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The Influence of France on the Economic Development of the Second Polish Republic in the First Years after Regaining Independence: An Outline of the Problem

Summary: This text aims to highlight the issue of building Polish-French economic relations in the first years after Poland regained independence. For the Polish state at that time, a key concern was securing French support in the political, military, and economic spheres. For victorious France, however, economic matters were at least as important as political issues, and perhaps even more significant in relations with Poland. This was evident when the Republic of Poland was contesting the eastern territories or asserting its rights in Silesia. Primarily, the French side — particularly entrepreneurs with influence over politicians — was interested in investing capital, which consequently translated into pressure during negotiations with the Polish government. Poland did not acquiesce to all demands; nevertheless, it was keen to finalise economic agreements and conclude a trade treaty, the signing of which was made conditional upon the implementation of the political accord and the secret military convention of 1921. Another important aspect of economic relations was the exchange of goods and the principles governing such exchanges. Commercial transactions were based chiefly on preferential customs concessions granted to the French side. The negotiations culminated in the signing of the trade treaty in 1922, which stipulated numerous benefits and privileges for the French state.

Keywords: Second Polish Republic, Third French Republic, economy, trade, exchange, politics

Introduction

The regaining of independence by Poland was a pivotal moment in the process of state reconstruction. The consolidation of territories following the partitions was, at that time, a key issue. The Second Republic of Poland also faced the task of securing

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external financial resources, as well as political support. It should be added that the only realistic ally capable of supporting Poland was France. For the French state, the Second Republic represented a counterbalance to Bolshevism, creating the so-called *cordon sanitaire* within the security system. The French had lost their former ally, Tsarist Russia, in which they had invested substantial financial resources. Although France emerged victorious from the war, it suffered enormous human and economic losses.¹ Consequently, strengthening an independent Poland was expected to yield tangible political and economic benefits.² Meanwhile, as Jerzy Łazor notes, the authorities in Warsaw had to contend with five different commercial law systems and currencies (including in Eastern Galicia).³ The Polish government required foreign capital for the reconstruction and development of the country. However, investing in Poland posed a challenge for foreign states, who regarded Poland as a ‘seasonal’, primarily due to its still unsettled borders.⁴

This text aims to highlight the issues concerning the development of economic relations between Poland and France. The subject matter addressed in this article pertains to the beginnings of such relations through a series of negotiations not only on economic matters but also on political and military ones. These issues were interconnected, particularly where French capital was involved, as it was also a subject of political negotiation. Economic relations between the two sides comprised multiple components, and ongoing scholarly research will in the future make it possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of Polish-French economic relations.

The Influence of France on the Economic Development of the Second Polish Republic

The French side became interested in the Polish economy in the spring of 1919, within the framework of the Inter-Allied Commission for the Investigation of Polish Affairs. Its task was to develop analyses concerning the condition and economic potential of the Polish state. The presence of the mission’s representatives was directly linked to the Polish-Ukrainian conflict, as well as the ongoing Polish-Bolshevik War. In March 1919, the economic attaché André Vicaire presented a report on the state of the Polish economy during wartime. The aim was to assess opportunities for potential investment by French companies so that any market penetration undertaken would be effective.

To this end, at the initiative of the mission, Prime Minister Ignacy Paderewski was approached to remove all obstacles faced by French companies still operating under

1 Ambrochowicz-Gajownik A. 2024, 129–143.

2 Ambrochowicz-Gajownik A. 2023, 227–248.

3 From this place, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Jerzy Łazor from the SHG in Warsaw for providing me with a copy of the book. Łazor J. 2024, 3.

4 Ambrochowicz-Gajownik A. 2019.

conditions inherited from the partitioning powers on Polish territory.⁵ There is no doubt that the Polish government required the support of the French Third Republic, not only in terms of military assistance — which entailed France granting loans for the purchase of armaments, uniforms, and other equipment — but also in economic matters. It is worth noting that from April 1919, the French Military Mission in Poland, headed by General Paul Henrys, commenced its activities.⁶ At the same time, credit agreements were concluded for the purchase of war materials from French reserves, totalling 300 million French francs, demonstrating the tangible and practical nature of French assistance. It should, however, be borne in mind that Poland's assumption of this obligation was necessary to continue fighting on the front and was made at the cost of acquiescing to French demands. The activities of the French Military Mission in Poland were intended not only to support the Polish army but also to strengthen French influence, with significant attention to economic matters.⁷ Consequently, as early as June 1919, a French industrialist and commander of a reserve artillery squadron arrived in Poland with the mission of assessing the situation on the agricultural machinery market. He was also tasked with investigating flax production for the French linen industry and flaxseed for farmers. Additionally, the industrialist was instructed to examine the beekeeping market.⁸

