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**INTEGRATING EAST CENTRAL EUROPE:
THE POLISH-CZECHOSLOVAK PLANS AND THE OPPOSITION OF THE
GREAT POWERS, 1939-1945**

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Abstract

During the Second World War there was great interest and enthusiasm among the Polish exile communities in Britain and the United States in the possibility of a federated East Central Europe after the war, which would ultimately join with other regional federations to form a European union. The first step in trying to bring this about was an agreement between the Polish and Czechoslovak governments in exile in London which was concluded in January 1942. This attempt proved to be abortive since the Czechoslovaks placed greater value on friendship with the Soviet Union than close association with the Poles. The Soviets were implacably opposed to the idea of a federation on their western borders, and the British government's support crumbled in the face of Soviet and United States' opposition. Post-war Soviet dominance in East Central Europe killed the émigrés' dream of unity for the region, but the ideas survived and ultimately bore fruit in East Central Europe's membership of the European Union.

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The German attack on Poland on 1 September 1939 was followed just over two weeks later by a Soviet invasion from the East. This joint aggression was a consequence of the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 23 August 1939, which also provided for the absorption of Polish territory by the two aggressors.¹ Some 90,000 Polish troops and some civilians were interned, only temporarily in most cases, in Romania, Hungary and Lithuania after escaping over the borders. With the help of diplomatic missions, and in some cases on their own initiative, a large proportion of them escaped from Romania and Hungary and travelled overland to France through Yugoslavia and Italy or by sea to Marseilles. On arrival they found that a Polish Government-in-Exile had been established under Article 24 of the Polish Constitution of 1935, under the premiership of General Władisław Sikorski.

When Germany attacked France in May 1940 Sikorski had under his command some 80,000 soldiers and around 7,500 members of the Polish Air Force. Around 20,000 of these soldiers were evacuated from the beaches of Dunkirk or from French west coast ports, and sailed to Britain where ultimately they formed part of the First Polish Army Corps. Add to these some 3,000 Polish civilians, mainly family members of military personnel or government employees, and a small number of servicemen who managed to find their way to Britain via the Iberian peninsula and

¹ The cost in human casualties and suffering of the three weeks of the campaign was enormous. Estimates suggest that Poland's losses were 200,000 men killed or wounded, 400,000 taken prisoner by the Germans and 230,000 by the Soviets. In addition some one and a half million Poles were deported to Siberia and northern Russia in 1940 and 1941 and hundreds of thousands more taken as slave labourers to Germany.

other routes. On arrival they found that Sikorski had set up his government at the invitation of Winston Churchill. Sikorski's first priority was to offer as much military assistance as possible to the Allied cause. His second was to make every effort to gain the release of Polish soldiers and civilian deportees who were languishing in camps and prisons in the Soviet Union. His third ambition was to negotiate with other East Central European governments in exile, such as the Czechoslovak, a form of association (called variously a federation or confederation) which would be the nucleus of an East Central European federation after the defeat and withdrawal of Germany from the Central European region.²

The idea that a new order should be established in East Central Europe to enhance the region's security, its economic development and its social progress was very widely shared among Polish and other Central East European exiles in Britain and the United States. A number of organizations and pressure groups were established by the exiles to promote this idea. More important in this respect, however, was the wholehearted commitment of Sikorski's government to create a new supranational authority in Eastern Europe to protect the region from the imperialism of its neighbours, Germany and the Soviet Union. From the Polish perspective, this regional federation would comprise one of the building blocks in a post-war federation of the whole of Europe. It was thought safer to construct a united Europe out of a number of regional federations than to create, in the first instance, an all-European entity. There were uncertainties about Germany's post-war position, in particular the possibility that through its size and economic strength Germany would exercise a dominating influence over any all-European federation. It was therefore better to consolidate the power of East Central Europe first, leaving the problem of Germany to be solved by Western Europe and the Great Powers. All that the states of East Central Europe could do initially was to build up their collective economic and military strength to try to deter any future German ambitions in their region.

² Studies of the consequences of the dual attack and the subsequent re-settlement in France and Britain are to be found in: Józef Garliński, *Poland in the Second World War*, London, Macmillan, 1985, 25; John Erickson, 'The Red Army's March into Poland, September 1939', in Keith Sword ed., *The Soviet Takeover of the Polish Eastern Provinces 1939-1941*, Basingstoke, Macmillan in association with the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 1991, 20-22; Keith Sword, with Norman Davies and Jan Ciechanowski, *The Formation of the Polish Community in Great Britain, 1939-1950*, London, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 1989, 37; Malcolm J. Proudfoot, *European Refugees 1939-1952: A Study in Forced Population Movement*, Evanston IL, Northwestern University Press, 1956, 35

Although the Polish government's long-term objective was to create an East European federation, this would be impossible until all the states of the region had reclaimed their independence and were free to decide on their future. Meanwhile, however, some progress could be made in this direction by the forging of a close association between Poland and Czechoslovakia, on the one hand, and Greece and Yugoslavia on the other, through their respective governments-in-exile in London. Although there was a very strong disposition on the Polish side to reach agreement with the Czechoslovaks, the latter's response was, for a number of reasons, far more ambivalent. One of the major sources of this ambivalence lay in the attitude of the Czechoslovak President, Edvard Beneš. By contrast, Sikorski remained, from his assumption of power in September 1939 to his premature death in July 1943, totally committed to the cause of East Central European unity based on a federation between Poland and Czechoslovakia. His so-called *éminence grise*, Józef Retinger, claimed that he had been instrumental in converting Sikorski to the cause of federalism in the late 1930s and was, according to Łaptos, the '*de facto* author of what was called in émigré circles, the Sikorski Plan'.³ Retinger's own conversion to the cause of European unity dates from at least the early-1920s, when he was influenced by the Englishmen Arthur Capel and E.D.Morel. He remained loyal to this 'religion', as he called it, for the rest of his life, working unceasingly and in different contexts for the achievement of this ideal.⁴ Hugh Dalton, who knew both Sikorski and Retinger, commented that Retinger was completely in the Prime Minister's confidence.

Whatever the precise influence of Retinger, there is little doubt that Sikorski was expressing federalist views from the Autumn of 1939 onwards, urging a federation of East Central Europe within a federation of Europe as a whole.⁵ In an interview for *Le Petit Parisien* in the Spring of 1940 Sikorski observed that 'one of the most certain causes of the terrible disaster which has struck Warsaw and Prague is to be found in the disagreements which have divided the Slav nations in the past'.

³ Józef Łaptos, 'Józef Retinger, "le père d'ombre" de l'Europe: le rôle de Józef Retinger et de ses réseaux personnels dans les débuts de la construction européenne', in G.Bossuat, dir., *Inventer l'Europe: Histoire nouvelle des groupes d'influence et des acteurs de l'unité européenne*, Brussels, PIE-Peter Lang SA, 2003, 181

⁴ Polish Social and Cultural Centre, Polish Library (henceforth POSK), Retinger Papers, 1280/Rps, Box file II, Nr.24a, 'My Part in the Movement for the Unity of Europe'; Łaptos, 81

⁵ Ben Pimlott ed., *The Second World War Diary of Hugh Dalton 1940-1945*, London, Jonathan Cape in association with the London School of Economics, 1986, 130, 488; *Wiadomości Polskie*, 15 November, 1940, in Walter Lipgens and W.Loith eds., *Documents on the History of European Integration*, 4 vols., 1, *Continental Plans for European Union 1939-1945*, Berlin and New York, Walter de Gruyter 1985, 625-28

These could be overcome by an economic and political union of the states of East Central Europe, entering in due course into a united Europe.⁶ The creation of a 'politically solid block of Slav states extending from the Baltic to the Black Sea and the Adriatic' was hardly a novelty in Polish thinking. Indeed, it had solid historical experience behind it dating from the Commonwealth period in Polish history; in fact Retinger referred to it as reminiscent of Jagiellonian thinking. It differed in two respects from this tradition, however. It extended the federation from the northern to the southern part of the East Central European region taking in the Balkans, and it attempted to create this block in close co-operation with the Czechoslovaks. Such a 'cohesive and concordant co-operation' of states according to Sikorski, 'would arrest the German drive to the East'.⁷

It would be misleading to imply that Sikorski and Retinger were the sole driving forces in the Polish Government-in-Exile behind the federalist campaign. The Government was united in its objective although there were differences of opinion about tactics. And, as we shall see, significant differences might have emerged between Sikorski and his colleagues if he had survived the fatal plane crash in July 1943. Until his death, however, Sikorski presided over a government united in its ambition to advance the cause of federalism in East Central Europe. Edward Raczyński, the Polish Ambassador in London and later Foreign Minister, was totally committed to the unity of Europe. For him it was necessary 'to construct a centre of power in Europe (a block in the intermarium area) ... for maintaining the European balance free from hegemony and oppression'. The Polish-Czechoslovak confederation, he believed, owing to its economic importance and geographical position, would act as a centre of attraction for other nations in the region.⁸ These ideas were supported by General Kazimierz Sosnkowski, the deputy Prime Minister, and the Foreign Minister August Zaleski, before their resignation in July 1941 over Sikorski's conclusion of an agreement with the Soviet Union. Stanisław Mikołajczyk, who succeeded Sikorski as Prime Minister, also committed his

