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## Reassessing the French *Impérialisme du Pauvre* in 1920s Poland\*\*

### Abstract

The goal of the paper is to reassess imperialist interpretations of French investment in interwar Poland. At the time, France used its political position in Central and Eastern Europe to secure economic concessions, impose asymmetric treaties, and help French companies obtain privileged treatment, despite their limited competitiveness and the weakness of the capital market in Paris. Georges-Henri Soutou called this policy “imperialism of the poor,” with similar imperialist interpretations emerging in the region’s historiography. In this paper, drawing on an analysis of key negotiations, I argue that French investment cannot easily be reduced to imperialist expansion, in which authorities in Paris and the companies they supported exploited the weaker positions of their eastern counterparts. Interactions between Poland and France were a complex game played by asymmetric partners, pursuing different, – not necessarily opposing and not always transparent – goals. In particular, Poland was often an active initiator of talks, rather than merely an object of expansion, and managed to achieve several surprising successes.

**Keywords:** French capital, interwar period, Poland, imperialism, FDI, semi-peripheries

**Słowa kluczowe:** francuski kapitał, okres międzywojenny, Polska, FDI, półperyferie

Interwar Poland’s economic and political relationship with France was a crucial component of Warsaw’s struggle within the global hierarchical system.

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I have also presented parts of this argument at the following conferences: “XXIII International Congress of Historical Sciences” (Poznań 2022), “Anno 1922: Central Europe Between Old and New Order” (Jerusalem and Be’er Sheva 2022), “BASEES Annual Conference” (Glasgow 2023), “PIASA 9th Congress on Polish Studies. Poland in the World” (Warsaw, 2024). I am thankful for all the generous comments and discussion, and glad to finally put it on paper. The article is based on research supported by the National Science Centre, Poland grant no. 2018/31/D/HS3/00405.

On the one hand, France remained the new country's most important political partner – supporting its territorial claims directly after World War I, and later becoming its key ally.<sup>1</sup> On the other, the French had the largest share in the new country's industrial sector and provided much of the loans and credits extended to the country after 1918. The coincidence of these roles was at least partly intentional. France used its geopolitical position in Poland and other states of Central and Eastern Europe to secure economic concessions, impose asymmetric treaties, and help French companies obtain privileged treatment. This occurred despite a weak capital market in Paris and limited competitiveness of French firms. At the same time, the Poles attempted to capitalize on the political relationship to obtain development and military aid from their ally.

French economic policies in interwar Central and Eastern Europe were conceptualized by Georges-Henri Soutou as “imperialism of the poor.”<sup>2</sup> He argued, challenging existing interpretations, that due to the country's weak economic position after the Great War, it was often the government, rather than private investors, that spearheaded the expansion of French businesses, in a form of “external Colbertism.”<sup>3</sup> In doing so, French authorities pursued their security policy, but also hoped to profit from the replacement of German and Austrian businesses in Central and Eastern Europe, and to secure their position using the economic weapon offered by the peace treaties. Nonetheless, the scarcity of capital in the country in the early 1920s undermined many efforts.

The goal of this paper is to reconsider both Soutou's interpretation in relation to Poland and Polish historiographical comparisons of French actions to colonial practices. Beyond exploring the meaning of these interpretations, I raise questions about the role of the state and private initiative in French investments. I seek to examine Poland's position in this relationship, as imperialist interpretations are one-sided, focusing on the agency of the stronger side. In doing so, I do not mean to fight a straw man by merely pointing out cases where Paris's influence was insufficient to overcome Polish resistance. Soutou did not overstate the power of French imperialism and did recognize the importance of private capital in expansion. Moreover, he recognized that the French position was not a guarantee of success, and that the Poles both pursued their own policy and became tougher negotiators after 1924. He also demonstrated a weakening of the Franco-Polish relationship after the Locar-

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<sup>1</sup> For classic works on the topic, see P.S. Wandycz, *France and her Eastern Allies 1919–1925: French-Czechoslovak-Polish relations from the Paris Peace Conference to Locarno*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1962; J. Ciałowicz, *Polsko-francuski sojusz wojskowy: 1921–1939*, PWN, Warszawa 1971; H. Bulhak, *Polska-Francja, z dziejów sojuszu 1922–1939*, cz. 1 (1922–1932), Wydawnictwa Fundacji “Historia pro Futuro”, Warszawa 1993.

