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BRITISH POLICY TOWARDS POLAND IN THE 1930s

In order to answer the question concerning the character of British policy towards Poland in the 1930s one has to pose an introductory question about the place which Poland held in British policy during the inter-war period in general. I see this problem in two aspects: theoretical and practical.

Poland did not hold an independent place in the theoretical assumptions of British policy. Her position, outside British spheres of interest, and the lack of a tradition of contemporary Polish-British relationships were decisive for the non-existence of direct political links between the two countries resulting in the fact that Poland did not enter into any British political arrangements. If in the memoranda of the Foreign Office in which the general lines of British policy were outlined, the Polish question was taken under consideration, then as a rule it was only as a component either of Central European problems or the policy towards Germany or France. Memoranda devoted exclusively to Poland were scarce and included mainly an analysis of the situation on the Polish-German border or either Polish-German or Polish-German-French relations. The Foreign Office never did formulate theoretical premises of British policy towards Poland.

Nonetheless, in diplomacy Great Britain paid more attention to Poland than would follow from her limited interests not only in Poland but in entire Central Europe as a whole. This state of affairs was the result of at least three premises. The first was Poland's geographical location between Germany and Russia, which was the reason for the fact that the relation of the British government towards Poland was a reflex of British diplomacy towards those two states holding an important place in the policy of Great Britain. The second premise was Poland's

place in the central part of Europe, at the crossroads of the East and West. Because of this location the Polish state was an element in the European equilibrium, the maintenance of which was always one of the main premises of British policy. Hence, if a threat to this equilibrium arose then it also pertained to the Polish question, and it naturally became the object of British interest. Finally, the third premise was the relatively independent policy of the Polish state which frequently placed the Western powers, claiming to hold the exclusive right for directing European policy, in situations which, from the point of view of their own interests, demanded the taking of a position towards the Polish policy.

The interest of British diplomacy in the Polish question always occurred during decisive historical period and especially :

1. in the closing stage of World War I, decisive for the victory of the Allies—1917 - 1918,
2. in the formation of the basic political and territorial structures of post-war Europe—1919 - 1922,
3. during the critical moment in the process of the disintegration of those structures—1939.

Although the emergence of the Polish state was not part of the aims formulated in the Foreign Office during the course of the war and although British policy did not desire a change of the territorial and political status quo in Eastern Europe, as a result of strategic war needs Great Britain supported and, at times, even inspired Polish independence activities and did so consistently until the restoration of the Polish state and the unification of the Polish lands. Thus, British policy played a positive role in the process of the rebirth of the modern Polish state.

A negative role, on the other hand, was played by Great Britain during the second of the above-mentioned periods, at the time when the borders of Poland were taking shape. Although as a rule the British government was indifferent towards the future frontiers of the Polish state, in striving towards a stability on the continent Britain wished to see these borders accepted by the two great neighbours of Poland—Germany and Russia, so that in the future, should those states regain their status as

great powers, their frontiers with Poland would not become the source of a new war. As a result, during the Paris Peace Conference debates on the Polish-German borders, the British delegation chose a compromise attitude towards both the German and the Polish demands. Simultaneously, the British government opposed the Polish eastern policy and this became especially obvious during the critical years of the Polish-Soviet war.

The third period extended from March to September 1939 during which time the British government, recognized Poland's position as significant for the restricting of further German expansion and decided to follow a policy which would lead towards war with Germany, formally in the defence of Poland, but actually because of its own threatened position as a power. I shall obviously return to this period later on in my paper.

We can see that even in those three stages during which British diplomacy was particularly active as regards Poland, it only reflected other and, from the point of view of British interest, more significant problems.

We are, thus, able to answer the initial question as follows: British policy towards Poland during the inter-war years resulted from a lack of interest shown by Britain for Poland and from the pragmatic activity of British diplomacy towards Poland in the decisive historical periods. This policy created the illusions of either a positive or a negative interest in Poland itself. However, British attitude towards Poland was always only an instrument serving a more general policy followed by Great Britain.

What were the antecedents of British policy of the 1930's? We have already mentioned the positive role played by Great Britain in the process of the rebirth of the Polish state and its negative role during the formation of the frontiers. The second stage came to an end when Lloyd George resigned as Prime Minister in November 1922 and the Conference of Ambassadors recognized Poland's eastern borders on 15 March, 1923. During the years 1923 - 1924 the British position was not a clear one. The statement made by Lord Curzon in the House of Lords on May 16, 1923 in which he expressed his conviction regarding the brighter future of the Polish state, the signing of the Polish-British Commercial and Navigation Treaty on

26 November of the same year or the visit to Poland at the turn of 1923-1924 of the Mission of Financial Experts headed by E. Hilton Young—all these attested to the beginnings of a normalisation of Polish-British relations and perhaps even of a temporary taking under consideration by the government of Bonar Law and the first government of Stanley Baldwin, of the Polish market as a substitute for the German one considering the economic chaos in Germany. In 1924 the Geneva Protocol postulated by Ramsey MacDonald, head of the first Labour Government, suited Polish policy since its guarantees pertained also to Eastern Europe. During this time contacts between official British circles and Polish socialists were maintained. However, simultaneously, the British government recognized Germany to be a state which could support the British economy while public statements by MacDonald and Arthur Henderson, Home Secretary, included accents favourable to the revisionist demands of Germany.¹

The British attitude towards Poland became more precise in 1925 when debates in the Foreign Office discussed guarantees of security others than those proposed by the Geneva Protocol. These deliberations led to the formulation of the Locarno policy. The memoranda of the Member of the Foreign Office Harold Nicolson, and the historical advisor of the Foreign Office, J. W. Headlam-Morley were particularly important.

