In Munich’s shadow: The Ukrainian question in Polish foreign policy (October 1938 – March 1939)

The Munich conference of four Western powers which nullified the foundations of the peace order constructed at Versailles had repercussions beyond Czechoslovak affairs. Munich launched or invigorated a series of processes whose consequences would affect all of Central and subsequently Western Europe. One aspect of this phenomenon was the sudden and, for many observers, surprising revival of the Ukrainian question. Seemingly put to rest as an international issue in the early thirties, this question again took on primary significance in the autumn of 1938 as a result of the federalization of the Czechoslovak Republic and the establishment within its borders of the autonomous region of Carpathian Ruthenia, whose government — after the crisis of late October — was dominated by local Ukrainian activists under the leadership of Fr. Avgustyn Voloshyn. Carpathian autonomy, initially treated as a provisory measure, grew stronger in early November 1938.

1 The text is a modified version of an article which appeared in Polish in the pages of Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny (Polish Diplomatic Review) (2010, no. 3).
2 Their victory, it is worth noting here, had not seemed obvious beforehand. In this peripheral area, far from the centers of Ukrainian life, they had to fight fiercely for influence with two other powerful national camps — the Russophile group (who saw local Rusyns as part of the Russian nation) and adherents of autochthonous Rusyn culture (believing themselves to represent a separate East Slavic nationality). The composition of the first autonomous government of Ruthenia, established 8 October 1938, bore witness to a certain equilibrium between these two groups. It was headed by Andrij Brodij, leader of the Russophile orientation. More on the conflict between national camps in Carpathian Ruthenia: P. R. Magoesi, Shaping of a National Identity: Subcarpathian Rus’, 1848–1948, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1978; J. J. Bruski, Rząd i partie polityczne I Republiki Czechosłowackiej wobec sporu o orientację narodową Rusinów zakarpackich (1919–1938), in: Studia Historyczne, 1997, no. 2, pp. 191–211; M. Jarnecki, Droga do identyfikacji narodowej. Stosunki narodowościowe na Rusi Zakarpackiej w przededniu I wojny światowej i w okresie międzywojennym, in: Sprawy Narodowościowe, 2005, no. 27, pp. 101–116.
thanks to the First Vienna Award delimitating a new Czechoslovak-Hungarian border. Although the decision was signed by the foreign ministers of Italy and Germany, there could be no doubt that it was Berlin which had decided to stifle the territorial ambitions of the Hungarians, who sought to annex all of Ruthenia, and that the Berlin government would henceforth act as protector of Ukrainian interests.

Events in Carpathian Ruthenia attracted the acute interest of foreign press and diplomats, who conjectured not only about the future of the region, but above all about the place accorded the Ukrainian question in Berlin’s plans. The belief that Ruthenia was intended to serve the Reich as merely a base for further activity in the East — toward the Southeastern voivodeships of Poland and the USSR — was widespread. There was speculation, in this context, that the Germans might be hoping to create Greater Ukraine and use that country as “their Manchukuo.”

The chain of events in Ruthenia complicated the policy of Warsaw. Poland had long been engaged in Transcarpathia (at least since the beginning of the thirties), treating its activities in the region as part of a general campaign of sabotage and subversion against the Czechoslovak state. While supporting the local Russophiles, the Poles were also attempting to disable the Ukrainian camp’s influence and prevent the emergence of an irredentist movement which could spread into Polish territory. At the time of the Sudeten crisis Poland was counting on decisive action from the Hungarians, who were to occupy Carpathian Ruthenia. This would achieve two goals — a common border, allowing Warsaw to entertain thoughts of building a wider pro-Polish bloc in Central Europe, and the weakening in Ruthenia of Ukrainian influence, disquieting to Budapest as well. The Hungarians had not decided to resolve the situation by force at the time of Munich, but there was hope in Warsaw that events would eventually lead in that direction. The Polish leaders judged that the process of the Czechoslovak state’s dissolution had not yet been completed, and expected no hindrance to their plans from the Germans.

The first noises giving voice to Warsaw’s anxiety at the situation in Ruthenia began to resonate in mid-October. Polish misgivings were articulated by Tadeusz Kobylański, head of the Eastern Division of the foreign ministry, who urged that

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the Hungarians be provided with effective military assistance. “Otherwise,” he argued, “in the event of a pseudo-state center emerging in Ruthenia, we may be forced to mobilize in the near future to pacify East Lesser Poland.” The head of Polish diplomacy had given them before leaving for Galați, where he was persuading the Romanians — fruitlessly, it turned out — to support the idea of the Polish-Hungarian border and to participate in the division of Ruthenia. Beck’s journey was only one part of a larger diplomatic offensive geared to help to implement the program of Hungarian territorial revindications. The Poles also decided to actively support Budapest by improvising sabotage activity in Transcarpathia under the code name “Łom” (“Crowbar”), coordinated with the operations of Hungarian fighting squads.

