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Ideas for Containment? World War Two American and British Confederation Plans for Postwar East-Central Europe

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Abstract

At an early stage of the Second World War American and British post-war planners were preparing and discussing confederation schemes for the small states of East-Central Europe. As a tangible outcome and a first step toward the establishment of a wider regional union after the war a Czechoslovak-Polish treaty was signed in January 1942 in London by Edvard Beneš and Wladyslaw Sikorki, the respective heads of governments in exile. According to the available (quite scarce and largely Cold-war focused) literature the project was gradually abandoned mainly because Beneš and the Western powers did not want to antagonize their Soviet ally, which soon held the region under its control.

The paper focuses on the emergence and development of these plans. It aims to revisit the question of their origin and the reasons why they were gradually abandoned. Based on British and American archival sources (mainly: policy documents of the British Foreign Office and minutes of the American Advisory Committee on Postwar Foreign Policy) it seems clear that diplomats in London and Washington were soon confronted with severe challenges. Before Soviet adversity was even expressed they found that the interested East-Central European political elites were not able to harmonize their postwar ideas, because of other perceived conflicting national interests. Although a confederation arrangement would have clearly benefited the USA, Britain, and all Western-friendly, democratic East-Central European political movements, after much deliberation and collaboration no such detailed plan was worked out by the parties.

While Soviet intervention had its effects, this failure was in part due to the fact that the pre-war regional arrangements frequently violated the principle of self-determination and formed the basis of serious grievances and disputes. American and British planners sought to ease these tensions, which had been exploited by Germany and the Soviet Union, by suggesting border corrections. However some of these would have meant taking away territories from “friendly” states and/or rewarding “enemies”, which was hardly attainable politically after the war. Thus, controversies of the peace settlement system that followed the first world war became a factor not only for the outbreak of the second but also for the failure of US and British policy makers to effectively oppose Soviet control over East-Central Europe afterwards.

Introduction

During the early years of the Second World War leading American and British diplomats were preparing and discussing postwar confederation plans for the small states of East-Central Europe[1]. The plans were designed in connection with similar ideas of several East-Central European emigrant politicians: Austrians, Czechs, Hungarians, Poles, and Slovaks among them. As a tangible outcome of the suggested schemes and a first step toward the establishment of a wider regional union after the war a Czechoslovak-Polish treaty was signed in January 1942 in London by Edvard Beneš and Władysław Sikorki, the respective heads of governments in exile. This paper focuses on the idea of East-Central European confederation and the different suggested and discussed plans of it during the Second World War.[2]

Research questions

My main research questions are: 1) What were the origin and the aim of these plans and 2) why did they gradually become abandoned in the course of the war?

The literature dealing with this subject is scarce and scattered and usually discusses the matter only briefly in the context of the prelude of the cold war: the strategic aims of the great-powers vis-à-vis East-Central Europe, their deteriorating diplomatic relations after World War Two, and the Sovietization of the region as the Iron Curtain fell.[3] Most of them present the plan for East-Central European confederations as an insignificant idea of the early years of American and British postwar planning, which was quickly discarded because, while they fought Germany together, Western powers did not want to antagonize their key ally, the Soviet Union which soon held the region under its control and vehemently opposed the plans as attempts to create a new cordon sanitaire.[4]

This is a legitimate approach, and yet, I believe, it produces one-sided accounts because in this way the story of the confederation idea is constructed and explained as part of an overall narrative which is focused on subsequent (postwar) events.

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[1] The term is used here to mean by and large the region between Germany, Italy, Turkey and the Soviet Union (the "Middle Zone" in the Anglo-American jargon of the time), with a special focus on the north-western part of that area, i.e.: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria and Hungary – keeping in mind of course that this definition is far from being exact as the borders of those countries were changing in the time period discussed. The schemes were discussed under different names by the planners, e.g.: East European Federation, Central European Union etc.

[2] This working paper was prepared for and presented at the 2014 TSA Annual Conference at the University of Ghent, Belgium, 7 - 10 July 2014. The research was conducted as part of my PhD studies at Eszterházy Károly Főiskola under the supervision of Professor Ignác Romsics, to whom I am indebted not only for his professional guidance but also for the research topic itself.

[3] This is to a large extent true also to those studies, which discuss the idea of these confederation plans primarily from an East-Central European national or regional perspective. See: Wandych (1956), Romsics (1992), Bán (2000).

