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Gdańsk in British Diplomacy, 1945–1989*

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Abstract:

Great Britain participated in the decision at the Potsdam Conference to hand over to Poland the territory of the former Free City of Danzig. The area was not recognized as part of Germany by the Great Powers. The aim of the article is to analyze the role that Gdańsk played in British policy towards Poland from the end of the Second World War to the fall of communist rule. It is based on archival research in the National Archives, Kew, supplemented by published British and Polish diplomatic documents, diaries and academic literature on the subject. Based on these sources, the author argues that the importance of the city of Gdańsk in British policy toward the region of East Central Europe diminished during the Cold War in comparison to the city's role as the Free City of Danzig 1919–1939. However, its place was dynamic as Gdańsk became an important center of protests against the communist authorities in the 1970s and 1980s. The city played a special role since the strikes in August 1980, becoming the center of activity of the Solidarity Trade Union. The culmination of British interest was Margaret Thatcher's visit to Gdańsk in 1988.



The importance of the city of Gdańsk in British policy toward the region of East Central Europe diminished during the Cold War in comparison to the city's role in the years 1919–1939. In the interwar period the city functioned as the Free City of Gdańsk established by the Paris Peace Conference. Due to its position in the League of Nations, Great Britain was an informal guarantor of the status quo. Moreover, British economic interests, which included access to the Baltic trade and investment opportunities in Gdańsk, made London's presence in the economic life of the Free City palpable.¹

* The article is based on research supported by Polonia Aid Foundation Trust.

¹ Anna M. Cieniala, "The Battle of Danzig and the Polish Corridor at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919," in: *The Reconstruction of Poland 1914–23*, ed. Paul Latawski (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 71–94; *eadem*, "Wolne Miasto Gdańsk w brytyjskiej polityce zagranicznej 1933–1938,"

Starting in 1920, when the Free City of Gdańsk was established, Great Britain continuously attempted to limit Polish influence in the functioning of the city. This attitude changed only with the British guarantees for Poland given on 31 March 1939. At this point the survival of Poland as an independent state in the face of German expansionism became a vital element of British strategy. Nevertheless, during the last months before World War II, there seemed to exist a possibility that the British would choose another compromise with Hitler in order to preserve peace in Europe. However, before it entered the war with France, the Third Reich sought not just the annexation of the Free City of Gdańsk but the total destruction of the Polish state. This ruled out another “compromise” similar to the Munich Agreement.²

During the “Phony War,” Great Britain was cautious in responding to the Polish demands for incorporation of Gdańsk into Poland following Germany’s defeat. It was not until the Royal Air Force won the Battle of Britain that this attitude would change. Initially, the Polish government-in-exile took the position of the inviolability of the Polish borders of 31 August 1939, but it also claimed the need for territorial adjustments at the expense of Germany, including the incorporation of Gdańsk. The Polish demands were formulated in a memorandum submitted to Ernest Bevin (Minister of Labour and Chairman of Committee on War Aims) on 19 November 1940. This was the first official document demanding that the Free City of Gdańsk, East Prussia, Upper Silesia, and parts of Pomerania, be incorporated into Poland.³

The British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was initially cautious about supporting Polish territorial demands regarding German territories and Gdańsk. It was the dictator of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, who was the first among the Big Three to endorse univocally such claims. On 4 December 1941, in a conversation with the Polish Prime Minister, General Władysław Sikorski, at the Kremlin, he expressed the idea of a significant shifting of the Polish-German borders to the west, even as far as to the Oder River. Sikorski was wary of such extensive territorial demands against Germany, fearing that Stalin would treat these as a compensation for the part of the Polish state he annexed in 1939. Nevertheless, general Sikorski said “Gdańsk and East Prussia were German colonies and a bastion for further German forays to the East, hence they must belong to Poland.”⁴

in: *Gdańsk. Z historii stosunków polsko-niemieckich*, ed. Marek Andrzejewski (Warszawa: Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen, 1998), 98–132; Bolesław Hajduk, “Anglia i Anglicy w gospodarce Gdańska ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem okresu międzywojennego XX wieku (1919–1939),” *Komunikaty Instytutu Bałtyckiego* 49 (2012): 5–28.

² Edward Raczynski, *The British-Polish Alliance: Its Origin and Meaning* (London: General Sikorski Historical Institute, 1948), 5–22; Donald Cameron Watt, *How War Came. The Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1939–1939* (London: Mandarin, 1990), 385–407.

³ *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne* [hereafter: PDD] 1941, ed. Jacek Tebinka (Warszawa: PISM, 2013), 26–29, E. Raczynski to A. Zaleski 19 I 1941; The National Archives, Kew [hereafter: TNA], FO 371/26419, C 14/14/62, Raczynski to A. Cadogan 20 I 1940.

