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Plan West. The plan that never was.

On 13 May 1939, a military convention was signed with France stipulating that a full French offensive would start within 15 days of mobilisation. This is how long Poland was to maintain the most important forces and warfare centres.



Since regaining independence and the formation of borders based on the Treaty of Versailles (1919) and the Peace of Riga (1921), people

were aware of the fragility of peace. From the very beginning from different positions, the Second Polish Republic's biggest neighbours, the Soviet Union and the Weimar Republic, looked at Poland as a "seasonal state". These treaties were an armistice rather than a solid foundation for peace.

In the shadow of Versailles

Already in the early 1920s, several operational studies were prepared by the General Staff of the Polish Army aimed to develop an appropriate strategy for war.

It is worth noting here Colonel Jan Thullie's study of the war with Germany from 1921, which showed that the optimal situation for Poland would be to approach a possible clash with the Weimar Republic with the participation of France and possibly Czechoslovakia. An independent war would have to be mainly defensive in nature; in his opinion, taking the offensive approach, given the possibilities at the time and geographical conditions, would be a risky undertaking.

In 1924, studies were prepared that anticipated two variants of the conflict. On the one hand, with Germany, and on the other, attempts were made to create an outline of war with both of the threatening neighbours at the same time. It should be emphasised that two years after the signing of the Treaty of Rapallo – between Soviet Russia and the Weimar Republic – the possibility of this disastrous configuration was assumed as probable.

In the event of a war with Germany, the plan was to carry out defensive and offensive actions, which in the first phase would defend the regions of Greater Poland and Pomerania while attacking East Prussia and Silesia. The second phase foresaw an attack from the Greater Poland region towards Germany. In the event of a war on two fronts, offensive action was assumed in the west, but combined with a defence in the east of the country. These studies were to form the basis for a proper plan for wartime.

The establishment of the General Inspectorate of the Armed Forces (GIAF) after the May coup in 1926 fundamentally changed the work on the concepts of the future war, the focus was shifted from the General Staff to the GIAF. All-round conceptual work was reduced and fragmented. Operational plans were developed for individual sections of the fronts in the east and west of the country. Not anticipating any immediate threat in the second half of the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s, a comprehensive plan was not prepared. Diplomacy and the signing of the non-aggression pact with the Soviets (1932) and the declaration of non-violence with the Third Reich (1934) gave the adequate amount of time to work out a broad overview.

Plan East

The dynamics of international affairs in the second half of the 1930s, however, called for conceptual work on a larger scale, taking into account the general level of coordination of activities on individual fronts.

Due to the international situation and, in particular, the fact that Hitler broke off cooperation with the Soviet Union, the possibility of a war on two fronts was considered unrealistic. The two-front variant, developed in the first half of the 1920s, was not undertaken more broadly a decade later.

The focus was only on the threat either from Germany or from the Soviets. First and foremost, in line with Piłsudski's policy, the threat was seen from beyond the eastern border. The rapid industrialisation process of the Soviets, aimed largely at increasing the potential of the Red Army, was carried out in the first half of the 1930s. This strongly encouraged the Poles to pay attention to the Soviets.

In November 1936, based on previous studies and reports, work began on a plan in the event of a war with Soviet Russia. The plan developed by a team led by Colonel Józef Jaklicz assumed, firstly, Romania's withdrawal from Poland's side as part of the alliance pact, and secondly, material support from the West.

Based on the four armies: "Podole", "Wołyń", "Baranowicze" and "Wilno", as well as the operational group "Polesie" and reserve formations, it was planned to combine the main enemy forces north of Polesie and launch a counter-offensive near Brest. As in the case of the 1920 campaign, the intention was to eliminate the advantage of numbers with speed and the right strategy.

As in the case of the later war plan with Germany, it was envisaged that all armed forces would be deployed against the Soviets, while the

western border was only secured by the Border Guard forces and one reserve infantry division.

Ultimately, Plan East was approved in March 1939. It remained only a document with no practical reflection in reality, as at the same time the dynamic international situation completely re-evaluated the assumptions made thus far. It became necessary to shift orientation towards the west.

The assumptions of Plan West

As in the case of Plan East, the tactical assumptions for the war with Germany were also based on previous experiences and studies. This work gained momentum in 1936; however, they did not aim to develop the final operational plan as quickly as in the case of the East.

Like with the Soviets, here also, the intensification of the armaments effort in the Third Reich prompted General Edward Śmigły-Rydz who stood at the head of the Polish Army (soon to be appointed Marshal of Poland) to become more acquainted with the situation in the western and northern sections. In the spring of 1936, at least two reports were published. The one compiled in March by General Tadeusz Kutrzeba, focusing mainly on the juxtaposition of Poland and Germany's military potentials was especially important.

In January 1938, the outline of an operational plan in the event of a war with Germany was presented by Lieutenant Colonel Stefan Mossor,

under the direction of General Kutrzeba. It should be remembered that this document was drafted at a time when Poland's geopolitical position had not yet deteriorated significantly in terms of geostrategy. It was not until March 1938 that Hitler incorporated Austria into the Reich, and he took the Sudetenland in the autumn. In the months that followed, he took complete control of the rest of the Czech Republic and strengthened his influence in Slovakia.

