

## **Diplomatic Co-operation between Germany and the USSR in the Baltic States in 1920-1940**

*by Zenonas Butkus*

Secret agreements between Germany and the USSR which led to the rise of the World War II have been described in literature rather extensively, they are recorded in the historical conscience of the society. However, the fact that these agreements destroyed the Baltic States is recounted disproportionately insufficiently and often rather vaguely in the European historiographical literature, sometimes it is only mentioned.

To illustrate this, I would like to show you a book published in Germany just in 1999 called '*August 1939: 11 Last Days before World War II*' by Manfred Vasold. Out of its nearly 300 pages only a half of a page, just a couple of sentences are devoted to the Baltic states. And they focus not on the most important typical things but rather on distorted, accidental ones. They even point out that the secret agreements posed no threat to the Baltic states.

More and more frequently an opinion is favoured that Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, its secret protocols represented an anomaly of international relations, an unprecedented event in the history of the humankind, an unheard-of crime of unheard-of dictators which had nothing to do with other politicians, diplomats and overall diplomacy. In terms of international relations, this was a censorship, a catastrophe without any continuation.

The question arises whether the secret German-USSR agreements were really in no way related to the previous development of the interrelations between the two countries, or perhaps they were an immediate result of that development, a logical further continuation.

Thus, let us consider what the USSR-German diplomacy in the Baltic states was like, how it functioned in the period between the two world wars. The main sources of reference are the archive material of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Russia and Germany as well as two major collections of documents '*Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918-1945*' and '*Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*'.

I have to inform you, first of all, that the diplomats of Germany and the USSR stayed in close co-operation in the interwar Baltic states, their mutual contacts were considerably closer than the relations with diplomatic missions of other states. These were not only the traditional diplomatic contacts for the exchange of views, discussion of the then topical issues of the international life. The USSR-German diplomatic co-operation was a special policy sanctioned and organised by the supreme authorities of both countries. This policy was targeted at the prevention of any possible union among the Baltic states, as well as other states lying in between Germany and the USSR, so that these countries would remain separate, isolated from each other without a co-ordinated foreign policy, i.e. it was aimed at the prevention of any military-

political bloc in Eastern and Central Europe which in future, could hinder Germany's expansion to the East and the extension of the Soviet boundaries to the West. In their opinion, the Baltic states were to become a bridge joining them rather than a barrier separating them and belonging to the British or French sphere of influence. In the interwar period, both the USSR and Germany wanted to keep the Baltic states as if preserved, unprepared for self-defence, neglectful of their security, as if in a freezer from where they could be taken and shared whenever needed.

The co-operation between the USSR and Germany was stimulated by geopolitical motives, the interwar fighting between marine and continental states. Though Conze<sup>1</sup> and several other German historians maintain that Germany belonged to both of these groups, in any way, Germany, similarly to Russia, was, first and foremost, a continental state. At least, this is what it was definitely considered to be by Soviet authorities. This is demonstrated by the protocols and other documents of, in fact, the top Soviet administrative body, the Politburo. They reveal that Stalin and his colleagues always perceived the UK as the main enemy, while Germany was considered the most important ally.

The Baltic states were the area where the Soviets and Germans shared a common goal not to allow Britain as a marine state to dominate here. Therefore, the USSR and Germany tried to weaken the British influence in the Baltic states so that they could dominate the territory themselves. This, in addition to other facts, is evidenced by the interwar Soviet intelligence documents preserved in the Estonian national archive.<sup>2</sup> They reveal that the Soviet intelligence devoted almost a half of its activities to the fight against British intelligence, to the detection, re-recruiting of its agents, etc. Meanwhile, the fight against German intelligence was not mentioned in these documents at all.

Similar trend was obvious in the diplomatic activities too. Soviet and German diplomats, both together and individually, made every effort to minimise the influence of Britain over the foreign and internal policies of the Baltic states. On 5 March 1926, German and Soviet envoys to Latvia Köster and Chernyh concluded in their conversation that Great Britain and the two states represented by themselves had 'major contradictions', thus, in the fight against the British influence they would act as allies.<sup>3</sup> This was not an extraordinary, but typical and long-lasting position of the Soviet and German diplomacy in the Baltic states. They also consolidated their efforts in combating the influence of France and its ally Poland in this area.

