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Analysis of the Oder–Neisse line status in British and American historiography (1945–1990)

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest przeprowadzenie badań nad oceną zagadnienia polsko-niemieckiej granicy w powojennej historiografii brytyjskiej i amerykańskiej. Był to jeden z kluczowych aspektów historii Niemiec po drugiej wojnie światowej. Artykuł przedstawia główne oceny sformułowane w brytyjskich i amerykańskich naukach historycznych dotyczące tego problemu. Analizuje określone okresy w rozwoju obu historiografii odnoszące się do polskiej granicy zachodniej, przedstawia główne i kluczowe czynniki wpływające na ewolucję definicji linii Odry i Nysy jako granicy polsko-niemieckiej.

Słowa kluczowe: brytyjska historiografia, amerykańska historiografia, konserwatyzm, szkoła “powstrzymywania”, racjonalizm, Angielska Szkoła teorii stosunków międzynarodowych, problem niemiecki, linia Odra-Nysa, zimna wojna

Formation of the main tendencies in British and American historical science after World War II was strongly affected by Cold War challenges and governmental response to them. The German question represented a key pattern of the USA–USSR confrontation in Europe after the Second World War. The issue of borders, in particular the Polish–German border, took a special place among various aspects of the German problem. Geopolitical objectives of Western powers defined their certain position on the delicate boundary question. Changes in the USA–USSR relations, evolution of the German problem as a whole, caused variations in the analysis of the Oder–Neisse line status in the works of American and British authors since 1945.

When studying the German question in the post-war time British and American historians followed mainly two approaches: conservative and rationalistic. Conservative approach is more typical of American researchers; its representatives shared the basic principles of revisionism and took an accusatory position towards the USSR, condemned the Soviet actions while forming an area of influence in Eastern Europe and questioned the final nature of the border along the Oder–Neisse line, not excluding its revision in

the future. Its principles coincide with the ones of “containment” school formed in the post-war years in the United States. As for rationalistic approach, it appeared within the framework of the English School of international relations theory. Representatives of the liberal direction in American historiography were close to the rationalists in their theory and methodology. When studying the German problem after World War II they called for taking into account the existing realities, pointed to the actual acceptance of the Oder–Neisse line by the United States and Great Britain at Potsdam and considered any ideas for borders revision harmful to the relations of the West with the USSR and socialist countries.

During the post-war years, according to changes in Cold War climate, the scientific community of the United States and Great Britain gradually demonstrated certain diversity in analyzing the problem, which allows us to distinguish several stages in its development. Since the Potsdam Conference till the signing of the Warsaw Treaty in 1970 Western allies did not officially recognize the Oder–Neisse line as a new state border. They accused the USSR of violating the Potsdam agreements and giving the Polish–German border a permanent status before signing a peace treaty with Germany. The West Germany took the most rigid position and was unconditionally supported by three Western powers until the end of the 1950s. At that time such tough diplomatic support was aimed at turning West Germany into a reliable ally, including its potential into the integration structures of the West and preventing the revival of German nationalism and/or Germany transition to the Soviet side. Such non-constructive position in post-war decades contributed greatly to deteriorating of the international relations in European region. American diplomat, the head of the CIA, Allen Dulles regarded the issue of the German eastern border as the Gordian knot of territorial problems in Europe. Representing a conservative trend, he suggested that a significant expansion of Poland’s borders to the west could ultimately prove dangerous for Poland. On the one hand, Polish state would occur in a difficult situation in relations with Germany. On the other hand, the USSR would be able to offer Germany the revision of the eastern borders in exchange for moving to the Soviet side. The Soviet Union could use the same tool successfully to establish control over the Polish government, reminding constantly about the potential German threat¹. At the same time, the British historian Joyce Marshall (School of International Relations) noted that despite Potsdam agreements, some events actually turned the Oder–Neisse line from a temporary border into a permanent one. He paid special attention to the resettlement of ethnic Germans from the former eastern provinces of the Third Reich. Noting the fact that in November 1949 Konstantin Rokossovsky announced the readiness of the Soviet and Polish troops to fight shoulder to shoulder, J. Marshall came

¹ A. Dulles, *Alternatives for Germany*, “Foreign Affairs”, 1947, vol.25, no. 3, p. 426.

to the conclusion that the wisest decision would be the acceptance by Western allies the Oder–Neisse line as *fait accompli*².