H. Nicolson accepted the premise that postwar Europe was divided into the victors, the conquered and Russia and that the latter was, at the moment, more of an Asiatic problem. As a result, he considered Germany to be a country which would sooner or later again become a powerful military factor and the policy of which would, as a result, be of fundamental importance for European security and, simultaneously, for British policy towards the continent. Hence, controversial Polish—German problems appeared in the centre of British policy towards

¹ Aide-memoire and Political Report from London No. 8, 27 March, 1924—Archiwum Akt Nowych [Archive of New Acts], The Polish Embassy in London 102; Parliamentary Debates, House of Lords, vol. 54, 16 May, 1923, pp. 188-198; The Commerce and Navigation Treaty between the Polish Republic and the United Kingdom, "Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej" [Journal of Laws of the Polish Republic], 1 July, 1924, item 582.

Poland. By analysing the situation of the "Corridor" and Upper Silesia, Nicolson came to the conclusion that Germany will certainly desire to revise the Polish clauses of the Treaty of Versailles. This conclusion led to another one, that if France were isolated and British neutrality to be assured, Germany might also endeavour to attack France. The British Under-Secretary of State recognised this state of affairs as dangerous for Great Britain. He saw a remedy in the renewal of the British-French alliance upon the basis of British guarantees for the French and Belgian frontiers with Germany. He left the question of Germany's eastern frontier open and only predicted that if a solution would not be reached in the future this could become the cause of a new European war. No final conclusion as to the character which British policy should assume in this situation, was made. However, one ought to remember that during this period there took place in England a pro-revisionist press campaign, which called for support for peaceful changes of the Polish-German frontier in order to prevent a future war.²

Headlam-Morley, on the other hand, decisively opposed such a solution. It is true that he also postulated for British guarantees to be granted only for the border of France and the Low Countries, but at the same time he pointed to the fact that it was in the British interest to maintain a territorial *status quo* in Europe and to become aware of the unity of interests between Western and Eastern Europe. "We cannot now be indifferent", he wrote, "if Germany breaks through upon the east and there begins to acquire a new accession of territory and strength which would inevitably in the future be brought to bear upon the Rhine".³

As a result, the two subsequent memoranda of the historical advisor justified the need to maintain a *status quo* along the Polish-German border including the most controversial points:

² Memorandum by H. Nicolson, *British Policy Considered in Relation to the European Situation*, 20 Feb., 1925, Public Record Office (hereinafter cited as PRO), Foreign Office (hereinafter cited as FO) 371/11064/C 2201.

³ Memoranda by J. W. Headlam-Morley, *The History of British Policy and the Geneva Protocol* 12 Feb., 1925, PRO, FO 371/11064/W 1252, and *The Problem of Security. England and the Low Countries*, 10 March, 1925, *ibidem*, 11065/W 2079.

the "Corridor" and Gdańsk. Although Headlam-Morley thought critically about precise line of that part of the frontier he did not see a better alternative. He also doubted whether it would be possible to carry on a change of the borders without causing an outbreak of war with France and Poland, in which Britain would be the ally of Germany. This, in turn, would be contrary to the state and imperial interests of Great Britain. As a result of his analysis, Headlam-Morley reached the following main conclusions :

"1. That of the two evils of dividing Eastern Prussia from Germany and shutting Poland off from the sea the former was all along considered the less, 2. That Mr. Lloyd George always admitted the principle of the Corridor and seemed to consider it justified on ethnographical grounds, 3. That the solution finally adopted was put through against strong Polish, French and even American opposition and was in essence a British plan, 4. That what the Poles secured was very far short of what they aimed at obtaining [...]"⁴

The position taken by Austin Chamberlain, Foreign Secretary, which formed the official guiding-line for the policy of the Foreign Office and the Cabinet, was the product of the two views presented above. Like Nicolson, Chamberlain recognized the distinctness of the interests of Eastern and Western Europe. He also did not agree to a proposal that British guarantees would include the Eastern borders of Germany. But, in accordance with the directives of Headlam-Morley, he agreed that new treaties with Germany must be on the basis of existing frontiers. As far as the Polish-German border was concerned, Chamberlain did not exclude its possible future modification on the basis of a mutual Polish-German agreement, but topically he did not see the possibility of solving this question otherwise than by maintaining the *status quo*. Thus, he advised to leave the solution to time and not to talk about it for a generation. This position defined British policy towards Poland up to the close of the

⁴ Memoranda by J. W. Headlam-Morley, Memorandum of 17 March, 1925, PRO, FO 371/10729/C 3975, Memorandum—*Danzig and the Polish Corridor* 4 April, 1925 and minutes (quote from A. W. G. Randel), *ibidem*, 10997/N 2267; see also T. Piszczkowski, *Anglia a Polska 1914 - 1939 [England and Poland 1914 - 1939]*, London 1975, p. 259.

1920's or, more precisely, during the entire period when A. Chamberlain held his ministerial post.⁵

At the beginning of the 1930s British policy towards Poland evolved from Chamberlain's advice to leave all eventual modifications of the Polish-German border to time, towards posing the question, both to the Foreign Office and the Cabinet, whether the peace treaties, and especially the territorial clauses pertaining to the Polish-German border should be revised or maintained and towards the suggestion that the former solution should become a policy to be followed.

