

■ The Polish-French Alliance of 1921

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Concluded in February 1921, Poland's alliance treaty with France, which was intended to afford the former an additional level of protection against German aggression, was the centerpiece of Poland's foreign policy during the Interwar Period. However, from Poland's viewpoint, the alliance had all along been fraught with significant shortcomings. With the passage of time, it lost some of its significance as Paris increasingly disregarded Warsaw's interests. This trend was epitomized by the Locarno conference of 1925, which marked the beginning of the Franco-German rapprochement. By 1933-1934, Poland began to revise its foreign policy with an eye to turning the alliance into a partnership. This effort turned out to be unsuccessful. It was not until the diplomatic crisis of 1939 that the treaty was strengthened and complemented with an Anglo-Polish alliance, which nevertheless failed to avert the German attack on Poland. Despite both France and Great Britain having declared war against the Reich on September 3, 1939, neither provided their Polish ally with due assistance.

However, French support was the main factor for an outcome that was generally favorable to Poland, which was to redraw its border with Germany during the Paris peace conference in 1919. It seems that the terms imposed on the Reich in the Treaty of Versailles were all that Poland could ever have hoped to achieve given the balance of power at the time. One should bear in mind that France made a significant contribution to organizing and arming the Polish Army, especially when the Republic of Poland came under threat from Soviet Russia in the summer of 1920. The conclusion of a defensive alliance by Poland and France seemed to be a logical culmination of the rapprochement between the two countries. The main advocate of the alliance with Paris was traditionally the national democracy camp, although the idea was realized by Chief of State Józef Piłsudski.

The French were initially restrained on forging closer ties with Poland. It took the final defeat of the "whites" in the Russian civil war for Paris to conclude that an alliance with Poland would strengthen France's position. The French were deeply divided on the issue. For instance, Marshal Ferdinand Foch and General Maxime Weygand opposed commitments to Poland, which they considered too weak to be their country's partner. Some French diplomats also expressed their misgivings. Secretary General at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Philippe Berthelot argued that Poland was too weak to play Russia's role in the French alliances network prior to 1914, and that it would additionally hinder France's relations with Soviet Russia going forward. However, President Alexandre



Millerand and Prime Minister and Foreign Affairs Minister Aristide Briand were of a different opinion and it was their views that ultimately prevailed.

The signing of the treaty was preceded by Pilsudski's visit to Paris on February 3-6. His talks there with Millerand and Briand led to the conclusion of an allied agreement. After Pilsudski left for Warsaw, Polish Foreign Affairs Minister Eustachy Sapieha and Military Affairs Minister Gen. Kazimierz Sosnkowski stayed behind to negotiate detailed provisions of the agreements. On February 19, Sapieha and Briand signed a Polish-French political agreement, while Foch, Sosnkowski, French Finance Minister Paul Doumer and French Military Affairs Minister Jean-Louis Barthou entered into a secret military convention. The political agreement was made public by Agence Havas on February 21.

The key clause of the political agreement was enshrined in Article 1.3, which stipulated that should either of the signatories be attacked, "the two Governments [would] take concerted measures for the defense of their territory and the protection of their legitimate interests." The agreement also provided for consultations "on all questions of foreign policy which concern both States" and for the signatories to "consult each other before concluding new agreements which [would] affect their policy in Central and Eastern Europe". They would endeavor to develop mutual economic relations. The political agreement was to remain on hold until the signing of the commercial treaty. The same applied to the conclusion of the secret military agreement, which specifically concerned threats posed by Germany and, to some extent, "by the Soviet Republic".

As expressed in the provisions of the military convention, the alliance with France did not greatly benefit Poland in military terms. France rejected the clause that would promptly mobilize the armed forces of the signatories and deploy them on the border with the Reich immediately upon a mobilization of German troops. Neither did the French agree to commit to "immediately declare war on Germany" (as stated in the Polish draft of the agreement) even if the Reich were to declare war on one of the signatories or attack either France or Poland. Regarding direct assistance in the event of German aggression, the Polish draft envisaged sending forces "to the strategic front of the other country". The French also rejected this provision. Article 3 of the official version of the convention stated clearly that "the direct help to Poland [would] consist in sending to Poland war equipment and a technical mission, but not French troops." France's only additional commitment was to "secure the lines of sea communication between France and Poland" "to the extent possible". Such a half-hearted commitment greatly diminished the significance of Art. 1 of the Convention, which stated that in the event of a German threat "the two signatories [would] undertake to strengthen their military preparations in such a way as to be in a position to provide effective and speedy assistance to each other and to act in common", and that "if Germany [attacked] one of the two countries, they [would be] bound to afford assistance to each other following an agreement between them".

The secret military convention also stipulated that in the event of a war with the "Soviet Russia", France would "ensure Poland's security against Germany" and "aid Poland in defense against the Soviet army." The details of this assistance have not been specified.



Poland pledged that, during times of peace, it would maintain at least 30 infantry divisions and 9 cavalry brigades, and develop its war indemnity, whereas France undertook to lend funds to equip the Polish army as necessary. The relevant clauses provided for equipping Poland with French-type small arms and artillery.