France, being keenly interested in the course of the Polish-Ukrainian conflict, closely monitored the situation in Eastern Galicia due to its oil deposits. Beyond the state authorities, the stabilisation of the region also attracted the attention of a capital group centred around the International Committee based in London, which sought to protect English, French, and Belgian oil interests in Galicia.⁹ Its French shareholders, led by Senators Henri Berenger and Léon Mougeot, who controlled capital amounting to approximately 300 million French francs, lobbied for government support of Polish claims to Eastern Galicia.¹⁰ Consequently, in France there prevailed a strong conviction of the need to resolve the conflict as quickly as possible and to establish a demarcation line.¹¹ It is worth noting that French interest in Ukrainian lands had already emerged by 1917, prompted by concerns over potential control of the area by the Central Powers, followed by the actual occupation by German forces, and in 1918 due to the interest of Bolshevik Russia. Unfortunately, the military intervention undertaken in Ukraine failed, leading to France's withdrawal from pursuing a direct policy in the region. At that point, Paris shifted its approach from active engagement

5 Kukułka J. 1970, 48.

6 Mróz M. 2019, 82–111; see: Schramm T. 1987.

7 Wandycz P. 2017, 3–15.

8 AAN MSZ. *Ministère*, 10–11.

9 Ambrochowicz-Gajownik A. 2023, 99–100.

10 Kukułka J. 1970, 51; Pisuliński J. 2013, 146.

11 Mroczyka L. 1998, 150.

to supporting countries in open conflict with Bolshevik Russia.¹² However, it should be emphasised that in this matter, France made decisions with consideration of the position of Great Britain, which viewed its military actions with disfavour. Moreover, both states competed for the acquisition of the largest possible shares in the Galician oil industry. This dispute was resolved favourably for France with the initialling of an oil agreement with Great Britain on 21 December 1919.¹³ At the same time, the Polish state conducted economic negotiations with Symon Petliura, the Ataman and leader of the Ukrainian People's Republic. Poland's interest was focused on the exchange of Ukrainian grain and sugar for oil and salt.¹⁴ These negotiations coincided with French interest in the economic exploitation of Ukraine. Through Poland as its agent, France sought to obtain specific economic concessions in the region.¹⁵ Evidence of this is found in the exchange of views between the French envoy in Warsaw, Hector de Panafieu, and the Deputy Minister of Military Affairs, General Kazimierz Sosnkowski, concerning Polish victories in Ukraine. Panafieu elaborated on the possibilities of cooperation in territories occupied by Polish forces, indicating that it was in both Polish and French interests for 'Poland to develop an economic protectorate over Russia and thereby become an agent of French economic penetration in Russia'.¹⁶ Paris thus sent an unambiguous signal of its desire to participate in the division of 'future profits'. As a means of pressure in the event of Polish refusal, it was noted that substantial stocks of arms and ammunition remained in France, intended for shipment to Poland. The French began emphasising that further deliveries would need to be paid for in the form of specific trade concessions in favour of the French state, effectively requiring Poland to forgo Ukrainian grain, sugar, or oil.¹⁷

During the offensive in Ukraine, the Polish Military Purchases Mission in Paris¹⁸ took control of the 'Groddek' sugar factory and requisitioned the sugar produced there, in which the French side held shares. This situation provoked a reaction from France, which demanded compensation equal to the value of the 'seized' sugar, amounting to 6 million French francs (calculated according to the market value prevailing in France). The Polish side paid 20 million Polish marks, which also corresponded to the price of the requisitioned sugar. The Ministry of the Treasury considered this sum sufficient, particularly as the Polish government had granted the sugar factory a loan of 20 million marks to maintain its beet plantations, which had not been repaid.¹⁹

