

## Political borders in Polish territory according to the Soviet atlas of 1940

**Abstract.** The author presents *Karmannyj Atlas Mira* (Pocket Atlas of the World) which was published in Leningrad in 1940. It shows political borders existing in Polish territory at that time. Those borders resulted from the Soviet-German agreement reached in August and September 1939 in Moscow (the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact). On the maps in the Atlas the territories of central Poland are described as “Oblast Gosudarstvennykh Interesov Germanii” (Area of the National Interest of Germany). The maps were reprinted in the article in the original version and underwent a historical, political and geographical analysis.

**Keywords:** Karmannyj Atlas Mira, borders of Poland, the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact

Formation of political borders and their geographical course are consequence of numerous historical and political conditions. It is often unpredictable and a process of time and spatial complexity. They are conditioned by many political, military, ethnic and economic factors. They are usually determined during, or after, military activities. In such cases they reflect the current balance of power between states. Such borders exist until when such balance is undermined politically or changed as a result of another military conflict. Military activities and strategic-geopolitical conditions are most often the altering factors, but borders can also change peacefully, e.g. as a result of a trade transaction (e.g. sale of Alaska by Russia), or territorial exchange (e.g. correction of the Polish-Soviet border in 1951), or a treaty between major powers (e.g. Munich conference in 1938). Most spectacular and groundbreaking border changes result from territorial conquest and military aggression. Later, after the war is definitely over, the winning side usually achieves legal sanctioning of its gains on international forum. Border alternations can be permanent or temporary. During military conflict there also appear provisional borders whose durability is temporary, but whose political and psychological consequences can be significant and have

a long-lasting effect on relations between states and nations<sup>1</sup>.

The aim of the author is to present such a relatively short-lived political border. It lasted for just under two years, from the end of September 1939 until June 1941, so it was only an episode. It was at the time of territorial expansion of Nazi Germany and Stalin's USSR. At that time nobody knew that a radical change of political alliances was due, and that former Allies would start a war which would lead to defeat of one of them resulting in a new political-territorial settlement. Within that short period were printed various geographical maps and atlases were printed documenting the current state of the wide German-Soviet border zone. Publications prepared in the Soviet Union are the least known of these. Later, after the war, in the countries of the socialist block those historical events were to be deleted from memory, or their significance diminished, because they presented compromising facts of Soviet politics and Soviet loyalty to Nazi Germany. Various cartographic manipulations were applied to minimize the significance and essence of the

---

<sup>1</sup> The issue of political borders in a historical perspective is popular in geographic literature. An extensive literature on the subject is presented in S. Kaluski 2017.

Soviet-German treaties. Thus presenting the original cartographic takes from 1939–1941 has a certain research value. They are little known to today's geographers and historians, so recalling them is purposeful. They constitute a physical proof the credibility of which can hardly be denied. They are a valid argument in attempts to reach historical truth regarding the responsibility for starting World War II.

During the six years of war (1939–1945) the area on the verge of German and Soviet interest changed its affiliation many times. Borders moved according to current political situation and warfare. Main changes involved middle-eastern Europe, i.e. the area between the Baltic, the Black Sea and the Adriatic. Within this area the Polish territory underwent most significant changes. Political and administrative borders were moved numerous times during the whole war, according to the current military situation, political alliances and agreements between major powers.

The decisive factor which started such key geopolitical changes, which were in turn reflected in changes of borders of many European countries, was the alliance treaty between Stalin and Hitler signed on 23 August 1939. It was later verified and finally confirmed on 28 September 1939. Formally and factually it was a treaty between the two entering countries, i.e. the German Reich and the USSR. Later it came to be known as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, because these two politicians, acting as ministers of foreign affairs, formally negotiated and signed the final version of the mutual agreement which was actually a treaty of alliance. The pact made it possible for Hitler, and later also for Stalin, to attack Poland and start World War II. Although there were many differences between the two dictators, they quickly reached an agreement on the issue of the partition of Poland and on establishing their zones of influence. According to the agreement the, so-called, zone of influence of the USSR included eastern Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland and Bessarabia. Central and Western Poland fell into the German zone. At a later time, i.e. on the turn of 1939 and 1940, Stalin failed to subordinate Finland, although he succeeded in altering the Soviet-Finnish border. In addition, to Ribbentrop's dissatisfaction, he conquered northern Bukovina, which was not mentioned in official documents.