In the 1950s the conservative tradition obviously gained the influence in historiography; its representatives noted the temporary status of the Oder–Neisse line and favored its revision. The preparations for the West Germany rearmament contributed greatly to revival of the boundary question. British researcher T. Vigers noted that in return for the inclusion of West Germany in the system of NATO, the Germans would want to get confidence that later “*the force can be used to maintain diplomatic efforts to protect a united and independent Germany ... to the border along the Oder–Neisse line and, probably, behind it*”. The author expressed uncertainty about the ability and readiness of Western states to solve this issue in practice, but considered it useful and even necessary to maintain such rhetoric³. In 1953 American researcher, former adviser to President F.D. Roosevelt James Warburg noted with alarm that almost all Germans were unanimous in desire to return the borders of 1937. He assessed the possible alliance between Germany and the USSR and the following Soviet–German deal at the expense of Poland as the greatest danger for the West. Proceeding from the economic priorities of the USA, J. Warburg considered it necessary to return Germany predominantly rural territories transferred under Polish administration in 1945. Otherwise, Germany would have to become an importer of agricultural products and an exporter of manufactured goods, which would turn it into a competitor of the United Kingdom and the United States on the world markets. The author noted that in the long term such a solution was in the interests of the Polish people, since it would serve as guarantee from another Soviet–German “bargain”⁴.

Since 1955 the political situation around the German problem undergone serious changes. When West Germany gain membership in Atlantic Alliance the Poles’ fears about the revival of German threat remarkably increased. The Society for Contacts with the Emigration “Polonia” was established in 1955. Its main task was to make and maintain contacts with Polish centers abroad in order to support the “western territories” issue and resist the propaganda of German “revisionists”. In April 1957, speaking at the Polish Embassy, Nikita Khrushchev stated that the border along the Oder–Neisse line is “yours and ours”, and any attempt to violate it would be assessed as a threat to the Soviet security. Researchers noted that unambiguous position of the USSR on this issue only strengthened its position in Poland, since the Soviet Union actually turned into the only guarantor of the Polish–German border inviolability^{5,6,7}. Concerns over the revival of the

² J. Marshall, *The German–Polish boundary*, “Columbia Journal of International Affairs” 1950, vol. 4, no. 2, p. 79.

³ T. Vigers, *German people and rearmament*, “International Affairs” 1951, vol. 57, no. 2, p. 155.

⁴ J. Warburg, *Germany: key to peace*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University, 1953, pp. 254–257.

⁵ N. Ascherson, *Poland’s Place in Europe*, “The World Today”, 1969, vol. 25, no. 12, p. 523.

⁶ J. Campbell, *Poland’s international position since 1956*, “The Polish Review”, 1959, vol. 4, no. 3, p. 52.

⁷ J. Karch, *Oder–Neisse: Anachronism of World War II*, “World Affairs” 1960, vol. 123, no. 4, p. 103.

German threat and possible collusion between Bonn and the Kremlin did not lose their urgency even after West Germany became a member of NATO. The unresolved issue of the German eastern borders was regarded as one of the potential tumors of Europe, which under certain political climate and the strengthening of German nationalism can become malignant⁸. The beginning of the second Berlin crisis and the threat of a superpowers clash contributed significantly to the development of a more flexible course towards the German question in general and the border question in particular. In 1959, France recognized *de facto* the Oder–Neisse line, and in 1962 Britain granted secret guarantees to Poland for its western border immunity.

