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THE “POLISH QUESTION”
IN SOVIET-GERMAN
RELATIONS
IN THE SECOND HALF
OF THE 1920s
(BASED ON THE MATERIALS
OF THE USSR CONSULATE
IN KÖNIGSBERG)

Yu. Kostyashov*



Recently uncovered records of the Soviet consulate in Königsberg retrieved from the Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation are used in this article to analyze relations between the USSR and Germany in 1925–1930. The author focuses on the role of the “Polish question”, which largely affected the nature of bilateral relations. The consulate documents indicate that Soviet diplomacy aspired to exploit the differences between Poland and Germany over a wide range of issues (the geopolitical situation of East Prussia, the position of national minorities, the problem of transit through the Polish corridor, the status of the Free city of Danzig, etc.). Soviet consuls carefully observed political life in Königsberg and the province. At the same time, they were paying close attention to an increase in the nationalist and fascist attitudes. On the other hand, they emphasized the aspirations of the local political and business elite to develop economic cooperation with the Soviet Union. The People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs tried to transform East Prussia into a Soviet lobby in the German government. These plans were not implemented at that time, but the 1920s ideas of cooperation between the two states on the anti-Polish basis were put into practice on the eve of World War II.

Key words: international relations, ‘Polish question’, USSR, Germany, consulate, Königsberg, Polish corridor, Free city of Danzig, 1920s

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A considerable number of documents and facts revealing that the nature of Soviet-German relations of the interwar period was largely affected by the “Polish factor” have been published over the recent years. Both states deemed the Polish borders established after World War I by

the Treaties of Versailles and (1919) and Riga (1921) [1—3] unfair; and neither could not reconcile itself with the new *status quo*. Their apparent animosity towards the Second Polish Republic created a natural platform for cooperation and interaction in the world arena.

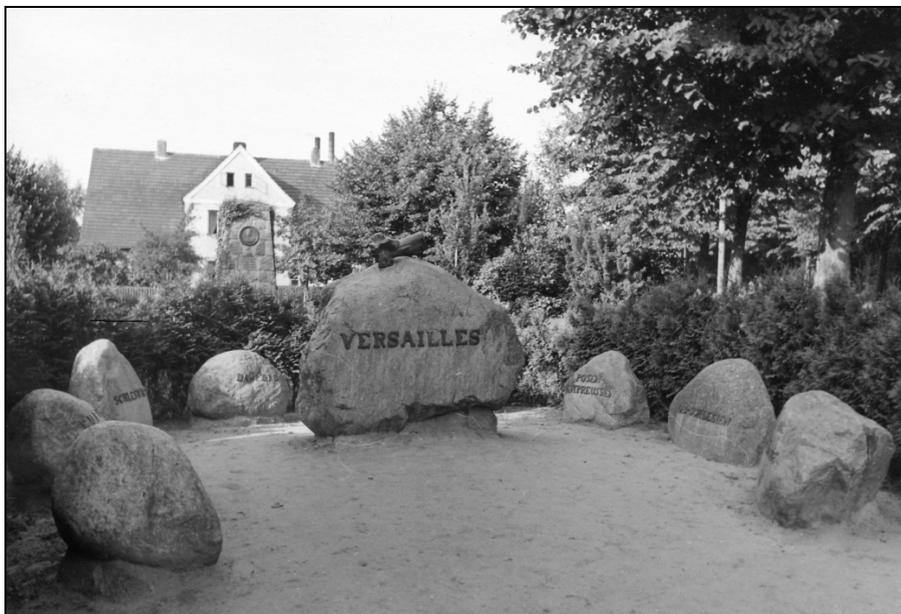


Fig. 1. The commemoration stone in Palminken (now the village of Yantarny) dedicated to the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, 1930s
Courtesy of: The Picture Archive of East Prussia (Bildarchiv Ostpreußen)

Here is an account of a veteran of the great Patriotic War, Nikolai I. Pashkovsky, describing this memorial (the stone did not survive to this day): “In the village of Yantarny, there was a memorial to German soldiers killed in World War I, it was decorated with a portrait of Hindenburg. In front of the memorial, there was a stone with the inscription “Versailles” and a sculptured hand with a raised dagger above it. It was surrounded by several smaller stones bearing the names of German provinces ceded according to the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. I was astonished how elaborated and inventive German propaganda was. That sign did affect national feelings, its meaning was clear — to destroy the Versailles system and restore Great Germany!” [11, c. 166].