[4] See for example: Davis (1974), 73-74.

My primary aim is to research and review the history of the American and British confederation plans in their original context: as subject matter of postwar policy planning, which should be understood as the fruit of American and British diplomatic mindset at the early phase of World War Two.

Postwar planners had no knowledge about the coming era of the Cold War, instead, they were influenced by their understanding of past and contemporary regional and global events and by their own forecasts and fears based on them. Their ideas reflected – at least as much as their fear of future Soviet power politics – their unease about the oppression by East-Central European states their own ethnic minorities, their worries of potential political or even military conflict between these small states, their concern for a continuation of economic backwardness of this region and their disquiet about the possibility of German hegemonic exploitation of all these conditions in the future.

The reason for the promotion of confederations was not only to fend off Soviet intrusion, not even to guarantee the independence of the small states in between two great-powers (Germany and the Soviet Union) but also to guarantee peaceful co-existence and minority rights, to foster economic cooperation and prosperity – something similar to the rational of the European integration process later on. So the problem of the confederations is worth examining not only through the lens of geopolitics but also as a means of economic cooperation and of regional peacemaking.

Additionally, when it comes to trying to understand the reasons for the confederation idea, it seems useful to not only widen the scope for a broad array of possible functions but also to have the bigger picture about similar ideas for other regions of the world and similar ideas of confederations for this area at earlier times. American and British diplomats were also working on confederation plans for other parts of the Globe like the Arab peninsula or Indochina, which implies that regional cooperation was the contemporary craze. On the other hand the idea of an East-Central European confederation to counter Russian and German influence dated back to almost a hundred years in the region before it was picked up by the Allied planners.

The other research question, the reason for the failure of the idea also deserves more investigation and nuanced account. My hypothesis is that once the history of the planning is taken out of the pre-Cold War context of great-power relations, new factors (besides the Western acceptance for Soviet influence) will come to light.

I am not able to go through all the vast amount of literature on how and why the west “abandoned” East Central Europe – in this question I will rely on a number of selected secondary sources. However I do turn to the original sources of British and American postwar planning[5] especially when they relate to the idea of East-Central European confederations. Where available I also read primary sources about those East-Central European emigrants who directly influenced American and/or British planners[6].

[5] mainly documents of the American Advisory Committee on Postwar Foreign Policy at the National Archives of the United States in College Park, Maryland, and of the British Foreign Research and Press Service at the National Archives of the United Kingdom in Kew, Richmond, Surrey

[6] Hodža (1942), Beneš (1942), Otto of Austria (1942)

The origins and aims of the American and British East-Central European confederation plans

There was a fundamental difference in the American and British way of postwar preparation mindset, despite the fact that on both sides of the Atlantic the central theme was to avoid similar developments in the future that led to the rise of Nazi Germany and the world war. The American political elite, first and foremost President Roosevelt, believed in the possibility of collective international cooperation of the great powers to bring about global security; and at the same time wanted very much to avoid the division of the world into spheres of influence by secret diplomacy, as done during the First World War, because it was assumed to have been a primary cause for the Second. The British on the other hand traditionally favored the creation of balance of powers in Europe as a means to secure peace after the war is won. The idea of confederations of smaller states comes naturally from both mindsets.

The idea of East-Central European confederations was discussed not as a vague idea, but in the most miniscule details: its member states, its internal boundaries, its organizational structure and its relations to neighboring states and international organizations were all debated up to the point whether the confederation should be granted one joint seat or one seat to each member at the world organization to be established after the war.[7]

By analyzing the discussions of American and British planners and the texts that were produced as a result, the aim of the confederation plans can be summarized as follows:

1. To create a buffer zone in between Germany and Russia (the Soviet Union) which is able to withhold German political influence and even military pressure and may guarantee the independence of the small states that constitute it. This aim is sometimes worded with slightly different emphases: to "enable the region to stand as a unit against the efforts of other powers to exploit and dominate individual states"[8]

Besides this aim – which is the one usually highlighted by the secondary sources – two further endeavors can be quoted:

2. To enhance economic cooperation in the region, to construct a free-trade zone or even a customs union in order to create the basis of a politically and militarily strong alliance but also to simply secure the healthy and peaceful development of a "backward" region.