<sup>2</sup> G.-H. Soutou, *L'impérialisme du pauvre: la politique économique du gouvernement français en Europe Centrale et Orientale de 1918 à 1929. Essai d'interprétation*, „Relations internationales” 1976, vol. 3, no. 7, 1976, pp. 219–239.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. P.S. Wandycz, *France and her Eastern Allies...*; A. Teichova, *An Economic Background to Munich: International Business and Czechoslovakia 1918–1938*, Cambridge University Press, London 1974.

no Treaties, which undermined the economic influence Paris could wield in Warsaw.<sup>4</sup>

This paper was partially inspired by Philippe Marguerat's reinterpretation of French policy in the Danubian states.<sup>5</sup> Marguerat challenged Soutou's thesis by showing that much of what the French had won in those states was the result of private initiative, and that French companies were not as cash-deprived as previously believed. The mechanisms through which funds were channeled abroad from Paris changed, with a bigger role played by nascent bank-industry cooperation. Moreover, these new investments targeted long-term rather than short-term profits, further undermining the "poor" component of Soutou's thesis, since money-starved companies are more likely to pursue short-term goals.

I have not found convincing arguments to fully extend Marguerat's thesis to Poland fully.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, there were long-term investments originating in the private sector and supported by French banks, as in the Danubian case. A similar big-bank-big-industry conflict also appears in the context of Polish investment. Nonetheless, as I will show in the paper, the French state was indeed a powerful agent. In some areas, it played a key role not only in supporting private endeavors but also in shaping them. Without decisions taken by the authorities, certain investments would not have occurred, and some private companies could not have hoped to obtain financing without government guarantees.

My reinterpretation of Soutou's imperialism, built on previous archival research on the subject, moves in a different direction. I point out the role of Polish initiative in shaping the direction of French investments and the use of various tactics to weaken the French position. Moreover, I highlight the existence of competing agents within states and informal networks that cross the boundaries between government and private spheres. As a result, I argue that while Soutou's thesis is a good approximation of French policy, it is not the best conceptualization of the Franco-Polish relationship. The latter is better understood as two unequal sides attempting to use the alliance to their benefit, with private actors pursuing their schemes, often at odds with government policy.

The rest of this paper is divided into five parts. First, I explore the meaning of the imperialist and colonial interpretations. Then I investigate four case studies, which allow a discussion with Soutou's thesis. They include: the expansion of French capital in the oil sector in Eastern Galicia, attempts to take over industry in Polish Upper Silesia, transportation infrastructure, and the automobile sector.

<sup>4</sup> G.-H. Soutou, *L'Alliance franco-polonaise (1925–1933): ou Comment s'en débarrasser*, „Revue d'Histoire Diplomatique” 1981, vol. 95, no. 2–3–4, pp. 285–348.

<sup>5</sup> P. Marguerat, *Les investissements français dans le Bassin danubien durant l'entre-deux-guerres: pour une nouvelle interprétation*, „Revue historique” 2004, vol. 39, no.1, pp. 121–162.

<sup>6</sup> J. Łazor, *The Political Economy of Interwar Foreign Investment: Economic Nationalism and French Capital in Poland, 1918–1939*, Routledge, London–New York 2024, pp. 7–8.

## Imperialist and Colonial Interpretations of French Investments

Soutou's thesis represents a broader group of either imperialist or colonial interpretations of the Central and Eastern European economy. Proponents of the first narrative argued that Western policy in the region was imperialist in nature, with political and economic influence exerted over the new countries through diplomatic means and conditionality. The result was the region's emergence as one of the three major capital export destinations in the interwar period.<sup>7</sup> The other group viewed the expansion of foreign capital in Poland as similar to what the great powers were doing in their colonies. This entailed a reduction of sovereignty, worker exploitation, and the stripping of resources.<sup>8</sup>

In historiography, the imperialist argument, in some form, dominates the French literature<sup>9</sup> and is also present in international works, even if its assumptions are not explicitly stated.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the colonial interpretation appeared mostly in the works of Polish historians (for ideological reasons, Stalinist-era publications were more likely to refer to imperialism instead, due to the privileged position of Lenin's writings<sup>11</sup>). This is understandable, as both interpretations helped answer questions specific to the historians' points of view. For the Poles, it was a way to understand the position of their country despite formal independence; for the French (and others), a tool to conceptualize Western policy in Central and Eastern Europe.