⁴ *Documents on Polish-Soviet Relations 1939–1945*, vol. I: 1939–1943 (London: Heinemann, 1961), 231–246; PDD 1941, 845–848; *The Great Powers and the Polish Question 1941–1945*.

In autumn 1943, during the Teheran Conference, Churchill, the U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Stalin agreed upon the plan to shift the Polish territory to the west at the expense of Germany as an element of the new European security order and as a way to foster Polish-Soviet agreement. On 1 December 1943, at the Big Three meeting Churchill suggested adopting the following statement in regard to the Polish borders:

It was thought in principle that the home of the Polish State and nation should be between the so-called Curzon Line and the line of the Oder, including for Poland East Prussia (as defined) and Oppeln; but the actual tracing of the frontier line required careful study and possibly disentanglement of population at some points.⁵

The British Prime Minister intended to present the above formula to the Polish government, although he rightly doubted that this would satisfy the Poles. Stalin was ready to accept Churchill's proposals, provided that he received the warm water port of Königsberg (Królewiec) along with a part of East Prussia. The Soviet leader did not question the necessity to incorporate the Free City of Gdańsk into Poland.⁶

At the second Big Three conference in Yalta, 4–11 February 1945, it was agreed that Poland was to receive “substantial accessions of territory in the north and west.” Gdańsk was not mentioned but there was little doubt that the Free City annexed by the Third Reich at the start of the war would be transferred to Poland. It was, however, Stalin who set the rules of the game on site, as the Red Army continued to push the Germans west. With its advances, territories formerly held by the Reich, including Gdańsk, were being transferred to the communist Provisional Government in 1945. On 30 March 1945, Krajowa Rada Narodowa (State National Council), acting as the provisional Polish parliament, issued a decree establishing the Gdańsk Voivodeship (province). It included the area of the former Free City of Gdańsk, whose institutions were liquidated by Germany following the annexation in September 1939.⁷

The U.S. and Great Britain reached an agreement with the Soviet Union regarding the extent of Polish territorial gains at the expense of Germany during the third and last of the Big Three conferences in Potsdam on 17 July – 2 August 1945. The question on the future of Gdańsk was not the subject of contention among the great powers. All parties agreed that the city should be transferred

A Documentary Study in Cold War Origins, ed. Antony Polonsky (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 1976), 95–98.

⁵ TNA, CAB 66/45, WP (44) 8, “Tehran Conference,” Record of a Conversation at the Soviet Embassy, 1 I 1943.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States* [hereafter: *FRUS*]. *The Conference at Malta and Yalta 1945* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1955), 973–974; *Dziennik Ustaw*, 1945, nr 11 poz. 57, <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU19450110057>, accessed on 6 I 2022.

to Poland. There was, however, a dispute regarding delineation of the western border of Poland. The question was whether it should follow the Lusatian Neisse line, as demanded by the Polish delegation in Potsdam, or run farther to the east. The decision by the three victorious powers was contained in the Potsdam Protocol:

Pending the final determination of Poland's western frontier, the former German territories east of line Oder-western Neisse, portion of East Prussia, and area of the former free city of Gdansk should be under administration of the Polish state.⁸

Concurrently, the three powers decided to deport the Germans who were living within the borders of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

The statement regarding the former territory of the Free City of Gdańsk in the Potsdam Protocol was significant because it meant that the three powers recognised that the entity with that name ceased to exist. Thus, a legal vacuum was created, which was filled by handing Gdańsk over to the Polish administration, analogous to the areas that had been a part of Germany prior to 1 September 1939. Yet, the final demarcation of Poland's western border was left to be decided at the time of the signing of the peace treaty. The delegations of the three powers gathered in Potsdam spent ample time discussing the borderline marking the limits of Polish administration in the west. The aims of the Western powers and the USSR were to establish a new security order in Central Europe based on an ethnically homogenous Poland. At the time, it was difficult to imagine any significant revisions of these decisions at the future peace conference, save for serious changes in the geopolitical situation.⁹

On 5 July 1945, Great Britain recognised the Provisional Government of National Unity established by the superpowers' decisions based on the Yalta Agreement. This paved the way for the creation of a network of British consulates in Poland. At the Foreign Office meeting of 8 August 1945, it was further planned to establish consular posts in the western and northern territories under Polish administration. The British did not think that the sending of diplomats to Gdańsk, Szczecin or Wrocław would affect the legal stance taken by their country, which was that the final determination of Poland's western border was pending until the peace conference.¹⁰

