



BULLETIN OF THE INSTITUTE FOR WESTERN AFFAIRS

■ Poland, Germany and the origins of World War II. A short response to a propaganda offensive by Russian falsifiers of history

Stanisław Żerko

Since December 2019, Russia has been waging a propaganda war to discredit Poland with a thoroughly manipulated version of the events that led to the outbreak of World War II. This, in fact, is not the first time that Russia engages in such a campaign as similar attempts were made in 2005 and, most prominently, 2009. On the latter occasion, which involved a meeting between Donald Tusk and Vladimir Putin on the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, Russia attacked Poland by releasing a collection of archival documents and a famed documentary on Russian television. An article published at the time in the *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily described Vladimir Putin's attempts to downplay the role of the Soviet Union in starting World War II.

The pseudo-historical interpretation of the events purveyed by the Russians revives not only the arguments disseminated under the rule of Leonid Brezhnev but also those circulated during the Stalin era. President Putin is playing a prominent role in this attempt to falsify history, backed by other Russian dignitaries, his regime media and Russian diplomatic missions abroad (Russian embassies have engaged in a coordinated Twitter campaign). Such lies are best replied to in a composed matter-of-factly manner by relying on sources and findings from researchers who have seriously investigated the origins of the Second World War. We are very pleased with the coverage that appeared in leading Western European newspapers, which have sharply rejected the assertions of Putin's historical propaganda.

Editorial Board:
Radosław Grodzki
Karol Janoś
(editor in chief)
Piotr Kubiak
Krzysztof Malinowski

No. 5(425)/2020
14.02.2020

ISSN 2450-5080

The Bulletin
is also available on:
NEWSLETTER IZ
FACEBOOK
SCRIBD
LINKEDIN
TWITTER

This article offers an in-depth look at Russian accusations regarding Polish-German relations and the origins of World War II with events arranged in chronological order for the reader's convenience. The footnotes have been limited in number to those referring directly to the statements cited in the text.

The Polish-German non-aggression pact of January 26, 1934

The Russians argue that the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact signed in Moscow on August 23, 1939 cannot be considered unique as Poland and Germany entered into a similar agreement six and a half years earlier, on January 26, 1934. The parallel is completely false not least in view of the very different circumstances under which the two agreements were signed and mainly because of the secret protocol attached to the pact of August 23, 1939. Under the terms of the protocol, Poland and Central and Eastern Europe in general were to be divided up between two powers: the German Reich and the Soviet Union. The arrangement made it considerably easier for Germany to attack Poland and start a global war.

The Polish-German declaration of non-violence entered into on January 26, 1934 was of a completely different nature. The treaty supplemented the Polish-Soviet non-aggression pact signed earlier, in 1932. The goal of the Polish leaders, headed by Józef Piłsudski, was to negotiate similar non-aggression arrangements with both of Poland's big neighbors. Non-aggression treaties helped stabilize international relations across Europe. They were a common device used by the Soviets in relations not only with their neighbors. For instance, on September 2, 1933, a pact on friendship, non-aggression and neutrality was signed by the Soviet Union and fascist Italy.

The hostility towards Poland showed by the successive governments of the Weimar Republic and Berlin's desire to revise the Reich's eastern border kept the two states from establishing tighter relations with each other for many years. Paradoxically, an opportunity to change that arose with the rise to power of Hitler and his radical party on January 30, 1933. It was clearly in the interest of both sides to normalize their bilateral relations.

Early on, Germany's motifs were purely tactical. As a new chancellor, Hitler poised as a statesman whose only ambition was to have his country recognized as an equal partner and secure peaceful relations with Germany's neighbors. Soon, however, the Nazi dictator sought to win Poland over as an ally for his anticipated war with the USSR. Launched in 1935, Germany's efforts to include Poland in the German alliance system continued until March 1939. Poland's refusal to go along with the plan prompted Hitler to invade it on September 1, 1939.

The declaration of non-violence between Poland and Nazi Reich (which was equivalent to the non-aggression pact) kept Poland safe from further anti-Polish revisionist propaganda that the Weimar Republic had successfully conducted and that had fallen on fertile soil even in France, despite Poland's military alliance with the latter that had been in force since 1921. Germany's foreign relations pivot and the easing of tensions between Warsaw and Berlin significantly bolstered Poland's position in the face of growing acquiescence towards the Reich on the part of Paris

and London. From the Polish viewpoint, the draft four-powers pact sanctioned a directorate of the four western powers of Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy to impose compromise solutions to international disputes on smaller states. Although the draft never became a fully-fledged covenant, the said powers forced Czechoslovakia in 1938 in Munich to hand over the Sudeten region to Germany. One thing is beyond question: the Polish-German declaration placed the revision of Poland's western border in the freezer of international politics for over five years.