12 Olszewski P. 2011, 76–94.

13 Kukułka J. 1970, 52–53.

14 Pisuliński J. 2013, 184.

15 Hovi K. 1984, 47.

16 Kukułka J. 1970, 177.

17 Wandycz P. 1962, 147; Kukułka J. 1970, 177.

18 Uwijala P. 2019, 203–228.

19 AAN MSZ. *Pismo*, 5–11.

It was estimated that French capital in Eastern Galicia amounted to 600 million French francs, thanks to the acquisition of German and Austrian shares by several major groups financing the oil industry.²⁰ At that time, suspicions arose on the Polish side as to whether France might, in fact, serve as a ‘protector’ for German interests.²¹ Nevertheless, there were also positive opinions regarding the French investment in the refinery at Limanowa. The Polish side believed that French entrepreneurs were primarily ‘chasing quick profits’ while simultaneously exerting considerable influence over politicians — deputies and senators — and, through them, over the government.²²

In the autumn of 1920, the Minister of the Treasury, Władysław Grabski, visited Paris once again to conduct economic negotiations. Grabski already perceived that the French government based its decisions on the interests of industrialists, particularly those in the oil refinery sector.²³ The French side’s stipulations effectively appropriated foreign currency earned by Poland from oil exports, leaving it in the hands of French oil enterprises, which sought to eliminate any state interference in oil matters and to minimise production at the state refinery in Drohobycz.²⁴ It is worth noting that French entrepreneurs were supported in negotiations by the ambassadors Joseph Noulens and Jules Cambon.²⁵ Noulens, in exchange for backing the demands of the French ‘oilmen’, was prepared to grant Poland a loan of 2 million French francs under the so-called financial advancement scheme, solely to satisfy their interests in the Polish oil industry rather than to focus on the delivery of oil. The minister rejected these demands but agreed to the delivery of sugar. Before discussing the issue of sugar in detail, it is important to mention the economic negotiations between the parties which took place in Paris during the summer of 1920.

The negotiations with the French were conducted by Minister Grabski, Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade Henryk Strasburger, and Commercial Counsellor Franciszek Doleżał. This meeting was significant for several reasons. The primary objective was to secure the signing of a trade convention regulating bilateral economic relations between the two states. The convention was to be of particular importance due to provisions concerning the settlement of debts arising from military deliveries. France guaranteed Poland greater customs concessions than those granted to Czechoslovakia. This information reached the public domain and consequently caused dissatisfaction in the United Kingdom and Italy over the preferential treatment and special

20 The most prominent groups operated within the framework of the *Société Française des Pétales*, the *Consortium du Nord*, and *Auerbach*. The latter was reportedly in control of the *Premier Oil and Pipeline Co. Ltd.*, having purchased mines in Harkłowa from German owners and cooperating closely with German capital. AAN MSZ. *Referat*, 30–44; Gmurczyk-Wrońska M. 2023, 165–181.

21 AAN MSZ. *Referat*, 30–44.

22 AAN MSZ. *Referat*, 30–44.

23 AAN MSZ. *Referat*, 30–44.

24 AAN MSZ. *Referat*, 30–44.

25 AAN MSZ. *Referat*, 30–44.

privileges in Polish-French trade. Mindful of its relations with Czechoslovakia, the United Kingdom, and Italy, the French side rejected the draft convention, introducing a link between the economic convention and the bilateral agreement on the one hand and the oil agreement — which Grabski did not sign — on the other, as well as the issue of French government guarantees regarding financial advancement against sugar deliveries.²⁶ Following consultations upon his return to Warsaw, Grabski concluded that matters relating to sugar sales should be handled separately. Consequently, Commercial Counsellor Franciszek Doleżał signed an agreement with the French company *David Gravis et Fils* for the sale of 15 tonnes of sugar, to be delivered in batches of 5,000 tonnes from January to March 1921. The Polish government undertook to supply sugar produced by Polish sugar factories or refineries in sacks containing a net weight of 100 kg.²⁷ The agreement was drafted in great detail, specifying the various obligations of both sellers and buyers, including customs duties. Payments were to be made through the Banque Franco-Polonaise, with which the Polish government had concluded a direct contract.²⁸ At that time, Grabski sought to link the conclusion of the oil agreement with the introduction of Polish credit on the Parisian market.²⁹ Negotiations concerning the oil agreement continued, as did discussions on the conclusion of the trade convention. The backdrop to these negotiations also included international events involving Poland, which were closely monitored by France.