⁶ Public Record Office, now National Archives (henceforth NA), FO 371 24480, C1972/1972/55 2 February 1940

⁷ Łaptos, p.181; Piotr S. Wandycz, 'Recent Traditions of the Quest for Unity: Attempted Polish-Czechoslovak and Yugoslav-Bulgarian Confederations 1940-1948', in Jerzy ŁLukaszewski ed., *The People's Democracies after Prague: Soviet Hegemony, Nationalism, Regional Integration?*, Bruges, de Tempel, 1970, 54; J.Łaptos and M. Misztal, *American Debates on Central European Union, Documents of the American State Department*, Brussels, PIE-Peter Lang, 2002, 30

⁸ NA FO371 31091 C464/464/55, 11 January 1942

government to the federal cause.⁹ Yet, there is abundant evidence to show that Sikorski, with Retinger, was the driving force behind the policy and that it was he, along with Beneš for the Czechoslovaks, who controlled the Polish-Czechoslovak negotiations, setting out the principles and the broad strategy to be adopted. Sikorski put the machine in motion and when it ground to a halt (or when he allowed it to grind to a halt because of other preoccupations) it was he who was instrumental, with Beneš, in getting it going again. Behind Sikorski was the British government, until it became inexpedient for it to continue its support, and behind Beneš was the looming presence of the Soviet Union, which ultimately wrecked the Poles' ambitions.

If Sikorski and Beneš were, as we believe, the decisive figures in the negotiations, it is natural to trace the ebb and flow of the Polish-Czechoslovak relationship from their particular perspectives. There was little natural sympathy between them, however, and it is probable that Sikorski would have found it much easier to deal with Jan Masaryk, the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister, whose western sympathies brought him closer to Sikorski, whereas his chief tended to look towards Moscow for political support, much to the irritation of the Poles. Sikorski commented that he could collaborate with Masaryk 100 per cent but only 52 per cent with Beneš. The Poles also believed that Beneš' commitment to a close association with the Poles was superficial and based on expediency. Zaleski, who had worked with Beneš in Geneva in the late 1920s, commented that Beneš was only paying lip service to the idea of federation to impress the British government which was in favour of the idea. When he and his Czech National Committee were seeking recognition from France and Britain as the Government of Czechoslovakia in the early stages of the war, he was prepared to agree in principle to a close association with the Polish government-in-exile.¹⁰ So long as the Soviet Union remained the ally of Germany, Beneš saw the Poles and the British as his strongest support. After the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 Beneš believed that his government's position was strengthened since the option of an alliance with the Soviets opened up. While the restored Soviet-Polish relationship (after July 1941) remained relatively strong, Beneš continued to negotiate with the Poles for an association between the two countries. When it weakened in 1942 and 1943 he

⁹ *The Polish Fortnightly Review*, 80, 15 November 1943, Speech of Polish Prime Minister S Mikołajczyk to the National Council, 27 July 1943

¹⁰ NA, FO371 26376 C5959/6/12, Letter from Sir.C.Dormer to W. Strang, 30 May 1941

distanced himself from them, and concentrated instead on trying, in the end successfully, to conclude an alliance with the Kremlin. This led to bitter complaints from the Poles that Beneš was an opportunist. That he was misguided Beneš himself acknowledged at the end of his life, when he rued putting his trust in Stalin.¹¹

However, even before the division between the Poles and Czechoslovaks widened to the point of irreparability, there were significant differences in policy between the two governments, and between the ideas for a Polish-Czechoslovak association of Sikorski and Beneš. They differed as to both ends and means. While both shared the objective of raising a barrier to future German expansionism they differed in their other aims, notably in relation to the Soviet Union. They also differed in their preferred methodologies for containing Germany. It was these differences in approach which contributed, almost as much as the machinations of the Kremlin, to the failure of the Poles to achieve their federalist ambitions for East Central Europe. To give an example, they asked themselves which was the best form of association for achieving the objective of containing Germany. For Sikorski it was clear that only a tightly integrated union of states, a *Bundesstaat* on the model of the United States federal government rather than a *Staatenbund* (or confederation), would be adequate for the task. Such a federal model was not alien to Polish experience since the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was built on not dissimilar foundations. In Sikorski's view, the government of the Polish-Czechoslovak federation would have the character of a political, military, customs and monetary union, with common institutions (for example, it would have single ministers for foreign affairs, defence and economic matters and even a single Assembly) as well as a common economic policy.¹² Sikorski wrote to Beneš on 3 December, 1940 that the Union must begin with 'total solidarity in war and peace', and this required the relinquishing of national sovereignty in the common interest.

¹¹ Stephen E. Medvec, 'Poland and Czechoslovakia: Can they find that they need each other?', *The Polish Review*, XXXVI, no. 4, 1991, 458; Piotr S. Wandycz, *Czechoslovak-Polish Confederation and the Great Powers 1940-1943*, Bloomington, IN., Indiana University Publications, 1956, 40-41; Helen Lawrence Scanlon comp., 'European Governments in Exile', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Library, Washington DC, 25 January 1943, 4; Lawrence L. Barrell, 'Poland and East European Union 1939-1945', *The Polish Review*, III, nos. 1-2, (1958), 114

¹² Barrell, p.91; *The Polish Review*, II, no. 35, 5 October 1942; Ladislav Feierabend, 'A Plan for Central Europe', *The Polish Review*, I, no.14, 1 December 1941; Wandycz, 'Recent Traditions ...', pp. 45-6

In emphasising the high degree of integration required, Sikorski drew attention to the federation's political character. He was not so enthusiastic about an economic union. A common economic policy, which he favoured owing to its potential for improving the standard of living in the region, did not imply a customs free zone, at least initially, since the Polish economy was severely damaged by the war and would need a period of reconstruction. Moreover, the Czechoslovak economy was more diversified than the Polish, and its manufacturing base was far stronger. Consequently the Polish economy, immediately after the war, would be unable to compete with the flow of manufactured articles from the less damaged Czechoslovak economy. Therefore, in Sikorski's view, tariffs or other controls on imports from Czechoslovakia would have to remain, at least in the early stages of the federation. The Poles stressed, rather, the necessity for the closest possible political unity. When it became clear that such a tight integration would be to Poland's benefit owing to its larger population and therefore greater representation in common institutions, the Polish negotiators were sensitive enough to suggest modifications in representation which would favour the Czechoslovaks. Wszelaki commented that the Polish cabinet had made, 'as its *point de départ* to abandon any idea of dominating' the Czechoslovaks. Hence they favoured the enlargement of the community in due course to eliminate the supposed fear of the predominance of a single country.¹³

Beneš, though employing the rhetoric of unity, was quite far from Sikorski's position. His secretary, Edvard Táborský, commented that Beneš conceived the idea of a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation and put it to Sikorski in November 1939. Táborský added that Sikorski's conception was the same, but this is doubtful. In referring to the necessity for 'the closest degree of co-operation between small states' and arguing that it would be in the interest of East Central Europe to create 'a large political formation of a federative type, militarily powerful, with great political, economic and cultural possibilities', Beneš' language may have sounded similar to Sikorski's.¹⁴ But Mastny asserts, convincingly, that Beneš 'never contemplated more than a loose association', a kind of Central European Commonwealth on the analogy of the British Commonwealth, in fact a customs union with additional co-operation in foreign and trade policies. Hubert Ripka, a Foreign Ministry official and acting

¹³ Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum (henceforth PISM), Wszelaki Papers, KOL 39/35, 5 March 1941; *The Polish Review*, III, no. 1, 4 January 1943

¹⁴ Edvard Beneš, 'The New Central Europe', *Journal of Central European Affairs*, I, no. 1, (1941), 2

Foreign Minister for a time during the war, described this as ‘a conservative association of independent states’. Beneš called this a *sui generis* confederation, stressing the point that its political and legal framework would not necessarily resemble any of the already known forms of state confederations.¹⁵ In preferring a confederation Beneš was conscious of the disparity in numbers between Poles and Czechoslovaks which would lead the former to dominate in a common parliament. Hence he was only prepared to allow a ‘relatively supple machinery’ to permit evolution in future ‘towards a union which might become closer if any need arises’. Meanwhile the sovereignty of each state should remain intact except perhaps in the economic field, where the Czech economy would have an advantage post-war. In a memorandum to American Under-Secretary of State Sumner Welles in March 1940 Beneš proposed that the putative confederation would have to be based on an economic foundation composed of a customs union and a common trade and financial policy.¹⁶

