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## **The United Kingdom Towards the Military Security of Poland and the Baltic States in the 20th and 21st Centuries**

**Summary:** The aim of the paper is to analyze and assess the attitude of the United Kingdom towards the military security of Poland and the Baltic States in the 20th and 21st centuries. The first part of the paper discusses the involvement of Great Britain in ensuring the military security of Poland and the Baltic States in the 20th century, including, in particular, their preservation of independence. The second part of the paper presents the activities of the British to strengthen the military security of these countries in the 21st century, especially in the context of the crisis in Ukraine and the military threat from Russia. The main research question is whether Great Britain's activities to ensure the military security of Poland and the Baltic States in the 20th and 21st centuries were significant and effective in achieving this goal? The main thesis of the paper is that the UK activities in the 20th century to support the military security of Poland and the Baltic States were insignificant and only partially effective. Nowadays, however, the United Kingdom is one of the NATO countries that have been most involved in strengthening the military security of the Alliance's eastern flank countries. The British security policy is primarily conditioned by a pragmatic approach typical of the theory of realism. The method of text source analysis was used in the paper. It is necessary to conduct further research, especially regarding the current activity of Great Britain to ensure the military security of Poland and the Baltic States.

**Keywords:** United Kingdom, Poland, Baltic States, military security

## **Wielka Brytania wobec bezpieczeństwa militarnego Polski i państw bałtyckich w XX i XXI wieku**

**Streszczenie:** Przedmiotem artykułu jest postawa Wielkiej Brytanii wobec bezpieczeństwa militarnego Polski i państw bałtyckich w XX i XXI wieku. W pierwszej części artykułu omówione zostało zaangażowanie Wielkiej Brytanii w zapewnienie bezpieczeństwa militarnego Polski i państw bałtyckich w XX wieku, w tym przede wszystkim w zachowanie przez nie niepodległości. W drugiej części artykułu przedstawiono działania Wielkiej Brytanii na rzecz bezpieczeństwa militarnego tych państw w XXI wieku, szczególnie w kontekście kryzysu na Ukrainie i zagrożenia militarnego ze strony Rosji. Głównym pytaniem badawczym jest czy działania Wielkiej Brytanii w zakresie zapewnienia bezpieczeństwa militarnego Polski i państw bałtyckich w XX i XXI wieku

były znaczące i efektywne w osiągnięciu tego celu? Główna teza artykułu zakłada że działania Wielkiej Brytanii w XX wieku na rzecz wsparcia bezpieczeństwa militarnego Polski i państw bałtyckich były nieznaczne i tylko częściowe efektywne. Obecnie jednak Wielka Brytania jest jednym z państw NATO, które w największym stopniu są zaangażowane we wzmocnienie bezpieczeństwa militarnego państw wschodniej flanki Sojuszu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Wielka Brytania, Polska, państwa bałtyckie, bezpieczeństwo militarne

## Introduction

The aim of the paper is to analyze and evaluate the involvement of the United Kingdom in maintaining the military security of Poland and the Baltic States in the 20th and 21st centuries. The main research question is whether Great Britain's activities to ensure the military security of Poland and the Baltic States in the 20th and 21st centuries were significant and effective in achieving this goal? The main thesis of the paper is that although the British authorities were aware of the geopolitical significance of Central and Eastern Europe for European and global security, their actions in the 20th to support the military security of Poland and the Baltic States were insignificant and only partially effective. The situation is different today because the United Kingdom is one of the NATO countries that have been most involved in strengthening the military security of the Alliance's eastern flank countries. The research used the method of analyzing text sources and the genetic method.

## The United Kingdom Towards the Military Security of Poland and the Baltic States in the 20th Century

As a consequence of World War I, a number of new countries, mainly small and medium-sized, appeared in Central and Eastern Europe. Due to their proximity to powerful Soviet Russia/USSR and Germany, they were forced to fight for independence (James, 1972, p. 28). The British authorities, inspired, among others, by Halford Mackinder's thought, were aware of the geopolitical significance of Central and Eastern Europe. In November 1918, the Royal Navy's squadron of ships under the command of Rear Admiral Edwyn Alexander-Sinclair was deployed in the Eastern Baltic to provide supplies and support the struggle for statehood by Estonia and Latvia (for more on this topic in Fletcher, 1976, pp. 134–144). The newly created Baltic States, first of all, had to face the Bolshevik invasion.

