

# Did benes betray the poles during world war ii

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With the establishment of the German puppet protectorate in Bohemia in the wake of Munich, and the setting up of a government-in-exile in London, Eduard Benes set about asserting the diplomatic position of the 'free' Czechoslovak government. Through his dealings with the great powers of east and west, and also with the representatives of the nations of Eastern Europe, he hoped to guarantee the liberation and continued freedom of his country.

However, it has been suggested that in his eagerness to pursue his Czechoslovak goals, he was prepared to betray the Polish government, first appearing to offer them the firm friendship of Czechoslovakia, and then turning his back on them in favour of the Russians, to whom he subordinated his policy far too willingly. In the two Polish-Czechoslovak declarations made in the first half of the war (11 November 1940 and 19 January 1942), the two governments set out plans for a post-war confederation between Poland and Czechoslovakia, with the option to involve other Eastern European states should they wish to join.

The 1940 declaration set out the intentions of the confederation: " The two governments consider it imperative to declare solemnly 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 interest, 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.

This seemed to be a real commitment to the Poles, offering the hope of a strong union to serve as a guarantee of independence against Poland's traditional enemies, the Germans and the Russians. However, according to his critics, Benes was never genuine in his professed wish to see such close co-operation with the Poles, and this indifference was manifested in 1942 and 1943 with first his refusal to back the 1942 declaration, and then his abandonment of the Poles in favour of a treaty with Russia, with whom Poland's relations were far from warm.

In fact, Benes' earlier co-operation with the Poles was simply a device to improve the position of the Czech government in London, designed to win full diplomatic recognition from the British through association with the respected (and unrivalled) Polish government-in-exile. " The Czechoslovak government-in-exile strove to improve its status by association with its respected Polish counterpart... But the mutual professions of good will hardly concealed vital differences of outlook... Benes'] prime considerations were tactical - the advancement of Czechoslovakia's claim for international recognition; the Poles' main concern was strategic - Poland's long-term security against both Germany and Russia. " `Despite British support for the idea of a confederation, which could perhaps have been used against the Russians in the event of their opposition to the plan, Benes, following Germany's attack on Russia, courted Russian friendship in a way which was too submissive, allowing the USSR to formulate policy which the Czechs would almost unquestioningly support.

Unlike 1940 when Benes was desperate for allies and so was prepared to give his support to the Poles in return for British recognition, by the time of <https://assignbuster.com/did-benes-betray-the-poles-during-world-war-ii/>

the 1942 declaration, he could choose between east and west, and in choosing the Soviets with whom he hoped to gain more for the Czechs, 'sold out' the Poles. In discussions with Molotov in London on 9 June 1942, Benes agreed to make the confederation plan dependent on friendly Soviet-Polish relations, in return for a Russian endorsement of Czechoslovakia's pre-Munich frontiers, an agreement which made possible the Russian veto of the plan.

The conditions which the Poles, who had been attacked by Russia in 1939 and with whom a boundary dispute persisted, were asked by Benes to satisfy were practically impossible to satisfy: " There won't be anything between us and the Poles if the relations between Poland and the USSR are not friendly... and there won't be any confederation without radical internal changes in Poland [by which he meant that the 'feudal' Polish government should dissolve itself and allow democratisation to take place]. By 1944, the confederation had been effectively abandoned in favour of Polish inclusion in the Soviet-Czechoslovak Treaty, over which the Russians had clearly more influence.

On January 6 1944, Benes summarised the Soviet (and by implication, the Czechoslovak) attitude concerning relations with Poland in conversation with Mikolajczyk: " The Soviet-Czechoslovak Treaty was the basis for both countries of their eventual agreement with Poland and also of any future joint guarantee for Poland against Germany. ` Not only did Benes repudiate the idea of a confederation, but he also knew from the start of his negotiations with the Russians for the Soviet-Czechoslovak Treaty that there was no immediate prospect of an agreement between Stalin and the Poles.

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Bogomolov related Soviet discussions with Benes on this issue: " The Soviet government had already informed him in this connection that we were willing to discuss a draft of a Soviet-Czechoslovak treaty but in no way one of a tripartite pact.