Both interpretations have a longer history, which predates Polish independence. I have already alluded to Lenin's work on imperialism from 1917, but arguments linking imperial expansion with capital exports supported by governments had been made earlier – most notably by John A. Hobson in 1902.<sup>12</sup> In this vein, imperialism came to mean not merely the expansionist policy of great empires, but the global spread of capital, with private interests shaping political decisions, leading to monopolization and a new form of capitalism.<sup>13</sup> Soutou's interpretation also focused on the relationship between the state and capital expansion, although he argued that influence in French expansion in Central and Eastern Europe often flowed in the opposite direction. This rema-

<sup>7</sup> A. Teichova, *An Economic Background...*, pp. 12–14.

<sup>8</sup> See also M. Pasztor, *Polska w oczach francuskich kół rządowych w latach 1924–1939*, Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, Warszawa 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Beyond the already quoted, see Ch. Laforest, *La stratégie française et la Pologne (1919–1939). Aspects économiques et implications politiques*, doctoral dissertation, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris 2001. M. Mihout-Natar, *L'intervention des capitaux français dans la Pologne de la Seconde République (1918–1939): contribution à l'histoire de l'impérialisme économique français en Europe centrale*, doctoral thesis, Université Charles de Gaulle-Lille III, Lille 2002.

<sup>10</sup> For example, see A. Teichova, *An Economic Background...*

<sup>11</sup> W. Lenin, *Imperializm jako najwyższe stadium kapitalizmu. Szkic popularny*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1980.

<sup>12</sup> J.A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study*, James Pott & Company, New York 1902.

<sup>13</sup> See T. Kowalik, *Róża Luksemburg. Teoria akumulacji i imperializmu*, Instytut Wydawniczy Książka i Prasa, Warszawa 2012, pp. 237–284.

ins the essence of later works on the topic. As noted, the contention between Soutou and Marguerat concerned the role of the state. Similarly, Christophe Laforest argued that even if French expansion was imperialistic, it remained a relatively benign form of imperialism, promoting entrepreneurship – and, similarly to Marguerat’s point, deriving much from private initiative.<sup>14</sup>

The colonial interpretation arguably also predates the Second Polish Republic, with earlier comments on the position of Polish workers and laborers framed in racial and colonial terms.<sup>15</sup> The racial-colonial connection was based on the strong undercurrent of Polish racial perceptions, linked to the adoption of the Western “colonial mind” in the country.<sup>16</sup> As explored in detail elsewhere,<sup>17</sup> similar comparisons were later used in discussions on the Poland’s position within the global hierarchical order. Unlike the imperialist interpretation, these comparisons were not grounded in rigorous theoretical discussions, but instead emerged from public-discourse conceptions of international colonial relations. Within this landscape, Poland was either compared to a colony, or Polish workers were equated with non-whites populations living under colonial rule. The essence of the colonial interpretation can be reduced to a common interwar observation: that Poland occupied a lower place in the interwar hierarchy than France (or other capital exporters), and that this asymmetry resulted in economic exploitation. It was conceptualized in colonial terms, as such global hierarchies were readily available to – and understood by – the interwar reading public.

The fact that this interpretation continues to appear in Polish historiography can be partially explained by historical context.<sup>18</sup> Especially among older generations of Polish historians, the imperialist framework retains a strong Leninist connection, which has limited its attractiveness.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, the colonial connection appears consistently in interwar sources and offers a ready-to-use conceptualization of Poland’s position.