Polish concerns were fully justified. The emancipation of Carpathian Ruthenia, seen as the “Piedmont” of a future united Ukraine, drove the radicalization of Ukrainian circles in Poland, including those which had hitherto kept relatively loyal to Warsaw. An external sign of this was a bill — submitted by the Ukrainian members of the Polish parliament — declaring the autonomy of Poland’s southeastern voivodeships. OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationals) terrorism had recently broken out anew in the region, accompanied by numerous anti-Polish demonstrations. The masses of young Ukrainians sneaking across the border gave Poland no choice but to close the Carpathian border and transfer elite detachments of the KOP (Border Protection Corps). In fairness we should add that Carpathian Ruthenia was only the fuse which ignited an explosion of suppressed emotion. The flames had been stoked for a long time by deplorable government policy in the border regions, above all the program of so-called “strengthening of Polishness”, implemented in the late ’30s, which resulted in the definitive collapse of attempts to normalize Polish-Ukrainian relations.

Two Polish diplomatic posts were consistently monitoring the situation in Ruthenia in late 1938 and early 1939 — the consulate in Uzhhorod, for the territories joined by the Vienna Award to Hungary, and the newly-opened consulate in

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Khust (actually residing in Sevlyush). Reports from these posts and intelligence
dispatches left no doubt as to the direction of Ruthenia’s political evolution: the
consolidation of Ukrainian positions and the supplanting of Polish-Hungarian in-
fluence by the Third Reich. The diplomats watched helplessly as the numbers of
“Carpathian Sich” fighting squads rose; the country was taken over by German
advisers; and as terror was used against the opposition, culminating in the dissolu-
tion of all non-Ukrainian political parties.¹⁰ In early December 1938 the Polish en-
voy in Prague, Kazimierz Papée, stated with unease that “Ruthenia abroad has be-
come a symbol of German penetration into the former Czechoslovakia,” and that
“Ukrainians [...] not only have absolute power, but because of the food and public
works they provide, they have begun to find support among the local population.”¹¹
Attempts were made to fight Ukrainian influence by supporting local Russophile
and Rusynophile activists, but this campaign had negligible results. The Polish con-
sum in Khust soberly summed up in his report of February 22: “The whole weight of
the Ruthenian [meaning ‘anti-Ukrainian’] efforts can at best help to maintain the
turmoil in Ruthenia but is not and will not be able to initiate an effective offensive
against the Ukrainians by itself.”¹²

The Polish sabotage campaign in Transcarpathia was suspended in No-
vember 1938 in connection with the Hungarians’ withdrawal from similar activity.
The Polish legation in Prague suggested, however, that Poles should continue the
campaign on their own. It was to be based on “the destruction of Ukrainian organi-
izations’ premises, government offices, ‘Sich’ military barracks, etc.,” and also indi-
vidual acts of terrorism “toward Ukrainian emigrants from Lesser Poland and pos-
sible instructors from Berlin.”¹³ Such proposals were not seconded by the foreign
ministry, unsurprisingly considering the position of the Hungarians, who had a
great deal more at stake. In the second half of November, after Berlin made its
opposition clear, they backed out of plans to occupy Ruthenia by force. This pro-
voked the indignation of Minister Beck, who declared Budapest’s policy “insincere,
cowardly, and evasive,”¹⁴ but it must be admitted that the Hungarians had made an
accurate assessment of the configuration of powers in the region, where the Third
Reich was becoming the only major player. Adolf Hitler himself defined the situa-
tion in a brutal manner in the course of a conversation with the Hungarian foreign mi-
nister István Csák in January 1939. The Führer stated authoritatively that “ Hun-
gary must respect decisions made in Vienna [the Vienna Award] and the Germans
will not accept a single gunshot being fired in Central Europe without their receiv-

