

LATVIA'S REACTION TO MOLOTOV–RIBBENTROP PACT OF 23 AUGUST 1939: PERSPECTIVE OF POLISH DIPLOMACY

Marek Kornat

Professor at the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences and Faculty of Law and Administration of the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw. Scientific interests: history of Polish diplomacy, totalitarian orders, 20th century international relations, and development of the 19th–20th century Polish political thought.

The article focuses on the reaction of the Latvian government and diplomatic circles on the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact on 23 August 1939 as reflected in documents of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The aim of the article is, in the light of Polish documents, to reflect and evaluate Poland's and Latvia's position concerning a threatening coup in international relations – union of two superpowers. The conclusion is that similarly to the Poles, the Latvian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vilhelms Munters was more afraid of continuation of Moscow talks than of Berlin–Moscow agreement, and moreover, the Latvian government and its Foreign Minister believed until the last moment that it was possible to prevent the war.

Key words: Poland, Latvia, Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, World War II.

Poland has clearly parted ways with the Baltic States in the 1930s. The latter continued to steer the course towards neutrality, counting that in face of a European war, this would be the most conducive stance perhaps allowing the nations to survive and avoid being drawn into the conflict. In order to truly deliver, the Baltic Entente, a regional defence pact signed by Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in 1934, had to be complemented with an alliance with Poland – an alliance that never came into being.¹ The strained relations between Poland and Lithuania were not helping. Finland was prone to German lobbies. The Polish

Ministry of Foreign Affairs saw the Latvian government, and particularly, its Foreign Minister Vilhelms Munters as being excessively “soft” with regard to the USSR. Warsaw might have trusted General Jānis Balodis, but not the Latvian Foreign Minister. The latter’s Polish counterpart, Minister Beck, clearly placed most confidence with Estonia from among the three Baltic States.

June of 1938 saw the visit by the Polish Chief of the General Staff, General Waław Stachiewicz, to Riga which was perceived as a sign of friendship between the two armies and was met with hostile criticism in the Soviet press. The same year was however witness to most controversial moves by the Polish side – two ultimatums, one given to the Lithuanian government aiming to force the establishment of relations with Poland, and another to the Czechoslovak government demanding the return of the Cieszyn Silesia inhabited by a Polish majority.² Across Europe, the two moves were met with accusations of complicity with German policies, even if Poland and the German Reich were not bound by any secret commitments. Those very claims nevertheless resonated with the public opinion in the Baltic States.

On the eve of 1939 – the year that would “change everything” for Poland as well as for its Baltic neighbours – Polish diplomacy envisaged virtually no initiative directed towards those states. From Warsaw’s perspective, its relations with Latvia were an integral part of Poland’s foreign policy vis-à-vis the Baltic States. The latter was founded on the principle of their sovereignty – for as long as it was possible. Both countries, driven by mutual consideration, found themselves in a similar position of critical danger.³ Facing the gravest of threats itself, in 1939, Poland was practically unable to do anything to support the Baltic States.⁴

The tragedy of World War II became unavoidable with the pact that bound Hitler’s Germany with Stalin’s Soviet Union in August 1939. Yet historians are drawn not only by the question of how this came about, but also of how this threat was perceived by the leadership of those countries that fell victim to the

Soviet–German division of “spheres of interest” in Eastern Europe. This article attempts to look at the latter question based on the key Polish diplomatic documents, while aiming to recall and compare the Polish and Latvian assessments of the international situation in 1939.⁵ Discussing Poland’s position in those final breakthrough weeks of peace, I refer the readers to my earlier works based on documents from Polish and foreign archives.⁶

Having been informed about the Soviet–German non-aggression treaty, Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs concluded that (1) it gave a solid basis for Germany to start a war; (2) the Soviet Union was turning away from active engagement in European affairs, as the treaty with the Third Reich offered it defensive protection; (3) the threat of Western powers stepping back on their commitments to Poland became real, as the international situation and Poland’s position both deteriorated severely. Minister Beck however argued that the non-aggression pact between Germany and the USSR “does not change the real position of Poland, given that Poland never counted on Soviet assistance”.⁷

Albeit falling beyond the aim of this article, references to various other statements by Polish diplomats on Poland’s situation in the final days of peace (24–31 August 1939) could give a valuable context.⁸ It should nevertheless be stated that many of them offered views that were far from realistic, reflecting rather the so-called wishful thinking. From among them, a large majority concerned the Soviet Union. For that reason, it is particularly important to acknowledge the unique and most insightful statement made by the Polish Ambassador to Paris, Juliusz Łukasiewicz, in his conversation with the French Prime Minister Daladier on 28 August: “Stalin continues to strive to keep a free hand and will react to events according to the advances in the war efforts on our territory, as well as to the effective actions of France and England as our allies”. The Polish diplomat conceded categorically that “one can not count on any cooperation from

Stalin in the aim of averting the war. Having signed the treaty with Hitler, he has done so in order to start the war and will most certainly go further in this direction”⁹

However accurate the assessments of the Soviet foreign policy may have been, they have not led the Polish leadership to recognise the approaching unavoidable tragedy that would bring the country's partition. The final days of peace saw a rising wave of optimism among the Polish leaders – a fact that appears utterly incomprehensible. At a meeting with Poland's key decision-makers, on 28 August, Minister Beck declared that despite everything, Poland's situation “is not the worst”.¹⁰

The source of this peculiar optimism can be traced to the renewed commitments of Great Britain, which decided to instantly finalise the talks that continued since May 1939 on the formal alliance with Poland. The treaty was signed in the afternoon of 25 August in London and immediately entered into force without the obligation of first being ratified. The document was accompanied by a secret protocol stipulating that the mutual obligations pertain only to war against Germany. Thereby Poland avoided the commitment of declaring war on Italy, should Great Britain find itself in a state of war with that country. Moreover, the secret protocol specified that in the case of Germany gaining military control over Switzerland, Belgium or the Netherlands, and should Great Britain see the need to enter into war on that account, Poland will come to its assistance. By analogy, should Germany advance a military takeover of Lithuania, and given that Poland would see it as a violation of its vital interests, Great Britain would join the war as an ally.