In the 1960s under the influence of a general shift in the international climate towards detente, British and American historians were much more likely to conclude that it was necessary and inevitable to accept the Oder–Neisse border. According to a number of researchers, that step was also necessary on the way to improving relations with the countries of Eastern Europe and to weakening the Soviet influence in the long term. On the one hand, the United States could not afford to allow a serious deterioration in relations with West Germany and decide in favour of the Oder–Neisse line official recognition. On the other hand, Western countries should strive to maintain a dialogue with the Poles on the border issue and gradually contribute to the shift of Eastern Europe towards “polycentric communism”. Such a model would weaken the Soviet position in the socialist countries and help to spread the influence of the West⁹. Other authors noted that by 1960 the population of the “western territories” had reached 8 million (in the 1950s Poland had the highest birth rate in Europe, second only to Albania), the region economy was included in the five-year development plans and long-term economic reviews did not foresee the loss of the “western territories”¹⁰. British historian Richard Hiscocks drew attention to the fact that the territories east of the Oder–Neisse line had already become *de facto* part of the Polish state. The Polish government paid special attention to the regional development, sending generous subsidies both to the industry and agriculture. Economic and demographic indicators of the region showed stable growth during the post-war years. The researcher expressed indirect support for the Polish side, noting that in the Polish–German tensions on the border issue “the Poles showed more restraint and common sense than the German revisionists”. In conclusion, R. Hiscocks assumed that neither Poland nor the USSR would ever agree to the border revision, as Oder–Neisse line became a reality¹¹.

At that period British and American researchers more and more often tried to explain and in some way to justify the tough position of West Germany on the issue of the

⁸ P. Nettl, *A decade of post-war Germany*, “Political Quarterly” 1956, vol. 27, no. 2, p. 175.

⁹ J. Campbell, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

¹⁰ J. Karch, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

¹¹ R. Hiscocks, *Progress East of the Oder–Neisse: Recent Developments in the Polish Western Territories*, “The World Today” 1960, vol. 16, no. 11, p. 492.

Oder–Neisse border by domestic political situation and the need to take into account the “expellees” sensitivity. At 1950s their number was about 1/4 of the West Germany population and the scale of their influence on the voters opinion could not be underestimated. Many German politicians were aware of the unlikelihood of border changes and accepted the realities in practice. But they could not openly declare their position, since there were serious fears of ultra-right sentiments growth^{12,13,14}. The bitterness caused by the loss of territories and national defeat, the demand for borders revision, the sharpened homeland sense – all of this researchers attributed to the constituent elements of Nazism, which were best seen in the mentality of “expellees” organizations^{15,16}.

Influenced by successful detente and implementation of new *Ostpolitik* there was a marked predominance of rationalist approach to the analysis of the problem in the second half of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. Researchers noted that by the time of the Potsdam Conference, the Poles had already occupied the German territory east of the Oder–Neisse line. Everything done in Potsdam was only the registration of the fact and the *postponement* of its legal consolidation until the peace treaty ratification. The Potsdam Declaration, which provided for the mass resettlement of ethnic Germans, marked the recognition of the Oder–Neisse line, if not *de jure*, then *de facto*. Open confrontation on this issue would only have accelerated the outbreak of the Cold War^{17, 18, 19}. The signing of the Moscow and Warsaw Treaties in 1970 and the adoption of the Federal Republic of Germany by the Polish–German border on the Oder–Neisse strengthen the position of rationalists. Works of the 1970s and 1980s had three characteristic features:

- they contained an unconditionally positive assessment of the border problem settlement;
- emphasized the inevitability of such decision, which meant the acceptance of realities;
- the authors emphasized that the recognition of borders did not mean rendering concessions to the USSR in the Cold War.

Most researchers came to the conclusion that the new *Ostpolitik* would help to develop more constructive and productive relations between Western countries on the one

¹² J. Campbell, op. cit., p. 52.

¹³ E. L. Dulles, *One German or two. The struggle at the heart of Europe*. Stanford, Stanford University, Hoover Institution, 1970, p. 163.

¹⁴ J. Karch, op. cit., p. 104.

¹⁵ C. Boxer, *German Christians and Germany's Boundaries*, “New Blackfriars” 1966, vol. 48, no. 558, p. 64.

¹⁶ F. Lewis, *The unstable states of Germany*, Foreign Affairs”, 1960, vol. 38, no. 4, p. 593.

¹⁷ C. Boxer, op. cit., p. 63.

