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The Road to Rapallo: Germany in the Soviet Russia's Policy in the Light of Viktor L. Kopp's Reports for Georgy V. Chicherin from 1920–1921*

Zarys treści: Artykuł dotyczy sowieckiej polityki wobec Niemiec w latach 1920–1921, analizowanej na podstawie raportów dyplomaty Wiktora Koppa do Georgija Cziczerina. Pokazuje, że w Moskwie dojrzewała idea współpracy z Niemcami przeciw państwom Ententy oraz Polsce. W tym okresie Kopp odgrywał kluczową rolę w stosunkach niemiecko-sowieckich, prowadząc rozmowy z niemieckimi politykami, przemysłowcami i wojskowymi, w tym z generałem Hansem von Seecktem.

Outline of content: The article examines Soviet policy towards Germany in 1920–1921, based on the reports of diplomat Viktor Kopp to Georgy Chicherin. It demonstrates that the idea of cooperating with Germany against the Entente powers and Poland was taking shape in Moscow. In that period, Kopp played a key role in German-Soviet relations, holding talks with German politicians, industrialists, and members of the military, including General Hans von Seeckt.

Słowa kluczowe: Rosja, Związek Sowiecki, Niemcy, Rapallo, Kopp, Cziczerin

Keywords: Russia, Soviet Union, Germany, Rapallo, Kopp, Chicherin

I have so often said to Trotsky, who has at last understood me, that an independent Poland poses no great danger to us. Poland is not Russia and no matter what government it has, it will not be dangerous to our Soviet organisation. But we absolutely cannot allow a bourgeois government to be formed in the south of Russia, a government that

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will become a pole of attraction for Ukraine and Central Russia, and we would then lose these provisioning granaries that are so valuable to us. Wrangel is a mortal danger to us and he must be fought at all costs.

Poland – we will possess it anyway, when the hour comes, and in any case, the plans to create a ‘Great Poland’ are grist to our mill, because as long as Poland makes these claims, the Germans will be on our side. The stronger Poland gets, the more the Germans will hate it, and we know how to use this indestructible hatred of theirs. We can always unite the whole Russian people against Poland and we can even ally ourselves with Germany, while the existence of an independent southern Russia [Wrangel’s] will pose a threat to Soviet Russia, permanent ferment of discord, and eternal uncertainty.

I have no special sympathy for the Germans, but I find it easier to deal with them than anyone else, if their pride is to be hurt. As victors, they were useful to us, combating the power of the tsarist regime and bringing corruption to the upper classes, for, in general, Germans are masters of corruption. As the vanquished, they are useful to us as well – thanks to their passive resistance in the enforcement of the peace terms and their underground plans, this state of fever and unrest, which we need in order to carry out our revolutionary work. [...] Everywhere the Germans are our helpers and natural allies, because their bitterness over the defeat they have suffered leads them to riot and disorder, through which they hope to break the iron hoop of the Treaty of Versailles. They want revenge, and we want revolution. For the moment, we have common interests. They will diverge and Germany will become our enemy on the day we want to see whether a new Germanic hegemony or a communist European union will emerge from the ruins of the old Europe.¹

These were apparently words uttered by Lenin to Jules Humbert-Droz, the Swiss delegate to the Second Congress of the Third International in Moscow, in July or August 1920. They were recorded by a Polish intelligence officer, Major Zygmunt Oldakowski, in his report from Bern, sent on 27 September that year to the headquarters in Warsaw. When I read this report for the first time, working in early 1991 in the archive of the Józef Piłsudski Institute in New York on a monograph on Poland’s eastern policy of 1918–1920, I wondered about its credibility and its political significance. Could it be that the leader of the Bolshevik revolution was presenting in this way the logic of Soviet Russia’s geopolitical game with Germany, a logic hidden from the world, and revealed in part only at Rapallo in 1922 and ultimately in Stalin’s pact with Hitler (known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) in August 1939?

The document was undoubtedly authentic. It ended up on the desk of Józef Piłsudski, the Commander-in-Chief. But could the words put into Lenin’s mouth have been true? Were they not perhaps a record of the fears of Polish military circles analysing the potential threat to their country’s independence, which had just been regained and defended against the Red Army’s offensive in the summer of 1920?

¹ Józef Piłsudski Institute of America, Adiunktura Generalna Naczelnego Dowództwa, vol. 29, no. 5239, Report of Maj. Z. Oldakowski of 27 Sept. 1920 from Bern (copy of a translation of Lenin’s statement into Polish).

I was soon able to ascertain that these words were not hidden from the public, but were, in fact, published in an English translation in the most influential British newspaper of the day, *The Times* of London, as early as 6 November 1920 – without the source (that is, Polish intelligence) being mentioned – as correspondence from Helsingfors.² Immediately after that, in December, they appeared in a newsletter published by the Russian émigrés in Berlin, and were subsequently quoted after that source in one of the first (now unjustly forgotten) Western analyses of Soviet foreign policy, by the American historian (a Princeton and Columbia graduate, and a US military intelligence officer during the First World War) Alfred L.P. Dennis.³ Thanks to the memoirs of Jules Humbert-Droz (1891–1971), published towards the end of his long life and covering the period of his participation in the Third International (at Lenin's personal request, he was elected its secretary already in 1921), we can also learn more about the historical and personal context of the conversation recorded by Major Ołdakowski.⁴

It may have indeed been, as it was quoted by Major Ołdakowski in his report. But what real significance could the line of collaboration with Germany have in Soviet Russia's policy in its early years? How did this line emerge? Answers to these questions could first be sought in studies based on archival material from the German side of this collaboration. Let me list just the most important among them, namely studies by Gabriel Rosenfeld, Richard Himmer, Gerhard Wagner, Richard Debo, and Manfred Zeidler.⁵ After the partial opening of post-Soviet archives, this body of knowledge was considerably expanded by source publications of historians using these archives (mostly, though not only, Russian historians). Here it is worth mentioning studies by researchers like Yuri Diakov, Tatiana Bushuyeva, Sergei Gorlov, Viktor Zubachevsky, Yulia Kantor, and Mariusz Wołos.⁶

² *The Times*, 6 Nov. 1920, p. 1.

³ *Ost-Information* (Berlin), no. 81, 4 Dec. 1920; A.L.P. Dennis, *The Foreign Policies of Soviet Russia* (New York, 1924), pp. 154–155.

⁴ J. Humbert-Droz, *Mon évolution du tolstoïsme au communisme, 1891–1921* (Neuchâtel, 1969); id., *L'origine de l'Internationale communiste: De Zimmerwald à Moscou* (Neuchâtel, 1969).

⁵ G. Rosenfeld, *Sowjetrussland und Deutschland, 1917–1922* (Berlin, 1960); R. Himmer, 'Soviet Policy toward Germany during the Russo-Polish War, 1920', *Slavic Review*, 35, no. 4 (1976), pp. 665–682; G. Wagner, *Deutschland und der polnisch-sowjetische Krieg 1920* (Wiesbaden, 1979); R.K. Debo, *Survival and Consolidation: The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, 1918–1921* (Montreal–Kingston, 1992); M. Zeidler, *Reichswehr und Rote Armee, 1920–1933: Wege und Stationen einer ungewöhnlichen Zusammenarbeit* (München, 1994).

⁶ Ю.Л. Дьяков, Т.С. Бушуева, *Фашистский меч ковался в СССР: Красная Армия и рейхсвер: Тайное сотрудничество, 1920–1933: Неизвестные документы* (Москва, 1992); С.А. Горлов, *Совершено секретно: Москва–Берлин, 1920–1933: Военно-политические отношения между СССР и Германией* (Москва, 1999); В.А. Зубачевский, *Политика России в Центрально-Восточной Европе (первая треть XX в.): geopolитический аспект* (Москва, 2019), pp. 129–136 [a summary of the author's many years of earlier research on the subject – my thanks go to Prof. Mariusz Wołos for drawing my attention to this important publication]; Ю. Кантор, *Заклятая дружба: секретное сотрудничество СССР и Германии в 1920–1930-е годы*

In preparing my monograph on the political relations of 'Poland and three Russias' in 1918–1920, I also had the opportunity to gather material for it in some Moscow archives, including the Russian Central Archive of Social and Political History, which contains fonds with documents relating to the most important activists of the Bolshevik party and the institutions controlled by it. In the fonds of Lenin's secretariat (fond 5, op. 1, Documents of Lenin's state activities 1917–1923), my attention was especially drawn to documents listed under no. 2137: Letters and reports from the plenipotentiary representatives of the RSFSR in Germany to the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs on the situation in Germany and the Soviet-German relations. With its 87 folios, the collection includes letters from 11 June 1920 to 1 October 1921. Most of them – and up to June 1921 all of them – are by Viktor Kopp (the last part, from the summer of 1921, also features some reports by Yuri Lutovinov). They are all addressed to the Commissar of Foreign Affairs, Georgy Chicherin, with copies forwarded to Lenin, and, less often, to Trotsky.

The importance of the information from this fonds for understanding Soviet Russia's foreign policy in 1920–1921, as well as the internal discussions among its authors about the possibilities of developing relations with Berlin, seemed fundamental to me. In the narrative of my monograph, focused on Józef Piłsudski's eastern policy, they are of secondary importance – and this was how I use them. I return to a specific theme presented in this fonds in another of my monographs, where I examine the case of a clandestine meeting between the envoy of the Polish Deputy Prime Minister Ignacy Daszyński and Viktor Kopp in Berlin, in late September 1920, the purpose of which was to accelerate the conclusion of an armistice and then peace treaty in the still ongoing Soviet-Polish war.⁷

Looking not so long ago at how Soviet-German relations between 1918 and 1921 are presented in the Polish literature, as well as in the more recent Western historiography, I was surprised to find that the archive fonds in question had not yet been presented in detail or analysed. Although a few publications mention Viktor Kopp as an important figure in shaping Soviet Russia's policy in Berlin, they do so without providing a broader context or the essential material base, for example, available at the RGASPI (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History).⁸

(Санкт-Петербург, 2009); Ю. Кантор and М. Волос, *Треугольник Москва – Варшава – Берлин: очерки истории советско-польских-германских отношений в 1918–1939 гг.* (Санкт-Петербург, 2011).

⁷ See A. Nowak, *Polska i trzy Rosje. Polityka wschodnia Piłsudskiego i sowiecka próba podboju Europy w 1920 roku (wydanie poszerzone)* (Kraków, 2021; 1st edn 2001), pp. 517–521, 667–673, 687–694; id., *Pierwsza zdrada Zachodu. 1920: zapomniany appeasement* (Kraków, 2015), pp. 449–483; English edn: *The Forgotten Appeasement of 1920. Lloyd-George, Lenin and Poland* (London – New York, 2023), pp. 253–273.

