



Frédéric Dessberg*
Guer

France and the Treaty of Riga: The Problem of Guaranteeing the Eastern Border of Poland

Abstract

Seen from Paris, the Treaty of Riga brought a welcome end to the Soviet-Polish war and completed the drawing of Europe's new borders. However, there remained no guarantee of stability in Eastern Europe. From 1918, successive French governments supported a 'strong Poland' to further their strategic aims in Europe. But both French and Polish diplomatic archives reveal the crux of the problem: the Treaty of Riga could sow the seeds of future conflicts with Russia (still considered a European power). Moreover, the events of the early 1920s jeopardized the relationship between Poland and Lithuania. For these reasons France remained unwilling to guarantee the boundaries that issued from the Treaty of Riga and was similarly reluctant to support Warsaw's regional plans.

Keywords: diplomacy, Polish-soviet war, Polish eastern borders, Quai d'Orsay, peace negotiation.

Słowa kluczowe: dyplomacja, wojna polsko-sowiecka, polskie granice wschodnie, Quai d'Orsay, negocjacje pokojowe

Introduction

Many historians now believe that the borders in Central and Eastern Europe are the result of a kind of civil war that shook the region between 1918 and 1923,¹ and that Poland was at the heart of violence and destruction that lasted until after the end of the First World War.² This civil war took place within the context of wider revolutionary upheavals, but the issue of Europe's borders played a significant role in the conflict that lasted from the signing of the peace treaties until the diplomatic recognition of these borders during the 1923 Conference

* Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University, e-mail: freddessberg@yahoo.fr, ORCID: 0000-0002-6424-7972.

¹ See for instance R. Gerwarth, 2016.

² J. Böehler, 2018.

of the Ambassadors. Among the treaties, the March 1921 Treaty of Riga meant the completion of the implementation of the European system initiated at the Paris Peace Conference. It also completed the fixing of borders in Europe (except the borders with Turkey) by solving a question left unresolved by the Treaty of Versailles. The latter only provided the following in article 87: “The borders of Poland which are not specified by the present treaty will be determined later by the principal Allied Powers”. This clause showed that a difference existed between borders drawn by law in Western Europe and borders drawn by the result of military operations in Eastern Europe. It was also a sign of the relative nature of the new European order before the Conference of Ambassadors solidified the Polish claims to territory as *faits accomplis* in March 1923 with the recognition of the Western borders of Soviet Russia.

Yet, a problem remained. From the French point of view, the recognition of the borders did not include a guarantee of Poland’s eastern borders, nor the will to intervene in case of a conflict, since France was not a signatory of the treaty. The French government took this ambiguous position in early 1921 and maintained it as the official one in the following years. This was understandable within the frame of the “special relationship” between France and Poland in the early 1920s. Indeed, the Polish alliance was crucial to Paris as far as the German threat was concerned, and the French leaders felt the obligation to support it. However, the point was to avoid any involvement in a conflict in the European peripheral area or, in other words, in a region where France had interests but that remained secondary in importance. Moreover, the Eastern European area remained unstable in the eyes of French diplomats, due to arguments about borders and revolutionary troubles. This situation can explain the extreme cautiousness of the French towards this “European neighborhood” during the 1920s and even after.³ Paris worried about the safety of the new Polish state, but it was impossible to forget the huge presence of its dangerous neighbor: the Russian power had not completely disappeared. It was expected to return to Europe, one day or another. Studying the French attitude toward this issue is thus an enlightening example of both converging and diverging interests between two allied powers.

The issue of Poland’s eastern borders, from the Conference of Spa to the Polish-Soviet preliminary peace negotiation (July-October 1920)

The Allied trusteeship on the Polish borders

The issue of the Polish eastern border was not only the responsibility of Poland and neighboring countries since the works of the Paris Peace Conference had resulted in a proposition for a definition of the border in April 1919. On December 8 of that same year, the delegates of the Inter-Allied Supreme Council had accepted the proposition. This boundary line became the so-called line of Spa, also called the “Curzon line” at the Conference of Spa, in July 1920. Before the

³ F. Dessberg, 2011, p. 337–351.

establishment of the future border - its recognition by the main Allied and Associate states – this decision only meant a right given to Poland to administrate the territories of the former Russian Empire east of the line. The aim was to give economic advantages to Poland, a rebuilt state that, according to the wishes of the French leaders, needed to be “viable and strong”. Consequently, the line could include non-Polish populations, for instance in the surroundings of Białystok, but the Poles disagreed with some of its aspects: particularly given the fact that the territory between Vilnius (Wilno) and Grodno was in Lithuania.