Before World War II, a British Consul General resided in the Free City of Gdańsk. In the summer 1945, the British consulate in Gdańsk was established. This meant recognition of the Polish rule over the city not just *de facto* but also *de jure*, as the British had to seek Warsaw's *exequatur* to open a consular post

⁸ FRUS. *The Conference of Berlin (The Potsdam Conference) 1945*, vol. II (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1960), 1579–1580.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ TNA, FO 371/47604, N 10307/6/55, C. Warner's minute 10 I 1945; N 10624/6/55, P. Dean's minute 28 I 1945.

there. In London, however, a different view prevailed. Kenneth Pickthorn, a Conservative Member of Parliament, asked the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Ernest Bevin on 31 October 1945 about “what is now the international status of Danzig; whether it is still a State under Articles 100–108 of the Treaty of Versailles; or when and by what juridical process it ceased to be a State.” The MP made a mistake referring to Gdańsk as a state because the wording of the Treaty of Versailles was precisely that of a Free City, without granting it the status of full independence. Bevin replied to this question “The juridical position of the free city of Danzig is, in the view of His Majesty’s Government, unchanged, and will remain so until it is re-determined at the Peace Settlement. The position of Danzig de facto is, as the House is aware, that it was placed under the administration of the Polish State by agreement between His Majesty’s Government, the United States Government and the Soviet Government at the Potsdam Conference.”¹¹

In a message to the Foreign Office of 5 February 1946, the British ambassador to Warsaw, Anthony Cavendish-Bentinck, imprecisely defined the area of operation of the Gdańsk consulate as including: Gdańsk voivodeship, Western Pomerania and Masuria. More precisely, the area covered by its jurisdiction encompassed the following voivodeships: Pomerania, Olsztyn, Gdańsk and Szczecin. Therefore, the area covered by the consulate established in Gdańsk included Szczecin as well. The latter city was of great interest to the British diplomacy. The first British Consul General in Gdańsk was Eric Arthur Cleugh, a consular officer with more than twenty years of experience.¹² In the Diplomat Service List containing the list of countries in which British diplomatic missions and subsidiary posts operated, the name of the city where he was deployed was Danzig. The change of the name to Gdańsk occurred only in 1948. The Consulate General existed in Gdańsk until 1951. Its rank was lowered to a Consulate and as such, it functioned in 1952–1954. In 1954, the consulate moved to Gdynia and was eventually closed in 1966, at the time operating as a one-man post.¹³

The British maintaining a consulate in a strategically positioned port city in the Soviet Bloc was rather unusual behind the Iron Curtain. The port in Gdańsk reopened in July 1945 and was important for the sustenance of the Polish-British trade. Great Britain was interested in importing food from Poland in exchange for industrial goods in the postwar decade. Gdańsk was a good location to observe the voting process in the parliamentary election of January 1947. The elections, as agreed by the Big Three, were supposed to be “free and unfettered” but instead

¹¹ Parliamentary Debates. House of Commons, 31 X 1945, Column 407.

¹² TNA, FO 369/3661, K 2321/770/255.

¹³ *Raporty roczne ambasady brytyjskiej w Warszawie 1945–1970*, ed. Mieczysław Nurek (Warszawa: Naczelna Dyrekcja Archiwów Państwowych, 2003), 427–447; Daniel Czerwiński, “Działania aparatu bezpieczeństwa Polski Ludowej wobec zachodnich placówek dyplomatycznych w Trójmieście na przełomie lat czterdziestych i pięćdziesiątych XX w Trójmieście na przełomie lat czterdziestych i pięćdziesiątych XX w. (zarys zagadnienia),” *Słupskie Studia Historyczne* 19 (2013): 223–224.

were marked by communist coercion and fraud. Ample evidence of it was provided by both British and American diplomatic personnel present in Poland at that time.¹⁴

The consular outpost in Gdańsk (Gdynia) was also a good place for observation and acquiring military and economic intelligence by the British. One specific case involved arms exports from Poland and Czechoslovakia to the developing countries. By mid-1950s, Great Britain was particularly concerned by the policies of Gamel Abdel Naser of Egypt. The leader of the Pan-Arab revolution was a source of worry to London. While communist Poland was not as prominent in military assistance to Egypt as Czechoslovakia, it was at the Polish Naval Academy in the neighboring city of Gdynia where the Egyptian cadets were trained. Moreover, the Russian naval vessels were transferred to the Egyptians via the Polish Navy. British intelligence knew about it.¹⁵

Information gathered by the British on the situation in Poland came not only from the consulates, but also from reports on travels and visits by representatives of the British embassy in Warsaw. For example, in March 1956, a few months before the Polish October marking the political change in Poland towards a more liberal system of Communist regime, a counselor of the British embassy in Warsaw, George Carey-Foster, visited Gdańsk and Szczecin. It was the first official meeting of a British diplomat with the representatives of regional authorities in both port cities, capitals of respective voivodeships, in the post-Stalinist period.¹⁶