When the preliminary agreement and armistice were concluded on 12 October 1920, Poland and Bolshevik Russia granted each other the right to free transit of goods through their respective territories. The Polish side reserved the right to regulate the conditions of transit for goods of German and Austrian origin transported to Bolshevik Russia.³⁰ This arrangement caused evident dissatisfaction on the French side. At that time, Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Georges Leygues emphasised that the signing of the Polish-Bolshevik armistice would only be possible after the conclusion of a trade agreement with France.³¹ As can be observed, the French side effectively controlled Poland's actions in its negotiations with the Bolsheviks. Preliminary trade agreements (to be discussed below) with France were concluded before the signing of the Treaty of Riga on 18 March 1921. As early as February 1921, the Polish government urged the Polish envoy in France, Maurycy Zamoyski, to do everything possible to persuade France to finalise the trade agreements, upon which the implementation of the political and military arrangements depended. In March, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs instructed Zamoyski to reject any proposals regarding the oil

26 AAN MSZ. *Referat*, 30–44.

27 AdC. *Warunki*, 70–74.

28 AAN MSZ. *Referat*, 30–44.

29 Gmurczyk-Wrońska M. 2023, 165–181.

30 Borzęcki J. 2012, 320.

31 AdC. *Ministère*, 78; Borzęcki J. 2012.

agreement, which would have been detrimental to Polish interests. Foreign Minister Eustachy Sapieha wrote that 'any attempts to make the Polish-French alliance an object of commercial bargaining constitute a diminution of its value'.³²

Another matter of major importance for Poland was the issue of Upper Silesia. Warsaw expected support from the Western powers regarding the recovery of these territories. Such declarations were obtained only in France. At the time, France aimed to weaken Germany, and this was further motivated by the placement of the French capital in the region, as evidenced by the agreement signed on 17 January 1920 and supplemented on 20 February 1921. Subsequently, on 1 March 1921, both parties signed an accord granting France a 36-year lease of Polish coal mines, while Poland obtained a loan for their exploitation. Both sides were entitled to half of the shares, though the rental payments were received by the French as part of the repayment of Polish debts. In the second half of March 1921, Poland and France signed an agreement concerning the acquisition of private mining and metallurgical enterprises. This facilitated the granting of three loans to Poland for the establishment of the 'Skarboferm' enterprise, the purchase of German-owned companies, and the creation of a Franco-Polish bank in Upper Silesia.³³ It is worth noting that, in anticipation of the upcoming plebiscite in Upper Silesia, Artur Benis was sent to Paris on 1 December 1920 as the Polish government's representative to offer economic concessions and shares in the Silesian company in exchange for support in decision-making regarding the province's future. The Polish side offered concessions, including the creation of an international bank and the linking of revenues from German properties in Upper Silesia to reparations payments. The French were aware of the value of the state-owned mines, and industrial circles sought to exploit them for maximum profit. Notably, the French had conducted discussions with German representatives on this matter long before engaging with Benis.³⁴ Benis believed that the new French capital would not invest domestically unless guarantees were provided to ensure both profitability and security.³⁵ Subsequently, in June 1921, Zamoyski telegraphed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the signing of the oil agreement and all related treaties had been delayed by France for political reasons, primarily concerning the Upper Silesian plebiscite. France was willing to conclude the trade agreement, but only if Poland took steps to mitigate the conflict.³⁶ Overall, negotiations regarding investments in Upper Silesia continued until the signing of the 1922 trade treaty, which regulated all economic matters between Poland and France.

32 AAN APP, 34.

33 AAN MSZ. *W. Olszewicz*, 1–4; Ambrochowicz-Gajownik A. 2019, 206; Ambrochowicz-Gajownik A. 2020, 166–167; Łazor J. 2024, 123–132; Łazor J. 2020, 289–320.

34 Łazor J. 2024, 121.