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¹⁰ Extensive material on this subject available at: Archiwum Akt Nowych w War-
szawie [hereinafter—AAN], MSZ [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] 5460, 5461, 5462 and 5463.
¹¹ Report of envoy Papée, 8 December 1938, in: PDD 1938, doc. 443, p. 820. This
document was first published with a penetrating commentary by Jerzy Tomaszewski. See J.
Tomaszewski (ed.), “Na pokładzie od Karpat.” Projekt zasad polityki Rzeczypospolitej Pol-
skiej wobec Czeczo-Słowacji, in: Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny, 2002, no. 6(10), pp. 159–
170.
¹² Report by Piotr Kurnicki of 22 February 1939, AAN, MSZ 5463, p. 47. More on
this subject: J. Pisuliński, Karpatorusini w polskiej polityce zagranicznej..., pp. 61–65.
¹³ Memorial from the Polish legation in Prague of 5 January 1939, in: PDD 1939,
doc. 2, pp. 6–8.
IV, p. 358.
ing advance warning.”15 As a result, Budapest decided to wait on Berlin’s decision before taking further action in Ruthenia. In doing so, they consciously accepted the status of clients of the Reich. From the Polish perspective it rendered questionable the benefits of the common border with Hungary, initially planned as a bulwark against possible German expansion. Warsaw nonetheless persisted in lobbying in the international arena for the liquidation of Ruthenia. To an increasing degree this was connected not with strategic and geopolitical calculations, but with apprehension about the uncontrolled development of the Ukrainian question.

Observing that problem became one of the main tasks of Polish diplomacy. Diplomatic posts fixed their attention on the reactions of particular governments and international opinion to the revival of the Ukrainian question. Dispatches on this subject came flooding in from capitals of the great powers as well as places of lesser political importance such as Kaunas, the Hague and Belgrade.16 Everywhere an attempt was made to monitor the threat to Poland’s political situation and to intervene whenever possible. The Polish diplomats loudly promoted the idea of the common border with Hungary and at the same time did a lot of effort to keep the Ukrainian issue — closely related to this question — as quiet as possible abroad. Józef Lipski, the Polish ambassador to Berlin, for example, influenced his French counterpart in this way. In December 1938 he reported a conversation with French ambassador Robert Coulondre, whom he allegedly convinced of “the need to influence foreign countries, Western European especially, to stop them from reawakening the Ukrainian problem by discussing it.”17 Roman Dębski, the Polish envoy to Yugoslavia, worked to influence opinion there in the same direction. He proudly reported that he had succeeded in limiting the number of publications in the local press dealing with the Ukrainian subject, e.g., he had kept an interview with the president of UNDO and Sejm vicechairman Vasyl Mudry out of the Belgrade periodical “Politika.” The bogey which he used to influence local ruling circles was the threat of the Croats’ autonomist and separatist tendencies, which could find “nourishment, menacing to the unity of Yugoslavia” in the Ukrainian example.18 The diplomats also resorted to other types of behind-the-scenes manoeuvres. An effort was made to force the Polish viewpoint toward the Ukrainian problem on influential parliamentarians and journalists at private conferences with them. There is evidence of e.g. special breakfasts given for such individuals by the embassy in Paris and the resident of Branch 2 of Polish intelligence.19

Furthermore, the mood of Ukrainian circles abroad was carefully observed. The Polish diplomacy looked with particularly grave concern on the process which

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15 Cable from Polish envoy in Budapest Leon Orłowski of 23 January 1939, in: PDD 1939, doc. 23, p. 42. Csáky’s visit to Berlin took place on 16–18 January.
16 See the reports of envoys: Franciszek Charwat, Waclaw Babiński and Roman Dębski in: AAN, MSZ, ref. # 5322.
17 Note by Ambassador Lipski (unsigned) of 12 December 1938, AAN, MSZ 108a, pp. 116–118.
19 One guest of the embassy was well-known socialist deputy Raoul Brandon, invited 30 November 1938 — the day before his appearance in the parliamentary Commission on Foreign Affairs. During the “breakfast” the Polish participants informed him in detail about Warsaw’s position on the issue of Eastern Europe and in particular the Ukrainian problem. A resident of the “Second Bureau” reported that “at the time of the anticipated interpellation [...] [Brandon] is to use the news in the defense of Poland. The report from the “Wellstone” (Pelc) from 1 December 1938, CAW, I.303.4.5476, p. 223. Branch 2 of the Second Bureau of the Main Staff was directing (in agreement with the Eastern Bureau of the Foreign Ministry) the Promethean action against the USSR.
Tytus Komarnicki, the envoy in Bern, described as “the ‘Gleichschaltung’ of the emigration.”\(^{20}\) This phenomenon was occurring even in such exotic areas as Ukrainian farming colonies in South America — in Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay. Polish diplomatic posts there reported regularly on the intensification of nationalist propaganda, recruitment of volunteers for Ukrainian legions and cooperation between the diaspora and representatives of the German government.\(^{21}\) Still greater unease was generated by reports concerning the long-settled and more politically influential emigration community in North America. As far as Canada is concerned, information periodically flowed in from the consulate in Winnipeg and the general consulate in Ottawa.\(^{22}\) The source of the greatest apprehension among Polish diplomats were attempts to disseminate Ukrainian propaganda outside Ukrainian ethnic enclaves. A Polish political counteroffensive was mounted against i.e. a well-publicized speech in the Canadian parliament by deputy William Hayhurst, who spoke in favor of Ukrainian national aspirations and called for a special commission to be formed by the Munich signatories which would be charged with finding a solution to the Ukrainian issue in Europe.\(^{23}\) The activities of the Ukrainian diaspora were also of central importance to the Polish embassy in Washington. At Ambassador Jerzy Potocki’s proposal the Eastern Division of the foreign ministry decided at the beginning of 1939 to appropriate additional funds for Polish counter-propaganda in emigration circles. A decision was made to centralize responsibility for all Ukrainian issues at the consulate in Pittsburgh, which served the region hosting the most important Ukrainian enclaves in the USA. Over time Polish diplomats were to move from the observation of these milieux to carry out sabotage among them. It was planned i.a. to use American Carpatho-Ruthenians as a tool.\(^{24}\) On January 12, Ambassador Jerzy Potocki reported on the first results of attempting to influence this group, citing with satisfaction the “many telegrams sent by Ruthenian organizations to Minister Beck, Chancellor Hitler and others, demanding that Carpathian Ruthenia be incorporated into Hungary.”\(^{25}\)

