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# Nuancing Hans J. Morgenthau

## Anglo-Polish-German Relations from 1940 to 1942 as a Deviation of the Realist Theory

### Abstract

Founded by Holocaust survivor Hans J. Morgenthau, the Realist school of international relations theory interprets the behaviour of European countries at the beginning of World War II as an endless tough struggle for each country's physical survival and/or dominance on the continent through a mixture of diplomatic and military means. Some historians, using the analytical categories of the Idealist school opposed to realism, speak instead of an epic clash of supranational military-economic alliances built around conflicting political philosophies. This article, based on archival documents recently discovered by the author, provides a more nuanced picture of the European geopolitical scene from 1939 to 1942. Using the dynamics within the Anglo-Polish-German geopolitical triangle as its main reference point, it shows that, in the discussed context, individual international actors, among them democratic Great Britain and the ostensibly democratic Polish government-in-exile, as well as the entire continental system of international relations, behaved both as "selfish" realists and consensus-seeking idealists, depending on certain geopolitical and military circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

Among the German-Jewish refugees who set foot on American soil in the late 1930s was the talented young political scientist Hans Joachim Morgenthau. Like many of his generation, he became preoccupied with the dilemma of choosing between personal survival at any cost and upholding universal moral principles, such as staying close to family members and other fellow tribesmen in hard times of oppression and persecution (Hans's maternal grandmother and some other relatives perished during the Holocaust).<sup>2</sup> The solution Morgenthau found would form the basis of his magnum opus *Politics Among Nations* (1948), numerous editions of which would bring its author worldwide fame and a reputation as the founding father of the so-called Realist Theory of international relations. Real statesmen in the real world, he professed, must act not in accordance with some abstract "universal moral principles", but in such a way as to ensure the accumulation of "national power" (military, economic, etc.) sufficient for their countries' physical survival and prosperity in the generally unruly and, therefore, highly dangerous international environment.<sup>3</sup>

It was through this achievement that state actors, even those adhering to diametrically opposed hostile ideologies, were expected to reach a state of "balance of

1 This article is based on the author's research on the Anglo-Polish-German geopolitical triangle from 1939 to 1942. See Yaacov Falkov, *Between Hitler and Churchill: Two Jewish Agents and the Attempt by the British Counterintelligence Service to Prevent a Secret Agreement between the Polish Government-in-Exile and Nazi Germany* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2025).

2 M. Benjamin Mollov, "The Jewish Experience as an Influence on Hans J. Morgenthau's Realism", *Jewish Political Studies Review* 12, no. 1-2 (2000): 113-114, 116, 118-120.

3 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 4-15.

power” that would allow them to control the elements of mutual disputes and thereby prevent outbreaks of destructive mutual hostilities or together contain mutual foes. In this context, Morgenthau’s key term was “prudence”. “There can be no political morality without prudence”, he stressed, “that is without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral action.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, for Morgenthau, being a living leader of a living, prosperous country outweighed the imagined imperative to be a “moral” statesman and, in fact, sanctified overt or covert geopolitical arrangements between seemingly incompatible political regimes.

As the ultimate example of a “political realist” among world statesmen, Hans Morgenthau cited the behaviour of Winston Churchill. This British politician ruled his country during World War II and won thanks to a seemingly unnatural military alliance with the Soviet communists, whom he openly despised. Comparing him to Neville Chamberlain, the prime minister of the United Kingdom from 1937 to 1940, Morgenthau wrote: “Sir Winston Churchill’s motives ... were much less universal in scope and much more narrowly directed toward personal and national power, yet the foreign policies that sprang from these inferior motives were certainly superior in moral and political quality to those pursued by his predecessor.”<sup>5</sup>

Given this, Morgenthau’s highly positive vision of Churchill’s legacy as a statesman, the story told in this article would likely have been warmly received by the great international relations theorist. Based on the rich archival evidence uncovered by the author, this article will argue that, from 1940 to 1941, devoid of any abstract moral incentive and pursuing only Britain’s narrow strategic interests, Sir Churchill coldly betrayed and crushed his country’s closest political and military ally – the Polish government-in-exile. The Poles caught Churchill secretly proposing to his Soviet counterpart Iosif Stalin the acceptance of the earlier Soviet annexation of eastern Polish territories in exchange for an anti-German strategic alliance. When the outraged Poles tried to respond to Churchill by acting similarly towards Nazi Berlin, he sent his secret agents to physically neutralise the chief Polish negotiator with the Germans, and he then promoted a quiet coup in the Polish military.

