

■ January 26, 1934: The Polish-German declaration of non-violence

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The Polish-German non-aggression treaty of January 26, 1934 came as a huge surprise to the international public. Even in the spring of the previous year, after Hitler's rise to power in Germany, rumors circulated about a possible outbreak of an armed conflict between Poland and the Reich and a preventive war being allegedly prepared for by Piłsudski. The unexpected turn in the previously tense relations between Berlin and Warsaw, which arrived with the declaration of January 1934, opened up a new chapter in relations between the two countries, which lasted until the spring of 1939.

Up until 1933, Polish-German relations had been disastrous. In Poland, memory of Germanization in the Prussian partition, and especially of the bloody fighting that accompanied the drawing up of the borders of the reemerging state (the Greater Poland Uprising and the three Silesian Uprisings), was still vivid. Equally well remembered was the Reich's hostility during the Soviet advance of 1920. The German-Soviet pact concluded in Rapallo, Italy in 1922 created, in the eyes of Poland, a gloomy prospect of revived cooperation between Prussia / Germany and Russia. In the Reich, the Treaty of Versailles of June 1919 was rejected by virtually every political group. The Reich has not come to terms with the handing of a large portion of the territories seized by Prussia during Poland's partitions of 1772, 1793 and 1795 or with the separation from Germany of what had become the Free City of Gdańsk. The revision of the Versailles treaty, and of the border with Poland in particular, became the main slogan of the successive governments of the Weimar Republic. The cards were stacked for a political conflict between the two countries.

Poland could live in relatively safety as long as Germany's hands remained tied by the Versailles Treaty. Without an air force or armored vehicles, Reichswehr's 100,000 troops posed an only minimal threat to Poland. Poland's security strategy rested on its 1921 alliance treaty with France, which provided for mutual assistance in the event of German aggression.

However, in the mid-1920s, France made a fundamental pivot in its foreign policy. The hitherto tough policy of enforcing the Versailles Treaty (an example of which was the Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr Region in 1923) was replaced with one of compromise with Berlin. The new approach was epitomized by the conference in Locarno, Switzerland (1925), at which Germany obtained assurances of the inviolability of its borders with France and Belgium, while equivalent guarantees were being denied to Poland and Czechoslovakia, both of which were French allies. In addition, the alliances



of Poland and Czechoslovakia were further weakened in Locarno. No wonder that Marshal Piłsudski would later say with his characteristic bluntness that a decent Pole spits disdainfully every time they hear the word “Locarno”.

Initiated in Locarno and continued in the following years, France’s policy of conciliation towards Berlin looked ominous for Poland. Germany, which gained its admission to the League of Nations at the Locarno conference, thus becoming a permanent member of the Council of this Geneva-based organization, used the opportunity to constantly attack Poland on the treatment of its German minority, whose rights were at times violated. The brunt of the Weimar Republic’s revisionist propaganda was aimed squarely at Poland, its arguments on the alleged need to “correct” Poland’s western borders in favor of Germany falling on increasingly fertile soil also in France. The Reich’s revisionist policy pinned its hopes on, among others, the option of invoking article 19 of the Covenant of the League of Nations regarding the revision of treaties said to no longer apply, and the need to reexamine any circumstances that could undermine peace. To make things worse, the rapprochement between Paris and Berlin came at a time of a customs and economic war declared against Poland in the mid-1920s by German diplomats led by Gustav Stresemann (who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his role in Locarno).

Polish-German relations deteriorated further after Stresemann’s death in October 1929, which coincided with the outbreak of a global economic crisis. Ever since 1930, Germany was ruled by conservative governments without parliamentary support, its members increasingly given to aggressive language, especially towards Poland. In August 1930, a speech by minister without portfolio Gottfried Treviranus openly demanding a revision of the border with Poland, became a symbol of the confrontation. In January 1931, speaking before the League of Nations, German Foreign Minister Julius Curtius declared in no uncertain terms that the Reich would one day attempt to singlehandedly revise its eastern border. This was also a time of great electoral success for the Nazi party. After the elections of July 1932, the NSDAP found itself holding more seats in the Reichstag than any other party (having garnered 37% of the vote). Allied France remained passive on Germany. In September 1932, asked by a Polish diplomat what would happen if Germany began arming itself, French ambassador for special assignments René Massigli replied in a spurt of frankness: “Nothing, we are not going to declare war, are we, and doing anything short of that would be futile.” Soon afterwards, on December 11 of that year, in a special declaration, the Western powers granted Germany “[military] equality in the security system.” And although such equality was only intended to take hold in the future, it was an unmistakable show of preparedness to meet the German demands.