The Conference of Spa took place at a critical moment for Poland, in early July 1920, when the counter-offensive of the Red Army jeopardized the very existence of the new state. On July 9 and 10 in Spa, the representatives of Great Britain, France and Italy received the Polish Prime Minister, Władysław Grabski, asking for their help. David Lloyd-George demanded in return that Poland abandoned its “imperialist and annexationist policy”. Consequently, an agreement was reached, that the Polish troops would withdraw to the line of 8 December 1919, that Warsaw would renounce the Vilnius region and that the situation of Eastern Galicia would be decided by a further peace conference, under British auspices.⁴ The French President of the Council and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alexandre Millerand, was worried about the security of Poland and his politics generally showed a strong support to Warsaw. However, he did nothing to counter Lloyd George’s decisions.⁵ Then Lord Curzon sent a note to the Soviets, on July 11, extending the December 8 line to Galicia. Meanwhile, Lithuania took advantage of the Soviet-Polish War and occupied the area of Suwałki before signing an armistice with Moscow on July 12, 1920. According to this agreement, the Soviets recognized the Lithuanian sovereignty over Vilnius, a capital of the new state.

A few days later, in Spa, Millerand and Lloyd-George decided to send a diplomatic and military mission to Poland. The French ambassador in Washington, Jean-Jules Jusserand, and the British ambassador in Berlin, Lord Vincent d’Abernon, headed the mission, with General Maxime Weygand, Foch’s Chief of Staff. This military aspect was important to the French who did not think of any armistice, unlike the British Government. The inter-allied mission was supposed to inform and advise the Polish Government.⁶ It was a rather symbolic initiative⁷ but one whose main objective was to control the Polish political and military behavior against Soviet Russia; still, it turned out to be helpful, especially due to Weygand’s military advice. Meanwhile, Lloyd-George suggested a peace conference in London and proposed British mediation to Prime Minister Grabski.

At the time London and Paris were at loggerheads regarding the stance that the threatened Polish state should adopt. The British Prime Minister considered Soviet Russia to be a future commercial partner, and his aim was to make peace as quickly as possible. However, signing peace with Moscow was possible only at Poland’s expense. On the contrary, Millerand was still waiting for the collapse

⁴ J. Borzecki, 2008, p. 78.

⁵ M. Wołos, 2011, p. 327–335.

⁶ J.-R. Potocki, F. Guelton, M. Grąbczewska, 2020, p. 178.

⁷ D. Szymczak, 2015, p. 33–58.

of the Bolshevik regime. The French aim was to involve the British in the defense of Poland (the inter-allied mission was supposed to help), while London wanted to involve the French in a peace conference including Poland and Soviet Russia.⁸

At this moment, the French political and military circles unanimously wanted to support General Pyotr Wrangel, who was leading the «White» troops in Ukraine,⁹ with war supplies. The French government hoped to bring Poland and Wrangel's Russia together while trying to dissuade the Poles from bothering the Russians too much with their territorial claims. By recognizing Wrangel's government on August 10, Paris showed its will to form a common anti-Bolshevik front bringing together White Russians, Poles, Ukrainians, Romanians, and Hungarians.¹⁰ It favored the building of a unified Russian state with which it would be possible to maintain normal relations. This policy was carried out until the fall of 1920.¹¹ The French archives also show that at that time, the French leaders had chosen to support Wrangel's offensive in order to relieve the Polish front and obtain a position of strength to negotiate with the Bolsheviks.¹² However, since the British received the Soviet conditions for peace, they strongly recommended the Poles to accept them, without consulting the French. In his turn, Millerand decided to go ahead with the *de facto* recognition of General Pyotr N. Wrangel's regime.

