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Poland in Times of Great War and Second Independence 1914–1939

1. Polish Question during the World War I Origins of independent state

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 indicated the end of a certain era. This epoch began with the fall of Napoleon I and the Vienna Congress of 1815. For many Europeans it was a period of development in different areas including economy, political freedoms, social security, science and technology. Despite mounting conflicts, social divisions and competition between superpowers this was a relatively stable and peaceful period.

Not for Poles, though. They did not regard 19th century a “golden era”. Those were times of captivity and national disasters. Many Poles stopped to believe in armed uprising against partitioning powers and preferred to focus on social and economic development of the society. There were still some patriots, who recalled the words of famous Polish poet *Adam Mickiewicz* (1798–1855) who had prayed for “a common war for freedom of peoples”.

The Great War, however, was not a fight for “freedom of peoples”, but undeniably resulted from a conflict of interest between superpowers. The fact that partitioning powers were on different sides of the barricade, namely Russia belonged to the Entente Powers whereas Germany and the Austrian Empire were in the Central Powers bloc, was advantageous for the Polish cause and raised hopes for independence. The main problem lay

in the choice of an ally: which side should Poles back up to acquire most political gains.

It should be pointed out that partitioning powers did not have a clear concept on Polish cause, except for their intention to turn Polish lands into battleground for eastern front operations. Military circles of the fighting sides did their best to foster friendly attitude of the civilian population. As early as August 1914 commands of German and Russian armies issued special manifestos to Polish nation, each army avoiding promises and disseminating sheer propaganda. Germans reminded Poles of the Russian persecutions while Russians invoked the tradition of the Slavs fighting against Teutonic Knights.

Polish political elites had different attitude towards partitioning powers and different visions of action. The best known leaders of opposing camps were *Józef Piłsudski* and *Roman Dmowski*. Piłsudski who was a follower of uprising tradition perceived Russia as the enemy of Poland and tactically supported Central Powers. Dmowski, on the other hand, was anti-German and believed to win Polish cause by co-operation with Russia and its Western Allies namely France and Great Britain.

In the Austrian partition, known as Galicia, Piłsudski well before the war organised paramilitary formations that later gave rise to the Polish Legions, subordinated to Austrian orders. For two years the Legions fought with dedication. Piłsudski took command of the First Brigade of the Legions himself. Piłsudski's charisma and skilful propaganda won him great popularity in the society. The legend of Piłsudski and his Legions partially came from the role Poles assigned to armed struggle and military commanders.

In 1915 a victorious German army occupied the area of Russian Partition and two zones of occupation were created on Polish lands. In German and Austrian Zones of Occupation Poles enjoyed certain range of freedoms, that were mainly given in the field of education and local government. In general, however, Poles were disappointed with the policy of the occupying powers that were economically exploiting the occupied area and were reluctant to take a decision on the future of Polish lands. Only on 5 November 1916 a famous Declaration was published. According to the will of the two emperors Poland was to become an independent constitutional

monarchy, but within so far undefined territorial and constitutional limits. The Declaration was a clear proof of German intention to create a buffer or satellite country and gain Polish recruitment. Therefore Polish nation were not satisfied with the Declaration. But on the other hand its objective importance cannot be underestimated as it raised Polish question effectively on international level.

However, the key event for the Polish cause was the Russian Revolution of 1917. After the February Revolution and the overthrow of the Tsar the Provisional Government proclaimed an independent Poland, yet in close military alliance with Russia. Polish military formations began to be created in Russia.

The policy of the Western Entente Powers towards Poland changed out of all recognition. Roman Dmowski, who had been campaigning for Polish cause in Western Europe for two years, had finally a chance to act effectively. In August 1917 he founded the Polish National Committee (KNP) in Lausanne, Switzerland. The KNP soon moved to Paris and the governments of the United Kingdom, France and Italy officially recognised it as the sole and exclusive representation of Polish interests. The KNP's great achievement was establishment of the Polish Army in France under the command of general *Józef Haller*, that joined the fighting on the Western Front at the last stage of the war and thus symbolised Poland active support for the winning coalition.

Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917 was of great importance for Poland. Firstly, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk between the Central Powers and Lenin's Russia signed in March 1918 excluded Russia from the victorious Entente powers. Secondly, the Western countries could not accept the new political system in Russia. Until the Revolution in Russia the western powers regarded the Polish question as an internal matter of their great Russian ally. After Bolsheviks' success, however, the Entente politicians, especially the French, started to consider creation of independent states in Central and Eastern Europe an advantageous move as they could separate the West from "the red plague".

The United States also showed sympathy for the Polish cause. The thirteenth of President Thomas Woodrow Wilson's famous "Fourteen Points" on peace aims, spoke of an independent Poland with access to the sea.

The defeat of the Central Powers and the Russian Revolution turned out to be a convenient coincidence Poles could not have dreamed of. Autumn 1918 brought Poland freedom. Local authorities started to be established. Poles disarmed German and Austrian garrisons. In the night of 6/7 November socialist leaders formed a Provisional Government in Lublin. Józef Piłsudski, who after his refusal to compromise with Central Powers, had been imprisoned since summer 1917 in Magdeburg, Germany, returned to Warsaw on 10 November. On 11 November he took office as Commander-in-Chief and on 14 November as Chief-of-state, on the plea of the Regency Council, convoked by the occupying powers.

Most Europeans perceived World War I as tragic nightmare, depicted in books by Erich Remarque, Siegfried Sassoon or Ernest Hemingway. For Poles, however, it was the war that brought them independence. 11 November, the day of the Western Armistice, a bank holiday when most people commemorate soldiers killed during the war, in Poland is celebrated as Independence Day. It should not be forgotten, however, that the war was also tragic for Poles. Not only did they have ranks in all the combatant armies, but their country was badly destroyed and as the result of the war many Polish soldiers and civilians were scattered all over the world.

2. Struggle for territory and frontiers

Some historians, e.g. Norman Davis, perceive the events of November 1918 as a “miracle” and describe actions of the Polish population as largely irrelevant in gaining independence. One should not forget that Poland regained independence after 123 years, its frontiers were not defined and sovereignty of the new state was fragile. Throughout the coming three years Poles were to establish the frontiers of their country as well as defend and preserve independence. They fought a series of wars concurrently including fierce Ukrainian and Soviet Wars and Minor conflicts with Czechoslovakia and Lithuania. Polish population in Posnania and Upper Silesia prosecuted war with Germany through Risings, secretly supported by the Polish government. Polish struggle for frontiers was an amazing achievement and perhaps the greatest success of inter-war Poland.

Piłsudski and Dmowski's political camps differed in their concept of frontiers and internal organisation of the state. Piłsudski and his supporters thought of establishing a new Central European order that could effectively resist the expansion of Russia both White and Red. The key to success was to be Polish-Lithuanian Federation closely connected with independent Ukraine with a military alliance. Some expressed opinion that with modern slogans of sovereignty of nations Piłsudski wanted to ensure Poland a dominating role in the region and restore the powerful position Poland enjoyed before partitions.

Dmowski strongly opposed this concept. He was a declared nationalist and wanted a centralised, uniform country conducting assimilation policy towards Slavic Minorities. He was ready to give up a part of former Polish Eastern lands but wanted Poland to gain more land on the West. In his opinion Poland's role was to resist German expansion.

Despite different points of view, both Piłsudski and Dmowski dreamed of powerful Poland. They both overestimated chances for its creation and at the same time underestimated national aspirations of Ukrainians and Lithuanians.

The struggle for frontiers required great effort on the part of Polish society. The increase of the army was impressive. In November 1918 Poland had an estimated 6 thousand soldiers, in January 1919 the number reached 110 thousand and half year later around 600 thousand! It is worth stressing that a large part of the army was made up of volunteers.

The greatest challenge for the infant Republic was the war with Soviet Russia. The conflict was inevitable. Bolsheviks had no intention of resigning from the areas of the former Tsarist Empire and planned to "export" revolution to the West. On the other hand Piłsudski dreamed of ultimate separation of Russia from Europe and uniting non-Russian nations with Poland.