This evolution was the result of a new conception which arose upon the basis of political, economic and financial repercussions to the world-wide economic crisis and preparations for the Disarmament Conference. A special worsening of Polish-German relations, particularly concerning Gdańsk, which occurred at that time, was also not without influence. This conception, formulated in a memorandum of 26 November, 1931 accepted by Sir John Simon, Foreign Secretary in 1931 - 1935, and presented to the Cabinet, called for a complex solution of all fundamental international problems—economic, political, military and territorial which, closely interconnected, appeared to be the cause of a "confidence crisis" dangerous for peace. "*The monetary crisis*", we read in the memorandum, "leads inevitably back to the *economic chaos* in Europe. The economic chaos, and all attempts to deal with it, involve in their turn the political questions of *reparations and war debts*. Those are linked by the United States with the question of *disarmament*, and the latter in the eyes of the French government, depends upon the problem of *security*. The problem of security in its turn raises the question of the *territorial status quo* in Europe (e.g. the Eastern Frontier ques-

⁵ Memorandum by A. Chamberlain 9 March, 1925, PRO, FO, 371/11065/W 2096, A. Chamberlain's letter to d'Abernon, 18 March, 1925; Ch. Petrie, *The Life and the Letters of the Right Hon. Sir Austen Chamberlain*, vol. II, London 1940, pp. 258 - 259; A. Chamberlain's minute of 7 May, 1925, the mentioned above memorandum by Headlam-Morley, 4 Apr., 1925. The policy of A. Chamberlain towards Poland is presented more broadly by A. Cienciala in: *Nastawienie Austena Chamberlaina do Polski w l. 1924 - 1933 [Austen Chamberlain's Attitude Towards Poland in 1924 - 1933]*, in: *Polska, Niemcy, Europa*, Poznań 1977, pp. 480 - 494.

tion), which brings us to the conflict between *the maintenance or revision of the Peace Settlements*".⁶ [Italics in the original].

From this general formulation there stemmed a following course of reasoning as regards detailed policies also pertaining to Poland: disarmament was the basic problem. But France was not going to disarm as long as she was to secure. This, in turn, could not occur since Germany refused to recognize the border with Poland while France understood security to mean not only guarantees against invasion but also against the peaceful revision of treaties. It was probable that Germany would agree to accept the frontier with Poland but only under the condition it would be modified and that Germany would receive relief in reparations and financial aid. Hence, the question of the Eastern frontier of Germany and especially the "Corridor" to which the Germans attached most importance, became the foremost problem for the security of France. This, in turn, gave rise to hopes that France would finally agree to a postulate of a peaceful revision of the Polish-German frontier. Hence, the most difficult was the position of Poland which would rather chose war than agree to a revision. This is why it seemed to be necessary to put pressure of Poland, "[. . .] While Poland faced by a combination of Great Britain, America, France, Germany and Italy might conceivably be brought to a more reasonable frame of mind". The memorandum asked the question: "But is any peaceful modification of the present status of Eastern frontiers of Germany within the reach of practical politics at the present time?". And answered: "*Germany says that it is essential. Great Britain believes that it is advisable.*" The conclusion is unambiguous. "Europe might come to realize," we read in the memorandum, "that her salvation was being blocked by Polish pride, and that Polish pride must therefore be sacrificed." (Italics in the original).

The British conception of a complex solution to all the complicated and controversial international problems had at

⁶ Memorandum—*Changing Conditions in British Foreign Policy, with Reference to the Disarmament Conference, a Possible Reparations Conference and other Contingent Problems*, 26 Nov., 1931, PRO, Cabinet Office, hereinafter -CAB, 24/225/C, P, 31.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

least two practical effects, both unfavourable to Poland. It caused a complete fiasco of the visit of August Zaleski, Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs to London (10 - 11 December, 1931) and the formulation by the Foreign Office of a concrete project for the revision of the Polish-German frontier in Pomerania and Gdańsk (January 1933).

The British conceptions were not known to Zaleski when he set out for London. He thus believed that in connection with the forthcoming Disarmament Conference it would be worthwhile to incline favourably the new British government towards Poland. He was particularly concerned with: 1) the declaration of Polish cooperation with West European powers during the forthcoming conference, under the condition that it would not disturb the existing peace treaties; 2) to make the English aware of the fact that the difficulties between Poland and Germany were not the result of the "Corridor" but of the German tendency towards depriving Poland of the seacoast and, as a consequence, towards a political and economic domination of that country; 3) to propose that during the Disarmament Conference the USSR should be included in international cooperation.⁸

Zaleski's statements did not, however meet with agreement. There exist divergences between the Polish and the English versions of his most important talks with J. Simon. According to the Polish report, Simon was to have said that as far as cooperation with the USSR was concerned he had no intentions to exceed the Disarmament Convention signed in December 1930. Referring to the statement made in the Polish Senate by Zaleski announcing the active role Poland planned to play during the Disarmament Conference, Simon was to have asked whether this meant that "Poland, in order to make disarmament possible, would agree to certain territorial solutions." According to the British version, the conversation on the subject of the USSR concerned mainly the explanation made by Zaleski as regards the Polish-Soviet pact of non-aggression, which was supposed to be signed in the near future, and the already

⁸ M. Nowak-Kiełbikowa, *Wizyta Augusta Zaleskiego w Londynie w grudniu 1931 r.* [August Zaleski's Visit to London in December 1931], "Dzieje Najnowsze," 1974, No. 4, pp. 19 - 34.

accepted Litvinov Protocol. The question posed by Simon pertaining to the scope of the Polish activity during the future Disarmament Conference did not include any allusions to a revision of frontiers.⁹

Even if the English version is true, it still remains a fact that the Zaleski visit did not bring to the Polish side the expected support for its conception. On the other hand, the English side did not stress that Poland ought to agree to a revision of her frontier with Germany. It is precisely this which one could have expected on the basis of the 9 December, 1931 memorandum which was prepared for Simon in connection with the planned arrival of Zaleski. In reference to the conceptions formulated earlier, during the previous month, it was stated that the maintenance of peace lies in the interest of Great Britain. This peace was most threatened by the state of the eastern frontier of Germany. Time favoured Poland—the country ruling the “Corridor”. This is the reason why the Germans were impatient and willing to strive towards a rapid recovery of lands lost. The Poles however, did not want to dispose of their property. At the time Poland was armed and Germany was not and this fact made it possible for Poland to maintain the existing state of affairs. However, it seemed to be only a question of time before Germany became armed. This would have enabled it to achieve all that she wanted whether by force or the threat of force. In order to prevent this, the memorandum warned, one should strive towards an amicable rectification of the Polish-German frontier, favouring Germany. One could also exploit the anticipated efforts of Zaleski who wished to gain British support for an Eastern Locarno in order to put pressure on Poland. “[. . .] no Eastern Locarno is, however, possible so long as the present frontier remains unaltered [. . .]”—it was written—“An agreement on the Locarno model might become practical political if the Poles were prepared to give up a certain amount of sovereignty in return for a guarantee of permanence for the rest [. . .]” As can be seen, the memorandum advised revisionism. This advice, however, did not find support among the other officials of the Northern Department