Much has been written about the pact and its political and geographical consequences in specialist literature<sup>2</sup>, so there is no need to comment on, or discuss it. Especially since any doubts have been solved and now we have a full picture of the negotiations and their political and territorial outcome. This article is limited to one particular issue which quite clearly exposes the territorial program of the contemporary USSR which was an expansionist and revisionist state. Soviet leaders remembered that a large part of Poland as well as the three Baltic states and Finland used to be a part the Tsarist Russia. The pact with Hitler made it possible to incorporate the territories of Western neighbors, which was treated not as a severe violation of international laws, but rather as a rightful consequence of Soviet international policy. Resulting border changes were duly noted in many atlases and maps published in the USSR between October 1939 and June 1941. The new Soviet-German border was treated not as temporary, but as a permanent element guaranteeing stability and correct Soviet-German relations<sup>3</sup>. Independent Poland was never expected to appear on the political stage, so the issue of its territorial range was pointless. However, it turned out that the German-Soviet border proved to be ephemeral, and its existence was short-lived. In Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam western powers accepted most territorial gains of the USSR. Instead of the German-Soviet border there appeared

<sup>2</sup> The first scientific research concerning the pact appeared at the turn of the 1950s. It was made possible thanks to the availability of documents taken over by the American army in 1945 from the archives of the German ministry of foreign affairs (*Nazi-Soviet...* 1948). Numerous monographies were elaborated which explained all the questions. The pact was unambiguously described as an infringement the norms of international law. This criminal covenant became, according to the joint conclusion of the authors, the direct cause for the outbreak of the World War II. This is how it was presented in the works of German historians (P. Kleist 1950; L. Fleischhauer 1990). English speaking authors presented a similar judgement (A. Rossi 1950; A. Read, D. Fisher 1988; G. Roberts 1995). A full review of the world literature on the subject and its analysis is available in the monumental work of a Polish author (S. Dębski 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Soviet publications presented a completely falsified factual analysis regarding the reasons and consequences of the pact. Even the existence of the confidential annex to the pact was questioned. After the disintegration of the USSR the interpretation of the pact is more varied. Beside tendentious studies there also appeared objective ones. (e.g. N. Lebedeva 1999).

a Polish-Soviet border, slightly altered in Poland's favor<sup>4</sup>.

In the first stage of the War (1939–1941) the German-Soviet alliance was politically significant. After the victory over France and the aggression against the USSR it was Germany which played the leading role in border changes. However it did not last long, because after the establishment of the Great Coalition it was evident that Germany would lose the war. As the war was drawing to a close the significance of the Soviet Union increased. Border changes were decided personally by Stalin himself. He conferred with the Allies, but it was him who shaped the post-war geopolitical status of the eastern part of Europe. The German-Soviet border was never re-established; after the defeat of Germany it was completely impossible.

During the period of military action and endless border changes there appeared many atlases and maps prepared by cartographers representing all sides of the conflict. They strived to recreate the current political-administrative situation<sup>5</sup>. Such maps are an important document, because their authors were unable to forecast not only the distant, but also near future. They used the terminology, methodology, argumentation and cartographic projection to match their understanding of the current geopolitical situation. Depending on their nationality (Polish, Russian, Anglo-Saxon or German) they attempted to present such cartographic image of the political and geographical reality which would agree with the views on military situation prevalent within their community. Because of the lack of political stability they were unable to accurately recreate current borderlines. Also, they received directions from their supervising authorities, which for the sake of propaganda were not always objective. Factual and cartographical manipulation was both purposeful and accidental. From historical perspective such intentional and often falsified deformations of borderlines explain the origin and course of political events at that time.

<sup>4</sup> Białystok region and the area around Przemyśl occupied by the USSR in 1939–1941 returned to Poland in 1945.

<sup>5</sup> Geographical atlases with a clear ideological bias towards glorification of Hitler's conquests were regularly published in Germany during the war (e.g. *Diercke Schulatlas* 1942). The post-war German atlas is more objective, but also raises many factual and political questions (e.g. W. Hilgemann 1984).

Many years after the war there were attempts to scientifically assess some of the more important German atlases and maps. They were evaluated negatively because their main objective was to serve Nazi ideology and to glorify territorial conquests of Hitler's Germany<sup>6</sup>. Soviet atlases published in the initial years of the war were not an object of interest of cartographers and they basically did not undergo any scientific evaluation<sup>7</sup>. Therefore a presentation of one of such atlases, or more precisely of two maps included in it, is justified, because it provides an insight into the Soviet policy of that time. The atlas selected for analysis comes from the exceptional period of 1940, when relations between Moscow and Berlin were still very friendly. Its ideological bias is very clear, since at the time of its publication relations with Nazi Germany determined the Soviet policy. At that time the Soviet authorities did not conceal the fact that according to the agreement the Polish state was erased from the map of Europe. Its existence ended definitely in 1939, and the Soviet-German border across the former Polish territory was permanent, and in compliance with the long-term interest of the USSR and the German Reich<sup>8</sup>. At the same time the Soviets did not expect Polish statehood to recover in any form, and in any foreseeable future. The maps fully reflected the provisions of the pact between the two countries.