George Carey-Foster had more than diplomatic experience. Before taking up the post at the British Embassy in Warsaw, he participated in the meetings of the Joint Intelligence Committee as a representative of the Foreign Office, serving in this ministry in the years 1947–1954 as the head of the Security Department. The change in attitude towards Western diplomats was obvious since Carey-Foster was allowed to visit the port warehouses in Gdynia. This was important because at this time the British embassies around the world were preparing monthly reports on communist penetration into developing countries. Thus, information on the economic contacts of socialist countries, including Poland, with the Third World was collected by the Foreign Office.¹⁷

¹⁴ Nurek, "Pierwsza wizyta ambasadora Wielkiej Brytanii W.F.V. Cavendish-Bentincka w powojennym Gdańsku, listopad 1945 r.," in: *Gdańsk – Gdynia – Europa – Stany Zjednoczone w XIX i XX wieku. Księga pamiątkowa dedykowana prof. A. Cienciale* (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2000), 119–126.

¹⁵ *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, Series I, vol. XI: *European Recovery and the Search for Western Security, 1946–1948*, eds. Gill Bennett, Patrick Salmon (London: Routledge, 2017), 385–386; TNA, FO 371/122589, NP 1016/38, A. Noble to FO 6 I 1956; FO 371/119003, JE 1216/1, A.G. Evans (Gdynia) to Warsaw 24 I 1956; Rafał Witkowski, *Na lądzie i na morzu. Zapiski ze służby w Marynarce Wojennej 1953–1988* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo "Czuwajmy," 1998), 36–37.

¹⁶ Jacek Tebinka, Ryszard Techman, "Z archiwów brytyjskich: raport G. Carey-Fostera z podróży do Gdańska i Szczecina (marzec 1956 r.)," *Przegląd Zachodniopomorski* 4 (2003): 209–226.

¹⁷ TNA, FO 371/122604, Warsaw to FO 6 I 1956.

The report of Carey-Foster's visit contained an interesting section on daily life in the coastal cities. The British diplomat noticed that the inhabitants of Gdańsk and Gdynia were better dressed than the people of Warsaw. Seeking explanation, he was told it was due to access of the citizens of port cities to shops supplying ships and the legal and illegal "import" (smuggling) by the merchant marine sailors. Despite this remark, the summary of the trip did not sound optimistic. Carey-Foster claimed that: "Nowhere else in the war areas of the west that I have visited has as much been left untouched nor are the conditions in which the people live anywhere in similar western areas so depressing."¹⁸

Władysław Gomułka's rise to power in Warsaw as a leader of the Communist Party in October 1956 fundamentally changed British policy towards Poland. During the dramatic days of October 1956, the British consulate in Gdynia provided the embassy in Warsaw with information about presence of the Soviet Fleet at the Gulf of Gdańsk. The Polish October and the Hungarian Revolution marked the end of the Western Powers' liberation efforts. Great Britain ruled out the possibility of NATO military support for any uprisings in satellite countries. A different policy emerged in London, which was to support the "national communist" regime in Poland. The aim of the policy was to develop many contacts and to encourage the communist authorities to preserve the widest possible autonomy from the Kremlin. Since late 1956, the British initiated differentiation in their policies toward the various countries of the Communist Bloc.¹⁹

One offshoot of this change was the embassy's favorable reaction to the establishment in Gdańsk of the Polish-British Friendship Society. Established at the initiative of an academic community, the Society was, however, to remain a local entity for the British feared that at the state level it would be subject to a tight communist control. In Gdynia, the local authorities (city's National Council) established contacts with the British port city of Southampton.²⁰

One issue that continued to stand out in the Polish-British relations in 1956–1970 was the question of the Oder-Neisse border. Clearly, there was an evolution of the British position on the Western border of Poland during the second Berlin crisis. In April 1962, the Foreign Office gave Warsaw secret assurance that "in any negotiations that we might have on the subject of Germany or Berlin Poles could be quite certain that Her Majesty's Government did not regard Poland's western frontier as a subject of barter." Nevertheless, the formal position of Her Majesty's Government was that the final determination

¹⁸ Tebinka, Techman, "Z archiwów brytyjskich," 223–226.

¹⁹ TNA, FO 371/128412, N 1051/3, Lord Hood to H. Caccia, 21 I 1957, "Policy towards the Satellites."