The allegation that Poland's agreement with Germany pulled the Reich out of its international isolation that followed the NSDAP's rise to power is equally baseless. In 1933, Germany was far from isolated, as is best evidenced by its involvement in the negotiation of the four-powers pact.

The alleged secret Polish-German agreement

The conclusion of the Polish-German non-aggression pact on January 26, 1934 came as a huge surprise to the international community. The treaty emerged amidst speculation of the existence of additional secret clauses that facilitated the sudden breakthrough in Warsaw-Berlin relations. One of the people who raised the matter was Undersecretary of State Fulvio Suvich of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs who mentioned this to the Polish Ambassador in Rome ("one cannot help but presume that Germany was offered something in return for renouncing a claim that constituted the mainstay of all of its post-war policies. Thus, the question on everyone's lips is how Poland managed to bribe Germany to precipitate its change of heart and what the implications of Poland's new commitments would be¹"). Similar speculations were voiced by other capitals, including Paris and - above all - Moscow.

On February 3 of the same year, Maksim Litvinov, the head of Soviet diplomacy, told the French ambassador about an alleged secret agreement between Poland and Germany that was thought to accompany the declaration of January 26, 1934. The assertion was that Poland agreed to the expansion of the Reich in other directions in exchange for Germany's renunciation of its claim to Gdańsk Pomerania and Upper Silesia. There was also speculation to the contrary. For instance, on February 15, 1934, the leftist *Manchester Guardian* reported on a confidential arrangement in which Poland agreed to give Germany a "Gdańsk corridor" in return for land in Ukraine once Poland and the Reich would have defeated the Soviet Union. Furthermore, a confidential note of February 17, 1934 by members of the French General Staff stated it was not inconceivable for Poland and Germany to be bound by a secret collaboration agreement.

Another wave of rumors on an alleged secret Polish-German agreement swept the Continent a few months later coinciding with negotiations on the so called Soviet-French Eastern Pact proposed by Maksim Litvinov and the French Foreign Minister Jean-Louis Barthou. The proposal, which envisioned Soviet assistance in the event of German aggression, was unacceptable to Poland and dismissed by the Nazi Reich.

¹ A passage from a memoir: A. Wysocki, *Tajemnice dyplomatycznego sejfu*, Warsaw 1974, p. 250 (Footnotes in this paper are limited to the sources of citations).

This provided yet another opportunity for the Soviets to accuse Poland of being secretly in league with Germany. In July 1934, Litvinov's Deputy Boris Stomoniakov told the French ambassador in Moscow that "he did not believe that Piłsudski would ever pursue a policy that would make nearly every country distrust Poland without hefty requital from Germany"².

In August of that year, the *Echo de Paris* daily and the left-wing *Liberté* disclosed "revelations" on an alleged secret pact between Poland and Germany, echoed by the popular *Illustrated Daily Courier*. In the same month, the Czech daily *Lidové Noviny* went as far as to publish an alleged secret pact between the two countries. According to this fake document, in exchange for the recognition of the Polish-German border and for Germany's recognition of the Baltic States as being in Poland's sphere of influence, Warsaw agreed to refrain from opposing the Reich's expansion in the Danube region. *Lidové Noviny* also claimed that a secret trilateral Polish-German-Japanese covenant provided for the three countries to jointly strike the USSR. Every so often, similar "revelations" would appear in other newspapers across a range of countries.

In a conversation with a Polish diplomat, the influential French commentator Geneviève Tabouis associated with the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (and a supporter of cooperation between Paris and Moscow) said she was confident that "the Poles and the Germans shared a secret agreement", that the Polish-French alliance had become "a toothless instrument" and that Europe's next war would "begin with a joint Polish-German invasion of the Soviet Union."³ The French publicist also alluded to the existence of a secret Polish-German pact in her popular 1938 book *Blackmail or War* published in London. An important role in spreading these rumors was also played by the head of the foreign section of *Echo de Paris*, a well-known journalist known as Pertinax.

