

## Polish-Japanese relations in 1904–1939

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### Abstract.

**This article aims** to analyze the development of Polish-Japanese relations, which emerged during the years 1904–1905 on the basis of a shared anti-Russian agenda. Particular attention is devoted to the evolution of these relations in the interwar period, especially in the context of Poland's Promethean strategy. This geopolitical concept sought the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the annexation of parts of its territory under the guise of establishing quasi-independent national republics. **The methodological framework** of the study is grounded in the principles of historicism and scholarly objectivity. Among the general scientific methods applied, the logical method made it possible to explore the spatial dynamics of Polish-Japanese relations, while the historical method enabled an examination of their evolution over time. **The scholarly novelty** of this research lies in its use of these methods to uncover the historical context in which Polish-Japanese relations emerged during the period of Poland's statelessness. The analysis of Józef Piłsudski's policies in fostering cooperation with Japan demonstrates a convergence of interests between the two nations in the dismemberment of Tsarist Russia and, later, the Soviet Union into separate national states. It is established that Polish-Japanese cooperation was characterized by a distinctly anti-Russian, anti-Soviet, and anti-communist orientation. **Conclusions.** The origins of Polish-Japanese cooperation can be traced back to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, where their shared opposition to the Russian Empire provided a common strategic foundation. In the interwar period, this antagonism persisted, though within a significantly altered geopolitical landscape: in 1918, an independent Polish state was restored, and in 1922, the Bolsheviks consolidated most of the former territories of the Russian Empire into the Soviet Union. Throughout the 1930s, Polish-Japanese relations evolved within the framework of Poland's Promethean strategy, which sought the fragmentation of the Soviet Union into separate national states. Japan's interests, shaped by its Pan-Asian doctrine, aligned with Poland's objectives – particularly with regard to the idea of establishing a puppet Ukrainian state, known as Zeleny Klyn (Green Ukraine), in the Russian Far East. Although these plans proved unrealistic and unattainable during the 1930s, bilateral cooperation between Poland and Japan continued to develop in a sustained and mutually beneficial manner.

**Keywords:** Polish-Japanese relations, Promethean movement, Józef Piłsudski, Polish-Japanese intelligence cooperation, Anti-Soviet foreign policy

**Польсько-японські відносини у 1904–1939 рр.****Степан Борчук**

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**Метою статті** є аналіз польсько-японських відносин, які формувалися в 1904–1905 рр. на спільній антиросійській платформі. Особливу увагу приділено розвитку цих відносин у міжвоєнний період, зокрема в контексті реалізації концепції прометеїзму Польщі, метою якої було повалення СРСР й анексії частину його територій під приводом побудови квазінезалежних національних республік. **Методологічною основою** дослідження стали принципи історизму й наукової об'єктивності. Із загальнонаукових методів у роботі застосовано логічний, що дав можливість розкрити зміни в польсько-японських відносинах, які відбувалися в просторі, а історичний метод – простежити їх еволюцію в часі. **Наукова новизна** роботи полягає у тому, що використовуючи вищезазначені методи, розкрито історичні обставини зародження польсько-японських відносин у період бездержавного існування Польщі. Аналіз політики Ю. Пілсудського в налагодженні співпраці з Японією засвідчив їх спільні інтереси в розчленуванні царської Росії, а згодом Радянського Союзу на окремі національні держави. З'ясовано, що польсько-японська співпраця мала виразно антиросійський, антирадянський і антикомуністичний характер. **Висновки.** Отже, початки польсько-японської співпраці були закладені в роки російсько-японської війни 1904–1905 рр. Їх основою було протистояння з Російською імперією. У міжвоєнний період вона продовжилася, але вже у зовсім інших геополітичних реаліях: у 1918 р. відродилася незалежна Польща, а в 1922 р. більшовики об'єднали більшість земель колишньої Російської імперії у складі Радянського Союзу. У 30-х роках ХХ ст. польсько-японська співпраця розвивалася в умовах реалізації концепції прометеїзму Польщі, спрямованої на розчленування Радянського Союзу на окремі національні держави. Інтереси Японії, яка сповідувала паназійську доктрину, співпадали з польськими щодо утворення маріонеткової української держави – Зелений Клин на Далекому Сході. Незважаючи на нереальність і нездійсненність цих планів у 30-х рр. ХХ ст., польсько-японська співпраця плідно розвивалася й надалі.

