question, the Soviets' true efforts are consistently aimed at aggravating the situation in Central Europe, based on the political calculation that an armed conflict would result and the Soviets could then adopt a wait-and-see attitude.' The opposite scenario was even more disturbing for Poland: should the USSR truly wish to take an armed stand against Germany, this would require the consent of the interested countries to the presence of the Red Army on their territory. In the Baltic States and in

¹⁴ See note of 7 March 1936 in: Jean Szembek, *Journal* 1933–1939, Paris, 1952, pp. 166–168. The matter was first mentioned by the then French ambassador in Warsaw, Léon Noël, in his memoirs *L'Agression allemande contre la Pologne. Une Ambassade à Varsovie* 1935–1939, Paris, 1946, p. 125.

J. Beck, Dernier Rapport..., op. cit., pp. 127–128; J. Gawroński, Moja misja w Wiedniu, Warsaw, 1965, pp. 391–392. Similar suggestions also appeared two months later in Beck's discussion in London, on the occasion of George VI coronation ceremonies. See M. Nurek, Polska w polityce Wielkiej Brytanii w latach 1932–1938, Warsaw, 1983, pp. 71–72. See also M. Zacharias, 'Geneza układu o wzajemnej pomocy między Polską a Wielką Brytanią,' in: Z. Błażyński (ed.), Władze RP na obczyźnie podczas II wojny światowej, London, 1984, pp. 84–92.

¹⁶ See the report of the ambassador in Moscow on the Soviet position with regard to Czechoslovakia, 25 May 1938, *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne 1938..., op. cit.*, doc. 122, p. 286.

Poland, this prospect was especially alarming, as was best reflected in an observation made by the Latvian Minister of Defence: Should Soviet troops ever be allowed to enter Latvian territory, Latvia would 'never be able to get rid of them.' 17

An entirely new chapter in these dramatic events began on 24 October 1938, when Joachim von Ribbentrop, the Reich's Minister of Foreign Affairs, confronted Józef Lipski, the Polish Ambassador in Berlin, with the proposal for a 'comprehensive' settlement (*Gesamtlösung*) of German-Polish relations. The documents in the present volume throw light on further developments as seen through the eyes of Polish diplomacy, ending with the establishment in France of a Polish Government-in-exile, whose basic aim was to continue the struggle at the side of the Western allies. Poland, a founding member of the anti-Nazi coalition, remained an integral part thereof from the first to the last day of the war in Europe.

* *

Of the 233 documents presented below, 226 were published in the *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne* series (see footnote 3). The present volume also contains 7 new documents which, for various reasons, were not included in this series. Footnotes from *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne* were used in part, while other footnotes were written anew, expanded or rewritten with the needs of a non-Polish reader in mind.

The documents which appear in English translation in this volume were not originally intended for publication. Some are rather informal and at times even conversational in tone, while others include comments suggesting a personal friendship between the author and the addressee. As such, they did not present any particular technical difficulty in translation, with the exception of occasional idiomatic expressions, some of them now obsolete, or typically Polish forms of address or valedictions, for which the nearest English equivalent was chosen.

¹⁷ This statement is to be found in the report of the Polish envoy in Riga from his conversation with the Latvian Minister of Defense, 28 February 1939, Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne 1939, styczeń-sierpień..., op. cit., doc. 61, p. 120. See also S. Dębski, Między Berlinem a Moskwą ..., op. cit., pp. 242–243.

Polish geographical names that appear in the original documents were changed to reflect the international historical context. Hence Danzig instead of Gdańsk, Kaunas instead of Kowno, Königsberg instead of Królewiec, Marienwerder instead of Kwidzyń, Memel instead of Kłajpeda, Ratibor instead of Raciborz and Teschen instead of Cieszyn, etc. Carpathian Ruthenia was also adopted as the preferred form for the area also known as Carpatho-Ukraine, Trans-Carpathia or Sub-Carpathia.

The territory known to the Poles as Pomorze Gdańskie and to the Germans as Westpreussen and which is referred to in the documents from 1938–1939 as 'Pomorze,' was translated as Polish Pomerania to avoid confusion with the part of Pomerania that at the time was a part of Germany.

A number of documents included in this volume have already been published in English. They can be found in *The Polish White Book*, a selection of diplomatic documents published in 1940 by the war-time Polish Government-in-Exile; and in *Diplomat in Berlin*, a compilation of the diplomatic papers of Józef Lipski, the Polish Ambassador to Germany, which was published in 1968 by Columbia University Press, New York.

The documents published in *The Polish White Book* were translated and published in great haste shortly after World War II began. Moreover, considerable portions of the original documents were omitted in the English edition. As a result, the editors of the present volume decided to retranslate a number of those documents in whole or in part. The documents published in *Diplomat in Berlin* were left in their original form, save for corrections of occasional spelling errors and evident oversights.

The documents in French, largely taken from *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne*, were treated in the same fashion.

The underscored fragments in the text were underlined in the original documents (by typewriter or by hand), passages in italics indicate text that was written or overwritten by hand, including signatures, while ... marks illegible words or passages.

The Index of Personal Names only provides information about the functions held by a given person in 1938 and 1939.

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