The meeting of the politburo of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) held on April 9, 1925 established Poland as one of the few states considered to pose ‘an immediate threat’ to the USSR. At the same time, a decision was reached to exploit the German differences with France and, first of all, Poland [4, c. 18—19].

The earlier unknown documents of the Soviet Consulate in Königsberg discovered by the author of the article make it possible to cast more light on the balance of forces and the nature of relations that were developing in the Baltic region at the time. Those new documents are interesting, first of all,

because they reflect the dominant perspectives on the 'Polish issue' characteristic of the then Soviet leadership and, especially, the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (PCFA). Moreover, they help understand the 'Polish policy' of the Weimer Republic. As a part of the foreign policy department, the Soviet Consulate in East Prussia also had a certain effect on the PCFA's position regarding Poland.

The official opening of the Soviet Consulate in Königsberg took place in February 1924 on the basis of agreements signed in the framework of the Treaty of Rapallo [5]; in March 1928, the mission's status was raised to that of a Consulate General. Throughout the existence of the Weimer Republic, five people held the position of the consul in East Prussia¹. In their reports to different departments of the People's Commissariat and other governmental bodies, as well as in the communication with the embassy in Berlin, consuls addressed various topics directly or indirectly relating to Poland. First of all, they focused on the general characteristic of political attitudes in East Prussia, which was defined as the most 'reactionary' German province. On April 24, 1925, Consul E. D. Kantor wrote to Ambassador N. N. Krestinsky:

East Prussia, this stronghold of German reaction, lives, to a great degree, on the memories of past economic connections with Russia and hopes for restoring them... While awaiting this future, we can be interested in supporting such local attitudes towards the USSR that can make possible certain political influences in the Junker community. I believe that this atmosphere of *expectation* should be cultivated both through personal policies and some political and economic initiatives [6, inventory 5, case 159, p. 127—127 rev.].

The nature of plans cultivated in the depth of the PCFA regarding East Prussia can be easily understood from the thesis of a report prepared by the same consul at the end of 1925. When analysing the political situation in the region, Kantor concretises his thesis emphasising the "abundance of nationalist and fascist organisations in the region", its overt militarisation ("almost each nobleman's household is a military unit, a system of military significant lakes, secret military storages, etc."). The attached great importance to "the exacerbation of national hatred for Poland and, thus, the increasing interest and even sympathy for the USSR apparent everywhere up to the right-wing circles" [6, inventory 5, case 159, p. 237—240].

Three years later, these trends were addressed in the secret memorandum of Consul General G. K. Meerson to the embassy. When describing his journey across the consular district made in November 1928, he emphasised that, everywhere, he "received a very warm welcome with a pronounced political anti-Polish and Sovietophile tone to it". In Elbing, he heard stories of the "difficult situation in industry and trade caused by the lack of economic ties with the USSR". He was assured that the province "feels a great need for Soviet timber, oil, machine oil, bristle, horsehair, etc." "We don't want to deal with the Polish. We want to trade with you', that was the usual refrain in almost all

¹ Yulian S. Boshkovich (1923—1925), Ezekiel D. Kantor (1925—1928), Grigory K. Meerson (1928—1930), Friedrich W. Linde (1930—1932), Solomon D. Smetanich (1932—1934).

speeches of traders.” Moreover, the receiving party emphasised on more than occasion that “the Polish, apparently, relying on the English and using their capitals, strive for the economic conquest of the whole East Prussian province”. The consul was persuaded that Poland had been devising plans for the annexation of East Prussia. G. K. Meerson summed up his impressions from numerous meetings with representatives of political and business elites as follows: “The USSR cannot benefit from a stronger Poland. Here, the interests of Germany and the USSR coincide completely”. This mutual interest, the diplomat believed, had to be encouraged, in particular, through placing Soviet orders for vessel construction with East Prussian enterprises and buying other industrial products from them [6, inventory 8, case 299, p. 62—67].