²⁰ TNA, FO 371/135063, NP 1015/27, E. Berthoud to S. Lloyd 13 V 1958; FO 371/135078, NP 1051/6, D. Ormsby-Gore to M. Edelman 9 V 1958, NP 1051/8, FO to Southampton 7 V 1958, NP 1051/12, Warsaw to FO 9 I 1958.

of the frontier between Germany and Poland cannot be formalised until there is a peace settlement.²¹

The status of Gdańsk, however, was beyond any doubt. In 1965, the official historian of the Foreign Office, Rohan Butler, prepared a memorandum on the question of Szczecin in British policy. This resulted from the claims of West German diplomats who indicated that the city should be returned in the event of the unification of Germany because of its location on the western bank of the Oder. There were no such claims towards Gdańsk.²² In fact, in a treaty signed by the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the Soviet Union on 12 August 1970, the parties confirmed the inviolability of the existing borders in Europe, including the Oder-Lusatian Neisse line. The signatories further renounced any territorial claims to any country. A similar wording was also included in the Agreement between the FRG and Poland concerning the basis for normalising relations, signed on 7 December 1970. In the text of the Agreement the parties: “reaffirm the inviolability of their existing frontiers now and in the future and undertake to respect each other’s territorial integrity without restriction.”²³ The British government welcomed the provisions of the FRG-Polish treaty, including the border issue, in an official statement of 20 November 1970. On 7 December 1970, Foreign Secretary sir Alec Douglas Home, speaking in the House of Commons, stated: “We are glad to see the matter of the Oder-Neisse line settled between the Poles and the Germans.”²⁴ Both enunciations left little doubt as to whether the current border line was considered. For the British, the normalisation of relations between Poland and West Germany in December 1970 closed the question of the border, although the legal position of the UK government on the final decision pending a peace treaty was not altered.

In December 1970, Gdańsk became the center of attention of the Foreign Office and of the British public opinion, though for reasons other than the Polish-German treaty. This was due to the Polish workers’ protest against the rise in food prices announced on 12 December 1970 by the authorities of the Polish People’s Republic. Two days later, strikes broke out in the factories in Gdańsk, followed by several days of clashes between numerous crowds, on the one hand, and the militia and the army on the other. They took place first in Gdańsk, and then in Gdynia, Szczecin and Elbląg. As a result, 45 people were killed, most of them shot by security

²¹ Tebinka, “Policy of Great Britain towards Poland between 1956–1970,” *Acta Poloniae Historica* 93 (2006): 158–159.

²² *Brytyjczycy o statusie Szczecina. Tajny raport Rohana Butlera (1965 r.)*, introduction and ed. Tebinka, Techman (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej, 2016).

²³ *Zbiór Dokumentów* 8 (1970): 1445–1448; *Zbiór Dokumentów* 12 (1970): 2034–2037.

²⁴ Parliamentary Debates. House of Commons, 7 I 1970, Column 34; Alfons Klafkowski, *Układ Polska – NRF z 7 grudnia 1970 r. Podstawy interpretacji w świetle prawa międzynarodowego* (Warszawa: Interpress, 1973), 47–48. In a note to the German government of 19 I 1970, the British Cabinet approved the initialed agreement, see: Krzysztof Skubiszewski, *Zachodnia granica Polski w świetle traktatów* (Poznań: Instytut Zachodni, 1975), 144.

forces. The British, who did not have a consular post on the coast after the closing of the consulate in Gdynia in 1966, followed the course of events based on reports from Swedish diplomats, information received from private persons and from the Polish state media. Images from Gdańsk appeared on the front pages of British newspapers. However, the development of the situation in Poland was important, so a short briefing on this subject was presented on 22 December 1970 at a cabinet meeting by the Foreign Secretary, Alec Douglas-Home. The aim of British policy was not to incite riots or uprisings, hence the events in Poland were received with concern. The British feared that the Soviet Union, preoccupied with the development of the situation in Poland, might slow down the process of détente and negotiations with the Western powers over Berlin. However, these fears turned out to be unfounded. Finally, Gomulka was removed from power on 20 December 1970. Edward Gierek replaced him in the position of the First Secretary of the Communist Party.²⁵

The fall of Gomulka was received without much regret in London. In the last years of his rule, British diplomats saw him as a hardline communist leader. It was noticed in London that for the first time in the history of the communist bloc, a social revolt led to the removal of the old party leadership. During the Gierek era the British policy was focused on the development of economic, cultural and scientific contacts and personal exchanges in order to support the evolutionary changes in Poland and other countries of the communist bloc.²⁶