The chief of Branch 2 of the Second Bureau of the Main Staff, Major Edmund Charaszkiewicz, judged that after Munich, pro-German feeling — of a clearly anti-Polish tinge — had “not left a single one of the Ukrainian political factions unmarked.”\(^{26}\)

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\(^{20}\) Komarnicki to Kobylański, Bern, 9 February 1939, AAN, MSZ 5322, p. 222.
\(^{22}\) A series of “Ukrainian” reports from diplomatic posts in Ottawa, Winnipeg and Montreal from late 1938 and early 1939 can be found in the folders mentioned earlier, in: AAN, MSZ 5322 and 11487. See also: ibid., Ambasada RP w Londynie [Polish Embassy in London] 1437.
\(^{24}\) Polish Ambassador to Washington Jerzy Potocki to Eastern Division of the Foreign Ministry, 10 January 1939, ibid., pp. 135–136.
\(^{26}\) Działania dywersyjne na Rusi Zakarpackiej [Subversive Activity in Carpathian Ruthenia], paper by E. Charaszkiewicz, Paris, 12 March 1940, in: A. Grzywacz, M. Kwiecień,
rent, which was receiving moral and financial support from Warsaw and was treated as a pillar of Polish influence in non-Russian anti-Bolshevik émigré circles. Even Mykola Livytskyi, son of the president of the UNR (Ukrainian National Republic) in exile, allegedly could not resist the fascination with the Reich and with the idea of a Carpathian Piedmont. In the transformed post-Munich situation the Petlurists began expressing solidarity with the demands of Ukrainians of Galicia and Volhynia, raising the issue of autonomy for those regions and the possibility of setting new Polish-Ukrainian borders in the future in conversations with the Poles. They also intended to take active part in building Ukrainian state structures in Transcarpathia. Warsaw resolved definitively to crush these tendencies. As Major Charaszkiewicz reported — “Ukrainian exaltation, harmful to Polish political interests, we very seriously condemned.” At the same time competent Polish authorities — Col. Tadeusz Pełczyński, head of the “Dwójka” (the Second Bureau of the Main Staff) and chief of the Eastern Division of the foreign ministry Kobyński — “acquainted Ukrainian partners with the Polish position regarding a common Polish-Hungarian border in a thorough and categorical manner.” The chief of the “East” Section of the Intelligence Department of the Second Bureau of the Main Staff, Captain Jerzy Niezbrzycki, had a similar conversation with Oleksandr Shulhyn, former UNR foreign minister and leader of the Petlurist group in France. They met in mid-December 1938 in Paris, where Niezbrzycki had been sent with a confidential mission of exposing and defusing German propaganda on the Ukrainian question. Other pressures were also placed on the rebellious Pietlurists using émigré activists of other nationalities who remained loyal to Poland, chiefly Caucasian politicians.