Military operations lasted nearly two years from the end of 1918 till autumn of 1920. The fortune of the war was very various. In 1919 the initiative lay with the Polish army that captured Wilno and Minsk. Yet in October Piłsudski, Commander-in-Chief, decided to halt military campaign partly because he was reluctant to provide aid to anti-Bolshevik forces and partly due to the exhaustion of Polish soldiers. Piłsudski knew that "white"

Russian generals were more hostile towards Poland than Bolsheviks. At the same time the “white” Russia got the support of the West. Some authors exaggerate claiming that Piłsudski’s decisions helped Bolsheviks win the counterrevolution and stay in power.

In 1920, the action expended dramatically. In April Poles launched an offensive in order to recapture Ukrainian lands from Russia as Ukraine played an important role in Piłsudski’s geopolitical concept. Piłsudski got the support of *Symon Petliura*, one of the few significant Ukrainian politicians willing to co-operate with Poland. Only after 12-day march Polish army took Kiev. But a Soviet counteroffensive in the north turned to be disastrous for Poland. In August the Red Army under the 27-year-old Mikhail Tukhachevsky, were approaching the suburbs of Warsaw. In the occupied territory power was in hands of Provisional Revolutionary Committee that was to become a government of “red” Poland after a victory Soviets expected.

Despite strong support of France (Polish army had French advisers, Charles de Gaulle among them), opinion in Western Europe was not favourable. Communist propaganda campaign under the slogan “Hands of Russia” proved successful and many people who were not dedicated communists believed that Russia conducted a just war. Foreign military assistance for Poland was blocked in Germany and Czechoslovakia.

For fear of losing only just regained independence the society got mobilised and integrated. Even boys under the age of 18 joined the army as volunteers. The all-party Government for National Defence led by *Wincenty Witos* was founded.

The turning point was the Battle of Warsaw fought in the middle of August 1920. Poles called it a “miracle of the Vistula”. A well-prepared military plan brought Polish army overwhelming victory and defeated Soviet army was forced to retreat. Lord D’Abernon, the British Ambassador at Berlin, called the battle “the eighteenth decisive battle of the world” and compared it to the victory over Arabs at the Battle of Tours in 732 by Charles Martel.

Both sides were exhausted and in October signed the armistice. In the capital of Latvia, in March 1921 the Treaty of Riga was made. It established the Polish – Soviet borderline that remained unchanged until the Soviet attack in September 1939.

Poland defended its independence and blocked Bolshevik advance to the West that was very dangerous for Europe given the revolutionary turmoil in Germany at that time. However, Piłsudski was not successful with his plan for Central and Eastern Europe. Though regarded as the main author of the military victory his opponents pointed to his unrealistic intentions that brought Poland to the verge of crisis.

While the eastern frontier was set up by military operations the western border was to be decided by politicians at Paris Peace Conference that established new order in Europe. The Chief Polish Delegates were Roman Dmowski and *Ignacy Paderewski* – Prime Minister, a pianist and a well-known composer.

Poles were a bit disappointed with the peace treaty signed in Versailles on 28 June 1919. Poland gained almost whole Posnania (due to successful Polish Risings in 1918 and 1919) and West Prussia at the Baltic Sea. However, an important port city of Danzig (Gdańsk) was made Free City of Danzig under the League of Nations. In Upper Silesia, East Prussia and Mazuria plebiscites were to be held. Poland was also to accept a Minority treaty that provided for the right of the League of Nations to control national Minorities in newly established states. And so German Minority in Poland was under the League protection whereas Polish Minority in Germany was not.

Poland lost plebiscites in East Prussia and Mazuria. Surprisingly enough, Poland also failed in Upper Silesia where Polish community was quite strong. In the voting that took place in March 1921, 479,000 voters opted for Poland and 708,000 for Germany. However, 200 thousand votes might have been cast by Germans born but not residing in Silesia.

Poles decided to organise the third rising as an “argument signed in blood”. Although fierce fighting in May and June 1921 did not bring a military solution, it exerted influence on the Allied Powers and the League of Nations and eventually Upper Silesia was divided along new lines. Only twenty-nine per cent of the total plebiscite area was granted to Poland. It was the most industrialised and the most densely populated part, though. It was passed into Poland in June 1922 and this event may symbolise the end of Polish struggle for territory and frontiers.