3. To help solve ethnic and territorial conflicts among the small states which were widely understood to be caused by the "Balkanization" of the region after the First World War.

It is not easy to determine whether it was the initiation of East-Central European emigrants that implanted the idea of an Eastern confederation in the minds of American and British postwar planners or if it was the other way round: emigrants tried to reach political gains by adopting these plans, which were dear to diplomats in Washington and London. There are indications for both assumptions.

[7] Political Subcommittee meeting June 6, 1942, Minutes P-14 in box 55, Records of Harley A. Notter, 1939-1945.
[8] Political Subcommittee meeting May 30, 1942, P Minutes 13, in box 55, Records of Harley A. Notter, 1939-1945.

One of the key documents of the American Department of State on the subject, titled An East European Union, is dated June 19, 1942[9]. It was prepared through a succession of debates at the Political Subcommittee of the Advisory Committee of Postwar Foreign Policy during May and early June of 1942.[10] A key British Foreign Office document of the same year[11] is a detailed collection of problems and policy suggestions, itself a "revised version", which was debated all over again in the following months. It was drafted by the Foreign Research and Press Service, which prepared another detailed paper in response to enquiries from the Foreign Office on the subject titled Memoranda on Confederations in Eastern Europe (dated February 2, 1943)[12].

However, it must be noted that both the British and the American plans were drafted after the conclusion of important agreements of the Czechoslovak and Polish governments in exile, led by Edvard Beneš and Władysław Sikorski respectively, in which they declared that the two states plan to "cooperate more closely" after the war. The Joint Declaration of the Polish and Czechoslovak governments, signed in November 11, 1940 in London, stated:

> *"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."*[13]

Then, in January 23, 1942 the two governments signed another agreement in which they already talked of a future confederation of the two states, the purpose of which would be "to assure common policy with regard to foreign affairs, defense, economic and financial matters, social questions, transport, posts and telegraphs".[14]

Also in January, 1942 a similar Greek-Yugoslav agreement on a future union was signed, and an article of Otto of Austria about the desirability of a Danubian Confederation (a reconstructed and democratized Habsburg empire, with a strong central government and equal representation to all nationalities) appeared in the Foreign Affairs.[15]

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[9] Political Subcommittee Document, "as considered to June 19, 1942", P Document 24 in box 56, Records of Harley A. Notter, 1939-1945.

[10] See minutes of the meetings on Danubian Federation, May 9, 1942 (P Minute 10), on East European Federation, May 16, 1942 (P Minute 11 and 12), on Draft Plan for a Federation, May 30, 1942 (P Minute 13) and on Central European Union, June 6, 1942 (P Minute 14) in box 55, Records of Harley A. Notter, 1939-1945. The Advisory Committee was established in February, 1942 to consider post-war problems and develop recommendations for the Secretary of State who served as chairman.

[11] Confederations in Eastern Europe [undated], Foreign Research and Press Service draft paper. U 420 in FO371/31500 (file no. 61.), Foreign Research and Press Service files

[12] U 1292 in FO371/35261 (file no. 58), Foreign Research and Press Service files

[13] Wandycz (1956), pp. 128-129.

[14] Wandycz (1956), pp. 133-135.

[15] Otto of Austria (1942). The article was published alongside an article of Edvard Benes who argued that the destruction of the Habsburg Empire was necessary and should not be undone. Instead, he saw the need for a reorganized Central Europe, the core of which should be the Czechoslovak-Polish confederation. He also declared that "the creation of this new political unit can already be considered an accomplished fact." Beneš (1942)

American and British planers frequently referred to the Czechoslovak-Polish Confederation agreement as well as to confederation ideas of Edvard Benes, Władysław Sikorski, Otto Habsburg or Milan Hodža, whose article titled A Central European Federation, was a basic document discussed by the American Advisory Committee[16].

Nevertheless it is not the case that the American and British planners were simply influenced by East-Central European emigrant politicians. If one looks at other documents of the American Advisory Committee or those of the British Foreign Research and Press Service it becomes apparent that the idea of limiting the sovereignty of individual states to foster closer political and economic ties were trendy at the time. For example, besides creating an international organization to tackle questions of global security, they also talked of a Scandinavian union[17] or the "federal relationship between the Union of South Africa and Swaziland, Basutoland, Southern Rhodesia and Bechuanaland, in addition to Southwest Africa"[18]

Is it possible then, that the émigrés propagated the idea of confederation for their homelands for the very reason that they knew that it would be to the liking of the leaders of their host country? They obviously worked very hard to win the Anglo-American diplomats and the public to their causes[19], but the intentions of most of them (e.g.: Hodža, Sikorski, Otto von Habsburg) are genuine.