⁸ See e.g. P. Madajczyk, 'Niemcy wobec wojny polsko-radzieckiej 1920 r.', in *Wojna polsko-sowiecka 1920 roku. Przebieg walk i tło międzynarodowe*, ed. A. Koryn (Warszawa, 1991), pp. 172–174; K. Jońca, *Wojna polsko-sowiecka 1920 roku w dokumentach niemieckiej dyplomacji* (Wrocław,

A breakthrough in recent Russian historiography came with, in addition to the already mentioned valuable study by Viktor Zubachevsky, studies devoted to Kopp and Soviet-German relations of 1918–1924 by a researcher from the Ivanovo State University, Professor Vasily Chernoperov. They are based on comprehensive, well-used research conducted in the most important archives relevant to this subject – not only the RGASPI, but also the AVPRF (Archiv Vneshney Politiki Rossiiskoy Federatsiyi – which includes the fonds of Chicherin's secretariat, the German desk, and the personnel department), the GARF (Gosudarstvennyi Archiv Rossiyskoy Federatsii – here we can find the fonds of the People's Commissar of Foreign Trade, Leonid Krasin).⁹ Chernoperov's studies – little known or, rather, never cited in Polish, and hardly ever cited in Western historiography – make it possible to reconstruct in greater detail than ever before the meanderings and contexts of the origins of Soviet policy towards Germany.

Using the results of this research, it is possible to delve more deeply into the contents of Viktor Kopp's reports to Chicherin, as well as other source material gathered in the course of my research at the RGASPI (including the minutes of the Politburo of the Bolshevik Party's Central Committee and the reports of Adolf Joffe, the other key Soviet diplomat in the relations with Germany) and the RGVA (Rossiyskiy Gosudarstvennyi Voyennyi Arkhiv). Above all, it is possible to see, in a new and powerful light, the strategic significance of the peculiar game Soviet Russia began playing with Germany in 1920. And this is what I want to offer to the readers of this article.

The starting point for understanding Soviet-German relations must be the Peace of Brest-Litovsk of 3 March 1918. The treaty, which Lenin decided to conclude with the Central Powers, primarily the Second German Reich, less than four months after seizing power in Petrograd, was a tactical concession forced by

2002), pp. 27–28; W. Petter, 'Niemcy i Reichswehra w wojnie polsko-sowieckiej (1919–1920)', in *Rok 1920 z perspektywy osiemdziesięciu lat*, ed. A. Ajnenkiel (Warszawa, 2001), pp. 250–253; B. Musiał, *Kampfplatz Deutschland, Stalins Kriegspläne gegen den Westen* (Berlin, 2008); Polish edn: *Na zachód po trupie Polski* (Warszawa, 2009).

⁹ See e.g. В.Л. Чернoperов, *Дипломатическая деятельность В.Л. Коппа и подготовка большевиками 'германского Октября' в 1923 году* (Иваново, 2006); id., *Дипломатическая деятельность В.Л. Коппа в Германии в 1918–1921 гг.* (Иваново, 2006); id., 'Viktor Kopp und die Anfänge der sowjetisch-deutschen Beziehungen 1919 bis 1921', *Vierteljahrsshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 60, no. 4 (2012), pp. 529–554; id., 'Силезский вопрос' в политической жизни Германии и международных отношениях по донесениям советских и британских дипломатов (1920–1922 гг.), *Вестник Томского государственного университета*, no. 488 (2023), pp. 191–195; id., 'Дипломат В.Л. Копп и его роль в формировании советской политики в отношении Германии в (1919–1924 гг.)', thesis for the degree of Doctor of Historical Sciences (Н. Новгород, 2006), the most complete version among Prof. Chernoperov's studies on Kopp has been obtained from the website: <https://www.dissercat.com/content/diplomat-vl-kopp-i-ego-rol-v-formirovani-sovetskoi-politiki-v-otnoshenii-germanii-1919-1924> – and provides the basic framework of reference for Kopp's biography in the remainder of my article. I would also like to thank here Prof. Svetlana Mulina for her assistance in gaining access to this fundamental work.

circumstances, namely the military weakness of the new Soviet government (lack of an army). Lenin (despite the opposition of some members of the Bolshevik Party leadership to this decision) was, as it were, buying time to allow the Soviet government to consolidate, in exchange for the territory ceded by Russia under the treaty. Marxist ideology, as interpreted by Lenin during the First World War, added a clear sequel to this tactic: the hope of an imminent revolution in war-weary Europe, especially in Germany, a country with the strongest working class. The 'peaceful coexistence' with the capitalist (or imperialist, according to Lenin's terminology) neighbour was expected to soon move into that revolutionary stage which would resolve all foreign policy dilemmas or, in fact, would resolve foreign policy itself.

However, what would influence the future development of the 'German line' in Soviet state policy stemmed not only from ideology but also from the geopolitical and institutional-legal consequences of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. These included, above all, the very establishment of regular diplomatic relations between Soviet Russia and the Second Reich. In April 1918, Wilhelm von Mirbach arrived in Moscow (via Petrograd) as German ambassador, while Adolf Joffe was received in Berlin in the analogous capacity as plenipotentiary representative of Soviet Russia. Willy-nilly, the Soviet state had to deal with the organisation of not only the preparations for a European revolution, but also a foreign policy apparatus capable of pursuing that policy in Russia's relations with other, 'bourgeois' states. On 30 May 1918, the position of the head of this apparatus – the People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs – was entrusted to Georgy Chicherin.

By signing a peace treaty with Germany and its allies (Austria-Hungary, Turkey, and Bulgaria), the Soviet state was exploiting the division in the 'capitalist camp' caused by the Great War. At the same time, however, it inevitably entered into this division, if only tactically: siding with the Central Powers against the Entente Powers. The closure of the eastern front was obviously helping the Germans to focus on the decisive battle in the West. Russia, like Ukraine, established under the patronage of the Central Powers by the earlier Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, could become a valuable resource base for the Second Reich. This geostrategic calculation allowed the relations between Wilhelm II's Germany and Lenin's Russia to survive its most profound crisis. It was brought about by the assassination of the German ambassador Mirbach on 6 July 1918 by left-wing Esers, who were trying to start an uprising against Bolshevik rule in Moscow. The assassination called into question the sense of Germany's continued policy of seeking agreement with Soviet Russia. Yet the conviction that ultimately prevailed in Germany was that this course was worth maintaining – in view of the increasingly difficult situation on the Western Front. The assassination of the ambassador required an official apology from the Soviet side. Lenin personally went to the embassy building, but refused to express any public remorse on behalf of his state. Another thread that must be introduced at this point was Lenin's unique complex, involving the investigation launched against him and made public a year earlier (in July 1917) by the

Provisional Government of the Russian Republic, which was intended to demonstrate the Bolshevik leader's links to the German General Staff and the Second Reich's financing of his party's subversive activity behind the lines of the Russian army fighting the Germans. In 1917, Lenin was publicly denounced as a German agent.¹⁰ As we shall see, this complex would again have a significant impact on the further history of Soviet-German relations.

Among the tasks which the Soviet officials received in Berlin, which they had to complete as urgently as possible, was the matter of exchanging prisoners of war: there were more than 1.25 million Russian soldiers held captive in Germany, and nearly 170,000 soldiers of Emperor Wilhelm II in Russia. The Soviet mission in Berlin had no professional staff. Faced with such a situation, its head, Adolf Joffe, sought to obtain a release of Viktor Leontevich Kopp, his comrade from the 1909–1912 period, when they jointly published the newspaper *Pravda* (associated with Lev Trotsky at the time) in Vienna. It was to Kopp that he entrusted the office that was to handle the evacuation of Russian prisoners of war and, at the same time, (unofficially) engage in revolutionary agitation among these prisoners. Born in Yalta in 1880 to a bourgeois Jewish family, Kopp studied at the Kharkiv Institute of Technology (where he met Leonid Krasin, the future Soviet foreign trade commissar). Active in the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (initially, like Joffe, in its Menshevik faction), from 1903 he organised its illegal system for transferring people and political literature in Berlin. Drafted into the tsarist army with the outbreak of the Great War, he was taken prisoner by the Germans in 1915. And it was from there that he was called to his first position in Soviet foreign policy: counsellor of the representative office in Berlin and head of the Re-evacuation Office.¹¹

Apart from the organisation of the return of the POWs, another aspect of this first, brief stage of Soviet Russia's relations with Germany deserves to be highlighted as a prelude to a more permanent line: the launch of talks on close economic cooperation between Soviet delegates and the most important representatives of German industrial and financial circles. The talks were initiated as early as July 1918 in Berlin by Joffe and Leonid Krasin (before the First World War, the latter combined revolutionary activity in the Bolshevik party with a managerial career in the big German company Siemens und Schuckert). The hopes, expressed by Joffe's and Krasin's German interlocutors, for a good deal with 'Jewish businessmen', that is, German companies taking control of Russian raw materials and ousting the rival Anglo-Saxon or French capital from the Russian market, were also shared by the Imperial Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹²

¹⁰ See R. Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York, 1990), pp. 407–438, 567–670.

¹¹ I provide the data on Kopp's biography and political career after Черноперов, 'Дипломат В.Л. Копп', pp. 112–138.

¹² See K. Riezler, *Tagebücher, Aufsätze, Dokumente-eingeleitet und herausgegeben von Karl Dietrich Erdmann* (Göttingen, 2009), pp. 385–387; cf. W. Baumgart, *Deutsche Ostpolitik 1918: von Brest-Litowsk bis zum Ende des Ersten Weltkrieges* (Oldenbourg, 1966), pp. 262–284.

Although Soviet Russia had concluded an additional political and economic treaty with the Second Reich on 27 August 1918, in view of Germany's apparent defeat on the Western Front, Lenin and his comrades in the Bolshevik Party leadership were already preparing to implement their 'Plan A', that is, a revolution in Germany. With preparations for it, led by Joffe's outpost in Berlin, well under way, the Soviet delegation was expelled from Germany on 6 November and diplomatic relations were severed.

However, the plans of Lenin, Trotsky, and other Soviet leaders, pursued with full conviction since at least October 1918, did not materialise. Despite the vast sums of money (more than ten million roubles in gold) allocated by Joffe and his staff to supporting revolutionary activities in Germany, the Soviet-inspired uprisings (for example, in Bremen and Berlin) were brutally suppressed by early 1919. Under the leadership of the Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert, the political foundations were laid for a new Germany, a parliamentary republic, later contemptuously referred to by Adolf Hitler as the Weimar Republic – after the place where its constitution was adopted. For the time being, the Red Army proved too weak to break through to Berlin through the 'partition wall' (Stalin's term) of the new or rebuilt states that came to separate Soviet Russia and Germany after 1917. The state that stood in the way above all was Poland, against which the Red Army had waged a war since early 1919.

However, what still remained just as significant was the plan – which I have taken the liberty of calling 'Plan A' – of the leadership of the Bolshevik Party and Soviet Russia, to bring about a European revolution and turn Germany into its second focus, alongside Russia. The durability of these intentions was reflected in the establishment of the Third International in March 1919. It was to bring together communist organisations recognising the leading role of Moscow as the first 'homeland' of the international proletariat. The manifesto of the International, drafted by Trotsky, left no doubt that the strategic goal was still a 'worldwide October'.