Before presenting and discussing the maps included in the Soviet atlas from 1940 it is worthwhile to recall the provisions of the agreement of 23 August 1939<sup>9</sup>. The point 2 of the pact read

<sup>6</sup> Views of Polish cartographers on the question of the western and eastern borders of Poland was discussed in a seminal article by G. Strauchold (2004).

<sup>7</sup> Despite attempts the author did not encounter any publications which would politically analyze the Soviet maps published in 1939–1941.

<sup>8</sup> The Soviet viewpoint was fully accepted by the leaders of the German III Reich. Work of nationalist and anti-Polish German historians (e.g. K. Lück 1942) completely justified the German-Soviet cooperation and the common border between the two countries. A review of those works is presented by A. Demand (1990).

<sup>9</sup> A full analysis of political and geographical consequences of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact is presented in the books mentioned earlier (A. Rossi 1950; A. Bregman 1979). Newer publications on the subject did not add much. However, they showed a wider background of the dramatic events which led to the outbreak of World War II (A. Read, D. Fisher 1988). This issue was deeply analyzed in the extensive monography by S. Dębski (2007), therefore there is no need to present it.

that "...in the case of territorial and political changes in the area of the Polish state, the zones of interest of Germany and the USSR will be divided according to the line of the rivers Narew, Vistula and San" (A. Bregman 1979, p. 42). The division line was determined more accurately two days later, on 25 August 1939, because the parties missed the fact that the river Narew does not reach East Prussia. The river Pisa was added to the definition, and the so-called line of four rivers was created, dividing Poland into two parts, including the division of Warsaw. The right bank part of the capital was to belong to the USSR and the left bank part, west from the Vistula, to Germany.

During the next round of Ribbentrop's talks in late September in Moscow a new pact was drawn. The aggressors exchanged the conquered territories: the Soviet Union gave up the region of Lublin between the Vistula and the Bug river, and some northeastern districts of the Warsaw voivodship, in return for Lithuania. The new German-Soviet border was to follow the rivers San, Bug and Pisa. As a special favor to Ribbentrop the USSR also gave up the small Suwałki region. Thus established western border of the USSR and the eastern border of the German Reich remained unchanged until 22 June 1941.

Soon after the Soviet-German agreement Soviet cartographers published a geographical atlas (*Karmannyj Atlas Mira* in the original). Later it was reprinted, because of its popular character it was used as a school and academic handbook. Before every new edition the contents were verified and updated. This process was extremely rigorous. Knowing the reality of Soviet relations, it must have been made under strict control of high rank Soviet authorities. It can be assumed that any detail of political significance was consulted at the proper level of party officials and had to comply with the official standpoint of the Kremlin. Soviet reality allowed no improvisation or independence. The intention of the authors of the project was to present the current geopolitical status, including mainly the borderline on the verge of Soviet and German interest. It had to be prepared, also graphically, so that the course of borderlines would comply with the mutual agreements and not collide with the interest of the allied German Reich. It was a difficult task, and therefore every small detail on the map

was not accidental, but rather intentional and most certainly accepted by the party and government officials of the Soviet state.

*Karmannyj Atlas Mira* was published in Leningrad. It was authored by Głównoje Uprawnienie Gieodezji i Kartografii pri SNK SSSR<sup>10</sup> (the General Office of Geodesy and Cartography). It was therefore a joint effort under the patronage of a state office at a high administrative level<sup>11</sup>. Its editor-in-chief was P.A. Wielikij. It was a typical general geographical atlas of a decisively political character, meant for wide distribution within the Soviet society. It contained few maps from the range of physical and economical geography. Almost all maps presented the current political and also administrative divisions using different colours. The scale varied depending on the territory in question (continent, group of countries, single political entity).