This dramatic development and its far-reaching political and military consequences have been overlooked by the existing historiography of Anglo-Polish strategic relations during World War II. The mainstream narrative describing these relations tends to rightly highlight the Pole’s enormous military and intelligence contribution to the Allied fight against Nazi Germany, arguing that it was only at the end of the war that Poland was betrayed by the West and brought under Soviet rule. “In the end, it would not be enemies, but the friends of Poland who sealed the country’s fate”, wrote the US military historian Kenneth K. Koskodan. He added: “Poland was offered up as a sacrifice by the Allied powers, particularly by a sick American president and a British Prime Minister, each presenting their own war-weary nations and neither willing to stand up to the menacing Soviet empire emerging from the rubble of war-torn Europe.”<sup>6</sup> Only a few historians have come to the correct conclusion that, for Washington and London, the Poles were “yesterday’s men” already in the fall of 1941.<sup>7</sup> But even they lost sight of the fact that, from 1940 to 1942, the British and

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Halik Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War* (London: The Penguin Press, 2013), 434–579; Kenneth K. Koskodan, *No Greater Ally: The Untold Story of Poland’s Forces in World War II* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2009), 10.

7 See, for example, Evan McGilvray, *Anders’ Army: General Wladyslaw Anders and the Polish Second Corps 1941–46* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books, 2018), 54–55.

Poles, pursuing *de facto* contradictory strategic goals, silently but actively struggled with each other through means of covert diplomacy and espionage. And the former, being much stronger in every possible sense, forcibly subjugated the latter to their will.

The following text will fill the said historiographical gap. Its findings will be compared to the claims made about the early years of the World War II by Morgenthau's followers and their rivals, inspired by the so-called liberalist camp in the theory of international relations. The latter believe in the maintainability of international stability through supranational institutions/regimes and the economic interdependence of states.<sup>8</sup> The conclusion will be made that, during the historical period under scrutiny, the entire European system of international relations, as well as its individual members, regardless of their political orientation, exhibited a "quantum" character, behaving at once in realistic and idealistic manners.

### In the "Geopolitical Jungle" of the "Not Yet a Real War"

In the fall of 1939, following the partition of Poland by Nazi Germany and the communist Soviet Union, and the Anglo-French declaration of war on the Third Reich,<sup>9</sup> most European leaders still believed that – to quote Italian dictator Benito Mussolini – neither side involved in the ongoing conflict wanted a new, terrible, and protracted "real war". High hopes prevailed that such a war could have been avoided.<sup>10</sup>

The way to fulfil these hopes was active diplomatic manoeuvres. And indeed, in the discussed period, everyone in Europe had been talking to everyone else to improve their own diplomatic and military standing, and this trend became even stronger after the chain of stunning Wehrmacht victories in the spring and summer of 1940. "What we see in Europe today is a jungle": this is how Ivan Maisky, then Soviet ambassador to London, described the frantic diplomacy sweeping the continent. His chief, Andrey Vyshinsky, stated that "international relations are fluid, and may develop".<sup>11</sup>

Against this backdrop, through open and secret channels, the Germans offered Great Britain, a cessation of hostilities in exchange for London's acceptance of the Nazi "new order" on the continent. The Nazi Führer expressed his readiness to "preserve something of Poland".<sup>12</sup> The envisioned "Polish remnant state" (*polnische Reststaat*), deprived of military forces and an independent foreign policy, could still retain the right to manage its own internal affairs.<sup>13</sup> This idea was warmly supported by Italian, Spanish, Finnish, and other European conservative and totalitarian regimes.

