

THE TREATY OF RIGA 1921



INSTYTUT
PAMIĘCI
NARODOWEJ

Organiser: Branch Office for National Education of the Institute of National Remembrance in Poznań

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Photographs and documents from the collections of: Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, Central Military Archive, Kujawsko-Pomorska Digital Library, National Digital Archive, POLONA.

Plenary meeting of the Peace Conference in Riga during the period of the preliminaries. Polish delegation on the right, Soviet delegation on the left. (source: <https://kpbcm.umk.pl/> from the collection of the Museum of Polish Diplomacy and Refugees, UKW)

FORGING EASTERN FRONTIERS AND THE DEFENCE OF THE REBORN POLAND

The Polish state, reborn in November 1918, had to fight to define its borders. In the east, in the so-called Taken Territories, at the beginning of 1919, a Polish-Bolshevik conflict broke out, culminating in August and September 1920. It was then that in two battles: of Warsaw and of the Niemen River, the Polish Army defeated the Red Army. The march of the Bolsheviks to the west of Europe, to spread the communist revolution was halted and victorious Poland sat down to peace talks with the Soviets.



▲ Polish military poster from 1920 Poland's military victory was influenced by the enormous social mobilisation and sacrifice of the Polish soldier. (source: POLONA)



▲ Józef Piłsudski (drawn by Władysław Skoczylas). During the crucial Battle of Warsaw, Józef Piłsudski was Marshal of Poland and Commander-in-Chief. (source: POLONA).

▲ Map of the Polish lands presenting the Taken Lands and places of first skirmishes in the Polish-Bolshevik war The Polish-Bolshevik conflict began when the German Ober-Ost troops left the eastern territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The first skirmishes of the war are considered to be the battle for Vilnius (January 1919), or the battle near the town of Mosty (February 1919) (by Marcin Kuciewicz)



▲ **capt. Ignacy Boerner (1875–1933)**

Józef Piłsudski's trusted officer in talks with the Soviet delegation in Mikaszewicze. Apart from him, the Polish side was also represented by Lt. Mieczysław Birnbaum and Michał Kossakowski.

(source: NDA)



▲ **Julian Marchlewski (1866–1925)**

Chief negotiator of the Soviet side during the talks in Białowieża and Mikaszewicze. In exchange for not giving aid to 'white' Russia, he offered to cede Lithuania and Belarus to Poland.

(source: POLONA)

TALKS BEFORE THE POLISH VICTORY

Already in the first stage of the Polish-Bolshevik war, the parties were negotiating with each other. Particularly intensive talks took place in July (Białowieża) and autumn (Mikaszewicze) 1919, at a time when Bolshevik power was under threat from the 'white' army of General Anton Denikin. Eventually, Polish guarantees of neutrality in the Russian civil war and the suspension of the Polish offensive enabled the Bolsheviks to smash Denikin's troops. Unfortunately, this fundamentally changed the Soviet approach to possible peace with Poland. Negotiations were broken off.

▼ **Railway station in Mikaszewicze near Lutsk.**
In sanitary train No. 15, standing on the siding of the Mikaszewicze station, confidential talks were held between the Bolsheviks and emissaries of Józef Piłsudski (October-December 1919).

(source: POLONA)



SHOW PEACE OFFERS

However, the Soviets' diplomatic and propaganda tactics sought to blame the Poles for the protracted war. The aim was to discredit Poland in the international arena, presenting it as an aggressor with imperial ambitions. The implementation of this strategy involved making official peace proposals to Poland, while at the same time issuing combat orders to Red Army units. The true intentions of the Soviets were known to the Poles, thanks to information obtained by Polish radio intelligence.

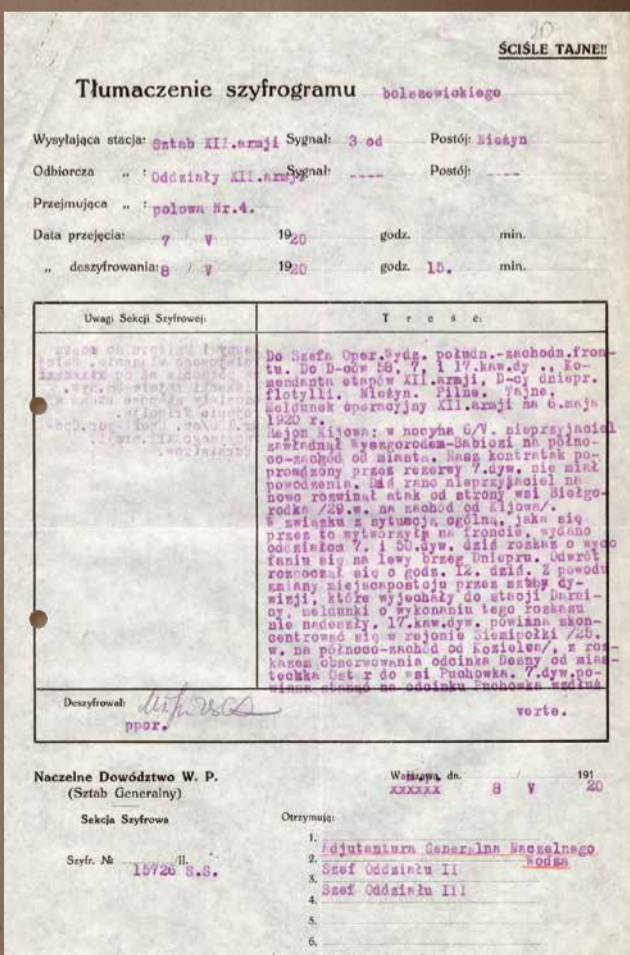
Georgy Chicherin (1872–1936)