One of the maps in the atlas presents the political divisions of Europe in 1940 (fig. 1). Its content shows precisely when it was drawn. The atlas shows the course of current European political borders, therefore it must have been prepared in March or April 1940. It must have been just after the Soviet-Finnish war, because it shows the verified Finnish-Soviet border after the incorporation of Karelia and Vyborg into the USSR. Earlier changes such as the disappearance of Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland had already been noted on maps, similar to the incorporation of Carpathian Ruthenia into Hungary and the appearance of a vestigial Slovakia deprived of its southern lowlands. On the map there are still independent Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the latter with its capital in Vilnius, returned by the USSR in compliance with the Moscow agreement. So it must have been before the incorporation of these states into the USSR. The German-French border is in its state from before the German aggression on France, because Alsace and Lorraine are still on the western side of the division line. This suggests that the map was definitely elaborated before the summer of 1940, because

<sup>10</sup> Until lately getting access to the *Atlas* was difficult. Now it is available online at <http://istmat.info/node/44855>. In spite of that, the knowledge of the *Atlas* has not reached professional geographers and historians.

<sup>11</sup> A copy of the atlas is kept in the library of the Institute of Geography and Spatial Organisation of the Polish Academy of Sciences (*Karmannyj*... 1940).



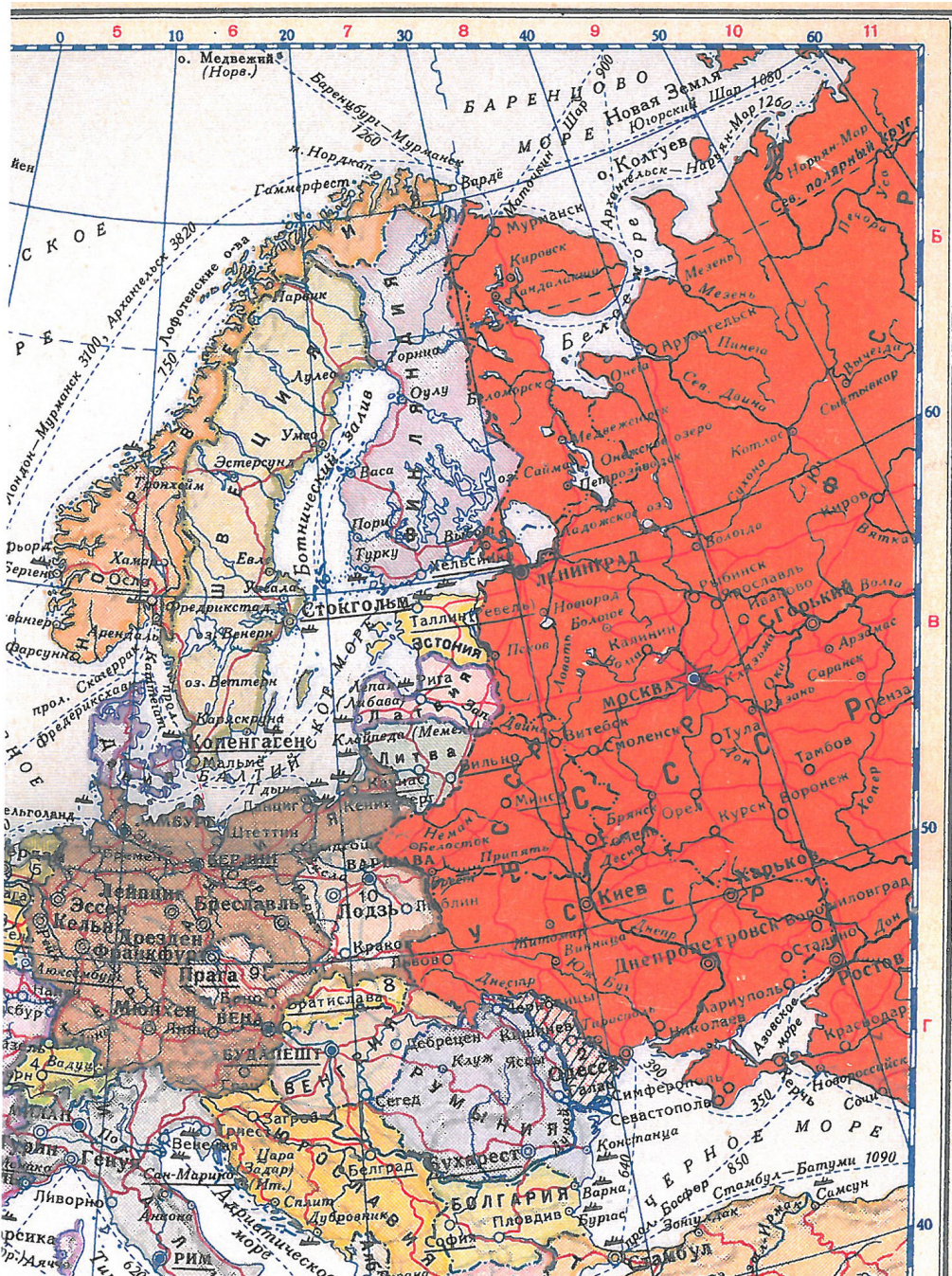


Fig. 1. Political divisions of Europe in 1940 (part of the map)