8 Michael Doyle and Stefano Recchia, "Liberalism in International Relations", in *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*, eds. Bertrand Badie, Dirk-Berg Schlosser, and Leonardo Morlino (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2011), 1434–1439.

9 Kochanski, *The Eagle*, 72–75.

10 Robert R. Miller, "The Welles Mission to Rome: February–March 1940. FDR's Diplomatic Initiative to Mussolini", paper presented at the New York Military Affairs Symposium, NYMAS-CUNY, New York City, 27 May 2008, accessed 26 July 2024, <http://bobrowen.com/nymas/Robert%20Miller%20-%20Sumner%20Welles.html>.

11 Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Bein ashlaya le-tarmit. Stalin ve-mivtsa Barbarossa* (Tel Aviv: Maarachot, 1999), 47–49, 113–114.

12 Protocol of Hitler's conversation with the Swedish mediator Birger Dahlerus, 26 September 1939, in *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918–1945* (Series D, 1937–1945), vol. 8, eds. James S. Beddie et al. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1954), 140–145.

13 Piotr Zychowicz, *Opcja niemiecka. Czyli jak antykomuniści próbowali porozumieć się z III Rzeszą* (Poznań: Rebis, 2014), 29–30.

Before September 1939, they cooperated with the ideologically close Polish Sanation (*Sanacja*) government and later insisted on maintaining diplomatic ties with the Polish government-in-exile.<sup>14</sup> Yet, Berlin's approaches fell on London's deaf ears. British intelligence considered them merely a Nazi tactic to buy enough time to plan and carry out more acts of war.<sup>15</sup>

The frustrated Germans promised "to carry on the fight to final victory"<sup>16</sup> and that "there will never again be a Polish state!";<sup>17</sup> their occupying authorities in the central part of Poland that became the General Government (*Generalgouvernement*) carried out mass atrocities against the local population. However, Berlin kept trying to implement the idea of restoring a "Polish remnant state" that would be willing to cooperate with the Third Reich against the Soviets. When a series of attempts by various senior Nazi officials to reach such an agreement with prominent Polish political figures who remained in their occupied homeland failed,<sup>18</sup> Berlin began reaching out to Polish diplomats representing their government-in-exile in various European capitals. One of them, Jerzy Giedroyc, who served in Bucharest, admitted in his memoirs to having such contact, during which the restoration of Polish sovereignty was discussed in exchange for an alliance in the face of the Russian threat.<sup>19</sup>

### Strategic Partnership with Limited Liability

Meanwhile, in June 1940, following the defeat of France, the Polish government-in-exile under the leadership of General Władysław Sikorski accepted Churchill's invitation to continue its activities on British soil. The British prime minister, determined to protect the kingdom and its empire at all costs, needed Sikorski's military force, numbering tens of thousands of war-hardened soldiers, on the shores of the English Channel, as well as in the Middle East. Besides, it was for the defence of Poland that Great Britain declared war on Germany back in September 1939. Therefore, having Sikorski and his men in London as official allies strengthened Churchill's political position against the still strong appeasement forces in the country.<sup>20</sup>

Initially, the Anglo-Polish relationship developed positively. Both sides expressed their shared commitment to fight shoulder to shoulder against the Nazi "new order" in Europe and for the restoration of Poland's independence. Polish volunteers in the Royal Air Forces proved themselves to be excellent fighters, contributing to the defence of Britain from Nazi air attacks and suffering terrible losses, disproportionately higher than those of their hosts.<sup>21</sup>

14 Memorandum signed by von Weizsäcker, State Secretary at the German Foreign Office, 23 September 1939, in Beddie et al., eds., *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918–1945*, 125–126; Michał Sokolnicki, *Dziennik Ankerski 1939–1943* (London: Gryf, 1965), 151.