In laying down the main lines of policy in political and military matters only a system of consultation between ministers was proposed. Nonetheless, it is worth recalling that in the perspective of the inter-war years this was in itself an advance since Beneš was proposing a foreign policy for the confederation which was ‘parallel in fundamental principles and directives’, and a coordination of state policies to ensure European peace and economic prosperity. Nor did this ‘conservative association’ preclude the possibility that in the future political questions might be resolved as the result of a ‘progressive evolution’ of forms of government in the light of experience.¹⁷ Sikorski accepted these reservations and, as we shall see later, conceded that the common institutions of the two states should reflect Czechoslovak preferences for a type of confederation. There were, however, a number of other serious and not-so-serious differences between the two sides which proved impossible to overcome. Among the former were the questions of frontiers and relations with the Soviet Union, among the latter doubts about the states to be included in a wider

¹⁵ Vojtech Mastny, ‘The Historical Experience of Federalism in East Central Europe’, *East European Politics and Societies*, 14, no. 1, (2000), 81; PISM Wszelaki papers, KOL 39/35, 5 March 1941; NA FO371 30827 C961/151/12 broadcast by Ripka 23 January 1942; NA FO 371, C12587/6/12, article by Beneš in *Daily Telegraph* ‘One Pillar of Future Peace in Central Europe’, 11 November 1941

¹⁶ Wandycz, *Czechoslovak-Polish Confederation*, p. 36

¹⁷ Wandycz, *Czechoslovak-Polish Confederation*, p. 36; NA, FO 371 30827 C961/151/12, broadcast by Hubert Ripka, 23 January 1942; PISM Polski Ruch Europejski, KOL 408/218, ‘The Basic Principles of the confederation between Poland and Czechoslovakia’ – draft presented by Czech delegates end 1941.

association of East Central European countries, the degree of support for the proposed association among the populations of Poland and Czechoslovakia, and the need to postpone any final decisions until that was clarified.

The Soviet Union became an increasingly important participant in the discussions about a new East Central Europe though she was slow to make her position clear. When she did, her intervention was decisive. She exercised her influence through discussions with Beneš, and by means of her growing hostility to the Polish government from early 1942 onwards. Sikorski's negotiations with the Soviet Union were constrained by some strong reservations among his government colleagues, the Polish exile community in Britain, and the personnel of the Polish Second Army Corps in North Africa and Italy. There was a wide body of opinion which believed that Sikorski should not have negotiated with the Soviets in July 1941, even though he was pressed hard to do so by the British Government, and that in the negotiations he made too many concessions and failed to demand that the Soviets accept the pre-1939 Polish eastern frontier. In advocating a federation of East Central Europe Sikorski offered the opinion that this would constitute a barrier to future German expansion and a bulwark on the western borders of the Soviet Union against German aggression. He argued that the federation would contribute to the peace and security of Europe, and of the Soviet Union too, by offering an alliance with the Kremlin against Germany. This, he believed, would meet the Soviet demand for 'friendly states at its western border'. There was no intention of re-creating the inter-war idea of a *cordon sanitaire*.¹⁸

However, Sikorski and his government could not help wondering whether the Kremlin would respond in a positive manner to Polish offers of friendship and co-operation. If she did not, what was to be done? In December 1940 Sikorski envisaged that if the Soviet Union defeated Germany it would attempt to bring about a communist revolution in Central Europe. Hence, a solid Polish-Czechoslovak block (a demonstration of the power of the union) was necessary to prevent the westward advance of the Soviets, the imposition of communism on both countries, the loss of independence of the East Central European states, and their isolation from European

¹⁸ *The Polish Review*, III, no. 1, 4 January 1943; Łaptos and Michtal, p. 50

affairs and from international trade.¹⁹ In contemplating this scenario Sikorski was quite confident in the support of Britain and the United States. He was sure that even if the Soviet Union were victorious it would be so weakened by its efforts that it would have to accept British-American domination, and yield to Western pressure over East Central Europe.²⁰ Moreover, Soviet domination of this region would not kill the desire of the states there to free themselves, and this would provide the Germans with the opportunity for intrigue and scheming, converting apparent Soviet strength into a source of weakness. All these arguments were addressed to the Czechoslovaks but it was inevitable that they would be reported to Moscow through the Soviet Ambassador in London.

From the perspective of the Kremlin the Poles' position was ambivalent. On the one hand they considered the confederation to be an advantage to the Soviets in that it formed a counterpoise to German power in Europe. On the other, they saw it as a barrier to Soviet expansion. Poland's refusal to negotiate on its eastern frontiers convinced the Kremlin of the Poles' expansionist ambitions, while the Poles themselves considered the demand for its pre-1939 frontiers (settled at the 1921 Treaty of Riga) a simple and just return to the status quo before Soviet aggression in the area. Sikorski himself was probably more flexible on this issue than many of his government colleagues, including his Foreign Minister, Raczyński. Beneš said at one point that both he and Sikorski knew that Poland would not be able to restore its pre-1939 frontier but that Sikorski could not admit this to his people.²¹ In public, though endorsing the Riga frontiers, Sikorski preferred to defer settlement of the issue in accordance with the Soviet-Polish treaty of 1941, which stipulated that consideration of frontier problems should be postponed until after the war.

The Foreign Office received a report from a Polish source in Washington outlining a proposal which Sikorski hoped to present to the Kremlin as a basis for negotiation. He would propose that Lithuania be incorporated in Poland while Poland would support a Soviet claim to Latvia and Estonia. The Polish-Soviet frontier would be settled on the basis of a modified Curzon Line with Lwów going to Poland and all Polish territory East of the Line going to the Soviet Union. An

¹⁹ Łaptos and Michtal, p.35; Wandycz, *Czechoslovak-Polish Confederation*, 41-42, letter from Sikorski to Beneš, 3 December 1940, and 87; NA, FO 371 24292 C13276/8531/12, 7 December 1940; Wandycz, 'Recent Traditions', pp.45-6

²⁰ Łaptos and Misztal, 51-2; Wandycz, *Czechoslovak-Polish Confederation*, 109

²¹ NA FO 371 32918 7 February 1942

exchange of populations would accompany this frontier arrangement. As compensation for Poland the Soviets would support Polish claims to East Prussia including Königsberg and perhaps other areas controlled by the Reich. Beneš confirmed this by reporting that the Russians seemed to be prepared to let Poland have East Prussia and even the German Baltic coast up to Stettin.²² This possibility was broadly consistent with Sarah Meiklejohn Terry's controversial argument, based on a memorandum sent by Sikorski to Roosevelt on 5 December, 1942, which suggested a westward movement of Poland's frontiers to control the mouth of the River Oder in compensation for the loss of the Riga frontier in the East. This strategy had a two-fold purpose: it would set the scene for friendly relations with the Soviet Union, and it would strengthen the foundations of the Polish-Czechoslovak confederation by guaranteeing a direct outlet to the Baltic Sea through the Oder waterway, with its concomitant economic advantages. It follows that if Sikorski had lived beyond July 1943 it is just possible that there might have been negotiations with the Soviet Union which, in return for Polish concessions on the Riga frontier, would have accepted a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation located further to the West.²³ However unlikely this seems given the intransigent Polish mood after Katyn, it cannot be ruled out completely. Yet one cannot be sure, as Walawender pointed out, whether the policy adumbrated in the documents was a realist one, actively pursued, or whether it reflected mere 'lofty ideals thought up in times of desperation'.²⁴ At this point it is difficult to see how Sikorski, assuming he was actively and determinedly pursuing such a policy, would have been able to persuade his colleagues in government of its wisdom.