France between support for Poland and return to alliance with Russia

The loss of the Russian ally was only temporary in the eyes of the French politicians, diplomats, and military. After the mid-August battle on the Vistula, the Quai d'Orsay wanted a Romanian participation in an offensive against the Bolsheviks. At the same time, it was also trying to restrict Józef Piłsudski's territorial ambitions and to not allow the Polish troops to enter non-Polish territories. Millerand, who wanted the White Russians to be reassured about Polish territorial ambitions, warned Warsaw against any further extension to the East. He also advised an agreement with Wrangel.¹³ However, he had not accounted for the Polish reticence in this regard. For a long time, Józef Piłsudski had refused to listen to the French and British demands to join Polish and Russian forces against the Red Army, because he knew that White Russian victory would result in the return of Poland's borders to those of the former Russian Empire.¹⁴ Moreover, the French leaders sometimes disagreed with each other about the organization of the anti-Bolshevik alliance. Foch wanted to join the Russian and Polish forces

⁸ M.J. Carley, 1980, p. 410–425.

⁹ General Weygand transmitted the Russian claim to the Quai d'Orsay and Millerand supported it. *Documents diplomatiques français (D. D. F.)* 1920, t. 2, doc. n° 92, note from General Maxime Weygand to Alexandre Millerand, June 9, 1920, 1997, p. 119–120.

¹⁰ *D. D. F.* 1920, t. 2, *op. cit.*, doc. n° 175, telegram from Alexandre Millerand to Hector de Panafieu (the French diplomatic representative in Warsaw), July 4, 1920, p. 225.

¹¹ G.-H. Soutou, 2005, p. 765.

¹² *DDF*, 1920, t. 2, *op. cit.*, doc. n° 269, from Field-Marshal Ferdinand Foch to A. Millerand, August 4, 1920, p. 379–380.

¹³ *D. D. F.*, 1920, t. 2, *op. cit.*, doc. n° 421, Millerand to Panafieu, September 2, 1920, p. 547–548.

¹⁴ M. Wołos, 2011, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

under French command, as Wrangel had requested. On the contrary, the Quai d'Orsay was reluctant to any direct involvement of the French High Command because Wrangel's situation was "too precarious" and the military operations in Southern Russia were still "too hazardous."¹⁵

Moreover, the French diplomacy feared that the Red Army might defeat Wrangel during the winter and then attack Poland in springtime. This is partly why Maurice Paléologue, Secretary-General of the Quai d'Orsay, encouraged the Poles to delay the conclusion of peace with Soviet Russia. In such a way, the Franco-Polish negotiation for an agreement with Wrangel was destined to fail, as the Quai d'Orsay advised Warsaw to remain cautious vis-à-vis the White Russians, while the Polish Government demanded French support and Wrangel's consent for its annexationist policy.¹⁶ The French proposal for a joint offensive did not succeed, as Romania refused to participate, but separate bilateral talks continued between representatives of Wrangel and the French and Polish Governments.

At the end of September, despite the doomed French efforts to support Wrangel's action against the Soviet Government, Millerand's successor, Georges Leygues, was still banking on a unified Russia based on Wrangel's authority. The objective was to re-engage with Russia, which would settle its old debts. Therefore, the best way was to delay the opening of talks between Warsaw and Moscow. The French policy finally changed when Maurice Paléologue resigned from his post in late September 1920. After the Millerand-Paléologue duo, when Philippe Berthelot again became Secretary-General of the Quai d'Orsay, the French policy became more defensive. Financial help for Wrangel was no longer possible.

However, the primary French concern remained to save Poland. The Poles were essential to the preservation of the Versailles settlement in the East. The most important aspect of French efforts to help Poland was not only military support but also the recognition of Wrangel, while London was pressing for the acceptance of a Soviet peace. The French solution – the creation of a "useful diversion" in southern Russia destined to draw Soviet troops from the Polish front – had failed.

The Polish Government understood France's less offensive policy. For the moment, Poland had to be moderate in the setting of its eastern border. Philippe Berthelot explained this point to Eustachy Sapieha, the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, on February 10, 1921: "Russia will sooner or later reconstitute itself as a great federal or unitary power, and Poland will find itself crushed between Germany and Russia, if it has not obtained, by its moderation, the acceptance of its existence within its legitimate ethnographic borders."¹⁷

¹⁵ *D. D. F.*, 1920, t. 2, *op. cit.*, doc. n° 453, Maurice Paléologue, Secretary-General of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 12, 1920, p. 587–588.

¹⁶ M.J. Carley, 1980, *op. cit.*, p. 421.