In practice, from the spring of 1919 onwards, the Bolshevik leadership had to focus its military efforts on the home front: the fight against 'White' Russia. It also needed economic contacts with the outside world in order to address immediate logistical and economic needs in the ruined country. This meant that Moscow had to adopt plans not to achieve maximum gains, but to survive and prepare for the next revolutionary offensive in the more or less distant future. The division in the enemy camp, or the 'capitalist encirclement', provided a natural opportunity to do so. The vanquished Germany, forced to accept the terms of the Treaty of Versailles and not reconciled to the loss of its territories in the east to a reborn Poland, appeared in such circumstances as a convenient partner with whom it was worth resuming the political game against a common enemy: the victorious Western powers and, especially, Poland. The dismantling of the Polish 'partition wall', that is, a state separating Soviet Russia from Germany, and the resumption of economic (or even military) cooperation between the two powers

contesting the fragile Versailles order were two easy motives for re-establishing relations between them.

The initiative came from the Soviet side. On 17 April 1919, Chicherin's proposal to the German government to engage in serious peace talks with Bolshevik Russia was announced on the radio.¹³ On 12 May, German intelligence made contact in Stockholm with a Soviet diplomatic agent, Karl Moor, who encouraged Berlin to cooperate with "the only country at present not controlled by the Entente". Moor was given an opportunity to come to Berlin. There, he sought to persuade the head of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau, to take his proposal seriously and send at least a trade mission to Moscow. When the Germans were forced to accept the final version of the Treaty of Versailles, this prompted the ostentatious dismissal of Brockdorff-Rantzau. However, just before the dismissal was announced – on 12 June – he had managed to approve the arrival of Viktor Kopp in Germany as a special envoy of the Soviet government. The shared hostility towards the Versailles system established by the Western powers inspired the idea of building a strategic axis between Soviet Russia and Germany, an axis that would cross Poland. Over the following two years, Kopp would be the main channel for discussing this idea between Berlin and Moscow.¹⁴

He returned to Berlin in the second half of July 1919. His regular partner in political talks was the head of the Russian desk in the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Adolf (Ago) von Maltzan. Kopp was also received on several occasions by Hermann Müller, Minister of Foreign Affairs (from June 1919 to March 1920 and then Chancellor from March 1920 to 21 June 1920). In the early months, it was Karol Radek who paved the way for Kopp to establish numerous contacts among the German economic elite. Sent to Berlin from Moscow to organise a communist party and an uprising against the legitimate government, after the failure of the January 1919 rebellion, Radek was imprisoned in Moabit. Treated almost as a guest of honour by his German hosts from August onwards, Radek ran a political salon in Moabit, as it were (until he left the prison at the end of that year), with the most important politicians and financiers of the nascent Weimar Republic visiting him.¹⁵

Radek's guests and Kopp's new contacts were representatives of the so-called eastern orientation in German politics, that is, supporters of cooperation with Russia, even Bolshevik Russia, against the victorious Western powers. Alongside such influential business figures in as Walther Rathenau, co-owner of Germany's largest electrical company AEG, they included the first representatives of military circles, in despair over the reduction of the Reichswehr under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.¹⁶

¹³ Документы внешней политики СССР, vol. 2: 1 января 1919 г. – 30 июня 1920 (Москва, 1958), pp. 131–135; Debo, *Survival and Consolidation*, pp. 47–66.

¹⁴ See Debo, *Survival and Consolidation*, pp. 67–70.

¹⁵ See J.-F. Fayet, *Karl Radek (1885–1939). Biographie politique* (Bern, 2004), pp. 289–314.

¹⁶ See Черноперов, 'Дипломат В.Л. Копп', pp. 174–210.

The treaty entered into force in January 1920, coinciding with the Bolsheviks' final victory in the Russian Civil War. The question that remained open was whether Soviet Russia would choose to stabilise its position in the Versailles system. Will it try again to break it up? In the first case, Soviet diplomacy had the option of taking the route that the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George wanted to open for it. It was a path of negotiation, leading to trade deals and then political deals concluded through a compromise with the Western powers.¹⁷ Under the second scenario, Soviet Russia was faced with two mutually exclusive options. It could go back to the plan of carrying out a frontal attack on the core of the capitalist system and taking the revolution to Berlin. However, it could also develop the idea of working with a non-revolutionary Germany, with a German state seeking to break the "iron rim of the Versailles Treaty". In both of these possible versions of Lenin's policy, Poland had to occupy a strategic place in 1920: either as a country on the path of the revolution from Moscow to Berlin, or as a state to be once again territorially divided between Moscow and Berlin, and thus to satisfy Germany's revisionist appetites and restore Russia's strategic domination over Eastern Europe.

Quite a few people in Germany were waiting for such an offer. In addition to the bitterness over the Versailles terms and tension over the anticipated plebiscite struggle for Silesia, and Warmia and Masuria, the ground for such sentiments in German nationalist circles in early 1920 was made more fertile by the demands of the Entente that both the Kaiser himself, in exile in the Netherlands at the time, and many of his officers, accused of war crimes, be brought before a tribunal. The newly appointed Reichswehr commander, General Hans von Seeckt, speaking in public and writing in his private letters, expressed his indignation and the need to establish in such a situation genuine cooperation with Russia, no longer 'White' (because it had collapsed), but 'Red'. He demanded that, at the very least, Soviet Russia should not be hindered in its efforts to regain its 1914 borders. If the devil is taking Poland, this devil must be assisted, as he said in February 1920, during a public lecture in Hamburg. At the beginning of March, representatives of all parties in the Reichstag Foreign Affairs Committee spoke out strongly in favour of establishing relations, beginning with trade relations, with Soviet Russia as soon as possible. In March and April, Kopp held further meetings with the leaders of German industry. His plans included ordering 1,200 steam locomotives for Soviet Russia; he also discussed purchasing 22 aircraft. Rathenau, in turn, insisted on a visit by a delegation of German financiers and industrialists to Moscow for serious talks on cooperation. Kopp, meanwhile, had obtained official confirmation of his status as Soviet Russia's plenipotentiary for the evacuation of prisoners of war and moved to new stately headquarters at Unter den Linden 7. He continued

¹⁷ This political line is discussed in my monograph, see Nowak, *The Forgotten Appeasement of 1920*.

to do what he could to persuade his superiors in Moscow to speed up the talks with Berlin.¹⁸

He came up against obstacles. The most serious among them was Lenin's recurring hope for the rapid implementation of the maximum plan: a revolution in Germany. That hope was revived by the attempted right-wing putsch on 13 March by Wolfgang Kapp and General Walther von Lüttwitz. Having received no clear support from the Reichswehr, Gustav Bauer's social democratic government fled to Dresden and then to Stuttgart. However, the general strike he organised quickly paralysed the putschists and forced them to capitulate. The communists, who did not support the strike in defence of the social democratic government, themselves attempted to exploit the chaos to overthrow Bauer's government. On 3 April, Hermann Müller's new government deployed troops to the Ruhr area, engulfed by a communist uprising, on the right bank of the Rhine, thus breaking the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, which established the Rhineland as a demilitarised zone. This in turn provoked France to retaliate – three days later, French soldiers entered Frankfurt and several other cities in West Germany. The Soviet leaders saw the putsch as an opportunity to fulfil their dream of a communist victory in Germany. At the opening of the Ninth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) on 29 March, Lenin described the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch as a German Kornilov affair that would "play the same role as in Russia", ushering in a turn towards 'proletarian Soviet rule in Germany'. At a meeting in Moscow on 25 March, the German communists, after listening to a report by their leader, Julian Marchlewski, resolved that they would make every effort to form, as soon as possible, a strike force from the German prisoners of war still remaining in Russia to support a proletarian uprising in Germany.¹⁹

The prospects for geopolitical cooperation between Moscow and Berlin were opened up by a new phase of the Soviet-Polish war, especially when the Red Army launched a vigorous offensive towards Warsaw in May 1920. On the German side, the 'eastern orientation' was also reinforced by the preparations for the plebiscite in Masuria, Warmia and Powiśle (11 July) and the related expectation that the Red Army, having seized more areas, including Gdańsk Pomerania, would hand them over to the Germans. Another factor reinforcing the orientation towards an alliance with Soviet Russia was the failure of German diplomatic efforts at the Spa Conference in early July. The aim of these efforts was to obtain permission to raise the Reichswehr to 200,000 troops (as a potential bulwark against a Bolshevik offensive into the centre of Europe) and, above all, to reduce Germany's economic burden resulting from the Treaty of Versailles.

¹⁸ See e.g. Wagner, *Deutschland*, pp. 42–52; Hans Meier-Welcker, *Seeckt* (Frankfurt am Main, 1967), p. 295; Himmer, *Soviet Policy toward Germany*, pp. 665–675; Черноперов, 'Дипломат В.Л. Копп', pp. 212–226.

¹⁹ See *Коминтерн и идея мировой революции: Документы*, сост. Я.С. Драбкин и др. (Москва, 1998), pp. 160–163.

On 11 July, precisely on the day of the plebiscite in Warmia, Masuria and Powiśle, and a week after the start of the decisive offensive of the Red Army's Western Front on Warsaw, Kopp met with Ago von Maltzan, a liaison officer from the Auswärtiges Amt. It should be noted that since 25 June, Germany had been governed by a coalition cabinet with Konstantin Fehrenbach (from the Centre Party) as Chancellor and the non-affiliated lawyer Walter Simmons as Minister of Foreign Affairs. In Kopp's view, the new government was more inclined to cooperate with Soviet Russia than its social democratic predecessor, which Kopp referred to as a "bastard" (ублюююдоичный) government in his 3 July telegram to the commissar of foreign affairs.²⁰ Informing Chicherin on 12 July of the plebiscite results as "the end of the Polish nightmare", Kopp argued for the conclusion of a formal peace with Germany and the start of close cooperation as soon as possible. On 16 July, in his subsequent report to the foreign affairs commissar, he explained what this cooperation should consist of: a Soviet-German conference should first of all address the "resolution of the Polish question". As Maltzan informed his superiors on 19 July, Kopp assured him that day that Moscow would speak strongly in favour of taking back Gdańsk Pomerania and Upper Silesia from Poland, and handing them over to Germany. It is important that "the [Pomeranian] corridor should fall", emphasised Maltzan's Soviet interlocutor.²¹

Yet Lenin pushed through a different policy decision at that time. A meeting of the Party's Central Committee on 16 July featured a discussion about the answer to the question of whether the Red Army should go farther west, "through the corpse of White Poland", or whether it should stop at the Bug River border, proposed by the British government in the so-called Curzon note of 11 July. In short: a European revolution or a geopolitical deal with other powers, restoring (Soviet) Russia's status as an equal empire. Lenin and two other Politburo members, Stalin and Lev Kamenev, as well as Grigory Zinovev and Nikolai Bukharin, who were preparing the Second Congress of the Third Communist International, about to begin at that point, were carried increasingly on a wave of 'revolutionary enthusiasm'. They wanted to attempt a full Sovietisation of Poland and go further west. In addition to the members of the Central Committee (the absentees included Stalin, who was in his capacity as commissar with the South-Western Front advancing on Lviv), among the participants in the 16 July meeting were the commissars of foreign affairs and trade, Chicherin and Krasin. In the ensuing lively debate Trotsky was not very optimistic about the prospects for further attack: The Poles are not giving up, there is no visible disintegration in their army. However, he called for

²⁰ Kopp's letter to Chicherin of 3 July 1920 is quoted extensively by Зубачевский, *Политика России*, p. 134.