Persuading Beneš of the wisdom of Polish policy towards the Soviet Union proved impossible. As early as November 1939 when Beneš was still counting on Polish help in gaining Allied recognition for his Czechoslovak committee, he insisted to Raczyński that Poland must give up all her territorial ambitions in the East beyond 'her strict ethnographic frontiers'. Later, after the German attack on the Soviet

²² NA FO 371 32918, 7 February 1942; FO 371 34564 C2296/258/G55, 22 February 1943

²³ Richard A. Walawender, 'The Polish Question during World War II – A review of recent literature', *The Polish Review*, XXX, no. 2, (1985), 215-221; Sarah Meiklejohn Terry, *Poland's Place in Europe: General Sikorski and the Origin of the Oder-Neisse Line 1939-1943*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983, *passim*

²⁴ Walawender, 217, quoting from a document in Anthony Polonsky ed., *The Great Powers and the Polish Question, 1941-1945: A Documentary Study in Cold War Origins*, London, London School of Economics, 1976; also 221

Union in June 1941, Beneš considered it tactically important for the Poles to make concessions on the frontier question and not leave negotiations until the Soviets re-occupied the territory they had taken in September 1939. Unlike Sikorski, Beneš always stressed that the Soviet Union would come out of the war victorious.²⁵ The necessity for Polish concessions reflected Beneš' view that Soviet acceptance of the proposed Polish-Czechoslovak confederation depended on agreement between Moscow and the Polish government on Poland's post-war Eastern frontiers. Without Soviet acceptance the confederation would not be feasible since, as he put it: 'There would either be friendship between the Polish-Czech Federation (sic) and Russia, or there will be no Polish-Czech Federation'. He confirmed this view to Ivan Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador to Britain, assuring him that an association with Russia would have priority over any other plans. This was exemplified in a conversation he had with Molotov in London on 9 June 1942, when he agreed that a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation would depend on the Poles agreeing to satisfy Soviet territorial demands. In return he gained Soviet recognition of the pre-Munich frontiers of Czechoslovakia, despite the fact that this issue had been reserved for settlement between the Poles and the Czechoslovaks.²⁶ There was irritation in the British Foreign Office at Beneš' action. In London's view Beneš had supported Soviet claims in effect against those of his own partner. Moreover, the United Kingdom had been careful to reserve its position on the Eastern frontiers of Poland and it assumed that Beneš would have adopted the same attitude.²⁷

Beneš took this position for a number of reasons. Firstly, he distrusted the Western powers after Munich and placed greater faith and reliance on Moscow's support. Not having had the Poles' experience with the Soviet Union in the previous two decades which had produced two wars and an occupation, Beneš had no reservations about seeking Soviet support. He was confident that there was no danger of Soviet interference in the domestic affairs of its smaller neighbours (the Soviet Union, said Hubert Ripka, 'will promote and ensure the existence of the small democratic countries in Europe' and Beneš agreed with this) and anticipated that an independent Czechoslovakia would have a non-Communist government and serve as

²⁵ Edward Raczyński, *In Allied London*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962, 46; NA FO 371 34334 C1020/206/12 12 January 1943, letter from Leo Amery on conversation with Beneš

²⁶ NA FO 371 32918 7 February 1942; FO 371 30827 C5813/151/12 8 June 1942; Wandycz, 'Recent Traditions', p. 51

²⁷ NA FO 371 30827 C5813/151/12 8 June 1942

a political bridge between East and West.²⁸ He did not believe that East Central Europe could or should be organized without the participation of the Soviet Union, and he was convinced that a successful barrier to the German *Drang nach Osten* could only be erected in association with the Soviet government. He did not wish to see Moscow isolated and marginalized from the affairs of Europe as it had been after the First World War since, without Soviet participation, German influence in East Central Europe would be restored. In other words, Beneš was not convinced that a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation on its own would be strong enough to counter-balance German economic and military power.²⁹ Hence the best outcome for the restoration of East European equilibrium would be an agreement between the Soviet Union and the Polish-Czechoslovak confederation which would produce ‘an anti-German outpost leaning on Russia’ A firmly-unified East would demonstrate to Germany that any imperialistic attempts in the region would be doomed to failure.³⁰

If the ‘real difficulty was Russia’ in the Polish-Czechoslovak relationship and hence the major obstacle to the successful achievement of a confederation between the two states, almost as important was the obstacle thrown up by the frontier question. In the early stages of Polish-Czechoslovak discussions Beneš was ‘bitterly outspoken about the guilt of Piłsudski and Colonel Beck’ who had to take the blame for bad Czechoslovak-Polish relations pre-war. The new Polish government of Sikorski was able to dissociate itself from Poland’s pre-war policies and from the mistakes of the previous regime, especially towards Czechoslovakia.³¹ In doing so they were hoping to begin with a clean slate. Unfortunately the highly sensitive question of Teschen (Cieszyn in Polish) inevitably obtruded itself and remained a stumbling block in Polish-Czechoslovak negotiations. Sikorski’s government, although repudiating the pre-war Polish government’s policies, could not agree to cede Teschen, which had been seized by Polish troops at the time of Munich, to Czechoslovakia. The Poles believed that this was justly Polish territory which had been wrongly awarded to the Czechs by a commission of the League of Nations in 1920. In the early stages of the Polish-Czechoslovak negotiations from 1939 to mid-

²⁸ Władysław W. Kulski, ‘The Anglo-Polish Agreement of August 25th, 1939: Highlight of my Diplomatic Career’, *The Polish Review*, XXI, nos. 1-2, (1976), 39-40; Wandycz, ‘Recent Traditions’, p.51; Łaptos and Michtal, p.49; NA FO 371 30827 C6731/151/12 3 July 1942

²⁹ NA FO 371 30827 C6731/151/12, 3 July 1942; Barrell, p.34

³⁰ Eduard Beneš, ‘The Organization of Postwar Europe’, *Foreign Affairs*, XX, no. 2, (1942), 229-31; Wandycz, ‘Recent Traditions’, p.41

³¹ Wandycz, *Czechoslovak-Polish Confederation*, 33-4

summer 1941 it was agreed to leave the Teschen dispute to one side while the proposed new confederal structure was being created.³² It was Sikorski who raised the issue again in June 1941, asking for a speedy resolution of the Teschen dispute to prevent its being a continuing source of tension and a reminder of the psychological mistakes made ‘by both parties’ between 1918-1938. Once the issue was raised Beneš’ had no option but to demand the pre-Munich frontiers. Furthermore, his self-esteem was injured by Sikorski’s reference to ‘mutual mistakes’ since Beneš had been in power in Czechoslovakia in the inter-war period and took this reference personally. Rather than accept the possibility of mutual mistakes he demanded that the ‘original fault’ must be established and ‘just retribution’ offered. A British Foreign Office minute regretted that Benes ‘refutes the slightest hint of criticism and claims to be universally right – this is wearing to his would-be allies’. This was not a good augury for Polish-Czechoslovak relations.³³ Indeed, during the remainder of 1941 and in 1942, as the Czechoslovak position in international relations strengthened, Beneš never wavered in demanding Teschen for the Czechs, and succeeded in the summer of 1942 in obtaining Soviet recognition of Czechoslovakia’s pre-Munich frontiers. In further negotiations with the Poles Beneš insisted that a proposed Polish-Czechoslovak treaty could not be signed unless the Teschen question was settled first, since he did not believe that there would be any will to solve the problem once the treaty was concluded. Polish suggestions for a condominium or arbitration were vetoed. Beneš’ preference was for a return to the pre-Munich position, with Teschen in Czechoslovak possession and the Poles continuing to maintain their claim to the territory.³⁴

The differences between the two sides on this politically sensitive issue were a major obstacle to an agreement on confederation. There were a number of other reservations, too, which illustrated the gap between the partners. For example, it was argued on the Polish side that a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation on its own would lack the economic and hence military potential to offer effective resistance to a revived Germany in East Central Europe. Consequently it would be necessary, the Poles believed, either to conclude a defensive alliance with Great Britain and other Western allies, or to enlarge the proposed confederation by the inclusion of some

³² Wandycz, ‘Recent Traditions’, 47

³³ NA FO 371 30827 C151/151/12, 6 October 1941, minute by Frank Roberts

³⁴ NA FO 371 30828 C12165/151/12 3 December 1942

other countries. In Wszelaki's opinion, most Poles would favour an association between the Polish-Czechoslovak confederation and Hungary, Lithuania and probably Romania. Leaving Hungary outside would create the risk that she would once again be attracted to Germany. As for Lithuania, the Poles were seeking some form of 'reinstated union'; for them it was an 'indispensable corollary' of a settlement with Czechoslovakia.³⁵ On a visit to Washington in December 1942 Sikorski told Lord Halifax, the British Ambassador, that he looked forward to a 'federate' bloc which would include Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Poland and possibly Hungary in close alliance with a Balkan bloc extending to and including Greece.³⁶

Beneš agreed that the Polish-Czechoslovak confederation should be enlarged and have a close relationship with a Balkan bloc but he disagreed about the membership of the northern association. He excluded Lithuania, being willing to consign all three Baltic States to the Soviet Union (Sikorski was prepared for Estonia and Latvia to fall into Soviet hands) and like Sikorski he tended to favour the inclusion of Romania. But Beneš disagreed with the Poles over the membership of Austria. The Poles felt that the latter would be a Trojan horse for German influence; the Czechoslovaks argued that if the Poles wanted to include Hungary it would be essential also to offer membership to Austria in order to strike a fair balance between industrial and agricultural interests, since the Czechs were conscious that the Poles and Hungarians could outvote them on crucial economic issues.³⁷