Moreover, Germany and the USSR were linked by a common dissatisfaction in the system established by the Treaty of Versailles, post-war division of the political map. Both of the states were considering its re-division. Favourable conditions for the co-operation were created by the Rapallo Treaty as well as other German-Soviet agreements.

Often the diplomats of those countries to the Baltic states used to meet and co-ordinate their actions even on a daily basis. They used to agree on the ways to exert influence on certain policies of the Baltic states, even on the Governments or the parliaments. The first Soviet envoy

to Lithuania Aleksandr Akselrod met German envoy Fritz Schönberg immediately on arriving in Kaunas, without having presented his credentials, already on 6 September 1920, and their two-hour conversation resulted in a conclusion that they both had 'common enemies and common interests'. The record of the conversation has been preserved by both Russian and German archives, therefore we have no grounds to doubt its authenticity.<sup>4</sup> Joint activities of the two diplomats were so intensive that already in 1921, one could hear among the public of Kaunas that Soviet and German envoys simply commanded Lithuanian policies.<sup>5</sup> Their co-operation caused the anxiety of the diplomacy of the Entente states. On 10 January 1921, when speaking to Akselrod, Lithuanian Foreign Affairs Minister Juozas Purickis gave out that at the meeting of the Nations' Union, the Lithuanian representative was told in his face that the envoy of Moscow assisted by German representative Schönberg was 'driving the entire Lithuanian foreign policy'<sup>6</sup>.

Besides Lithuania, Soviet and German diplomacy acted together in Latvia and Estonia, even in Finland. The international policy review prepared by the USSR Foreign Affairs People's Commissariat (FAPC) in January 1926 legitimately noted: 'German diplomats in the Baltic states, especially in Riga and Helsinki, work together with us'<sup>7</sup>.

The main effort of the USSR and German diplomacy was directed towards the prevention of Baltic states' rapprochement, establishment of any, particularly military, union. The creation of the union was hindered by co-ordinated actions of the two states. On 22 July 1921, Schönberg, mentioned above, suggested Soviet envoy to Lithuania Aralov that a special conference of German and USSR diplomats and politicians be convened where both countries could agree on the common actions against the establishment of the Baltic Union<sup>8</sup>. Probably in order to avoid undesirable publicity, this conference was not held. Common actions were co-ordinated through diplomatic channels, mutual agreements which definitely were sanctioned and, in most cases, initiated by the supreme powers. On 9 March 1925, the Politburo adopted a plan of special concrete actions aimed at obstructing the creation of the Baltic Union. Besides other things, the plan envisaged that Germany should be more actively involved in the obstruction. Germany had to be informed that the Baltic Union would be established by France and Poland, thus, it would, first of all, be targeted against Germany<sup>9</sup>.

The consolidation of the Baltic states was blocked in various ways. Soviet and German diplomats used to organise co-ordinated diplomatic demarches. Whenever an idea about the creation of a union was born, they would immediately warn Baltic politicians that the establishment of the union would represent an unfriendly, even hostile step towards both the USSR and Germany. Lithuanian politicians, moreover, used to be told that on acceding the union, Lithuania would not be able to expect any support in its fight for Vilnius with Poland. Soviet and German diplomats worked together, often each of them taking actions in specific fields, in dissuading various political parties and individual politicians of the Baltic states from the union, as well. The most enthusiastic advocates of the union were frequently discredited, even forced to resign. In 1925, Soviet and German envoys to Tallinn, acting through an influential politician Päts, a supporter of the pro-Russian orientation, and other powers, achieved the

resignation of a very active supporter of the Baltic Union, Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Pusta<sup>10</sup>.

The common actions of Soviet and German diplomats frequently interfered with the internal affairs of the Baltic states, they regulated the political processes taking place there. They supported forces opposing the Baltic Union and sought to turn these states towards Germany and the USSR. In Lithuania, these forces were represented by the Nationalists. In March 1927, the FAPC instructed Soviet envoy to Lithuania Aleksandrovski to ask German envoy Moraht for the latter's assistance in weakening the Populists' opposition to the Nationalists<sup>11</sup>. Moraht kindly agreed to help. He promised Aleksandrovski to arrange a special lunch for the leaders of the Populist Party and convince them that it was not worthwhile to oppose the Nationalists' rule<sup>12</sup>.