¹⁸ R. Cecil, *Potsdam and its legends*, “International Affairs” 1970, vol. 46, no. 3, p. 456–457.

¹⁹ D. C. Watt, *Anglo–German relations today and tomorrow*, In: *Britain and West Germany. Changing societies and the future of foreign policy*, K. Kaiser R. Morgan (eds.), London, Oxford University, 1971, p. 205.

hand and the Soviet Union and Eastern European states on the other^{20,21,22,23}. The British historian Martin McCauley (School of Slavic and East European Studies, University of London) was one of the first who recognized that Potsdam's agreements did imply the transfer of territories east of the Oder–Neisse line to Poland²⁴. Later some other authors also noted that in Potsdam no one doubted the final character of the Oder–Neisse border. The formal thesis about the solution of the issue at the peace conference was caused by the simple need *to keep up appearances*²⁵. Some American authors paid special attention to the study of the two foreign policy traditions of Poland – the ones of Piast and Jagiellon. They came to the conclusion that the final choice of the three great powers in favor of the “Piast line” (expanding Poland's borders to the west) was made at the Tehran (!) Conference, in conditions of military success of the Soviet army. Not having convincing military victories at their disposal, the United States and Britain could not take a dominant position on the diplomatic level. Churchill's and Roosevelt's hypothetical insistence on the border issue could not have changed the situation^{26,27}. In the 1970s and 1980s for the first time some British and American authors indirectly touched on the topic of national interests of Great Britain and the United States in solving the problem of the eastern German border. For example, the American historian Wolfram Hanrieder (University of California) pointed to the fact that, despite the manifestation of solidarity with the rigid course of Bonn on the eastern borders, the Western powers did not show much enthusiasm for the issue of German unity. Supporting the idea of creating a united Germany only in theory, they understood that the issue of borders revision would remain beyond practical implementation²⁸.

The year 1990 marked a new milestone in the development of the German question historiography. During the year, the final character of the state border along the Oder–Neisse line was fixed at the legislative level in Poland and the united Germany²⁹. In the publications of the 1990s and 2000s the tendency to a scientific justification of the

²⁰ R. Morgan, *54: West Germany's foreign policy agenda*. London, Sage, 1978, p. 31.

²¹ F. Russell, *A concise history of Germany*, London, Cassel, 1973, p. 216.

²² A. Ryder, *Twentieth century Germany: from Bismarck to Brandt*, New York, Columbia University, 1973, p. 559.

²³ J. Steele, *How the West Does Not Serve Poland*, “Third World Quarterly” 1982, vol. 4, no. 2, p. 301.

²⁴ M. McCauley, *East Germany*. In: *Communist power in Europe, 1944–1949*, ed. M. McCauley, London, Macmillan, 1977, p. 59.

²⁵ D. Roy, *From war to cold war, 1943–1948*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1981, p. 100.

²⁶ T. Sharp, *The Origins of the “Teheran Formula” on Polish Frontiers*, “Journal of Contemporary History” 1977, vol. 12, no. 2, pp. 381,391.

²⁷ S. Terry, *Poland's place in Europe: General Sikorski and the origin of the Oder–Neisse line, 1939–1943*, Princeton, Princeton University, 1983, p. 356–258.

²⁸ W.G. Hanrieder, *The foreign policies of West Germany, France and Britain*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1980, p. 52.

²⁹ W. Smyser, *From Yalta to Berlin: The cold war struggle over Germany*, New York, St. Martin's Griffin, 1999, p. 378–391.

Oder–Neisse border legitimacy in post-war Europe remained. At the same time, British and American authors began to conduct a more objective and comprehensive study of the problem. The end of the Cold War and the USSR collapse removed many of ideological barriers. A number of archives opened to the researchers; many new documents were introduced into the scientific circulation. The conservative tradition in Anglo-American historiography was significantly weakened after 1990. To some extent, conservative elements were reflected in the works of the Professor Richard Raack (California State University, USA). In the article “Stalin fixes the Oder–Neisse line”, he concluded that the contemporary Polish–German border appeared as the result of Stalin’s unilateral actions. Soviet leader authorized the forced exodus of Germans from the “western territories” and, using the soft position of Churchill and Roosevelt at Tehran and Yalta Conferences, turned the preliminary agreement into *fait accompli*³⁰. The author views this step of the Soviet side as a manifestation of disrespect for the Allies. Having analyzed sources that became available in the late 1980s, he concluded, that Stalin, who had effectively deceived the Allies on the issue of Polish western border, played a major role in undermining the anti-Hitler coalition and unleashing the Cold War³¹.