**Ключові слова:** польсько-японські відносини, прометеївський рух, Юзеф Пілсудський, польсько-японська розвідувальна співпраця, антирадянська зовнішня політика.

**Problem Statement.** At the beginning of the 20th century, the territories of the former Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth were partitioned among Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Germany. Nevertheless, the Polish nation did not accept the loss of its sovereignty and persistently pursued the restoration of independence, seeking support from external powers. A favorable opportunity emerged during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, when leaders of both the Polish Socialist movement and the National Democrats (endecja) appealed to Japan for assistance. During this period, Polish-Japanese relations were founded on a shared anti-Russian agenda. It was also proposed to exploit the intelligence and sabotage potential of the Polish Military Organization (Polska Organizacja

Wojskowa, POW) within the territory of the Russian Empire. Thus, even during the period of Poland's statelessness, the foundations of a Polish intelligence apparatus were laid, accompanied by the initial development of cooperation with Japanese military intelligence.

Polish-Japanese collaboration continued beyond 1926, following the ascent to power of the Sanation regime under Józef Piłsudski. Under his leadership, Poland clandestinely pursued the Promethean strategy, which aimed to dismantle the Soviet Union into separate national republics linked to Poland through federal associations. Japan, driven by its Pan-Asian doctrine, likewise sought the disintegration of the USSR and territorial expansion in the Far East. Accordingly, Polish-Japanese relations during this period were built upon a shared anti-Russian, anti-Soviet, and anti-communist foundation.

The renewed confrontation with the Russian Federation in the early 21st century echoes many of the geopolitical patterns of the previous century. As such, the topic remains highly relevant. Grounded in a long-standing anti-Russian orientation, Polish-Japanese relations have consistently treated the «Ukrainian question» as a matter of strategic priority. Just as it did a century ago, Ukraine continues to occupy a pivotal role in global geopolitics.

**Analysis of Sources and Recent Research.** For evident reasons, Polish-Japanese relations during the period under study are most thoroughly examined in the works of contemporary historians from the Republic of Poland and Japan. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 marked the earliest phase of such relations, as documented in a seminal monograph by Polish scholars (Pałasz-Rutkowska, Romer, 1996). Published at the end of the 20th century, this work was among the first to draw academic attention to previously overlooked aspects of the bilateral relationship.

Subsequent research was advanced through collaborative efforts between Japanese and Polish historians, notably Hiroaki Kuromiya and Paweł Libera (Kuromiya, Libera, 2009). Their studies are fully consistent with the historical tradition of Polish-Japanese cooperation within the framework of the Promethean movement, which gained momentum during the interwar period. The authors further sought to analyze the motivations, development, and consequences of Japan's involvement in Promethean initiatives on the eve of the Second World War (Kuromiya, Libera, Peplowski, 2009).

The culmination of this joint scholarly endeavor was a comprehensive monograph by Hiroaki Kuromiya and Andrzej Peplowski – a leading expert on the history of Polish intelligence during the interwar years. This work traces the trajectory of intelligence cooperation between Poland and Japan from Józef Piłsudski's initial contacts with Japanese representatives in 1904 to the closing stages of World War II (Kuromiya, Peplowski, 2009). Of particular relevance to the present study is a dedicated chapter in this volume that explores the origins of Promethean activity in the Far East. The authors underscore that collaboration with Japan constituted a significant component of Poland's interwar foreign policy.