15 William Stevenson, *A Man Called Intrepid: The Secret War 1939–1945* (London: Sphere Books, 1976), 102–103; Weekly Political Intelligence Summary No. 2, Foreign Office, Political Intelligence Department, 10 October 1939, The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), RG-59.006.M-FO371/24054, Scan 00041.

16 Circular from the German Foreign Office, signed by Foreign Minister Ribbentrop, 18 November 1939, in Beddie et al., eds., *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918–1945*, 424–425.

17 Headquarters of the High Command of the Polish Armed Forces in Exile, 5<sup>th</sup> Dept., quoted from: "Warschauer Zeitung for the period August 4–16, 1940", 16 August 1940, USHMM, RG-59.047, KOL-25-10-A\_264.

18 For examples, see Kochanski, *The Eagle*, 97; Zychowicz, *Opcja*, 31–32.

19 Jerzy Giedroyc, *Autobiografia na cztery ręce* (Paris: Towarzystwo Opieki nad Archiwum Instytutu Literackiego w Paryżu, 2006), 91.

20 Kochanski, *The Eagle*, 217–236; Koskodan, *No Greater*, 79–176.

21 Lipsky, an untitled memorandum without an exact date, December 1940–January 1941, Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum (PISM), A.XII.1/66a, 49–50; Anthony Eden to Sikorski, 15 August 1942, PISM, A.XII.1/52B, 17. See also: Roman Tusiewicz, *Historia Polski od A do Z* (Pniewy: Kram, 2005), 379–380.

However, this apparent idyll did not last long. Soon, astounded Polish leaders in exile learned through various diplomatic and intelligence channels that their British colleague and patron was making diplomatic efforts to win over the hated communist Soviet Union as an ally against the Third Reich. Equally shocking was the discovery that the British maintained simultaneous secret contacts with the German anti-Nazi opposition and even with senior officials in Berlin. Polish military intelligence informed its consumers that there were strong Nazi sympathies among some British aristocrats, including Churchill's second cousin, Charles Stewart Henry Vane-Tempest-Stewart, the Seventh Marquess of Londonderry.<sup>22</sup>

For their part, the British voiced extreme displeasure at the Poles' reluctance to unequivocally and openly side with London in its conflict with fascist Italy. Rome refrained from declaring war on the Polish government-in-exile, and both sides maintained diplomatic ties even after the fall of France, when Mussolini officially joined Hitler in his war against Britain.<sup>23</sup> In early 1941, the British national security agency MI5 issued a warning about "anti-British propaganda" that representatives of the Polish government-in-exile were distributing to Polish soldiers in the Middle East, urging them to refuse to fight against the Italians.<sup>24</sup>

### "To Come to Terms with the Emergent Reality"

Against the backdrop of the deteriorating Anglo-Polish strategic relationship, voices appeared among the Polish diaspora in the West advocating reconciliation with Hitler's regime. In the second half of 1940, many prominent Poles in their occupied homeland and abroad already knew that Berlin was offering a geopolitical arrangement that would allow the restoration of Polish autonomy over part of the prewar Polish territory. Some seemed to embrace the idea of a new government under the Nazis modelled on Vichy France, believing it would spare them and/or their families from the ever-intensifying Nazi terror in the Generalgouvernement. In December, the British MI5 noted with concern that the press secretary of the Polish embassy in Bucharest – a government official – had expressed the opinion that creating a provisional government in the German-occupied Polish territories was the order of the day.<sup>25</sup>

In the fall of 1940, when Anglo-Soviet contacts finally became apparent, and the personal Churchill-Sikorski relationship deteriorated into the exchange of openly critical messages, a top official of the Polish government-in-exile – the minister of the interior and Sikorski's right-hand man, Stanisław Kot – initiated a series of contacts with the Germans aimed at clarifying Berlin's true intentions. The chosen location for these rendezvous was Istanbul, the Turkish metropolis on the Bosphorus. Since Kot himself could not leave the British capital without attracting the MI5's attention and therefore raising unwanted questions, he instead sent to Turkey his personal emissary, a Polish citizen of Jewish origin named Samson Mikiciński. Using