Nonetheless, despite the different perspectives, the two approaches ultimately advance the same claim: that Poland was part of a hierarchical world system, and its position was somewhere between that of great empires and colonies. Moreover, both are based on similar assumptions: that Warsaw was the

<sup>14</sup> Ch. Laforest, *La stratégie française...*, pp. 421–422.

<sup>15</sup> A. Leszczyński, *Ludowa historia Polski: Historia wyzysku i oporu. Mitologia panowania*, W.A.B., Warszawa 2020, p. 378.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. L.A. Ureña Valerio, *Colonial Fantasies, Imperial Realities: Race Science and the Making of Polishness on the Fringes of the German Empire, 1840-1920*, Ohio University Press, Athens 2019; P. Puchalski, *Poland in a Colonial World Order: Adjustments and Aspirations, 1918-1939*, Routledge, London and New York 2022.

<sup>17</sup> J. Łazor, “A Colony of Alien Capital.” *French Investments, Polish Identity, and a Story of Murder in 1930s Warsaw*, “Slavic Review” 2022, vol. 81, no. 1, pp. 122–141.

<sup>18</sup> A. Ambrochowicz-Gajownik, *Polsko-francuskie stosunki gospodarcze w okresie międzywojennym: nowe postulatory badawcze*, „Przegląd Środkowo-Wschodni” 2016, vol. 1, p. 211.

<sup>19</sup> This also has been the author’s experience when engaging with topics related to imperialism.

object of foreign expansion, and that investors in the new country – supported by their states – gained a position at odds with Polish independence.

## Oil in Eastern Galicia

The French stake in Eastern Galician oil, worth approximately 25 million dollars in 1930, represented roughly three-quarters of capital invested in the sector.<sup>20</sup> Most of this investment occurred directly after World War I and resulted from geopolitical changes. The territory had belonged to the Austria-Hungarian Empire, and capital from the Central Powers controlled the majority of the sector, with modest French or British holdings placed under forced administration during the war. Now contested by the newly independent Poland and the West Ukrainian People's Republic, it presented a rare opportunity to the Allies of winning access to one of Europe's few sources of oil. Moreover, as talks in Paris progressed, it seemed plausible that Austrian and German owners might be forced to sell to the Poles. Ultimately, the Treaty of Saint-Germain – unlike that in Versailles – did not contain such provisions, but the potential threat nonetheless influenced shareholders. The French authorities supported Polish control over the province during the peace talks, as well as the expansion of French companies there (mostly completed by the summer of 1920). Over the next decade, as their holdings underwent horizontal integration, the Małopolska group became the largest producer, responsible for approximately 40 percent of Polish oil extraction. The other major French investors united in 1934 into the Galicia/Silva Plana group, with another approximately 20 percent of crude oil production.

Foreign direct investment only one part of French efforts. Between the wartime experience of nearly running out of oil and fears of potential Polish economic nationalism, the Quai d'Orsay sought guarantees for the position of their companies in the sector. They appeared to obtain them in 1922, when Poland signed a one-sided oil agreement, imposed as a condition of the alliance. The agreement guaranteed export freedom for French companies, exemption from any exchange control regulations (which the Poles used extensively throughout the first half of the 1920s), and additional incentives for any new investments.

Given the control of companies, a one-sided agreement, and French support for the province's political fate, French expansion in the oil sector might appear to be a textbook case of Soutou's imperialism. However, when we look more closely at the details, the picture becomes more nuanced.

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<sup>20</sup> J. Łazor, *The Political Economy...*, pp. 54, 99–107. Cf. L. Jilek, *Impasses d'une "politique nationale" d'approvisionnement : capitaux français dans les pétroles de Galicie 1918–1926*, „Relations Internationales” 1985, vol. 12, no. 3 (43), pp. 323–341; P. Franaszek, *Kapitał francuski w procesie centralizacji kapitału w polskim przemyśle naftowym 1920–1939 (koncern naftowy “Dąbrowa” i grupa “Małopolska”)*, „Studia Historyczne” 1986, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 229–243; I. Kawalla, *Działalność Polskiego Eksportu Naftowego w latach 1933–1939*, [in:] *Kresy Wschodnie. Gospodarcze i społeczne znaczenie polskich kresów*, ed. T. Głowiński, Gajt, Wrocław 2015, pp. 257–271.