¹⁷ *D. D. F.*, 1921, vol. 1, note by Philippe Berthelot, February 10, 1921, p. 158.

Poland at the heart of a Baltic region between Germany and Soviet Russia (October 1920-early 1921)

The key to understanding the French attitude towards Poland's eastern border is the question of Lithuania and the Baltic States. For the Allied powers, the main threat for Poland resided in the prospect of a Russian or German domination of Lithuania. Another important point is that a real Lithuanian independence was hard to imagine, at least for the French, because of German and Russian influence. This state of mind must be taken into account in order to understand the ambiguity of the French position in the dispute between Poland and Lithuania.

Vilnius and the possibility to set Lithuania in the «Polish orbit»

For the Polish authorities, Lithuania was important for the security of Poland. The possibility of a Soviet or German domination of the Baltic country could justify Polish intervention or, at least, Polish influence. The British representative in Warsaw explained it thus: "They (the Poles) have no objection to the independence of an ethnographic Lithuania but they feel that it is vital to their safety that such a State should revolve within the Poles' orbit."¹⁸

However, the situation was different concerning Vilnius, since the city was unquestionably Polish, at least in the Polish eyes. What sort of solution could address the question of the place of Lithuania: should it exist within a Baltic confederacy or in an enlarged Poland? Moreover, since the Polish-Lithuanian conflict took place in the German and Russian spheres of influence, Lithuania and the other Baltic States seemed to occupy the place of a buffer zone in the aftermath of the First World War. The Lithuanians could face difficulties with the Germans and the Russians, and with the Poles as well and, therefore, could end up in a compromising situation in the eyes of Paris.¹⁹

After the Polish victory on the Vistula, the Lithuanians and the Poles had still not reached a compromise. In early September 1920, they were even fighting around Suwałki. Facing such a situation, the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eustachy Sapieha, appealed to the League of Nations to set the border. He made the argument that this was necessary in order for the Poles to recover the territory that was under attack by the Lithuanians with the help of the Red Army. He simply demanded its plain restitution, without any international arbitration.²⁰ The French leaders had no other option but to support their Polish ally. Nevertheless, they remained afraid that Warsaw might become involved in something that could stir up the conflict with Russia. That is what Georges Leygues, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, summarized in a phrase, on the eve of the Riga peace talks: "France will never lose sight of the essential

¹⁸ *Documents on British Foreign Policy (D. B. F. P.), 1919-1939*, First Series, vol. XI, London, HMSO, 1961, Sir H. Rumbold to Earl Curzon, n° 172, January 26, 1920, p. 200.

¹⁹ J. Gueslin, 2004, p. 128. According to the author, the French diplomats were convinced that Lithuania was «a bridge to favor the alliance between Germany and the Soviet Union».

²⁰ A.E. Senn, 1966, p. 36-37.

interests of her Polish ally and of the restoring of the general peace to which it is steadfastly attached.”²¹

This stance was predicated on an assumption of cautiousness by the Polish government, whose soldiers have driven back the Red Army and, according to Paris, Warsaw had to admit the necessity:

“to be moderate and fair in victory, to content itself of its unquestionable ethnographic borders in order not to irremediably offend Russian patriotism and (in accordance with Mr Grabski’s promises in Spa) to respect equally the borders of Lithuania and its capital Vilnius in order to encourage this country towards Poland, and thus to complement the system of union of the Baltic States, instead of repulsing it towards the Bolsheviks or the Germans.”²²When the October 7 Suwałki agreement was reached, a demarcation line was laid down, under the aegis of the Council of the League. A ceasefire was also decided. This “Arrangement” drawn up in French kept Vilnius in Lithuania. An Allied Military Commission had been created in September, with French colonel Chardigny as Chairman. It was sent to Lithuania when, on October 9, the Polish General, Lucjan Żeligowski, crossed the demarcation line with his troops and began to occupy the Vilnius territory. He then declared the birth of “Central Lithuania” (*Litwa Środkowa*), a district that joined Poland. The French and the British were caught unprepared, Paris having even assured Lithuanian diplomats that the Poles had positively guaranteed that they would not carry out any movement towards Vilnius.²³ The Allies demanded a disavowal of the capture of Vilnius from the Polish government, particularly because it undermined the prestige of the League. However, this demand failed to take into account the Polish determination as it overestimated the influence of the Allies on Poland.²⁴