People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of Soviet Russia. (source: NDA)



Lt. Jan Kowalewski (1892–1965)

Head of the Cipher Bureau in the Polish General Staff's Second Department. Thanks to radio-intelligence reports, the Poles knew about the concentration of Soviet forces in the Borisov area. This information was used to verify the sincerity of the Bolsheviks' will to conclude peace. The offer of Borisov as a place for peace talks was rejected by the Soviets. (source: NDA)



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‘If there is going to be a war, it is absolutely necessary that the blame should fall on the Polish government’
”
 G. Chicherin, note from February 1920.

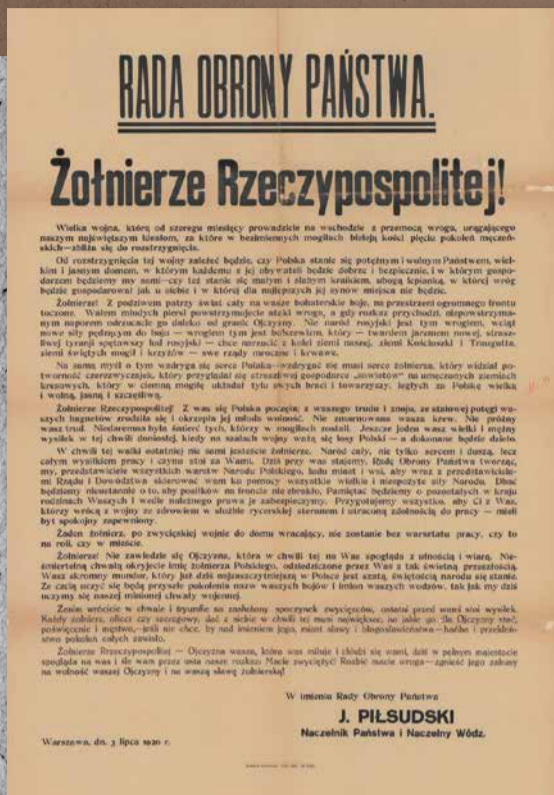
◀ Translation of a Soviet ciphertext from the period of the Polish- Bolshevik war, intercepted by Polish radio intelligence. (source: CAW WBH)



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Proclamation of the Council for State Defence (ROP) to soldiers.

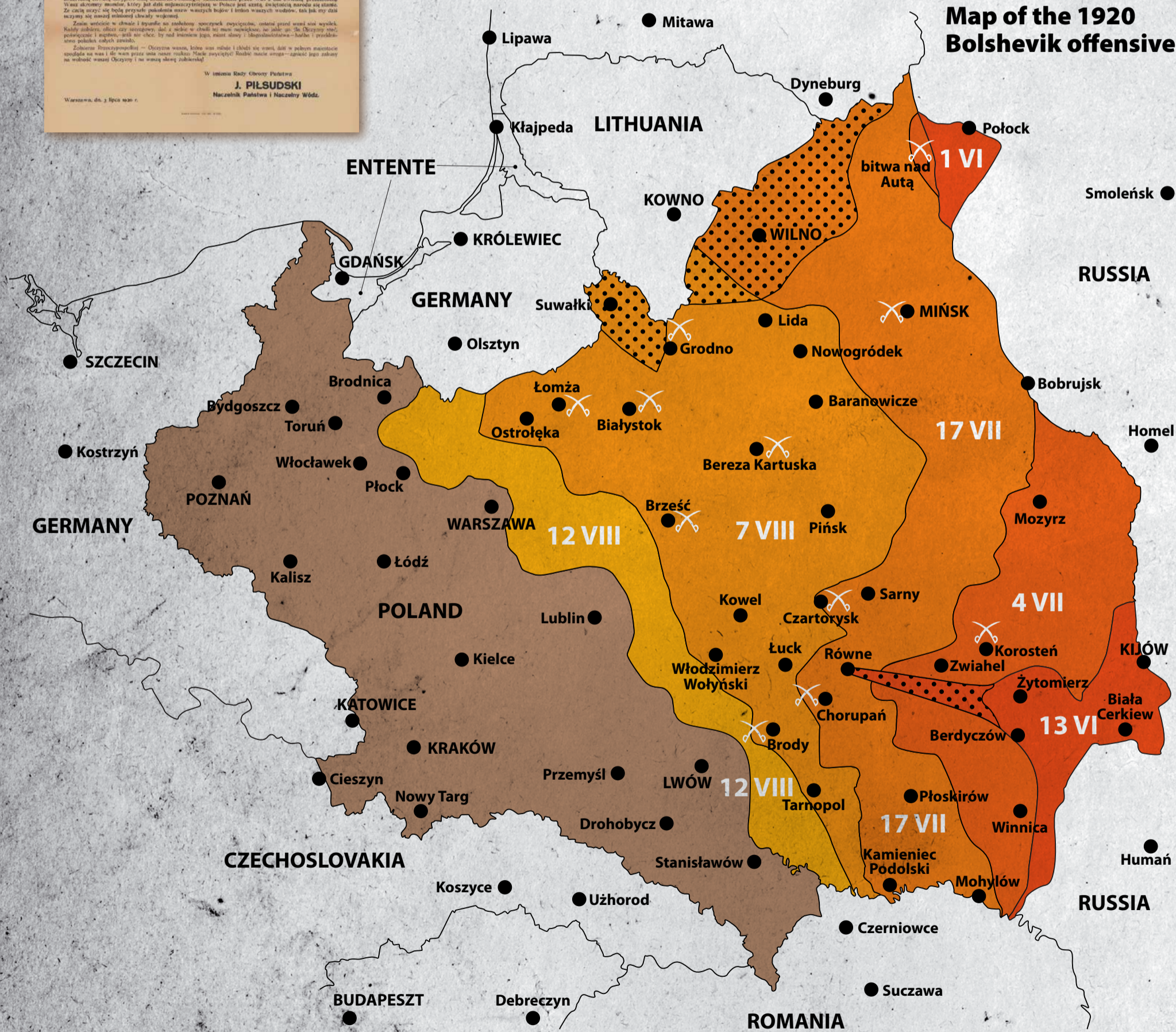
This temporary parliamentary and governmental body, established on 1 July 1920 at a time of a critical military situation for the Polish state, attempted to boost the morale of soldiers depleted by defeats on the entire front line. The Council also determined the character and composition of the Polish delegation sent to Minsk (source: POLONA).