Meanwhile, Marshal Piłsudski came to the conclusion that in light of the new challenges, Poland should adopt a more vigorous foreign policy. In 1930, one of his most trusted people, Józef Beck, became deputy minister of foreign affairs. In November 1932, Beck replaced the former head of Polish diplomacy August Zaleski in the post of minister after Piłsudski saw the latter as being too soft for the new times.

The proof of Poland having adopted a more spirited foreign policy was its show of strength in a conflict with the Free City of Gdańsk in June 1932 (the Wicher battleship



incident, in which the destroyer demonstratively set a course for Gdańsk). In a separate incident, Piłsudski expressed his disapproval of France's disloyal policy towards Poland by expelling the French Military Mission from his country. In yet another, the Polish delegation to the Disarmament Conference in Geneva took a stance in opposition to France.

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler, leader of the party that fought the Versailles system with particular vehemence, became head of the Reich government. The two countries seemed to be on a collision course, this time over Gdańsk. When, in mid-February, not unlike a few months earlier, the German authorities made another attempt to curtail Poland's rights in the Free City, Poland demonstratively sent an additional infantry company to the Military Transit Depot in Westerplatte, which disembarked there from the ORP Wilia transport ship. This operation, which formally violated the Westerplatte agreement, was accompanied by a strengthening of the Polish military presence in Pomerania and by anti-German demonstrations of the local population. Rumor had it that Piłsudski was planning a preemptive war (its legend remains alive to this day). The Free City retreated as did the Polish company leaving Westerplatte. Soon afterwards, on May 2, Hitler had a friendly talk with Polish MP Alfred Wysocki, followed by an appropriate, reassuring message. Hitler had no intention of aggravating relations with Poland. On the contrary, he sought to ease tensions following the "Westerplatte affair", which was the phrase he used in reference to the March crisis.

Meanwhile Poland faced another disloyal episode from its French ally, which in the spring of 1933 launched negotiations on Benito Mussolini's draft of the Four-Power Pact aimed at establishing a directorate consisting of France, Great Britain, Germany and Italy that would, among others, revise existing treaties. Although the draft never entered into force, Poland opposed it fiercely from the get-go. In a statement made in a conversation with French Ambassador Jules Laroche, Minister Beck had this to say about the state of Polish-French relations at the time: "If a country, whether acting alone or in the company of others, attempts to take even a single square meter of our land, cannons will speak. Berlin is well aware of it and has acknowledged that fact. My fear is that fact is not sufficiently clear to London, Rome, or even Paris ...".

When, in October 1933, Nazi Germany left the League of Nations (having also abandoned the Geneva Disarmament Conference, realizing no further deliberations made sense), Piłsudski used it to propose that Germany conclude a non-aggression treaty. Although the German foreign ministry, which at the time remained dominated by conservatives, was unwilling to accept the proposal, Hitler's view prevailed. After a few weeks of negotiations, in which all that the German diplomats achieved was to replace the name "non-aggression pact" with "declaration of non-violence", the document was signed by the Reich's Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath and the new Polish envoy to Berlin, Józef Lipski, who also played a key role in negotiating the deal. A few weeks later, two protocols were signed, one on the conclusion of the Polish-German economic war and one obliging the signatories to suspend propaganda attacks against the other side.



The January 26, 1934 treaty was a complement of sorts of the non-aggression pact concluded by Poland a year and a half earlier, in July 1932, with the Soviet Union. In effect, Poland ended up with non-aggression deals with both of its big neighbors. This started a new chapter in Polish foreign policy and especially in Warsaw-Berlin relations. In the following years, Polish diplomats eagerly spoke of “the January 26 line” and sometimes even “the policy of balance”. The latter term, later adopted by most historians, is misleading, suggesting that Poland made efforts to ensure that its relations with Moscow would be just as good as they were with Berlin. The reality was very different as Polish-Soviet relations had been deteriorating from 1934 onward.

