



"ROMANIAN BRIDGEHEAD" AS A POLITICAL AND MILITARY CONCEPT IN SEPTEMBER 1939

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The article concerns the intention to group Polish troops on the so-called Romanian bridgehead, created during the Polish campaign of 1939. The author presents the geopolitical conditions for the Polish strategic concepts, including the special importance that Romanian diplomatic relations had, including the common border relevance for Poland's defence. The article presents the assumptions and changes to the Polish operational plan, in which, along with hostilities' progress, the importance of the intention to create a defensive redoubt based on the Romanian border grew. The author sums up the article by discussing the military significance of the Romanian bridgehead during the military operations at the beginning of World War II.

Keywords: World War II; Polish-Romanian relations; Romanian bridgehead; Polish campaign.

Poland's international situation in the months preceding World War II outburst was extremely unfavorable. The shaping of the borders after World War I and the partition of Czechoslovakia in the years 1938-1939 meant that Poland primarily bordered on hostile or potentially hostile states. Poland's land border total length was 5,408 km, including the Third Reich border (altogether with Slovakia, the puppet, and the Free City of Gdańsk), 2,759 km, the border with the USSR 1,412 km, and the border with Lithuania 507 km. For Hungary (border length 277 km) and Latvia (border length 106 km) there was no risk of aggression, quite the contrary, we can even speak of close diplomatic relations with Hungary, but it should be taken into account that Latvia, did not have greater strategic importance for Poland, due to its location, while Hungary, orbited towards an alliance with the Third Reich, despite its sympathy for Poland. In this situation, Romania was Poland's most important partner to bound by an official alliance but also with the greatest geopolitical significance (a border with 347 km length) (Andrzej Jezierski 2003, 258).

Romania in the Polish political and military plans

Poland and Romania were bound by an official military alliance – the "the resistant

alliance convention "on March 3rd, 1921, and then extended twice by the "treaty of guarantee". In the treaty, the main paragraph read: "Poland and Romania undertake mutually against all aggressive external intentions that undermine their territorial integrity and political independence." Although this general formula did not specify whom the alliance was to be aimed against, the secret military convention (updated several times, for the last time in 1931) indicated joint military actions against the USSR. Although the Polish-Romanian alliance was by far the most important actor in the event of a Soviet Union war, Romania's geographic location meant that Polish-Romanian relations were also of great importance in the event of a Poland versus Germany war. Should a war with Germany have occurred, Poland counted on "benevolent neutrality" – the use of Romanian harbours (Constanța) for reloading purposes, rail, road and air transit for war materials, as well as deliveries, especially gasoline (Łossowski 1995, 168-169) (Polskie Siły Zbrojne w drugiej wojnie światowej 1951, 106-107). As for during the war approach, the concept of Polish authorities evacuation to the West crossing the Romanian territory emerged. Considered in the field of historical science as well as in international law, this issue provides separate considerations that go beyond this article.

Although the political events unfolding between the fall of 1938 to the summer of 1939 weakened the Polish-Romanian alliance rather than strengthening it (mainly due to the extremely different policy and territorial program

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both countries had towards Hungary), the Polish government expectations, counting on Romania's benevolent neutrality, building its political and military concepts on this attitude, remained. The first Romanian authorities declarations suggested such a position. It was on September 4th, 1939, when the Romanian government issued a message welcomed by the Polish government, about the fact that "Romania wants to maintain its current position". In the following days, however, German diplomacy took very active steps to isolate the defending Poland. A special role in these activities was played by the Third Reich envoy in Bucharest, Wilhelm Fabricius, who demanded Romanian authorities to provide strict observance of neutrality, a closure of the border and an absolute internment of those Polish soldiers who would find themselves in Romania", as well as a prevention of the military materials transit to Poland. Romanian authorities did not bow to German blackmail and did not change their official position on the war material transit for Poland through Romanian territory (Skrzypek 1989, 138-139) (*Polskie Siły Zbrojne w drugiej wojnie światowej* 1959, 14-16) (Michowicz 1999, 112-113).