Two other issues divided Sikorski and Beneš. The first was Beneš' insistence in December 1942 that no final decisions about a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation should be taken until independence for the two countries had been restored and the electorate had had the chance to express its opinion – 'without the direct voice of the people and the constitutional institutions in each country, nothing final can be decided by a government-in-exile'.³⁸ This could have been an attempt by Beneš to play for time or it could have represented genuine uncertainty about public opinion in the Czechoslovak lands during the war. By contrast, the Polish government in London was in close touch with political parties, the underground government, and the Home

³⁵ PISM Wszelaki papers, KOL 39/35, address of Wszelaki to the Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA), 8 March 1941, 3-4; Eden's comment in reference to the inclusion of Lithuania was that 'Sikorski is wiser than most Poles, but doesn't learn much all the same', NA FO 371 31091 C12329/464/55 9 December 1942

³⁶ Łaptos and Misztal, 50; NA FO 371 31091 C12329/464/55 9 December 1942

³⁷ NA FO 371 26376, Lockhart to Eden 19 January 1941

³⁸ Barrell, 114

Army in Poland, and was convinced that public opinion supported the government's attempts to form a confederation with Czechoslovakia. Beneš' second reservation concerned the social and political structure of Poland which, in his opinion, was dominated by large landowning gentry and aristocratic families to the disadvantage of the rural and urban poor. Czechoslovak society was more middle and working class. Some Poles disputed this claim, countering that the war had eliminated many aristocratic estates, and Poland post-war would be far more egalitarian than in the past. Beneš remained to be convinced, maintaining that the first requisite for building a successful Central European bloc was for the partners to have an approximately similar political and social structure, which quite demonstrably they did not have towards the end of the war. Whether this would have been a real stumbling block if there had been no other conflicts between the two sides is impossible to say. Beneš had a point in theoretical terms, but perhaps the narrowing gap in social structures would have been overcome if there had been an overwhelming desire on both sides for a confederation to be created.³⁹

Despite the substantial differences between the two leaders, which became increasingly apparent between 1940 and 1943, there was, initially, sufficient political will to conclude an agreement. Discussions began in earnest on 18 September 1940 with a meeting between Raczynski and Kulski for the Poles and Ripka and Slavic on behalf of the Czechoslovaks. There was consensus that it was time to end former disputes and to initiate the close co-operation which would be required after the war. The British interest in the success of these discussions was shown by the presence of senior officials at a high level Polish-Czechoslovak meeting on 9 October.⁴⁰ The Czechoslovak position in these discussions was outlined in a letter from Beneš to Sikorski on 1 November 1940. The subsequently agreed Declaration of 11 November 1940 (which was widely celebrated at the time) should be read in the light of Beneš' letter, in which he tried to avoid entering into definite commitments but accepted in principle 'some form of Federal Union', stressing that 'a simple alliance seemed to be insufficient'. He also hoped that it would be possible in future to find some *modus vivendi* with Russia. In fact, Beneš wanted 'a system of co-operation' in which the sovereignty of each state would remain intact, except perhaps in the

³⁹ Beneš, 'The Organization', 233

⁴⁰ *Polish Fortnightly Review*, 10, 1 December 1940. These included a senior minister, Dalton, a senior civil servant, Harold Nicolson, Kennard, the British Ambassador to Poland, Victor Cazalet, Churchill's liaison man with Sikorski, General Bridge and Frank Savery, a Foreign Office Polish expert.

economic field, whereas the Poles wanted a much closer and more precise form of union. The Declaration, which was welcomed by Winston Churchill in the House of Commons, bore the stamp of ‘Czech circumspection’, as the following extract makes clear:⁴¹

‘The two Governments consider it imperative to declare solemnly even now that Poland and Czechoslovakia, closing once and for all the period of past recriminations and disputes, and taking into consideration the community of their fundamental interests, are determined on the conclusion of this war, to enter as independent and sovereign States into a closer political and economic association which would become the basis of a new order in Central Europe and a guarantee of its stability. ... The two Governments are resolved already now to cooperate closely for the defence of their common interest and for the preparation of the future association of the two countries.’⁴²

The Poles would have preferred some ‘bolder and more definite undertaking’ with a higher degree of political integration including ‘common decisions on essential issues’⁴³ However, they were unable to include even the term ‘confederation’ in the Declaration and had to accept, as the price of agreement, the words ‘closer political and economic association’. They hoped that the idea of ‘association’ could be fleshed out in the forthcoming negotiations in the light of the then political situation, and in a sense more favourable to Polish conceptions. The primary impact of the Declaration was to commit the two governments to close co-operation.⁴⁴

Discussions began in January 1941 and continued on and off during the year and into 1942. A joint committee was established in December 1940 and held its first meeting on 10 January, 1941 when it adopted the title of Committee of Coordination. The Polish side was composed of Sosnkowski, Zaleski, Seyda and Raczyński (the first three resigning after the conclusion of the Polish-Soviet agreement in July) and the Czechs were represented by Masaryk, Ripka, Slavic and Feierabend. It met only four times by between January and November 1941. A number of sub-committees or mixed commissions were formed, whose activities were

⁴¹ PISM Polski Ruch Europejski, KOL 408/218, article by T.Komarnicki ‘Modern Projects for the Union of Central Eastern Europe’

⁴² ‘Joint Declaration of the Polish and Czechoslovak Governments favouring closer political and economic association’

⁴³ Wandycz, ‘Recent Traditions’, 45-6

⁴⁴ PISM, Wszelaki papers, KOL 39/35, lecture to the RIIA, 17 March 1943; NA FO 371 C13252/6/12, 26 November 1941

directed by the Coordination Committee.⁴⁵ In addition the Poles created a Committee of the Council of Ministers whose function was to prepare a draft Constitution for the Czechoslovak-Polish Union, which it completed by 21 May, 1941. But very little further progress was made until the Autumn for a variety of reasons. The key to progress was the relationship between Sikorski and Beneš, and already in January 1941 there were signs of disagreement. Each of them raised the question of frontiers, Sikorski emphasising that Poland's pre-1939 frontiers could not be changed and that it was in Czechoslovakia's interest too to stop the westward advance of the Soviet Union. Beneš, in response, wrote that any specific pledge on frontiers would 'cause him grave embarrassment' since he had to reckon with pro-Russian sentiment in his own country.⁴⁶ At the same time he insisted on recovering the pre-1938 borders of Czechoslovakia. The raising of the frontier issue puzzled British officialdom since it had always been said that the delimitation of frontiers would be the very last problem to be tackled, if only because it lacked 'all sense of reality until the war had been decided'. This was confirmed by Wszelaki, who noted that the negotiators had agreed to postpone discussion of more difficult problems, such as Teschen, Hungary or Russia, since only some of these theoretical problems would materialise.⁴⁷ Despite their differences of opinion, the two leaders at this stage were ready to compromise, agreeing to create a new political structure in Central Europe 'irrespective of what the final boundaries of our countries will be'.⁴⁸

Another reason for slow progress was Sikorski's absence in the United States in the Spring of 1941; even on his return, when more rapid progress might have been anticipated, he vetoed publication of the Polish proposals for a Polish-Czechoslovak constitution, pronouncing them to be premature. There was further delay in July when the Polish-Soviet negotiations led to the resignation from the Polish government and from the Coordination Committee of the three very senior figures, as noted earlier. However, the Polish-Soviet treaty of 30 July improved the climate between Poland and Czechoslovakia and led to a rapprochement both over the Polish-Czech border and on the need for political collaboration between West and East Europe.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ NA FO 371 26376, 28 December 1940, 12 January 1941; FO 371 C3298/6/12 29 March 1941; FO 371 C13252/6/12 26 November 1941

⁴⁶ NA FO 371/26755 C3226 31 January 1941

⁴⁷ NA FO 371/26755 C3226 31 January 1941; PISM Wszelaki Papers, KOL39/35, lecture to the RIIA, 5 March 1941, 9

⁴⁸ Wandycz, *Czechoslovak-Polish Confederation*, 40, 46

⁴⁹ NA FO 371 C13252/6/12 26 November 1941

On the anniversary of the publication of the Declaration, 11 November 1941, the Coordination Committee decided to proceed with a detailed elaboration of the principles of the 'confederation', which now replaced 'association' as the preferred term to define the relationship between the states.⁵⁰ Shortly afterwards the Coordination Committee met to consider two drafts of proposed constitutional arrangements.