Polish diplomatic and intelligence forces naturally focused their attention on Germany and the Third Reich’s attitude towards Ukrainian aspirations. The situation in Vienna, which had become a powerful center of Ukrainian agitation, caused great anxiety. The Polish consulate general there reported on the euphoria which had swept the numerically strong Ukrainian community at the news from Munich and the demands for the political independence of Ruthenia which that
community had immediately put forward. The slogan of “Carpathian Piedmont” was also promoted on the Viennese radio, which in mid-October began to feature two daily broadcasts in Ukrainian. The supervision of the programs’ unambiguously anti-Polish content had been entrusted to persons with close political ties to the OUN. Since the establishment of Voloshyn’s government in Ruthenia and the delineation of the new Hungarian border, the number of Ukrainian-themed publications in the Austrian press had also increased rapidly. The situation of the Ukrainian population in Poland was one topic accorded a great deal of attention and column space. The consul general in Vienna, Mieczysław Grabiński, had no doubt that this was a “systematic propaganda campaign” with the placet of the Nazi authorities. In the second half of November he also reported that the Ukrainian community in Vienna was not only supported but directly organized and financed by German government agents.

The involvement of the Reich in the political game over Carpathian Ruthenia and its promotion of the Ukrainian issue came as a surprise for the Poles. As late as 10 October the head of the Eastern Bureau of the foreign ministry had assured the Polish envoy in Budapest that the Germans were not against the incorporation of Ruthenia into Hungary. News on this subject, he wrote, was being “distributed on a large scale by Ukrainian emigré agents in accordance with the intentions of certain low-level German groups. If the Hungarians managed to talk with Hitler and his staff, [...] they would certainly be quick to eliminate this subversion from their gameplan.” Other Polish diplomats also detected in the activation of the Ukrainian question — to some extent correctly — the result of rivalry between several independent Nazi factions attempting to shape the Reich’s Eastern policy. The most frequently named possible advocates of Ukrainian interests were Alfred Rosenberg or, in Józef Beck’s words, “the epigones of the Austrian K-Stelle.” Nobody, however, believed that playing the Ukrainian card against Poland was part of Hitler’s long-term plans. This conviction probably influenced the fairly reassuring evaluation formulated by Minister Beck during the meeting in the foreign ministry on 4 November. True, the minister did stress that in Poland “the German intrigue in the Ruthenian matter provokes conjectures about ‘diabolical plots,’” but he himself belittled the threat. To his own question “Was Hitler hoping through settling the Ruthenian issue to make his path to Kiev?” he answered in the negative, adding that he personally did not rate the issue of Transcarpathia as having great importance for Polish domestic policy.

Such appraisals did not indicate complacency among Polish diplomats. The Ukrainian campaign in Germany and Berlin’s unsettling actions in Ruthenia were subject to repeated interventions. They were carried out on Beck’s orders by Amba-

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31 Polish consul general in Vienna Mieczysław Grabiński to the Cabinet of the Foreign Minister, 3 October 1938, AAN, MSZ 5460, pp. 10–12.
33 Grabiński to the Polish Embassy in Berlin, Vienna, 17 December 1938, AAN, MSZ 5322, pp. 94–96.
34 Grabiński report of 23 November 1938, ibid., 5460, pp. 73–76.
ssador Lipski, who protested i.a. against the Viennese radio broadcasts, the German press campaign and successive anti-Polish publications, published in the Reich by the Ukrainian diaspora. At the beginning of December 1938 he was given the directive to pursue the expulsion of the most active Ukrainian emigrés, Polish citizens, from Germany. The further details of this affair are unfortunately not known. Hans Adolf von Moltke, the German ambassador in Warsaw, was also made to hear complaints against Berlin's policy in a series of conversations whose tone grew gradually sharper, culminating in the stand taken by vice foreign minister Jan Szembek on December 16. At that time, the Polish diplomat stated emphatically that the Ukrainian campaign supported by the Germans “is not a threat to the existence of our state and we are perfectly able to handle this agitation. I don't know, however,” he continued, “what Polish-German policy of agreement will look like if this situation continues.”

The interventions resulted in reassuring statements from German representatives, asserting that the Reich did not intend to transform Ruthenia into a Ukrainian Piedmont and that its involvement in Ukrainian matters was not anti-Polish in nature. These declarations were not followed up on with substantive action, however, except the suspension, for a time, of the Ukrainian broadcast from Vienna. A temporary détente took place only after the meeting between Beck and Hitler in Berchtesgaden on 5 January. The Führer declared that “he was interested in Ukraine from the economic angle, while politically it was of no interest whatsoever. He had nonetheless to keep a watchful eye on the problem. He assured that he would not take any action against Poland on that front.” It appears that after the conversation in Berchtesgaden the Germans tried to silence the Ukrainian propaganda on their territory, waiting to see what subsequent action would be taken by Warsaw, to whom cooperation had been proposed. This behavior was typical of Berlin’s tactics, treating the Ukrainian issue not as a long-term political investment, but rather as a bargaining chip, a means of placing pressure above all on Poland and Hungary. Warsaw began to understand the approach toward the

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39 Beck's instructions to Lipski, undated [sent 6 December 1938], AAN, MSZ 5460, pp. 91–92.