The successful Bolshevik offensive launched in May 1920 placed Poland in a tragic military and international situation. The defeats at the front and diplomatic pressure from the Western powers forced the Polish authorities to make truce proposals to the Soviets (22 July 1920). At first, the Bolsheviks, believing in a quick capture of Warsaw, deceived the Poles and only on 14 August 1920 - being at the gates of the Polish capital, they decided on sham talks. Minsk was designated as the place for meeting the delegations of both countries.

BACK TO THE TALKS TABLE

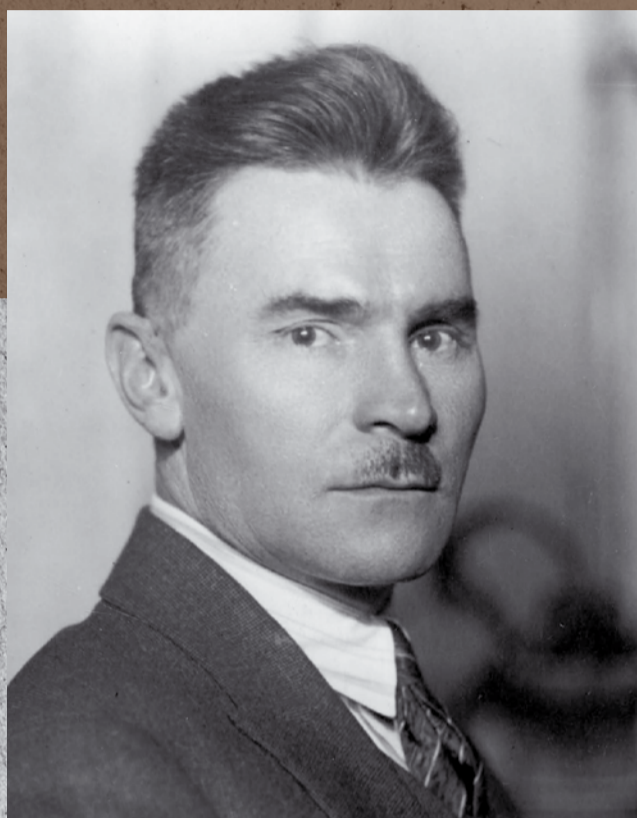
Map of the 1920 Bolshevik offensive.



- Areas occupied by the Soviets until:
 - 1-3 June
 - 4 July
 - 7 August
 - 12 August
- Most important battles
- Capture of the town of Rive by an advanced unit of Semyon Budyonny's First Horse Army
- Areas ceded by the Soviets to Lithuania

At the beginning of July 1920, the Red Army offensive started on the Lithuanian-Belarusian front. The 1st Cavalry Army under Semyon Budyonny was advancing in the south. The Poles were in retreat. (author Marcin Kuczewicz)