Co-operation was maintained even in the fields where German and Soviet interests seemed to have nothing in common. For instance, Moraht tried to assist Aleksandrovski in saving the leaders of the Lithuanian communists from shooting who were arrested in the coup of 17 December 1926. Having learnt that the execution was to be carried out soon, on the night of 25 December 1926, well after midnight, Aleksandrovski awoke Moraht who immediately agreed to go to the then master of the situation President Antanas Smetona. Both he, and Prime Minister Voldemaras who was staying with him then, were explained by Moraht that the execution of communists would spoil Lithuania's relations with not only the USSR, but also Germany, and they could no more be expected to provide any support. Smetona and Voldemaras replied that nothing could be done at that time. The execution had to take place due to internal policy reasons<sup>13</sup>.

Despite of its failure, this move brought Soviet and German diplomats yet closer. The USSR expressed special thanks to Germany for the assistance, while the authorities of the latter evaluated the actions of Moraht favourably.

The USSR and Germany were also in close co-operation in regulating Lithuanian-Polish conflict. Both of the great neighbours supported and incited the Lithuanian-Polish conflict, however they also were concerned about not turning the conflict into a war as long as they were not ready for it. They wished to keep the temperature of the conflict at a certain level, not too high and not too low. The principle of a barometer or a thermometer was adhered to. Until the end of 1926 the conflict was being provoked, while in 1927 and 1928 it was being extinguished.

Due to the shortage of time, I think, I will manage to provide to you at least one more example of co-operation out the great number of factors. In early July 1928, representatives of France, UK and Italy Eber, Perish and Amadori were instructed by their governments to organise a joint demarche to demand Lithuanian Prime Minister Voldemaras to make more concessions to Poland. There was a wish to include German envoy Moraht into the joint demarche too. However, the latter refused and informed USSR representative Rabinovich of that. On 14 July,

the two of them met and held exhaustive talks. Rabinovich encouraged Moraht 'in no way to contribute to the joint demarche'<sup>14</sup>, but rather to act in conjunction with him. Moraht agreed, telling Rabinovich that on the 19 July he would have to go to the joint meeting with Eber, Perish and Amadori. Rabinovich did not mind, but explained to Moraht in great detail how he had to behave in that meeting. He was advised to stay passive, not to initiate a discussion - let all the others express their views first, let them reveal the instructions they have. The first to speak was Eber, since being French he was impatient.

Moraht told him that he would necessarily follow his advice. He would not disclose his intentions and only listen to the ideas of the Western diplomats<sup>15</sup> .

The course of the meeting of the 16 July corresponded to the plans of Rabinovich. The first to speak was Eber who attacked Lithuania with violent accusations. British representative Perish proposed to present a 'joint memorandum' to Voldemaras. Moraht firmly rejected the proposal. He indicated that he would never sign it and, in general, would not contribute to the joint demarche. He did not say anything about his own actions, he only found out when and what the others would speak to Voldemaras.

Moraht communicated every detail of this to Rabinovich on 19 July<sup>16</sup>. On that day, as well as in the mentioned meeting of 14 July, the two of them agreed when, how and what they were going to say to Voldemaras and other Lithuanian politicians. Moraht and Rabinovich agreed to tell them that in case of a military conflict between Lithuania and Poland, they should not expect Germany and the USSR to come to the defence of Lithuania immediately, without taking into consideration the circumstances. The hopes that 40 or 50 thousand volunteers would rush to defend Lithuania from Germany were not grounded. In the best case, only 20 or 30 individuals would arrive.

In these conversations Moraht used to be extremely frank. He showed the most secret diplomatic documents to Rabinovich. On 14 July, he read to him a note of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs about secret intentions of France to allow Poland to occupy Lithuania in a sudden attack. On 19 July, Moraht read to Rabinovich the whole of his telegram, just prepared for sending to Berlin, and even asked him what else could be included into it<sup>17</sup>.