Ukrainian scholars have primarily focused on the relationship between representatives of the State Center (Derzhavnyi Tsent, DC) of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR) and the Japanese government during the 1930s. They have concluded, in particular, that the initiative to establish ties between the DC UNR's intelligence services in exile and Japan was spearheaded by Volodymyr Murskyi – UNR envoy in Istanbul, diplomat, and operative of the Ukrainian intelligence service – who was the first to establish substantive contacts and initiate information exchanges with Japanese attachés in Turkey (Okipniuk, Kozlov, 2023, p. 103). While we agree with the authors' assessment that this intelligence cooperation facilitated improved operational conditions for Ukrainian émigré organizations in Manchuria, it is necessary to add that these developments took place within the broader framework of Poland's Promethean strategy.

Overall, Polish-Japanese relations remain a largely underexplored topic in Ukrainian historiography. Despite their historical relevance, they have yet to receive the scholarly attention they warrant, and thus require thorough investigation within the scope of this research.

**The primary source base** for this study consists of documents from Section II of the General Staff of the Polish Army, preserved in the collections of the Central Military Archive of the Republic of Poland.

**This article aims** to investigate the formation of Polish-Japanese relations during the First World War and their evolution in the latter half of the 1930s, with particular emphasis on the cooperation between the military intelligence services of the Second Polish Republic and Imperial Japan. The two parties shared a strategic interest in the fragmentation of the Soviet Union into separate national republics and the establishment of the entity known as Zeleny Klyn (Green Ukraine).

**Presentation of the Main Research Material.** A favorable opportunity for the implementation of Józef Piłsudski's plans arose during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. At that time, the prospect of Polish-Japanese cooperation appeared feasible and would later develop into a sustained tradition. In 1904, in his Memorandum to the Japanese government, Piłsudski underscored the strategic importance of mobilizing the numerous non-Russian peoples inhabiting the Black Sea–Baltic region in the struggle against the Russian Empire, arguing that Poland should assume a leading role in this

endeavor. He justified Poland's predominance in the process by invoking the historical legacy of the federative Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (Zbiór dokumentów..., 2000, p. 56). For Piłsudski, this was not only the fulfillment of a civilizational mission on the path toward Polish independence, but also a means of ensuring that «Russia, deprived of the territories it has seized, will be weakened to such an extent that it will cease to be a formidable and dangerous neighbor» (Piłsudski, 1937, p. 253).

Piłsudski personally traveled to the Japanese capital, Tokyo, to present his plan to the government of Katsura Tarō concerning the organization of a national uprising in Poland «together with other subjugated peoples of the Russian Empire». During negotiations with representatives of the Japanese military – Murata, Iganaki, and Kawakami – he proposed the establishment of a Polish intelligence network designed to coordinate sabotage and terrorist operations against Tsarist Russia. In exchange, he requested that Japan provide weapons, ammunition, military instructors for the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), and diplomatic support for the Polish cause in international forums (Charszkiewicz, 1955, p. 138). Under pressure from Great Britain, which strongly opposed any extension of the conflict into Europe, the Japanese government declined to adopt Piłsudski's proposal in its entirety, limiting its engagement to intelligence cooperation (CAW. I.303.4.5500, fols. 118–125).

At the time, the Polish people – subject to the rule of Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Russia – were engaged in a determined struggle to restore their statehood. Within this national liberation movement, two of the most influential political currents competed for dominance. The first, represented by the PPS and its leader Józef Piłsudski, sought the full restoration of an independent Polish state. The second, the National Democratic Party (NDP) under the leadership of Roman Dmowski, aimed to achieve Polish autonomy within a future federated Russia. In mid-May 1904, Roman Dmowski arrived in Tokyo, where he initiated consultations with the Director of the Political Department of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Yamasza, and with General Fukashina. The Japanese authorities, however, declined to pursue cooperation, citing the evident divisions within the Polish political sphere. They expressed a preference to engage with a unified national movement – conditions that had not yet materialized at that time (CAW. I.303.4.5500, fol. 120). Nonetheless, Polish-Japanese relations were not entirely severed. On the contrary, it was during this period that the foundations were laid for a relationship that would later fully materialize in the interwar years.