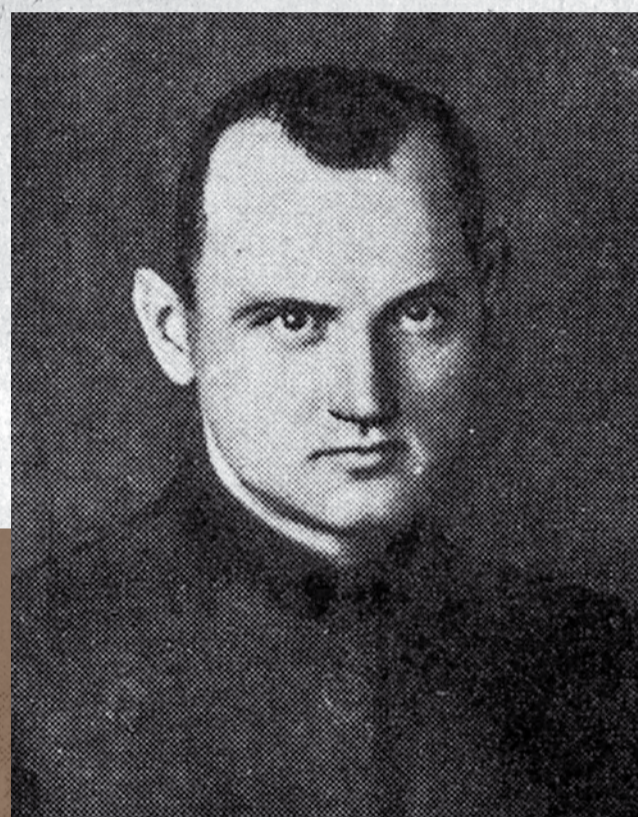
The Polish delegation left for Minsk on 14 August 1920. Talks between the representatives of both sides lasted from 17 August to 2 September 1920. Despite the changed military situation (Bolshevik defeat in the Battle of Warsaw), the head of the Soviet delegation Karl Daniszewski, taking advantage of the lack of knowledge of the Polish delegates about the situation at the front, presented peace terms humiliating for Poland. Daniszewski's dictate was, however, rejected. The delegations left Minsk, and then, at the request Poland, negotiations were moved to neutral Riga.



◀ **Jan Dąbski (1880–1931)**

A politician associated with the Polish People's Party 'Piast'. He was the head of the Polish delegation in Minsk and later also in Riga. As the Soviets blocked communication between Polish delegates and the government and high command, he was unaware of the outcome of the Battle of Warsaw, which was favourable for Poland. Nevertheless, he rejected the peace terms presented by the Soviets, claiming that 'there is always time to sign a bad treaty'. (source: NDA)

MINSK DICTATE



Karl Daniszewski (1884–1938) ▶

Head of the Soviet delegation to the Minsk talks. At one of the meetings, he presented absurd (considering the defeat of the Soviets near Warsaw) peace conditions, including the limitation of the Polish army to 50,000, the creation of a workers' Citizens' Militia led by communists on Polish territory, or the free movement of people and Soviet goods across Polish territory. (source: POLONA)





◀ One of the first plenary sessions. At the table on the left the Russian delegation, on the right the Polish delegation. The first plenary meeting of both delegations took place on 21 September 1920.

(source: <https://kpbc.umk.pl/> from the collection of the Museum of Polish Diplomacy and Refugees, UKW)

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[...] At around five o'clock in the evening, the hall of the House of the Blackheads is already full of people. The mood is lively. The gazes of those present turn to the door through which the delegations are to enter. There is a long table in the centre of the hall [...] On either side of the main table are the stenographers, a little further on are the correspondents [...] At exactly 5.12 p.m., the Polish delegation is the first to leave the study, followed shortly afterwards [through another door] by Joffe and his colleagues [...].

(„Siegodnia” z 22 Sept. 1920 quoted in Ēriks Jēkabsons, Polskosowieckie rozmowy pokojowe w Rydze – punkt widzenia Łotwy [Polish-Soviet peace talks in Riga - Latvia's point of view] [in:] Zapomniany pokój. Traktat ryski. Interpretacje i kontrowersje 90 lat później, [Forgotten peace. The Treaty of Riga. Interpretations and controversies 90 years later], ed. Sławomir Dębski, Warsaw 2013, pp. 329-330).

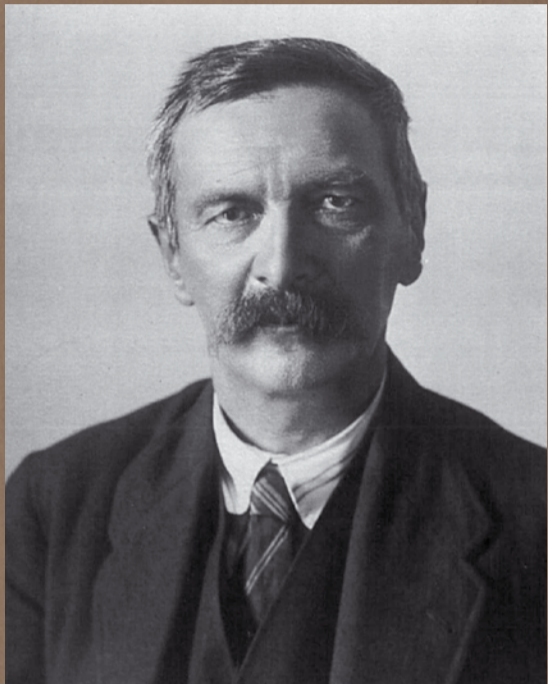
RIGA – HOUSE OF THE BLACKHEADS



The House of the Blackheads in Riga.