that is when France was defeated and the three Baltic states disappeared. Bessarabia does not belong to the USSR, but is separately marked as a territory of uncertain affiliation. According to the Soviet authorities the status of that province was not legally determined by any treaty and before World War I it belonged to the Tsarist Russia. Area around Warsaw and the Czech Prague were marked in a slightly different color than the territory of the proper German Reich. They have no names but numbers. In the lower margin the number 9 marks the so-called Protectorate of Czechia and Moravia, or "Czechia and Moravia – Protectorate", and the number 10 represents central Poland which is referred to as "Oblast Gosudarstviennykh Interesov Germanii" (Area of the National Interest of Germany). On the following map this area is shown in larger scale, which allows for a more accurate factual and cartographical analysis.

The original Soviet map of Europe attached to the text is an exceptional document, worthy recalling. It presents a political picture which lasted for only two months and became outdated very quickly. Soon the three Baltic states were incorporated into the USSR. The same fate was met by Bessarabia, which after annexation became the Moldovan ASSR. The Romanian northern Bukovina was also incorporated into the Soviet Union, which went beyond the German-Soviet agreement and was met with German disapproval. In the west the political status of France and its eastern border changed. A correction of the Romanian-Hungarian border also occurred because northern Transylvania was incorporated into Hungary. Further changes took place on the Black Sea coast because Romania lost southern Dobruja to Bulgaria. Further border alterations connected to the disintegration of Yugoslavia and wars on the Balkan peninsula came later.

Another map from the atlas, titled "Germanija", presents the Great German Reich from the Rhine in the west to the line of Bug in the east. Figure 2 shows its eastern part with the area on the middle and southern Vistula marked in a separate color, and captioned with a name similar to that mentioned on the margin of the map of Europe: "Oblast Gosudarstviennykh Interesov Germanii". The course of the borderline of that para-political entity is surprising. In the east it follows the demarcation line de-

termined in the Soviet-German pact of 28 September 1939. At that time it was the actual border dividing the Great German Reich from the Soviet Union. The western border is marked according to the division which existed from the Congress of Vienna (1815) until the Treaty of Versailles (1919). It stretches from the Carpathians, separating the Dąbrowa Coal Basin from Upper Silesia and reaching Proсна near Calisia. Further it follows between Słupca and Strzałkowo as well as between Aleksandrów Kujawski and Toruń. The Soviet authors referred to the former historical border which was definitively defunct as a result of the Treaty of Versailles. It had nothing to do with the reality of 1940. Ignored was the pre-war Polish-German border, which was understandable, but also the German decisions after September 1939 were not accounted for and the western border of the General Governorate was not shown. So the territories which before World War I belonged to the Russian Empire were not incorporated into the proper Reich. This concerned, among others, Łódź (on 11 April 1940 renamed Litzmannstadt), Włocławek, Płock and Ciechanów. The fact that these towns were incorporated into the German Reich as a result of Hitler's decision of 8 October 1939 was completely ignored, as were borderline changes done by the Germans without an approval of the authorities of the USSR. Such omissions must have had political justification. Apparently the Soviets accepted the incorporation into Germany of those areas which Germany lost after World War I. However, the incorporation of the areas which used to belong to Russia raised serious doubts. Perhaps for that reason the name of "General Governorate" was not introduced. The name "Oblast Gosudarstviennykh Interesov Germanii" indirectly indicated its temporary status which could be questioned at a later date.

The area of the enlarged USSR is marked in a clearly visible red. Within it there are lands on the eastern side of San and Bug, the whole region of Białystok, up to the Pisa river. Between the USSR, Germany and Lithuania there remains a small enclave of Suwałki. On the map it is not incorporated into Germany, although German authorities have actually done it. Color-wise this small enclave reminds of the area of central Poland. Nomenclature of settlements is interesting. Perhaps it was selected for technical rather than political reasons. On the terri-





Fig. 2. Great German Reich (eastern part of the map)

tory of the pre-war Polish state occupied by Germany the Polish names are used. This also concerns the former Prussian partition. The name Warsaw is printed in larger letters than Kraków, but unlike other capital cities it is not underlined.