In the 1970s, East-West relations entered the era of détente. In the context of the relationship to Poland, the Polish-West German treaty paved the way to solving the issue of the Gdańsk gold deposited in the Bank von Danzig before the war. Poland demanded the return of the gold of the Free City of Gdańsk (4,726 kg), stolen by the Third Reich in 1939. Already in 1947, Poland sought assistance in this matter by applying to the Tripartite Commission for the Restitution of Monetary Gold, which managed the resources of gold stolen by Nazi Germany. In the first decades after the end of World War II, a commission composed of representatives of the USA, France and Great Britain was in no hurry to make a decision on the Gdańsk gold issue. Formally, reference was made to the formula that the settlement of this matter must wait until the final resolution of the Polish western border issue, although in London there was no doubt that the Free City

²⁵ Nurek, "Dyplomacja brytyjska wobec Grudnia 1970. Pierwsze reakcje i oceny," in: *Polska w podzielonym świecie po II wojnie światowej do 1989 r.*, ed. Marian Wojciechowski (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2002), 279–294; Tebinka, Techman, "Szczecin w polityce brytyjskiej w latach 1945–1970," in: *Polska w podzielonym świecie po II wojnie*, 318–319; Władysław Gomulka, *O problemie niemieckim. Artykuły i przemówienia* (Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza, 1984), 421; *Tajne dokumenty Biura Politycznego. Grudzień 1970*, ed. Paweł Domański (London: Aneks, 1991), 77–78; TNA, CAB 128/47/48, Cabinet Conclusions CM (70) 48, 22 I 1970.

²⁶ Tebinka, *Nadzieje i rozczarowania. Polityka Wielkiej Brytanii wobec Polski 1956–1970* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Neriton, Instytut Historii PAN, 2005), 387–389.

of Gdańsk no longer existed.²⁷ Apart from the agreement between the People's Republic of Poland and West Germany of 1970, crucial to resolving this matter was the consent of the Polish side to linking the Gdańsk gold issue with the taking over of the financial liabilities of the Free City of Gdańsk towards the Western bondholders of that city. Poland agreed to pay 35% of their issue value, which in 1976 amounted to USD 1.2 million. Finally, the agreement on the Gdańsk gold between the Trilateral Commission and Poland was commenced in Brussels on 12 July 1976. The Commission transferred to the National Bank of Poland 2,474 kg of gold worth USD 8.5–10 million. 1,500 kg were in gold bars and the remaining amount in coins.²⁸ The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs was very pleased with this agreement, not only because of retrieving gold. The return of the Gdańsk gold was interpreted as the recognition by Great Britain, the USA and France of the western border and of Gdańsk belonging to Poland.

Furthermore, the era of détente brought about an unexpected consequence for the internal developments in some Soviet Bloc countries, particularly in Poland. On 1 August 1975, the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) was signed. While the Soviets intended for it to be a final approval of the post-war borders in Europe, the Third Basket contained provisions on the protection of Human Rights. While it did not formally give British diplomats the right to intervene on behalf of political prisoners in the Soviet Bloc, it created an opportunity to express concerns about whether detention of dissidents did not break the letter of the Helsinki accords.²⁹

The fate of the Polish dissidents was relayed to the Foreign Office by Alistair Harrison, the Secretary of the British embassy in Warsaw who travelled across the country. On 6–7 February 1980, he was in Gdańsk. His account of the visit based on talks with representatives of the opposition was the first such detailed diplomatic report from this city. It mentioned the name and provided information about Lech Wałęsa, the future leader of the strike at Gdańsk shipyard. Despite the memory of the protests of December 1970, the account of an opposition group in Gdańsk remained outside the current circle of British diplomacy's interest, as it did not seem to pose a major threat to the authorities. Harrison thought otherwise. After spending many hours with dissidents such as Bogdan Borusewicz, Lech Wałęsa, Andrzej Gwiazda and Anna Walentynowicz, he came back to Warsaw obviously impressed by their resolve. The young British diplomat's contacts with dissidents caused concern to British Ambassador in Warsaw Kenneth Pridham,

²⁷ https://gdansk.gedanopedia.pl/gdansk/?title=BANK_VON_DANZIG, accessed on 6 I 2022; TNA, FCO 28/, C.L. Nash (FCO) to Herbert Smith & Co., 14 I 1973.

²⁸ *PDD 1976*, ed. Piotr Długołęcki (Warszawa: Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 2008), 541–544.