Their proposals reflected decades (or in some cases even a century) old local ideas for regional cooperation to counterpoise great-power meddling. The plan that Wladyslaw Sikorski advocated was based on the interwar Polish idea of "Intermarium" (in Polish: "Międzymorze"), a political and military alliance of the smaller states between the Baltic and the Aegean sees. In the words of Sikorski: „A Central-European Federation is a fundamental condition of (…) the security of the states along the Belgrade-Warsaw axis. (…) the basic elements of the federation include: Poland (with Lithuania), Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Greece, (and Hungary)"[20] Habsburg crown prince Otto of Austria propagated the resurrection of the (democratized) Habsburg monarchy, which seized to exist in 1918, and which had been considered by the Americans (and the British) an important element of European security up to the last year of the First World War[21]. Milan Hodža, in his book Federation in Central Europe[22] refers to the anti-Habsburg "Danubian Federation" plan envisaged by Hungarian revolutionary leader Lajos Kossuth and his fellow emigrants in Italy in May 1862, as well as the 1906 plan of Aurel Popovici to further federalize the dualist Habsburg monarchy along ethnic lines.

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[16] A retyped copy referring to The Nation, May 16, 1942 appears as a separate file of the Political Subcommittee of the Advisory Committee (P Document 15 in box 56, Records of Harley A. Notter, 1939-1945)
[17] Territorial Subcommittee Document, February 8, 1943, T Document 234 in box 62, Records of Harley A. Notter, 1939-1945.
[18] Political Subcommittee Document, October 22, 1942, P Document 121a in box 56, Records of Harley A. Notter, 1939-1945.
[19] A typical example of how Otto von Habsburg (Otto of Austria) explains in his Foreign Affairs article to its primarily American audience how the old-new confederation should function: „As for the problems of national culture, that is to say for all linguistic, educational and cultural questions, I think we could borrow one of the dominant ideas of the Constitution of the United States, the fact that every state, large or small, has an equal number of seats in the Senate. And this Senate of the Danubian Nationalities, together with a Supreme Court, could have special competences in safeguarding equality, not only for the nationalities but also for their individual members." Otto of Austria (1942), p. 249.
[20] Terry (1990), pp. 138-139.
[21] Ferrell (1956), p. 28. and 42.
[22] Hodža (1942)

All in all, the idea of creating an East-Central European confederation was in the air both in America and in Britain, both in government circles (as the implementation of a generally and globally favored political and economic design) and among East-Central European emigrant groups (as a continuation of an intellectual tradition tied to the independence of small nations).

The obstacles – reasons of failure

Traditional view holds that the idea of East-Central European confederations was effectively dropped by the American and British planners during the year of 1943 mostly because of Soviet rejection. Members of the American Advisory Committee talked of Soviet suspicion about the Czechoslovak-Polish confederation and other regional plans already in November 1942, the Soviet opposition to these plans was clearly voiced in a letter of Molotov sent to the British government in June 7, 1943; and he expressed his most definite rejection in October 1943 in the foreign ministers' summit in Moscow and then again at the Teheran Conference later that year.[23]

The following logical question is: why did the Soviet rejection result in the dumping of those plans? Why did the Anglo-American diplomats gave in so easily to Soviet pressure in connection with the confederation plans?

Several factors are offered in the existing literature to this question (or to the question of why the Western Allies didn't show more resistance between the years 1943 and 1945 to Soviet territorial demands and political bullying in the region):

- American and British planners feared the possibility of a new German-Soviet separate agreement (a renewal of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact) therefore they did not want to alienate Stalin by supporting plans for East-Central Europe that were rejected by Moscow as being based upon the idea of a cordon sanitaire.[24]
- They accepted Stalin's perception that only East-Central European friendly states can guarantee the security of the Soviet Union in the future, therefore they accepted his demands vis-à-vis East-Central Europe as based on legitimate concerns.
- They assumed that Moscow would be no danger to the region, because "upon the establishment of a collective security organization with United States participation, cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union would be assured: the Soviet Union would no longer need to expand territorially to insure its security or use Communist centers to create internal dissension abroad"[25].
- They didn't consider it a great sacrifice to let East-Central Europe to a Soviet sphere of influence, after all this region had been ruled for ages by the Habsburg, Osman Turkish, German and Russian empires.[26]