²¹ 'Aufzeichnung des Wirklichen Legationsrats Freiherr von Maltzan. 19.07.1920', in *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik: 1918–1945. Serie A, vol. 3* (Göttingen, 1985) (hereinafter: ADAP), pp. 430–431. Kopp's reports for Chicherin of 12 and 16 July are discussed after Черноперов, 'Дипломат В.Л. Копп', pp. 248–253.

the mediation offered by the British Prime Minister to be accepted – he saw it as an opportunity to deepen the rift between France (reluctant, of course, to reach an agreement with Moscow) and England, ready to sell Poland in the name of concord with Moscow. Karol Radek, as a member of the Central Committee, was also critical of the possibility of a revolutionary attack on Europe. Some scepticism was also expressed by Aleksei Rykov, Mikhail Kalinin, and the author of the notes, Preobrazhensky. Lenin's opinion prevailed, however. In the end, the Plenum expressed its support, formally without opposition, for his proposal: to continue advancing on Warsaw, towards full Sovietisation of Poland, but also not to break off the talks with the British in London, but to conduct them on Soviet terms.²²

Regardless of the differences between the members of the Central Committee, revealed in the course of the decision-making process, after 16 July, all had to follow one line. This was no longer just about Poland. On 23 July, Lenin convened a session of the Second Congress of the Third International in Moscow. The essential aims of Soviet Russia's strategy were expressed in a telegram that day from Lenin to Stalin, who was leading the Red Army's South-Western Front assault on southern Poland. In view of this direction of Stalin's offensive, Lenin wrote that he, together with Zinoviev and Bukharin, considered it necessary to "stimulate the revolution in Italy", and, along the way, to Sovietise Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. In his reply the following day, Stalin deemed these objectives very much realistic.²³

And what was Germany's place in this strategy? The chairman of the Republic's Revolutionary Military Council (or Revvoensoviet), Lev Trotsky, described it quite vividly: "A White Poland was that impenetrable wall that separated us from the huge gunpowder supplies [literally: gunpowder cellars] of revolutionary Germany. [...] A Red Poland means a proletarian revolution in Germany" ("Белая Польша была той непроницаемой стеной, которая отделяла нас от могущественных пороховых погребов революционной Германии [...] Красная Польша означает пролетарскую революцию в Германии").²⁴ Meanwhile, on 20 July, President Ebert issued a proclamation declaring the German Republic's neutrality in the Soviet-Polish war. On 23 July, Fehrenbach's government took the decision

²² Discussion and all quotations from the Central Committee's meeting of 16 July after E.A. Преображенский, *Архивные документы и материалы: 1886–1920 гг.* (Москва, 2006), pp. 349–350; see also Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsialno-Politicheskoi Istorii (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History; hereinafter: RGASPI), fond 17, op. 2, Minutes of the plenary meetings of the Russian Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), d. 31, Minutes of the meeting of 16 July 1920, pp. 1–2. The minutes of the plenum of 16 July (without theses and complete resolutions) were published in *Известия ЦК КПСС*, no. 1 (1991), pp. 121–122.

²³ *Коминтерн и идея*, p. 186 (Lenin's telegram to Stalin, 23 July 1920); *Большевистское руководство. Переписка, 1912–1927: Сборник документов*, ed. A.V. Квашонкин, O.B. Хлевнюк, L.P. Кошелева (Москва, 1996), p. 145 (Stalin's telegram to Lenin, 24 July 1920).

²⁴ Л.Д. Троцкий, 'Доклад на Всероссийском съезде профессионального союза железнодорожников', 21 July 1920, in Л.Д. Троцкий, *Сочинения, Серия V, vol. 15* (Москва, 1927), p. 404.

(announced two days later) not to allow any transports of war material through German territory, which, obviously, only affected Poland. On 22 July, Lenin issued a directive to Chicherin that Kopp should hold talks in Berlin, which led only to a trade agreement, not a political agreement. The next day, however, Kopp, immediately after his conversation with Minister Simmons, urged Chicherin to persuade his party superiors to strike a political deal with Berlin on the following terms: “1) Poland should cease being a barrier and become a bridge between Germany and Russia” (“Польша должна перестать быть барьером и стать мостом между Германией и Россией”); “2) the problem of the West Prussian Corridor, vital for Germany, can only be solved by us [that is, by the Red Army, now approaching the Pomeranian ‘corridor’ – A.N.]” (“жизненный для Германии вопрос западно-прусского коридора может быть разрешен только нами”). Under point three, Kopp linked the question of a final political settlement with Germany to an agreement with the Entente powers, after Poland’s defeat, of course.²⁵

In his conversation with Kopp, Simmons set solving the Mirbach’s murder from two years earlier as a prerequisite for starting concrete political talks with Moscow “about good neighbourly relations”. In an official letter, which the German minister sent to his Soviet counterpart on 22 July, he expressed specific wishes: the German flag should be flown on the house where Mirbach was killed, and a company of Soviet troops, after giving an honorary salute in a tribute to the victim, should march solemnly in front of the building.²⁶ The following day, Kopp set off for Moscow to hand over the German minister’s letter to the foreign affairs commissariat and to hold the necessary political consultations on further negotiations with Berlin. Kopp’s proposals and Fehrenbach’s letter were discussed at a meeting of the Central Committee’s Political Bureau on 31 July. The ‘highest authority’, headed by Lenin (apart from him, the only other permanent member of the Politburo present was Nikolai Krestinsky; Trotsky and Stalin were absent, because they were busy with the war against Poland, while Lev Kamenev had been sent to London for diplomatic talks), decided that Chicherin should prepare a “peace conference with Germany on the resumption of trade relations”. Significantly, at the same meeting, the terms of the ‘peace’ talks with Poland were approved; they were tantamount to its Sovietisation.²⁷

²⁵ Quoted from Kopp’s telegram to Chicherin of 23 July 1920 (from the fond kept at the AVPRF after Чернoperов, ‘Дипломат В.Л. Копп’, p. 256).

²⁶ Letter from Simmons to Chicherin, 22 July 1920, in *Советско-германские отношения от переговоров в Брест-Литовске до подписания Рапалльского договора. Сборник документов*, vol. 2: 1919–1922 (Москва, 1971), p. 198.

²⁷ Minutes of the meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of 31 July 1920, RGASPI, fond 17, op. 3, d. 99, point 6 (concerning the conference with Germany). The text of Chicherin’s note submitted at this meeting with the terms of the truce with Poland was published in the collection *Польско-советская война. Ранее не опубликованные документы и материалы*, ред. И.И. Костюшко, ч. 1 (Москва, 1994), pp. 155–160.

On 5 August, the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) chose the preliminary composition of the delegation to the conference with Germany. In line with Trotsky's proposal, the delegation was to be led by Adolf Joffe.²⁸ Three days earlier, Chicherin had sent a formal note to the Auswärtiges Amt with consent to a joint conference on the resumption of trade and, "if possible also political" ("по возможности также политических"), relations. However, the requirement for a formal return to an apology for the murder of Mirbach was, at Lenin's request, firmly rejected.²⁹

Incidentally, the note contains an interesting formula for an ideological justification of Soviet Russia's cooperation with Germany, which had been defeated by the Entente powers. The government of an "oppressed class" (that is, the Soviet leadership) can naturally communicate with the government of an "oppressed people", Chicherin wrote. In fact, he was merely elaborating on the thought presented by Lenin in the introduction, of 6 July 1920, to the French and German editions of his study *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Revolutionary Russia is presented in this introduction as the leader not only of the class struggle, but of a global coalition of peoples colonised and subjugated by the (primarily Anglo-Saxon) empires that were victorious in the Great War. From Russia is to come the spark of a worldwide revolt, not just a class revolt, but, in fact, also a geopolitical revolt against the order established at Versailles. The vanquished Germany is one of the countries invited to join this revolt.³⁰

Obviously, however, the class struggle and the idea of a European revolution, carried through the "corpse of White Poland" to Germany, took precedence in the practical intentions of Lenin and his comrades. Hence, the apparent reluctance to go along with Kopp's proposals and to move quickly to a general political agreement with 'bourgeois' Germany, as well as the emphasis that the primary objective of the conference with Germany would be trade relations. In early August, as the Red Army was already surrounding Warsaw from the north and approaching the Pomeranian 'corridor', Lenin was excited by the possibility of exporting the revolution to Berlin. In Petrograd, German-language training was already being prepared for of the *krasnye komandiry* of the future German Red Army. In Łomża, in the immediate rear of Mikhail Tukhachevsky's Western Front troops

²⁸ See RGASPI, fond 17, op. 2, Minutes of meetings of the plenums of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), d. 32, minutes of the meeting of 5 August 1920, item 5: conference with Germany. Trotsky's telegram of 4 Aug., addressed to the Politburo and Chicherin, on entrusting the talks with Germany to Joffe, *The Trotsky Papers 1917–1922*, vol. 2: 1920–1922, ed. J.M. Meijer (Mouton – The Hague, 1971), p. 242.

²⁹ Chicherin's note to Simmons of 2 Aug. 1920, in *Документы внешней политики СССР*, vol. 3: 1 июля 1920 г.–18 марта 1921 г. (Москва, 1959), pp. 75–77.