⁹ *Ibidem*, and J. Simon's note to W. Erskine No. 769, 10 Dec., 1931, PRO, FO 371/15586/N 7936.

who were willing to maintain the old principle of "letting it alone". Perhaps their position resulted in the restraint which characterized Simon's talks with Zaleski. The Polish minister did not, however, pose the question of an Eastern Locarno and thus did not create a pretext for discussion about the Polish-German border.¹⁰

Revisionist tendencies were embodied in the project for a modification of the frontier in Polish Pomerania and a change in the status of the Free City of Gdańsk. The original pattern was taken from a project prepared on 15 November, 1931 by the High Commissioner of the League of Nations in Gdańsk, the Italian Count Manfredi Gravina in which he proposed the transformation of Gdańsk, enlarged at the price of the southern part of Polish Pomerania and including a railway line (or two lines) joining the Reich with Eastern Prussia, into a neutral state under the protectorate of the League of Nations.¹¹

In the Foreign Office opinions on the subject of the treatment of the problem of revisions as the question of the moment and the proposed solution were divided. Nevertheless, it seems that as a result of a growing conflict between Poland and Germany, which presented itself particularly sharply in the relations of both of the states with Gdańsk, in January 1933 a British project for the revision of the border in Pomerania and the change of the status of Gdańsk was prepared and accepted by the Central Department. The project recommended the following solution :

"A plebiscite should be held in Danzig in order that there may in future be no question of a settlement having been imposed on that city against its will. It might be taken for granted that the result of the plebiscite would be the reversion of the Free City to Germany. Poland would continue to have the use of a free area in the port and special transit facilities, but would

¹⁰ *Memorandum Summarising General Position Including Corridor Question and the German Minority in Polish Upper Silesia*, probably by H. J. Seymour, quotes taken from Annex A of the *Eastern Frontier Question and Eastern Locarno*, minutes by T. V. Perrowne, L. Collier, P. Nicolson, PRO, FO 371/15572/N 8198.

¹¹ A detailed course of the frontier between Poland and Gdańsk outlined in the Gravina memorandum is presented by T. Piszczkowski (*op. cit.*, p. 358).

forfeit other privileges. At the same time, full possession and control of the main railway line from Berlin to Königsberg should be given to Germany, together with enough land alongside to construct a main road for trans-Corridor traffic". This was a proposal formulated only for internal use and it was never presented for discussion on an international forum.¹²

Revisionist tendencies towards the Polish-German border, characteristic of the years 1931 - 1933, did not take the shape of a more consistent policy. One should seek the sources for this in the changed international situation and mainly in the repercussions of Hitler's rise to power. Beginning with 1934, in Great Britain there began to emerge reservations towards Nazi domestic and foreign policy and a conviction that Nazi German will become dangerous to the British Empire. The report of the Defence Requirements Sub-Committee prepared in February 1934, advised British war plans to take Germany under consideration, and this advice was followed. At the same time, the report recognized the weakness of British military forces which would make it impossible to intervene in a European war.¹³

The first symptom of a withdrawal of support for German revisionism appeared already in 1933. Despite the support which MacDonald and Simon gave to the project for a Four-Power Pact, presented by Mussolini and despite a similarity between the revisionist proposals contained therein and the British project of January 1933, the postulate of returning Gdańsk together with a 10 to 15 km. wide strip of Pomerania to Germany as well as other revisionist projects of the Pact not only did not find support by the British side but brought about an alarmist feeling in the Foreign Office. This was expressed most succinctly by Sir Orme Sargent, Assistant Under-Secretary, superintending the Central and Southern Departments :

"For my own part," he wrote, "the prospect of Mussolini taking the lead at the present moment in raising the Polish

¹² Memorandum by R. M. A. Hankey, 1 Feb., 1933 and minutes, PRO, FO 371/16715/C 934, also T. Piszczkowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 359 - 360.

¹³ S. Newman, March 1939, *The British Guarantee to Poland*, London 1976, p. 10.

Corridor question and the Hungarian frontiers fills me with considerable alarm. For some time past the Central Department has held the view that as the time is fast approaching when the Polish Corridor will have to be tackled, it was for consideration whether His Majesty's Government as the only impartial Great Power, should not take the initiative of sounding the French in the matter. It did not, however, find much favour and has not been pursued. Now it is one thing for His Majesty's Government to raise the question, but it is quite another thing when Mussolini on the morrow of a Nazi revolution in Germany proposes to do so".¹⁴

Alongside the increasing mistrust towards Nazi policy shown by the Foreign Office and the awareness that in the future Germany could threaten British interests, as well as also a fear caused by the territorial demands of Italy, the dying down of Polish-German controversies which took place after the signing of a non-aggression declaration by the Polish and German governments on 26 January, 1934, caused the pro-revisionist tendencies in British policy towards Poland to lose their topicality. The declaration made the question of the revision of the Polish-German border disappear from the field of vision for a few years.

This entirely new element in international policy was the object of a relatively large interest shown by the Foreign Office. The British attitude was ambivalent. Officially, the Foreign Office expressed its satisfaction and sent its congratulations to both sides. After all, the declaration was a first step towards the realization of the British postulate for solving controversies directly by the Poles and the Germans in a peaceful way. Thus, a note drafted in the Foreign Office on 29 January, 1934 declared that "His Majesty's Government noted with satisfaction that there seemed prospect for ten years to come for good neighbourly relations between Germany and Poland."¹⁵ However, the internal discussion which took place in the Foreign Office about the

¹⁴ Report of R. Graham, 8 March, 1933 and minutes by O. Sergeant, 10 March, 1933, PRO, FO 371/16801/2148.