Polish diplomatic missions reported that "revelations" on alleged secret Polish-German agreements appeared regularly in pro-Soviet press. In Great Britain, similar coverage could be found in *The Week*, whose editor-in-chief maintained close relations with the USSR embassy in London, as well as the left-leaning *New Statesman* that sympathized with Moscow. Czechoslovak diplomats, who were generally hostile to Poland, were also suspected of spreading such rumors.

In the autumn of 1936, shortly after Germany and Japan signed the so-called Anti-Comintern Pact (a commitment to jointly combat communist influence around the world), rumors appeared that Poland too had been invited to enter the agreement. The rumors returned with a vengeance a year later after Italy joined the Anti-Comintern Pact. Most likely in response to this development, Minister Beck instructed Poland's foreign diplomatic missions on November 9, 1936 to maintain that Poland had never received such an offer should the question be raised. He also emphasized that Poland could not accede to such a grouping even if it wanted to "prevented by

² *Dokumenty wniezionej polityki SSSR*, vol. XVII, Moscow, doc. 235.

³ *Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne, 1934*, ed. S. Żerko in collaboration with P. Długołęcki, Warsaw 2014, doc. 301.

its specific location as a neighbor of the USSR and its general opposition to blocks”⁴. The argument was repeated three days later in a semi-official statement by the Journalistic Agency Polish Political Information, which mentioned additionally that Warsaw was compelled to pursue “a policy of equilibrium between its two neighbors”⁵.

Poland’s policy of equilibrium in 1934-1938/39

An approach originated by Józef Piłsudski with the support of minister Józef Beck and pursued singlehandedly by Beck post 1935 was commonly referred to as “the policy of equilibrium”. It envisioned Poland keeping an “equal distance” between Berlin and Moscow. However, such descriptions may completely misrepresent the essence of Józef Beck’s policy if used out of context.

All that the equilibrium or equal distance meant was that Poland’s foreign policy of 1934-1938/39 sought to avoid forging alliances with either of its big neighbors against the other. In line with this principle, Poland had no intention to align itself with Germany against the USSR or entangle itself in agreements akin to the aforementioned Eastern Pact (1934) that provided for Soviet assistance to Poland in the event of German aggression. This did not mean that in its day-to-day political practice, Warsaw kept Berlin at a distance equal to that it maintained from Moscow.

On the contrary, while Poland’s relations with Germany improved continuously every year since 1933, its ties with the Soviets deteriorated. Eminent Nazis (including Goebbels, Göring, Frank, Ribbentrop, Himmler) made frequent visits to Warsaw. As a result of the Polish-German deal of February 1934 known as the press agreement, Reich newspapers stopped attacking Poland. In fact, all German revisionist propaganda both in the Reich and abroad disappeared. Even the subject of Polish local authorities violating the rights of the German minority had been abandoned. Polish-German cultural cooperation flourished. Meanwhile, the coverage of Poland in the Soviet Union became increasingly hostile. Moscow was well aware that the Polish government sought to limit the USSR’s influence on European affairs. Warsaw’s involvement in torpedoing the draft Eastern Pact provoked Soviet press attacks on Poland. When, in late September 1938 (at the peak of the so-called Czechoslovak crisis), Europe seemed to be on the verge of war, hostility in Polish-Soviet relations reached a critical point. The use of the term “equal distance” to describe Poland’s policies towards Germany and the USSR is therefore a misrepresentation.

The term “policy of equilibrium” is a more fitting description of Poland’s approach to Germany and France in 1934-1938. While the alliance with France continued to serve as a foundation of Poland’s security strategy, faced with the tendency of Paris to make concessions to Germany and disregard Poland’s interests, Poland saw a rapprochement with the Reich as a way to temporarily strengthen its international position. A councilor of the Polish embassy in Paris suggested on November 7,

⁴ *Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne*, 1937, ed. J. S. Ciechanowski in collaboration with P. Długołęcki, Warsaw 2012, doc. 261.

⁵ *Ibid*, doc. 262.

1934 that: “we need to do our utmost to warm our relations with France all the while treading carefully not to ruin things with Berlin.⁶” Nevertheless, the French were increasingly annoyed by Poland’s new policy. “What they hold against you in France is that you have gotten too close to the Germans and consult your every decision with them,” said Jules Laroche, the French ambassador in Warsaw and Beck’s Deputy, to Jan Szembek⁷.