This article does not constitute a new attempt at analysing the Polish–Latvian relations in 1939, but rather aims to recall the perspective of Polish diplomacy on the threat to Latvia's independence. For that reason, the sources referred to draw almost in their entirety on Polish archives.

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For any historian of diplomacy who ventures to look at the Polish–Latvian relations on the eve of World War II, reports by the Polish envoy to Riga constitute a fundamental source. Jerzy Kłopotowski, born in 1892, was an engineer by education and an army officer by profession. He was among the Polish army staff who in the period when Józef Beck headed the Ministry, joined the diplomatic corps, in some instances advancing to serve as head of mission.¹¹ With a decision of the Ministry of Military Affairs, Kłopotowski was moved to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in May 1932. After a brief period at the headquarters in Warsaw, he first took up the post of the consul general in Tbilisi (October 1933 – April 1936), after which, as of August 1936, he worked again at the Ministry’s headquarters. In March 1938, he was sent to Kaunas to assist in the efforts aimed at normalizing the Polish–Lithuanian relations, in the aftermath of the Polish ultimatum of 17 March. It is difficult to give a more comprehensive assessment of the diplomat’s qualities, as he took the post in Riga from Franciszek Charwat, who in turn would serve as the Polish envoy in Kaunas from 31 March 1938. Kłopotowski’s service in Riga spans over a period of a year and a half – from April 1938 to September 1939 – which in itself was rather brief, perhaps too brief for a genuine historical evaluation of the qualities that this officer would bring into his diplomatic service.

A crucial delineation of the aims of Polish policy towards Latvia in the latter days of European peace (1938–1939) is to be found in a memorandum prepared by Polish Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jan Szembek, based on the instructions given by Minister Beck to Jerzy Kłopotowski in April 1938, upon the latter’s nomination to the post of the Polish envoy to Riga. “The Minister remarked,” wrote Szembek, “that the guiding principle of our actions towards the Baltic States draws from the following argument: we will help those states as long as they are able to sustain the independence of their policies, and do not become the object of policies pursued by neighbours. In the latter case,

Poland – which has direct interests on the Baltic coast – would thus have to either: a) adjust its relationship with the Baltic states to the relationship she would have at a given moment with the neighbour exercising a protectorate over the Baltic states, or: 2) raise its claims vis-à-vis the Baltic states. (...) Speaking on the Polish–Lithuanian relations, the Minister underlined that above all he aims to avoid antagonizing the Lithuanians with excessive coarseness and persistence on our part¹²

In this context, let us recall once again that in March 1938, Poland managed to normalize its relations with Lithuania, as the Polish ultimatum resulted in the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two neighbours. Without going into the details of this matter, it should however be stated that this accomplishment came much too late to effectively foster the creation of a Baltic block or a system of Intermarium, which Minister Beck undeniably envisaged.¹³

It will hardly be a revelation to state that the year 1939 placed the Baltic States in a radically deteriorated situation as compared to the earlier period, when the international order still offered some hope for stabilization. At the outset of 1939, diplomacies of the three Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) undertook certain preventive efforts vis-à-vis the growing threat from both the Third Reich and the USSR. On 1–3 February 1939, a conference of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Baltic countries was held in Kaunas.¹⁴ Yet the three key figures – Jouzas Urbšys, Kaarl Selter, and Vilhelms Munters – did not manage to advance far beyond a general declaration on “close cooperation and economic assistance in case of emergency”.¹⁵

On 4 February, the Polish envoy to Riga was received by General Jānis Balodis, head of the Latvian army. The Polish diplomacy perceived him to be clearly anti-German. The General argued “that Poland’s position is vitally important not only for Latvia, but equally for Estonia and Lithuania. Poland can exist without Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, but none of them can or will exist without Poland. Consolidation among the Baltic states,

or the so-called Entente, will have practical and real significance only if it leans strongly on Poland!"¹⁶ This view, however accurate, could by then hardly change much in the position of Poland or the Baltic nations. Throughout the entire inter-war period (1918–1939), there was no agreement establishing political and military cooperation between Poland and the Baltics.

The capitals of the Baltic States placed much hopes in acceding to the group of Scandinavian states, which in the Stockholm Declaration of 27 May 1938 committed themselves to closely following the principle of neutrality.¹⁷ As a matter of fact, the economic ties of the Baltic States very much dictated such a path of seeking closer cooperation.¹⁸ At a conference held in Tallinn on 2 November 1938, the Baltic States declared their intention to bring the Stockholm commitments into their national legislation.¹⁹ Yet by spring of 1939 the idea of neutrality of the Baltics was clearly only a fiction. Seeking sustained independence on this path was destined to failure. The Baltic States stood no chance in effectively pursuing the efforts of the Oslo Group, which proclaimed their neutrality. In any case, in 1940 even that latter group fell under enemy invasion and control. A Lithuanian historian of diplomacy, Algimantas Kasparavičius was thus accurate in giving his monograph on Lithuanian policy the title *Lithuania in 1938–1939: Illusions of Neutrality*.²⁰

A reconstruction of the views advanced by the Latvian political figures on the threat posed by the Third Reich allied with the USSR reveals a variety of contradictions. Moreover, it gives witness to a surprising permanence of certain convictions to which the actors of unfolding events grew accustomed, even as the developments proved those concepts outdated.