¹⁵ Note from 29 Jan., 1934, PRO, FO 371/11744/C 691.

Polish-German declaration shows that the perspective of the German-Polish rapprochement gave rise to disquiet. In any case, the declaration brought about various speculations.

The variants of opinions expressed by the Foreign Office in the years 1934 - 1935 on the subject of Polish-German relations can be presented as follows: the first variant which we could call "optimistic" was characteristic only of the turn of 1933 - 1934. According with it, the declaration was a success for the policy of both states and was supposed to forecast an actual reform of Polish-German relations and perhaps of an entirely new German policy. The second variant pointed to implications harmful for international policy, the most important of which was: 1) the fact that Hitler enjoyed strong support of the German nation if he was able to pursue such an unpopular policy; 2) improvement of the international situation of Germany which freed from fear of a sudden attack by Poland against Berlin, was able to concentrate its attention on closer aims such as the Saar and the Anschluss in order to once again come out against Poland after an appropriate improvement of its strength; 3) a possibility of the existence of secret clauses perhaps concerning the representation by Poland of German interests in the League of Nations and a cooperation of the two states directed against the USSR. The latter, however, seemed to be less feasible. Regardless of the existence or the nonexistence of secret clauses it was supposed that Poland could enter into the orbit of German policy. Finally, the third variant which recognized Polish reasoning and according to which the declaration did not include any secret clauses. The Polish government still planned to cooperate with the Western Powers at the League of Nations and did not aim to come out against the USSR. It conducted a policy of maintaining equal distance both from Moscow and Berlin and had no illusions as regards the ultimate aims of the German policy. On the other hand, by signing the declaration the Polish government achieved benefits such as the calming down of the revisionist campaign. This third variant was composed mainly of the opinions of the British Ambassadors in Warsaw, Sir William Erskine and Sir Howard Kennard. Particularly the latter did not agree with the widely accepted opinion about

the pro-German attitude of Beck. "I should say", he wrote, "that the only foundation for the charge that Beck's policy is pro German is that he is certainly unwilling to take any positive action calculated to offend Berlin."¹⁶

The British government did not wish a Polish-German rapprochement to take place. On the other hand, however, it did not react to the pro-British inclination shown by Beck and pointed out by Kennard. The visit made by Anthony Eden, Minister for the League of Nations Affairs to Warsaw on 2-3 April, 1935 was connected with Britain's involvement in support for the French project of an Eastern Pact, and was only of an exploratory nature. In the first place, the Foreign Office recognized Polish argumentation which justified the negative attitude towards the pact. In the second place, the British Ministry had no proposals of its own which could induce the Polish side to change its opinion. It was presupposed that the position of the British delegates would be that of attentive listeners rather than initiators of discussion.¹⁷

In the period between 1934 and 1936 the Foreign Office presented various proposals connected with the course of British diplomacy in relation to Nazi Germany. In November 1934 the Cabinet accepted the proposal of negotiations with Germany for a wide-range agreement which would be based on Germany's return to the League of Nations and her inclusion into a number of proposed pacts. These efforts were to guarantee the maintenance of a *status quo* in Europe in return for an approval of the Western Powers for granting Germany equality in armaments. The latter lost its topicality after Germany broke the fifth part of the Versailles Treaty and introduced universal

¹⁶ Memorandum on the German-Polish Declaration of November 16, 1933, minutes concerning the declaration 26 Jan., 1934, *ibidem*, C 676; Pollyakov's letter to R. Leeper 28 Sept., 1934 and letter from W. Erskine to O. Sargent, 24 Oct., 1934, *ibidem* 17745/C 6515 and C 7111; reports by W. Kennard, 11 Jan., and 16 Dec., 1935, memorandum by H. Baxter, *Polish Foreign Policy* 21 March, 1935, letter of W. Kennard to L. Collier, 6 Nov. 1935 and minutes, *ibidem*, 18896/C 465 C 8388, 2480, 7548; minute by R. Vansittart, 30 Sept., 1935, *ibidem*, 18811/C 6856; cf. T. Piszczkowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 374-376.

¹⁷ Report of A. E. Aveling from a talk with L. Kozłowski, 9 March, 1935, PRO, FO 371/18896/2096.

military service.¹⁸ A rapid growth of undisguised armaments which then took place, together with an additional worsening of the international situation as a result of the Abyssinian crisis, encouraged the Foreign Office to undertake further reflections. In December 1935 Counsellor Owen O'Maley proposed to substitute a policy of rapprochement with Germany for a policy of "collective security" which, according to him, led to an arms race and, as a result, towards war.¹⁹

A full analysis of the situation and subsequent directives for British policy was offered only in the memorandum of the Permanent Under Secretary, Robert Vansittart on 3 February, 1936. This is the memorandum referred to by Anthony Eden, then Secretary of State, when he outlined the tasks of current British policy. Taking as his starting point the premise that the Versailles system collapsed, Vansittart acknowledged the indispensability of the continuation of attempts at reaching an agreement with Germany, an agreement which would pertain to a wide range of problems, but he made the condition that negotiations must take the form of a bargain. In return for Germany's agreeing to enter into the League of Nations, a limitation of armaments and guarantee for the European status quo one could agree to return a part or all of the former German colonies. One should also reach an agreement as regards the Rhineland before "this dangerous question will be thrust forwards in an aggressive and dangerous manner". All territorial concessions in Europe, on the other hand, were considered unthinkable. Vansittart also drew attention to the fact that considering German aspirations of economic political, and territorial expansion in Europe forms a part of the German policy one should take into account that in trying to negotiate a settlement we must always bear in mind the likelihood of failure in view of the probable height of Hitler's price.²⁰

¹⁸ S. Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁹ Memorandum by O'Maley, *Collective Security*, 1 Dec., 1925, PRO, FO 371/20473/W 5075.