3. The Second republic. Territory and society

When the borders were fixed Poland had a territory of 388,6 thousand sq. km. and in 1938 after the occupation of the Zaolzie, a conflict area with Czechoslovakia, Polish territory extended to 389,7 thousand sq. km (now its total area is 312,7 sq. km), that gave Poland 6th place in Europe after the USSR, France, Spain, Germany and Sweden. The borderline was 5534 km long and Poland was bordered with Germany, the USSR, Lithuania, Latvia, Czechoslovakia and Romania. The country was divided into 16 voivodships (see: map "Poland 1918–1939").

In 1921 Poland had an estimated 27,2 million inhabitants and in 1939 their number amounted to 35 million. The largest cities were Warsaw, Łódź, Kraków, Poznań, Wilno (now the capital of Lithuania) and Lvov (now in Ukraine). Poland was a multinational country and one third of the total population constituted national Minorities with Ukrainians 15–16%, Jews 8–10%, Byelorussians 4–6% and Germans 2–3%. It was generally considered that successive Polish governments failed to develop a sensible Minority policy that would limit national conflicts. It was a complex problem since a lot of Poles were devoted to Polish nationalism whereas many organisations of national Minorities declared their hostility toward Poland and were reluctant to compromise. For instance Ukrainian nationalists for many years pursued terrorist activities in south-eastern Borderlands.

Inter-war Poland was an agricultural and underdeveloped country. Integration of the three formerly partitioned areas that differed economically (as well as had different administrations and legal codes) and had been closely lined with economies of the partitioning powers was the largest problem to overcome. The area of Prussian Partition was the best developed. The situation in the former Kingdom of Poland was not bad, but the rest of former Russian Partition and a large part of Austrian Partition were very underdeveloped and it is not an exaggeration to say that in rural areas people lived in severe poverty and misery.

Independent Poland was facing economic problems. Severe war destruction not only by military operations but also intentional activity of the armies that had trundled through Polish lands only added to the problem.

The structure of the Polish society displayed certain characteristic features. It was a rural society as peasants made up more than a half of the population (75% Poles lived in the countryside). The social groups responsible for economic development in the West namely bourgeoisie and higher middle class were rather weak in Poland. It was a result of economic regression and harmful impairment of burgher estate that had already lasted for many centuries. A significant proportion of the bourgeoisie ranging from poor shop owners and craftsmen to entrepreneurs were Jewish and to a lesser extent German. Nationalists used this fact for the purpose of their propaganda that unfortunately many Poles attentively followed.

Office workers called *intelligentsia* that made up 5–6% was a special group in Polish society. It included people with higher (only 11% of office workers) and secondary education as well as unqualified clerks. Therefore prestige the *intelligentsia* enjoyed was not an effect of the respect for education but was rather attributed to high praise of office work, even unproductive, that the society considered to be a pass to “the better kind of people”.

Another prestigious social group were landowners deriving from the noble estate i.e. *posessonati*. Anachronous as their social function may seem, landowners were the ones to promote civilisation development in Polish backward agriculture.

A compulsory education for children aged 7–14 began to function in the first few months of independence. However resources were scarce. There was a lack of both schools and teachers. In more backward rural areas the scope of mandatory education was reduced and children attended school only up to the third or fourth grades. Despite all these difficulties an immense progress was made in the sphere of primary education. In 1921 33 per cent of the population were illiterate whereas 10 years later illiteracy rate was reduced to 23 per cent and at the outbreak of The World War II it came to the level of approximately 15%. Only a small proportion of young people could afford secondary or higher education, but still peasant youngsters were more eager to obtain higher education in inter-war Poland than those in communist Poland when education was free! Secondary and higher education was on very high level and main cities as Warsaw, Cracow, Vilnius, Poznań and Lublin had their universities. Interestingly enough there was no university in Łódź, which was the second biggest city

in Poland. Despite financial problems Polish science was successful in many fields such as mathematics, physics, chemistry and technical science and achieved the highest world level.