41 See e.g. Rozmowa Pana Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych z Ambasadorem Niemieckim von Moltke dnia 22 listopada 1938 [Conversation of the Foreign Minister with German Ambassador von Moltke of 22 November 1938], in: PDD 1938, doc. 427, pp. 784–787.


43 During the Warsaw visit toward the end of January Ribbentrop underscored: “After Berchtesgaden categorical orders were given that no German agents were to engage in the Ukrainian anti-Polish work. All German agents received the order.” Unsigned note from the Warsaw conversations of Ribbentrop and Beck, in: PDD 1939, doc. 27, p. 48.

end of October 1938 after Ambassador Lipski had met with Joachim von Ribbentrop, when for the first time the Germans had made their well-known offer of Gesamtlösung. As part of a complete settlement of Polish-German relations, the Reich’s foreign minister proposed among other things agreement on the liquidation of Carpathenian Ruthenia and the creation of the common Polish-Hungarian border. Beck, aware of Berlin’s game, henceforth ignored such offers and in conversations with German partners minimized the importance of Carpathian Ruthenia for Poland. The point was, as he told Szembek after Ribbentrop’s January visit to Warsaw, to “avoid taking out a mortgage that would later be paid with the Danzig region.”

There was more at stake than Danzig, however. After Munich the Germans sprang into action, with the goal of drawing Poland decisively into the orbit of the Third Reich. The litmus test of Warsaw’s position was to be its acceptance of important concessions in the matters of the Free City and the extraterritorial highway through Pomerania, followed by Poland’s accession to the Anti-Comintern Pact. In the longer term the vassalized Republic of Poland was expected to ally itself with the Reich’s march on the USSR. The bait for Poland was, in part, the issue of Ruthenia, but the Germans had decided to offer more long-term gains as well. Berlin was ready under certain conditions to renounce its Ukrainian ambitions and acknowledge the primacy of Poland’s interests in this matter. In exchange for its participation in the anti-Bolshevik crusade, Poland was to be given its own sphere of influence and territorial compensation in Ukraine.

It was not a new idea. Hermann Rauschning, President of the Senate of the Free City of Danzig, had been the first to sound out the Poles on the matter of anti-Soviet cooperation between Berlin and Warsaw in December 1933. Then Nazi leaders, above all Adolf Hitler himself and Hermann Göring, repeatedly returned to this topic in conversations with Polish diplomats, meeting each time with a polite but resolute désintéressement of the other side. Göring, at the time the Prime Minister of Prussia, was probably the first to put out a relatively concrete proposal concerning Ukraine. At the start of 1935, while hunting in the Białowieża Forest, he lured Polish top brass with the vision of “a joint march” against the Soviets. Jan Szembek noted in his diary: “He suggested that Ukraine would be in Poland’s sphere of influence, while the Germans would have Northwestern Russia as theirs.”

__Zweiten Weltkrieges, in: Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas, 49 (2001), Heft 1, pp. 67–95.\(^{45}\)

\(^{45}\) DTJS, vol. IV, p. 480.


\(^{47}\) Szembek’s account is based on information given to him by Ambassador Lipski coming straight from the hunt. T. Komarnicki (ed.), Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka, vol. I, Polish Research Centre, London 1964, p. 230. Lipski himself, testifying in 1941 before the Winierski commission attempting to determine the reasons for Polish defeat in the September Campaign 1939, characterized Göring’s proposal thus (presumably downplaying it deliberately): “Göring went very far in his conversations and in Russian affairs he proposed the allocation of a sphere of influence, which he imagined in a confused, chaotic manner. First he proposed to give us the south of Russia, reserving the Baltic area for the Germans, then he wanted Ukraine for the Germans with a free hand for us in the north. We could see that he had more imagination than knowledge of the problem or the map, and had no firm point of reference in the subject whatsoever.” M. Kornat (ed.), Ambasador Józef Lipski o stosunkach polsko niemieckich (1933–1939), in: Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny, 2002, no. 1(5), p. 223. See also: J. Pisuliński, Kwestia ukraińska w polskiej polityce zagranicznej..., p. 119.
renewed the offer in 1938 at two consecutive meetings with Ambassador Lipski. As before, this inquiry too was ignored by Warsaw.\textsuperscript{48}