In this 14th century building, which owes its name to the statues of knights made of black marble, decorating the main entrance, further peace talks between Poland and Soviet Russia took place. (source: NDA)

POLISH POLITICIANS VS BOLSHEVIK DIPLOMATS



▲ **Stanisław Grabski (1871–1949)**

A representative of the Popular National Union at the Riga Conference. He was considered the most important figure among the Polish plenipotentiaries in Riga. He sought to subordinate the Polish delegation to his influence in order to force through the concept of the national camp concerning the future eastern border of Poland. (source: POLONA [author Anatoliusz Masłowski])

Both delegations arrived in Riga a few days before the official start of the peace conference. The Soviet delegation consisted of four people headed by the skilful and experienced diplomat Adolf Joffe. The Polish delegation, on the other hand, was not uniform in character and was divided into a parliamentary group (six representatives of the main political parties) and a governmental group (a chairman, two diplomats and an army representative). What distinguished Poles from Soviets was the lack of experience in conducting peace negotiations and political disputes, which made it impossible to agree on common decisions.



▲ **Adolf Joffe (1883–1927)**

Head of the Bolshevik delegation to the peace talks in Riga. He completely dominated and controlled the negotiating strategy of the Soviet side. The unity of the Bolshevik milieu had a huge impact on his effectiveness during the talks with the Poles. (source: POLONA)



Polish delegation in Riga. In the centre of the photograph, representatives of the Polish government: Chairman Jan Dąbski (seated fourth from right) and Leon Wasilewski (seated fifth from right).

The group of ten plenipotentiaries was supplemented by experts and technical staff. In total, the Polish delegation consisted of eighty people. The Soviet delegation was half as numerous. (source: POLONA)

BEHIND THE CLOSED DOORS OF THE RIGA NEGOTIATIONS



Friction in the Polish delegation and the personal ambitions of its individual members were skilfully exploited by Joffe. With intrigue, he successfully reinforced the Poles with the conviction that signing an 'amicable peace' that would not humiliate either side is needed. It was also on his initiative that the form of negotiations was changed into secret meetings of chairmen, where, on account of his experience and diplomatic cunning, he had a huge advantage over his Polish counterpart. In the case of both delegations, however, it was evident that the pace of talks was adjusted to the current international and domestic situation in his country.

▲ **Meeting of the legal commission during the Riga Conference.** Detailed issues were decided during meetings of the commissions, four of which were created: main, territorial, legal and economic-financial. The decisions made there, however, were the result of secret meetings of the chairs of both delegations.

(source: <https://kpbk.umk.pl/> from the collection of the Museum of Polish Diplomacy and Refugees, UKW)



▲ **Minsk**

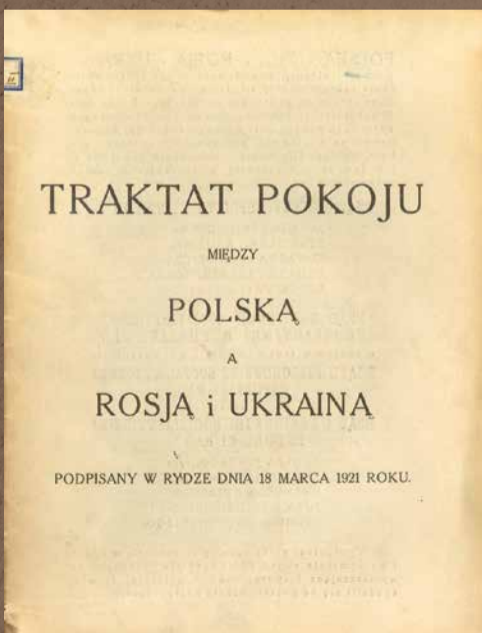
The possible affiliation of this city to Poland was the main axis of dispute among the members of the Polish delegation. The supporters of Józef Piłsudski's federation plans (creation of a subordinated block of states east of Poland's borders) were in favour of incorporating Mińsk into Poland, while the opponents of this idea, wanting to limit the number of national minorities within the future borders of the Republic of Poland, fought against these plans (the so-called incorporation idea). Eventually Minsk was given back to the Soviets. (source: POLONA)

PEACE PRELIMINARIES AND THE TREATY OF RIGA

The peace treaty was concluded in two stages - on 12 October 1920 the peace preliminaries were signed, which resulted in the end of fighting on the front, and then, after arduous and difficult negotiations, the final treaty was signed on 18 March 1921. It included provisions on, i.a., the course of the border line between Poland and Soviet Russia, mutual respect for each other's national sovereignty, and not supporting military action against the other side. Furthermore, the Soviets undertook to respect the rights of Poles living in Soviet Russia, return to Poland cultural property seized during the annexations and pay 30 million roubles in gold.