²⁹ Tebinka, "Human rights in British policy on Poland (1975–1979)," in: *Human Rights and Political Dissent in Central Europe Between the Helsinki Accords and the Fall of the Berlin Wall*, ed. Jakub Tyszkiewicz (London: Routledge, 2022), 22–25.

who in a letter to the Foreign Office stated that if he had known about Harrison's intentions in advance, he would have denied him permission to go to Gdańsk.³⁰

While British diplomacy and intelligence closely observed the economic crisis developing in Poland in the late 1970s, they were surprised by the wave of strikes that broke out in the summer of 1980 in the Baltic ports of Gdańsk, Gdynia and Szczecin. The fear of provoking the Kremlin by openly supporting the unraveling Solidarity revolution dominated British political thinking. With the imposition of the martial law on 13 December 1981, the British remained convinced that a sudden disintegration of the communist system in Poland could lead to the military intervention of the Warsaw Pact countries. In this situation, martial law was a better solution, even from the point of view of London, than the military intervention of the USSR.³¹

In the years 1982–1987, however, Gdańsk became a place of interest to British diplomacy primarily because of its importance as one of the crucial centers of opposition to the communist regime. This resulted in frequent trips by the embassy personnel to the Tri-City (the conurbation of Gdańsk, Sopot and Gdynia). Besides meetings with the regional communist authorities, the British diplomats, including the ambassador, met with the leader of Solidarity, Lech Wałęsa, as well as other opposition activists and the hierarchs of the Catholic Church. It annoyed the authorities but apart from the surveillance by the Security Service, these meetings were not disturbed.³²

In November 1984 Minister of State at the Foreign Office Malcolm Rifkind visited Warsaw. It resulted in the normalisation of Polish–British political relations. However, it did not stop the British diplomats from contacting opposition leaders, whose activities were deemed illegal by the communist authorities. It was only in October 1987 that the Polish communists accepted the fact that the normalisation of relations with NATO countries involved consenting to meetings of official guests from Western countries with representatives of “Solidarity.” However, these cases continuously caused serious irritation on the part of the Communist leaders.³³

In autumn 1988, the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was invited to visit Poland. The program of her visit was discussed at the meeting of the Secretariat

³⁰ TNA, FCO 28/4141, memorandum by W.A. Harrison “Visit to the Triple City,” 8 I 1980; K.R.C. Pridham to C. Mallaby 14 I 1980.

³¹ The most important British documents for the analysis of the Solidarity revolution and reaction to the introduction of martial law see *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, series III, vol. X: *The Polish Crisis and Relations with Eastern Europe 1979–1982*, eds. Isabelle Tombs, Richard Smith (London: Routledge, 2017); see also *The Polish Crisis 1980–1982 from the Western Perspective*, ed. Piotr Długolecki (Warszawa: PISM, 2022).

³² TNA, FCO 28/6788, J. Morgan to J.A. Birch 24 X 1985, Meeting with Lech Wałęsa 16 X 1985.

³³ Malcolm Rifkind, *Power and Pragmatism. The Memoirs of Malcolm Rifkind* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2016), 185–189; Andrzej Paczkowski, “Boisko wielkich mocarstw: Polska 1980–1989. Widok od wewnątrz,” *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny* 3 (2002): 201–202.

of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party on 10 October 1988. Records of the meeting clearly indicate the annoyance of the communist leader, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, who juxtaposed Thatcher's record fighting the Irish Republican Army with her intent to visit the grave of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko, who was murdered by officers of the Security Service. Moreover, the British Prime Minister planned to meet Lech Wałęsa and other representatives of the opposition over dinner at the church of St. Bridget in Gdańsk. The church was a symbol of resistance to the communist authorities. General Jaruzelski commented: "A nasty woman, while the Anglicans cannot stand these papists at all, she starts everything with Popiełuszko." Jaruzelski called the selection of the site for the planned dinner: "the parish of this thug," referring to the parish priest, Father Henryk Jankowski.³⁴

On 21 October 1988, the displeased Prime Minister of Poland, Mieczysław F. Rakowski, informed the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev about Thatcher's intention to meet the opposition. Seeking to commence the visit, however, the authorities of the Polish People's Republic had no room for maneuver and accepted these points of its program. The only adjustment they made was to limit Jaruzelski's presence next to Thatcher in Gdańsk when jointly paying tribute to the defenders of Westerplatte.³⁵

Margaret Thatcher, the first British Prime Minister to visit Poland, was triumphantly received on 4 November 1988 by the inhabitants of Gdańsk. After paying tribute to the defenders of Westerplatte of 1939, together with General Jaruzelski, she met Lech Wałęsa and representatives of the opposition. She found the sight of the shipyard workers cheering as she sailed on a motorboat from Westerplatte to the Old Town as especially memorable. One other such moment was meeting the crowds at the Monument to the Fallen Shipyard Workers of 1970, to which she paid tribute.

During a sumptuous dinner with Father Henryk Jankowski, the British Prime Minister discussed with Lech Wałęsa and representatives of the opposition how she could help them establish a dialogue with the authorities. Thatcher was very fond of Solidarity, not as a trade union movement, but as an anti-communist force weakening its ideological opponent. Thatcher was eager to appear in the company of oppositionists, but was far from encouraging them to take any radical steps.