After 1990 the majority of authors are inclined to stress the unambiguous acceptance of the new Polish–German border by the United Kingdom and the United States at the Potsdam conference. They recognize freely the predominantly manipulative nature of subsequent declarations about its temporary character and the possibility of its revision in future^{32, 33, 34, 35}. Some researchers stated that Western countries actually accepted the new Polish–German border even at the Tehran Conference^{36, 37}. Professor Geoffrey Roberts (University College Cork) noted that at the Potsdam Conference Western Allies had actually cheated Stalin when made an agreement to speak about “Germany” as a German state in borders of the year 1937. Later they used it for declaration that Oder–Neisse line problem was not a matter of Polish–German relations but a part of quadripartite responsibility for the post-war Germany³⁸.

³⁰ R. Raack, *Stalin fixes the Oder–Neisse line*, “Journal of Contemporary History” 1990, vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 476, 487.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 479.

³² S. Anderson, *The Oder–Neisse border and Polish–East German relations, 1945–1949*, “The Polish Review” 1997, vol. 42, no. 2, p. 187.

³³ R. G. Hughes, *Unfinished business from Potsdam: Britain, West Germany and Oder–Neisse line, 1945–1962*, “International History Review”, 2005, no. 27(2), p. 275.

³⁴ J. McAllister, *No exit: America and the German problem, 1943–1954*. Ithaca; London, Cornell University, 2002, p. 119.

³⁵ W. Smyser, op. cit., p. 22.

³⁶ W. Hanrieder, op. cit., p. 43.

³⁷ W. Smyser, op. cit., p. 8–9.

³⁸ G. Roberts, *Stalin’s wars. From World War to cold war, 1939–1953*. New Haven and London, Yale University, 2006, p. 278.

Professor Debra Allen (University of Concordia, Texas, USA), while working on her thesis concerned US policy on the Oder–Neisse border in 1945–1990, concluded that the Western states actually agreed to a permanent nature the new Polish–German border at Potsdam. Professor Allen considers the Allies’ agreement on the deportation of ethnic Germans from the “western territories” as the main proof of her hypothesis, since “the movement of millions of people on a temporary basis was unthinkable”³⁹. The subsequent manipulations on the diplomatic field served to the purely pragmatic considerations of the West during the Cold War. By 1945 it had become clear that Poland would enter the Soviet sphere of influence, and the advancement of its borders in the western direction would only strengthen the position of the USSR in Central and Eastern Europe. In this regard, the Western allies took an ambiguous position on the border along the Oder–Neisse line. Subsequently, the emphasis on its temporary status turned them into lawyers of German unity and contributed to the successful implementation of several projects: creation of a separate West German government and its involvement into Western integration structures^{40,41,42,43}. At the same time, the authors acknowledge the fact that the Western allies were not ready to take risks and go for a forceful solution to the problem. Historians noted that during the second Berlin crisis the United States and Great Britain discussed the possibility of recognizing East Germany and the Oder–Neisse border *de facto* in exchange for guarantees of their presence in West Berlin. Such policy of Western states found a positive assessment in scientific works and characterized as realistic and far-sighted^{44,45}.

Most of rationalist historians came to the conclusion that the Warsaw Pact had regulated the border issue in the relations of the two states. According to a number of authors, having signed the document, West Germany unambiguously recognized the Oder–Neisse line. Taking into account the international law, this issue should finally have been resolved after the peace treaty ratification. However, politically, the Warsaw Pact marked West Germany rejection of territorial claims in the east^{46,47}. According to this, Chancellor Kohl’s equivocal position on the Oder–Neisse line issue during the German reunification got a strictly negative assessment in historiography. Historians explained the Chancellor’s

³⁹ D. Allen, *An Unacknowledged Consensus: Polish American Views about the Oder–Niesse Line during the Truman Administration*, “Polish American Studies” 2000, vol. 57, no. 1, p. 75.