▲ **After signing the Treaty of Riga, Riga 18 March 1921.**
Chairman of the delegation of Soviet Russia Adolf Joffe on the left, Chairman of the Polish delegation Jan Dąbski on the right.
(source: <https://kpbz.umk.pl/> from the collection of the Museum of Polish Diplomacy and Refugees, UKW)



◀ **First page of the Treaty of Riga.**
Formally, peace was concluded between Poland and Soviet Russia and Ukraine. The representative of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, during the peace talks in Riga was Dmitro Manuilski. Poland's agreement to recognise this Republic was tantamount to breaking the so-called Warsaw Agreement of April 1920 signed with the Ukrainian People's Republic.
(source: POLONA)

▶ **Map with the Polish-Soviet border delineated by the Riga peace treaty.**
The course of the border line was defined by Article II of the peace treaty. Part of Belarus and Ukraine were incorporated into Poland, in the north the eastern border was based on the Dvina River, in the south on the Zbrucz and the Dniester Rivers.
(source: POLONA)



RECEPTION OF THE TREATY IN POLAND AND IN EUROPE.

Public opinion in Poland rather welcomed the information about the signing of the peace and its provisions. Few critical voices were visible in the circles of the Polish Eastern Borderland gentry and some military circles. They raised above all the issue of granting the Soviets territories inhabited by significant Polish population centres. In Western Europe, however, the Treaty was received with reserve, even in France, which was rather friendly towards Poland. It was not concealed there, that Poland's eastern border should be based on ethnic criteria.



▲ **Feliks Perl (1871-1927)**

(source: POLONA)



▲ **Juliusz Poniatowski (1886-1975)**

(source: NDA)

One of the few MPs who, during Sejm discussion on the ratification of the Riga Treaty, suggested the naivety of the slogan of a 'just peace' which, without humiliating the Soviets, was to ensure its permanence. They aptly pointed out that no conciliatory approach would stop imperialist tendencies in Soviet Russia.



The last page of the Riga Treaty with seals and signatures of the parties.

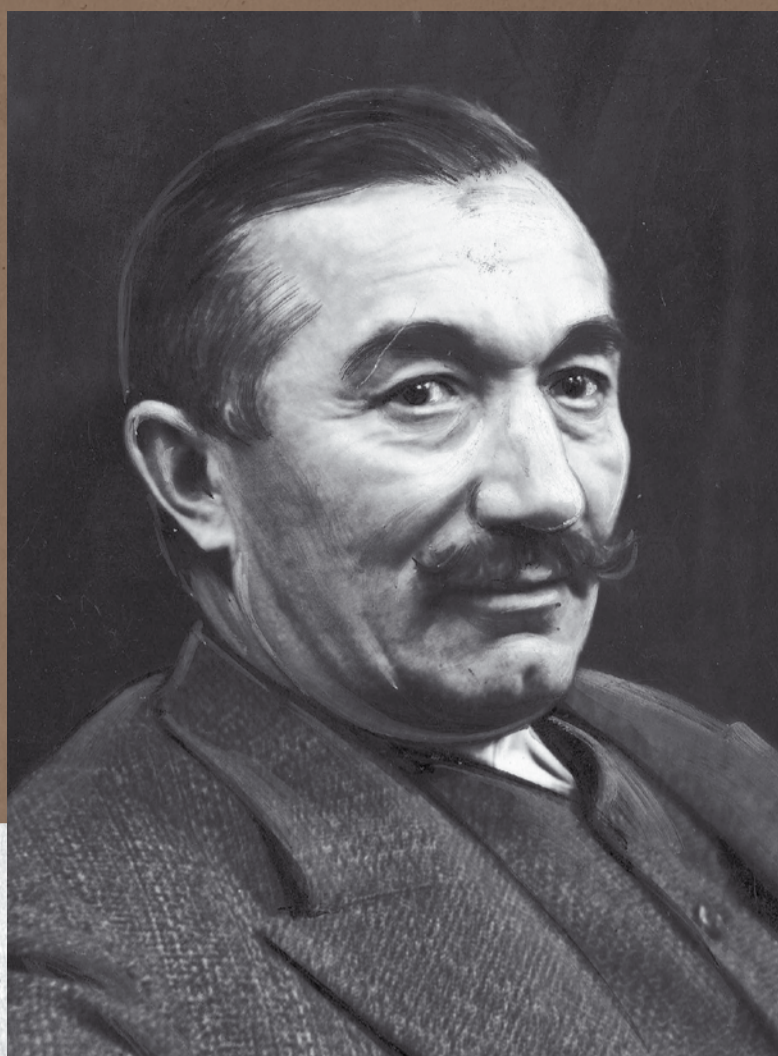
The treaty was ratified by the Polish Sejm on 15 April 1921. The Western European powers, however, never recognised the Treaty of Riga as a legal element of the Versailles Agreement. Even the Council of Ambassadors' decision of 15 March 1923 to approve the eastern borders of the Republic of Poland took place without reference to the treaty's provisions.