²⁰ Memorandum by R. Vansittart, *Britain, France and Germany* 3 Feb., 1936; Memorandum by A. Eden 11 Feb., 1936, PRO, FO 371/19885/C 997.

Debates held in the Foreign Office this time did not take under consideration concessions for Germany at the expense of Poland. According to O'Maley this was decided by the Polish-German declaration. "The question of Danzig, Memel, Silesia and the Corridor are different aspects of a single matter—German-Polish relation" we read in the memorandum, "and by a sensible arrangement between the two parties consideration of any territorial changes on Germany's eastern frontier has been deterred until 1943 [...]" In turn, Vansittart, who considered the Polish-German peace to be superficial and mentioned the annexation of Gdańsk, the economic penetration of Poland and a rectification of the Polish-German border among the aims of German policy, as a rule opposed territorial concessions in Europe in favour of Germany and thus opposed concessions at the expense of Poland.²¹

A similar attitude was taken by Eden in the course of his meeting with Beck during the latter's official visit to London on 9-11 November, 1936. Eden stated that the British government "had no desire to make of Danzig a great international question if this could be avoided" and made the reservation that "there was no intention in the mind of His Majesty's Government to make an agreement among the Western Powers at the expense of anybody else". This was an important declaration, the more so that after German troops entered the demilitarized Rhineland when it became obvious that France was not willing to undertake an appropriate counter-action, the political and strategic position of Poland greatly deteriorated. However, regardless of the above-mentioned declaration, in the sphere of foreign affairs the invitation to London of Beck was only of an exploratory character. The memorandum on Polish policy prepared by H. Kennard was intended for information only.²²

In this way, up to and including 1936, despite various supposi-

²¹ Memoranda quoted above (O'Maley and R. Vansittart).

²² Materials concerning the visit by J. Beck to London—telegrams, minutes, memoranda, 9-10 Nov., 1936, PRO, FO 371/1964/C 7996; Kennard's *Memorandum on Polish External and Internal Affairs*, *ibidem*, 19957/C 7905; also M. Nurek, *Londyńska wizyta Józefa Becka w listopadzie 1936 r. [Józef Beck's Visit to London in November 1936]*, "Dzieje Najnowsze," 1975, No. 1, pp. 111-126. T. Piszczkowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 400-402.

tions regarding the direction of the development of Polish policy and the growth of Polish-British economic relations (a coal agreement signed on 6 December, 1934 and a new trade agreement on 27 February, 1935), the Foreign Office did not attach much weight to Poland as a state, the policy of which could be of importance for British interests. First signs of a departure from this attitude appeared in 1937 and coincided with tendencies towards reducing the growth of German economic and political influence in Central Europe and with fears of Poland joining the Axis. It seems, that Kennard was the first to draw attention to the fact that Poland, as the largest Central European state, striving towards the maintenance of a territorial status quo was precisely a factor favouring peace in Europe. In his report entitled "Poland as a Factor in World Affairs" he wrote :

"It is surprising that in the study of international affairs so little account is ordinarily taken of the potential importance of Poland. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that Poland, a country of nearly thirty-five million inhabitants, situated between Germany and Russia is often left wholly out of account as a factor determining the issue between peace and war". And further on "[...] Poland is a matter of the greatest importance to every country which is concerned to avoid an European conflict". At the same time Kennard pointed to the fact that because of her defence Poland is unable to follow an anti-German line. In spite of that not only did Poland not plan to come closer to Germany, but clearly revealed pro-British tendencies. He also pointed out that she was a country of economic and military value and in case war should break out her soldiers would fight well. Although on the margins of Kennard's reports one finds remarks which prove that a part of the Foreign Office officials doubted the correctness of his appraisal, the reports, nevertheless, helped to overcome a Foreign Office stereotype of Poland as a peripheral country of no significance for British policy.²³

At the same time, however, after over three years of silence

²³ Reports by H. Kennard, 11 May, 9 Nov., 1937, PRO, Fo 371/20760/C 3584 and C 8603.

the English once again made a proposal, for the first time by official circles, of concessions for Germany at the expense of Poland. As is known on 19 November, 1937 Lord President Viscount Halifax, while presenting to Hitler conditions for cooperation, mentioned Gdańsk among possible concessions to Germany.

This attitude was the result of the modification of British policy towards Germany which took place in the autumn of 1937 under the government of Neville Chamberlain and which lasted at least to the turn of 1938 and 1939 or, more precisely, until March 1939. At the basis of this policy one finds, on the one hand, pressure of German diplomacy aiming to link to the Reich lands inhabited by a German majority and, on the other hand, the conviction that Great Britain was unable to successfully oppose Germany if the latter would wish to realize these plans by force. Even more so, Great Britain would not be able to oppose simultaneously those three states which at that time pursued an active policy, i.e. Germany, Italy and Japan. As a result, the memoranda of the Foreign Office which analyzed the policy of Great Britain towards Central Europe called for an opposition towards the economic and political penetration by Germany within this area, using only economic means, i.e. an increase of commercial exchange and financial aid for the Central European countries. At the same time, attempts to achieve an agreement on the basis of a "bargain" were continued. It was asked of Germany to limit armaments, relinquish competition for Central European markets and to resign from hegemony in Central Europe, in return for colonial concessions and aid in alleviating economic difficulties in Germany itself. However, during the period from March to September 1938 the British government, finding itself under the pressure of *faits accomplis* and the demands of German diplomacy, forsook the principle of taking under consideration only the colonies as an area of territorial concessions. As a result it accepted the Anschluss and, subsequently, the cession of the Sudeten region to Germany. Talks between Chamberlain and Hitler preceded decisions concerning the latter problem also showed that between the 15th and the 30th of September the British government rejected the

principle of bilateral concessions in favour of unilateral ones. Policy during this period remained under the strong influence of Neville Chamberlain who believed in the efficacy of economic means and was convinced that Hitler had no aggressive aims. Eden, Sargent, Vansittart and, at the close of 1938, also Lord Halifax, were of a different opinion. In one way or another it does not follow from the deliberations of the Foreign Office and the Cabinet that even during the period of unilateral concessions did the Prime Minister, and even more so the Foreign Office, take under consideration the possibility of giving Germany a free hand in Europe. It does follow, on the other hand, that after the Anschluss the maintenance of the independence and sovereignty of Central European states from the point of view of British interests was recognized as important.²⁴