4. Right and left wings. Politics in inter-war Poland

Political life in inter-war Poland was very eventful not only due to numerous political parties but also their frequent divisions. The most important political camps included national, Christian democratic, peasant, socialist and Piłsudski's camp.

4.1. National Democrats

The strongest party in the first years of independence was the National Democracy (*Endecja*). Its programme was based on nationalist ideology formulated by Roman Dmowski and his associates at the turn of the century. The movement activists perceived nation as the most important value and political category. They were reluctant to grant concessions to national Minorities and exhibited strong anti-Semitic and anti-German attitudes. The role of religion and Roman-Catholic church was emphasised. Nationalists looked for close relations with France and proper relations with the USSR. Later they led to the rise of radical and anti-democratic nationalist organisations such as the Camp of Great Poland (in 1926) and National and Radical Camp (1934). Their activists organised numerous anti-Semitic incidents, especially in the 30s.

The greatest nationalists were Roman Dmowski, *Stanisław Grabski*, *Stanisław Głąbiński* and *Marian Seyda*.

4.2. Christian Democrats

The ideology of Christian Democratic parties derived from with the social teaching of the Roman-Catholic Church but they did not exert much influence on Polish politics since Catholics in Poland were circled around National Democracy. In 1937 main parties of Christian Democrats

(called *Chadecja*) created Labour Movement. The most outstanding activist of Christian Democracy was *Wojciech Korfanty*, the leader of fighting for Upper Silesia.

4.3. Peasant movement

Given the structure of society the peasant movement played a significant role on the political map of Poland. However, a big number of peasant parties hindered its influence. Only in 1931 did the most powerful parties create the Peasant Party. In the 1930s its programme was based on the Agrarian Idea formulated in Germany in the second half of 19th century. According to this doctrine agriculture was the key sector of economy and peasants the most important and valuable social group. The most outstanding leaders of the peasant movement were *Wincenty Witos*, three times Prime Minister and *Maciej Rataj*, Sejm Speaker.

4.4. Socialist movement

The Polish Socialist Party was founded in 1919 after a merger of socialist organisations from the three partitions. Shortly after Poland regained independence socialists insisted on establishing broad social legislation (e.g. it provided for eight-hour working day) that put Poland ahead of other European countries. Socialists strongly supported parliamentary democracy. In 1926 the party gave open support to Piłsudski's coup d'état who was their former leader. But disappointed socialists soon moved to the opposition against Piłsudski's camp. The party was an active member of Labour and Socialist International (continuation of the Second International). Leading party activists included *Ignacy Daszyński*, *Feliks Perl* and *Mieczysław Niedziałkowski*.

4.5. Communists

Communist party in Poland was weaker than in neighbouring and western countries. Communists were persecuted because they did not recognise independent Poland considering it "bourgeoisie". They also questioned

Polish ownership of Eastern territory. Majority of Poles perceived communists as Soviet spies. In 1938 Stalin ordered to dissolve the Communist Party of Poland and its greatest activists were murdered in Soviet prisons. The party leaders were *Maria Koszutska*, *Maksymilian Horwitz-Walecki* and *Adolf Warski*.

4.6. Józef Piłsudski's camp

It was the most unusual political formation of all. At first Piłsudski's supporters did not constitute a political organisation but tried to exert influence in various parties, social organisations and in the army. They set up their own Non-Party Block for Co-operation with Government (BBWR) in 1928 when Piłsudski was already in power after his coup d'état. After Piłsudski's death BBWR was replaced by Camp of National Unity concentrated around Marshal *Edward Rydz-Śmigły*, army commander and Piłsudski's successor.

Piłsudski and his followers believed the state is the greatest value. They were fiercely critical of political parties and parliamentary system and glorified authoritarian regime. They claimed aversion to ideology and believed in interparty co-operation for the well-being of the state.

4.7. Transformations of political system

In 19th century Poland was erased from the map while many European countries were developing modern forms of political life and political culture. After the World War I Poles had to start building their democracy from the scratch.