As late as on 28 April 1939, Latvia's Foreign Minister would declare that "in the event of German aggression on Latvia, the Soviets would immediately react with the military".²¹ As is known, Latvians accepted the German offer of a non-aggression treaty. Vilhelms Munters travelled to Berlin and was given an audience with Hitler on 7 June 1939, the same day that the treaty

was signed.²² Latvian chief diplomat conceded that the pact had little value, yet the country had no choice but to agree to the German initiative.²³ Through this demarche, Germany signalled to the Soviets its *désintéressement* with the region. Three months later, this would bring about a Soviet–German agreement on the division of spheres of influence in Eastern Europe. But such sequence of events was properly understood neither in Riga, nor in Warsaw.

Jerzy Kłopotowski followed closely the Latvian reaction to the German offer of a non-aggression pact. His report, dated 4 May 1939, offers an interesting perspective on the matter. On 2 May, Latvian Council of Ministers agreed to the German proposal. The following day, on the occasion of Polish national holiday, Kłopotowski had an opportunity to speak with Minister Munters. The latter explained that “as far as Latvia is concerned, its stance on the non-aggression pact with Germany was always a positive one; it was only the German government which, influenced by such or other factors, decided to finalise the matter, and this with regard to a whole range of countries in the north and south. Munters attaches no significant importance to this agreement, however he is convinced that Latvia could not have given a negative response to the German proposal.” Asked by the Polish diplomat “whether he currently expects any complications from the Soviets”, Minister Munters declared that “he does not believe the Soviets intend to intervene militarily in case of German aggression on the Baltic States. In the view of this experienced politician, all Soviet demarches have a purely demonstrative value.”²⁴ These views certainly correspond with those of Polish diplomats at the time, yet it is quite difficult to offer an unequivocal assessment of Munters’ overall stance. His views were prone to change and often to clear contradictions, with which observation Jerzy Kłopotowski confronted the Latvian Minister in their conversation on 4 May 1939.

June and July 1939 saw fruitless political consultations unfolding between London, Paris, and Moscow. The Soviets

demanded a clause on “indirect aggression” as well as the right to have their troops enter the territories of the Baltic States in advance of a European war. The British government decided not to yield to these demands, having in minds its international reputation and the fact that an agreement would constitute nothing less but the betrayal of the Baltic States. More interesting is the fact that the Polish diplomacy had information of the Soviet insistence to work out the details of the definition of “indirect aggression”, yet no documents are to be found attesting to this matter being consulted with Kaunas, Riga, or Tallinn.

In early July 1939, the Polish mission reported on the views held by the head of the Political Department in the Latvian Foreign Ministry, Director Masens, as well as those of the head of the Second Department of the General Staff, Col. Kikuls.²⁵ The former argued – quite as the Poles did – that the Soviet Union primarily aimed at maintaining a “free hand” in its relations with the two competing power blocks, without being bound by either one. As for the head of the Latvian intelligence, he held the view that Moscow would rather enter into an anti-German alliance with the Western democracies, since in the event of fruitless negotiations in Moscow, Germany would begin war and accomplish its goals in Eastern Europe as Russia stood passive.²⁶

An assessment prepared by Jerzy Kłopotowski on 15 August argued that Riga was witnessing a growing sense of anxiety. Nevertheless, as the Polish envoy reported, Latvians were unanimous in their conviction as to the need for “efforts and even significant sacrifices to keep strict neutrality in case of war”.²⁷ Today, this very perspective is quite naturally prone to criticism, yet at the same time it could inspire a question as to feasible alternatives. Latvia being bound to Poland, as the latter faced the threat of German aggression hardly offered a viable alternative.

The Latvians – as needs being underlined – overly trusted in the reassurances of the British envoy, Sir William Orde, who delivered a declaration to Minister Munters with a commitment that Latvian issues will not be an object of any secret accords

between the West and the USSR without Riga's involvement, or at least Great Britain will not be a party to any agreement that would decide the fate of the Baltic States without their knowledge.²⁸ Against this background, Minister Munters would make mistaken calculations arguing that “in the present moment, when the political negotiations in Moscow have been interrupted to give way to strategic counselling, it seems that the danger has been averted for the time being. Naturally, once the political negotiations resume, we will have to follow them closely. Nevertheless, Latvia trusts and wants to trust English reassurances.”²⁹ All the while, the British strategy did not foresee real military engagement in the Baltic region.³⁰ Thus, much similarity is to be found between the Polish and Latvian leadership in their mistaken reading of Britain's foreign policy and military strategy.

The Anglo-Franco-Soviet military negotiations – commencing on 12 August – saw the head of the Soviet delegation, Marshal Voroshilov, put forward demands with regard to Poland and Romania. The question of the Baltic States was not hinted at, giving the political elites of those countries, who only in July had deep apprehensions with regard to Soviet proposals on “indirect aggression”, grounds for optimism, however illusionary they may have been.

On 19 August, the day of the signing of the German-Soviet Trade and Credit Agreement in Berlin, the Polish envoy was received by the Latvian Minister of Foreign Affairs for a discussion on German-Soviet relations. Minister Munters thanked the Polish diplomat for Poland's understanding as regards Latvia's “full political independence”.³¹ The Polish envoy reported back to Minister Beck, “Munters does not believe that it [Russia] will decide to intervene at an early stage of the war (of course if not threatened directly). It is with all the composure and calculation that Russia chooses a moment most advantageous to it. In harshest of words, Munters criticised England's policy for its particular nervousness and haste in efforts at finalising the alliance with Russia. He claims that certain English circles fear that Russia will reach

an agreement with Germany. Munters believes this option to be completely eccentric – or in his words: “It is silly to believe a thing like that” (*C’est idiot de pouvoir supposer une chose pareille*).³²

It must be said that Munters’ reaction to the Hitler–Stalin pact echoed, in principle, the Polish assessments of the international situation. It highlighted the criticism of the British efforts aimed at accommodating the Soviets, while expressing reservation as to the possibility of a German–Soviet rapprochement.