The Kutrzeba-Mossor plan, extremely level-headed in assessing Poland's defence capabilities, was anyway based on relatively more favourable assumptions than those that became real when work on Plan West was commenced.

The conclusions of the document were far from optimistic. It was stated outright: "Compared to Germany, Poland's war potential is so small that she must be recognised as incapable of conducting an independent war with Germany, of course in the sense that an isolated Poland cannot count on the possibility of a decisive victory, which does not mean that we are incapable in the case of a war declared upon us of defending our independence."

This is why the necessity to balance the differences in potentials through a military alliance was emphasised. Different variants of aid were considered: from France, Russia, the still existing integral Czechoslovakia, and Romania. The authors consciously assumed the possibility of disappointment with the French ally; they foresaw the possibility of a neutral stance from Russia, the desired strategic cooperation with Czechoslovakia, and only the transit value of the

Kingdom of Romania.

On the other hand, it was clearly written that “by no means can Russia’s alliance with Germany be allowed (which cannot be ruled out), because this could at any time lead to the total crushing of Poland.” The conclusion made it clear that the defence plan was based solely on the hypothesis of active support from France and neutrality from other neighbours. Moreover, it was emphasised that in the event of being let down by France, the plan would lose its value.

Purely strategic indications were based on these premises, taking into account the geographic and potential conditions. The authors ruled out the possibility of offensive action (towards East Prussia and Lower Silesia) but concentrated on gathering the appropriate forces and protecting strategic points to lead to possible counter-strikes. To implement these assumptions, creating an extensive system of fortifications was necessary; however, they significantly extended the time required for preparation for the war. Importantly, nonetheless, the need to make a rapid effort to modernise and expand the army was emphasised. The year 1939 was mentioned as the first possible date for a German attack on Poland.

War alongside the allies

Different assumptions were adopted in the final version of the defence plan against the Third Reich. Its guidelines were formulated in February 1939, and at the beginning of March work intensified. A

decision was then made to harden the position towards Germany, not excluding military action.

The need to generate active support from Western countries was recognised, especially from France, with whom Poland had been bound by an alliance treaty since 1921. A plan was being drawn up for a future war with France's quick reaction in mind.

The Polish side assumed typical defensive activity, with the possibility of offensive turns, which were to suspend the German attack until the offensive in the west. In a previous report, Kutrzeba pessimistically assumed that Poland could fight alone for 6 to 8 weeks. Marshal Śmigły-Rydz, encouraged by the assurances of France, planned military action over a two-week perspective.

On 13 May 1939, a new military convention was signed with France stipulating that a full French offensive would start within 15 days of mobilisation. According to the future Commander-in-Chief, that was how long it was necessary to maintain the most important forces and centres enabling the war to be conducted further.

It should also be noted that no variant considered the possibility of aggression from Soviet Russia, regarding it as an anti-German factor that would remain neutral in the most pessimistic option.

The general outline of the plan, modified before September 1939, assumed the concentration of all units divided into large army groups on the border with Germany. It was known that the attack would come from three directions: west, north (from East Prussia), and south (from

the then Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, as well as Slovakia). The defence plan, in general, envisaged in the first phase the protection of the borders based on six large army formations (the “Carpathian”, “Cracow”, “Łódź”, “Poznań”, “Pomerania” and “Modlin” Armies, and the Independent Operational Group “Narew”). Of the reserves, the most important was the “Prusy” Army, located behind the “Łódź” and “Cracow” Armies. Peace on the eastern border was to be guarded by formations of the Border Protection Corps. The second stage assumed a withdrawal and formation of defences on the line of the Narew-Vistula-San rivers.

However, Plan West itself was not an operational plan in the full sense of the word, just like Plan East, which had been developed earlier over three years. It was an outline and a general idea that needed to be properly specified. In many areas, such as the communications plan, the fortification plan, or the quartermaster plan, it was not possible to go beyond the ad hoc assumptions. The operational activities themselves were also only generally outlined, further work was carried out in individual armies, which bore the mark of a hastily created makeshift plan. The ultimate strength of the individual groups was unknown; the tasks of other armies were unknown. The plan for the second part of the future clash was developed on an even higher level of generality. As in the case of modernising the army, so in this area of planning activities there was not enough of what could not be bought – time.

Haste, no data...

Many objections were raised against Plan Z. They were formulated in detail by Marian Porwit in his excellent “Commentaries on the history of Polish defence activities in 1939”.

The haste, the lack of proper data, and unrealistic assumptions meant that a difficult war with a more powerful opponent was started without being fully prepared in view of the scant possibilities. What was only an optimistic assumption, that is, the offensive in the West and the neutrality of the Soviet Union, were taken for granted, in fact, the success of the risky operation depended on it.

Poland’s Plan West, as an operational plan in the full sense of the word, was non-existent. The process of drawing it up was interrupted by the war. However, when it broke out, the time for planning had ended and the time for decisions had begun.

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