[23] Romsics (1992), pp. 20-23
[24] The concern about such a future separate peace is mentioned in Mosely (1956) p. 66.,
[25] Davis (1974), p. 84.
[26] See for example Békés (1999), 217-226. The feeling of non-interest about these faraway places is nicely summarized by Roosevelt's words at a discussion with Joint Chiefs of Staff in November 19, 1943: "we do not want to use our troops in settling local squabbles in such a place as Yugoslavia". Quoted by Davis (1974), p. 77.

- They were grateful to the Soviet Union for taking the hardest part in defeating Nazi Germany, they felt that the Soviet Union deserves domination over a territory as a restitution for its sacrifices or in exchange for its war efforts.[27]
- Especially in the first years following the Nazi German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941 the United States and Britain were not much afraid of the Soviet Union taking East-Central Europe, because they predicted that it would come out of the war weakened and dependent on foreign aid, therefore they assumed that even if Moscow "swallowed" the region, it would not be able to "digest" it.[28]
- At the last years of the war it turned out that nothing short of a substantial military force could have prevented Stalin to exert its influence on the region, however the United States (even alongside Britain) was not willing and probably not in the position to wage war for East-Central Europe.[29] According to some accounts in 1944 even Western Europe was perceived by Churchill to be at risk as President Roosevelt thought it necessary to bring home the US Army from Europe after the war. Therefore the question was not how to uphold Western influence over East-Central Europe but how to defend Western Europe from becoming part of the Soviet sphere.[30]

Overall the Cold War centered reasons for "abandoning" East-Central Europe, contradictory as they sometimes are, can be summarized as the unequal balance of interests (and balance of efforts) of the "three big" powers:

For the British and especially the US diplomats the fate of East-Central Europe was of secondary importance (e.g. compared to securing Western Europe, the Middle East, Japan or the establishment of the United Nations). And even when the future of East-Central Europe was discussed the question of ensuring free and democratic elections or solving the problem of the eastern and western boundaries of Poland was considered much more important than the confederation plans.

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[27] "In the United States, 'through a curious kind of illogic the Russians vigorously successful resistance to Hitler purified them ideologically in the eyes of Americans. (…) In Britain, the trend was less permeated by ideological preconceptions but equally pervasive. (…) Thus on both sides of the Atlantic a growing opinion held that the Russians deserved what they wanted in eastern Europe, not so much because of their ability to take it as because of their presumed other virtues."Mastny (1979), pp. 98-99.

[28] The factor that the Soviet Union would not pose a real danger to the independence of East-Central Europe because of its economic weakness after the war is mentioned by Gordon Brook-Shephard and Ignác Romsics based on quotes from President Roosevelt and Charles E. Bohlen respectively. See Brook-Shepherd (2003), p. 168., and Romsics (1992), p. 23.

[29] This is a conclusion widely held among historians and contemporary diplomats see for example: Mosely (1956), p. 61. The following story of how President Roosevelt felt about this is demonstrated by his words in a conversation with Polish emigrants in June, 1944: "There were five times as many Russians as Poles, the President said, >>and let me tell you now, the British and the Americans have no intention of fighting Russia<<" Gaddis (1972), p. 144. And after the Yalta summit about his chances to force Moscow to let democratic elections in Poland: "After negotiations had ended, Admiral Leahy warned Roosevelt that the agreement on Poland was 'so elastic that the Russians can stretch it all the way from Yalta to Washington without ever technically breaking it'. The President replied wearily: 'I know, Bill – I know it. But it's the best I can do for Poland at this time." Gaddis (1972), p. 163.

[30] The assumption that "the dangers of all continental Europe coming under Soviet domination were great" is demonstrated by Philip E. Mosely quoting a letter of Admiral Leahy to Secretary Hull on May 16, 1944 in which the former presumed that "any future world conflict in the foreseeable future will find Britain and Russia in opposite camps" and the maximum aid the United States can successfully offer in Europe is to defend Britain itself. See: Mosely (1956) pp. 54-55.