In January 1939 von Ribbentrop intended to revisit the matter — now on new terms, with the Carpatho-Ukrainian asset in hand. The day after Beck’s meeting with Hitler in Berchtesgaden he hosted the Polish foreign minister in Munich. The subject of conversation, revolving around the search for a lasting \textit{modus vivendi} in Polish-German relations, included the alignment of the policies of both countries toward the USSR. Ribbentrop declared on this occasion that the Germans were not interested in building a Greater Ukraine, but remarked that the elimination of misunderstandings on Ukrainian matters would only be possible after “a general, complete settlement of all problems” and the establishment of “many-sided cooperation” between Berlin and Warsaw. If Poland wanted to make its anti-Soviet position clear, he assured Beck, the Germans would be ready “to treat the Ukrainian question as Poland’s prerogative.” As the discussion continued, the Polish minister, to his interlocutor’s dismay, stressed the importance to Warsaw of peaceable contiguity with Russia, and made light of Ribbentrop’s question about Polish aspirations in Ukraine. In effect, the German offer went into the void.\textsuperscript{49}

It should be emphasized to the utmost here that, contrary to repeated speculation in contemporaneous diplomatic circles,\textsuperscript{50} Poland after Munich was not considering, even hypothetically, the option of a military intervention in the East with or without the Germans. Such theses, promoted in Soviet historiography, also occasionally appear in the work of contemporary Russian scholars.\textsuperscript{51} The authors repeating them most often cite two statements made by Polish diplomats: those of Kobylański and Jan Karszo-Siedlewski from December 1938, noted by the secretary of the German embassy in Warsaw, Rudolf von Scheliha, incidentally almost certainly an agent of Soviet intelligence.\textsuperscript{52} They are used as proof of the powerful influence exerted on Warsaw by the Prometheus ideology supporting efforts to split the USSR into separate nation-states. This is not the place to discuss the meaning of the cited statements or the veracity of von Scheliha’s account in detail.\textsuperscript{53} What is

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  \item[\textsuperscript{48}] Lipski’s reports of 11 and 24 August 1938, in: PDD 1938, doc. 176, p. 413; doc. 184, p. 432.
  \item[\textsuperscript{50}] Compare J. Pisuliński, \textit{Kwestia ukraińska w polskiej polityce zagranicznej...}, p. 118.
  \item[\textsuperscript{52}] \textit{SSSR v borbe za mir nakanune vtoroi mirovoi voiny} (sentjabr 1938 g. — avgust 1939 g.). \textit{Dokumenty i materialy, Izdatelstvo politicheskoi literatury}, Moskva 1971, doc. 45 and 83. Kobylański allegedly declared to his German interlocutor: “If Carpathian Ukraine falls to the Hungarians, Poland will agree then to take part in a German campaign in Soviet Ukraine”.
  \item[\textsuperscript{53}] More extensively on this subject: S. Żerko, \textit{Stosunki polsko-niemieckie...}, pp. 138–141, 163–166; M. Kornat, \textit{Polska 1939 roku wobec paktu Ribbentrop-Molotow. Problem zbliżenia niemiecko-sowieckiego w polityce zagranicznej II Rzeczypospolitej}, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, Warszawa 2002, pp. 253–256. As proof of Poland’s “imperialistic” plans for the USSR the rather unclear statement of the ambassador in Moscow Waclaw Grzybowski, noted 10 December 1938 by vice minister Szembek is cited (DTJS, vol. IV, pp. 379–380), and the study made by the Second Bureau of the Main Staff in 1938
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more important is that the majority of the other available evidence and the logic of Polish policy of that time contradict such interpretations. Though Warsaw undoubtedly saw the collapse of the Soviet Union as a highly advantageous outcome, nobody believed that such an outcome was imminent, and, more importantly, there was no intention of signing on to bring about its acceleration. A large number of statements to this effect from Minister Beck exist on record. He did not see the nationality problem in the USSR, particularly the Ukrainian question, coming quickly to a boil, although he perceived that the country had seriously weakened. “[It] has entered a period,” he observed to his subordinates in November 1938, “which for a Western country would be a dangerous crisis. In Russia they have their own way of reacting, though.” 54 The great “defensive possibilities” of the Soviet Union were also accented by Grzybowski, the Polish ambassador in Moscow, otherwise a proponent of Polish expansion to the East. Toward the end of 1938 he estimated the chances of creating an independent Ukraine as factually nil.55 The official line taken in conversations with foreign diplomats at the time was to indicate the unrealistic nature of plans to build a Ukrainian state entity through “a campaign from the outside.”56 This could be seen as camouflage were it not for identical, completely confidential statements made to Ukrainian emigres working with the Polish government. During the meeting with Shulhyn in Paris mentioned earlier, Captain Niezbrzycki deflated the hopes of his interlocutor, unambiguously disavowing the idea of a military action on the Dnieper. “Any armed aggression by the Germans on the territory of the Soviet Ukraine must end in a fiasco,” he argued, “since, no doubt due to 20 years of xenophobia propagated by the Bolsheviks, Ukrainians […] will immediately turn all their efforts to getting rid of the foreign invaders. Poles, despite being racially and geopolitically close to Ukraine, would in the event of any such an aggres-

54 PDD 1938, doc. 435, p. 800. The opinion quoted was in the instructions for Ambassador Edward Raczyński and was to be passed on to the British Foreign Minister, Lord Halifax.