22 Raczyński, the Polish Ambassador to London, an untitled report, 8 July 1940, USHMM, RG-59.036, A-12-1-8\_0137-9; Raczyński, an untitled report, 19 July 1940, USHMM, RG-59.036, A-12-1-8\_0143-4; 2<sup>nd</sup> Department of the Polish General Staff, "An informational and counterintelligence report for the first half of 1941. The attitude of British society to the Polish question", 13 June 1941, PISM, A.XII.1/38, 7–8.

23 Magdalena Hulas, "Wrogowie naszych sojuszników. Kwestia (nie)istnienia stanu wojny między Polską a Włochami. 1940", *Białostockie Teki Historyczne* 15 (2017): 205–228, <https://doi.org/10.15290/bth.2017.15.10>.

24 Undated draft of a memorandum by Special Operations Executive (SOE), titled "Note on the Kot organisation in the Middle East", The National Archives (TNA), HS 4/213.

25 Undated and untitled report by agent A/H.2, late December 1940, *ibid.*

his official status as personal secretary of the Chilean chargé d'affaires in Ankara and a Chilean diplomatic passport, Mikiciński, a forty-five-year-old well-established businessman, had long been shuttling between the Sikorski government and the Polish underground in the occupied homeland. He rescued and brought to the West close relatives of the Polish émigré leaders, and he delivered correspondence and money necessary for the development of the anti-Nazi struggle.<sup>26</sup>

Having landed in Istanbul, Mikiciński approached Franz von Papen. This former German chancellor, who had helped bring Hitler to power in 1933, now developed a vibrant diplomatic career as Nazi ambassador to Turkey, contacting American and other Western diplomats. It was through him that, in 1939 and 1940, some of Berlin's peace offers reached the British and Poles. Thus, choosing von Papen as a contact person was a logical decision on Kot's part. Meeting privately in the city on the Bosphorus, the two negotiators – a German aristocrat and a high-ranking Nazi official, and a Jewish businessman from defeated Poland – discussed a possible arrangement between their leaders that could change the course of the war. "Recently, Mikiciński has been holding negotiations here with von Papen", the astonished head of the Ankara station of Polish military intelligence, who had not been warned about the contacts and discovered them only occasionally, updated his superiors in London. He added: "[t]he British are planning to do something about it, fearing that Poland is aiming to negotiate with the Germans."<sup>27</sup>

### A Very British Murder and Its Far-Reaching Consequences

Indeed, the Middle Eastern branches of British intelligence became aware of Mikiciński's delicate mission in Istanbul around November 1940. In their internal secret correspondence, they reacted extremely negatively, accusing Kot and his closest aides in the Middle East of not informing London about "very dangerous" contacts with the enemy. British intelligence analysts doubted who might have given the order and even guessed that Sikorski himself might have been involved.<sup>28</sup>

Whatever the truth, the discovery of the nature of Mikiciński's activities on Turkish soil immediately prompted planning to neutralise him. This months-long undertaking, surrounded by a veil of strictest secrecy, involved several British special services and, more importantly, was highly sensitive from a (geo)political perspective. After all, this was the official representative of one of the top Polish political figures, at the time London's closest ally, who was now in British crosshairs. It is therefore very likely that Churchill himself supervised the operation. It culminated in mid-January 1941, when its target, a Polish-Jewish businessman negotiating with the Nazi ambassador, was kidnaped in the centre of Istanbul and secretly flown to Mandatory Palestine. "The Turks have given an outstanding performance!", a Cairo-based kidnapping supervisor updated London, signalling Ankara's silent but decisive contribution to the plot.<sup>29</sup> And, just a month later, the young British pilot who performed this highly sensitive flight was awarded the highest order given to

26 Top secret report titled "The Paluchowicz Case", copy # 1, 18 July 1941, *ibid.*; undated report titled "Mikiciński Samson", Józef Pilsudski Institute of America (JPIA), Archiwum Osobowe, NZ 154, Sygn. 658.

