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British Diplomacy, Soviet-Polish War, and the Treaty of Riga: Searching for Stabilization in Eastern Europe¹

Abstract

British diplomacy played an important role not only during the Soviet-Polish War of 1919–20 but also in the settlement of this armed conflict, which ended with the signing of the Riga peace treaty on 18 March 1921. How effective was London? What political methods did the British government use to achieve the main strategic objective of stabilizing the Versailles order in Eastern Europe? And what were the short- and long-term consequences for Soviet Russia and Poland? The answers to these questions will be given in this article, based upon diplomatic correspondence as well as on diaries and memoirs penned by direct participants and contemporary observers.

Keywords: Versailles world order, Soviet-Polish War, Riga peace treaty, British diplomacy, British policy in Eastern Europe

Słowa kluczowe: światowy ład wersalski, wojna polsko-sowiecka, traktat ryski, dyplomacja brytyjska, brytyjska polityka w Europie Wschodniej

Introduction

Despite the fact of that the Treaty of Riga, which Soviet Russia and Poland concluded in March 1921, had a decisive impact upon the situation in Eastern Europe and may be considered the Interbellum's most important East European pact, the modern scholarship of the British policy during the conflict remains far from complete.² Much more attention is traditionally given to the

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¹ The present essay is supported by the Russian Academy of Sciences State Academic University for the Humanities (Grant FZNF-2020-0001).

² For the review of scholarship on the subject, refer to J. Flynn, 1983, p. 5–15; J. Smele, 2003, p. 482–495; J. Borzęcki, 2008, p. 1–22. It is also useful to take into consideration the published biography of Horace Rumbold, the British ambassador to Poland during the culmination of the

diplomatic maneuvers by Moscow and Warsaw in the summer-autumn of 1920, when London made strenuous efforts to arrest the Red Army penetration into Central Europe, on the one hand, while constraining Joseph Pilsudski's alleged territorial aspirations for Greater Poland to be invigorated after the decades of partition between Russia, Germany and Austria.

To reach a more comprehensive understanding of the situation in Eastern Europe from the British point of view, one should focus on the Soviet-Polish negotiations during their military conflict and in its aftermath, for the Treaty of Riga played a crucial role in the region's pacification. This process, in turn, led to the stabilization of the whole system of the post-war international relations. As the contributors and editors of the recent collective monograph defined this agreement, it "enhanced and detailed the Versailles order."³

Hence, this essay aims to highlight how the British diplomacy contributed to the peace negotiations between the Bolshevik and Polish delegations, which were headed by Adolph Ioffe and Jan Dąbski, respectively. Another goal of the author is to study the short- and long-term consequences of the Riga treaty for Eastern Europe, which sustained both the Bolshevik encroachments and the renaissance of new national states as the successors of three previous empires – Russian, Austrian-Hungarian and (partly) German.

Principal challenges for Britain in Eastern Europe

It is common knowledge that since the last months of 1919 David Lloyd George, the Prime Minister of the coalition Cabinet, had been eager to withdraw the Allied interventionist troops from Russia as well as to end support for the anti-Bolshevik forces, in order to come to terms with the Soviets. He was convinced that the Bolsheviks would eventually abandon their revolutionary desires in return for persistent political and economic relations with the so-called capitalist West. That is why after the armed conflict between Warsaw and Moscow entered the phase of full-scale hostilities in mid-1920, the British leader repeatedly claimed that Poland's "imperialist and annexationist policy" was one of the most formidable obstacles to the appeasement of both the key geopolitical actors in Europe – Russia and Germany.⁴ It should also be taken into consideration that Lloyd George's apparent unwillingness to support Poland was conditioned by the fragility of the coalition government and other domestic restraints on a renewed intervention against Soviet Russia. Moreover, the Prime Minister was willing to restore trade relations with Moscow in order both to dissolve the unemployed workers in the United Kingdom and to pacify numerous Bolshevik sympathizers among the lower social strata of British society.⁵ Hence, as some Polish historians

Soviet-Polish warfare (see M. Gilbert, 1973), as well as the monograph on the foreign secretary George Curzon's contribution to the settlement in Eastern Europe (see G. Bennett, 1995, p. 41–59; E. Sergeev, 2015, p. 216–218).