French diplomats severely criticized the Polish-Russian talks in Riga, as well as the capture of Vilnius, as they feared that the negotiation could be an opportunity for the Poles to spread their domination from Vilnius to the whole country.²⁵ Hector de Panafieu, the French representative in Warsaw, criticized the “Polish megalomania”, visible in Pilsudski’s desire to reconstitute Poland within its 1772 borders. The Quai d’Orsay instead advised respect for the borders of Lithuania and Vilnius, in order to incline the country towards Poland and thus complete the system of union of the Baltic States, instead of repulsing it back towards the Bolsheviks. The French government had no intention

²¹ *D. D. F. 1920*, t. 3, doc. n° 23, Georges Leygues to Hector de Panafieu (Warsaw), October 1, 1920, Bruxelles, P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2003, p. 28.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 29–30. What the French diplomats and military personnel generally called «ethnographic Poland» was in fact the regions mainly inhabited by the Polish speaking and Catholic people. The French diplomats and military were extremely mistrustful towards Pilsudski’s federalist ambitions.

²³ A.E. Senn, 1966, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

²⁴ *D. D. F. 1920*, vol. 3, *op. cit.*, doc n° 79, Leygues to Panafieu, October 16, 1920, p. 111–112.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, n° 51, H. de Panafieu to G. Leygues, October 8, 1920.

of guaranteeing the border that would result from any treaty because Germany remained its priority. Moreover, French leaders wanted to avoid being drawn into a conflict provoked by a revanchist Russia. They preferred to calm relations between Poland and its neighbors.

Paris and the Baltic Entente

The Council of the League examined the Polish and Lithuanian arguments, expressing support for the principle of the rights of minorities, but the Poles put forward historical and ethnic arguments with regard to the Polish population of Vilnius. The council recommended a consultation of the population, which did not take place. Paris believed that the ballot could be favorable to the Poles and that the result would encourage the Lithuanians to accept the idea of a federation. Beyond this, the Baltic States could join a federation headed by Poland. In fact, the group of Baltic countries could hardly constitute a bloc of buffer states because of their lack of homogeneity. Lithuanians, unlike Estonians and Latvians, had to find support against Poland in both Berlin and Moscow. The *de jure* recognition of Lithuania remained suspended in the works of the League of Nations, while Estonia and Latvia obtained their diplomatic recognition following France's initiative, at the end of January 1921.²⁶ For the Quai d'Orsay, the Lithuanian boundaries remained temporary, the relations with Poland were unstable, in addition to the Memel issue. The French intention was then to exert pressure over Lithuania in order to make it accept a "narrow union" with Poland.²⁷

In January 1921, the French diplomacy changed tact, fearing an obligation to intervene in the possible resumption of the Polish-Soviet war. Paris had asked for the recognition of Latvia in late December 1920. At this time, General Niessel, who headed the French military mission in Poland, was describing the Polish military weakness. At the Quai d'Orsay, Philippe Berthelot was now convinced that the Soviet regime would last under the shape of a "great federal power". In those circumstances, the Baltic countries should join Poland for their mutual defense against the Soviet and German influences.²⁸ The Inter-Allied Conference recognized Estonia and Latvia at the end of January 1921, but not Lithuania because of the Polish-Lithuanian dispute.

When the Riga peace treaty was signed, returning to a Greater Russia or Greater Poland was impossible, but the borders remained susceptible to be used as a pretext for launching a new conflict, at the very moment when Poland was officially becoming the ally of France through the February 1921 French-Polish military agreement. In this context, Aristide Briand, who headed the French diplomacy at this moment, could not afford to allow Lithuania a victory in the Vilnius issue. He wrote to Léon Bourgeois, chairman of the French delegation in Geneva: "The French Government cannot intervene in Warsaw in order

²⁶ *D. D. F., 1921*, t. 1, Bruxelles, P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2004, doc. n° 41, Aristide Briand (Minister of Foreign Affairs) to M. de Sartiges (Kovno/Kaunas), January 26, 1921, p. 63.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, doc. n° 50, Briand to de Sartiges, January 29, 1921, p. 77.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, note by Berthelot, February 10, 1921, p. 158.