The first of these, the Polish Draft Constitutional Act, proposed a complete scheme of union in line with the earliest Polish preferences. It envisaged a Supreme Federal Council (composed of heads of states and delegations from each Parliament) with very wide powers in the political, military and economic spheres based on the principle of absolute equality of member states, and taking decisions by majority vote. The Executive body, called the Council of State Secretaries, comprised prime ministers and at least four senior ministers, for foreign affairs, defence, economics and finance. The Legislature or Federal Assembly, was to be elected on universal suffrage, one representative for each half a million inhabitants, and would decide issues by majority vote. Budgets, legislative powers and control of the government were vested in this Assembly. There was to be complete unification of decision-making in foreign policy in the sense that all treaties had to be negotiated and completed by the common institutions of the Union. The federal government had very wide powers too in defence matters. As regards the economies there was to be complete unification which, however, had to be achieved gradually in view of the differences in economic structures. Far-reaching unity of decision-making was extended also to communications, social policy, and banking. Sikorski described this draft constitution as 'the boldest attempt in the history of our region to set up an organic union between the two states'.⁵¹ In response the Czechoslovak side submitted the 'Fundamental Principles of the Czech-Polish Confederal Union'. As its name implied, this proposal represented an intergovernmental approach, embodying the coordination of policies rather than a joint policy subordinated to supranational organs.⁵²

⁵⁰ 'Joint Communiqué issued on the anniversary of the Joint Polish-Czechoslovak Declaration, November 11, 1941'

⁵¹ PISM Polski Ruch Europejski KOL 408/218, Polish Draft Constitutional Act of 21 May 1941; NA FO 371 C13370/6/12, 25 November 1941, Kulski to Foreign Office. See also Roberts' minute giving an immediate British response

⁵² Wandycz, *Czechoslovak-Polish Confederation*, 65-6

Considering these two sets of proposals the governments published an agreement on 23 January, 1942, of which the major elements were as follows:

- the proposed Confederation should be open to the membership of other European states with which the vital interests of Poland and Czechoslovakia were linked.
- the purpose of the Confederation was to assure a common policy in foreign affairs, defence, economic and financial matters, social questions, transport, posts and telegraphs
- the Confederation would have a common General Staff and in the event of war a unified supreme command
- the Confederation would co-ordinate foreign trade policy and harmonise customs tariffs with a view to concluding a customs union
- the Confederation would have an agreed monetary policy and would co-ordinate the financial policy of the states, especially tax policy.
- There would be a common plan for educational policy.⁵³

The Polish side may have been disappointed with this outcome since the agreement did not embody federalist principles. On the other hand Łaptos's comment that 'the end result was a mouse' ignores Beneš' characterisation of the proposed relationship between the states as a 'confederation *sui generis*', or Barrell's similar opinion that the arrangement was 'on the verge' between a league and a federation. Evidently the individual states retained a veto on decisions and there was no formal transfer of sovereignty. On the other hand the agreement was extremely wide-ranging covering large areas of government responsibilities: war and peace, foreign policy, economic affairs, monetary and tax policy, education and communications. It involved not simply the coordination of policy but rather the joint formulation of policy and its implementation by joint institutions, in which politicians and officials of both states would be represented. The Czechoslovaks could be satisfied that the freedom of action of their state would not be impaired and the Poles could interpret the agreement as the first step towards a more federalist arrangement. Beneš himself saw the agreement as being capable of organic growth

⁵³ Polish-Czechoslovak Declaration, signed 25 January 1942, United Nations Information Center, New York

should circumstances permit or demand. Placing the agreement in a broad chronological perspective, it represents a qualitative advance on the relations between the two states in the inter-war period, and had the potential to develop into a deeper bond.

In practice this agreement marked the high water mark in the Polish-Czechoslovak relationship. From the beginning of 1942 Polish-Soviet relations began to decline and Czechoslovak-Soviet relations steadily improved (indeed, the latter was a consequence of the former), culminating in a formal treaty late in 1942. Beneš showed that he would not place the Polish connection above his commitment to the Soviet Union. Asked to make a choice he came down on the side of the Kremlin. The Poles in turn were unable to compromise on their Eastern frontiers in order to gain approval from the Soviets for a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation. Before the conclusion of the Anglo-Soviet treaty in May 1942 the Soviet government seemed prepared to accept the British proposal of a clause expressing the desirability of a federation in Central Europe. But when the British would not agree to recognise Soviet territorial annexations in Central Europe the Kremlin withdrew its assent to the federal clause.⁵⁴ Neither side was prepared to give way on the Teschen question. When, in April 1943, the question of Katyn led to the Soviet Union's breaking off diplomatic relations with the London Polish government, the possibility of consolidating the agreement between the Poles and the Czechs was severely damaged and remained in a comatose state after the death of Sikorski in July 1943.

The negotiations between the Polish and Czechoslovak governments-in-exile did not take place in a diplomatic vacuum. The Great Powers were deeply interested in these discussions and influenced the direction they took. As host to the two governments the British were very directly involved and had considerable, though not decisive, influence in sponsoring the talks, encouraging progress, and attempting to smooth over misunderstandings and difficulties. The Soviet Union's position evolved from cautious welcome to the confederation proposal to definite hostility. The United States was opposed to any federal or confederal arrangements which had the potential to check or obstruct the Americans' main goal, which was to shape the peace by means of a world organization. Soviet co-operation in this endeavour was imperative, and it was impolitic to support any development, such as an East Central

⁵⁴ PISM Wszelaki papers, KOL 39/35, lecture to the RIIA, 17 March, 1943, 27-8

European 'federation', which the Soviets opposed. Given the opposition of two of the Great Powers, how much support did the Poles receive from the British government for their federalist ambitions? Could the British have done more?

Did they disappoint the Poles in this respect as they did over Yalta?

The British offered firm support for the Polish-Czechoslovak efforts to create a close political and economic relationship between the two states; indeed a Minister, Hugh Dalton, and officials such as Cazalet, Churchill's official representative with the Polish Government, and Sir Horace Kennard, the British Ambassador to Poland, attended the first public meeting between the Poles and the Czechs on 11 October 1940 to offer support for the projected association. Sikorski was informed in August 1940 that the British government attached importance to the Polish government's entering into closer relations with the Czechs.⁵⁵ It seemed unimportant to the Foreign Office whether this association was described as a federation or a confederation: the important thing was to create a working association which would meet the needs of the partners and of Britain's own foreign policy. From the beginning of the war until mid-1942 the interests of British and Polish governments were in harmony. The creation of a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation would, as the British told Stalin, 'strengthen the smaller countries of Europe so as to put them, economically and strategically, in a position to resist successfully pressure by Germany', thus strengthening stability in a notoriously unstable region, and diminishing the risk of future conflicts.⁵⁶ But in the British Foreign Office there was a minority of sceptics who were unconvinced that this proposed confederation would be strong enough to provide 'any greater barrier to German expansion eastwards than the small states set up under the 1919 settlement'.⁵⁷ If that were the case then the Soviet Union would, as *The Times* warned, claim a predominant interest 'in the settlement of affairs of Eastern Europe'.⁵⁸ It followed that if the Soviets were to be induced to retire behind their own borders after the war, any possible threat from Germany had to be nullified. The British strategy was to commit the Soviet government to an acceptance of the Atlantic Charter, in particular to its 8th Article which postulated a completely disarmed Germany. This was intended to allay any

⁵⁵ NA FO 371 24292 C9361/8351/12, 28 August 1940

⁵⁶ NA FO 371 30827 C7636/151/12, 29 July 1942

⁵⁷ Gladwyn Jebb, *The Memoirs of Lord Gladwyn*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972, 116

⁵⁸ Wandycz, 'Recent Traditions', p. 46

Soviet suspicions that Britain would promote a balance of power policy in Eastern Europe between the Soviets and a revived Germany.⁵⁹

However, despite the sceptics, majority opinion in the British Foreign Office and in the Cabinet as a whole was in favour of a confederation or confederations in East Central Europe as an extra insurance against a resurgent Germany, while others saw it as a barrier to Soviet expansion westwards as well, though Eden was careful to deny that this was the British intention. The government and the majority of the British press supported the Polish and Czechoslovak efforts to achieve an agreement and warmly welcomed the Declaration. Eden publicly endorsed the 23 January agreement, as marking 'a further important stage in the development of closer relations between these two allies'.⁶⁰ At a time when relations between the Czechoslovakians and the Poles were cooling, Eden made a speech at Leamington in which he reiterated British support for the confederation. Inside the Foreign Office Frank Roberts, Robert Bruce Lockhart and Roger Makins agreed on the importance of the proposed confederation – 'the ideal' wrote Roberts 'of Polish-Czech co-operation is clearly an excellent one'.⁶¹ Lockhart commented that it was the first task of the British government to support and encourage it 'with tact, patience and perseverance' until it could stand firmly on its own legs, especially as British influence was strong given that the exiles were 'guests in our country'. Roberts added that 'in private conversations we have always impressed on the Poles and the Czechs how desirable the process is and how gratified we are at the progress being made'.⁶² As further evidence of British commitment and support he suggested that Eden make a point of enquiring generally about the progress of the talks to show British interest in their successful development. On the other hand the British were aware of the risks of too much interference; if the two parties were pressed too fast there might be undesirable reactions.⁶³