The first parliamentary elections were held in January 1919. It is worth to stress that women were granted full voting rights, and in this respect Poland was ahead of such countries as France and Great Britain where democracy had been already long established. The main task a unicameral parliament, traditionally called Sejm, took on was to draft a constitution. The constitution was proclaimed on 17 March 1921 and is known as March Constitution. It was one of the most democratic constitutions at that time.

The march Constitution provided for the organs of the nation: in the domain of legislative power it was a bicameral parliament made up of Sejm and Senate and in the domain of executive power the government and the president. The tenure of parliament was 5 years and president was elected for 7 years. The constitution provisions guaranteed Poland a very strong and influential parliament and comparatively weak executive power with considerably reduced competencies of the president that were relatively small if compared with other democratic countries such as Germany or Czechoslovakia. Many experts consider the imbalance between legislative and executive power the basic defect of the constitution.

What were the main weaknesses of Polish political life in the first years of independence? The country was rife with numerous political parties, fiercely fighting each other. This in turn made it hard to form a stable Majority that could establish a reliable government. In the period between November 1918 and May 1926 Poland had 13 governments, one remained in office only 9 days. The longest working government was under Prime Minister *Władysław Grabski*, a reformer of Polish economy and survived nearly 2 years.

Political conflicts became highly confrontational. In December 1922 professor *Gabriel Narutowicz*, an outstanding scholar, was elected the first Polish constitutional President. This moderate politician, was a candidate of the centre and left wing, supported by the national Minorities. The disappointed right wing unleashed a violent campaign against the President. Street riots broke out and opposition hurled insults at the President. A week after his appointment Narutowicz was assassinated by a fanatic nationalist. Poland was at the verge of civil war but tensions got resolved.

Piłsudski, a charismatic politician and Chief of State in 1918–1922, posed a serious political problem. During a few years spent on the political sidelines he protested against the democratic system which he himself had initiated. He took particular offence at the performance of political parties arguing that they did not act in the interest of the state but for private benefits of their members. He also claimed that Polish political elites are demoralised and incompetent. Piłsudski's supporters attempted to convince Poles that he should return power in order to make Poland strong and secure.

Polish young democracy came in for far too fierce criticism that was more and more popular in the society. One should bear in mind that Europe was in the grip of crisis and parliamentary systems were considered to become outdated.

In May 1926 Piłsudski staged an armed coup d'état supported by the left wing, progressives, liberals and communists. Piłsudski set up a weird political system. It was not a typical dictatorship, as the parliament was not dissolved. Formally the constitutional order was prolonged, but in reality Piłsudski took control of political affairs and made decisions himself. In fact ministers of consecutive governments were appointed by Piłsudski and his people, not by the parliament. And thus one of the most important elements of parliamentary democracy seized to function and power lay in the hands of narrow group of people.

Officially Piłsudski was only head of the army. He was also the Prime Minister twice. Unlike other dictators he did not show interest in administrative matters, nor external splendours of power.

Piłsudski criticised and discredited the parliament often in brutal language. He wanted an obedient Sejm of limited competencies. In late 1920s opposition from the left wing and the centre joined together and formed the inter-party alliance of the Centre-Left (Centrolew). They aimed at overthrowing Piłsudski. In September 1930 a group of parliamentary opponents were arrested and confined in the military prison at Brześć Litewski. They were treated with brutality, many were bestially beaten. Later they were put on trial. Though they did not get harsh sentences, these remained the gloomiest events in Polish inter-war history.

Piłsudski's subjugation of opposition symbolised the end of his "liberal" rule. In November 1930 his camp got the Majority vote in the parliamentary elections by frauds and intimidation. Sick and strained Piłsudski limited his interest to foreign policy and commanding the army leaving rest of power in the hands of his co-workers called "Colonels".

On 23 April 1935 a new constitution was signed. Piłsudski's supporters employed unfair practices in order to approve the April Constitution whose provisions resembled their political views. It significantly reduced the powers of parliament to the benefit of Presidential prerogatives. Practically

all organs were subordinated to the president as he could appoint the government and higher officials, summon and dissolve parliament as well as appoint his successor. It was assumed that the president was responsible only “before God and history”. The constitution did not provide much for civic rights.