³ S. Dąbrowski, 1960, p. 3–4; S. Dembski [Dębski], A. Małgin, 2014, p. 5.

⁴ Notes of a meeting at villa Neubois, Spa, July 9, 1920, TNA, CAB 29/88.

⁵ See N. Davies, 1971, 132–154.

maintain, Lloyd George was hostile to Pilsudski's regime and sought to hold back the ambitions of new Polish leaders, no matter how democratic they tried to represent themselves, at every suitable opportunity.⁶

As the declassified political correspondence and the diaries of eyewitnesses show, British military strategists and diplomatic pundits were meticulously monitoring all the developments in the Polish-Soviet theater of war.⁷ Walter Long, the first lord of the Admiralty, argued in the memorandum for the Cabinet that the Bolshevik submarines in the Baltic were about to carry out naval demonstrations to intimidate Poland, Finland and other "small states," contiguous with Soviet Russia.⁸ The Foreign Office analysts maintained, in turn, that notwithstanding obvious military and political preponderance of the Bolshevik regime in Russia, "its economic feebleness seemed doubtless." They argued furthermore that the mass revolts by disgruntled Russian peasants who joined numerous detachments known as the "Greens," sympathizing with neither the Reds nor the Whites, could erode the Soviet rule elsewhere in the country.⁹

For the lack of any cohesive and persistent foreign strategy, the Cabinet was split in the perception of the Soviet-Polish hostilities. While Lloyd George and Andrew Bonar Law, the then lord Privy Seal and Tory leader, pinned their hopes on the foreseeable diplomatic consultations with the Soviet side, Arthur Balfour, lord president, and Austen Chamberlain, the minister without portfolio, advocated for a cautious attitude. On the other side, Winston Churchill, the secretary for war, together with George Curzon, the foreign secretary, and Edwin Montagu, the head of the India Office, tended to militarily support Pilsudski.¹⁰

Owing to counter-offensive operations conducted by the Red Army in mid-1920, the fundamental shift in the Soviet-Polish war triggered feverish diplomatic activities by the British government. As one historian notes, "trade was seen by Lloyd George and the Labour party, as well as by significant members of the Conservative party" as aiming to "stabilize Russia, encouraging what we might call 'convergence' and 'interdependence.'"¹¹ The gathering that Lloyd George and Curzon convened with the French Prime Minister, Alexander Millerand, accompanied by the Entente C.-in-C. Marshal Ferdinand Foch in Spa (Belgium) on July 8–10, 1920 drew the attention of many European politicians, military experts and general public. Władysław Grabski, the Polish Prime Minister, escorted by the chief of the General Staff, Stanisław Haller, were also invited to attend the meeting.¹² Being short of funds and ill-equipped to launch a new large-scale military campaign to rescue their Polish associates, both British and

⁶ T. Komarnicki, 1957; P. Wandycz, 1969.

⁷ See, for example, the diary by the former tsarist diplomat who had been residing in Warsaw as a correspondent for the *New York World* since September 1919, V.K. Korostovets, 1928.

⁸ Memorandum by Walter Long, for the Cabinet, May 1, 1920, TNA, CAB 24/105/9.

⁹ Memorandum by the Foreign Office political intelligence department, 12 May 1920, *Ibid.*, CAB 24/106/27.

¹⁰ Preliminary conversations in London between British ministers and the Soviet Russian trade delegation, May 31 – June 7, 1920, [in:] DBFP, 1958, First ser., vol. VIII, p. 280.

¹¹ A. Williams, 1992, p. 88.

¹² E. D'Abernon, 1930, p. 69; C. Lowe, M. Dockrill, 1972, p. 330; N. Davies, 2005, p. 69.