to impose conditions clearly opposed to the Polish national interest, as well as to the interests of France.”²⁹

This was mainly due to the bonds that Kaunas had with Berlin and Moscow. The Quai d’Orsay above all favored a consolidation of Poland thanks to the constitution of a federal structure, which would leave Vilnius to Lithuania, in order to avoid any rapprochement between the latter and Germany or Soviet Russia. Paris was moving toward the solution, if not a recognition of the *fait accompli*, of at least autonomy for Vilnius inside a federation. The latter was the best solution for French diplomacy as the Quai d’Orsay could hardly imagine an independent Lithuania: the country was doomed to fall under the domination either of the Germans or the Bolsheviks.³⁰ This is why Paris apparently supported the Polish federalist cause, all the while condemning it. This position can seem surprising since Paris had been supporting the Polish National Committee headed by Roman Dmowski from the beginning. In fact, the capture of Vilnius by the Polish federalists served the cause of the nationalists who demanded the inclusion of the city in a national state. The Riga negotiations between the Soviet and Polish delegations, at the same time, ratified the solution of a state of a clear Polish national domination and thus challenged the federalist solution.³¹ In any way, Stanisław Grabski, who led the Polish delegation, was there to fulfill the ambitions of the National Democrat government against Piłsudski’s federalist aims.

The most important point, even for Roman Dmowski, was to remove Lithuania from German influence, even by annexing territories where Poles represented a minority. Therefore, the French principle of a group of nation-states in the Baltic area could be implemented. But Paris kept the conviction that Vilnius would remain a long-lasting bone of contention. The Hymans Plan that aimed to give a status of autonomy for Vilnius within Lithuania was rejected in Geneva in early 1922. The Polish Sejm voted for the annexation of Central Lithuania, imposing Dmowski’s nationalist model.³²

The Treaty of Riga in the European order: French certainties and hesitations

The peace settlement of March 18, 1921 was territorially advantageous for the Poles. It ratified the solution of a state dominated by ethnic Poles and challenged Piłsudski’s federalist solution. The border was further east than the Curzon Line, the Soviet ambitions had been stopped dead in their tracks, but the Ukrainian claims were not satisfied, and the Lithuanians remained hostile to Poland. This did not encourage the Allies to recognize the borders, as they considered themselves the guardians of the border issues from the conference of Spa.

²⁹ *D. D. F., 1921*, t. 2, doc. n° 218, Briand to Bourgeois, September 28, 1921, Bruxelles, P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2005, p. 331.

³⁰ J. Gueslin, 2004, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

³¹ T. Snyder, 2003, p. 57–59.

³² Olivier Lowczyk, 2003, p. 247.

Riga and the French-Polish alliance

Meanwhile, France ended its military presence in Russia and its support for White Russians, helping to evacuate Wrangel's troops from the Crimea. In the words of the French Vice-Admiral de Bon, who commanded the Fleet in the Black Sea: "The lack of cohesion between the Allies in their policy and their lack of decisiveness have brought a complete ruin of their hopes in Russia."³³

On February 21, 1921, a military convention was signed in Paris between the French and the Poles, preceding a political convention. From the French point of view, the main advantage of the alliance was to prevent German revanchism much more than to protect Poland against a Soviet aggression. Moreover, it was signed thanks to the will of the political leaders, Alexandre Millerand and Aristide Briand, against the advice of the military. Numerous examples bear witness to the French reluctance to get involved in the protection of Poland against an eastern threat. For instance, General Buat, Head of the French High Command, wrote in his diary, dated February 17, 1921: "We cannot say that when Poland fights against the Soviets, we will *ipso facto* declare war on the Soviets."³⁴

The French General was referring to a visit by General Kazimierz Sosnkowski to Foch's home, during which the Polish Minister of War aimed to discuss the details of the text of the convention that was to be signed. He also wanted to obtain assurances regarding the French military support in case of war. As Buat had to admit, Paris was in a position neither to assure the security of the terrestrial and naval communications between France and Poland, nor to protect the Polish coasts against an attack or an enemy landing.³⁵

Indeed, in the text of the February 1921 military convention, Paris refused the obligation to declare war on Soviet Russia in the case of it being at war with Poland, thus following the counter-project written two weeks before by Field-Marshal Foch.³⁶ In the preamble, both the Polish and French governments agreed to maintain the treaties signed in common but also to respect those that they would be led to recognize respectively. Paris thus kept its right to abstain from the recognition of the Polish-Russian border, which was under negotiation at that very moment, a few weeks before the signing of the Treaty of Riga.³⁷