⁴⁰ G. Hughes, *Britain, Germany and the cold war. The search for European détente, 1949–1967*. London; New York, Routledge, 2007, pp. 9–12.

⁴¹ R. G. Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

⁴² W. Smyser, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁴³ N. Lewkowicz, *The German question and the international order, 1943–1948*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 138.

⁴⁴ R. G. Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

⁴⁵ W. Smyser, *op. cit.*, p. 178–179.

⁴⁶ T. Banchoff, *The German problem transformed: institutions, politics and foreign policy, 1945–1995*. Michigan, The University of Michigan, 1999, p. 63.

⁴⁷ A. Pittman, *From Ostpolitik to reunification: West German–Soviet political relations since 1974*. New York, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 162.

behavior pointing at quite difficult domestic political situation, high activity of the right political forces and their rising influence on the upcoming election campaign. The authors emphasized that the chancellor had never had serious intentions to seek the borders revision and expressed readiness to discuss all the problematic issues with the Polish side^{48,49,50}. Nevertheless, representatives of the rationalistic approach are unanimous that Helmut Kohl's statements on the border issue created a serious problem on the way to German settlement and damaged the reputation of the German government both inside and outside the country, affecting negatively the further development of Polish–German relations^{51,52,53}.

To summarize, it should be noted that the Anglo-American historiography of the Oder–Neisse border problem was inseparably linked with the study of the German question. The researchers of the problem followed either conservative trend (represented mainly by the “containment” school formed in the USA) or rationalistic approach (formed in English School of international relations theory). The conservative approach definitely prevailed in historiography until the early 1960s. The official non-recognition of the Oder–Neisse line was supported and explained in the works of historians. With the onset of détente the situation began gradually to change. The rationalist tradition revived and strengthened its positions significantly after the signing of the Moscow and Warsaw Treaties in 1970. More and more authors recognized the legitimacy of the Oder–Neisse line and supposed its official recognition as inevitable in future. The unification of Germany and ratification of border agreements between Poland and Germany in 1990 finally resolved the problem and affirmed the primacy of the rationalist approach to its analysis. As for the conservative tradition, its influence has reduced, mainly, to criticism of the Soviet *modus operandi* while determining the Polish western border in 1944–1945.

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⁴⁸ M. Croan, *Germany and Eastern Europe*. In: J. Held (ed.), *The Columbia history of Eastern Europe in the twentieth century*, New York, Columbia University, 1992, p. 390.

⁴⁹ W. Griffith, *American views on the German question*. In: J. Thies G. van Well (ed.), *Auf der Suche nach der Gestalt Europas*, Bonn, Internationale Politik, 1990, p. 122.

⁵⁰ C. Maier, *Dissolution: the crisis of communism and the end of East Germany*. Princeton, Princeton University, 1997, p. 266.

⁵¹ R. Evans, *Rereading German history : From unification to reunification, 1800–1996*. London; New York, Routledge, 1997, p. 213.

⁵² J. K. Young, *International relations since 1945. A global history*. New York, Oxford University, 2004, p. 626.

⁵³ W.Griffith, op. cit., p. 123.

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Analysis of the Oder–Neisse line status in British and American historiography (1945–1990)

Summary: The article analyzes British and American historical records dealing with the Polish-German border after World War II. The establishment of the Polish-German border along the Oder-Neisse line was one of the most widely debated topics in Germany's post-war history. The article reviews the opinions of British and American historians. It analyzes different periods in the development of both historiographies relating to the Polish western border, and discusses the main and key factors that had led to the evolution of the definition of the Oder-Neisse line as the Polish-German border.

Keywords: British historiography, American historiography, conservatism, appeasement, rationalism, English School of international relations theory, the German problem, Oder-Neisse line, Cold War