³⁰ I analyse this ideological strand in Lenin's political concept extensively in A. Nowak, *Powrót 'Imperium zła'. Ideologie współczesnej Rosji, ich twórcy i krytycy* (Kraków, 2023) (to be published in 2026 in English by Brill as *Ideologies of Russian Imperialism: 1913–2023*), pp. 25–42.

advancing on Warsaw, the first German unit was being formed. A little farther, in Minsk (Belarus), an entire German brigade had already been formed by mid-August, according to a member of the Western Front War Council, Józef Unszlicht. At a Politburo meeting on 10 August, a decision was made to send a hundred German communists, “fit for Soviet and propaganda work”, to the East Prussian border. This was to be the responsibility of the head of the Comintern, Zinoviev. On 14 August, the Western Front Commissar Ivar Smilga urged Trotsky to ensure that a “German printing press and German comrades” were sent to the captured Warsaw as soon as possible. Warsaw was to be only a stopover on the way to Berlin.³¹

Lenin wanted to keep going. On 12 August, abandoning the language of class political correctness altogether, he wrote to Efraim Skliansky, deputy chairman of the Revvoyenensoviet, coordinating the supervision of the Red Army, that “it is of utmost importance to finish off Poland” (“архиважно добить Польшу”).³² In another note to Skliansky he stressed the need to “cut Poland off from Gdańsk” (“отрезать Польшу от Данцига”).³³

It was on this day, 12 August, that Kopp handed Simmons Chicherin’s note on his return from Moscow. As we know, it did not meet the condition of apologising for the killing of Mirbach – and this was something Kopp spoke about with regret the following day in a conversation with Ago von Maltzan. He tried to console his disappointed German interlocutor by assuring him that once there was a Bolshevik government in Poland, it would give the Germans all their “ethnic territories” (as we know from his other enunciations, for Kopp this meant Gdańsk Pomerania, part of Wielkopolska, and Upper Silesia). If, on the other hand, only a “reformist government” was to be formed in Poland – this was a stipulation in the event of a diplomatic deal with England, which was being negotiated by Kamenev at that point in London – then Soviet Russia would demand from it the right of unlimited (extraterritorial?) transit to Germany.³⁴

³¹ Rossiyskiy Gosudarstvennyi Voyennyi Arkhiv (Russian State Military Archives, hereinafter: RGVA), fond 4, op. 3, d. 1575 (*Список совершенно секретных приказов РВСР за 1920 г.*), no. 2378/467 (on the establishment of a German-language Special School of Red Commanders in Petrograd); RGVA, fond 104 (*Управление армиами Западного Фронта*), op. 15, d. 17, p. 2 (Smilga’s telegram to Trotsky of 14 Aug. 1920); *Польско-советская война*, ч. 1, p. 176 (minutes of the Politburo meeting of 10 Aug. 1920), p. 198 (telegram by Władysław Dolecki [Jakub Fenigstein] of the Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee of 17 Aug. 1920 to W.L. Gerson of the Cheka concerning the German unit in Łomża). Unszlicht’s telegram of 18 Aug. 1920 about the formation of a German brigade in Minsk is quoted by Musiał, *Na zachód po trupie Polski*, p. 39; see also J. Szczepański, ‘Niemcy wobec najazdu bolszewickiego na Polskę w 1920 roku’, *Res Historica*, no. 31 (2011), pp. 80 and 81.

³² *Польско-советская война*, ч. 1, p. 180 (Lenin’s handwritten remark quoted in a footnote to Smilga’s telegram to him of 12 Aug. 1920).

³³ Quoted after *The Trotsky Papers*, p. 254 (the editor of this edition dates this note by Lenin to Skliansky to 17 Aug. 1920, but given the context of the actions on the Polish front, it seems to me that it was more likely written on 12 Aug.).

³⁴ ‘Aufzeichnung des Wirklichen Legationsrats Freiherr von Maltzan. 12.08.1920’, in ADAP, pp. 495–496.

The fate of the political system in Europe after the First World War was hanging in the balance. On 3 August, Karol Radek proclaimed the “Death of the Peace of Versailles” on the pages of *Pravda*. The head of the Reichwehr, General von Seeckt, had emphasised a week earlier, in a secret note to the highest authorities of the German Republic, that the liquidation of Poland by the Red Army forces could restore Germany’s pre-1914 eastern borders. He predicted an inevitable defeat for the Entente, if it tried to forcibly stop this inevitable revision of the Versailles system. In addition, he called for concrete cooperation with Soviet Russia.³⁵

As the Red Army’s offensive unfolded, Soviet diplomacy was playing a political game in London, with the Politburo member Lev Kamenev as the chief negotiator. The British Prime Minister Lloyd George opened up the prospect of convening a new conference of the powers in London, which would – this time featuring Soviet Russia – revise the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Lloyd George had already invited US President Woodrow Wilson to this conference on 5 August. In the background of this project was the re-establishment of a kind of traditional concert of the powers, including Soviet Russia and – as Lloyd George also wanted – Germany. When it came to Poland, the British Prime Minister was ready to hand it over to Lenin as long as the Red Army’s offensive stopped at the German border.³⁶ Kopp and his superiors in Moscow knew, of course, that France was more determined to defend the Versailles system – and such a split in the Western powers camp was what the Soviets wanted in this game. If France decided on its own to intervene militarily to prevent Germany’s *de facto* alliance with Lenin’s Russia, then the Red Army should support its German neighbours – as victims of “French imperialism”. Kopp wove these reflections into his note addressed directly to Lenin on 19 August, as well as into his interview for the German social democratic newspaper *Freiheit* of 14 August.³⁷

Bringing about a formal agreement between Moscow and Berlin in such a favourable situation became an obsession for Kopp, as it were: since we are challenging the Versailles system, it is better to have Germany, any Germany, on our side, and treaty-bound at that. Starting from this premise, Kopp at the same time warned Moscow against being too hopeful about the current capabilities of the German communists as a factor of revolution. An agreement between the Soviet government and the German government would be a solid foundation for a future, more certain success of the revolution. In the name of such calculations, in August the Soviet representative in Berlin sent appeal after appeal to his Moscow headquarters to somehow resolve the Mirbach case through a compromise and to start the Soviet-German conference immediately. However, as

³⁵ See K. Радек, ‘Смерть Версальского мира’, *Правда*, 8 Aug. 1920; ‘Aufzeichnung des Chef der Heeresleitung hn Reichwehrmmisterium Generalleutnant von Seeckt. 26.07.1920.’, in ADAP, pp. 455–458.

³⁶ See Nowak, *The Forgotten Appeasement of 1920*, pp. 100–116.

³⁷ See Черноперов, ‘Дипломат В.Л. Копп’, pp. 267–270.

early as on 15 August Trotsky sent a telegram to the Politburo members present in Moscow, suggesting that they firmly reject the Germans' 'idiotic' demand for redress for Mirbach's murder. During its meeting on 19 August, the Politburo considered Kopp's proposal presented by Chicherin. Point 2 called for an official declaration of "assistance" by Soviet Russia to Germany, in the event of a breach of its neutrality by a "third power" (meaning France). Point 3 provided for the issuing of an appeal to the population of the Pomeranian 'corridor' for an armed uprising against the Polish Army units deployed there. Point 1, concerning honourable redress in the Mirbach case, was decisively rejected by the Politburo. As Chicherin informed Kopp on 23 August, in the case of the second point, it would be possible to accept a declaration that Soviet Russia would be ready to defend Germany's 'neutrality', while the third point was right in principle, but at the present moment, there was no proper formula for it...³⁸

This was because everything had changed in the meantime, with the Polish military triumph over the Red Army in the Battle of Warsaw. Moscow became aware of the failure of its over-ambitious plans. The Politburo decided to focus its efforts on eliminating the last outpost of 'White Russia', that is, Crimea, with General Peter Wrangel's troops. In Europe, there was again a growing need to return to diplomatic negotiations, to get a break to gather new forces. On 23 August, Chicherin wrote to Kopp that the conquest of Poland was out of the question for the time being, though only temporarily. "There is no catastrophe, this retreat is paving the way for a more successful strike, just a little patience is needed" ("Никакой катастрофы нет, это отступление готовит более удачный прыжок, нужно только некоторое терпение").³⁹

The new strike, that is, the planned new advance of the Western Front under Mikhail Tukhachevsky in September, was stopped once again by the Polish Army in the so-called 'Neman Operation'. However, already on 1 September, the Politburo decided that Adolf Joffe would not prepare for any conference with Germany but would instead be appointed head of the Soviet delegation to the serious peace talks with Poland in Riga. And at the same meeting, the Politburo decided to instruct Kopp in a sharp tone to ultimately 'ridicule' the German demands for an apology for the murder of Mirbach.⁴⁰ This marked the failure of the feverish efforts of the Soviet representative in Berlin to secure a formal Soviet-German agreement on an anti-Polish basis as early as the summer of 1920. The failure was caused by Moscow,

³⁸ See *The Trotsky Papers*, p. 250 (Trotsky's note of 15 Aug. concerning Mirbach); minutes of the meeting of the Central Committee' Politburo of 19 Aug. 1920, RGASPI, fond 17, op. 3, d. 103, p. 2; Чернoperов, 'Дипломат В.Л. Копп', pp. 270–274 (discussion of the Kopp-Chicherin correspondence from 14–23 Aug. 1920).

³⁹ Quoted from Chicherin's telegram to Kopp of 23 Aug. 1920 after Чернoperов, 'Дипломат В.Л. Копп', pp. 282–283.

⁴⁰ RGASPI, fond 17, op. 3, Minutes of meetings of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), d. 106, Minutes of the meeting of 1 Sept. 1920, p. 2.

by the Politburo decision-makers, led by Lenin. Kopp, formally admitted to the Bolshevik party (after years of 'adventures' with non-Bolshevik factions) only in June 1920, nevertheless had the courage to stick to his opinion and defend it before the 'highest authority'. In a letter to Chicherin of 7 September (with copies forwarded to Lenin and Trotsky), he lamented that "our failures on the Polish front" ("Наши неудачи на польском фронте") had resulted in the absence of a direct link with Germany, which in turn had fatally weakened the 'eastern orientation' of German policy. Right-wing nationalist circles are no longer hoping for a joint action with Soviet Russia against France. "Summing up, it could be said that we have been pushed back in the diplomatic field in Germany to the starting positions of earlier this year. This line, which I have pursued here, that is – to bind the German government with concrete formal acts towards us even before our conflict with Poland and the Entente has been resolved – has clearly failed" ("Подводя итоги, можно сказать, что мы отброшены в Германии дипломатически на исходные позиции начала текущего года. Та линия, которую я преследовал здесь, а именно – связать германское правительство определенными формальными актами по отношению к нам еще до того, как будет уложен наш конфликт с Польшей и Антантою, потерпела очевидное крушение"). He went on to express his regret (after a fresh conversation with Minister Simmons on 7 September) that, had it not been for Moscow's stubbornness on the Mirbach issue, such a formal agreement could have been concluded with Germany when the Red Army was surrounding East Prussia in its offensive against Poland. And then Soviet Russia's negotiating positions vis-à-vis Poland, Finland, and Romania would of course have been much better...⁴¹

However, in his very following letter to Chicherin, from 11 September, Kopp was already reassuring in one respect: Germany would not violate its neutrality in favour of Poland. Hatred of Poland, especially in the regions bordering it, is so powerful among Germans that any help for or agreement with Warsaw was impossible for the 'bourgeois government' in Berlin, in any political configuration. However, as Soviet Russia, having been defeated in the war with Poland, had lost its ability to control this sentiment in Germany, the real benefits of the 'friendship with Germany' had to be limited to economic matters for the time being. To speed up agreement with the German government, Kopp argued that it would not be well received by the German proletariat. "The establishment of friendly relations between the bourgeois government of Germany and us will be welcomed by the [German] workers as their victory, and not as a departure from the revolutionary path" ("установление дружеских отношений между буржуазным

⁴¹ RGASPI, fond 17, op. 3, d. 2137 (Письма и докладные записки полномочного представителя РСФСР в Германии В.Л. Коппа и Ю.Х. Лутовинова о советско-германских взаимоотношениях и по другим вопросам внешней политики, направленные В.И. Ленину. 11.06.1920 – 1.10.1921 г., pp. 19–25), Kopp's report for Chicherin from Berlin of 7 Sept. 1920, quot. on p. 21.