On the other hand, to establish Soviet-friendly governments in East-Central Europe was a primary war aim of Moscow, and their concern about the future of this region was tightly connected to the rejection of confederations, the idea of which was perceived a direct danger to its security.

However, in addition to this mainstream account of the fate of the confederation plans, two substantial factors can be highlighted for the causes of failure.

1.) Even before the Soviet "Nyet", American and British planners identified tremendous amounts of problems. Partly because of them no clear policy recommendation came out of the discussions of various sub-committees.

Some of the diplomats were on the opinion that even a close alliance would not be sufficient or even significant for the economic development of the states involved. This was voiced by Russian born leading international economist Leo Pasvolsky, a prominent member of the Advisory Committee. As the minutes of a meeting of the Political Subcommittee record it, earlier he had started a research for a book on economic relations of the Danubian states "with the proposition that Austro-Hungary had been an economic unit as opposed to the fragmented post-war Danubian world, and that therefore it was necessary to get back to the Dual Monarchy (…). He discovered (…) that (…) Austria and Hungary nearly broke apart whenever they had to revise the tariff. (…) He found also that every ten years, in connection with the renewal of the Austro-Hungarian Bank, there was sharp strife. (…) Austria-Hungary solved its economic problem only through forced industrialization with the use of foreign capital and through the exportation of 200,000 men per year. He stated that in his view, the Danubian territory is not at all self-sufficient. Even if, he said, Czechoslovakia and Austria were willing to give up their agricultural tariff protection, this would afford to the other Danubian countries only a small additional market. Similarly, if the agricultural countries of that area were to give up industrial production, this step would increase by very little markets of the industrial states of the area. The result is that all of the Danubian states are forced to deal chiefly with non-Danubian states and are therefore thrown back on their need for relations with the outside world."[31]

It was also widely discussed that the questions of minority protection and of drawing acceptable borders constituted a very difficult problem. It would have been easy of course to go back to the interwar arrangement, yet the Versailles-system was considered as something that needs to be altered to produce a more just and more secure regional order. Thus were raised the complex questions of where the western and eastern borders of Poland and where the southern border of Czechoslovakia should lie, what the future status of Transylvania should be, and whether population transfers after the war could help solve the issue of minority oppression and ethnic separatism. A paper of the Foreign Research and Press Service identified the following territorial questions as problematic: Austro-Italian, Yugoslav-Italian, Greek-Turkish, Bulgaro-Turkish, Austro-Yugoslav, Hungaro-Yugoslav frontiers. It also included as special problem areas the following: Slovakia, Sub-Carpathian Ruthenia, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia[32].

[31] Political Subcommittee meeting May 9, 1942, Minutes P-10, pp. 8-10, box 55 of Records of Harley A. Notter, 1939-1945. It is true however, that with his scepticism Pasvolsky earned himself the title „our minority of one" from Sumner Welles at a meeting later in May. Minutes P-12, p. 16, box 55 of Records of Harley A. Notter, 1939-1945. NA7/9092

[32] Confederations in Eastern Europe. Foreign Research and Press Service document [undated] pp. 18-19. U 420 in FO371/31500 (file no. 61.) pp.

It soon became apparent that in order to produce a "more just" peace system (i. e.: national borders that more reflect the ethnic-linguistic "facts on the ground") interwar conditions should be changed in a way unfavorable to regional allies (e.g.: Poland and Czechoslovakia) and "reward" enemy states (like Bulgaria and Hungary) that had been too severely punished after the First World War. The transfer of territories from friends to enemies seemed politically problematic[33].

Because of these difficulties American and British planners already in 1942 downgraded the original plan of creating a strong political union consisting of all states in between Germany and the Soviet Union from the Baltic to the Aegean sea. The new versions of the plans talked of two or three confederations (Northern, Danubian, Southern), which were to become more of a loose alliance than a politically bound union. From 1944, as the resistance of Moscow became clear to everyone, planning committees and subcommittees ever more frequently use the term "regional groupings" instead of confederations.[34] This however is not a sudden change but a step in an earlier existing trend of disenchantment with the confederation idea.

2.) Even if concerned about the Soviet advance East-Central European émigrés could not agree on a joint plan – even though some of them kept on propagating their own plans and recommending a confrontational course with Moscow up until 1945.