Estonians managed to repel the attack at the turn of 1918 and 1919 thanks to the support of the British squadron, but also volunteer forces from northern Europe and the Russian Whites. In early 1919, Royal Navy ships granted protection to the Latvian government, which, under the pressure of the Bolsheviks and local communists, took refuge in Liepāja. The British supported Latvian negotiations with Russians and Germans, which enabled the national government to return to Riga (*Baltic*). At the end of 1919, the British government and admiralty decided to withdraw ships from the Eastern Baltic (Sergeev, 2017, p. 68). Poland also had to fight on several fronts for state sovereignty and demarcation of borders. It is worth mentioning that British Prime Minister David L. George did not want to strengthen it significantly at the expense of Germany, because he wanted to maintain a relative balance in Europe between France and Germany. Great Britain also supported Lithuania's protest after the so-called Żeligowski's Mutiny and the creation of the Republic of Central Lithuania dependent on Poland in October 1920.

After twenty years of independence, the existence of Poland and the Baltic States was under threat again. During the conference in Munich on September 29–30, 1938, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier gave up the Czechoslovak Sudetes to satisfy the territorial claims of Nazi Germany ruled by Adolf Hitler. On October 2, 1938, the Polish Army entered Zaolzie despite the position of Great Britain, which proposed mediation in the dispute between Poland and Czechoslovakia. The Munich conference led to the establishment of the German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia on March 16, 1939. A few days later, on March 23, 1939, the Nazis forced the Kaunas government to agree to the German annexation of Klaipėda. Great Britain, like Poland and France, did not respond to the call for the help of the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Juozas Urbšys. Meanwhile, territorial demands for Poland were intensifying, including consent to incorporate Gdańsk into the Third Reich and delineate the extraterritorial corridor through Pomerania. Therefore, on April 6, 1939, bilateral British–Polish security guarantees, and on August 25, 1939, the British–Polish mutual assistance agreement was signed.

Two days after the Nazi aggression against Poland, i.e., on September 3, 1939, the British government declared war on the Third Reich. Anyway, on September 12, the British admitted that they would not help defend the Polish ally (Szachowski, 2014). On September 28, 1939, the territory of Poland was divided between the Third Reich and the USSR. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were, in

turn, annexed to the Soviet Union in 1940, and after the Third Reich attack on the USSR, they came under German occupation. The collaboration of representatives of the Baltic States with Germany enabled partial maintenance of the local administration. While the United Kingdom had a great impact on the Western Front, it did not have much to say about the Eastern Front. The territories of Poland and the Baltic States were “liberated” from German occupation by the Red Army, supported by the West, and cooperating with the pro-Soviet armed groups of the region. In Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, the Soviet republics were restored, and formally independent Poland came under Soviet domination. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill believed that the Allied success in Normandy in June 1944 had increased his bargaining position vis-à-vis Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and that he would negotiate an agreement to divide Central and Eastern Europe into spheres of influence. According to him, such a solution would give the British and American greater influence on European security (Dobson, 1995, p. 80) and would allow the United Kingdom to maintain its superpower status. Still at the summit in Yalta in February 1945, there was a split between London and Moscow regarding the future of the Polish government and holding elections in the countries under the occupation of the Red Army (Callaghan, 2007, p. 165). On July 5, 1945, the British government withdrew its diplomatic recognition of the Polish Government-in-Exile, recognizing the establishment of the Provisional Government of National Unity. Soon the communists removed pro-Western representatives from the government and took over full power.