The Romanian "friendly border", the area of the so-called Eastern Lesser Poland (Małopolska), adjacent to the Polish-Romanian border, bounded by the rivers Stryi and Dniester from the North-West, covering approximately the area of three voivodeships: Lviv, Tarnopol and Stanislaviv (located farthest to the South-East) received an utmost importance from the Polish authorities. The importance of this area for the Polish Republic defence was emphasized in July 1939, by Colonel Stanisław Kopański in a note on Poland's strategic and political position. Kopański pointed out the strategic importance that Lviv - Stanislaviv - Śniatyń railway line has, connecting Poland with Romania. According to the Polish officer, keeping Eastern Lesser Poland in a Polish possession would also have other advantages – it would prevent the USSR from entering the war (from the Polish *raison d'état*, point of view the USSR neutrality in the ongoing conflict was optimal) and it would make it difficult for the Germans to use the Ukrainian minority card. In the realities of the ongoing military operations, the importance of having this territory was also influenced by a number of other potential benefits: it could have

been a place of military units reorganization and replenishment, a place of aviation relocation, a place of residence and functioning for some Polish military and administrative authorities, and finally a typical front line base. On the other hand, in terms of materials and personnel, it should be borne in mind that the Polish mobilization and military base was located on the right bank of the Vistula and its loss, despite the strategic importance of South-Eastern Poland, could not be compensated in the long run (Włodarkiewicz 2014, 27-28).

The above assumptions were reflected in the operational plan "West" – developed only in the first months of 1939, i.e. the operational plan of the Polish Army in the event of war with Germany. The plan assumed that Germany would attack Poland with four great operational formations in four main operational directions: from East Prussia, Pomerania, Lower Silesia and Upper Silesia. The Polish defence line was along the Polish borders. In this situation, the Commander-in-Chief, Marshal Edward Rydz-Śmigły decided to play the fight in three phases: 1) in the first, to fight the battle in defensive positions, covering the areas of the country necessary to carry out general mobilization and develop forces, 2) in the second phase of operations, to stop the defensive battle and withdraw in the general South-East direction, 3) the third phase was intended to conduct defence activities based on river valleys and mountain ranges of Central and Eastern Poland. The second, and even more so, the third phase of operations were never prepared in a staff-like manner, and on the basis of individual reports, it can be concluded that the Polish Supreme Command was quite flexible in its approach to later scenarios of military operations. It was assumed there would be both the possibility of keeping the Vistula line longer, but also the necessity of a deeper departure of the troops towards the South-East. However, the withdrawal general concept was clear, assigning the Army "Kraków", based on the fortifications of Upper Silesia, the role of a pivot, enabling the withdrawal of the most advanced Polish armies – "Poznań" and "Pomorze". Finding itself in the war planning stage, the Polish Supreme Command acknowledged that they should give the area - to the German army, after the border battle but it was not able to predict the depth of the withdrawal and the detailed course of hostilities after departing from the starting positions. Nevertheless, the attitude towards

the retreat axis South-Eastern general direction indicated the South-East Poland and the Polish-Romanian border strategic importance for the future hostilities phases planning. (Abraham 1972, 358-359) (Porwit 1983a, 78-80) (Polskie Siły Zbrojne w drugiej wojnie światowej 1951, 277-281).

The first days of the Polish Campaign had already shown that the Polish operational plan was unfeasible, given the German military numerical and especially technical advantage (air domination and effective use of armored weapons). On September 2nd, the Germans made a deep breach between the "Łódź" and "Kraków" armies, and the Commander-in-Chief agreed to "Kraków" Army withdrawal for fear of tearing down the front. Thus, the formation that was to play a pivotal role while saving itself from the encirclement, broke the front and made the Polish operational plan obsolete.

The Romanian bridgehead concept

There are no direct sources when the Commander-in-Chief began to consider making the decision to withdraw the Polish Army to South-Eastern Poland, but from various reports it can be concluded that this took place between September 4 and 6. Years later, somewhere in September, Colonel/General Stanisław Kopański recalled that he had heard Colonel Tadeusz Klimecki (both of them held managerial positions with the Commander-in-Chief Staff) saying that the Commander-in-Chief had anticipated a general retreat towards the Romanian border (Kopański 1989, 164-165). Perhaps this should be combined with General Kazimierz Sosnkowski's suggestions, who, in an early September campaign was out of assignment, but who was also one of the most prominent representatives of the Polish generals at that time. In talks with Rydz-Śmigły on September 3rd 4th and 6th, Sosnkowski, suggested that he would regroup the front and shift the axis of the operation to the Xouth, shorten the front, fortify the area of South-Eastern Poland (using the Dniester River and its tributaries) and shift the existing reserves and resources there (Sosnkowski 1988, 68-71). Rydz-Śmigły either listened to an experienced general or came to similar conclusions himself, as the situation at the front was unfavorable.