(source: Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland)



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LEFT TO DIE



◀ Wincenty Witos (1874–1945)

A politician of the Polish People's Party 'Piast', the Prime Minister of Poland at the time of signing the Riga Treaty. Despite the pleas addressed to Witos by the Poles living in the eastern borderlands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to have their lands incorporated into the reborn Poland, those territories were granted to the Soviets. The greatest heartlessness of the treaty provisions in this matter was the lack of a choice of place of residence, which condemned Poles to remain in Soviet Russia.

(source: NDA)



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The hardest and most unpleasant thing at the same time was with the delegations of Polish people who were to remain on the Russian side. These delegations would come from Kamianets-Podilskyi, Minsk and Berdychiv, risking their lives to sneak in and begging with tears that Poland should not abandon them to the mercy of the Bolshevik executioners [...] At the end, they somewhat embarrassingly mentioned the large areas of land, forests and everything connected with them, which had been Polish property for many centuries.

(W. Witos, *Moje wspomnienia*
[My Memoirs],
vol. I, Paris 1965, p. 371)

Kamianets-Podilskyi

One of the towns with a high percentage of Polish population which was not incorporated into Poland. It is estimated that up to one and a half million people of Polish nationality remained in Soviet Russia. They were then subjected to physical extermination or Russification. (source: POLONA)

From the very beginning, the Poles had enormous problems with enforcing the Riga obligations on the Soviets, e.g. in the area of restitution of cultural property or compensation, which, incidentally, was never paid in full to Poland. This situation was the result of the Soviets taking advantage of the lack of treaty provisions providing sanctions for failure to comply with their provisions and failing to appoint conciliators for any discrepancies that might arise.

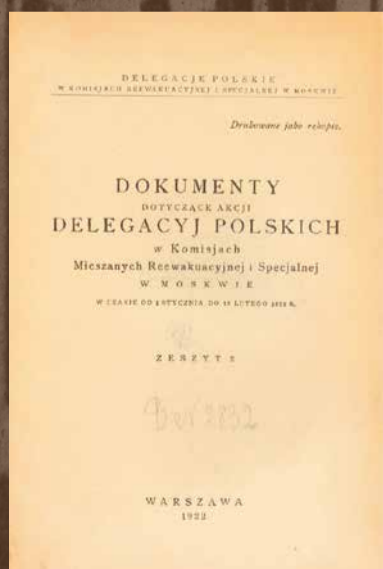
IMPLEMENTATION OF OBLIGATIONS



▲ **Participants of the Polish delegation in the Mixed Reevacuation and Special Commissions with a crate of repossessed items.** The third from the left chairman - Edward Kuntze. The chairmen of the Polish delegations were Antoni Olszewski from 1921 to 1923 and Edward Kuntze in 1923-1935. The process of recovering Polish cultural property took 15 years, even so, it did not end with the return to Poland of all the books and documents (source: POLONA)