The Polish foreign policy makers managed to steer their country through the rough waters of the diplomatic crises of March 1935 and March 1936 without disrupting good relations with Germany. Warsaw operated on the assumption that the Western powers would limit themselves to verbal protests against the Reich violating the restrictions imposed on it. In February 1935, after another meeting of French and British politicians, Minister Beck told his deputy that “easing tensions in relations between Poland and Germany is the greatest and most valuable achievement of our foreign policy. We would be in a dreadful pickle had we not signed a Polish-German declaration of non-aggression. After all, we would otherwise be sold for 2 pounds 13 shillings in the London talks⁸.”

Ambassador Józef Lipski and Jewish emigration from Poland

Vladimir Putin was particularly vicious in his attack against the Polish ambassador in Berlin Józef Lipski, whom he accused of extreme anti-Semitism. There is no evidence to support the claim of hostility against the Jews on the part of this outstanding Polish diplomat. On the other hand, many surviving documents testify to the efforts of Lipski’s diplomatic post in Berlin (which became the Polish embassy in 1934) in defense of Polish citizens of Jewish descent living in the Reich, who were repressed by the German authorities. A significant role in the effort was played in the autumn of 1938 by Feliks Chiczewski, Consul General of the Republic of Poland, who reported to the ambassador. When, on the night of October 27, the Germans began to deport Polish Jews from the Reich (in the so-called *Polenaktion*), Consul Chiczewski harbored some 1,300 Jewish citizens of Poland in the consulate villa and garden and, when it became essential, had valid Polish passports issued to them. Ambassador Lipski approved the consul’s actions.

President Putin used an unfortunate wording from Lipski’s letter to Minister Beck dated September 20, 1938, in which the ambassador reported on the course of his over two-hour conversation with Hitler held that day at the chancellor’s residence at Obersalzberg near Berchtesgaden. The document has been known for decades since it was first published in Polish in Warsaw in 1949 in a volume of Polish and German documents acquired by the Soviets during the war and compiled by the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs (“Dokumenty z przedednia drugiej wojny światowej” (“Documents from the Eve of World War II”), vol. 1: November 1937-1938, the Publishing House Książka i Wiedza). In the following years, the letter appeared in

⁶ *Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne, 1934*, doc. 293.

⁷ *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka (1935-1945)*, ed. T. Komarnicki, vol. I, London 1964, p. 216 (record of January 26, 1935).

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 233 (13 February 1935).

a number of other collections, including a well-known voluminous English-language tome of materials of Ambassador Lipski published by Columbia University Press and edited by Wacław Jędrzejewicz (“Diplomat in Berlin 1933-1939: Papers and Memoirs of Józef Lipski, Ambassador of Poland”, New York - London 1969). Another copy of Lipski’s letter to Beck is kept at the Polish Institute and the Sikorski Museum in London. The quote has been taken out of context and used on multiple occasions to discredit Poland’s foreign policy of the 1930s.

The exchange between Lipski and Hitler focused on the Sudeten crisis and Polish-German relations and only marginally touched upon Jewish migrations. The relevant quote reads: “The Chancellor’s other long-winded arguments suggested that (...), f) he sought to resolve the Jewish issue by moving Jews to an overseas colony in consultation with Poland, Hungary and perhaps Romania (at this point I told him that if he finds a solution, we will honor him with a beautiful statue in Warsaw)⁹.”

The unfortunate joke of the Polish diplomat does not prove that Lipski was an anti-Semite or that Poland’s foreign policy was tainted with anti-Semitism. The resettlement of Jews to Palestine was the main goal of the Zionist movement, which began growing in the late 19th century. The problem was compounded following Hitler’s rise to power in the Reich and the adoption of an anti-Jewish policy by Nazi authorities. The matter was further exacerbated by Arab protests in Palestine that led to bloody clashes between the Arabs and the Jews. The endeavors of Great Britain, which managed Palestine under a League of Nations mandate, to limit the influx of Jewish migrants into Palestine added more fuel to the fire. In July 1938, an international conference in Évian, France, held on the initiative of US president F. D. Roosevelt, set out to resolve the problem of Jewish refugees from the Third Reich. Due to the unwillingness of the United States, Great Britain and other states to accept Jewish refugees, the ten-day deliberations produced no solution.