The pacts did not enter into force until a year after the conclusion of the commercial agreements (on February 6, 1922) and until the Legislative Assembly ratified the political agreement (May 12), along with the Chief of State (May 30). The ratification instruments were exchanged in Paris on June 27. Both parties were to blame for the delay of several months. The French sought to secure the best possible terms to facilitate the penetration of Poland by its industry, while the Polish government, and in particular the Ministry of Industry and Trade and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, opposed the imposition by the French of solutions that were contrary to Polish interests.

The Polish-French political agreement and the secret military convention were lopsided from the very beginning. Poland was the requesting party while France acted as the responder who effectively set the terms. Nevertheless, the agreement with France was of great political importance for Poland and strengthened its international standing, especially vis-à-vis Germany. By and large, the political and military relationship with France remained the cornerstone of the strategy and foreign policy for successive Polish governments. Nevertheless, Warsaw quickly realized that France saw allied Poland as much less than a partner. "France treats us as vassals", wrote Parliament Spokesman Maciej Rataj (of the Piast Polish People's Party) in his journal on February 4, 1923 having spoken to the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Count Aleksander Skrzyński. Nevertheless, in staff talks (during a visit to Paris by the Chief of General Staff Gen. Władysław Sikorski in autumn 1922), Poland secured the promise of immediate French intervention in the event of German would attack it.

Meanwhile, after the victory of the Left Cartel in the French elections in May 1924, France made a sharp about-face in its policy on Germany. At the Locarno conference of October 1925, France was satisfied by the Reich guaranteeing the inviolability of the Franco-German border, despite the latter refusing to offer similar assurances regarding the Polish-German frontier. Somewhat earlier, French Foreign Affairs Minister Aristide Briand suggested to the Reich that the Polish-German border could be peacefully revised (August 6, 1925). The Franco-Polish guarantee treaty concerning the Polish-German border, signed in the same town of Locarno, actually weakened Poland's position making the alliance between both countries contingent upon the procedure of the League of Nations. The treaty obligated both states to provide immediate mutual assistance only if the League's mediation would fail.

In the following years, the French made repeated attempts to dismantle their alliance with Poland, which increasingly burdened Paris. This prompted Poland to fundamentally change the course of its foreign policy in a bid to make its relations with France more akin to a partnership. In 1932, the Polish government made a significant gesture towards



Paris: disappointed with French policy (and in particular with France's refusal to grant Poland a substantial armament loan), Marshal Piłsudski chose to discontinue both the French military and maritime missions in his country.

Poland entered into a non-aggression pact with the USSR in 1932 and, shortly afterwards, in 1934, into a Polish-German declaration of non-violence. This considerably strengthened Poland's international standing, liberating it from reliance on France's whim. However, as Poland and Germany came closer together, Polish-French ties continued to fray pushing the two countries further apart. Scandals related to economic exploitation, abuses and embezzlements by French investors in Poland (e.g. the so-called Żyrardów scandal of 1934) exacerbated tensions. In general perception, Polish-German relations were quickly becoming improved beyond those between Poland and France. Attempts to breathe new life into the alliance (Gen. Maurice Gamelin's visits to Poland and Gen. Edward Śmigły-Rydz's visits to France) in 1936 proved largely ineffective. Mutual relations soured particularly in 1938, in the months leading up to the Munich Conference. For some time already, the Soviet Union, perceived as potentially the greatest ally, had played an increasingly important role in French eastern policy. In May 1935, both countries concluded a mutual assistance treaty. What upset Poland further was that France's military doctrine became highly defensive, prompting the fortification of the French-German border (the famous "Maginot line").

These allied relations were not strengthened until the spring of 1939, after Great Britain provided Poland with its own assurances of assistance for the event of German aggression. France followed suit by concluding a Franco-Polish political protocol on May 12, in which both states reaffirmed their allied commitments and pledged to immediately provide each other with "any and all assistance and support within their power". However, the protocol was never signed due to opposition from French Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet. Soon, in conclusion of bilateral staff talks (between Minister of Military Affairs Gen. Tadeusz Kasprzycki and the French Chief of General Staff Gen. Maurice Gamelin), a military protocol was signed (May 19). The protocol stipulated that in the event of a German attack on Poland, France would launch an offensive starting within fifteenth days of mobilizing its armed forces. However, the protocol would not take effect until the political agreement was signed. In early May, the French and the British agreed that decisions regarding the fate of Poland would depend on the outcome of the final victory of the Allies over Germany. This meant that helping Poland in the early days of hostilities would not be a priority.

Great Britain and France declared war on Nazi Germany on September 3, 1939, on the third day of German aggression against Poland. The following day marked the signing of the said political protocol of May 12 on the interpretation of allied agreements. This still did not mean that France would go on western offensive. The French operations on the Western Front were limited and essentially ground to a halt on the news of the Wehrmacht's rapid advances in Poland. The extent to which the French procrastination contributed to the defeat of the Polish armed forces in September 1939 is still subject to dispute by historians.