The Soviet government approved the latter concept only in principle, but negotiating over it was now difficult with regard to the disturbed relations subsisting between the Polish and Soviet governments... Benes agreed with me and said that it would be better to separate the Soviet-Czechoslovak treaty from the proposal for a tripartite pact. Benes can have had few doubts that in the immediate future at least, Poland would not come to terms with the USSR, and so his switch of orientation towards the Russians was one which precluded co-operation with the Poles in the short term, no matter how much he proclaimed his hope that the Poles would one day be persuaded that a compromise with Russia would be desirable. `The final 'betrayal' of the Poles came with Benes' moves to recognise the Lublin Committee in late 1944.

With the selfish motive of the recovery of Teschen in mind, Benes was prepared to help deliver Poland into the hands of the Soviet puppet regime, provided they looked more favourably upon the Czechs' grievances than the London government had done. Here, as before, Benes was prepared to give a 'stab in the back' to the London government in his pursuit of gain for his country alone. `Thus, according to his critics, Benes appeared to offer the hope of a strong post-war alliance to the Poles, but was prepared to reverse his policy without compunction should he see better opportunities elsewhere.

The 1940 declaration was made with more regard to the British than the Poles, while by 1942 he was fully prepared to turn his back on the Polish declaration in return for the support of Russia, and the Soviet-Czechoslovak Treaty of 1943 was realistically never likely to attract the Polish London government. ` Much of the criticism of Benes concerns his inconsistency, which has been seen as " an unwillingness to devise any policy. " However, there is evidence which points to a remarkable consistency in the driving forces behind Benes' diplomacy.

In his memoirs, Benes noted, " I was convinced that the Soviet Union would ultimately be on the winning side. On this particular point I had never hesitated and had guided our liberation struggle in the second World War from this standpoint. " This was not simply a retrospective analysis designed to justify his wartime actions. In July 1941 Smutny recorded one of the President's comments: "'After the war is over,' the President confided to his associates, 'in Europe, only Germany and Russia will be left.

Germany will be disrupted, and in the East, and, I hope, in central Europe as well, Russia will play the decisive role... It will come together with Europe and after the war Bolshevism will not even be remembered. '" From the start, Benes' conviction that Russia would play the decisive role in Eastern Europe after the war was his main guiding force. ` Benes did not regard the potential power of Russia in the east as necessarily to be feared. On his Russian visit in 1943 he was very impressed by the progress of Russian modernisation since his last visit in 1935, and his own domestic politics during the war moved to the left, apparently converging with the Russian ideology.

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He also saw the Russian presence as being necessary for the stability of Eastern Europe, saying to Stalin in 1943, " Peace will last long if we are ready to defend it. The Versailles settlement was not bad. The trouble was that neither you nor others were prepared to defend it. " Unconditional acceptance of the Polish plan for an independent confederation would surely have been an acceptance of an anti-Russian bloc, an idea which Benes saw as being doomed as a result of Russia's overwhelming power, and as unnecessary in view of the potential benefits of Russian protection in the post-war balance of power.

This is not to say that Benes refused to have anything to do with the west. Ideally, Benes would probably have liked to have been an impartial link between east and west, and was careful to preserve good relations with the western powers. Eden managed to successfully delay the signing of the Soviet-Czechoslovak treaty, and as much as Benes wanted to sign, was unwilling to do so (in the short term at least) at the cost of good Anglo-Czechoslovak relations.

However, as much as he would have liked to have remained neutral, he began leaning towards the east, both as a result of his own convictions about the future of Russian power, and due to the attitude of the west. The most obvious sign of Britain's lukewarm reception of Benes' government was the reluctance displayed to officially recognise it. Halifax's letter to Benes on July 16 1940 was hardly an unrestrained endorsement of Benes' position: " His Majesty's Government have taken notice of the fact that this Provisional Government is to be a [not the] representative government of the Czech and Slovak people... t cannot be presumed that His Majesty's Government

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necessarily share your conclusion, drawn in your letter: namely, that by their attitude after the events of March 15th, 1939, His Majesty's Government have taken any particular attitude concerning the legal continuity of the Czechoslovak Republic. "

The attitude of the British seemed to endorse the view which Fierlinger offered as to, "... the indifference to our affairs on the part of England and America, who will have enough problems of their own and altogether different regions of interest... Benes' attitude to the Russians was not motivated simply by short-term considerations as to where the best concessions for the Czechs could be gained, and Benes did not simply drop the Poles in some kind of U-turn. The Czech attitude was shaped by Benes' considered belief that Russia could not and should not be ignored, and as a result of the peripheral nature of the Czech problems to the western powers. `Neither can it realistically be claimed that Benes kept the Poles in the dark over his diplomatic leanings.