Regardless of that failure, the Polish government strove in the 1930s to facilitate the resettlement abroad of a portion of the 3.3 million strong Jewish minority. Talks on the matter were held with selected Jewish communities at home and abroad, many of which showed interest in the idea. The Polish authorities (and especially the military ones) also supported radical Zionist organizations, among them the Bejtár movement led by Włodzimierz Żabotyński, who was keen on persuading a part of the Jewish minority in Poland to move to Palestine. The Polish government assisted the Jewish military organizations Irgun Zwi Leumi and Haganá by, among other things, training them in camps in Poland. As stated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1937 in its internal correspondence, “the Jewish question in Poland is purely economic and demographic, as it results in its essence from an unhealthy economic structure of the Jewish population which engages overwhelmingly in trade, crafts and brokerage.” An additional comment suggested that “Jewish emigration from Poland (...) is the only way to significantly mitigate the problem if not resolve it entirely with the passage of time”. It was also emphasized that the Polish government

⁹ *Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne, 1938*, ed. M. Kornat in collaboration with P. Długołęcki et al., Warsaw 2007, doc. 248.

“condemns and actively combats all manifestations of anti-Semitism that go beyond sound trade competition¹⁰”.

The issue of the migration of Jews from Europe was raised in the League of Nations, among other fora. Minister Beck believed that Palestine, which was managed by Great Britain and had taken in some 150,000 Polish Jews, was incapable of accepting all Jews willing to leave Poland and other Central and Eastern European countries. At a January 1937 meeting of the Budget Committee of the Polish Parliament, Beck remarked that “Palestine has neither the capacity nor the conditions to solve the huge problem of Eastern European Jews. In view of this state of affairs, I think it is only natural and logical to submit this issue for consideration by a broader platform without renouncing assistance for maintaining and developing emigration to Palestine.¹¹” Thus, in talks with Great Britain and France, Poland and Minister Beck in particular attempted to ascertain whether these countries would be willing to receive Polish Jews in some of their colonies. The Polish authorities showed particular interest in securing a green light for the resettlement of Jewish migrants to Madagascar. In mid-1937, a three-person-strong investigative committee headed by Piłsudski’s former adjutant, the explorer Maj. Mieczysław Lepecki, who represented the Polish government on that committee, spent several weeks on the then French-held island. Also taking part in the committee’s work was the famous reporter and associate of the pro-Sanation *Gazeta Polska* daily Arkady Fiedler, who was financially supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Jewish settlement in Madagascar was a recurring theme in Polish-French relations until 1939.

Poland’s role during the Czechoslovak crisis of 1938

The aforementioned talk between Hitler and Lipski on September 20, 1938 coincided with the height of the so-called Sudeten crisis that ended with the infamous Munich Conference of September 29-30, 1938 with the four powers compelling Czechoslovakia to surrender to the Reich the so-called Sudetenland, inhabited predominantly by Germans.

To this day, Poland’s policies during the crisis remain controversial. The one issue that is particularly divisive is the ultimatum of the Warsaw government given to Prague demanding the latter hand over Zaolzie, the Czechoslovakian part of Cieszyn Silesia with a mostly Polish population, to Poland. While there are Polish historians who defend Józef Beck’s policy of 1938, a closer analysis of the subject suggests caution in justifying Beck’s approach.

In a conversation with Beck during his fifth visit to Poland in February 1938, Hermann Göring not only disclosed Germany’s plans regarding Austria but also hinted at the Reich’s plans against Czechoslovakia. The two politicians agreed it would be imperative for Berlin and Warsaw to act in unison on the matter. Even at that time, Beck admitted Poland’s interest in “a certain region of Czechoslovakia” (referring to Zaolzie).

¹⁰ *Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne, 1937*, doc. 190 (both citations).

¹¹ J. Beck, *Przemówienia, deklaracje, wywiady 1931-1937*, Warszawa 1938, p. 297.

In the ensuing months, Poland avoided voicing its unease with Germany's aggressive course, especially against Czechoslovakia. The prevailing view in Warsaw was that Poland had an interest in breaking up the Czechoslovak state by, among others, separating off Slovakia and handing Carpathian Ruthenia over to Hungary. From the very beginning, the head of Polish diplomacy was convinced that neither France nor Great Britain would actively defend Prague and therefore had no intention to jeopardize Poland's good relations with Germany by having Poland do so. He was of the opinion that Poland should continue to evade thorny issues and "refrain from joining any block of states", which he shared with his deputy on May 11, 1938.¹² The latter had previously explained to the Polish ambassador in Bucharest that Poland's goal was to "break up Czechoslovakia."¹³