Piłsudski died three weeks later on 12 May 1935. The political system after 1926 was based on his authority and the role he played and after his death conflicts between politicians from Piłsudski camp arose. Eventually President *Ignacy Mościcki* shared power with the head of the military *Edward Rydz-Śmigły*. Some ironically compared that system to Japanese shogunate.

5. Foreign policy. Problems and dilemmas

Two neighbours of inter-war Poland questioned decisions of the Treaty of Versailles. Both for Germany and the Soviet Union Poland was a “harmful fruit of Versailles”. Germans believed that Poles occupy their lands whereas the Soviet Union could not accept the fact that Poland hindered their victorious march to the West.

In the 1920s and early 1930s relations between democratic Weimar Republic and the Soviet Union were good. In 1922 a pact in Rapello was signed and in 1926 in Berlin. The two countries established intensive military co-operation. This situation worried Polish military and political elites.

The counter-balance of Polish foreign policy rested in Polish-French alliance and in Poland's alliance with Romania. France had traditionally been a friend of Poland. French society, however, threatened by atrocities of the World War I, were ready to make concessions to Germany. Great Britain willing to relax relations with Germany, exerted pressure on French government. France and Belgium were given safety from German invasion in 1925 at the conference in Locarno, Switzerland. The agreement did not include support for eastern French allies namely Poland and Czechoslovakia. In fact European borders were divided into “better” western and “worse” eastern frontiers. Poles understood that Western countries were ready to accept German territorial revisionism.

Undoubtedly bad relations with other neighbours added to the problem. Relations with Czechoslovakia could be described as not friendly and relations with Lithuania were very hostile and until 1938 the two countries did not maintain diplomatic relations as Lithuania laid claim to Wilno area that belonged to Poland. Only short borderlines with Romania and Latvia were unproblematic.

The achievements of Polish diplomacy in 1930s are the most controversial and the hardest to assess in the history of the Second Republic. In 1932 *Józef Beck*, a 38-year old, ambitious and dynamic Piłsudski's associate was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs. Along with Piłsudski they developed the policy of "balanced relations" with Germany and the USSR. The concept was based on the assumption that only peaceful relations with the most dangerous neighbours would ensure Poland security. The architects of Polish foreign policy did not believe in efficiency of multilateral security systems or the League of Nations.

In 1932 the Treaty of Non-aggression was signed with the Soviet Union. In 1933 Hitler assumed power in Germany and launched anti-Polish propaganda campaign. Polish leaders sought an agreement with Germany as they believed that Western countries were ready to sacrifice Polish Western frontier. In January 1934 Poland signed a pact of non-aggression with Germany and Polish-German relations became as good as never before.

Polish policy towards Germany enraged France and caused antipathy of Western countries towards Poland, especially among left and liberal anti-fascist circles. But it enabled Poland to gain a few years of stability it needed.

Partnership relations with Germany were possible as long as the military potential of the two countries was similar. But the situation changed. In the light of Hitler's successes, his aggressive approach, restoration of German military power, Western appeasement policy and Stalin's play the policy of "balanced relations" turned to be inefficient.

Hot discussions continue to this day on errors of Polish diplomacy. Some historians believe that Polish politicians should not have followed the policy of balanced relations so closely when conditions changed. Others emphasise that establishing closer relations with Germany was too ostentatious and so Europe was further antagonised towards Poland. Moreover,

certain mistakes are said to be made in policy towards countries of Central Europe, mainly Czechoslovakia. Nevertheless, the prevailing opinion is that Polish politicians did everything in their power to preserve independence.

German-Soviet agreement (Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact) signed on 23 August 1939 was a death sentence on Poland. The fact that at the outbreak of World War II Poland had political and military guarantees of France and Great Britain was an undoubted success of Polish diplomacy. Polish side was not to blame that Poland's allies could not provide it with efficient assistance.

Some historians and political commentators believe that Poland should have accepted Hitler's political and territorial demands and they provide examples of Central European satellite countries of the Third Reich i.e. Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. They perceive Polish "No" as a romantic but not clever move that cost Poland horrors of the World War II. Such an opinion is not popular among Poles, though.

Translated by Ewa Kądziała

Poland in 1923