правительством Германии и нами будет воспринято рабочими как их победа, а не как отказ от революционного пути”).⁴²

By offering these assurances, the Soviet plenipotentiary in Berlin wished to deflect suspicion that he was disregarding the most important, ‘proletarian-internationalist’ point of view on international relations. He sought to persuade his superiors in Moscow that the treaty he was proposing could hasten a military confrontation between Germany (based on just such a treaty with Soviet Russia) and the Western powers, especially France, and there was nothing like war between capitalist states to hasten a revolution...⁴³

However, he failed to persuade them. At its meeting on 14 September, the Politburo instructed Chicherin to reprimand Kopp for his persistent disregard of the order to reject the German demands in the Mirbach case once and for all.⁴⁴ Not only did Kopp not ‘ridicule’ these demands, as instructed by the Politburo, but in the reports sent to Chicherin (with copies for Lenin) in the second half of September, he continued to try to justify the validity of the line of agreement with Berlin he had chosen as a strategy for the future. In a seven-page report of 16 September, he started with an analysis of the new international situation, following the failure of the Red Army’s assault on Europe through the Polish gates. He described the political situation as a ‘protracted crisis’ and Moscow’s necessary policy in this situation as “a revolutionary strategy of defending Soviet Russia, punctuated by short offensive strikes wherever the course of events gives us a chance of success” (“Революционная стратегия обороны Советской России, переменяющаяся короткими наступательными ударами там, где ход событий дает нам шансы успеха”). The main opportunity in this regard was created by the ferment of German discontent, which should be matched by the Soviet policy pursued under the slogan of “liberating Germany from the Versailles yoke” (“освобождения Германии от версальского ига”). Ironically, Kopp wrote, the slogan found its greatest support on the German far right. However, Soviet Russia should recognise that the aim of these far-right formations was positive: “national liberation”. All the more so, given that these formations were becoming increasingly popular thanks to this very slogan, thereby taking popular support away from social democracy. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Simmons, essentially representing big German industry, understood the inevitability of an ‘eastern’ orientation (that is, one geared towards relations with Russia, any Russia). But he also understood that “Soviet Russia means in the near or distant future Soviet Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia, then Soviet Poland, and, finally, Soviet Germany” (“Советская Россия означает в более-менее близком будущем Советскую

⁴² Ibid., pp. 28–30 (Kopp’s report for Chicherin of 11 Sept. 1920).

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 31–32.

⁴⁴ RGASPI, fond 17, op. 3, Minutes of meetings of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), d. 108, Minutes of the meeting of 14 Sept. 1920, p. 1.

Литву, Эстляндию и Латвию, затем Советскую Польшу и, наконец, Советскую Германи"). Hence, the understandable hesitation in German policy. It could be overcome only by the Soviets' own initiative. The moment for such an initiative was the Red Army's approach to the borders of Prussia. This moment was wasted (the unfortunate Mirbach affair...). However, a similar moment – a chance for the Soviet initiative to draw Germany towards Moscow – might soon recur. This would be the case as long as the Western powers at any of the forthcoming international conferences once again upheld the terms of the 'Versailles dictate' towards Berlin, terms that were unacceptable to the German public. At that point, wrote Kopp, concluding his report of 16 September 1920, "we must win over the German government to our side with specific benefits" ("связать германское правительство определенными благами в нашу сторону"). Thanks to this "we will once and for all pull Germany out of the imperialist, anti-Soviet bloc and we will secure its neutrality also after the end of the Russo-Polish war" ("мы раз на всегда вырвем Германию из империалистического анти-советского блока и обеспечим за собой ее нейтралитет и по и исцелении русско-польской войны").⁴⁵

Undaunted by the Politburo's criticism, Kopp responded with yet another updated analysis of the situation and, at the same time, a defence of his own concept. The following extensive report, from 27 September 1920, already accepted the inevitability of the war's imminent conclusion with Poland and focused on the opportunities presented to Soviet policy by the worsening Polish-German conflict. I will take the liberty of quoting two extensive excerpts, as their importance for understanding Soviet strategy throughout the inter-war period seems unique:

Imperialist Poland, designed by the Entente as a barrier between Germany and Russia on the one hand, and on the other as a heating compress applied to Germany from the east, has created for Germany something of which an outside observer has no clear idea – German irredentism. [...] Upper Silesia, the Polish corridor, some districts in the Poznań region – these are all bleeding wounds in the German state organism, the very thought of which drives even the gentle German bourgeoisie to fury. "It's better to have Bolsheviks than Poles" – this slogan can be heard all across Germany's eastern frontier. [...] A reconciliation between Germany and Poland (in any case with an Ententophile Poland, and Poland cannot be different, if it does not want to become Soviet Poland) – is a thing that is absolutely impossible at the present historical moment.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ RGASPI, fond 17, op. 3, d. 2137, pp. 33–35v (Kopp's report for Chicherin from Berlin of 16 Sept. 1920).

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 40–40v and 42 (Kopp's report for Chicherin from Berlin of 27 Sept. 1920). The original wording of the quote: "Империалистическая Польша, задуманная Антантой как барьер между Германией и Россией, с одной стороны, и как согревательный компресс, приложенный к Германии с Востока, с другой, создала для Германии то, о чем наблюдатель ставший вне Германии ние имеет ясного представления германскую ирреденту. [...] Верхняя Силезия, польский коридор, некоторые округа Познани – все это кровоточащие раны на немецком государственном организме, самая мысль о которых приводит в бешенство даже степенного

Kopp stressed that in such a situation, Soviet Russia's policy should be based on the following five points:

1. The dormant conflict between the Entente states, treating the Peace of Versailles as the charter of a new Europe (the words of Millerand [Alexandre Millerand, President of France – A.N.]), and Germany, whom the Peace of Versailles leaves no room to breathe, should be highlighted by us at every opportunity and, at moments similar to our appearance on the Prussian border, brought to a state of crisis. 2. Germany should be put in a position where it would become impossible for it to join any anti-Bolshevik coalition. [...] 3. In all our actions concerning Germany, it is necessary to emphasise this idea that we do not recognise the predatory Treaty of Versailles and that Germany's desire to overturn this treaty deserves the sympathy and support of Soviet Russia. 4. Conflicts between Germany and Poland should be used by us in our discussions with Poland in the sense of strengthening our and weakening Poland's position. The principle of self-determination of nationality should be defended by us on this point most energetically.⁴⁷

It is difficult not to see a parallel between the concept of Soviet Russia's policy towards Germany formulated in this manner and Lenin's words, quoted at the beginning of this article and probably most likely spoken in (the second half of) September to Jules Humbert-Droz. It should also be added that on 22 September, Lenin publicly presented a strikingly similar diagnosis of the possibility of exploiting the German will to smash the Versailles system and the importance of eliminating 'bourgeois' Poland to this end. The occasion for this speech was the Ninth Party Conference in Moscow, which discussed the defeat of the Soviet offensive against Warsaw. Analysed many times in historiography since its publication in 1992, this particular speech by Lenin does not need to be repeated here.⁴⁸

немецкого бургера, “Лучше большевики, чем поляки” – вот лозунг, который можно слышать во всей восточной окраине Германии. [...] Примирение Германии с Польшей (по крайней мере с антантофильской Польшей – а иной Польша быть не может, если она не хочет стать Польской Советской) вещь для данного исторического момента абсолютно невозможная”.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 42 (Kopp's report for Chicherin from Berlin of 27 Sept. 1920). The original wording of the quote: “1. Латентный конфликт между странами Антанты, рассматривающими Версальский мир как хартию новой Европы (слова Мильерана), и Германией, для которой этот Версальский мир не оставляет свободу дыхания, должен подчеркиваться нами при всяком удобном случае и в моменты, подобные нашему появлению на прусской границе, доведен до состояния кризиса. 2. Германия должна быть поставлена в такое положение, при котором для нее формально было бы невозможно вступление в какую бы то ни было антибольшевистскую коалицию [...] 3. Во всех наших выступлениях, касающихся Германии, необходимо подчеркивать ту мысль, что мы не признаем грабительского Версальского мира, и что стремление Германии свергнуть этот мир заслуживает симпатию и поддержку Советской России. 4. Конфликты между Германией и Польшей должны быть использованы нами при переговорах с Польшей в смысле усиления нашей и ослабления позиции Польши. Принцип самоопределения национальностей должен защищаться нами в этом пункте со всей энергией”.

⁴⁸ See “Я прошу записывать меньше: это не должно попадать в печать”. Выступления В. И. Ленина на IX конференции РКП(б) 22 сентября 1920 г., *Исторический Архив*, no. 1 (1992), pp. 18–19.

However, it has to be said that there is a difference between the line proposed by Kopp and the position expressed by the leader of the Bolshevik party. That difference was revealed at one point. It was point 5 of Kopp's recommendation of 27 September, which I have not yet discussed. In it, the Soviet plenipotentiary in Berlin urged his superiors in Moscow to force the Communist Party of Germany to follow the strategy he had outlined. It was a strategy of geopolitical cooperation, with the ultimate goal of dismantling the Versailles system. The German communists should, therefore, combat any pacifist tendencies.⁴⁹ Lenin, on the other hand, did not give up his ideological belief in the supremacy of the revolutionary cause, nor his hope that it was still, in the not-too-distant future, viable in Germany. He also put a stronger emphasis on the fear that cooperation with Germany in overturning the Versailles system might bring not only the "liberation of the German people" from the "suffocating" rule of the victors, but might also be used by Berlin to revive its own imperialism, just as dangerous as Anglo-Saxon or French imperialism.⁵⁰

The difference between these two points of view became apparent as early as in October 1920. On 6 October, in a note concerning an article prepared by Karol Radek for the German press, Lenin firmly forbade any mention "of our future (or possible) assistance to the Germans through Poland" ("чтобы говорить о нашей будущей (или возможной) помощи немцам через Польшу").⁵¹ We can only guess at the reasons behind this ban. It may have stemmed from the priority given to the battle with Wrangel at this point and a desire to temporarily close the second front – against Poland. However, it was probably also an expression of Lenin's habitual attitude, emphasised here: not to be exploited by the German side in this game, which the leader of the revolution himself joined in 1917.

Kopp, meanwhile, in another report for Chicherin, reassured him that the possible coming to power of far-right forces in Germany would not be a threat to Soviet Russia. In view of the impending peace on the Soviet-Polish front and the related prospect of the "perpetuation of Polish tyranny" ("увековения польского произвола") in the Pomeranian 'corridor' and across the eastern borderlands with Germany, he also reiterated his belief that this would only serve Soviet Russia being recognised as a natural partner by German 'bourgeois circles'.⁵² Kopp wanted

⁴⁹ RGASPI, fond 17, op. 3, d. 2137, p. 42v (Kopp's report for Chicherin from Berlin, 27 Sept. 1920): "5) Коммунистическая огнозиция в Германии должна кооперировать с нами в том смысле, чтобы несовместимость Версальского мира с интересами и даже самой возможностью пролетарской революции в Германии подчеркивалась бы с большей выпуклостью и конкретностью, чем это делалось до сих пор. Пацифистской мелодии не должно быть в коммунистической критике Версальского мира".