Benes wrote to Sikorski only ten days before the 1940 declaration, "... to be able to stop more or less definitively the German Drang nach Osten, i. e. , a life-and-death struggle of the Germans against the Poles and the Czechs,... we must not have the Russians against us. " From the start, Benes made his attitude known to the Poles, and so his apparent change of heart in 1942 should not have come as too much of a surprise to them. Even before Barbarossa, Benes cultivated a covert friendship with Russia.

To criticise Benes for turning his back on the Poles seems slightly harsh both in view of the fact that his stance was more consistent than his more public



activities suggested, and because some alteration in his diplomacy was inevitable after the German attack on Russia in 1941. Throughout the war, Benes maintained a sense of realism regarding the potential of the Polish-Czechoslovak confederation, which the Poles often seemed to lack. Although the confederation might have served as a strong regional power, in no way could it have stood up to the colossal power of Russia.

Benes outlined the Polish attitude to Stalin in 1943: " That's the idea that the Poles could serve as a barrier, a cordon sanitaire, between you and Germany. Now, after the collapse of France, the Poles think that they are destined to assume her role... they estimate that England will always need a partner in Europe... they don't assess properly their own possibilities as a nation of 20 million. " Benes held no such pretensions. " His policy was a clear one: he believed in a Confederation between the Poles and the Czechs supported by the Russians and by ourselves [the British].

With doubts as to how interested the west was in Eastern Europe, Benes saw the need for an alternative to the confederation, which in any case was running into difficulties as a result of Polish intransigence in the face of Russian demands. Sikorski's wish to, "... have no regard for anyone, sign the confederation, and present the others with a fait accompli," was unrealistic, and such a move could easily have been interpreted as anti-Russian, in the face of the inescapable westward extension of Soviet power. Benes realised that the Poles were standing firm against Russia with little concrete western support.

Despite a degree of Polish belief to the contrary, neither Britain nor America had given any real commitments regarding frontiers, and so Poland stood alone against Russia on this issue. Given these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Benes showed a reluctance to offer his unconditional support to Sikorski. Benes clearly stated his attitude to the frontier issue in 1941: " I think that it is premature and almost impossible today to formulate a definitive standpoint in regard to frontiers in all the details...

Therefore, from our side we do not wish to discuss these most delicate matters today and are waiting until the events themselves will help us solve a number of these questions... It is in the interests of both our states that an agreement is reached... that in case of a German collapse the Soviet army will not cross the line it is now holding [i. e. roughly, the Curzon Line. ]. " At no time did the Czechs give overt support to the Polish territorial claims in the east.

The Polish attitude over the frontier question perhaps reflected what has been perceived as a 'great power' mentality on the part of the Poles, that Poland had historically been a significant European force, and could once again play this role against their traditional enemy, Russia. This anti-Russian prejudice meant that the Poles could not bring themselves to give way over frontiers, and they could not believe that the Russians could be trusted. Benes showed the Soviet-Czechoslovak treaty to Mikolajczyk: " His eyes were as big as saucers when he was reading it.

Then he asked: " And you think the Russians are going to sign this? " He was flabbergasted when I told him that it's all settled. " The Polish attitude

towards Russia was consistently too inflexible, failing to take into account the growing likelihood of Russian domination in Eastern Europe, and so it is understandable that Benes began to distance himself from the Poles, instead following his consistent line that the Russians had to be come to terms with. `Benes' attitude towards the Poles in the Second World War, while not always friendly, could not be described as a betrayal.

His attitude remained consistently that the Russians would be dominant in the future, and he never (at least intentionally) did anything which might give the Poles reason to hope for a backer against the Russians. Benes was genuine in his desire to see greater co-operation between Czechoslovakia and Poland, whether through the confederation or the Polish protocol of the Soviet-Czechoslovak Treaty, but this could not be achieved at the cost of good relations with Moscow.

Eastern Europe would always remain a secondary consideration of the west (even if it were capable of maintaining an effective presence there in the face of Russian power), and any belief that the confederation could remain independent of the protection of the great powers was simply wishful thinking. Despite this, the Polish London government maintained a hard line against the Russians, and eventually payed the price. Benes was in no position to give any effective support to the Poles, and maintained a sense of realism in his attitude to the Soviet Union.