First, while the Ministry of Finance in Paris did agree to the acquisitions of companies in Eastern Galicia, we see little government initiative in these activities.<sup>21</sup> These were private decisions, made without government guarantees or negotiations with banks. Like Danubian investments studied by Marguerat, the takeovers of oil companies were also long-term investments, as evidenced, for instance, by significant technological improvements introduced by the Małopolska group. Finally, the terms of the oil agreement owed much to lobbying by company owners.

Second, the oil agreement did not address the issue of a major state-owned refinery in Drohobycz. Control over it was crucial, as the refinery had excess capacity and the right to compulsory oil purchases. As a result, its owner could shape the market. In the French case, this would allow them to disrupt competitors and protect their companies – at the very least, from the possibility of the refinery being used against them. The issue was first brought up by the Poles, who were trying to raise capital for the country's reconstruction and development. This included leasing out state property or using it as collateral for loans. In subsequent years, it was the Poles who shaped the potential uses of the refinery, and once they realized the French would not provide the funding, they terminated the negotiations entirely. In this, we see Warsaw not only making all the major decisions unilaterally, but also setting the term of negotiation.

Third, and more generally, the oil agreement was only a shadow of what the French had initially sought – namely, freedom from all Polish regulations. This result was to be expected, as all agreements come from negotiations, and their outcome is rarely one-sided. Nonetheless, the Poles resisted the most far-reaching demands and postponed the coming into force of others. By the time it happened, Warsaw had stabilized its currency and imposed special taxes on oil companies – precisely the kind of regulation the agreement had aimed to prevent.

To summarize these points: although the French gained the upper hand in Eastern Galicia, it would be inaccurate to describe this as a case of purely one-sided imperialist expansion. The Poles kept the initiative in certain matters and delayed decisions in others. Ultimately, they maintained control over the crucial state-owned refinery – a strategic asset they later used to increase state control over the sector during the 1930s.

## Polish Upper Silesia

Paris attempted to use the opportunity presented by the Polish takeover of Upper Silesia (ultimately – the eastern part of the province) to gain a foothold in its impressive industry and directly weaken German influence in the region. The French hoped to use the threat of forced industrial takeovers, as envisaged in the Treaty of Versailles. With some prodding from government officials, talks

<sup>21</sup> J. Łazor, *The Political Economy...*, p. 100.

with German industrial owners started in the summer of 1920.<sup>22</sup> Shortly thereafter, in October of the same year, the Poles offered future shares in Silesian companies as a form of bribe to Western powers. They hoped to win French, Italian, or British support for awarding the province to Poland rather than to Germany. Ultimately, only the French were interested – the only major power already in favor of a Polish Upper Silesia. A complex and lengthy series of parallel negotiations followed, including Franco-Polish intergovernmental talks, Franco-German business discussions, and various attempts to link the two.<sup>23</sup>

Within the scope of the negotiations, four secret agreements were signed between Warsaw and Paris (between March 1921 and November 1922), followed by a series of amendments. Three Franco-Polish mixed companies were formed, and one German-owned company admitted the French and the Poles as minority shareholders before the project collapsed in early 1924. The agreements – and especially their amendments – were notably one-sided, granting privileges to French shareholders without giving the Poles anything meaningful in return. The companies in question were: Skarboferm (Polish State Mines in Upper Silesia Leaseholding Company), a coal giant and at times the largest producer of the mineral in Poland; Tarnoferm (Tarnowskie Góry Leaseholding Company), a lead and silver smelting works; Bank Śląski (Bank of Silesia). Only the creation of a Franco-Polish holding company, which would have controlled shares in German-owned firms, ultimately failed.

The Upper Silesian story seems to follow the imperialistic script quite closely. The French used the threat of withdrawing support and linked the signing of the Silesian agreements to other matters important to the Poles to obtain one-sided privileges. Moreover, as Soutou has argued, it was the French state that spearheaded the talks, organized the investors' groups, and helped secured funding. While these points are difficult to contest – after all, I agree with the most of Soutou's argument – the story once again becomes more compelling when one looks at details.