The final decision to withdraw troops to the area of South-Eastern Poland was made by Marshal

Edward Rydz-Śmigły on September 8, 1939. After more than a week of fighting, the Polish army was in constant retreat. After the lost border battle, all Polish armies left their original defensive positions, of which only the Army "Poznań" together with the depleted Army "Pomerania", so far not involved in the fight, had the opportunity to take the initiative and make an offensive turn towards the German 8th Army, marching towards Warsaw. However, this could not change the general strategic situation and the position of the Polish troops, which were either already defeated (the partially destroyed Reserve Army "Prusy") or were on a deep defensive, withdrawing and trying to avoid encirclement (the armies "Modlin", "Łódź", "Kraków"). On that day, the first Wehrmacht units (4th Panzer Division) reached Warsaw. The Polish Commander-in-Chief, in the face of the direct threat to Warsaw, moved the headquarters to Brest-on-the-Bug on September 7, and the government evacuated to Lutsk in Volhynia.

On September 8, late in the evening, Marshal Rydz Śmigły informed his staff about the concept of rolling up the front and evacuating to South-East Poland. It was mentioned in later reports, among others of the Chief of the Staff of the Commander-in-Chief, General Waclaw Stachiewicz (he himself was still in Warsaw at that time) or the then Colonel Stanisław Kopański. Moreover, the simultaneous decision on the aggressive turn of the "Poznań" Army towards the German 8th Army was to play, from the Commander-in-Chief's point of view, a mainly auxiliary role for the evacuation of the remaining Polish troops to the South-East, delaying the outflanking movements of the Wehrmacht (Kopański 1989, 177).

In the following days, executive orders were issued for the concept of organizing resistance in South-Eastern Poland. On September 10, the Staff of the Commander-in-Chief developed the "Plan of focusing in the Eastern Lesser Poland" area, which was based on: "Keep Eastern Lesser Poland and the connection with the Western countries through Romania at all costs." The plan indicated that the area was optimal for defence in the West by the line of the San River, and from the West by a line from the Brest-on-the-Bug fortress, through Polesie to the border with the USSR. The plan rightly emphasized the great importance of the extreme Southern wing of the Polish army between the Carpathian range and the mouth of the San