Much as the Poles did, Munters feared the continued negotiations in Moscow more than an agreement between Berlin and the Soviets. It is striking how close those views on the Moscow negotiations were to those of the Polish Ambassador in the USSR, Waław Grzybowski, as reflected in his letter to Minister Beck dated 29 August.³³ Both the Latvian Minister and the Polish diplomat took a rather optimistic stance on the broken negotiations, which thus freed the Baltic States of the pressures regarding “indirect aggression” and Poland of the growing demands from Paris and London regarding the right of passage for the Red Army through Polish territory.

One matter, however, marked a divergence between Munters and Beck. Latvia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs seemed to suggest that the war can be avoided – a view which Beck did not share at all. In his conversation with the Italian envoy in Riga, Rogeri de Villanova, on 24 August 1939, Munters argued that the German–Soviet agreement would bring a certain detente in Europe and the pressures exerted by the Soviets on the Baltic States regarding the issue of “indirect aggression” will certainly weaken. Riga also counted on Poland to make concessions to Germany regarding Danzig, whose nonviolent *Anschluss* was to help save the peace.³⁴ In contrast, Beck and his main advisers saw clearly that the pact signed in Moscow would prompt the war, making it unavoidable. Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs had no doubts that the Soviets gave Hitler “green light” to attack Poland.³⁵ Yet neither he, nor his advisers did take into account the possibility of the Red Army striking from the East.

24 August is when Kłopotowski's report from his conversation with Munters the day before is dated. The two met at an event organised by the American envoy to Riga, John Wiley. Kłopotowski's memorandum for Minister Beck reads: "When I mentioned how soon the events of the past hours disproved the claim he made with such conviction only five days earlier – namely that only fools could believe in the possible accord between Germany and the USSR, Munters conceded that the recent events completely took him by surprise. He attempted to convince me that the signing of the German–Soviet non-aggression pact does not make anything definite (the fact of the signing and the treaty's text were still not known here). The Soviets – according to Munters – were preparing to take the most advantageous position in the poss[ible], future European war. Concluding, Munters cited a part of his conversation with the Soviet envoy [Ivan] Zotov who, when asked about the pact, was to state: "Today marks the end of the German era in Europe, and the beginning of the Soviet era."³⁶

The report of the Polish envoy to Riga, dated 24 August, concludes with a general observation that serves as a useful summary: "The signing of the German–Soviet Non-aggression Pact made an important impression in Latvia, causing disorder and partly even panic. The political spheres try to suggest that with the recent events, Latvia's and Estonia's chances for neutrality have significantly increased. The public comments on the recent agreement to the contrary, and the view as to a planned division of the Baltic States among Germany and Russia is quite common. (...) The council of ministers, which debated over the new situation, took no decisions; the need to closely monitor further developments was declared."³⁷

In his report of 25 August, Kłopotowski sent a summary of the talks he held with his French counterpart in Riga, Jean Tripier. The Polish diplomat wrote, "The French envoy Tripier, with whom I had a conversation today, declared that Russia gave Germany a free hand as regards Poland, and in return Russia

ensured German *désintéressement* with regard to the Baltic States. Tripier claims that the German–Soviet non-aggression pact makes void the alliance between the USSR and France, and this is how every Frenchman understands the matter.”³⁸ Tripier’s cautionary observations merit recognition.³⁹

Latvian press has been shaken by the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, seeing a wave of articles being published on this true “revolution” in international politics. “Latvian press published such a great number of articles on the recently signed German–Soviet Non-aggression Pact that there is hardly any space left for other news. Latvia’s daily papers underline that the signing of the pact pushes the threat of war away from the Baltic States. With the embrace of two great powers, at the present the Baltic States have nothing to fear, which might not be the case with a number of other European countries. (...) stresses that this introduces significant changes in the life of the Baltic and Northern states. The signing of the pact presently eliminates all danger of war that previously hanged over those countries” – reads an overview found in one of the Polish diplomatic reports from the latter days of August 1939.⁴⁰

On 25 August, the Polish press began publishing accounts from the Latvian press reports on the secret annexes to the non-aggression pact signed two days earlier in Moscow. One of those accounts, published in *Wieczór Warszawski*, particularly merits a reference: “As they report from Moscow, the non-aggression pact between Germany and Russia has a number of annexes, which concern the Ukrainian question, the Anti-Comintern pact, the Far East and the Baltic states. In those annexes, the Germans have committed to not mentioning the question of Ukraine, eliminating the Anti-Comintern pact and refraining from supporting Japan in case of a Russo–Japanese war. The annex, which concerns the Baltic states carries the decision to delineate spheres of influence in those countries, which should in fact make their consequent partition possible. Russia was to commit to supporting the German colonial demands.”⁴¹ These reports were far from

precise, yet remained accurate on one account. The pact signed in Moscow set out the fate of the Baltic States, although not only theirs.

On 29 August 1939, Jerzy Kłopotowski was received by the head of the Latvian Army, General Balodis. His wishes passed on to the Polish envoy were for “Poland not to give in and to win.”⁴² It seems quite probable that by then the chief of Latvia's army had already accepted the inevitability of war. Nevertheless, following their conversation, the Polish diplomat wrote to Warsaw reporting that the Latvians utterly do not want to think of and see the danger they are in. Similarly in Poland, there was regrettably a general feeling of optimism and lack of comprehension of the approaching military threat from the Soviets.