First comes the issue of initiative. The form of the Silesian agreements owes much to the Polish government's strategic planning. This includes the creation of the Bank of Silesia, which the French were initially uninterested in and only agreed to because of the special privileges it was granted. Moreover, the Poles later ignored those privileges and sidestepped any complaints. Second, the Polish move allowed Warsaw to torpedo the ongoing Franco-German talks, prolonging them long enough for the project to collapse – due in part to German's hyperinflation. Third, even without forced takeovers – which Warsaw was ultimately barred from pursuing for 15 years, beginning in 1921 – the Poles needed capital to restart former German state-owned enterprises (such as the mines that became Skarboferm). And they obtained the funds at low

<sup>22</sup> T.H. Tooley, *National identity and Weimar Germany: Upper Silesia and the eastern border, 1918–1922*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 1997, pp. 203–207.

<sup>23</sup> Details in: Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski, *Misja prof. A. Benisa*, "Teki Archiwalne" 1959, vol. 6, pp. 29–225; J. Łazor, *The Political Economy...*, pp. 118–141.

financial cost, due to the specific terms of the Silesian agreements. Warsaw was thus hardly a passive object of expansion and continued to shape the agenda. A notable exception was the holding agreement and its amendments, but that presents a different problem altogether.

I called the Franco-Polish companies in question “mixed” not because of their shareholder structure – which, by intergovernmental agreement, reserved equal shares for capital from both countries – but due to the nature of the Polish side. Because of the dearth of private capital in Poland and decisions taken early during negotiations, the state became their sole shareholder. This placed the companies with the growing state sector in the new country and exposed them to a complex network of political influence. This is evident during the initial talks, where private interests affected both the French and Polish negotiators.<sup>24</sup> On the French side, Joseph Noulens – head of the Franco-Polish Bank in Paris and former ambassador in Tzarist Russia – attempted to block the creation of the competing Bank of Silesia. The Polish aspect of this story is more complex. The negotiations were conducted in secret from much of the government, with agreements signed without proper parliamentary authorization. Moreover, as later investigations revealed, this was done in part for self-serving reasons by a small group of negotiators with questionable mandates. Confidential information was also shared with private German owners, even as Polish officials responsible for these sectors were left in the dark.

The French entry into Upper Silesia, while certainly an example of imperialist expansion, appears far more complex upon closer examination. The initiative – despite Paris’s preponderant power – was often on the side of Warsaw, which was also able to block what it found unhelpful and obtain much of what it sought. At the same time, it is less a story of intergovernment relations directing private investment than an illustration of the heterogeneity of “national policy,” and the power of informal networks.

## Automobile Production

The Franco-Polish relationship originated from geopolitical considerations. With the revolution in Russia, Paris reluctantly selected Poland as a “replacement ally,” initially still hoping that relationship with Moscow could be restored. The 1921 alliance included provisions for French assistance in organizing the Polish army and developing the new country’s armaments industry.<sup>25</sup> This included 400 million francs in credits to be spent on the military. This dimension of Franco-Polish relations led to considerable resentment. The Poles were required to sign economic treaties – such as the oil agreement – before they

<sup>24</sup> This was the conclusion reached by interwar officials who investigated the matter (Z. Landau, J. Tomaszewski, *Misja...*, pp. 175–209).

<sup>25</sup> Ch. Laforest, *Kulisy zrzeczenia się przez Polskę czwartej raty pożyczki francuskiej w 1925 r.*, “Dzieje Najnowsze” 1999, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 91–99; J. Łaptos J., M.W. Majewski, *Francuska pomoc w wyposażeniu armii polskiej (1919–1939)*, “Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Historica” 2013, vol. 14, no. 139, pp. 102–116.

could begin negotiating for the credits, and they were furious that the French would only authorize purchases vetted by their authorities. Paris, on the other hand, perceived the Poles as unreasonable. Moreover, Polish attempts to use French company know-how and capital to spearhead domestic production largely failed – most famously in the case of Frankopol.<sup>26</sup>