The national liberation efforts of Piłsudski, Dmowski, and other Polish patriots culminated on November 11, 1918 – the day the First World War ended – with the re-establishment of an independent Polish state, known in historiography as the Second Polish Republic (1918–1939). In 1919, Japan officially recognized Poland's independence. Throughout the 1920s, Polish-Japanese relations evolved in the broader context of shared opposition to Bolshevik Russia. This era was marked by the Polish-Soviet War of 1919–1920 and Japan's military intervention in the Russian Far East (1918–1922). During this period, diplomatic missions were established in Warsaw and Tokyo; Polish children were repatriated from Siberia; official contacts between the Polish authorities and the Japanese imperial family were maintained; and cooperation between the General Staffs of both nations intensified. Military envoys were exchanged, a Polish-Japanese maritime trade agreement was signed, and the Polish-Japanese Society was founded (Pałasz-Rutkowska, Romer, 1996, pp. 62–109).

Cooperation between the Polish and Japanese intelligence services, grounded in a shared anti-Soviet and anti-communist agenda, progressed steadily throughout the entire interwar period (CAW. I.303.4.5741, fol. 19). Representatives of the Sanation regime in Poland, who endorsed the Promethean concept, exhibited a marked interest in Ukrainians residing in Soviet-controlled regions of the Russian Far East and in Chinese Manchuria. Japanese authorities likewise sought to harness the national liberation aspirations of Ukrainians to advance their own strategic interests. Consequently, the Ukrainian question came to occupy a prominent place in the bilateral relations between the two states.

In the Russian Far East, descendants of Ukrainians resettled in Siberia by the Tsarist authorities as early as the 1850s continued to reside. By the end of the 19th century, mass Ukrainian migration to the southern regions of the Russian Far East led to the emergence of the term Zeleny Klyn (Green Ukraine), denoting the territories of the Amur and Ussuri regions, which became the primary areas of Ukrainian colonization. By the 1920s, virtually all of these lands had become the focal point of a Ukrainian national liberation movement aimed at establishing an independent Ukrainian state on the Pacific coast. As a result, the concept of Zeleny Klyn acquired a broader interpretation, encompassing the territory stretching from Lake Baikal to the Bering Strait. Alongside the term Zeleny Klyn, the designation Zelena Ukraina (Green Ukraine) also came into use.

Poland's geopolitical ambitions extended into Soviet-controlled territories of the Russian Far East and Chinese Manchuria. Proponents of Poland's Promethean doctrine sought to harness the dissatisfaction of various national groups with Soviet policy and to unite them into a coordinated anti-Soviet front. As is well documented, the Polish General Staff, acting through its consulate in Harbin, facilitated the establishment of a Manchurian branch of the Warsaw-based Prometheus society, which oversaw the activities of émigré centers representing non-Russian peoples in their struggle against the USSR. The Harbin branch was headed by Władysław Pelc. Active participants included

representatives of the Polish, Georgian, Idel-Ural (Volga Tatar), and Ukrainian émigré communities. The Ukrainian émigrés in Manchuria were represented by Pavlo Yakhno and Ivan Svit, both of whom adhered to the ideological legacy of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR) and operated under the authority of General Volodymyr Salsky. Of all the groups involved, the Polish leadership placed its greatest hopes for the success of the Promethean strategy in the Ukrainians, who constituted the largest and potentially most influential force in the Far East (CAW. I.303.4.5500, fol. 81). It was clear to the Polish ruling elite that Poland could attain the status of a great power only by strengthening a system of alliances with Slavic minorities – foremost among them, the Ukrainians (CAW. I.303.4.5659, n.p.).

In supporting Promethean initiatives, the Japanese military establishment primarily pursued its own strategic interests. Japan was particularly committed to advancing the Pan-Asian doctrine in the Far East – an extension of its great-power ideology and a central component of its broader imperialist policy in Asia. The objective of Japanese messianism, or Nipponism – positioned in direct opposition to communist ideology – was to unite the so-called “yellow race” into a powerful empire, with Japan, Manchuria, and China constituting its initial core (CAW. I.303.4.5782, fol. 619). Japan aspired to exclusive dominance over the Sea of Okhotsk, the Sea of Japan, the Yellow Sea, and the East China Sea, as well as strategic control over the adjacent continental territories (BPP. AAK, sygn. 1199, fol. 46). In light of these ambitions, a military confrontation with the Soviet Union appeared inevitable.