With diplomatic relations between Poland and Latvia severed, Kłopotowski summed up his efforts during his mission in Riga giving *pro memoria* the “final report”, dated for 17 October 1939⁴³. It offered an overview of his talks with Minister Munters in the latter days of August 1939, stressing that until the very end, the Minister refused to recognise that a secret agreement had been reached between Germany and the Soviet Russia. He rejected such a possibility even in the face of numerous claims that “the Soviets were given a ‘free hand’ in the Baltic region.” Latvia's Minister of Foreign Affairs argued that “the non-aggression pact is a bluff on the part of Germany, aimed to intimidate Europe.”⁴⁴ Those arguments were also present in the Polish assessments of the Hitler–Stalin pact.

Latvia's efforts to save its statehood at the price of strict neutrality were founded on illusions. Yet it merits recognition that Poland, having strained relations with Germany and the Soviets, could not have been seen as an attractive partner for the Baltic States. In Riga – as was the case in Kaunas, Tallinn, and Helsinki – the dominating fear was that of the Polish–German conflict, yet the possibility of the Soviets participating in the military effort and territorial conquest, without formally declaring a war, was beyond comprehension. 2 September 1939 saw Latvia

proclaim neutrality in face of the Polish–German war. Fifteen days later the Red Army attacked Poland.

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There have been significant similarities between Polish and Latvian diplomatic leadership in their perception of international developments. First of all, both Warsaw and Riga saw the failure of the negotiations conducted in Moscow, as well as the efforts of the Western Powers to see the USSR join the anti-German alliance, as benefiting, in principle, Poland and the Baltic States, given the fears of Soviet demands as regards the right of passage for the Red Army. Second, both capitals were convinced that the ideological enmity between Germany and the Soviets precluded those powers from a close enough rapprochement that could lead them to divide Eastern Europe between themselves. Third, both the Polish and Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs acted on the premise that the Soviets did not seek peace but planned to assume the most favourable position for the USSR by keeping its neutrality vis-à-vis the two blocks of imperialist countries – thus precluding an alliance with either of them. Fourth, the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs interpreted all claims of agreement between Berlin and Moscow as German propaganda aimed at exciting fears in Poland and coercing it to give up without a fight, in view of the inescapability of its position.

Finally, it is difficult not to share the perspective offered by one of the most distinguished Polish historians, Piotr Wandycz, who wrote: “The fact that Beck and the general staff overestimated Polish military strength and underestimated that of Germany did not really change anything. Even if their calculations had been more accurate, a capitulation was out of the question.”⁴⁵ Anyone who knows the reality of European geopolitics in 1939 will clearly understand that even if the leaders of Poland or the Baltic States had known the contents of the secret protocol to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, it could not have saved their countries’

independence or even partly modified the plan construed in Moscow and Berlin. The margin for maneuver left to Minister Beck, or even more so in the case of the Baltics, was reduced to zero.

Poland could not succeed in reopening the talks with Germany, since already in April 1939 Hitler declared that his demands and proposals had been rejected by the government in Warsaw and there could be no going back to them. Conceding to the Soviets the right of entry into Poland – in line with Stalin's demands put forward in August of that year – was out of the question. It would in effect mean relinquishing independence even before the war commenced. The fate of the Baltic States, which in October 1939 agreed to host Soviet military bases on their territories proved Minister Beck right in his thinking.

In contrast to the Polish leaders, Latvia's political forces – or those in Lithuania, Estonia, or Finland – did not have to face demands similar to those that Poland was presented with by Hitler in January and March 1939, and Stalin in August of that year. Neither were the Baltic States given guarantees by the Western Powers, nor were they bound through alliances. All these elements constitute an important difference in positions that distinguished Poland from its Baltic neighbours.

The broader context merits an additional comment from a historian of diplomacy. Clearly diplomatic documents cannot give a full witness to the general mood that accompanied such dramatic events as those of the latter half of August 1939. As a principle, a diplomat does not give a spontaneous expression of one's fears *pro foro externo*. Even when the position of one's country becomes hopeless, it can hardly be confirmed openly, as such a declaration would constitute an admission of failure and helplessness. It must thus be assumed that Minister Munters – as did Minister Beck – followed this very principle.

A historian of international relations is thereby inclined to reach the following conclusion. Poland's partition in September 1939 unleashed a whole sequence of territorial changes that were

forced on the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Fins, Romanians – were all its victims. Finland was the only one which did not fall, having defended its independence in the “Winter War”. The heroism of its soldiers and the wisdom of its government merit particular recognition.

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The Third Reich was the force that unleashed World War II, yet it was the Soviet Russia that gained most and at the lowest cost in 1939. Its conquests brought crucial territorial gains, acquired in alliance with Germany.

On 7 September 1939, when the war had already started, the leader of the Communist International, Georgi Dimitrov, was told by Stalin that the possible disappearance of the Polish state from the map of Europe would be highly desirable, as it would open new possibilities “to extend the socialist system.”⁴⁶ Stalin’s statement is yet another of the most telling proofs undermining the claims that in the 1930s the Soviet Union had reconciled with the territorial decisions taken at the Paris Peace Conference – where Russia was not present – and in Riga.

A renowned German historian, Martin Broszat accurately acknowledged that in Stalin, Hitler found a partner to lead a total war of destruction – “a partner equally willing to dispose of foreign territories (...) thinking in terms of (...) interest over vast territories.”⁴⁷ The two totalitarian systems might have had opposing ideological fundamentals, yet they also had many similar characteristics.