During the Czechoslovak crisis Poland's role in British policy grew significantly. This took place under the influence of fears of an intensification in Polish-German cooperation which would have strengthened Germany's position in Central Europe and enabled it to safeguard its rear lines. This is why the British government was willing to accept the demands made by Poland concerning Zaolzie Silesia under the condition that Polish diplomacy would not conduct any actions together with Germany but would support the activity of the Western Powers. When the Polish side did not fulfill this condition, Polish-British relations visibly cooled at the close of 1938.²⁵

The growth of international tension at the turn of 1938 - 1939 overcame this impasse. Rumours about the German threat to the Western states, then Rumania and then Gdańsk were accompanied in March by the annexation of Bohemia and Moravia as well as Memel together with the creation of the Slovak state

²⁴ Memoranda : *British Influence in Central and South-Eastern Europe*, 24 May, 1938 and *Central and South-Eastern Europe*, 10 Nov., 1938, PRO, CAB 24/277/C. P. 127 and 280/C. P. 257 ; report *Czechoslovakian Crisis—the Form of British Assistance* 7 June, 1938 PRO, FO 371/21723/C 5491 ; cf. S. Newman, *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 18 - 19, 22 - 50.

²⁵ *Memorandum Statements Made by and to Polish Representatives Regarding the Polish Minority in Czechoslovakia*, 20 Sept., 1938, PRO, FO 371/21567/2119 ; materials concerning the position of Poland in the Czechoslovakian crisis and the relation of the Foreign Office towards it, *ibidem*, 21567, 21569, 21810 ; see also T. Piszczkowski, *op. cit.*, pp. 407 - 414.

under the German protectorate. These events and the violation of the Munich Agreement by Germany which, in turn, weakened Chamberlain's prestige, despite continued British-German economic negotiations, and the ever topical plan by Chamberlain to renew political talks, resulted in an intensification of British preparations for war and a new manoeuvre in Chamberlain's diplomacy towards the acceptance of the position of the anti-German circles in the Foreign Office. One should agree with the thesis of the British historian S. Newman that, as a result, there emerged a conviction that if Great Britain did not oppose Germany the moral and psychological balance in Europe and in the world would be tilted so drastically in favour of Germany that the capability of Great Britain to fulfill the functions of a power would become irretrievably lost. In order to prevent this one had to break the chain of German successes with an official declaration of the British opposition to further German expansion in Central Europe. Such a decision, however, equalled to admitting that the policy of rapprochement failed and there remained only the alternative of war.²⁶

These considerations increased the role of Central Europe, and particularly the Polish state, in British policy. The growth of the importance of Germany in this region depended to a great extent on Poland submitting to it. At the same time, Poland as the largest and relatively strongest state of Central Europe and a direct neighbour of Germany lend itself to being the best British ally in the East. Initially, the USSR was seen as an ally of equal importance but the opinion prevailed that it was less valuable because it lacked a common border with Germany, there was no certainty as to its behaviour in case of conflict, a negative resonance of British-Soviet cooperation was foreseen to emerge in many countries and because Poland voiced objections towards declaring cooperation against Germany within a group of states which would include the Soviet Union. In this situation only Poland remained as the potential British ally. Her policy, however, was still unclear to the British government. On the one hand, it was feared that Poland could, under

²⁶ S. Newman, *op. cit.*, pp. 136, 196.

the pressure of Germany, enter into the sphere of German influence or remain neutral which would make it impossible to create a second front. William Strang, head of the Central Department wrote :

“Hitler now holds the view that Poland has not yet consolidated her position as an independent state and that he has plans for dealing with the Polish question. He expects to be able to do this without an European war”. On the other hand, Kennard argued that dark clouds were gathering over Poland and that one should expect military conflict because “one must imagine that if Germany ever puts a pistol to her [Poland’s] head she will make more stalwart efforts than Czechoslovakia to resist, hopeless though the struggle may be”. J. Beck did not inform the Western Powers either about the actual situation in Poland nor about the intentions of Polish policy, i.e. regarding German demands presented for the first time in October 1938, renewed in January and March 1939 and connected with the question of the inclusion into the Reich of Gdańsk and the railway line as well as the motorway joining Germany with Eastern Prussia in exchange for unlimited guarantees as regards the Polish borders, the extension of the non-aggression pact up to 25 years and Poland’s entrance into the anti-Comintern Pact. He also did not inform about the negative answer given by the Polish side to these proposals.²⁷

In the atmosphere which existed in Great Britain, characterized by an uncertainty as regards Poland’s behaviour, the efforts to secure a London visit of Beck which took place between January and the beginning of March 1939, become more understandable. The pretext was furnished by a need to reconsider the possibilities of the functioning in Gdańsk, under conditions of Nazi pressure, of the High Commissioner of the League of Nations. Actually, as Roger Makins of the Foreign Office Central Department wrote, other matters of general interest for the two countries would be discussed. In turn, Sir Orme Sargent in connection with information coming from Poland about Beck’s wavering attitude towards the London visit despite an earlier

²⁷ Minute by W. Strang, 10 Nov., 1938, PRO, FO 371/21808/C 13705 ; annual report by H. Kennard, 1 Jan., 1939, *ibidem*, 23142/522.