French cabinets instead warned the Bolshevik government against crossing the “Curzon line” to further bolshevize the provinces where the autochthonous Polish population prevailed. The Spa declaration invited the delegates from Soviet Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Finland to assemble in London as soon as possible for a peace conference under the League of Nations’ patronage.¹³

The diaries compiled by Colonel Maurice Hankey, the permanent secretary of the Cabinet and the Committee of Imperial Defence in the 1920s, corroborate the view of those historians who wrote about the pressure which the Anglo-French military mission to Warsaw had exerted upon the Polish politicians and chief officers.¹⁴ Contrary to the opinion that Norman Davis, the renowned British historian, expressed in his monograph on the Soviet-Polish crisis, Hankey wrote about the British representatives pursuing close collaboration with their French colleagues, particularly with Division General Maxime Weygand, Foch’s deputy, in repelling the Bolsheviks’ offensive. This also referred to encouraging the Poles to inflict a decisive blow in the gap between the armies commanded by the Red generals – Mikhail Tukhachevsky and Aleksandr Yegorov.¹⁵ As one Hankey’s biographer correctly remarked, “the presence of military advisers together with the fact that on 23 July [1920] Hankey passed a message to the War Office to prepare ‘a list of 200 suitable officers for service with the Poles,’ shows that active assistance was certainly envisaged as a possibility.”¹⁶

After the “miracle on the Vistula river” and the Polish troops’ successful counter-offensive in Byelorussia and Lithuania, the Entente diplomacy, not excluding the Foreign Office, hoped initially that the Polish government would coordinate their military plans with General Pyotr Wrangel, whose army was occupying the Crimean peninsula. However, these expectations proved fully abortive, given the fact that Pilsudski deeply mistrusted the White Russian governors who preferred to recognize Poland only within the boundaries of the former Kingdom of Poland. It was easier and more appropriate for Warsaw to deal with a weakened Bolshevik government than with the rulers of reanimated imperial Russia who would leave no chances for Poland’s self-determination.¹⁷

It is necessary therefore to stipulate the key tenets which the London Cabinet put in the foot of the British policy towards Poland and Russia after the Paris Peace Conference. These principles were, first, the search for a neutral status of the restored Polish state suffocated by the Weimar republic and the Soviet state; second, the resistance to Poland’s encroachments, supported by France, upon the Vilnius district and the province of Galicia; third, the restoration of balance of powers between Paris and Berlin in Eastern Europe; and last, albeit not least, the struggle against the Bolshevik advance in westward direction. “He [Lloyd George] urged moderation on both sides,” wrote one Cambridge historian, “and in particular sought constantly to restrain the Poles. But also,

¹³ Curzon to Chicherin, July 10, 1920, TNA, FO 371/4058/207846.

¹⁴ See, for example, F.S. Northedge, 1966, p. 88–89; N. Davies, 1972, p. 553–561.

¹⁵ N. Davies, 2005, p. 297–298.

¹⁶ S. Roskill, 1979, vol. 2, p. 181.

¹⁷ F. Bryant, 1990, p. 526–547; Z. Steiner, 2005, p. 146.

he was ever haunted by his dislike and fear of Bolshevism and his dread lest it spread westward from Russia, though he also led his government and his country away from the intervention in her [Russia's] civil war as that policy ceased to be capable of producing results.¹⁸

Whitehall afforded special attention to the Russo-Polish frontier that was defined by the Inter-Allied commission at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 as the "Curzon line" according to the ethno-territorial principle. The problem with the frontier's delimitation was not only the interlacing areas of residence by the Poles, Byelorussians and Ukrainians, but also the absence of natural barriers capable to separate the inhabitants of one nation from the others. Besides that, the vacuum of geopolitical control over the territories under consideration during the period of military hostilities constituted a problem threatening to seriously hamper the British government's effort to secure the international order in Europe as a whole.