27 "Mikiciński – information", radio report by the chief of the Turkey station of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Department of the Polish General Staff to his superiors in London, 25 January 1941, The Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, USA (HIA), 800/41/0/-/141 Folder 7, Scan 001018.

28 Undated draft of a memorandum by SOE.

29 MX in a letter to M, Cairo, 1 June 1941, TNA, HS 4/213.

RAF personnel for the outstanding performance of non-military tasks in war-time.<sup>30</sup>

As for Mikiciński, after being brought to Palestine, he was imprisoned in the famous fortress of Acre that had been turned by the British into a huge prison. Around June and July 1941, following several interrogations aimed at extracting information about his contacts with von Papen, he simply disappeared without a trace. Various post-war Polish accounts suggest that he was simply murdered by one of his interrogators and buried in the sands near the fortress.<sup>31</sup>

Amazingly, London decided not to confront Sikorski's government on this issue, neither publicly nor privately, considering the Mikiciński-von Papen connection an "internal Polish affair". When the immediate threat of a Polish-German conspiracy had already been successfully neutralised, Churchill probably chose, for reasons of domestic and international prestige, not to publish the fact of an attempt by Britain's closest ally to cross the line to the German side. Instead, from the fall of 1941, British authorities, including MI5, promoted a multi-stage plan aimed at marginalising General Sikorski as the Polish political and military leader in exile. This goal was achieved in 1942, first by limiting Sikorski's freedom of movement outside the British Isles and putting Polish military counterintelligence under informal MI5 control, and, later, by making another Polish exiled general and Sikorski's harshest critic, Władysław Anders, the most powerful and popular military leader of the Polish diaspora.<sup>32</sup>

### Conclusion: Discovering the "Quantum" Nature of International Relations in the Early Years of World War II (and Beyond)

The eight decades that have passed since the end of World War II have witnessed an intense intellectual contest between the adherents of Morgenthau's Realist Theory and its various later versions, on the one hand, and their multiple opponents, on the other. Concerning the European and global situation from 1939 to 1941, prominent realists – Henry Kissinger, Morgenthau's academic colleague and close friend, among them – argued that by that time European countries had not yet accepted America's legacy of collective security and international arbitration, sticking instead to the old habit of securing the balance of power through diplomatic manoeuvres; that even as Britain became more receptive to the US idealistic agenda, it lacked experience in pursuing policies on that basis;<sup>33</sup> and that in any case, after the fall of France in June 1940, American idealism gradually gave way to a more realistic stance, according to which "Hitler had gone so far beyond any acceptable norm of morality that the battle against him assimilated the triumph of good over evil into the struggle for naked survival".<sup>34</sup>

The opponents of this interpretation of the events of 1939 to 1941, inspired by the so-called liberalist school in the theory of international relations and its offshoots, insisted that the entire World War II, including its initial period, must be interpreted

30 "Air Ministry, 21<sup>st</sup> February 1941," *London Gazette*, 21 February 1941, 1077, <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/35083/supplement/1077/data.pdf>.

31 Roman Buczek, *Człowiek do złotych interesów* (Warsaw: Rój, 1991), 170–171; Ladislas Michniewicz, *Opération Haïfa. Les espions ne se pardonnent pas* (Tournai: Casterman, 1969), 203–206.

32 McGilvray, *Anders' Army*, 41–88.

33 Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (London: Touchstone Books, 1995), 376.