The views of Soviet diplomats in Königsberg were shared by the employees of the Berlin embassy. The members of the Soviet mission, S. I. Brodovsky and N. Ya. Raivid, who also visited East Prussia in 1928, prepared a comprehensive report for People’s Commissar G. V. Chicherin. They stressed that all province’s parties and groups without an exception — from communists to fascist “exhibit extremely Russophile attitudes”, mentioning that they felt everywhere “as if among friends” and that locals “professed their love” to them. They emphasised that the East Prussian elite was not satisfied with the policies of the German government, which paid little attention to the development of bilateral economic cooperation. At the same time, everywhere one could feel violent, brutal hatred against the Polish”. According to the authors of the report, there was a need to use these attitudes so that “East Prussia exerted pressure on the German government as to their Russian and Polish policy”, to which end, when placing large orders, preference should be given to local enterprises [7, c. 50—52]. The thesis about “reinforcing interest in East Prussia” found broad support at the PCFA’s Department of Central Europe, which announced its practical implementation [6, inventory 8, case 299, p. 50].

Poland was considered in Moscow an economic competitor. It was especially true in the case of such traditional Russian export article as timber; during the war, the whole East Prussian timber industry (31 woodworking factories) worked solely on Russian materials [8, c. 68]. The memorandum prepared by the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Trade in 1925 mentioned that most of the timber supplied to Königsberg storage facilities was bought in Poland, thus, it was necessary to take urgent measures to force the dangerous competitor out of the East Prussian timber market [9, p. 21—23].

When formulating the strategy and tactics for counteracting the policy of the Second Polish Republic, the PCFA put emphasis on using the Polish-German differences regarding Danzig and the Polish Corridor. This issue had a direct bearing on the Consulate in Königsberg, which also assisted residents of the Free City of Danzig (until another consulate was opened there), where thousands of Russian white émigrés found asylum; E. Kantor called it the “centre of international espionage” [6, inventory 5, case 159, p. 332 rev.].

According to the consul, the separation of East Prussia from the bulk of Germany by the Danzig Corridor was a serious blow for the economy of the eastern German province, which resulted in a major conflict in bilateral rela-

tions. E. Kantor wrote to Ambassador N.N. Krestinsky in Berlin on October 18, 1926:

The Polish leaders do understand the impossibility of maintaining the current corridor anomaly over a long time. But how does Polish nationalism solve this problem? Its answer is swift and determined. East Prussia should be alienated from Germany and annexed to Poland [6, inventory 6, case 199, p. 289].

The diplomat lists Poland's methods for reaching the above goal: "rather intensive propaganda"; establishment of various unions of compatriots; publication of brochures and newspapers; offers of cheap loans; support for Polish schools and other cultural institutions; barriers to German transit across the corridor, etc. These doings of the "Polish offensive"², according to E.D. Kantor, raised great concerns in East Prussia; its residents felt the "imminent threat" coming from the southern neighbour [6, inventory 6, case 199, p. 288].

This rhetoric was supported by the instances of insolent behaviour of Polish border guards towards foreigners crossing the Danzig Corridor, including the cases of Soviet citizens being beaten up [6, inventory 5, case 159, p. 123]. Moreover, there was a proposal to agree to the request of the president of the Danzig Senate that the plane of the Deruluft company that cruised from Moscow to Berlin over Königsberg made a landing in Danzig, which "would be a grand gesture on our part" and one "not bereft of political interest" [6, inventory 8, case 299, p. 1—4 rev.].