⁵⁹ Łaptos and Misztal, 184, quoting US Dept. of State document R.38 T224, 28 January 1943 'British Opinion on Postwar Arrangements in Eastern Europe'; 202, Dept. of State doc. 'Soviet and British Attitudes towards Eastern European Union', 18 February 1943

⁶⁰ Wandycz, *Czechoslovak-Polish Confederation*, 68

⁶¹ NA FO 371 30828 C10671/151/12, 4 November 1942; FO 371 26376, 28 December 1940

⁶² NA FO 371 26376, 28 December 1940

⁶³ NA FO 371 26376, 28 December 1940, 12 January 1941, 15 January 1941; FO 371 C6251/6/12 5 June 1941

In fact, the Polish government was the main beneficiary of the encouragement offered since the Czechoslovaks were perceived as ‘backsliders’ who had to be chivvied to show more commitment. Makins believed that negotiations between the Poles and the Czechs were proceeding smoothly before the Czechoslovak government got full recognition, which ‘went to Beneš’ head’. When the Soviet Union entered the war Beneš allowed Polish-Czechoslovak relations to deteriorate, which was the ‘purest folly’ since ‘the principal hope of a satisfactory settlement in East Europe lies in a really close relationship between Poland and Czechoslovakia’. He added that Eden should firmly discourage Beneš from angling for a Czechoslovak-Soviet treaty and tell him that the first and most important task was to reach a proper understanding with the Poles before venturing further afield.⁶⁴ The Czechs should also stop leaking information to the Kremlin since this made it easy for the Soviets to play the two sides off against each other.⁶⁵ The British were also exasperated by the determination of the Poles and the Czechs to keep bringing up the question of frontiers, Teschen and the Eastern frontiers of Poland. Although ‘both sides behaved disgracefully over this issue’ it was Beneš who was subject to the most severe criticism since he rejected the Polish view, supported by the British, that Teschen should be left over for settlement in the more favourable atmosphere following a Czechoslovak-Polish treaty. To allow the treaty to fail over Teschen would surely show ‘a lamentable lack of any sense of proportion’. Lockhart thought that Eden should emphasise to the Czechoslovaks on all suitable occasions the ‘unreality’ of the frontier issue in comparison to the supreme consideration of national preservation.⁶⁶

The Assistant Under-Secretary of State, Sir Orme Sargent, introduced a cautionary word for his younger colleagues. On the evidence available he did not think that Beneš’ behaviour was likely to ‘torpedo’ the Polish-Czechoslovak confederation. The truth was that unless the Poles and Czechoslovaks could gain the goodwill of the Soviet Union, ‘a reasonable degree of Soviet benevolence’, there would be little chance for a confederation at all since the Kremlin could destroy it. In this sense Beneš was correct in making further progress in the negotiations dependent

⁶⁴ NA FO 371 30827 C5534/151/12 28 May 1942, Makins’ minute

⁶⁵ NA FO 371 24480 C7401/151/12, 24 July 1942, Roberts’ minute

⁶⁶ NA FO 371 26376 Bruce Lockhart to Eden 12 January 1941; FO 371 30828 C11953/151/12 3 December 1942, Roberts’ minute

on Soviet good will.⁶⁷ It was British relations with Moscow which revealed the limits of their support for the confederation. Admittedly, the British did all they could at the time of the signing of the British-Soviet treaty in 1942 to persuade the Kremlin to agree to confederations in East Central Europe, short of accepting Soviet demands for the Curzon Line as the Polish Eastern frontier. For example, it gained a promise from Moscow that it would conduct itself in accord with the principles laid down in the Atlantic Charter, such as no territorial aggrandizement and no interference in the internal affairs of other states.⁶⁸ But when Eden raised the question of confederations at the Moscow conference of Great Powers in October 1943 and Molotov criticised such schemes as harmful to European stability, Eden did not push the point, particularly as he received no support from Cordell Hull, the American Secretary of State.

Wandycz is very critical of British policy. In welcoming Soviet participation in the war unreservedly and trying to make co-operation with Moscow as easy as possible the British failed to stress clearly enough the importance they attached to the Czechoslovak-Polish confederation. On the contrary, they placed Sikorski under enormous pressure to come to terms with Moscow in July 1941 at the price of splitting his government. This was a policy set from the top. Churchill subordinated his feelings towards the Soviet Union to the necessity of winning the war. In his talks with the Russians immediately after the German attack on the Soviet Union he relied on Soviet good faith and did not 'insist at this moment on any written guarantees for the future'⁶⁹ For the British it was absolutely vital to placate the Soviets in the battle to defeat Hitler. The failure to meet Soviet demands to open up a second front placed the West on the defensive and not in a position to challenge the Kremlin on the question of East Central Europe. This was reflected in discussions in the Foreign Office, where it was thought unwise to raise delicate matters like the proposed confederation 'until we are taking a more active part in military operations'. Cadogan put it even more bluntly – 'it's no good talking to the Russians now'. 'We are not in a position' added William Strang 'to press the Soviet government hard on this point at the present stage of the war'⁷⁰

⁶⁷ NA FO 371 30828 C12165/151/12 3 December 1942; FO 371 30828 6 November 1942; FO 371 30827 C6364/151/12 21 June 1942

⁶⁸ Łaptos and Misztal, 202; NA FO 371 30828 C10670/151/12, 30 October 1942

⁶⁹ Wandycz, 'Recent Traditions', 51

⁷⁰ NA FO 371 30828 C9428/151/2 11 October 1942 and C10670/151/12 26 October 1942

From a Polish perspective it would appear that the British were ready to help in every possible way to support the establishment of a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation, short of insisting to the Kremlin that this was a priority of British policy. Even before Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union British policy had hinged, firstly, on bringing the Soviet Union into an alliance to defeat Hitler and, secondly, on keeping this alliance alive. The great fear in London was that Stalin and Hitler might agree to end hostilities, leaving Hitler with the opportunity to concentrate his forces in the West. From Churchill's point of view this possibility had to be avoided at all costs. Hence the British government was not prepared to force the issue of confederations in East Central Europe in the teeth of Soviet opposition. By the time that a second front was finally opened in 1944 relations between the Soviet Union and the Polish government in London had been severed, and Stalin was well on the way to establishing a government of Soviet puppets in Warsaw. At this point the British had to accept the inevitability of Soviet paramountcy in East Central Europe and the futility of continued support for a no-longer-practical confederation. The Poles in London might have felt let down, with some justification, but Beneš was in any case not prepared to continue with the federation project in the face of Soviet opposition. The British acknowledged that their failure to insist on confederations in East Central Europe reflected the limitations of British power and influence in a world now increasingly dominated by the two Superpowers.

Yet, for quite a long time, in the first years of the war, the Polish Government was under the impression that the Soviet Union would not oppose confederations in East Central Europe. It tried to dispel the fear in Moscow that confederations in that region would constitute an element in a new *cordon sanitaire*. But policy-makers in both the Polish and Soviet governments could not forget that until the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union and the subsequent Polish-Soviet treaty the two countries had been in a state of war, and that they held diametrically opposed positions on the question of Poland's Eastern frontiers. Their treaty, sponsored by the British government, did not resolve the issue of future frontiers, but for a time, from July 1941 to early 1942 when Polish-Soviet relations entered a more cordial phase, Polish hopes of Soviet acceptance of a confederation were high. There were reasons for this optimism. In August 1941 Vyshinsky expressed his personal approval of closer unions of countries on the Soviet Union's western border. In the course of the Stalin-Eden conversations

in Moscow in December 1941 Stalin said that the Soviet Union would have no objection if some European countries wished to federate, and a month later Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador to Britain, repeated this assurance.⁷¹

This initial optimism was dampened when it was learned that ‘Soviet circles’ believed that the Polish-Czechoslovak ideas ‘ran ahead of events’ and did not take a realistic view of the future.⁷² The Czech ambassador in Moscow, Fierlinger, reported in the same sense in February 1942. Bogomolov, the Soviet Ambassador to the exile governments in London, stressed Russian criticism of any co-operative plans in Eastern Europe which excluded the Soviet Union.⁷³ During the discussions about the Anglo-Soviet treaty in April 1942 the first draft contained a section in which the federation idea figured prominently. At first the Soviets rejected this draft but later Molotov was prepared to accept a reference to strengthening ‘the economic, military and political independence of all European countries’ and added: ‘This should be done in suitable cases by means of regional understandings and confederations on the basis of friendly relations towards the USSR and Great Britain’. This draft clause later disappeared as we have seen.⁷⁴