⁵⁰ See "Я прошу записывать меньше", p. 19.

⁵¹ *Коминтерн и идея*, pp. 208–209 (Lenin's note prompted by the manuscript of K. Radek's article, 6 Oct. 1920).

⁵² Kopp's report for Chicherin of 8 Oct. 1920, kept at the AVPRF, is discussed after Черноперов, 'Дипломат В.Л. Копп', p. 296.

this anti-Polish, revisionist tendency to serve as the basis for a formal agreement, which had not been reached in the summer. Something else was more important to the Bolshevik Party authorities at this point: the Fourth Congress of the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD, which had won nearly 19 per cent of the votes in the German parliamentary elections in June) and the intention to win it over to the side of the Moscow-controlled Communist Party of Germany. Lenin sent a delegation of the Third International, headed by its chairman, Grigory Zinoviev, to the congress, which was taking place in Halle. Thanks to Kopp's efforts, the delegation was able to enter Germany legally, with Minister Simmons' permission. Zinoviev's fiery four-hour speech in Halle on 14 October brought a call for revolution and a justification for mass revolutionary terror... Zinoviev was arrested, and German government and business circles again became increasingly fearful of a partnership with Russia – the centre of the world revolution. Kopp described the participation of the Soviet delegation at the Halle congress as "a hard experience for the stability of the Russian-German relations" (he used this very term: not Soviet-German, but 'русско-германских').⁵³

At Moscow's behest, he now had to deal with getting Zinoviev out of prison, again putting aside his line of building a strategic relationship with Berlin. However, he stuck to the point from which these relations could be revived as soon as possible. That point was the Polish question, that is, the strengthening of the Polish state and the related desire to destroy it by German supporters of a radical revision of the borders and the dismantling of the Versailles system. It was then, in late November 1920, that Kopp established closer, regular contact with General Hans von Seeckt. In the last days of November, the Soviet plenipotentiary in Berlin met the Reichswehr commander personally, of which he informed Chicherin in a telegram of 2 December and then in a comprehensive report. In a sense, the way for the meeting was paved by the order for the Red Army that Kopp was instructed by Moscow to place with the German war industry from the autumn of 1920 onwards. This was about dozens of aircraft, 200,000 rifles, a thousand machine guns, motorbikes, engines, specialised cameras, and even footwear and uniforms for Soviet soldiers. The intensity of talks on these matters was so great that Kopp had to arrange with the German authorities a visit of an entire delegation of Soviet specialists in military technology.⁵⁴

According to a 2 December report for Chicherin, Seeckt presented a vision of German military specialists organising the Russian arms industry, which in turn would be a source of armaments for Germany, deprived by the Treaty of Versailles of the possibility of legally developing its army. This thread, however, was only a postscript, as it were, to the much bolder proposal for cooperation put forward

⁵³ Discussion of Kopp's summary report on the Zinoviev affair for Chicherin of 28 Oct. 1920 (kept at the AVPRF) after Черноперов, 'Дипломат В.Л. Копп', pp. 299–301.

⁵⁴ See Zeidler, *Reichswehr und Rote Armee*, pp. 47–58.

by the German general in his conversation with Kopp. The crux of his strategic declaration was as follows: if the Poles dared to occupy Upper Silesia on the occasion of the plebiscite scheduled for 20 March 1921, the Reichswehr would have to wage war against Poland, regardless of the circumstances. In such a situation, Germany is relying on Soviet Russia for help. To coordinate activities, Seeckt proposed organising a contact mission between the Reichswehr and Red Army staffs, immediately naming his candidate for military attaché in Moscow (Oskar Ritter von Niedermayer, an experienced intelligence officer). To the news of this sensational proposal, Kopp added a comment that the Germans had already begun deploying troops towards the Polish border and were preparing to rapidly expand the Reichswehr to half a million troops. The Soviet plenipotentiary in Berlin recommended to his superiors in Moscow that Seeckt's proposal be taken seriously. Firstly, in order to organise arms purchases for the Red Army, and secondly, in order to, taking advantage of the simmering conflict with Poland, "transform the anti-Entente attitude of certain circles of bourgeois Germany into an open conflagration" ("превратить противоантантовское настроение известных кругов буржуазной Германии в открытый пожар").⁵⁵

Chicherin replied on 12 December: Seeckt cannot be given concrete promises, but talks with him must be continued, as they can be very useful in Moscow's parallel diplomatic and strategic game with other states. The foreign affairs commissar stated somewhat melancholically that "We would have conducted our talks [that is, the peace negotiations with Poland in Riga – A.N.] quite differently, if we had had absolute certainty and assurances that what he [Seeckt] told you was possible would indeed happen" ("Мы бы совершенно иначе повели наши переговоры, если бы у нас была полная уверенность и гарантия что будет то о возможности чего он Вам говорил").⁵⁶

In January 1921 Kopp, at his own request, was summoned to Moscow to give a personal report on such important matters as those that arose from his contacts in Berlin. Before he set off, Niedermayer provided him with German intelligence information suggesting that the Polish Army was amassing troops near Upper Silesia, thus weakening its positions on the eastern, anti-Soviet front. The Soviet plenipotentiary thus travelled to the Moscow headquarters with a clear incentive to consider the possibility of resuming the war against the Poles, and certainly to fundamentally harden the position of the Soviet delegation in the Riga peace negotiations, which were had been going on for four months.⁵⁷

On 27 January Kopp was received by Lenin. We do not know the content of their conversation, and can only make guess on the basis of an indirect account – by

⁵⁵ Discussion of Kopp's report of 2 Dec. 1920 (kept at the AVPRF) after Черноперов, 'Дипломат В.Л. Копп', pp. 367–369.

⁵⁶ Quoted from Chicherin's telegram to Kopp of 12 Dec. 1920, after *ibid.*, p. 369.

⁵⁷ See *ibid.*, pp. 371–373.

Adolf Joffe. Kopp met the head of the Soviet delegation in Riga on his return from Moscow to Berlin in mid-February. He then told Joffe that Lenin had agreed to the suggestion that the peace talks with Poland should be protracted until the end of the Upper Silesian plebiscite, but no longer than until the beginning of April.⁵⁸ The report that Kopp had already sent on 1 March to Chicherin also describes the “Moscow-fixed direction” that the Soviet plenipotentiary sought to pursue in his subsequent conversation with the German Foreign Minister Simmons – at the end of February. This direction was to be summarised in the acceleration of the “full-scale agreement” (“полномасштабного договора”) between the Soviets and the Germans. It was to be based on the following terms: (1) Berlin was to relinquish all claims for compensation for nationalised German property. (2) Soviet Russia was in turn to renounce war reparations from Germany. (3) The Russian-Polish peace treaty should not be signed by the Soviet side before the Upper Silesian plebiscite (“не раньше голосования в В[ерхней] Силезии”), but no later than 1 April. Kopp expressed the hope that a German victory in the Silesian plebiscite would provoke the Poles to respond, which would immediately “shatter the fragile balance in Central Europe” (“опрокинет неустойчивое равновесие в Срединной Европе”).⁵⁹

The Soviet-German negotiations did indeed get off the ground. Kopp brought with him to Moscow the German plenipotentiary for the re-evacuation of prisoners of war, Moritz Schlesinger. Supported by Gustav Hilger (who later negotiated the economic aspects of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), Schlesinger held talks – not only on the issue of the prisoners of war – with a team of key specialists in political and trade relations with Germany: Chicherin, his deputy Lev Karachan, Krasin, Kopp, and Radek. The resulting supplementary agreement on prisoners of war and the agreement “on the rights granted to citizens and representatives of both sides” were important formal steps towards mutual diplomatic recognition and a trade agreement.⁶⁰

The tragic internal situation in Lenin’s state stood in the way of fulfilling Kopp’s ambitions and exploiting a possible Polish-German conflict to finalise a full political and trade deal between Soviet Russia and Germany or even to unleash another war, this time in a Soviet-German alliance against Poland. The cumulative effects of the so-called wartime communism, devastation of the country, as

⁵⁸ See *Владимир Ильич Ленин: Биографическая хроника, 1870–1924*, vol. 10: Январь–июль 1921 (Москва, 1979), p. 20 (Lenin receives Kopp on 27 Jan. 1921, between 19.00 and 21.30, and then, from 21.30, he receives the foreign trade commissar, Leonid Krasin); cf. Чернoperов, ‘Дипломат В.Л. Копп’, pp. 374–377. See also *ibid.*, pp. 374–375.

⁵⁹ RGASPI, fond 17, op. 3, d. 2137, pp. 61–62 (Kopp’s report for Chicherin from Berlin of 1 March 1921) – this is the source of all the quotations in the paragraph.

⁶⁰ See G. Hilger, A.G. Meyer, *The Incompatible Allies: A Memoir-History of German-Soviet Relations, 1918–1941* (New York, 1953), pp. 65–69; *Советско-германские отношения 1922–1925 гг. Документы и материалы*, vol. 2 (Москва, 1977), pp. 292–301.

well as the growing hostility of the peasants and the starving urban population to the Bolshevik regime put that regime on the brink of collapse. The closure of factories because of a lack of raw materials and the systematic under-allocation of food led to a great wave of strikes in Petrograd in February 1921; on 1 March a mutiny of sailors broke out at the Baltic Fleet base in Kronstadt. An anti-Bolshevik uprising involving tens of thousands of peasants in the Tambov Governorate had already been going on for weeks. On a smaller scale, similar expressions of protest occurred in hundreds of other places. Lenin understood that his regime badly needed a *peredyshka* (respite). An army faithfully following his orders was needed in March to suppress the Kronstadt and Tambov uprisings, not to launch a new assault on Europe.⁶¹

Adolf Joffe, who headed the Soviet delegation at the peace talks with Poland in Riga (but who also kept a close eye on the relations with Germany), alerted Lenin on 23 February: "The thing is that we no longer have the physical strength to conduct these negotiations any longer" ("Дело в том, что мы уж физически больше не в силах вести эти переговоры").⁶² Joffe was not speaking about his own physical strength, but about the strength of the Soviet state at that moment, when its fate hung in the balance – or at least the fate of the Kronstadt uprising (it was not suppressed until 17–18 March). Joffe was strongly opposed to postponing the signing of the peace treaty with the Poles even for a few days, until after the plebiscite in Upper Silesia. He believed that the Germans had to be persuaded that Soviet Russia would be prepared to help them also after the conclusion of a peace with Poland. The Politburo shared this opinion. On 25 February, Chicherin conveyed to Kopp the leadership's decision: that the signing of a peace treaty with Poland must be accelerated by all means.⁶³

The Soviet plenipotentiary in Berlin had not yet given up hope that it would nevertheless be possible in March to link the "German national cause" (that is, the desire to attack Poland and revolt against the 'Versailles dictate') to Moscow's revolutionary policy. The source of this hope was Berlin's expected reaction to the ultimatum prepared by the Entente states at the London conference at the beginning of March. Germany was to immediately hand over war criminals, pay twenty billion marks in gold in contributions, and reduce the armament of its army.