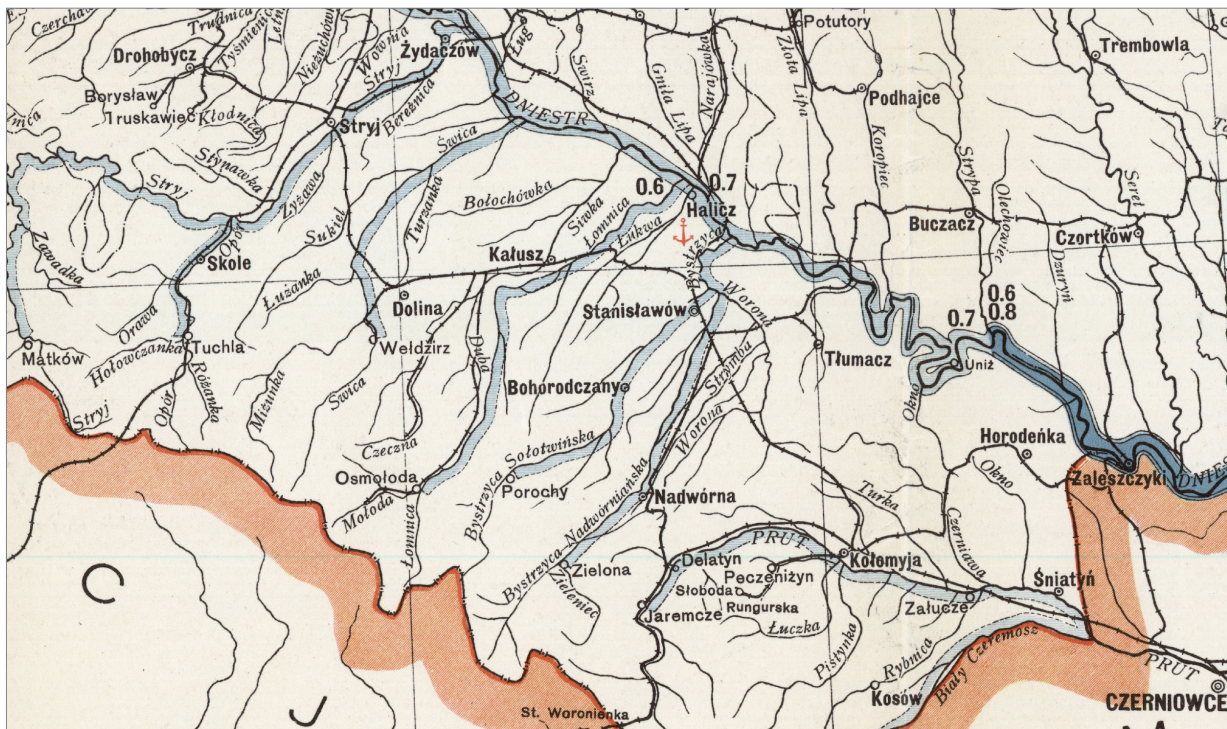


Figure 1 The area of the Romanian bridgehead bounded by the rivers Dniester and Stryi.
(Source: *Map of Polish waterways*, ed. T. Tillinger, Waterway Directorate in Warsaw, 1931)

River to the Vistula River. An important role was played by Polish troops defensive and delaying actions led by General Kazimierz Sosnkowski in this area, carried out as part of the Southern Front established on September 10, 1939. On September 11, on the basis of the above-mentioned plan, "the own forces concentration Guidelines in the South" were developed. This document partially contained orders and decisions issued the day before (*Polskie Siły Zbrojne w drugiej wojnie światowej 1959*, 185-189).

On September 13, General Sosnkowski's report from September 12, which presented the situation on the Southern Front as "extremely difficult", arrived at the Commander-in-Chief headquarters (moved in the meantime from Brest-on-the-Bug to Włodzimierz Wołyński). The report showed that the German forces were trying to outflank Sosnkowski's forces, gaining a free way to Lviv. In this situation, it became clear that the defence area indicated in the September 11 order was unrealistic. In response, the Commander-in-Chief issued on September 13 "General Guidelines for Action in Eastern Lesser Poland", limiting the defence area in South-Eastern Poland to a "bridgehead" based on the Romanian Border, limited by the lines of the Dniester and Stryi rivers. It was an area of approximately 15,000

square kilometers (about 90% of the Stanislawiv voivodeship). Moreover, the isolated garrisons of Lviv and Przemyśl were to be defended to the end. Of great importance, not only strategic, but also psychological and symbolic too, was the validation of the first of these cities, the capital of South-East Poland, which gained the name "*Leopolis Semper Fidelis*" over the centuries (including the years 1918-1920).

In this way, on September 13th, the strict Romanian bridgehead concept was created, known for the Polish troops final defence area. In his memoirs, The Commander-in-Chief's Chief of Staff emphasizes that the concept of the Romanian bridgehead should not be associated with the evacuation of the Polish authorities to Romania. On the contrary, the Commander-in-Chief Concept assumed the creation of a kind of fortified area in which the Polish army, strengthened by troops departing from Central and Northern Poland, was to await the results of the French offensive on the Western Front, planned for September 16 (Stachiewicz 1989, 73-74).

Organization of defence in the Romanian bridgehead

The intention to base the defence on the Romanian bridgehead required the organization



of the armed forces in this area. On September 13, the Commander-in-Chief gave an order to General Kazimierz Fabrycy, the then current commander of the Army "Karpaty"/the Army "Małopolska" (whose previous role was largely taken over by General Kazimierz Sosnkowski and his Southern Front) to go to the Stanislaviv-Stryi region, to recreate the Army "Karpaty" and the organization of defence. General Gustaw Paszkiewicz became Fabrycy's deputy. Two operational groups were subordinated to General Fabrycy: "Stryj" (General Stefan Dembiński), which was to organize defence along the Stryj River, and "Dniestr" (General Maksymilian Milan-Kamski), which was to organize defence along the Dniester River.