The map of Poland with its caption is significant, because it fully illustrates the Soviet policy towards the Polish state at that short but important period of history. It could be claimed that the use of such a discriminating name, consisting of four purposefully selected words which define a vassal entity fully dependant on Germany, reflects the relation of the USSR authorities to the Polish state and nation. The names used does not comply with the rules of international law. From a quite distant perspective of today, the Soviet participation in the division of Poland, its aggression towards other countries and friendship with Nazi Germany are all morally appalling and show the real ideological character of the Soviet authorities, and Stalin himself, at that time. Maybe because of

that reason such material and ideological proofs of loyalty of the Soviet Union to its Nazi ally were carefully deleted from library collections and Russian memory. As a result *Karmannyj Atlas Mira* published in 1940 became a desired bibliophile rarity, which clearly documents the friendship and cooperation of the two dictators – Hitler and Stalin, who together occupied and divided the territories between the Baltic, Adriatic and the Black Sea. Their illicit cooperation resulted in an eradication of several sovereign states and a division of central-eastern Europe, including the annihilation of the Polish state. All that was clearly presented in the atlas, despite the intentions of its authors. The Soviet-German friendship and cooperation lasted relatively short. There remained few cartographic documents illustrating that pivotal period in the history of Europe. This concerns mainly the original Soviet cartographic takes. Therefore the atlas presented and analyzed here is undoubtedly a document of exceptional value for both historians and geographers.

## Literature

- Bregman A., 1979, *Najlepszy sojusznik Hitlera. Studium o współpracy niemiecko-sowieckiej 1939–1941*. Londyn: Księgarnia Polska Orbis.
- Demand A., 1990, *Deutschlands Grenzen in der Geschichte*. München: Verlag C.H. Beck.
- Dębski S., 2007, *Między Berlinem a Moskwą. Stosunki niemiecko-sowieckie 1939–1941*. Warszawa: Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych.
- Diercke *Schulatlas*, 1942, Braunschweig, Berlin, Hamburg: Georg Westermann.
- Fisher D., Read A., 1999, *The deadly embrace: Hitler, Stalin and the Nazi-Soviet Pact 1939–1941*. London: W.W. Norton Company.
- Fleischhauer L., 1990, *Der Pakt. Hitler, Stalin und die Initiative der deutschen Diplomatie 1938–1939*. Frankfurt a. M.: Ullstein.
- Hilgemann W., 1984, *Atlas zur Deutschen Zeitgeschichte 1918–1968*. München: Verlag Piper.
- Kaluski S., 2017, *Bliźny historii. Geografia granic politycznych współczesnego świata*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog.
- Karmannyj Atlas Mira*, 1940. Leningrad: Glavnoe Upravlenie Geodezii i Kartografii pri SNK SSSR.
- Kleist P., 1950, *Zwischen Hitler und Stalin 1939–1945*. Bonn: Athenfium Verlag.
- Lebedeva N., 1999, *Polsha mezhdu Germaniej i SSSR w 1939 g.* In: *Vojna i Politika*, ed. A.O. Chubarian, Moskva, pp. 65–84.
- Lück K., 1942, *Der Lebenskampf In deutsch-polnischen Grenzraum*. Schriftenreihe der NSDAP. Gruppe VII. Bd. 4. Berlin.
- Meltiuchov M.I., 2001, *Sovetskoe-polskie vojny 1918–1939 gg.* Moskva: Viecez.
- Nazi-Soviet Relations 1939–1941*, 1948. Documents from the Archives of the German Foreign Office, ed. R.J. Sontag, J.B. Beddie. Washington.
- Read A., Fischer D., 1988, *The deadly embrace: Hitler, Stalin and the Nazi-Soviet Pact 1939–1941*. New York – London: WW Norton & Co.
- Roberts G., 1995, *The Soviet Union and the origins of the Second World War: Russo-German relations and the road to war, 1939–1941*. London: Bedford/st Martins.
- Rossi A., 1950, *The Russo-German Alliance 1939–1941*. London: Chapman & Hall.
- Strauchold G., 2004, *Geografowie polscy wobec kształtu granicy zachodniej od końca epoki zaborów do pierwszych lat po II wojnie światowej*. In: *Eugeniusz Romer, geograf i kartograf trzech epok*. "Studia i Materiały z Historii Kartografii" T. 19, pp. 123–138.