The British quickly adapted their policies to the new international situation. They did not treat the Cold War as a transitional period leading to the overthrow of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. On the contrary, they took steps to normalize relations with the East as soon as possible. In November 1947, Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin addressed government members with the words “we have been scrupulously careful not to encourage subversive movements in Eastern Europe or anti-Russianism, or to lead the anti-communists to hope for support that we cannot give” (White, 1992, p. 39). The West’s consent, including that of Great Britain, for Soviet control of Central and Eastern Europe, has become the basis for seeking ways of inter-block normalization of relations. In the 1960s and 1970s, the United Kingdom joined the activities leading to the convening of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Simultaneously, however, its representatives condemned the USSR for the sovietization of Central and Eastern

Europe and the crimes committed against its inhabitants (Callaghan, 2007, pp. 194-195). British politicians sympathized and encouraged the peoples of the region. For example, British Foreign Minister George Brown in a 1966 speech called the Cold War division of Europe “the greatest tragedy of all” and emphasized the great contribution of the East to the history and culture of Europe. He also expressed the hope that in the future, reunification could retake place (Wall, 2013, p. 120).

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who had the reputation of the “Iron Lady” and an ardent enemy of communism, strongly protested against the imposition of martial law in Poland in 1981, which was to lead to the destruction of the democratic Solidarity movement (Dobson, 1995, p. 156). On the other hand, however, she was more reserved than the American President, Ronald Reagan, about imposing economic sanctions on the USSR and communist Poland. This situation confirmed that in the policy of Great Britain, there was a clear gap between hostile anti-Soviet rhetoric and subdued actions against the “Evil Empire”. One of the reasons for this discrepancy was the need to save the remains of *détente* (White, 1992, p. 14 & p.141). In the 1980s, the United Kingdom intensively developed relations with individual countries of Central and Eastern Europe. London, however, was quite skeptical about the turn of 1988/89, not believing in the changes taking place in the region, most of all in the Soviet Union. For this reason, British actions were late compared to other western countries (White, 1992, pp. 153–154). In the following years, the United Kingdom became involved in promoting the principles of democracy and economic liberalism in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This was in line with the “enlargement” strategy of peacefully expanding security, stability, and prosperity by Anthony Lake - National Security Advisor to U.S. President Bill Clinton (Mayall, 2010, p. 18).

In the first half of the 1990s, the United Kingdom was cautious about Russia; therefore, it was moderate about NATO enlargement to the former Eastern Bloc. It also articulated the fear of weakening the Alliance’s coherence and effectiveness as a consequence of its possible territorial development (Czarnocki, Kondrakiewicz, 2007, pp. 607–610). The change in London’s approach was mainly due to Washington’s support of the idea of NATO enlargement to the east. British Prime Minister John Major believed that the North Atlantic Alliance was not only a defense organization but also had a significant political dimension. Through the American “Partnership for Peace” initiative, London became involved in supporting the transformation of defense systems of post-communist countries

of Central and Eastern Europe (Dover, 2016, p. 34). Her Majesty's Armed Forces also participated jointly with the armies of the region in military missions in the Balkans (Codner, 2016, p. 189). Consequently, the British accepted the aspirations of Poland, and later the Baltic States to join NATO. British post-Cold War governments did not have any major issues regarding the inclusion of Central and Eastern European countries in the European Union. This concept was most strongly supported by the government of Tony Blair. The British government also withdrew objection to the EU Common Security and Defense Policy, which development was also in the interest of the new member states. Paradoxically, however, the influx of workers from Central and Eastern Europe to the United Kingdom has become the main reason for Brexit (Gowland, 2017, p. 106, p. 123–127).

### **The United Kingdom Towards the Military Security of Poland and the Baltic States at the Beginning of the 21st Century**

In the 21st century, the United Kingdom, Poland, and the Baltic States took part in crisis response operations outside the North Atlantic area. This concerned primarily military missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also a number of smaller missions carried out under the auspices of the North Atlantic Alliance. During these missions, there was direct cooperation between soldiers from these countries. For example, as part of the "Iraqi Freedom" mission, commandos from the Polish GROM supported the activities of the 3rd Commando Brigade of the Royal Marines. In Afghanistan, on the other hand, during the implementation of the mission of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), a contingent from Estonia supported the British in the province of Helmand (Cawkwell, 2016, p. 60).

