

## ■ The Treaty of Rapallo (1922)

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On Easter Sunday on April 16, 1922 in the Italian town of Rapallo, Germany and the Soviet Union signed a treaty which - although devoid of any outrageous provisions - came as a big surprise causing quite a stir in the international community. After all, here was an agreement between the two countries that had thus far been treated as pariahs by the states that guarded the Versailles peace order. The Rapallo pact caused particular concern in Poland where the return to cooperation between the two signatory states brought back sinister historical parallels. This was the worst-case scenario for Poland's security. The term "Rapallo" became a household name in international relations seen as synonymous with Germany and Russia going into cahoots against both the West and Poland.

A series of international conferences were held in the early 1920s concerning the reparations imposed on Germany by the Versailles Treaty. At one of them, convened in Cannes in early 1922, a decision was made to invite the Soviet Union to the following conference to be held in Genoa. There was talk of establishing an international consortium (involving the Reich) that would embark on restoring the Russian economy and making that country part of the international trading community. This would be the first appearance at a large international meeting by a delegation from the Bolshevik state. The Soviet state had not yet been officially recognized by the major Western states, although it had already established economic ties with some of them. Such ties included the German-Soviet trade agreement of May 1921. A few months later, an unofficial representative of the Kremlin, Karol Radek (who in fact had been well known in the Reich from his earlier visits there), came to Berlin to encourage the Germans to establish diplomatic relations with Moscow. The Germans, and especially the Reich's Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau, who opposed "the eastern orientation" and advocated cooperation with the Western powers, faced a major dilemma.

The Genoa conference raised high hopes. Held between April 10 and May 19, 1922, it was the biggest convocation of its kind since the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. Some even compared it to the Berlin Congress of 1878. 29 states and 5 British dominions were in attendance. A 32-person-strong Polish delegation was led by Ministers of Foreign Affairs Konstanty Skirmunt and Minister of Public Works Gabriel Narutowicz.

The Soviet delegation, headed by the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs and the aristocrat Georgi Chicherin, made a sojourn in Berlin (April 2-4), where Chicherin held talks with Chancellor Josef Wirth (of the Catholic Center Party) and Minister Rathenau, who - as an industrialist - was also a spokesman for German industry associations.



The parties agreed to maintain their newly established relations and continue talks to negotiate a bilateral agreement. However, many German politicians were skeptical on whether closer ties with the Soviets would benefit the Reich. Such misgivings were expressed in particular by Reich President and Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert.

Despite expectations, the proceedings in Genoa - in which British Prime Minister David Lloyd George became the leading figure - produced no major breakthroughs. Hardly any progress was made on the German reparations. The Western powers postulated that the Soviet Union repay the debts incurred by Tsarist Russia, whereas the Soviets reciprocated by demanding compensation for losses inflicted by the great powers that intervened in the Russian civil war. Chicherin suggested addressing disarmament in addition to economic matters. He argued that reduced defense spending would boost the economies of all countries. France, in particular, objected to the move.

Both Germany and Soviet Russia benefited from the conference. Their respective delegations remained in touch during the conference, as had previously been agreed. What helped to reach an agreement and make Germany seek it out more willingly was its sense of being discriminated against in Genoa by both the British and the French. Through the night of April 15, members of the German delegation debated the Russian proposal to continue the Berlin talks. German historians would later dub this the “pajama conference” (“Pyjamakonferenz”). The main German supporter of an agreement with the Russians was the influential head of the eastern section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ago Baron von Moltke. Meanwhile, the advocate of cooperation with the West, Minister Rathenau, never ceased wavering. He even wanted to fill Lloyd George in on the proceedings. It was only von Moltke that managed to dissuade him from doing so by threatening to resign. Finally, around five in the morning, the parties chose to sign the agreement. After a sleepless night, on Easter morning, both delegations convened in the nearby seaside town of Rapallo, 30 km from Genoa, where the Soviet delegation were staying. In early evening, Chicherin and Rathenau signed a pact expected to shock the international public. Two states considered to be the pariah of the Versailles system and that were, in fact, isolated by the international community, came together.

Formally, there was nothing appalling in the document’s language. Both countries restored official diplomatic and consular relations, gave up each other’s financial and material claims from the times of the war and revolution, and committed to uphold the principle of absolute equality in mutual economic relations, which were to be ramped up going forward. A secret supplement to the treaty dealt exclusively with financial matters. While the Rapallo pact contained no secret protocols on bilateral military cooperation, the first such agreement was concluded within months.

The Rapallo Pact marked a break with the previous policy of Western states refusing to recognize Soviet Russia. Prior to that, Bolshevik Russia was only officially recognized by its European neighbors (except Romania, due to its dispute over Bessarabia) and some Asian states (Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Mongolia). A host of declarations to recognize the Soviet state cropped up in 1924, when diplomatic relations with Russia were established by the Great Britain, Italy, Scandinavian countries, France, China and Mexico,



to name a few. At the time, the United States was an exception among the Western powers, as no relations between Washington and Moscow would be established until 1933.

Outcry over the Rapallo pact was raised by some of the delegations to Genoa, including Poland, which took the form of a joint memorandum submitted to Germany on 18 April. The treaty actually raised controversy also in Germany itself, where it was criticized widely by both the Social Democrats and some moderate right and far right groups. Fascists (the so-called *völkische* groups, which included the then small Nazi party) explained the agreement with Bolshevik Russia away by highlighting the Jewish descent of the Reich's Foreign Minister. In June of the same year, two months after the pact's signing, Walther Rathenau fell victim to a treacherous murder committed by reactionary officers from the secret terrorist organization Consul. He was shot dead while driving a car from his home to the ministry building. The assassination stunned the Weimar Republic. In the following month, the Rapallo deal was approved by a large majority in the Reichstag.