The creation of the state of Manchukuo marked the first phase of Japan's imperial expansion and constituted a significant setback for Soviet policy in the region. In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria, and in 1932 it proclaimed the puppet state of Manchukuo, ostensibly established for the Manchu people (CAW. I.303.4.5569, fol. 1). Nominally a monarchy led by the last heir of the Manchu dynasty – Prince Puyi, who assumed the throne under the regnal name Kangde – Manchukuo was, in reality, under the direct control of Japanese authorities (Svit, 1972, p. 116). It was conceived as a precedent for the establishment of similar client states elsewhere. Strategically, the Japanese leadership remained focused on the Russian Far East.

Following Japan's occupation of northeastern China and the formation of the vassal state of Manchukuo in 1932, Japanese authority was institutionalized through the establishment of military missions across all major settlements in the occupied territory. Governance in Manchukuo was overseen by the Japanese ambassador to Manchuria, who also served as commander of the Kwantung Army (Svit, 1962, p. 3). The Japanese Military Mission (JMM), through its political advisor I. Mykhailiv, expressed significant interest in the Ukrainian question (Svit, 1972, p. 117). Japan supported the idea of establishing a Ukrainian state in the Zeleny Klyn (Green Ukraine) region, modeled on the example of Manchukuo (Referat..., 1937, p. 6). As part of its efforts to undermine Soviet influence in the Far East, Japan considered the possibility of founding a state entity – Zelena Ukraina (Green Ukraine) – in the area encompassing Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, and the Amur River basin (Kossenko, 1934, pp. 4–8).

In general, Japan did not fully endorse Poland's Promethean policy; nevertheless, it sought to exploit Polish-Promethean networks to expand its influence among the émigré communities of Manchuria, which shared a border with part of the Zeleny Klyn (Green Ukraine) region. The Japanese intelligence services attached considerable importance to the Far Eastern diaspora in anticipation of a future conflict, intending to harness this community to advance Japan's imperial objectives. To that end, at Japan's initiative, the organization Segeydon was established. It brought together Georgian, Ukrainian, and Tatar émigrés and trained them for sabotage activities directed against the Soviet Union (RGVA. f.461/k, op.1, d.1, l. 141).

The Ukrainian émigré community was assigned a particularly prominent role in the envisioned Far Eastern conflict, as Japanese intelligence viewed it as a key asset in the pursuit of its strategic aims. Members of the Petliura movement – already active participants in the Polish Promethean campaign – readily agreed to cooperate, perceiving in this alliance an opportunity to leverage Japanese military and political support for the restoration of an independent Ukrainian state. They hoped that an imminent Japanese-Soviet conflict would result in the dissolution of the USSR into several independent entities – Ukraine, the Caucasus, Turkestan, and others – thus enabling their return from exile (Kossenko, 1934, p. 6).

The non-aggression pact signed between Poland and the Soviet Union on 25 July 1932 significantly undermined the implementation of Promethean policy in the Far East. Representatives of various national émigré centers, along with certain figures from the Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR), became disillusioned with Poland's support and shifted their focus toward cooperation with Japan. This realignment corresponded with the strategic objectives of Japanese policymakers. In 1932–1933, a series of directives was issued to Japanese military attachés in Europe and Turkey, advising the intensification of intelligence operations within the Soviet Union and collaboration with so-called «oppressed peoples» (CAW. I.303.4.5569, fol. 36).

In mid-1935, the Japanese embassy in Berlin established contact with the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) with the aim of utilizing Ukrainian militants to carry out anti-Soviet sabotage operations (CAW. I.303.4.2014, fol. 28). The Japanese engaged in discussions with General Mykola Kapustiansky in Paris and Centurion Richard Yary in Berlin. In November 1936, Colonel Yevhen Konovalts met twice in Geneva with Colonel Tanaka, who had traveled from Berlin specifically for that purpose. At the time, Tanaka served as the senior Japanese political liaison officer in Europe for engagement with Ukrainian political groups. He was accompanied by Captain Matsuoka (a pseudonym), the unofficial representative of the Ukrainian division within the Manchukuo émigré apparatus (CAW. I.303.4.5764, n.p.).