34 *Ibid.*, 389.

as an epic clash of conflicting political and social ideas and values physically carried out by two hostile “concerts” of major powers, mammoth supranational military-economic structures joined by “junior” state partners. The alleged ultimate goal of this clash was not a “selfish” rebalancing of political and military power on continental and global scales, but rather a far-reaching restructuring and reorienting of the entire international system.<sup>35</sup>

Regarding the anti-Nazi alliance (the so-called “Big Three” allies) it was stressed that, steadily developing since early 1941, it rested upon Anglo-American collaboration in the geopolitical, diplomatic, military, intelligence, economic, and technological fields. This collaboration was so close that the “arch-realist” Churchill surrendered to Roosevelt’s more idealistic vision of future healthy European and global spaces in which new moral, political, and economic factors might come into play.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, a chance was given to the unprecedented relationship between the alliance’s seemingly incompatible Anglo-American and Soviet parts. These were glued together not only by a shared strong desire to see the destruction of Nazi Germany as an “ultimate enemy”, but also by the hope in Washington and London that economy would beat ideology, and Moscow’s desperate need to rebuild the shattered western part of the Soviet Union would convince the Soviets to cooperate with their potential Western donors, discarding any thoughts of confrontation.<sup>37</sup>

Likewise, the Tripartite Pact between Germany, Japan, and Italy – also known as the Axis Powers – has been portrayed by the liberalism-influenced historiography of World War II as a phenomenon far beyond the rigid theoretical mainframe of balance of power. Although classical liberals attribute the ability to establish peaceful unions solely to liberal republics, the pact too was said to be a peaceful union based on ideas: similar political philosophies; a common strong, highly emotional rejection of world communism, Stalin’s Soviet Union, the British empire and Roosevelt’s United States of America; as well as a shared belief (at least at the leadership’s level) in the importance of mutual cultural and economic ties (including the exchange of vital raw materials and cutting-edge war technologies).<sup>38</sup>

The research on which this article is based provides us with a picture of the international relations in the World War II early years that is more nuanced than those presented by the described approaches. First, it shows that, between the collapse of Poland in 1939 and the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, all the European state actors, major and small alike, behaved in a typical “Morgenthauian” manner. The improvement of their national power, and thereby physical survivability, was expected to be achieved through militarisation and/or creating or joining international alliances, notwithstanding the potential allies’ political orientation. Major powers

35 For example, see Stephen J. Lee, *The European Dictatorships, 1918–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 196.

36 For examples, see David French, “British Military Strategy,” in *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, vol. 1, eds. John Ferris and Ewan Mawdsley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 38–43; Thomas Mahnken, “US Grand Strategy, 1939–1945,” *ibid.*, 189, 197–199, 203.

37 Martin H. Folly, *Churchill, Whitehall, and the Soviet Union, 1941–1945* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 168.

38 For examples, see Jason Dawsey, “A Shared Enmity: Germany, Japan, and the Creation of the Tripartite Pact”, The National WWII Museum, New Orleans, 10 December 2021, accessed 21 July 2024, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/germany-japan-tripartite-pact>; Jost Dülffer, “German Strategy in the Tripartite Pact during the Second World War”, The National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), Japan, 29 September 2010, accessed 21 July 2024, <https://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/event/forum/pdf/2010/06.pdf>; Ken Ishida, *Japan, Italy and the Road to the Tripartite Alliance* (Nottingham: Nottingham University Press, 2019), 192–195; Rotem Kowner, “When Economics, Strategy, and Racial Ideology Meet: Inter-Axis Connections in the Wartime Indian Ocean”, *Journal of Global History* 12, no. 2 (2017): 228–250, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022817000067>.



could choose to exclude some similar state actors from their geopolitical manoeuvres (see Britain's fundamental refusal to accept German peace offers), while this was impossible for smaller states. The latter openly or secretly contacted anyone they considered relevant to ensure their safety although, after the collapse of France in June 1940, most of these actors showed their preference for Berlin rather than London. That said, in the period under scrutiny, the European geopolitical scene did not fall into chaos, as the famous neo-realists, such as Kenneth Waltz, might have expected.<sup>39</sup> On the contrary, the continent's conservative and totalitarian regimes, including in the newborn Vichy France, began consolidating and advocating the creation of a formal pan-European anti-communist bloc. With this ideal in mind, the Italians even declared their readiness to host an international "peace conference". These two clear geopolitical trends of the discussed period – the ideological "flexibility" of all European states and their readiness to make broad alliances even at the cost of limiting their own ambitions – can teach us that there are historical and geopolitical situations in which state actors, liberal and conservative alike, would exhibit both realist and idealist behavioural patterns, with no apparent contradiction between them.