In his report of September 27, 1938, Hans-Adolf von Moltke, the Ambassador of the Reich in Warsaw, stated bluntly that Poland and Germany were practically in collusion over Czechoslovakia and that Beck went out of his way to keep von Moltke informed about the movements and numbers of Polish troops¹⁴. Poland's collaboration suited Berlin tremendously, prompting the Germans to thank the Poles for it on numerous occasions. Needless to say, at this juncture, any opposition by Poland against Germany in defense of Czechoslovakia was out of the question. In that era of appeasement, it was thought to be a huge mistake for Polish leaders to stand up in support of Czechoslovakia, which was not only disliked in Poland but also hostile to it. However, being drawn into a proactive move against Czechoslovakia was an entirely different matter. Aggressively phrased memoranda were submitted to the Prague government (as early as March 22, 1938) while Polish organizations in Zaolzie stepped up their efforts and the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs tightened its cooperation with Slovak politicians. Most importantly, French and British attempts to attenuate Warsaw's anti-Czech stance were rejected although Warsaw had also made it clear that should Paris and London resolve to fight Germany, Poland would stand on the side of the Western powers.

The global community interpreted the ultimatum given to Prague demanding that the Zaolzie region be surrendered or else an armed attack would follow (shortly before midnight on September 30) as a sign that Poland began to stoop to German methods. Poland risked isolation, of which the German diplomats who wanted Hitler to strike Poland in the fall of 1938 after the Czechoslovak crisis was ended, were well aware. As Polish consuls reported from the Reich, the German public was convinced that "Poland would be next" and that they would soon strip it of the Greater Poland, Gdańsk Pomerania and Upper Silesia regions. However, the Third Reich leader chose to resolve the "Polish problem" by proposing (on 24 October 1938) an alliance and "a comprehensive solution" for the disputed territories (by incorporating Gdańsk into Germany and establishing an extraterritorial corridor across Pomerania).

Minister Józef Beck downplayed these developments without realizing just how serious a predicament Poland was in. On November 4, 1938, he said to a narrow circle of his closest associates that things were excellent ("we are in a good place

¹² *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka (1939-1945)*, vol. IV, ed. J. Zaráński, London 1972, p. 145.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 132.

¹⁴ *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918-1945*, Serie D, Bd. II, Baden-Baden 1950, doc. 642.

politically”) and that much more could be obtained from the Czechs¹⁵. Beck was apparently highly satisfied with his apparent success and oblivious about the actual danger looming over Poland and Hitler’s intentions. Less than a year later, Poland was conquered by the Reich operating in collusion with the Soviet Union.

Poland and the origin of World War II

In the early 1930s, sandwiched between two hostile powers, Poland was in an extremely difficult position. The dramatic nature of its plight was further aggravated by the stance of Great Britain and especially allied France, both of which were acquiescent towards Germany and would remain so post 1933 towards the Nazi Reich.

The appeasement policy pursued by Western European powers left Polish diplomacy very little room for maneuver. To make things worse, the efforts of Polish foreign policy makers to ensure the security and territorial integrity of their country were not free of mistakes, as became particularly evident in 1938. They overestimated Poland’s importance on the international arena, fostered illusions about Hitler’s policies and believed they would be able to continue their balancing act between the superpowers well into the future. Nevertheless, it was Poland that rejected Hitler’s offer to jointly attack the USSR at the turn of 1938 and 1939 and that was the first state to put up armed resistance to Nazi Reich expansionism. The decision by Polish leaders meant that World War II did not start with Germany attacking the USSR, as Hitler had previously envisioned. Under the circumstances that resulted from Poland’s decision, the Stalinist Soviet Union made it easier for Hitler to start a world war by concluding a non-aggression pact with him, which was in fact a pact of aggression, and specifically one of German aggression against Poland and subsequently also Western Europe.

All this notwithstanding, the recent allegations by Russian historical propaganda whereby Poland paved the way for the unleashing of World War II by Germany, and even bears responsibility for its outbreak, are as absurd as they are unsupported by source materials and historiography. No self-respecting historian, whether Polish, German, British or Russian, will subscribe to the falsifications of Putin’s historical policy.

The statements expressed herein reflect solely the opinions of its author.

¹⁵ *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka*, vol. IV, p. 339 (summarized by J. Szembek).



Prof. Stanisław Żerko - he is an employee of the Poznań Institute of Western Affairs and a lecturer at the Naval Academy of Gdynia. He has published three monographs devoted to the origins of World War II (including “Stosunki polsko-niemieckie 1938-1939”, <“Polish-German Relations 1938-1939”>, Poznań 1998) and four volumes in the series “Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne” <“Polish diplomatic documents” from the 1930s> (over 1600 documents in total).