The Rapallo Treaty was frowned upon in the West and raised particular concerns in Poland. Although nothing changed formally in Polish-German and Polish-Soviet relations, politicians in Warsaw realized that despite ideological differences between them, it was conceivable for the two big neighbors of the Republic of Poland to join forces against it behind its back. One of the leaders of the Polish Socialist Party, Ignacy Daszyński, said this in the Parliament: "There is no doubt that (...) the Rapallo treaty is fraught with dangers for Poland (...) that could materialize very soon" "(...) leaving us crushed". Jan Dąbski of the Polish People's Party Piast claimed: "The Treaty of Rapallo is the worst possible turn of events that could ever befall Poland." The party's leader Wincenty Witos, emphasized: "There is no denying that (...) dark clouds are gathering over Europe in general, and over Poland in particular, and that the balance of power and political relations in Europe has shifted substantially."

Meanwhile, people in Berlin wondered if siding with Russia was really their best choice. Reservations on the wisdom of joining forces with the Soviets were expressed by the newly appointed (in 1922) Reich Ambassador to Moscow Count Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau. Chancellor Wirth responded to him: "I want to make one thing very clear to you: Poland must be wiped off the face of the earth! My policy is aimed at reaching this very goal (...). I will not enter into any agreement that could strengthen Poland (...)"

On the other hand, the policy of rapprochement with Soviet Russia gained support of the Reichswehr, and especially German Army Commander General Hans von Seeckt. Military German-Soviet relations had been established in 1921. Interest in doing business with the Bolshevik state had also been shown by German industry. In a September 1922 memorandum issued a few months after Rapallo, Seeckt, an unwavering supporter of Berlin's cooperation with Moscow, wrote: "The existence of Poland is unacceptable and contrary to the vital interests of Germany. Poland must and will disappear as a result of its own weakness and, through Russia's doing with our help (...). The pursuit of this goal



must become one of the most enduring principles to guide German policy. That goal is achievable but only by Russia or with its assistance. The restoration of 1914 borders must be the centerpiece of an agreement between Russia and Germany.“

The signing of the Rapallo treaty meant by no means that the Weimar Republic would pivot to the East and get intimate with the Bolshevik state. In a monograph published in 1962 by the Institute for Western Affairs, Jerzy Krasuski noted: “(...) Rapallo was only a tactical move on the part of Germany that never led to a lasting rapprochement with Soviet Russia. On the contrary, the treaty strengthened Germany's position vis-à-vis the West, catapulting it straight to its agreement with the West as enshrined in the Treaty of Locarno”(J. Krasuski, *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie 1919-1925*, Institute for Western Affairs, Poznań 1962, p. 97). An important aim behind the German-Soviet détente was to put pressure on Western powers. On the other hand, stressed Krasuski, the rapprochement did not go far enough to prevent a reconciliation with the West in the spirit of Locarno. After all, Gustav Stresemann, the man in charge of German foreign policy from 1923 until his death in 1929, chose the pro-Western approach which called for the Versailles Treaty and the Polish-German border to be revised peacefully by Berlin, London and Paris. That was what Stresemann hoped for when signing the Locarno Treaties in 1925.

As the Weimar Republic tightened its bonds with France and Great Britain, it made certain to cultivate the best possible relations with the USSR. In October 1925, a German-Soviet trade treaty was concluded in Berlin, followed by the signing of a German-Soviet treaty on mutual neutrality and cooperation in April of the following year.

Cooperation between the Reichswehr and the Red Army grew stronger. The Germans and the Russians concluded their first agreement between the two armed forces as early as August 1922. It provided for mutual assistance in the training of both armies. As a result, the Soviets gained access to modern German technologies, while the Germans acquired opportunities to train their officers and soldiers on military training grounds in the USSR in the use of the types of weapons (armored vehicles and military aircraft) that the Germans had been forbidden to use by the Treaty of Versailles. From 1924 onwards, prospective Luftwaffe pilots would be trained in Lipetsk (between Moscow and Voronezh). Tank training took place in the Kazan area on the Volga River. Red Army officers, in their turn, got to be trained in Germany. Polish military intelligence and other institutions were well aware of these goings-on. However, the importance of German-Soviet military cooperation should not be exaggerated. The political leaders of the Weimar Republic did not follow the “Rapallo line”, choosing to maintain the best possible relations with the Western powers.

German-Soviet relations died down in the last years of the Weimar Republic, especially under the leadership of Chancellors Henrich Brüning and Franz von Papen. In the early 1930s, cooperation between the Reichswehr and the Red Army also began fading. These ties were completely severed after Hitler's rise to power in January 1933. In talks with Polish diplomats, the Nazi dictator repeatedly vowed he was far from willing to nurture the Rapallo tradition. However, in August 1939, it was he who - in a pact signed by



Ribbentrop and Molotov - fulfilled the dreams of General von Seeckt of 1922. The German-Soviet cooperation of almost two years (1939-1941) took place “in the spirit of Rapallo”.

The term “Rapallo” made it into the vocabulary of historians and political scientists. Some American observers associated Rapallo with the somewhat intimate West-German-Soviet relations in the 1970s, when the Federal Republic, at the time ruled by Social Democrats and Liberals, pursued its “new Ostpolitik” with a view to achieving “change through rapprochement” in Bonn-Moscow relations. References to Rapallo kept popping up in American news media after Vladimir Putin came to power in Russia and began to strive for the best possible relations with Social Democratic Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. A part of the Polish public saw Rapallo as having guided the controversial Nord Stream and Nord Stream 2 projects, even if such historical parallels may not be entirely accurate or justified.