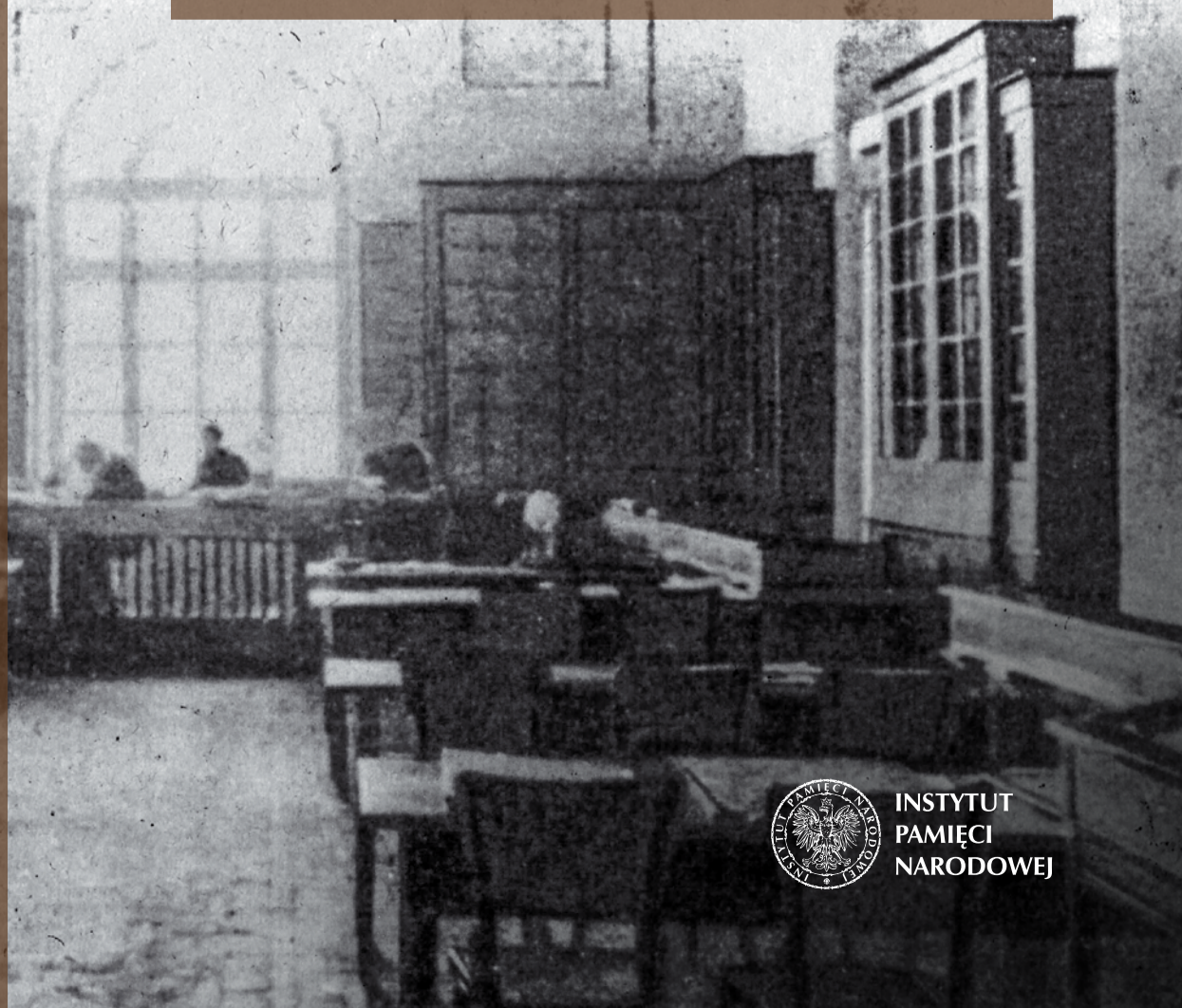


▲ **Pyotr Voykov (1888 – 1927).** Soviet chairman of the Mixed Re- evacuation and Special Commissions. The author of a report suggesting consistent failure to fulfil the treaty provisions in the scope of reparations and return of Polish property. (source: NDA)



◀ **One of the notebooks of the Polish Delegation to the Mixed Reevacuation and Special Commissions in Moscow.** These commissions were set up on the basis of a protocol signed on 7 October 1921 by the Polish and Soviet sides on the conditions for the implementation of the Treaty of Riga. The committees worked on the restitution of material and cultural property to Poland. (source: POLONA)

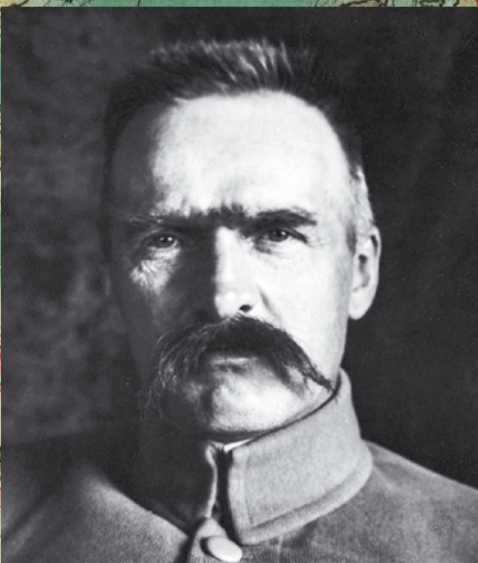
Library of the Krzemieniec High School ▶ The library's valuable collections were not given back to Poland. Paradoxically, this saved them from destruction during World War II. (source: POLONA)



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SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TREATY

The Treaty of Riga was important not only for Poland and Soviet Russia, but also for the entire Central and Eastern Europe, as it stabilised the situation in this part of the world. The Treaty also put an end to Vladimir Lenin's original plan to spread the flame of communist revolution to Western Europe, thus forcing the Soviets to build communism in one country. Unfortunately, Soviet imperialism was curbed for less than 20 years. Following Hitler's Germany's alliance with the Soviet Union in August 1939, the world created after the Great War was buried.



◀ Józef Piłsudski (1867–1935)

The Treaty of Riga threw Józef Piłsudski's federation plans into disarray. Piłsudski's final acceptance of the Polish eastern border as set out in the Treaty was probably the result of his awareness of the huge obstacles to making his own concept real (the clear reluctance or indifference of the inhabitants of Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania).

(source: POLONA)



Symon Petlura (1879–1926) ▶

Chairman of the Directory of the Ukrainian People's Republic. An ally of Józef Piłsudski. The Treaty of Riga buried the state-forming aspirations of Ukrainians. (source: NDA)

Political map of Europe created under the Versailles-Riga system.

The Treaty of Riga was one of the last elements in the process of shaping the borders of the new political system in Europe.

(source: POLONA)

THE TREATY OF RIGA IN NUMBERS

80 the number of members
of the Polish delegation
in Riga

40 the number of members
of the Soviet delegation
in Riga

~1,5 About 1.5 million people of
Polish nationality
remained on the territories
incorporated under
the treaty into Soviet Russia

30 Poland was to receive 30 million
roubles in gold as a compensation
for the participation of Polish
lands in the economic life
of the Russian Empire.

1412 this is how many kilometres
the border
between Poland and Soviet
Russia established
by the Treaty of Riga had

15 For 15 years the Mixed Commissions
carried out their work: Special and
Re-evacuation

18 The Riga Treaty
lasted 18 years