During the meeting, it was agreed that the most pressing issue was the legalisation of Solidarity. Margaret Thatcher promised to raise the matter in conversation with General Jaruzelski. Then she met with supporters of Solidarity in the church of St. Bridget. In the square in front of it, a crowd of thousands had gathered. People reacted enthusiastically to the mere fact of the presence of the "Iron Lady."

³⁴ *Tajne dokumenty Biura Politycznego i Sekretariatu KC. Ostatni rok władzy*, ed. S. Perzkowski [Andrzej Paczkowski] (Londyn: Aneks, 1994), 156–160.

³⁵ *Zmierzch dyktatury. Polska lat 1986–1989 w świetle dokumentów*, vol. 1: *lipiec 1986 – maj 1989*, ed. Antoni Dudek (Warszawa: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej. Komisja Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, 2009), 337–338.

The visit to Gdańsk was the peak of Thatcher's popularity in Poland. Wiesław Górnicki, a journalist and advisor to General Jaruzelski, claimed later that the Security Service managed to eavesdrop on the exchange of views between Thatcher and her staff after a meeting with Lech Wałęsa, and the British prime minister "did not hide sharp critical remarks" about the views of the opposition on economic issues.³⁶

The head of the British government kept her word and, during a conversation with General Jaruzelski on 4 November 1988, she raised the issue of the legalisation of Solidarity. Thatcher mentioned the fears expressed by the representatives of the anti-communist opposition that the invitation to talks could be withdrawn by the government at any time. She knew that Gorbachev appreciated Jaruzelski and his attempts at reform, therefore, regardless of the memory of martial law, she treated the general with respect. Jaruzelski was cautious about the restoration of Solidarity, fearing it would quickly become an organisation making wage demands that would prevent the economic reforms planned by Rakowski's government.

In his conversation with the British Prime Minister, the general stated that "the key issue for us is to eliminate extremism, which is fatal to Solidarity itself," praising his side for having gotten rid of "opponents of the agreement." Although the atmosphere of this meeting was less stiff than the previous one, Jaruzelski tried to convince Thatcher that the reception she had received in Gdańsk was unusual. He stated: "Crowds of people cheering for Solidarity slogans are not all of Poland, they are just a group." The conversation ended with the unanimous statement of both politicians that their states should act towards détente within the alliances to which they belong.³⁷

Prime Minister Thatcher's visit to Poland, and especially to Gdańsk, at the beginning of November 1988, including her meeting with Wałęsa and representatives of the opposition, created a good atmosphere for further attempts at negotiation between the communist authorities and Solidarity. The British Prime Minister encouraged both sides to engage in dialogue, thus helping to pave the way to reach an agreement. In the Spring of 1989, the Round Table talks and final agreement accelerated the process of the collapse of the communist system of government in Poland and in Europe.

The collapse of the communist system of power in Poland in 1989 and the subsequent fall of the Berlin Wall closed the chapter when Gdańsk held the attention of British diplomacy. During the negotiations on the conditions of German

³⁶ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (London: Harper Collins, 1993), 777–782; Bernard Ingham, *Kill the Messenger* (London: Fontana, 1991), 273; Wałęsa did not write about meeting with Thatcher in his memoirs: Lech Wałęsa, *Droga do prawdy. Autobiografia* (Warszawa: Świat Książki, 2008); Wiesław Górnicki, *Teraz już można. Ze wspomnień kulawego szpery* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1994), 144.

³⁷ *Okrągły Stół. Dokumenty i Materiały*, vol. 1: *wrzesień 1986 – luty 1989*, eds. Włodzimierz Borodziej, Andrzej Garlicki, Błażej Brzostek, Grzegorz Sołtysiak (Szczecin–Warszawa: Kancelaria Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2004), 268–271; Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, 780–782.

reunification (4 plus 2), no one raised any doubts that this city is a part of Poland. The Western Powers, moreover, did not recognise the annexation of the Free City of Gdańsk by the Third Reich in September 1939. The Chancellor of West Germany, Helmut Kohl, was in no hurry to recognise the border of Western Poland in 1990, but the position of the four powers – the United States, Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union – was unequivocal. A united Germany would cover the territories of West Germany, East Germany and Berlin. In turn, the socio-political transformation in Poland meant that Gdańsk, which played a significant role in the history of Poland as a place of protests against the communist regime, lost this role. The city did not become a place of British investments after 1989. After Thatcher, no British prime minister going to Poland visited Gdańsk. Its exceptional political, economic and social significance has become history.