The United Kingdom, Poland, and the Baltic States are united by a critical assessment of Russia's military policy in Eastern Europe, as well as more broadly towards the entire continent. These activities are seen as provocative, destabilizing, unlawful, and violating peace and regional security. London sees Moscow's military activity as threatening the security of the Baltic Sea, North Sea, Black Sea, and even the Mediterranean. The United Kingdom's National Security Strategy of November 2015 states that "Russia has become more aggressive, authoritarian and nationalist, increasingly defining itself in opposition to the West. The illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and continuing support to separatists in eastern Ukraine through the use of deniable, hybrid tactics and media manipulation



have shown Russia's willingness to undermine wider international standards of cooperation in order to secure its perceived interests" (HM Government, 2015, p. 18). A similar statement appeared in the National Security Strategy of Poland of November 2014: "Rebuilding Russia's superpower status at the expense of its surroundings and the intensification of its confrontational policy, as exemplified by the conflict with Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea, is negatively affecting the state of security in the region" (BBN, 2014, p. 21). The concern and criticism of Russia's actions also appeared in the security strategies of the Baltic States.

The determination of the United Kingdom towards Russia's military policy is also maintained due to emerging cyclical crises in bilateral relations. Examples include, among others, poisoning of the British-naturalised Russian defector Alexander Litvinenko and regular violation of the British territorial waters and airspace by Russian naval vessels and aircraft. The poisoning of March 4, 2018, in Salisbury, a Russian military intelligence officer cooperating with British intelligence services – Sergei Skripal – also had a big impact on mutual relations. This resulted in a serious diplomatic crisis, during which the United Kingdom could count on the solidarity of Poland, the Baltic States, and many other NATO and EU members (Szostkiewicz, 2018).

During the NATO summits in Newport on 4–5 September 2014 and in Warsaw on 8–9 July 2016, the British delegation demonstrated a great understanding of the postulates regarding the security of Poland and the Baltic States. The British government supported the demands of this group of countries for securing NATO's eastern flank. This concerned the sending of allied forces to the region, intensification of joint military exercises in these countries, as well as the development of a component of rapid response forces and updating contingency plans in the event of various crisis scenarios. The United Kingdom has also made a significant contribution to implementing allied commitments.

First of all, the United Kingdom was involved in the implementation of the NATO enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) concept, within which four battalion battle groups were deployed in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Great Britain became the framework state of a battalion group stationed in Estonia. Since the turn of March and April 2017, the British are sending, on individual shifts, an average of 800 soldiers to the Ämari base in Estonia. Each time the battle group includes a British infantry battalion or armored infantry battalion, equipped with about 300 vehicles, including tanks – Challenger 2, armoured

vehicles – Warrior and self-propelled artillery – AS-90. Battalions are supported by logistics, engineering, intelligence, and reconnaissance units (Telegraph Reporters, 2017). Since April 2017, British soldiers also participate in a battle group stationed in Poland, in which the United States is the framework country. The British send about 150 soldiers to Orzysz, mainly from the reconnaissance regiment (Boguszewski, 2017).

NATO's rapid reaction forces are to play an important role in defending NATO's eastern flank. The United Kingdom has decided to become one of the seven framework countries of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). The British post a significant number of soldiers to this unit, usually about 1,000, but in January 2017, they took command of the VJTF and posted about 3,000 soldiers, mainly from the 20th Armored Brigade (Fallon, Howe, 2017).

The Royal Air Force (RAF) was one of the first to take part in the mission of securing the airspace of the Baltic States after their accession to NATO as part of the "Baltic Air Policing" mission. In October 2004, RAF sent four Panavia Tornado to the Šiauliai base in Lithuania for the first four-month shift. For almost a decade, the British suspended this activity, but when the threat to the airspace of these countries increased, they argued for the intensification of NATO's mission and began to bring resources to its implementation. RAF began sending four Eurofighter Typhoons for four-month shifts. From May 2014, they were stationed in Šiauliai, Lithuania, and from May 2015, April 2016, and May 2019 in the Ämari base in Estonia, achieving the mission's objectives (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2019). In turn, with the task of patrolling the Polish airspace, RAF sent a Boeing E-3 Sentry. Also, the Royal Navy supports the stability and security of the Baltic Sea. For example, in 2019 took place the first deployment of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) (Royal Navy, 2019).