Consequently, “Russian invasion of Central Europe can not be presented in the spirit of Soviet interpretations as ‘a common reaction to German aggression.’” Soviet Russia had “a far-reaching ‘programme’ aimed at ‘extending the Soviet rule in Europe – after the expected defeat of Germany in the war in the West – well into the continent’s centre, and assuming a confrontational

stance vis-à-vis the United States and Great Britain.” Such were the conclusions of yet another German historian, Andreas Hillgruber⁴⁸. Undeniably, he was right. There can be no doubt that in the long-term perspective, it was the Soviet Union which came to benefit most from the pact with the Third Reich, whose leader, in the end, proved unable to impose his will on the world, yet waged a terrible war on Europe, which ended with Soviet domination over the continent's Central-Eastern part.

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- ² For an in-depth analysis of the two demarches, see: Marek Kornat (2012). *Polen zwischen Hitler und Stalin. Studien zur polnischen Außenpolitik in der Zwischenkriegszeit*. Berlin – Brandenburg (Chapter II); and Marek Kornat (2012). *Polityka zagraniczna Polski 1938–1939. Cztery decyzje Józefa Becka*. Gdańsk (Chapter III).
- ³ For a very concise analysis of the Polish–Latvian diplomatic relations see: Piotr Łossowski (1990). *Łotwa nasz sąsiad. Stosunki polsko-łotewskie 1918–1939*. Warszawa. For a more comprehensive discussion of this matter, see: Andrzej Skrzypek (1997). *Stosunki polsko-łotewskie: 1918–1939*. Gdańsk. The two volumes by Polish historians essentially focus on bilateral relations between Warsaw and Riga. Consequently, Andrzej Skrzypek leaves aside the analysis of the Hitler–Stalin pact (pp. 140–141), while Piotr Łossowski offers only a most brief discussion of its context. Thus the Polish historiography still awaits a comprehensive synthesis of the Polish–Latvian relations in the interwar period.
- ⁴ This is the view held by the Polish historiography, which is essentially in line with the arguments of the most prominent Latvian expert on relations with Poland, Erik Jekabsons. See: Erik Jekabsons (1993). *Stosunki polsko-łotewskie na przestrzeni dziejów*. In: Edward Walewander (ed.). *Polacy na Łotwie*. Lublin.
- ⁵ For my comparative study of the perspectives advanced by Poland and the Baltic States on the approaching threat related to the rapprochement between Berlin and Moscow, see: Marek Kornat (2002). *Państwa bałtyckie między Niemcami a ZSRR w roku 1939. Przegląd Wschodni*, Vol. 2 (30), pp. 292–334.
- ⁶ The various issues raised in this article have already been discussed in a number of my works: Marek Kornat (2002). *Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop–Mołotow. Problem zbliżenia niemiecko-sowieckiego w*

- polityce zagranicznej II Rzeczypospolitej*. Warszawa; idem, *Polen zwischen Hitler und Stalin. Studien zur polnischen Außenpolitik in der Zwischenkriegszeit*, pp. 183–224; idem, *Polityka zagraniczna Polski 1938–1939. Cztery decyzje Józefa Becka* (Chapter VI); Marek Kornat (2009). Choosing Not to Choose in 1939: Poland's Assessment of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. *The International History Review*, Burnaby/British Columbia, vol. XXXI, No. 4, pp. 771–797; Marek Kornat (2009). Sehenden Auges. Polens Außenpolitik vor dem Hitler-Stalin Pakt. *Osteuropa*, Berlin, vol. 59 (7–8), pp. 47–74.
- ⁷ Stanisław Żerko (ed.) (2005). *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne. Styczeń – sierpień 1939*. Warszawa (hereinafter: PDD/1939/I), p. 786.
- ⁸ Józef Zarański (ed.) (1972). *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka (1935–1945)*, vol. 4 (1938–1939), London, pp. 691–705. The diary of Polish Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, Jan Szembek, remains the key source in reconstructing the thinking of Polish decision-makers and diplomats at the end of 1939. The citations referred to here can be found in the French edition: Leon Noël (ed.) (1952). *Comte Jean Szembek: Journal 1933–1939*. Paris.
- ⁹ Juliusz Łukasiewicz (1995). *Dyplomata w Paryżu 1936–1939*. Henryk Bułhak, Waclaw Jędrzejewicz (eds.). Warszawa, p. 328.
- ¹⁰ Józef Zarański (ed.) (1972). *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka*, vol. 4 (1938–1939), London, p. 701.
- ¹¹ For a discussion of this matter, see: Bernard Michel. (1981). La formation du Ministère des Affaires étrangères et le personnel diplomatique en Pologne de 1918 à 1939. In: Ulrich Hausteijn, Georg Strobel, Gerhard Wagner (eds.). *Ostmitteleuropa. Berichte und Forschungen*, Stuttgart, pp. 403–421; Piotr Lossowski (1992). *Dyplomacja Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*. Warszawa.
- ¹² Józef Zarański (ed.) (1972). *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka*, vol. 4 (1938–1939), London, p. 121.
- ¹³ Marek Kornat (2011). The Polish Idea of the Third Europe (1937–1938). A realistic concept or an ex-post vision? *Acta Poloniae Historica*, No. 103, pp. 101–126; Marek Kornat. *Polen zwischen Hitler und Stalin. Studien zur polnischen Außenpolitik in der Zwischenkriegszeit*, pp. 119–138.
- ¹⁴ Albert Tarulis (1959). *Soviet Policy toward the Baltic States 1918–1940*. Notre Dame, p. 146. For a valuable monograph, see also: Seppo Myllyniemi (1979). *Die baltische Krise 1938–1941*. Stuttgart.
- ¹⁵ Polish envoy in Kaunas, Franciszek Charwat, reporting to Minister Beck, report dated 5 January and 4 February 1939, Archiwum Akt Nowych in Warsaw (Central Archives of Modern Records, hereinafter: AAN), MSZ, vol. 5195A.
- ¹⁶ Jerzy Kłopotowski reporting to Minister Beck, 5 February 1939, PDD/1939/I, p. 73.