Yet more intensive co-operation was maintained by Moraht with another experienced Soviet envoy Karski. In one case, the latter even found it necessary to warn Moscow: 'It would be undesirable if Berlin learned how exhaustively Moraht informs us. We can read the originals of the ciphertexts'<sup>18</sup> .

However, neither Berlin, nor Moscow reproved their diplomats in the Baltic states for co-operation. Soviet and German foreign affairs agencies themselves, their leadership used to discuss, find agreement on joint policies with regard to the Baltic states and implement them.

Germany and the USSR pursued joint policies concerning the issue of Klaipeda, co-ordinated economic relations with the Baltic states, etc. The co-operation was usually initiated by the Soviets. After Fascists took over the rule of Germany, the co-operation temporarily went down, however, it did not cease. Rapallo Treaty was not declared null and void. In 1939, the USSR and Germany agreed on the division of the Baltic states rather easily. Throughout the entire interwar period, Germany used to recognise that at least in Latvia and Estonia, the priority of influence belonged to the Soviets.

In terms of the history of international relations, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was a crime of unprecedented extent. However, archive documents reveal that it had its own roots, even, I would say, was a consequence of the previous co-operation between the USSR and Germany, a result of numerous minor conspiracies which destroyed the independence of the Baltic states.

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<sup>1</sup> Conze W. *Das Deutsch-russische Verhältnis im Wandel der modernen Welt*, - Göttingen. 1967.S. 8-10, 19.

<sup>2</sup> Eesti Riigiarhiivi Filiaal (Parteiarchiv) F. 138. Dokumentide Kasutamislekt.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. 06 03 1926 report of the USSR envoy to Riga delivered to the Foreign Affairs People's Commissariat (FAPC) // Archive of Foreign Politics of the Russian Federation (AFPRF) F. 0150. File 18, folder 25. B. 10. L. 8.

<sup>4</sup> 07 09 1920 report by Schonberg to German MFA // Political Archive of German Ministry of Foreign Affairs (PA GMFA). R. 31384 k. K. 086164; 07 09 1920 report by Akselrod sent to Lenin // Russian Federation Centre for Storage and Investigation of Modern History Documents (RCMH) F. 5. File 1. B. 2151. L. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Butkus, Z. *The First Soviet Envoy to Lithuania A. Akselrod: Six Months of Diplomatic Activities (September 1920 - March 1921)* // *Chronicle of the History of Lithuania*. 1996. V., 1997. P. 136.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* S. 129

<sup>7</sup> AFORF. F. 0151. File 12. Folder 18. B. 15. L. 322.

<sup>8</sup> 22 07 1921 report by Aralov sent to Lenin // RCMH. F.5. File m!. B. 2196. L. 61.

<sup>9</sup> 09 04 1925 Resolution of the Politburo // *Ibid*. F.17. File 162. B. 2. L. 108-109.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. 1925 Reports of the USSR Mission to FAPC // AFPRF. F. 0154. File 14. Folder 12. B. 5. L. 33, 101, 131-137 et al.

<sup>11</sup> Butkus, Z. *Intrigues of the USSR in the Baltic states 1920-1940* // *Darbai ir dienos* issue No 7 (16) 1998. P. 146.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. March 1927 reports by Aleksandrovski to FAPC // AFPRF F. 04. File 27. Folder 187. B. 130. L. 180-184.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. 28 12 1926 report by Aleksandrovski to FAPC // *Ibid* F. 0151. File 13. Folder 20. B. 4. L.2-4.; 27 12 1926 report by Moraht to MFA // PA GMFA. R. 31385 k. K 086532-K086538.

<sup>14</sup> 14 07 1928 record of the conversation between Moraht and Rabinovich // *Ibid* F. 0151. File 16. Folder 32. B. 3. L. 295.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* L. 297.

<sup>16</sup> Record of conversation // *Ibid* L. 308-313.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* L. 311.

<sup>18</sup> 1932 reports by Karski to FAPC // *Ibid*. File 21. Folder 45. B. 8. L. 7.