Originally, the forces at Paszkiewicz's disposal were very few. The most serious formations, 3-4 divisions and a motorized cavalry brigade operated within the Southern Front between Przemyśl and Lviv, i.e. West of the designated area, and the question of their arrival remained questionable. In the area of the Romanian bridgehead there were only de facto forces of the "Stryj" Operational Group (the size of a reinforced infantry division), but without artillery. The potentially greatest chance for a quick strengthening of the defence was the inclusion of several smaller groups operating to the West and North-West and the formation of new troops in backup centers, located in large numbers in the Eastern part of the Lviv and Stanislaviv voivodeships. In the Corps District VI Command area (territorial administrative district in the Polish Army) based in Lviv, there were about 40,000 partially armed soldiers, of whom about 15 infantry battalions were to be formed. A small part of the Polish aviation also reached the Romanian bridgehead, but its activities were limited due to fuel and ammunition lack. The Polish Supreme Command had great hope for the war material first transports from France – between September 17 and 20, a transport with tanks, planes and ammunition was to arrive at the Romanian port in Galați (Dalecki 1989, 347-356) (Kopański 1989, 199-201) (Grzelak and Stańczyk 2005, 243) (Włodarkiewicz 2014, 81-92) (Moczulski 2009, 814-817) (Porwit 1983b, 58-64).

A positive circumstance for the Polish plans was a marked decrease in the German attack pace for the Southern section, during the third week of the war. This resulted from objective

difficulties (logistical problems, gasoline shortages for German armored units), but also from the of General Sosnkowski's effective action troops, above all, This talented commander, breaking through from the west towards Lviv, defeated the SS-Standarte "Germania" regiment in the Jaworów battle. The activity of the Polish troops and the increasing number of the Lviv garrison made it difficult for the German armored forces to operate in the deep hinterland of the Polish troops. In theory, this gave at least a few days to organize a strong defence on the Stryi River. So while Polish troops' general situation was generally bad in the third week of the war, and some of the Polish troops were either doomed to extermination (the Armies "Wielkopolska" and "Pomorze", ending the offensive on the Bzura River and trying to break through to Warsaw) or their fate was uncertain (the Northern Front, Army "Kraków" and Army "Lublin" operating in the Lubelskie Voivodeship), the partial stabilization in the Southern direction gave the Polish staff a glimmer of hope for the Romanian bridgehead implementation. This assessment of the situation was shared by the French Mission head, General Louis Faury, who sent the report to Paris, in this spirit (Kopański 1989, 202-203).

On the morning of September 17, fulfilling the provisions of the secret protocol to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of August 23, 1939, six Soviet armies crossed the Polish Eastern border, making the proverbial "stab in the back" of the still fighting Poland. The Polish Eastern border was manned primarily by the Border Protection Corps (Korpus Ochrony Pogranicza, KOP) weak formations, hence the local attempts to defend them could only be delayed. In addition, the Soviet troops used disinformation in many places, claiming that they were coming to Poland to help, and some Polish commanders, wanting to spare soldiers or believing in Soviet assurances, laid down their arms without a fight. The Commander-in-Chief, Marshal Rydz-Śmigły, gave a significant order: "Do not fight the Bolsheviks, except in the event of an attack on their part and an attempt to disarm the troops." Poland also did not take advantage of the possibility to declare a state of war with the USSR (which would be beneficial in the light of international law) and gave up asking Romania for allied aid despite the occurrence of *casus foederis* (which, in turn,



did not make sense in Poland's position view). The President, the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Commander-in-Chief, staying near the border with Romania, crossed the Polish-Romanian border on September 17-18 with the intention of transit to France and continue the war alongside their allies. The internment of the Polish authorities in Romania, as noted, is a separate topic, repeatedly discussed in the literature and going beyond the considerations of this article. Polish military units, which were to defend the Romanian bridgehead mostly crossed the borders with Romania and Hungary on the orders of the Commander-in-Chief. Until September 20, the Red Army captured the area of Romanian bridgehead (Moczulski 2009, 841-861).

Today we cannot fully say whether the Polish authorities expected Soviet aggression. In Commander-in-Chief's Chief of Staff's opinion, General Waclaw Stachiewicz, "the crossing of the border by the Soviet troops was a complete surprise for both the Supreme Command and the government. Foreign missions were also completely surprised" (Stachiewicz 1989, 75). One cannot fully agree with the latter statement in particular - as a result of the German diplomat's actions in Moscow, Hans von Herwarth, who passed information about the pact content to an American colleague, Moscow's intentions were known in the capitals of powers. In one form or another, German indiscretions went to Polish diplomats (Kornat 2020, 87-120). On the other hand, even the conviction or certainty about the Soviet aggression could not change much in the behavior of the Polish civil and military authorities, which were not able to conduct a war on two fronts, but were also not able to prevent Soviet aggression.