- ¹⁷ French envoy in Tallinn, Jean Helleu reporting to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, 30 May 1938 (telegram 109), Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (Paris – La Courneuve), serie: Europe 1918–1940, Pays baltes 1102/3.
- ¹⁸ See: Bolesław Polkowski (1937). The Foreign Trade of the Baltic Countries in 1935. *Baltic and Scandinavian Countries*, Vol. III, No. 2, pp. 296–304.
- ¹⁹ See: Władysław Kulski, Michał Potulicki (1939). *Współczesna Europa polityczna*. Warszawa, pp. 470–472. Compare also: Brita Skottsberg Ahman (1950). Scandinavian Foreign Policy, Past and Present. In: Henning Friis (ed.). *Scandinavia Between East and West*. Ithaca, pp. 255–306.
- ²⁰ Algimantas Kasparavičius (2010). *Lietuva 1938–1939 m.: neutraliteto iliuzijos*. Vilnius.
- ²¹ Jerzy Kłopotowski reporting to Minister Beck, 28 April 1939, AAN, MSZ, vol. 6189.
- ²² For the text of the document, see: *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik, Serie D: 1937–1945, vol. VI: Die letzten Monate vor Kriegsausbruch. März bis August 1939*, Baden-Baden, 1956, document 485, p. 542.
- ²³ Jerzy Kłopotowski reporting to Minister Beck, 4 May 1939, PDD/1939/I, p. 415.
- ²⁴ Ibidem.
- ²⁵ Memorandum by the counsellor of the Polish mission in Riga, Stanisław Siemiński, annexed to the report by Jerzy Kłopotowski for Minister Beck dated 1 July 1939, AAN, MSZ, vol. 6189.
- ²⁶ Ibidem.
- ²⁷ Piotr Łossowski (1960). *Łotwa nasz sąsiad. Stosunki polsko-łotewskie 1918–1939*, p. 60.
- ²⁸ Jerzy Kłopotowski reporting to Minister Beck, 2 June 1939, AAN, MSZ, Vol. 6189.
- ²⁹ Jerzy Kłopotowski reporting to Minister Beck, 19 August 1939, PDD/1939/I, p. 772.
- ³⁰ Polish historiography offers a well-documented monograph on the British policy towards the Baltic region, authored by Mieczysław Nurek (1988). *Polityka Wielkiej Brytanii w rejonie Morza Bałtyckiego w latach 1935–1939*. Gdańsk. See also: Mieczysław Nurek (1992). Great Britain and the Baltic in the last months of peace, March – August 1939. In: John Hiden, Thomas Lane (eds.). *The Baltic and the Outbreak of the Second World War*. Cambridge, pp. 21–49.
- ³¹ Piotr Łossowski (1990). *Łotwa nasz sąsiad. Stosunki polsko-łotewskie 1918–1939*, p. 60.
- ³² Jerzy Kłopotowski reporting to Minister Beck, 19 August 1939, PDD/1939/I, p. 772.

- ³³ Józef Zbarański (ed.) (1972). *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka*, Vol. 4 (1938–1939), London, pp. 771–772.
- ³⁴ Italian envoy in Riga, Rogeri de Villanova, reporting to Minister Galeazzo Ciano in Rome on 24 August 1939: “Munters looked satisfied with the German–Soviet Non-aggression Pact, as it seems to diminish, at least for the time being, the threat to which the Baltic states would be exposed, had the USSR actually allied itself with the Western Powers. He considered implausible and unverifiable the rumours circulating here yesterday, according to which the Reich would give the USSR a free hand in the Baltic countries and especially in Estonia. On the other hand, the persistently difficult, general political situation did not diminish the dangers facing Latvia due to its geographical proximity to Poland. However, he still hoped that the latter would have been able to prevent an armed conflict with Germany, accepting the Anschluss of Danzig based, for instance, on the decision of the League of Nations. Commenting on the German–Soviet relations, Munters mentioned the obvious Anglo–French gullibility and short-sightedness in persisting to believe in Soviet’s good intentions to help anyone, advertising their possible support with exaggerated moral relevance. In any case, Munters seemed sceptical about the permanence of German–Soviet relations founded on the new Non-aggression Pact. Finally, he expressed interest in the Foreign Minister’s visit to Berchtesgaden, in the related visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, as well as, more generally, in the position of the Royal Government on current developments.” See: *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*. Ottava serie 1935–1939, Roma 1953, vol. XIII, 12 August – 3 September, document 209, p. 137.
- ³⁵ This is confirmed by the notes made by the Deputy Minister Jan Szembek on 22, 23 and 24 August 1939. See: Józef Zbarański (ed.) (1972). *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka*, Vol. 4 (1938–1939), London, p. 690 and 692. Notes on the conversations with Michał Łubieński (chief of Beck’s Cabinet) and with Beck.
- ³⁶ Jerzy Kłopotowski reporting to Minister Beck, 24 August 1939, *PDD/1939/I*, p. 799.
- ³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 800.
- ³⁸ Jerzy Kłopotowski reporting to Minister Beck, 25 August 1939, *PDD/1939/I*, p. 803.
- ³⁹ Jean Tripier served as the French envoy to Riga from 23 December 1930, having previously been posted as the French Ambassador in Warsaw.
- ⁴⁰ Report by the mission in Riga to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw, dated 27 August 1939, AAN, MSZ, Vol. 6664.
- ⁴¹ Quoted in: Stanisław Gregorowicz, Michał J. Zacharias (1995). *Polska – Związek Sowiecki. Stosunki polityczne*. Warszawa, pp. 203–204.