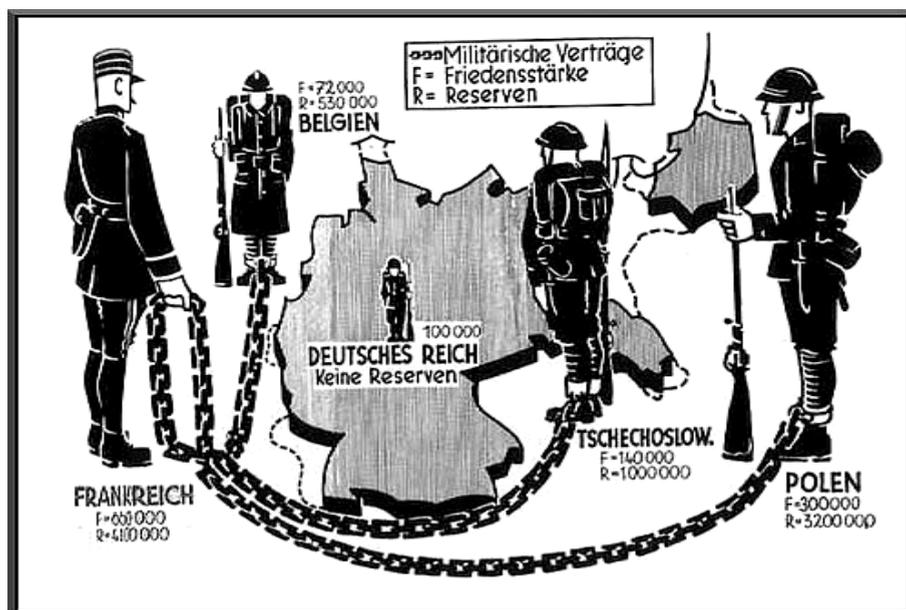


Fig. 2. A German propagandist poster of the 1920s depicting the military restrictions imposed on Germany by the 1919 Treaty of Versailles in comparison to the forces of the neighbouring countries

² The Soviet media of the time used this collective term to denote the intelligence and subversive services of the Second Polish Republic.

To better understand the position of the Soviet diplomats in Königsberg we propose to look at another memorandum of E. D. Kantor prepared at a request of the Berlin embassy on December 31, 1925. The memorandum was a response to the publication of a book by Stanisław Srokowski, the ex-Polish consul in Königsberg, entitled *Z krainy Czarnego Krzyża (From the Land of the Black Cross)* [10]. The author of the memo gives the following commentary to the book:

The main idea of the author is that the retention of the Danzig Corridor by Poland requires the whole East Prussia to become a part of Poland. This thought gives rise to a number of initiatives aimed at the economic weakening of East Prussia so that the latter is forced to understand the need to join Poland. One can only assume that Srokowski's point of view is shared by the official Polish circles [6, inventory 6, case 199, p. 60—62].

In this connection, Kantor quotes R. Dmowski³, who already in 1918 stated that the corridor did not mean anything for Poland unless it had East Prussia. Kantor also references S. Grabski's⁴ words at the Warsaw-based reception for Prussian Warmia compatriots: "Poland cannot rest satisfied until the Polish flag is raised above the tower of the Königsberg Castle" [6, inventory 6, case 199, p. 60—62].

Referring to press materials and quoting his own information sources, Kantor writes that the Polish created a propaganda organisation "The Polish Union in East Prussia" headed by Jan Bazcewski⁵ (with headquarters in Allenstien). According to the consul, 600 activists of this association "are in touch with Poznan and Warsaw". Moreover, the province was home to the Union for the Protection of Polish Interests in Masuria and the Union of Salvation of Masurians; a newspaper under the motto "Masuria for Masurians" was published there, and so on. Polish policy towards the German province was defined by Kantor as "the policy of isolating it from the rest of Germany". It was this policy, in response to which the Prussian Landtag adopted the so-called East Prussian Programme. Kantor also wrote about the visit of a delegation of 35 members of Reichstag to East Prussia. They studied the local opportunities for promoting German culture as "a stronghold against Slavism" (i. e., against Poland). In conclusion, he stresses the need to use these attitudes and this programme for the benefit of the USSR and suggests convening a special meeting bringing together all interested ministries and agencies [6, inventory 6, case 199, p. 61, 229]. Such meeting took place at the PCFA on December 8, 1928, after G. K. Meerson had been appointed the consul in Königsberg. It was dedicated to the development of economic ties with East Prussia "with a political perspective" [7, c. 54—55].

³ Roman Dmowski (1864—1939) was a Polish politician, the leader of the National Democracy political movement, the founder of the Polish National Committee, a representative of Poland at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919—1920.

⁴ Stanisław Grabski (1871—1949) was a Polish statesman, the minister of education and religion in 1923, 1925—1926, and an advocate of the Polonisation of Germans and other national minorities.

⁵ Jan Bazcewski (1890—1958) was a Polish politician in Germany, in 1922—1928, a member of the Prussian Landtag from the Polish national minority.