In this section, I focus on car and truck production. It highlights the imperialistic character of French influence, the role of French private initiative and informal networks, and their potentially disastrous consequences. This was an area in which mutual engagement held the potential for beneficial outcomes – both for Poland's military might (and thus its value as an ally) and for its broader economic development, given the high level of technology involved. The contracts generally involved the supply of automobiles, with a gradual shift of production to Poland. As such, they guaranteed steady demand and profits for French companies while providing easy access to a new market.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, cooperation in this field proved disastrous. There were multiple attempts in the early 1920s, beginning with negotiations involving the Franco-Polish Aviation and Automobile Consortium (also responsible, as the Franco-Polish Aviation Consortium, for the Frankopol debacle mentioned above). The next major failure came with three tenders for military trucks. In the first, issued in 1923, the Italian company Spa-Ansaldi was selected as a winner. The French authorities immediately intervened and pressured the Poles to annul the results. A second tender was issued later the same year, this time requiring a Polish company to find a foreign investor. The offer based on the participation of the French firm de Dion-Bouton was selected, but its competitor Berliet – also French – offered significantly lower prices. The Poles now felt that the winner firm had attempted to trick them, and once again annulled the tender. A third round was held soon after. Once again, de Dion-Bouton submitted the strongest offer from a technical standpoint, but Berliet underbid – reportedly below cost – and used family connections to convince the French Military Mission councilor responsible for this sector, to support their offer. As a result, Berliet was awarded the contract, together with Spa-Ansaldi. Ultimately, because of changing prices, the French withdrew from the project altogether. Finally, in 1929, negotiations between the Poles and Renault broke down, despite support from Paris. Similar episodes continued in the 1930s.

The military story thus encapsulates a major tension within the French position in interwar Poland. On the one hand, we again see the significant influence of government and military officials on decisions taken in Warsaw. On the other, however, the Poles sought to leverage their alliance with France to get access to new technologies, while private French companies used their government as a tool to secure contracts – sometimes through questionable

<sup>26</sup> M. Mihout-Natar, *L'intervention...*, pp. 895–898; J. Łazor, *The Political Economy...*, p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> Details in: M.W. Majewski, *Rozwój motoryzacji w Polsce w latach 1919–1930*, “Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Historica” 2010, vol. 9, no. 78, pp. 56–77; Ch. Laforest, *La stratégie française...*, pp. 169–173.

means. Even prior to the informal contacts and nepotism, the consequences of French companies' actions were already damaging. They did little beyond delaying the start of truck production in Poland – an outcome that conflicted with the security objectives of the government in Paris.

## Polish Infrastructure

French engagement in Polish infrastructure again originated in the alliance between the two states and in Poland's broader effort to unify its territories and establish a military and economic foundation for its continued existence.<sup>28</sup> Warsaw faced two major investments needs. First, as the war with Soviet Russia had demonstrated, it could not rely on the Free City of Danzig to maintain access to the outside world. This was important not only for military supplies, but also for trade, as the country needed new overseas buyers for its products after its new borders cut off traditional markets. This problem became crucial after Germany launched a trade war against Poland in 1925. A new port was clearly needed and would ultimately be built in Gdynia, but it required major adjustments to the domestic transportation network. As Poland strove to integrate its lands, it had to fill in key gaps – most notably, a rail connection between its industrial basins and Gdynia. This was the so-called Coal Trunk Line.

Since both projects required money and know-how, Warsaw turned to the concession model.<sup>29</sup> Under this arrangement, investors would finance and construct the new infrastructure, and in return, receive ownership rights for several decades. In 1924, both concessions were awarded to Franco-Polish consortia dominated by French companies. Ultimately, the port concession proved highly successful: Gdynia soon overtook Danzig as Poland's primary commercial port, and to the French secured numerous additional contracts for maritime investments. The second concession, by contrast, failed to obtain financing, and by 1928 the Poles withdrew from the agreement despite pressure from the the Quai d'Orsay. The Coal Trunk Line would not be built until the 1930s, made possible first by a Polish bond issue in Paris and later by direct French government funding.