Due to the crisis in Ukraine, the United Kingdom abruptly increased the number of soldiers participating in military exercises carried out in NATO's eastern flank countries. While in 2011 there were only about 700 British soldiers, in 2015 about 4,000, and 2016 over 9,000 (Koval, 2018, p. 99). Most of these exercises are carried out in Poland, and the Baltic States and both lands, air, sea and special forces take part in them. The United Kingdom has decided to participate as a framework state in the Trans-Atlantic Capability Enhancement and Training Initiative (TACET) initiated by Germany and the United States in June 2015. Its goal is to support the defense capabilities of Poland and the Baltic



States through joint exercises, training programs, expert assistance, and exchange of experience (Atlantic Treaty Association, 2018). Great Britain also supports the modernization of the armed forces of the Baltic States, including navies and land forces. The British Armed Forces also sent one soldier to each of the six NATO Forces Integration Units (NFIU) established since September 2015, including those in Bydgoszcz, Riga, Tallinn, and Vilnius (Tomaszewski, 2015, p. 28). British officers also joined the structures of other military units located on NATO's eastern flank. For example, in 2015, they joined the Multinational Corps Northeast (MNC NE) in Szczecin, which plays a special role in coordinating the activities of allied forces stationed and training in Poland and the Baltic States. Great Britain also supported the creation of the NATO Energy Security Center of Excellence (NATO ENSEC COE) in Vilnius.

During the NATO summits in Brussels on the 25 of May 2017 and 11–12 of July 2018 and in London on 3–4 of December 2019, the United Kingdom was in favor of maintaining NATO's increased military engagement on the Alliance's eastern flank. At the last summit, as the host, the British authorities sought the approval of defense plans for Poland and the Baltic States. To achieve this, they collaborated with delegations from other NATO countries to break the deadlock caused by Turkey's attitude.

## Conclusion

In the 20th century, the British authorities were aware of the importance of Central and Eastern Europe for the security of Europe and the world. It was in their interest to have sovereign states in the region, which would be an effective buffer separating Germany from Russia/the Soviet Union. After World War I, a number of states appeared in the region, but their independence was at risk from the very beginning. The British engaged in supporting the statehood of Latvia and Estonia against the threat from their eastern neighbor. The British attitude towards Poland, which London did not want to strengthen too much at the expense of Germany, was more ambivalent. It turned out to be a mistake because, after two decades of independence, both Poland and the Baltic States became victims of the aggression of both Germany and the Soviet Union.

The United Kingdom played an important role in defeating Nazism during World War II. Despite this, Central and Eastern European countries may have felt disappointed and even betrayed by its policy towards the USSR. London

agreed with the domination of the Soviets in the region, including the loss of independence by the Baltic States. During the Cold War, on the one hand, with varying degrees of intensity, Great Britain criticized Moscow's actions in Central and Eastern Europe, but on the other, it did not take action to liberate the region from the Soviet domination. The attitude of the United Kingdom remained until the changes in the Soviet Union of the late 1980s, which enabled London to support the independence aspirations of the Central and Eastern European countries. However, the United Kingdom did not play a leading role in this respect. Also, the decision of Great Britain to support the aspirations of Poland and the Baltic States to join Western political and military organizations was a consequence of the change of position by allies, mainly the United States. Nevertheless, at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, the United Kingdom supported Poland and the Baltic States in the reforms of the security and defense sectors.

After the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine, the United Kingdom strongly criticized Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine and its provocative actions towards NATO member states. British government expressed full solidarity with Poland and the Baltic States, which felt threatened by Russia. During individual NATO summits, the United Kingdom strongly supported the demands of the Alliance's eastern flank states to strengthen their security. The British Armed Forces have also engaged in a number of military activities on the territory of Poland and the Baltic States, which aim to give credibility to NATO's security guarantees. This means that the United Kingdom has drawn the right conclusions from the 20th century.

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