⁶¹ See RGASPI, fond 5, op. 1, d. 2619 (Информационные сводки ВЧК о политическом и экономическом положении военных округов и губерний. 07 марта 1921 – 28 апреля 1921), pp. 2–25. See also the minutes of the 28 Feb. 1921 meeting of the Central Committee's Politburo, devoted mostly to the internal crisis of Soviet government and economy: RGASPI, fond 17, op. 3, d. 136, pp. 1–2.

⁶² RGASPI, fond 5, op. 1, d. 2134 (Письма А.А. Иоффе В. И. Ленину о своей работе в качестве полпреда РСФСР в Германии, о политическом и экономическом положении в Германии и о советско-германских взаимоотношениях), p. 31 (Joffe's letter to Lenin of 23 Feb. 1921).

⁶³ Документы внешней политики СССР, vol. 3, p. 536 (Chicherin's telegram to Kopp of 25 Feb. 1921).

In the event of a negative response, the Entente states announced occupation of the Ruhr (which indeed happened on 8 March). Kopp hoped that this would lead to a workers' uprising in West Germany, and that the Upper Silesian plebiscite would result in a German-Polish war. In a report to Chicherin (with a copy presented to Lenin) of 2 March, he called for an armed force to be prepared for the situation. He proposed to reinforce the Red Army group on the still unconfirmed Polish border and to prepare collaboration with sympathisers of Bolshevik Russia in Germany.⁶⁴

As a plenipotentiary for the evacuation of prisoners of war, he ordered that on 15 March all former Russian prisoners of war from the First World War still working in Germany (there were about 70,000 of them) should assemble in their camps. Vasily Chernoperov points out that for the same day the Red Army's commander Sergei Kamenev ordered that plans be prepared for a possible resumption of hostilities against Poland. On this basis Chernoperov hypothesises that this may have been the result of the plan, arranged by Kopp, for the German and Soviet army staffs to work together in order to attack Poland.⁶⁵

However, it seems that even if we add to this the formation in early 1921, on the orders of General Seeckt, of a special 'R[ussland] Group' to deal with military cooperation with the Red Army – these are still too tenuous grounds for such a bold conclusion. This was only the very beginning of the organisation of secret German-Soviet armament cooperation. Above all, however, the plans mentioned here, ordered by Sergei Kamenev, did not reflect any new offensive military objectives of Moscow at that point. Rather, they stemmed from the Soviet leadership's fear that the failure to sign a peace treaty with Poland (and it was not concluded, as we know, until 18 March) – combined with the ongoing Kronstadt uprising – could lead to a possible resumption of offensive operations by the Polish side. The critical attitude of Moscow to the dreams of any resumption of a wider offensive in cooperation with Germany in mid-March 1921 is most emphatically demonstrated by Chicherin's sharply worded letter to Kopp of 7 March. In it, the commissar warns of the possibility that the German side will unilaterally exploit the agreements with Soviet Russia. He admonishes his subordinate: Kopp must not let himself be exploited – he must change his too submissive attitude towards Berlin.⁶⁶

In a way, the sense of failure of the Soviet plenipotentiary's feverish efforts in Berlin was summed up in his report of 17 March for Chicherin. This was the day before the signing of the Treaty of Riga and three days before the plebiscite

⁶⁴ RGASPI, fond 17, op. 3, d. 2137, p. 64 (Kopp's report for Chicherin from Berlin of 2 March 1921).

⁶⁵ Черноперов, 'Дипломат В.Л. Копп', pp. 383–384, cf. id., "Силезский вопрос" в политической жизни Германии и международных отношениях по донесениям советских и британских дипломатов (1920–1922 гг.), *Вестник Томского государственного университета*, no. 488 (2023), pp. 191–195.

⁶⁶ Discussion of Chicherin's letter to Kopp of 7 March 1921 (from the AVPRF fonds) after Черноперов, 'Дипломат В.Л. Копп', pp. 386–387.

in Upper Silesia. The French army had already entered the Ruhr. Soviet Russia, however, stuck to its passive stance. I will take the liberty of quoting Kopp's comment for the last time in a more extensive excerpt:

From the point of view of the revolutionary possibilities in Central Europe, the Silesian question should be considered central at this point, and the stabilisation of relations in Silesia, and between Germany and Poland in general, should be regarded as highly inconvenient to us. If we have come to a rather ignominious peace with Poland because of domestic considerations, it is no use 'making a boon out of necessity' and closing our eyes to the fact that, separated by a double wall from Western Europe [this was not only about maintaining an independent Poland, but also about the border, set in Riga, that cut off Soviet Russia from possible transit to German East Prussia via Lithuania – A.N.], as an agent of international revolution we lose a serious part of our influence at this point. This has hitherto been the basic assumption behind my policy towards Germany, especially on the Silesian question. Not showing some favours to bourgeois Germany, for which I see no basis, but increasing the possibility of conflict between Germany and the Entente – this is its [Kopp's policy] main thread. The decision of the Central Committee on the Polish question communicated to me [the decision to conclude a peace treaty in Riga without waiting for the plebiscite in Silesia – A.N.], as well as unfavourable external circumstances (Simmons' absence from Berlin, the Entente's sanctions, Kronstadt) forced me to break this thread...⁶⁷

This was 17 March. The previous day, Soviet diplomacy had concluded a trade agreement with Britain (signed in London by Leonid Krasin) and, at the same time, struck a political deal with Turkey in Moscow. A day later, as I have mentioned, a peace treaty was signed with Poland in Riga. In his report of 22 April, Kopp was still expressing his enthusiasm about the possibility of exploiting the "national-Bolshevik action on the right" (национал-большевистского выступления справа) that the issue of the division of Upper Silesia after the plebiscite could still provoke.⁶⁸ Moscow would wait longer for such action, and would take full

⁶⁷ RGASPI, fond 17, op. 3, d. 2137, pp. 61–62 (Kopp's report for Chicherin from Berlin of 17 March 1921), p. 66: "С точки зрения революционных возможностей в Срединной Европе Силезский вопрос нужно для данного момента считать центральным, и стабилизацию отношений в Силезии и вообще между Германией и Польшей для нас крайне невыгодной. Если по соображениям внутренней политики нам пришлось пойти на довольно-таки похабный мир с Польшей, то нечего, «из нужды делать добродетель» и закрывать глаза на то, что отделенные двойной стеной от Западной Европы, мы как международный революционный фактор теряем для данного момента добрую долю своего влияния. Из этого основного положения исходила до сих пор моя политика по отношению к Германии, в частности в Силезском вопросе. Не оказывать какие-либо услуги буржуазной Германии, к чему я не вижу никаких оснований, а увеличивать возможность конфликтов между Германией и Антантой – вот ее руководящая нить. Сообщенное мне решение ЦК по польскому вопросу, а также внешнее стечеие не благоприятных обстоятельств (отсутствие Симонса из Берлина, «санкции Антанты», Кронштадт) заставили меня оборвать эту нить..."

⁶⁸ RGASPI, fond 17, op. 3, d. 2137, p. 69 (Kopp's report for Chicherin from Berlin of 22 April 1921).

strategic advantage of it only in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939, when the two parties succeeded in eliminating Poland and dividing Eastern and Central Europe into two zones of imperial domination. In 1941, the moment predicted by Lenin (in the conversation with Humbert-Droz quoted at the beginning) would occur: who? – that is, a confrontation of transitional partners “the ruins of old Europe”.

The source material analysed in this article makes it possible to reconstruct the efforts of the Soviet representative in Berlin to bring about, as early as between July 1920 and March 1921, such a strategic agreement between Soviet Russia and the German Republic on the basis of a common desire to overturn the political order established at Versailles and, in particular, to “tear down the Polish wall” between Moscow and Berlin. Unexpectedly, we realise how close he was to achieving this goal in the first half of August 1920, when Kopp had already persuaded his superiors in the Kremlin to appoint a delegation to a Soviet-German political conference that could agree on the principles of the geopolitical division of Eastern Europe after crushing Poland. And how deeply Kopp believed in the chance of a resumption of the war with Poland – assuming a *de facto* alliance with Germany – in March 1921 (in connection with the Upper Silesian plebiscite). Both of these critical moments have so far been barely analysed in historiography.

The question of the sources of the failure of these projects refers us not only to such objective, so to speak, determinants as the defeat of the Red Army in the Battle of Warsaw in August 1920 or the extreme exhaustion of Soviet Russia’s forces, but also to the threat to Bolshevik rule by a popular revolt in March 1921. Another vital factor was Lenin’s restraint – and his key role in refusing to meet the conditions the German side was formulating in the negotiations with Kopp. This aspect of the discussions within the top Soviet leadership deserves more attention as well, in my opinion. It was not Trotsky, not Stalin, not anyone else from the top leadership of the Soviet party and state (we need to bear in mind that in the second half of 1920 the Politburo comprised, apart from the two men, only Lev Kamenev), but Lenin – as the material analysed here demonstrates – who had the most important voice in the matter of Soviet-German relations.

Finally, what also deserves to be emphasised is the degree of independence of opinion and, to some extent, even willingness to uphold it, despite the clear disapproval of the leadership, displayed by the first Soviet plenipotentiary in Berlin. Viktor Kopp was not allowed to witness (for this reason as well) the signing of a political and commercial agreement concluded in Berlin on 6 May 1921 between Soviet Russia and Germany.⁶⁹ He had already been recalled to Moscow at the end of April, and had been replaced by Yuri Lutovinov as diplomatic representative (Krasin’s protégé Boris Stomoniakov became Russia’s trade representative). Kopp, however, proved irreplaceable. The contacts he had established in German

⁶⁹ See *Советско-германские отношения*, vol. 2, pp. 318–323.

industrial, financial, diplomatic, and military circles made his return to Berlin necessary, also in the eyes of his political superiors. He was back in Berlin already on 14 June, having been appointed Soviet Russia's Plenipotentiary Representative for Political Affairs (Stomoniakov remained in his position).⁷⁰ He would later play a key role in the secret and open negotiations that, after 10 months, would finally lead to the deal he had been working so hard to achieve. This would be the Rapallo Treaty, signed on 16 April 1922. A treaty that would become a symbol of the policy of strategic and economic cooperation between Moscow and Berlin, across ideological divides, against Poland and against Western Europe.

Abstract

The article deals with Soviet policy towards Germany in 1920–1921. The analysis is based on diplomatic reports of Viktor Kopp, the Soviet Russia's representative in Berlin, sent to the foreign affairs commissar Georgy Chicherin. The author examines the development of Soviet-German relations from the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918) until the period after the Polish-Bolshevik War (1920). He demonstrates that already at that time the concept of cooperating with Germany against the Entente powers – excluding Poland, seen as a 'wall' between the two countries – was taking shape in Moscow. Viktor Kopp was a key figure in this diplomatic game: he held talks with German diplomats, industrialists, and members of the military (including General Hans von Seeckt), proposing a united front against Poland and the Versailles system.

Translated by Anna Kijak

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⁷⁰ For more on the subject, see Черноперов, 'Дипломат В.Л. Копп', pp. 397–504.

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