The French and Germans added to British annoyance during the Soviet-Polish peace negotiations first in Minsk and then in Riga. As Curzon repeatedly communicated to the diplomats in Warsaw, not excluding Horace Rumbold, the ambassador to Poland, the French representatives attempted to patronize the Poles at the expense of British national interests, while Berlin was about to intimidate the Entente powers by reaching an eventual Soviet-German accord.¹⁹ What seemed even more ominous was the feeling, shared by many policymakers in London, that France was infecting Poland with her own anti-Germanism, threatening in this way to derail British intention to consolidate the Versailles system.²⁰

The Cabinet's official position after the Soviet-Polish armistice in October may be illustrated by Percy Lorraine, the charge d'affaires in Warsaw, who interviewed Prince Eustachy Sapieha, the Polish foreign minister, on October 17, 1920: "I [Lorraine] reiterated arguments in favour of a compact and racially homogeneous Poland and said that so long as uncertainty prevailed as regards Poland's territorial ambitions, I did not see how she was ever going to attract the foreign capital indispensable for her economic reconstruction and consolidation." In response, the Polish statesman informed the British diplomat about the government's intention to colonize the "eastern lands" by means of settling there 200,000 Polish war veterans.²¹

In the winter of 1920–1921, there were three territorial problems interconnected with the Polish-Soviet negotiations: the Polish-Lithuanian conflict around Vilnius, the Danzig problem, and the difficulty of Eastern Galicia being contested by neighboring states.

With regard to the first point, the British government was especially irritated with Germany and Soviet Russia consistently stimulating Lithuanian revisionism

¹⁸ H.J. Elcock, 1969, p. 153.

¹⁹ See, for example, Curzon to Max Muller, February 16, 1921, [in:] DBFP, 1961, First ser., vol. XI, p. 719–722.

²⁰ F.S. Northedge, 1966, p. 88.

²¹ Lorraine to Curzon, October 17, 1920, [in:] DBFP, 1961, First ser., vol. XI, p. 619.

which threatened regional stability.²² However, the seizure of the Vilnius district by the “mutinied” troops under General Lucjan Żeligowski in mid-October 1920 led to Whitehall vigorously protesting both through diplomatic channels and at the League of Nations’ tenth session. In British view, this military operation obviously deferred the achievement of fragile balance of power in Eastern Europe.²³

Concerning the second issue, it was important for London not only to safeguard a free cargo transit through the Danzig corridor but also to prevent a new surge of strikes by those local dockers who sympathized with Soviet Russia.²⁴ It suffices to mention the opposition by Reginald Tower, the Allied high commissioner in Danzig, to the landing of French military supplies for Poland on the grounds that it would violate the relevant clauses of the treaty of Versailles.²⁵ Besides that, the establishment of the Danzig Constituent Assembly on May 16, 1920 as a result of the general elections did not prevent hostilities between nationalists and social-democrats, which led to the prorogation of its session by the acting high commissioner, Colonel Edward Strutt, toward the end of October. However, the city’s statute was proclaimed the following month, following by the creation of the Free City of Danzig on December 7 the same year.²⁶

Referring to the territorial affiliation of Eastern Galicia, London had to reconcile with *fait accompli* after the Polish troops re-conquered the province in September 1920. Despite all British warnings about Warsaw’s excessive territorial claims to Ukraine, which both in Lloyd George and Curzon’s views would bring about an eventual Russo-German military cooperation, the Polish delegation in Riga rejected any compromise settlement, including the status of autonomy for Eastern Galicia.²⁷

Unsurprisingly, Hankey penned in his diary on September 18, 1920: “I should mention that I found England in general and Lloyd George in particular very unpopular there [in Poland] ... They [the Poles] considered that Lloyd George had thwarted Polish aspirations in Danzig, Upper Silesia, and Eastern Galicia; but a few, including a wise under-secretary for foreign affairs, realized that Lloyd George was really their friend by refusing to them at the peace conferences large blocks of alien populations whom they would never have assimilated, and by warning them against the Kiev offensive.”²⁸

The Treaty of Riga in the light of British foreign policy

When analyzing the “permanent bases,” as Austen Chamberlain, the chancellor of the Exchequer in 1919–21, called the general principles of British geopolitics,

²² See C. Laurinavichius, 2010, p. 37–54.