Soviet diplomats closely observed the development of political life in the province describing in detail the most significant events and putting emphasis on the increasing influence of fascists who were the most vigorous opponents of Poland. In his report to the PCFA of June 9, 1925, E. Kantor paid special attention to the rally of a local branch of the Stahlhelm:

On May 23—24, a rally of the East Prussian organisations of the fascist Stahlhelm⁶ took place in Königsberg. Landlords-employers took an active part in organising the rally: they sponsored their workers so that they could come to Königsberg and buy the uniform. The rally brought together approximately 6,000 people. The city was decorated with national flags and banners that read “Front Heil”⁷; local residents stood in ranks along the streets as the procession passed by. The leader of the Stahlhelm, Franz Seldte, announced that the Stahlhelm counted up to 1,000,000 members across Germany: “Our goal is to have the state ruled by a person who will follow our path... to create a strong country capable of defending itself. We do not acknowledge the separation of East Prussia from the rest of Germany by the Danzig Corridor”. The rally was peaceful and enjoyed full support of the local authorities and police [6, inventory 5, case 159, p. 147].

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| С. С. С. Р. | г. Кенигсберг, „ ^{28/9} 192 ⁹ г. |
| Генеральное Консульство в Кенигсберге | РАССЕКРЕЧЕНО Сов. Секретно. |
| № <u>904</u> | Поступило 30. СЕНТ. 1929 |
| КОПИИ: НКВД ОМЕ Консодт. | Полпредство СССР в Германии <u>1164</u> тов. Бродовскому. |
| | Б е р л и н. |
| Многоуважаемый Стефан Исахимович, По предложению Полпредства /письмо т. Лоренца/ я посетил 25-го с/м. обер-президента Д-ра Зира и сославшись на сообщение нашего военного атташе т. Путно выразил от имени Полпредства обер-президенту и в его лице властям и населению провинции благодарность за образцовый порядок, в котором сохраняются могилы наших соотечественников, солдат и бывших военнопленных. Д-р Зир был очень тронут и заявил, что, они всегда считали своим долгом следить за охраной могил не только своих граждан, павших в бою, но и иностранных воинов. | |
| Г е н к о н с у л |  /Meerson/ |

Fig. 3. The letter of the Consul General in Königsberg, G. K. Meerson, to the embassy in Berlin of September 28, 1929 featuring information on the condition of East Prussian burials of Russian soldiers killed in World War I [6]

⁶ Stahlhelm was a German monarchist organisations of World War I veterans.

⁷ Front Heil was a greeting among the Stahlhelm members.

In a later report entitled “The political Parties of East Prussia”, Kantor estimates the membership of local fascist and semi-fascist organisations at 40—50,000 people. Their influence, he writes, “has deeply penetrated the school and the youth, almost all schoolchildren of the city of Königsberg wear fascist pins on their caps — it is the extent, to which it has become a matter-of-fact here”. The consul stresses that it is the isolation of the province from Germany and the territorial claims of Poland that “significantly deepen and extend the foundation of fascist organisations”. At the same time, he emphasises the “friendly attitude of East Prussian fascist organisations to the USSR”, which is explained by the “expectation of the inevitable confrontation with Poland, in which the USSR must, according to the general sentiment, act as a German ally” [6, inventory 5, case 159, p. 274].

Repeatedly drawing attention to the “violent hatred towards Poland” cultivated by the East Prussian authorities and society, especially, ‘Hitlerites’, which created favourable opportunities for the development of Soviet-German cooperation, E. Kantor once foresightedly mentioned that “at a certain moment, this fascist fist can be directed against us” [6, inventory 5, case 159, p. 335].

In conclusion, it is worth stressing that, when devising policy towards East Prussia, in which the employees of the USSR consulate in Königsberg took a conspicuous part, the Soviet party was guided by almost exclusively political motives. The PCFA believed that the Polish-German differences as to the position of national minorities, the problem of the Free City of Danzig and the Polish Corridor, are a good foundation for formulating a common policy against Poland, which both Germany and the Soviet Union were prone to consider a possible enemy. The Soviet party hoped that the manipulation of the geopolitical problems of East Prussia and the interest of its business circles in intensifying economic ties with the USSR would make the local political elite somewhat of a lobbyist of the Soviet interests in the German government. This plan did not come to fruition in the 1920s; however, the ideas developed over that period were used later during the pre-war international crisis paving the way for the Soviet-German rapprochement in August 1939.

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