It is obvious that Paris was guided by its German obsession in the negotiation of the Franco-Polish military alliance. It is fair to add that the French military were also reluctant to promise a strong support in the case of a Soviet attack on Poland. But the political and military alliance had a political and geopolitical meaning. Only a couple of weeks after the Franco-Polish military convention, a defensive alliance was concluded between Poland and Romania, on March 3,

³³ DDF, 1920, t. 2, *op. cit.*, doc. n° 368, letter from Vice Admiral de Bon to M. Landry (Minister of the Navy), December 16, 1920, p. 518–524.

³⁴ Général E. Buat, 2015, p. 991.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ Service Historique de la Défense. Département de l'Armée de Terre (SHD/DAT), 4 N 93, dossier 1, February 10, 1921.

³⁷ A. Ajnenkiel, 2001, p. 209–222.

1921. Almost simultaneously, the Little Entente took shape, rallying Czechoslovakia, Romania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes against the threat of Hungarian territorial revisionism. Thus, it is possible to agree with Henryk Bulhak's opinion, according to whom the Versailles order found its confirmation in Central Eastern Europe, in relation to France, in the Treaty of Riga, the Little Entente, the French-Polish conventions and the Polish-Romanian defense agreement.³⁸ Indeed, Paris was supposed to be the principal guarantor of the political and territorial *status quo* in Europe. The problem was that the different signatories of the alliances had different objectives. It is worth recalling that the aim of the French-Polish alliance was mainly to deter Germany, from the French point of view. Moreover, there was no master plan, even from France: the agreements were not formalized at the same time or for the same purpose. The February 1921 French-Polish alliance and its formal implementation one year later could be a pillar of the Versailles order in this part of the continent, thanks to the political and military cooperation between France and Poland and the signing of supplementary agreements in Eastern Europe. However, as obstacles arose between the two mistrustful partners – the question of the Polish borders remained a problem (Polish sovereignty in Eastern Galicia, Teschen) – the articles of the Treaty of Riga were always a matter of disagreement and a cause of instability.

After Riga, a lack of French involvement?

After the signing of the Treaty of Riga, it was important to keep Poland safe while opening relations with Russia, as Western countries could not completely ignore this power. It is true that only one month after the treaty, in April 1921, David Lloyd-George took action to obtain a trade agreement with Soviet Russia. France had the same goal: Aristide Briand wished to obtain open trade relations but without political recognition of the Soviet regime.³⁹

In any case, the post-1921 French-Polish military relations show that the issue of the guarantee of the eastern Polish border was still insecure, partly because the Treaty of Riga was sometimes considered to be provisory. For instance, Édouard Daladier, a radical-socialist opposition MP, wrote that the treaty of Riga seemed to him to be more advantageous to Poland and showed little respect for “the will of the population that had been annexed to Poland in spite of its wishes.”⁴⁰ In fact, this reservation reflected, above all, disapproval of the Polish eastern policy. It is worth noting that the radical-socialist newspapers commented positively on the Treaty of Riga. Besides, the French Government did not yet officially recognize Poland's eastern borders.⁴¹ Moreover, rumors were circulating in Paris about Piłsudski's hawkish intentions. General Joseph Niessel, the Chief of the French military mission in Warsaw, explained that the Polish

³⁸ H. Bulhak, 2001, p. 223–234.

³⁹ M.J. Carley, 2016, p. 66.

⁴⁰ Paper by Édouard Daladier in *Bonsoir*, April 20, 1921.

⁴¹ M. Wołos, 1998, p. 261–273.

leader was ready for an attack against Kaunas. Maurycy Zamoyski, the Polish representative in Paris, would have confirmed the worrisome news.⁴²

Germany remained the priority of the French diplomacy, which is why it was absolutely necessary for the French leaders not to get involved in a conflict provoked by revanchist Russia. Moreover, when the Conference of the Ambassadors recognized the eastern borders of Poland in March 1923, the Quai d'Orsay believed that the threat from the East had been reduced. This opinion was not shared in Warsaw. This is demonstrated by the fact that in autumn 1923, the Chief of the Polish Staff, General Stanisław Haller, advocated for a coalition between France, Poland, and Romania. But the French diplomacy was moving towards collective means of security. This did not prevent the Polish leaders to look for a deepening of the French-Polish military relationship. France was then on the way toward a *de jure* recognition of the Soviet Union.