²³ On the British government’s sharp discontent with Żeligowski’s adventure, see Curzon to Lord Derby, October 11, 1920, [in:] DBFP, 1961, First ser., vol. XI, p. 592.

²⁴ For more information, refer to J. Mason, 1946.

²⁵ Lord Derby to Curzon, August 19, 1920, BL, Curzon Papers, MSS Eur F 112/198A.

²⁶ Anonymous, 1921, p. 78–80.

²⁷ M.M. Narinskii, 2014, p. 48; J. Smele, 2015, p. 164–166.

²⁸ Diary, September 18, 1920, [in:] S. Roskill, 1972, vol. 2, p. 186.

it is important to consider the geographical position of the United Kingdom as a group of islands separated from continental Europe by a narrow sea channel. Yet Britain's status as a great power was inextricably linked to the developments in this part of the world because it was impossible to safeguard British security without maintaining friendly relations with the neighboring coastal states, such as France, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway. Any hypothetical situation of their hostility toward Britain threatened to undermine the kingdom's role as an arbiter and principal guardian of the post-world war international system.²⁹

At the same time Great Britain was a maritime empire with global economic interests. Under these circumstances, there was the ambiguity of British foreign policy aimed at preserving *post-bellum* status quo in Europe, on the one hand, while safeguarding ocean communications which provided for overseas commercial operations, on the other. It was Bolshevism as a subversive ideology and the export of revolution by the Soviets as a general practice that ran contrary to the basic principles and even liberal democratic morality of Britain's foreign policy, judging from Chamberlain's opinion. "Great Britain makes no pretention to dictate the form of government which other nations shall adopt," wrote this renowned British politician in a journal article, "but she expects that nations with which she is in formal relations shall abstain from interference in her domestic affairs, shall respect her institutions, and not excite to enmity against her either at home or abroad."³⁰

However, the severe industrial and commercial crisis as well as the financial indebtedness to the United States compelled British statesmen to repeat on every plausible occasion that any expectation of Britain expanding political guarantees to Central and, moreover, to Eastern Europe did not stand up to criticism. Additional economic problems stemmed from the existing post-traumatic syndrome due to huge war casualties. That is why no responsible British political front-runner wished a repetition of a large-scale military conflict in Europe, including armed confrontation with the anti-liberal Bolshevik regime, even though, as one diplomat wrote to Curzon, "British naval power was the only thing, they [the Bolsheviks] feared."³¹

According to diplomatic correspondence and public orations by British statesmen, Whitehall expected that nations with which it was in formal relations should come to a compromise decision on international problems, albeit taking necessary consideration of the League of Nations' Covenant. Not surprisingly, London accentuated diplomatic efforts on the direction of the Soviet-Polish negotiations in Riga toward mutual concessions. As A. Chamberlain correctly remarked, "stable governments, able to defend their independence and to preserve their territory from attack, best serve British interests..."³² In October 1920, Lloyd George even discouraged leaders of the so-called Little Entente,

²⁹ A. Chamberlain, 1931, p. 538–540.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 542.

³¹ Kidston, the charge d'affaires in Helsinki, to Curzon, September 21, 1920, [in:] DBFP, 1961, First ser., vol. XI, p. 565.

³² A. Chamberlain, 1931, p. 543.

including Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, from admitting Warsaw to their group.³³ Lord Curzon, for his part, severely criticized the Polish position during the negotiations with the Bolsheviks, commenting on the memorandum submitted to him by the Foreign Office experts: “The Poles have completely alienated the sympathies of the Cabinet by their levity, incompetence and folly. If you are to run a state as completely as it is here proposed, the patient must have confidence in the doctor, be loyal, helpful and obedient. Poland has none of these qualities and the attempt to resuscitate her would be a European parallel to the experience we are now going through in Persia.”³⁴

Although the Polish aspiration for democracy met British expectations, Warsaw’s geostrategic ambitions contradicted London’s desire for consolidated and stabilized Europe because, as Whitehall politicians were fully aware, excessive territorial expansion by means of incorporation of the territories to the east of the “Curzon line” would hardly benefit the Poles in the face of such revisionist states as Bolshevik Russia and Weimar Germany.