From the perspective of Soutou's thesis, there are four aspects of these projects that warrant further comments. First, the role of the French government in both pressuring the Poles to award the concessions to the chosen consortia and shaping the structure of the port consortium is fully in line with the ideas

<sup>28</sup> Details in: J. Łazor, *French capital, Gdynia, and the position of Polish coal on international markets in the interwar period*, [in:] *Fueling the World Economy: seaports, coal, and oil markets during the Early Globalization*, ed. D. Castillo Hidalgo, C. Honorato, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2023, pp. 99–121; R. Mielczarek, *Budowa portu handlowego w Gdyni w latach 1924–1939*, Instytut Kaszubski, Gdańsk 2001; G. Kotlarz, H. Dąbrowski, E. Wieczorek, *Magistrala węglowa: najciekawsze linie kolejowe Polski*, Eurosprinter, Rybnik 2017.

<sup>29</sup> D. Barjot, *Public utilities and private initiative: The French concession model in historical perspective*, "Business History" 2011, vol 53, no. 5, pp. 782–800.

encapsulated by Soutou. Paris forced foreign companies out of the group and invited other French construction firms.

Second, the same is true in the financial sphere, where the government in Paris (albeit reluctantly) provided guarantees for the port project and supported the consortium's efforts to find money. Ultimately, it was the absence of similar such support for the trunk line in the 1920s that undermined that project. The difference in policy came from the importance of the port to French security plans in the Baltic – the trunk line only won similar support in the 1930s.

The third point again concerns the question of initiative. All of the infrastructure projects discussed in this section were initiated by Polish authorities, who shaped their design and resisted attempts to link negotiations to unrelated French complaints. Moreover, once one of the concessions proved unworkable, they quick abandoned it and resumed construction independently. In the difficult 1920s, using the Franco-Polish alliance to finance important national investment was sound policy.

The fourth point concerns private companies. The principal French firm interested in the project had already engaged in talks with the Poles and foreign peers before the French government intervened. Once the port contract was signed, and the French no longer depended on governmental support, the firm immediately rehired the Dutch and Danish companies it had previously been forced to excluded from the consortium. From this perspective, there was little practical effect of the French government intervention. And certainly, these investments were made with the long-term in mind – after all, you cannot hope to profit from concessions otherwise.

To summarize, while the story of infrastructural investment falls squarely within Soutou's interpretation, it nonetheless shows the importance of private initiative and Polish government agency.

## Conclusion

The stories presented in this paper are just a selection from a much broader pool of cases. Although some could certainly serve as counterexamples, the four discussed above are representative of the wider pattern. They show that French activities in Poland took place within a complex web of interactions, involving the governments in Paris and Warsaw, private companies, businessmen, and politicians. The Poles, despite their weaker position, often retained the initiative, and shaped the scope of negotiations. This was an unequal relationship, certainly, but not one in which the stronger party made all the decisions or necessarily won all the battles.

There is an inherent link between the choice of sources and the conclusions reached by the researcher. The historian must challenge the bias of document producers – something especially difficult when there are no competing narratives from the other side. The research which contributed to this paper draws little on company records, so its conclusions are likely biased against

them, and in favor of central, especially French, institutions.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, even with limited materials from managers and companies, the examples above point to an overreaching polycentrism in both decision-making and initiative.

These conclusions do not warrant rejecting Soutou's interpretation, especially when treated solely as a tool to understand French policy. Nonetheless, they suggest a new way of looking at the position of the European semi-periphery in the interwar period. Not merely a territory where imperial ambitions and influence collided, it was formed by weaker, yet sovereign countries that understood their position and pursued their policies. There was agency in Warsaw or in Prague in 1920, different from the economic nationalism Central and Eastern Europe would become associated with in the next decade.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> J. Łazor, *Kto ma budować Gdynię? Wpływ władz w Paryżu na kształt konsorcjum francusko-polskiego*, „Dzieje Najnowsze” 2022, vol. 53, no. 3, pp. 22–23.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *The Great Depression in Eastern Europe*, eds. K. Richter, J. Nithammer, A. Mándru, Central European University Press, Budapest–Vienna–New York 2025; J. Kofman, *Economic nationalism and development: Central and Eastern Europe between the two world wars*, Routledge, London – New York 2018.

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