We can find a good example of the intensity of the French-Polish debate during the trip by General Władysław Sikorski, the Polish Minister of Military Affairs, to Paris, undertaken to discuss the adaptation of the French-Polish military cooperation to the Geneva Protocol. The meetings took place in mid-October of 1924, exactly as the French government led by Edouard Herriot was about to recognize the Soviet government. The French tendency was to limit what could seem to be overly precise commitments regarding the security of the Polish eastern border.⁴³ In the very near prospect of a diplomatic recognition of the Soviet Union, Sikorski wanted to ensure the safety of that frontier. He tried to weaken the French opinion according to which the treaty of Riga was unfair and could lead to further conflicts between Poland and the USSR.⁴⁴

It was obvious to the French that the Polish delegation was waiting for a French guarantee of the 1921 Russo-Polish treaty, even if Warsaw did not dare to express it.⁴⁵ The Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Aleksander Skrzyński, expressed doubts about the French willingness to recognize the Polish eastern border. Sikorski did not ask the French to guarantee it outright but insisted on mentioning the Treaty of Riga in the final text of the conference. Herriot refused but the final text did mention the acceptance by Paris of the decisions taken by the Conference of the Ambassadors.⁴⁶

As for the Baltic countries, the failure of the Hymans Plan that proposed a status of autonomy within Lithuania signaled the end of the conciliation attempt between Warsaw and Kaunas. As a result, Paris delegated the problem of Vilnius to the collective decision of the Conference of the Ambassadors, which settled in favor of the *fait accompli* in March 1923. In fact, France was used to reacting to the policies of the main powers in the Baltic area, rather than taking the initiative. Therefore, French policy was often passive, because of the German issue.

⁴² E. Buat, 2015, *op. cit.*, July 9, 1921, p. 1053.

⁴³ SHD/DAT, 7 N 3446, EMA/3, note on French-Polish military relations, October 13, 1927.

⁴⁴ SHD/DAT, 4 N 93, note by Sikorski, October 18, 1924.

⁴⁵ Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères français (AMAEF), vol. 356, Panafieu to Herriot, October 24, 1924.

⁴⁶ SHD.DAT, 4 N 93, Protocol, November 6, 1924.

In early 1922, Warsaw tried to establish a union of Baltic countries (Latvia, Estonia, with Finland) around Poland; this grouping was supposed to be extended to Romania. The project was at the heart of the French strategic interests and supporting the Polish influence on its neighborhood was vital for France. Raymond Poincaré, then President of the Council, cautiously supported the building of a Baltic Union. The French idea was to create a bloc against Soviet Russia, but it failed, partly because Paris did not approve of the inclusion of Finland, which hoped for a neutralization of the Baltic Sea. Above all, the Baltic States deviated from this strategy by signing peace treaties with Moscow. At the same time, the Quai d'Orsay did not want to provide too much support for Polish regional domination. It was a difficult balance to maintain.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the time came for France to gather its eastern partners, as Ferdinand Foch tried to do in 1923, just after the recognition of the Polish eastern border by the Conference of the Ambassadors in March 1923. During the following months and years, successive French governments supported military talks between Poland and its Baltic neighbors, as well as an Entente headed by Warsaw.

Conclusion

One may argue that the Treaty of Riga was a confirmation of the Versailles order, but only if France is not considered to have been a guarantor in Eastern Europe. Indeed, all of Poland's borders remained disputed. In the East, after the 1923 decisions of the Conference of the Ambassadors, the great powers recognized the borders without guaranteeing them. Paris, like many other capitals, saw Riga only as a provisional act. Further confirmation was needed, which came, although in an illusory way, during the Locarno era, in the form of the non-aggression pacts between the USSR and its western neighbors, and then with the Eastern Pact project of 1934.

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⁴⁷ D. D. F., 1922, t. 1, doc. n° 60, Poincaré to Ribot (Helsingfors), January 18, 1922, Bruxelles, P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2007, p. 117–119.

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