55 The conversation cited above between Szembek and Grzybowsk on 10 December 1938, in: DTJS, vol. IV, pp. 379–380. Gottfried Aschmann, head of the Press Department of Auswärtiges Amt, who in January 1939 was testing the reaction in Warsaw to the activation of the Ukrainian problem, noted that Polish ruling circles related the emergence of an independent Ukraine to the possible collapse of the USSR, which they saw, however, as a distant prospect, and remained indifferent to the “idea of taking Soviet Ukraine for Poland.” S. Żerko, Stosunki polsko-niemieckie..., pp. 210–211.

It would appear that the contemporaneous Polish Promethean action conducted by Branch 2 of the Second Bureau of the Main Staff was treated by most of the policy-makers in Warsaw as merely a kind of insurance policy in case of a sudden reversal of the situation in the East. It was conducted rather by force of inertia, and at continually diminishing expenditure of funds. The Promethean current in Polish policy had hit crisis point in 1932 when the nonaggression pact with the USSR was signed but it was the death of Pilsudski what marked the definitive end of the previous era. His successors, Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigly and chief of the Main Staff Gen. Waclaw Stachiewicz, consistently balked at taking a firm stand on the Promethean action, which met with increasing indifference from the leadership of the Polish “Dwójka” as well. The idea that Poland should promote the Ukrainian case met in particular with increasing reluctance. It should be added that the Warsaw authorities found themselves under intense pressure from Polish borderland public opinion, which was succumbing to ever stronger nationalist feeling and was repeatedly attacking Polish “Ukrainophiles” and their activities. The dismissal of Henryk Józewski, a well-known spokesman for Polish-Ukrainian cooperation and for building an independent Dnieper Ukraine, from his post as voivode of Volhynia, testified to the changes in the atmosphere. Toward the end of 1938 Branch 2 together with several related institutions had become the only remaining significant center of Promethean activity in Poland. Its members hoped for an “acceleration” of events after Munich and sudden changes in Eastern Europe, but they were alone in reckoning on this. Particularly significant was the case of Włodzimierz Bączkowski’s book, *W obliczu wydarzeń* [In the Face of Events], which constitutes a kind of manifesto for Prometheanism and a Polish policy of engagement in the East. This work, written at the behest of and funded by Branch 2, was sharply attacked in autumn 1938 by the military authorities, who demanded that the Ministry of the Interior confiscate it.60

In late January 1939 the Reich foreign minister “made his last attempt for an anti-Russian intrigue,” as Beck noted. During his visit to Warsaw Ribbentrop repeated the details of the German offer to “align” relations with the neighbouring state, accenting two issues: Berlin’s readiness to act in concert with Poland and recognize her particular interests “in the event of Russia’s disintegration,” and on the other hand — the necessity of Polish concessions in the matter of Danzig and the highway through Pomerania. The importunate demand that the Free City be joined to the Reich elicited a sharp reply from Beck, to which Ribbentrop reacted by suggesting Poland be compensated for her loss with territory in Ukraine. This proposal

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60 Materials on this subject in: CAW, I.303.4.5774.

was then decisively rejected by the Polish minister, who left no doubt as to Warsaw's negative attitude regarding participation in the Anti-Comintern Pact either.62

For the next several weeks both sides strove to maintain a high level of courtesy toward each other, which still could not change the fact that a fundamental and, as it would turn out, ineradicable difference had emerged between their positions. In late March both sides dispensed with the facade in their relations, while events began to move with increasing speed toward an armed Polish-German confrontation. Danzig served as the pretext, but Poland was really paying for refusing to agree to be the Reich’s vassal and its Eastern outpost. As for the Ukrainian question, it temporarily lost its relevance after the occupation of Ruthenia by the Hungarians in mid-March 1939. The Polish-Hungarian border so long desired by Warsaw was at last delineated in the Carpathian Mountains. Considering Budapest’s subordination to the policy of Germany, however, it now had a little practical value from the Polish perspective.

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