Second, the position of the Poles in the described realistic-idealistic context also turns out to have a dual nature. An integral element of the European conservative-totalitarian non-communist milieu, they found themselves in a state of long-term fierce military conflict with this milieu's leading actor, Nazi Germany, although without being ostracised by their other ideological comrades. This peculiar historical precedent may testify that sometimes, amidst an idealist process of arranging geopolitical spaces through peaceful means of international rules, agreements, and mechanisms, states are being compelled to use purely realistic tools against some of this process' participants.

Another important takeaway from the discussed Polish case is that the motives of a small state actor to enter into a strategic alliance with a bigger and stronger one (here Britain) may be of a mixed nature – both realistic (the desire for strong political and military patronage, described by Morgenthau and his followers) and idealistic (the ambition to join a post-war world-changing international coalition). Eventually, though, they can yield a disappointment and trigger a purely realistic revenge, such as the decision of a senior figure in the Polish government-in-exile to launch secret talks with the Germans.

Third, the behaviour of the British towards the Poles, Americans, and Soviets from 1940 to 1942 shows that, despite being a democratic Western country supposedly defending universal Western values, as well as despite the presumed growing influence of American idealism on its foreign policy, in the discussed period Great Britain perfectly embodied the "Morgenthauian" model. To outwit Germany in the European geopolitical arena, it turned not only to friendly capitalist Washington but also to ideologically alien communist Moscow, to which it promised, as a reward for possible cooperativeness, official recognition of the Soviet annexation of eastern Polish territories that had occurred in September 1939. Not a single Polish official was informed of this "generous offer" or asked for their opinion on the matter. Moreover, when the Poles finally discovered such a treacherous move by their supposedly closest ally and tried to behave in the same way, Churchill's secret services acted swiftly to limit the freedom of Polish diplomatic and military actions and did not hesitate to

<sup>39</sup> For Waltz's idea of a chaotic international environment determining the behaviour of its individual members, see Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010).

even physically eliminate the official envoy sent by the Polish government-in-exile to meet the Germans. An important deduction from this pivotal historical event is that there are contexts in which even a well-established democracy could add to its usual idealistic *modus operandi* on the international stage some extremely realistic tools to be applied to both geopolitical rivals and partners (especially “junior” ones).

Finally, about the role of the Germans in the discussed historical drama, the fact should be stressed that, from 1939 to 1941, amidst the fiercest battles on the Western Front and even at a time of their obvious strategic advantage, they kept trying to come to terms with the British, whom Hitler and his close entourage openly admired as a “brotherly Aryan people”. The dowry promised to London for its compliance was at least a partial restoration of the Polish state, the destruction of which the Nazis considered one of their greatest achievements. What is more, during the short periods of preparations for the offensives in France and the Soviet Union, when the Poles suddenly became a potentially useful ally against the Soviets, the Germans did not hesitate to approach them directly with clear proposals for reconciliation and further strategic cooperation with the Reich and its partners in building a “new socialist Europe”. This may indicate the ability of Nazi Germany in particular, and other such strongly realist states in general, to become “situational idealists” from time to time.

To sum up, overall Morgenthau’s Realist Theory seems applicable to the description of both the dynamics of the European geopolitical scene from 1939 to 1941 and the specific relations within the Anglo-Polish-German geopolitical triangle. However, upon closer examination it turns out that we are dealing with a more nuanced phenomenon. The historical evidence at our disposal leaves no doubt that the entire continental system of international relations, as well as its individual members, regardless of their political orientation, exhibited at once realistic and idealistic behavioural patterns, depending on certain geopolitical and military circumstances. Future academic study will have to examine whether such a “quantum” nature was also characteristic of international relations in other periods of human history.

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