- ⁴² Piotr Łossowski (1990). *Łotwa nasz sąsiad. Stosunki polsko-łotewskie 1918–1939*, p. 60.
- ⁴³ The diplomatic relations between Latvia and the Polish government in exile were severed as a result of Soviet pressures exerted on Riga in October 1939. Consequently, Jerzy Kłopotowski left Riga. His final report entitled Latvia's situation over the past 12 months – attitude toward Poland, Germany and the USSR was dated 17 October 1939. The report is quoted in: Marek Kornat (2000). *Dyplomacja państw bałtyckich w obliczu układu Ribbentrop–Mołotow w świetle nowych dokumentów. Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*, Vol. 35, pp. 211–217. The original document is held in the archives of the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, sign. A.XX.5/14.
- ⁴⁴ Marek Kornat (2000). *Dyplomacja państw bałtyckich w obliczu układu Ribbentrop–Mołotow w świetle nowych dokumentów*, p. 216.
- ⁴⁵ Piotr Wandycz (1988). *Polish Diplomacy 1914–1945: Aims and Achievements*. London, p. 26.
- ⁴⁶ Georgi Dimitrov (2003). *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933–1949*. Ivo Banac (ed.). New Haven/London, p. 116.
- ⁴⁷ Martin Broszat (1961). *Narodowo-socjalistyczna polityka w sprawie Polski 1939–1945*. Warszawa, p. 14. For the German original see: Martin Broszat (1961). *Nationalsozialistische Polenpolitik (1939–1945)*. Stuttgart.
- ⁴⁸ Andreas Hillgruber (1989). *Der zweite Weltkrieg. Kriegsziele und Strategie der großen Mächte*. 5th edition. Köln, p. 59. See also: Ernst Topitsch (1990). *Stalins Krieg. Die Sowjetische Langzeitstrategie gegen den Westen als rationale Machtpolitik*. Herford, p. 30.

LATVIJAS REAKCIJA UZ MOLOTOVA–RIBENTROPA 1939. GADA 23. AUGUSTA PAKTU: POLIJAS DIPLOMĀTIJAS REDZĒJUMS

Mareks Kornats

Polijas ZA Vēstures institūta un kardināla Višņiška Juridiskās un Administrācijas nodaļas profesors Varšavā. Nodarbojas ar Polijas diplomātijas, totalitāro iekārtu, 20. gs. starptautisko attiecību, kā arī 19.–20. gs. poļu politikās domas attīstības vēsturi.

Raksts veltīts Lavijas valdības un diplomātisko aprindu reakcijai uz 1939. gada 23. augusta Molotova–Ribentropa paktu, balstoties uz Polijas Ārlietu ministrijas dokumentiem. Raksta mērķis ir poļu dokumentu gaismā

atspoguļot un izvērtēt Polijas un Latvijas nostāju pret ļoti draudīgu apvērsumu starptautiskajās attiecībās – divu totalitāru lielvalstu savienību. Tiek secināts, ka, līdzīgi poļiem, Latvijas ārlietu ministrs Vilhelms Munters vairāk baidījās no Maskavas sarunu turpināšanās nekā no Berlīnes–Maskavas vienošanās, turklāt Latvijas valdība un tās ārlietu ministrs līdz pēdējam ticēja, ka karu iespējams novērst.

Atslēgas vārdi: Polija, Latvija, Molotova–Ribentropa pakts, Otrais pasaules karš.

Kopsavilkums

Raksts veltīts Latvijas diplomātijas reakcijai uz Molotova–Ribentropa paktu Polijas Ārlietu ministrijas dokumentu gaismā. Autors izvērtē Polijas un Latvijas diplomātijas nostāju pret ļoti draudīgu apvērsumu starptautiskajās attiecībās – divu totalitāru lielvalstu savienību. Slepēnā protokola saturs Varšavā nebija zināms. Vienlaikus Polijas diplomātiskā korespondence ļauj izdarīt pieņēmumu, ka poļu diplomātija nesaņēma no Latvijas Ārlietu ministrijas nekādu informāciju par šo tēmu. Latvijas ārlietu ministra Vilhelma Muntera reakcija uz Hitlera–Staļina paktu vērtējama kā pamatos līdzīga poļu nostādnēm par starptautisko stāvokli. Tā atspoguļo viņa kritisko nostāju pret Lielbritānijas centieniem panākt Padomju Savienības labvēlību, viņam vienlaikus šauboties par vācu-padomju tuvināšanās iespējamību. Līdzīgi poļiem, Munters vairāk baidījās no Maskavas sarunu turpināšanās nekā no Berlīnes–Maskavas vienošanās. Pārsteidzoši līdzīgi par Maskavā noslēgtā pakta nozīmi izteicās Polijas vēstnieks PSRS Vaclavs Gžibovskis savā ziņojumā ministram Juzefam Bekam 1939. gada 29. augustā. Gan Varšavā, gan Rīgā pozitīvi tika novērtēta Maskavas sarunu izjukšana, šīm sarunām atbrīvojot Baltijas valstis no spiediena “netiešās agresijas” definēšanas jautājumā, kas varēja dot pamatojumu Padomju Savienībai okupēt Baltijas valstis ar Rietumu lielvalstu piekrišanu. Trīspusīgo Maskavas sarunu izjukšana atbrīvoja arī Poliju no arvien uzstājīgākajām Parīzes un Londonas prasībām piekrist Sarkanās armijas cauriešanai tās teritorijai. Tomēr Muntera un Beka uzskatos bija liela atšķirība. Izskatījās, ka Latvijas ārlietu ministrs vēl ticēja iespējai, ka izdosies izvairīties no Eiropas kara. Beks pēc 1939. gada 23. augusta tam vairs neticēja.