By the summer of 1942 Soviet equivocation was replaced by outright opposition, Bogomolov being the bearer of bad news in talks with Masaryk in July.⁷⁵ Later in the same month he asked Ripka why it was necessary for the Czechs to bind themselves so closely to a nation (Poland) ‘which is doing all it can to make trouble for the Russians’.⁷⁶ Soviet spokesmen’s main criticism of the proposed confederation was that it was a Polish idea and that it was directed against the Soviet Union rather than Germany.⁷⁷ As Polish-Soviet relations steadily deteriorated Soviet opposition to the confederation idea became even more explicit. A Soviet journal *War and the Working Class* virulently attacked the ‘anti-democratic and semi-fascist elements’ which were striving to prevent the participation of the USSR in the organization of the post-war world, and setting up plans hostile to the Soviet Union, ‘namely federations, confederations and regional blocs’. If these projects went ahead, they

⁷¹ The Rt.Hon. the Earl of Avon, *The Eden Memoirs: the Reckoning*, London, Cassell, 1965, 290; Táborický, p.388; NA FO 371 C10191/6/12 7 September 1941

⁷² Táborický, 388

⁷³ Wandycz, ‘Recent Traditions’, 56

⁷⁴ PISM Wszelaki papers, KOL 39/35, lecture to RIIA 17 March 1943 p.28; NA FO 371 36992 N4906/499/38 10 August 1943

⁷⁵ Táborický, p. 389; Wandycz, *Czechoslovak-Polish Confederation*, 81-2;

⁷⁶ NA FO 371 30827 C7636/151/12, 29 July 1942

⁷⁷ NA FO 371 36992 N4906/499/38 10 August 1943

added, there would be no hope of friendship and collaboration between the USSR and its allies in the post-war period.⁷⁸ When Eden raised the question of confederations at the Moscow conference in October 1943, Molotov denounced them as ‘harmful not only the interests of small states but also to the general question of European stability’.⁷⁹ The British were well aware of Soviet suspicions but were unable to allay them. They knew that Moscow had a profound mistrust of Polish post-war intentions which was augmented by the openly-expressed anti-Russian feelings in Polish papers and conversations. Poland was regarded as ‘the focal point of a *cordon sanitaire* policy’. The Kremlin was also suspicious that the British might be glad to see the Soviet Union destroyed, or at least permanently crippled, in the process of victory, with the result that the Anglo-Saxons would shut Moscow out of the post-war settlement. In short, a confederation or federation in East Central Europe would be an obstacle to Soviet ambitions to dominate the region after the war.⁸⁰

From a later vantage point the failure to establish confederations was predictable given the powerful forces against their realisation. But among the Poles in London and in the British government there was a genuine hope that the confederal project could be realised. Beneš’ attitude was equivocal, and then openly opposed, and there were, as it proved, irreconcilable differences between the Poles and the Czechoslovaks over frontiers. It was not only Beneš who wanted the pre-1938 frontiers of Czechoslovakia restored. His Foreign Minister, Jan Masaryk, who was much more in sympathy with the Poles and the Western powers than his President, said that ‘an essential preliminary’ to really good relations between Poles and Czechs was an agreement by the Poles to return to the status quo. If this were agreed in principle, Masaryk assured the Poles, he would be ready to negotiate changes to the pre-1938 position on Teschen.⁸¹ Another fundamental difficulty in Polish-Czechoslovak relations was the Czechs’ deep-rooted Russophile feelings. Sikorski said that the Czechs had a sentimental attitude towards the ‘Russian brother’ and seemed to regard the Russians as their first friends in Eastern Europe. He chided

⁷⁸ David Weigall, ‘British Ideas of European unity and regional confederations in the context of Anglo-Soviet Relations 1941-45’, in M.L.Smith and P.M.R.Stirk eds., *Making the New Europe, European Unity and the Second World War*, London and New York, Pinter Publishers, 1990, 159; Władysław R. Malinowski, ‘Towards Polish-Soviet Understanding’, *New Europe*, Supplement, November (1943), 12

⁷⁹ Weigall, p. 159; Wandycz, *Czechoslovak-Polish Confederation*, 94

⁸⁰ NA FO 371 C10670/151/12 12 October 1942; FO 371 31535 U1742/1742/70 23 October 1942

⁸¹ FO 371 34334 C2564/206/12 6 March 1943

them for subordinating their Polish to their Russian policy.⁸² Masaryk responded that it was impossible to convince the Poles that the Czechoslovaks were not ‘entirely in the hands of the Russians’. The Czechoslovaks were, he reiterated, in favour of a confederation but were not prepared to push this through in face of direct Soviet opposition.⁸³ Behind the issue of frontiers and the different attitudes towards the Kremlin lay a rather strong antipathy between rank-and-file Czechoslovakas and Poles. The disagreements over frontiers and Soviet relations brought to the surface the mutual suspicions and hostility which had characterised the inter-war years. The fact that ordinary Czechoslovaks took the Soviet side over the Katyn incident was a dismaying illustration of the divisions between the two peoples.⁸⁴

The Czechoslovaks believed that Moscow’s opposition could be overcome if Poland came to a ‘friendly neighbourly understanding’ with the Soviet Union. A central element in reaching agreement was a Polish concession on the Polish-Soviet border. Ripka thought that Sikorski should have taken up Stalin’s offer in December 1941 to discuss frontiers – after all Stalin had offered the Poles Lwów on that occasion.⁸⁵ He also criticised the Poles for assuming that the Soviet Union would either be defeated by Hitler or would be so exhausted at the end of the war that it would be unable to impose terms on Eastern Europe.⁸⁶ This was a view shared by Lockhart in the British Foreign Office who argued that a Polish-Soviet agreement on frontiers could have been reached when the Soviet Union had its back to the wall during the early months of the war with Germany. Later the Poles were ‘the victims of their own miscalculations’.⁸⁷ This was a view shared by the British diplomat Nichols who emphasised that the success or failure of the confederal project depended mainly on the struggle between Poland and the Soviet Union over frontiers.⁸⁸ Christopher Warner, also of the Foreign Office, observed that there would be no

⁸² NA FO 371 30828 C9648/151/12 6 October 1942

⁸³ NA FO 371 30828 C11494/151/12 19 November 1942; FO 371 C6578/6/12 16 June 1941; FO 371 30827 C4835/151/12 8 May 1942

⁸⁴ NA FO 371 30828 C10145/151/12 23 October 1942; for a short but well-informed discussion of Katyn see G.Sanford, ‘The Katyn Massacre and Polish-Soviet Relations 1941-1943’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 41, 1, 95-111

⁸⁵ NA FO 371 30828 C11666/151/12 27 November 1942

⁸⁶ NA FO 371 30828 C11666/151/12 27 November 1942

⁸⁷ NA FO 371 34334 C2304/206/12 15 February 1943

⁸⁸ NA FO 371 30828 C10145/151/12 23 October 1942

Soviet consent to confederations unless 'we [the British] inform the Poles at once that they must agree to the Curzon Line'.⁸⁹

It is sometimes suggested that Sikorski recognised that an agreement with Moscow over a modified Curzon Line might have opened the path to Soviet acceptance of a Polish-Czech confederation. Sikorski may have flirted with such a solution, as this article tries to make clear, but his capacity to carry his government with him is open to doubt since he was under attack from many quarters for his Soviet policy.⁹⁰ Nor is there any evidence that Stalin would have accepted such a compromise, given his determination to have absolute guarantees of security on the Soviet Union's western frontiers. If the only enemy for both Poles and Czechoslovaks had been Germany there was a strong chance that a confederation would have come to pass. But Polish enmity towards the Soviet Union, for understandable reasons, could not be disguised, nor could Soviet determination not to yield over the question of frontiers when it was clear that Germany would be defeated. From Moscow's perspective a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation, the possible nucleus of a federation for the whole of East Central Europe, would not have provided such guarantees. The confederation would have looked West, in a political and cultural sense, and cast in its lot with putative federations in other parts of Europe. The ultra cautious Stalin was unlikely to have given it the benefit of the doubt. Ultimately the confederal idea became the victim of Great Power politics: the Americans, under the leadership of Roosevelt, were indifferent since they feared regional associations as a danger to their favoured world organization; the British placed good relations with the Kremlin ahead of their objective of regional associations in East Central Europe; the Russians were determined to control their Western approaches and had the power to enforce their will in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, although the confederal project was suffocated, the federal idea remained very much alive and flourished among the Polish exiles in Europe and the United States in the post-war period.

⁸⁹ NA FO 371 30828 C10670/151/12 30 October 1942

⁹⁰ NA FO 371 30827 C5534/151/12 28 May 1942

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