Conclusions

At the end of this article, it is worth considering the question regarding the extent to which the political and military concept of the September 1939 Romanian bridgehead had any chance of being implemented. Despite the more than 80 years passage since the outbreak of World War II, this issue has still not been unequivocally assessed, at least by Polish historians.

Undoubtedly, the intention to base the burden of Polish defence in South-Eastern Poland, revised

later as a narrower concept of the Romanian bridgehead, was based on several analogous examples from the past World War. An example is the Yser Front in Belgium (keeping a scrap of Belgium under the control of Belgian troops, based on France) or the Romanian Front (based on Russia). Polish politicians and the Supreme Command counted on Romania's benevolent neutrality, the possibility of arms deliveries and transit through its territory, and perhaps even – again using the analogy of World War I – the soldiers transport in a changing situation, in favor of the geopolitical situation. Unquestionably, several objective factors could work to Poland's advantage: the deteriorating weather (especially important in the South-Eastern Poland Roads poor condition), the possibility of guerrilla operations at the rear of the German army, reconstruction of the military units in the "Polish side of the front" backup centers. Of course, Polish decision-makers counted on Allies' active attitude, the French offensive in the West (which would force the Germans to dislocate some of their forces from Poland to defend the Western border), of war materials transports, the allied air force and navy activities. With these assumptions, many respected Polish historians (Leszek Moczulski, Pawel Wieczorkiewicz) do not exclude the chances of success to lean "back" on the Romanian border¹.

However, the disadvantages brought by such a concept should also be pointed out. First of all, the World War I examples cannot be compared to the situation in 1939. Romania and Belgium were able to keep some or even a scrap of their territory based on an allied country fighting side by side as part of the alliance (even ignoring the positional nature of World War I). In 1939, Polish-Romanian relations were deprived of this component. Despite the Romanians' generally loyal attitude and the Romanian Prime Minister Armand Călinescu's nobility and courage, who did not succumb to German pressure (and soon was murdered by a member of the Iron Guard), Romania was neither politically stable, nor even one that guaranteed benevolent neutrality in unpredictable future in 1939. Of course, Romania's future involvement on

¹ On this subject, Wieczorkiewicz writes: "Hipoteza o szansie utrzymania 'przyczółka rumuńskiego' jest zatem na tyle prawdopodobna, że wymaga poważnego przebadania", zob. P. Wieczorkiewicz, *Rozważania o kampanii 1939 roku* [in:] *Polski wiek XX: II wojna światowa*, Warszawa 2010, p. 15.

the Third Reich's side was largely influenced by the German domination in Central and Eastern Europe, but a very important factor of this domination was break-up in 1939. Even taking into account that the Poles could stay in the Romanian bridgehead for some time.

In addition, there was a lot of criticism on the Romanian bridgehead concept, as early as September 1939. The Polish ambassador to France, Juliusz Łukasiewicz, expressed his doubts. Despite the fact that the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces, General Maurice Gamelin, was a supporter of the withdrawal of Polish troops to South-Eastern Poland (not even to the Romanian bridgehead). He pointed out that such a situation may result in the Soviet troops entry into North-East Poland abandoned territories and for Polish troops grouped in a relatively small area, in a exposure to harassing attacks by aviation (Skrzypek 1989, 135-136). The list of this type of concern can be extended. First of all, the military significance of the Polish redoubt would be limited. To a large extent, deprived of air force and armored forces with a limited number of

weapons and ammunition, it could only perform defensive functions, and thus be blocked by relatively small German forces. There were very little prospects that any larger Polish formations would be able to reach the area, except for, maybe, the 10th Cavalry Brigade (motorized), reserve and fortress units from the North, the mobile cavalry groups. German diplomatic pressure on Romania, significantly limited them., even if it did not completely block Poland's transit and purchasing possibilities. Finally, South-East Poland region, and the Romanian bridgehead in particular, are agricultural areas, devoid of industrial centers, and, in addition, inhabited by a hostile or at least reluctant Ukrainian national minority (the majority in this area). And so, all the above considerations must be based on two sine qua non conditions - a situation in which there is no Soviet aggression against Poland, and there is a French offensive in the West. Without these conditions, the concept of the Romanian bridgehead could only be what it actually became – an illusory concept in a war in which Poland was doomed to defeat.

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