Despite political setbacks, the leadership of the Promethean movement continued efforts to reestablish ties with Japan, seeking to revive bilateral cooperation. W. Bączkowski, a leading figure within the Warsaw-based Prometheus group, conducted clandestine negotiations with Masutarō Inōe, secretary of the Japanese embassy. Bączkowski was widely regarded in Poland as a specialist in Polish-Japanese relations, a reputation substantiated by numerous press articles published in *Myśl Polska*, a journal under his editorship (Kožuchowski, 1937, p. 1; Orłowski, 1937, p. 2; Bączkowski, 1938, p. 1). On 1 April 1938, he presented Inōe with a historical essay outlining the wars and conflicts between Poland and Russia, beginning in the fourteenth century (CAW. I.303.4.5476, fol. 56). In a private conversation, Bączkowski also sought to persuade Inōe of the futility of Japanese reliance on representatives of the Russian White émigré community and advocated for the continuation of Japanese-Promethean cooperation (Bączkowski, 2009, p. 135). Additionally, through Bączkowski's mediation, the leadership of the Promethean movement urged Japanese officials to intensify efforts to neutralize Russian influence in the Far East. In exchange, it proposed the creation of a Ukrainian puppet state – Manchukuo No. 2 (CAW. I.303.4.5476, fols.70–73).

To advance these plans, it was proposed that Promethean centers be established in Tokyo and Harbin. These would operate through propaganda mechanisms –including the press, leaflets, radio broadcasts, congresses, and conferences – alongside clandestine executive committees organized along national lines, such as the «Committee for Ukrainian Action» (Bączkowski, 1938, p. 1). However, Wacław Bączkowski's proposals failed to gain sufficient support from the Japanese leadership, which ultimately disregarded Poland's Promethean initiatives. Although Japan did not abandon cooperation with Polish intelligence services altogether, it chose to independently exploit the potential of anti-Soviet émigré communities in the Far East to pursue its own imperial objectives. Ultimately, the grand strategic designs of both Poland and Japan for the dismemberment of the Soviet Union were not realized prior to the outbreak of the Second World War.

In their struggle for national independence, the Poles sought support from Imperial Japan, which was itself opposed to the Russian Empire. Diplomatic relations between leading Polish political figures – Józef Piłsudski and Roman Dmowski – and the Japanese government were first established during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. For Piłsudski, Russia represented the principal adversary, as he regarded it as the primary force behind the partitions of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and its subsequent collapse at the end of the eighteenth century. This shared anti-Russian platform formed the foundation of Polish-Japanese relations and continued to evolve during the interwar period, particularly following the emergence of an independent Poland and the Soviet Union on the geopolitical map of Europe. Piłsudski viewed the USSR as the ideological and political successor of Tsarist Russia and sought to dismantle it from within by fomenting separatist movements among its non-Russian populations.

This gave rise to Poland's Promethean strategy, which envisioned the fragmentation of the Soviet Union into independent national republics, with the ultimate aim of federating them under Polish leadership. The initiative to establish a Ukrainian state in the Far East – Zeleny Klyn (Green Ukraine) – was fully consistent with Japan's regional strategic interests. The overarching goal of Polish-Japanese cooperation was the dissolution of the Soviet Union into a constellation of national states. In this broader geopolitical contest, both countries sought to assume an active role and to position themselves for participation in the territorial reorganization of the USSR.

However, Poland's intense focus on the Ukrainian question ultimately made it a target of expansionist policies by its neighbors, who invaded and partitioned its territory at the start of the Second World War. Japan, for its part, suffered catastrophic losses during the final phase of the war, including the atomic bombings by the United States and the destruction of the Kwantung Army by Soviet forces.

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