agreement, pointed out in March that one should do everything possible to humour Col. Beck and to strengthen his present tendency to look towards Great Britain and France rather than to Germany. In the second half of March, after the Czechoslovak state was annihilated, German pressure grew and it was considered that the granting of British political guarantees to Poland would be the best way to gain her support for the Western Powers. For the first time the idea of guarantees was formulated by Lord Halifax on 21 March, 1939. This was a proposal initially of a conditional guarantee (aid from Poland for Rumania, Great Britain and those states which Britain would defend). Subsequently, under the influence of news about the expected attack on Poland in the near future this proposal became transformed on 29 March into an unconditional guarantee. After its presentation to Beck, as if in answer to an earlier suggestion made by the Polish minister for signing a bilateral Polish-British agreement, and following its immediate acceptance by the Polish side, unilateral and unconditional guarantees for Poland were announced in the House of Commons on 31 March. This was, at the same time, an official announcement of an important decision concerning the change in British policy of negotiations with Germany into a policy of resistance against Germany. This course of events, we may recall, was foretold by Vansittart already in 1936. Such a policy in the conditions of the existence of aggressive German aims and an increasing pressure upon Poland, led to war.²⁸

Mutual guarantees of both Poland and Great Britain announced in a communique on 6 April, during a visit by Beck to London, military and financial negotiations, an unprecedented Treaty of Mutual Assistance signed on 25 August and finally the declaration of war with Germany by Great Britain on 3 September, 1939 were, for Poland, a by-product of the British guarantees. They did not grant Poland immediate aid during the course of her military involvement against the German armies, even

²⁸ Memorandum by R. Makin, *Proposed Visit of Colonel Beck to England*, PRO, FO 371 23133/C 2607; minute by O. Sargent, 7 Dec., 1939, *ibidem*, C 2632; a detailed account of the evolution of the British position from the 15th to the 31 of March is presented by S. Newman (*op. cit.*, chapters 7-9).

to the slight extent foreseen in the agreements. However, one should remember that this was not aid which could have been decisive for the course of the campaign in Poland. The Polish government and military leadership was aware of this fact. In spite of that for Poland, willing to defend not only her independence but also her territorial integrity and political as well as economic sovereignty it was more advantageous to continue resistance with the aid of the British ally. On the other hand, Polish determination made it possible for British policy to achieve its aim, i.e. to interrupt a sequence of bloodless German victories, not to enable Germany to increase its power at the expense of Poland while avoiding conflict, to create a second front along Germany's rear lines and to gain in Central Europe an ally who would engage a part of the German forces not only during the short-lasting Polish-German war but during the whole course of World War II.

An analysis of British policy towards Poland in the 1930s enables us to draw the following conclusions :

1. Although during this period the British Government was not interested in Poland for herself, Poland's role in British diplomacy grew.

2. The evolution of British policy towards Poland passed through four stages which reflected the British-French alliance, transformations which took place in British policy towards Germany and in Polish-German relations.

3. The first stage of British policy towards Poland which we date from the turn of the 1920s and 1930s up to January 1933 was characterized by a resignation from the principle of allowing controversial Polish-German problems to be solved by time alone in favour of posing the question about the necessity of a revision. This position was the result of conviction that a conception of a complex solution to all controversial international problems, including the Pomeranian Corridor was of great importance for European security. In effect, the British project for the revision of the status of the Free City of Gdańsk and Polish Pomerania was prepared for internal government use.

4. The second stage of evolution which took place in the spring of 1933 and lasted until the autumn of 1937 was charac-

terized by a departure from pro-revisionist tendencies as regards Poland. This change occurred under the influence of a growing distrust towards the policy of Nazi Germany, the formulation of a conception of reaching an agreement with Germany upon the basis of bilateral concessions, which excluded territorial changes in Europe and of improvements in Polish-German relations.

5. The third stage was characterized by a transformation which took place from November 1937 to the turn of 1938 - 1939, under the pressure of Germany; it consisted of taking under consideration a possible agreement to the revision of the status of the Free City of Gdańsk. This was accompanied by an acceptance of changes undertaken by Germany along her southeastern border. During this period the British government rejected the principle of excluding from British-German negotiations the condition of a transformation in the European territorial status quo as well as the principle of bilateral concessions. Because of the southeastern direction of German expansion the policy of fulfilling German nationalistic revindications together with the then arisen conception of opposing German penetration only by economic means, pertained to Polish matters only to a slight degree.

6. During the fourth stage which occurred from January-March to September 1939 it was agreed that it lay in British interest for Poland not to become a German satellite or a neutral state but an ally of Great Britain. This turnabout was the result of a conviction that a policy of rapprochement had failed and that Great Britain must oppose militarily the aggressive policy of Germany if she wants to retain her position as a power.

7. British policy was also influenced by the evolution of Polish policy towards Germany. From the political point of view the first most significant interest in Poland was connected with the signing of the Polish-German declaration; the intensity of this interest depended upon the growth of fears about Poland's entrance into the sphere of German influence. Up to 1936 the Foreign Office did not formulate any conclusions as regards an appropriate course of policy towards Poland.

8. The breakthrough in the Foreign Office's attitude towards

Poland's role in international politics took place in 1937. The conviction that Poland is a state of great importance as an element of maintaining balance on the Continent grew together with the worsening of the international situation and accompanying fears about the direction of future Polish policy. Simultaneously, British policy underwent a metamorphosis from one of negotiations to that of resistance. This evolution, and particularly its final stage, was accompanied by the efforts of the British government to win Poland as an ally.

9. In effect, Poland as the largest state in Central Europe, bordering with Germany and willing to defend her independence and sovereignty, became a British ally. This unprecedented event occurred in conditions when Great Britain, while wishing to maintain the position and prestige of a power, had to declare resistance against Germany. In the terms of the aggressive policy of Germany this resistance led to war.

(Translated by Aleksandra Rodzińska)