It is worth examining at greater length the motives of both signatories of the declaration. The man behind the pivot in Polish-German relations was Piłsudski while Minister Beck and MP Lipski remained faithful executors of the Marshal's ideas. Piłsudski intended the treaty with Germany to be a response to allied France's disloyalty to Poland and France's efforts to seek an agreement with Berlin behind Poland's back at the expense of Polish interests. The declaration of January 26, 1934 silenced Germany's anti-Polish revisionist propaganda and put a stop to contestations of the Polish-German border. In addition, both Piłsudski and Beck were of the opinion that Hitler was relinquishing the traditional Prussian policy against Poland that was also designed to appease Moscow. Both believed that the new Austrian-born chancellor would direct the Reich's expansion to the south-east, and specifically towards Austria and then Czechoslovakia. However, according to Piłsudski, this was only a makeshift solution. In the spring of 1934, Prime Minister Kazimierz Świątalski noted the words of the marshal in his journal: “The Commander (...) sounds a warning for all those who believe that the peaceful relations between Poland and both of its neighbors would last forever. He calculates that good relations between Poland and Germany may last another four years (...). He cannot vouch for them to continue any longer.” According to Gen. Kazimierz Fabrycy, Piłsudski said at another confidential meeting at about the same time that: “With both of these pacts (with Germany and Russia) in hand, we are sitting on two stools. This can't last. We need to know... which stool we will fall from first and when”.

All this notwithstanding, the alliance with France remained the cornerstone of Poland's foreign policy. An unsigned 1935 memo drawn up in the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated unequivocally: “By singlehandedly forging its relations with its two largest neighbors through bilateral agreements, Poland made it practically impossible to be treated as a bargaining chip in France's political game. This puts an end to Poland being used as a pawn in French policy and, as Poland sees it, creates an opportunity to enshrine the right provisions in the Franco-Polish alliance by restoring the disturbed balance of rights and obligations.” However, Polish-French relations deteriorated by the year, with tensions persisting until the spring of 1939, months before the outbreak of World War II.

For Hitler, the sudden shift in the German policy on Poland observed in 1933/34 began as a purely tactical maneuver. The new chancellor needed some peace in the immediate future. His absolute priority was to consolidate the National Socialist regime and then



rebuild the armed forces. No wonder that - in order to gain time - he posed as a promoter of peace. His finding a modus vivendi with Poland, with which Germany had been in a vicious political conflict for several years then, was to serve as the crowning proof that the intentions of the Third Reich were all amicable. A few years later, on November 10, 1938, the dictator confessed in a private meeting with several hundred of the regime's publishers and journalists: "For years now, the circumstances have forced me to speak almost exclusively of peace." He explained that this had been the only way to arm and strengthen the Reich.

Soon after concluding a non-aggression pact with Poland, Hitler convinced himself that his eastern neighbor would find its place in the future Berlin-dominated Europe. According to the author of *Mein Kampf*, Poland could become an ally of the Nazi Reich if it could only live with the role of a junior partner. His vision, as laid out in the aforementioned book (which was to build a German colonial empire on the ruins of the USSR) could not be realized without resolving the problem of Poland, a country separating the Reich from the Soviet Union. Also of significance was the military might of the Polish arm forces whose officers had gained experience in the victorious war with the Red Army in 1920. Hitler admired Piłsudski, seeing him chiefly as an opponent of Bolshevism and an establisher of authoritarian rule in Poland.

Hitler intended for Germany to spend the following years encouraging Poles to permanently side with the Reich and engage in military cooperation against the Soviets with the prospect of one day advancing together eastward. This effort became a particular specialty of Hermann Göring (even if his talk with Piłsudski in early 1935 led nowhere) although other Nazi dignitaries, not least Joachim von Ribbentrop and Hans Frank, also joined the campaign of recruiting Poland as the Third Reich's ally. The first prominent figure to appear in Poland after signing the declaration of non-violence was Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, whom Piłsudski himself received in June 1934.

Poland either evaded or squarely refused to comply with the German wishes. Yet, after the conclusion of the declaration, speculations and rumors suggested that a secret protocol had also been signed that bound Poland to cooperate with Germany against the Soviets. False reports on that matter came not only in the press in various countries but also from some diplomats, including those from such Reich-friendly countries as Italy and Japan. In an interview with a Polish diplomat, the well-known and widely influential French commentator Geneviève Tabouis, known for her sharp criticism of Piłsudski and Beck's policies, expressed the view that a new war in Europe "would begin with a joint Polish-German attack on the Soviets." Similar "revelations" also appeared in international press in the following years. Such theories and blatant falsehoods in contemporary newspapers, are embraced by Putin-supporting propagandists specializing in the Russian brand of manipulated "historical politics".