35 AAN MSZ. *Referat*, 30–44.

36 AAN MSZ. *Hr. M. Zamoyski*, 25.

Trade Exchange

An important issue in trade exchange was the establishment of rules governing the shipment of products. The most financially and logistically advantageous route was maritime transport. Before the Gdynia–Le Havre shipping line was established, the company *Worms et Cie* expressed interest in the exchange of goods, declaring that it would be beneficial for both countries to establish a regular shipping route from Gdańsk to Dunkirk, Le Havre, and Bordeaux. Consequently, a representative of the company informed Noulens of its intention to open a branch in Gdańsk and an office in Warsaw.³⁷ With the creation of the Polish-French Consortium, the Gdynia–Le Havre maritime line was inaugurated.³⁸

Polish goods reached the French market mainly on ships belonging to *Worms et Cie*, as well as to the German companies *Deutsche Levante Linie*, *Svenska Lloyd*, and certain Amsterdam-based firms.³⁹ Between April and May 1920, Poland managed to export 450 tonnes of products to France, while imports from France to Poland amounted to 1,400 tonnes. Statistical records were at that time very limited, but they were compared with those regarding Polish-German trade.⁴⁰

According to French reports, the Polish government was making systematic efforts to develop and organise its export trade in order to improve the country's overall financial situation. However, Poland lacked both substantial reserves and sufficient supplies of manufactured goods. It could export little beyond raw materials and basic products, and even then had to limit exports to avoid depriving its own industry of essential resources. Conversely, it needed to import certain raw materials — such as wool and cotton — for domestic consumption as well as for the re-export of finished goods, which would provide employment to many Polish workers and the unemployed. In these circumstances, the Polish government decided to impose strict controls on imports, given the country's limited export capacity. The French considered that the Polish authorities should introduce strict control over both imports and exports so that equilibrium in foreign trade could be achieved until exports exceeded imports. Additionally, trade was hindered by the weakness of the Polish mark and by the lack of cooperation between Polish and French entrepreneurs. French products — particularly luxury goods and phosphates — posed a further difficulty for the Polish state, especially since the French side sought to obtain customs concessions for its

37 AdC. *Worms*, 7–8.

38 AdC. *Note*, 138–140.

39 AdC. *Nota*, 7.

40 AdC. *Notatka*, 81. In the quarter from November 1919 to January 1920, imports from Germany amounted to 90,778 tonnes. Between April and June 1920, German imports reached 302,225 tonnes, of which coal accounted for 237,666 tonnes, or 70% of the total import volume. Furthermore, in the first quarter of 1920, goods of German origin represented a total value of 4,702,000 Swiss francs, corresponding to 20% of the total import value of 23,535,000 Swiss francs.

merchandise. At that time, the Polish authorities were engaged in negotiations with the French association *Linière*, which sought to purchase flax from Polish harvests, particularly from the Lithuanian territories administered by Poland, in exchange for African phosphates. The quantities and prices were to be specified in a contract between representatives of French buyers and the company *Kresolen*, responsible for the sale of flax from the eastern territories. Revenues from flax sales in French francs were to be used to pay for deliveries of Algerian phosphates to Poland until the due date. A credit line equal to the proceeds from the sales was to be opened simultaneously for the Polish government for a period of six months. The French envoy in Warsaw, Eugène Pralon, considered this operation to be highly advantageous, as it provided French merchants in Poland with defined working conditions and a relative stabilisation of exchange-rate risks. The Head of the Commercial Relations Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Quai d'Orsay*), Jacques Seydoux, sought to be informed of the entire operation, requesting the Chief of the Financial Section, Albert Kammerer, to determine the measures to be taken in order to facilitate trade between France and Poland.⁴¹

Conclusion

France's influence on the reconstruction of the Second Polish Republic after the First World War was directly linked to the political situation of the Polish state. Political and military matters were closely intertwined with economic issues, a fact that the French side skilfully exploited. Poland required French assistance, while France took advantage of this dependency by negotiating preferential treatment for itself in trade agreements concerning its capital investments in Poland and in commercial exchange — particularly regarding the pricing of goods. France was willing to provide loans for the reconstruction of the economy, including for military purposes, but always under specific conditions. Consequently, the two sides signed a trade treaty only in 1922. This treaty regulated all economic relations between them and enabled the political agreement and the secret military convention of 1921 to enter into force.

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41 AdC. *Ministère des Affaires*, 15, 16–18.

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