Conclusion

Summing up, one has to acknowledge that although the signing of the Riga treaty contributed to the appeasement of Eastern Europe, it could hardly create a formidable pillar of the Versailles international order for several political and economic reasons, contrary to the arguments which some Polish historians put forward in their academic works.³⁵

In the first place, Soviet Russia preferred to stay outside the post-war “concert of powers” until the beginning of the 1930s, while viewing the League of Nations – the global guardian of the Versailles order – as “a complot of capitalist countries against the proletarian state.” In fact, the Bolsheviks regarded the Riga treaty to give a mere breathing space for their regime in the anticipation of a new round of all-European military hostilities.

Secondly, most contemporary Western policymakers were fully aware that neither the peace with Russia would be long-term, nor Poland’s territorial acquisitions would be safeguarded from infringements by neighboring states. In Warsaw, there existed comprehension that Soviet Russia had concluded the peace treaty in extraordinary domestic (the ongoing civil war), as well as external (the need for diplomatic recognition by the West) circumstances.

Thirdly, one more important dilemma formulated by the Cabinet and Foreign Office remained on the British agenda. Both Lloyd George and Curzon believed that in case of a new Soviet-Polish armed conflict, the League of Nations would hardly regard the crossing of the border by the Red Army as an act of aggression

³³ Notes of a conversation between Lloyd George and Take Jonescu, October 20, 1920, TNA, CAB 29/89, I.C.P. 144 C.

³⁴ Curzon’s commentaries on the memorandum by the Foreign Office Northern Department, December 6, 1920, [in:] DBFP, 1961, First ser., vol. XI, p. 691.

³⁵ M. Volos [Wołos], 2011, p. 8–16; S. Dembski [Dębski], 2014, p. 14–29; A. Novak [Nowak], *ibid.*, p. 111–137.

against Poland because, according to the Riga treaty, it was demarcated much to the eastward of the “Curzon line.”³⁶ Hankey’s diary illustrated the preponderant British opinion on this controversial issue: “He [Lloyd George] knows that in my [Hankey’s] view it is inevitable sooner or later that Russia gets a continuous frontier with Germany, and that... we ought to orientate our policy so as to make Germany and not Poland the barrier between eastern and western civilization.”³⁷

Doubtlessly, the Riga treaty became a forced compromise between Polish national claims and the Bolsheviks’ attempts to sponsor a “world revolution” in Central Europe. At the same time the diverged ethno-confessional composition of the territories, disputed by Soviet Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Byelorussia, and Lithuania, to mention but a few states, predetermined the incompetence of the pacification of this region of the sub-continent. Nevertheless, despite the fact that British foreign policy seemed the reverse of consistent or uniform in the aftermath of the First World War, the coalition Cabinet headed by Lloyd George attained the immediate stabilization of Eastern Europe, while aiding to consolidate the new-born states as well as arresting the penetration of Bolshevism into Europe. It appears therefore acceptable to conclude that the Treaty of Riga made it possible for London to further maintain the balance of power between France and Germany, thus creating the possibility of constructing an international order which suited the mentioned principles of British foreign policy.

Yet this achievement proved to be of a tactical score, since the geostrategic realities soon made His Majesty’s government sacrifice the independence of nearly all Eastern European nations for the sake of British imperial interests, when states such as Poland had fallen prey to totalitarian dictatorships.

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³⁶ Curzon to Muller, February 16, 1921, DBFP, 1961, First ser., vol. XI, p. 719–22; Memorandum by John Gregory after the conversation with Prince Sapieha during his visit to London, February 18, 1921, *Ibid.*, p. 723–730.

³⁷ Diary, July 20, 1920, [in:] S. Roskill, 1979, vol. 2, p. 181.

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