These politicians acted upon their own perceived national (or personal) interest and turned a blind eye on the vital need for regional cooperation. This is perhaps the least true of Milan Hodža (who was the representative of the least powerful nation among the émigrés discussed here) and the most typical of Edvard Beneš (who as the most prominent diplomat among them was a key politician shaping postwar East-Central Europe).

At a certain point in the course of the Second World War Beneš had a conflict with all the above mentioned émigré politicians. At the beginning of the war, he and Milan Hodža led two competing governments in exile in London and Paris respectively. Hodža's Czecho-Slovak National Council was an organization that embodied Slovak aspirations for some national autonomy as opposed to Czechoslovakist Beneš who wanted a homogeneous nation state. Beneš also considered Otto von Habsburg and Hungarian right wing émigré Tibor Eckhardt a national enemy, who want to re-establish the pre-1918 regional order, where "Czech and Slovak lands" were separate parts of Austria-Hungary.

Beneš even had some deep quarrels with Sikorski, with whom he seemed to come to terms by signing the Czechoslovak-Polish confederation agreement. The details of the plan were never worked out. There was no solution to the decades old delineation problem of the Teschen (Český Těšin/Cieszyn) region. Being in close cooperation with Moscow Beneš was not in favor of Poland getting back its prewar eastern regions (which was claimed by the Soviet Union and where Poles were a minority). Sikorski, in turn, did not want to guarantee the pre-war southern frontier of Czechoslovakia. And while

[33] See for example the following train of thought: „It would seem most natural to draw any new frontiers in Eastern Europe on ethnic line. (…) It was on economic or strategic grounds that the 1919 settlement included Magyar areas in Rumania, Slovakia, Ruthenia and Yugoslavia, and Bulgarian areas in Yugoslavia and Greece. Acceptance of the above argument would thus involve adjustments of the pre-1938 frontiers in favour of Hungary and Bulgaria. While feeling against these two States will run very high among their neighbours, who may therefore resist any such concessions, it may be urged upon them that some concessions may be wise if they are to live together with their old enemies at all" Confederations in Eastern Europe. Foreign Research and Press Service document [undated] pp. 18-19. U 420 in FO371/31500 (file no. 61.)

[34] Romsics (1992), p. 23.

for Sikorski (and a substantial part of the Polish political elite) the Soviet Union was as serious an enemy as Nazi Germany, Beneš, following a century-long Czech pan-Slav political tradition, was not afraid to cooperate and trust Moscow. He was even willing to drop the idea of confederations as he learned the serious objections of the Soviet leadership.

Western diplomats frequently noticed the antagonisms of their "Middle zone" allies, and the petty and selfish nationalism they represent. It was clear that even those politicians who advocated some form of regional cooperation (be it Polish Sikorski, Czech Beneš, Hungarian Eckhardt or "Otto of Austria") were more interested in re-gaining their country's territorial unity, than to cooperate either on economic or internal political grounds or to counter the age old menace of domination by neighboring great powers. This substantially weakened the chances of Western diplomats to design an acceptable confederation plan, especially as their discussions also brought up a great deal of problems in connection with its possible implementation.

All this doesn't mean however, that the failure of the confederation plans is due only to local factors and doesn't have to do with great power politics. One of the reasons why East-Central European political elites were not able to harmonize their postwar plans was the fact that the pre-war regional arrangements in many cases violated the principle of self-determination and formed the basis of serious grievances and disputes.

Thus, controversies of the Versailles peace settlement system that followed the First World War became a factor not only for the outbreak of the second but also for the failure of US and British policy makers to effectively oppose Soviet control over East-Central Europe afterwards.

Conclusion

Did confederation plans for East-Central Europe function as early ideas for containing the Soviet Union? Even though other (economic, regional political) factors were also present for proposing them, if they were pursued further, these schemes could have become an attempt of early containment. While probably even a confederation treaty signed by leading East-Central European politicians and endorsed by the American and British administration could not have hindered the setting up of puppet regimes and the Sovietization of the region, its "digestion" would certainly have been made more difficult for Moscow, and the plan could have formed the intellectual and political basis for coordinated East-Central European opposition movements later on.

However these early efforts for containment never materialized. As opposed to the existing literature I tried to show that the reason for this failure is not only that the Western allies were interested much more in keeping the coalition with Soviet Union working during the war than in having a say in East-Central European matters, but also that upon closer research the confederation ideas for the region turned out to be unworkable, especially as even Allied-friendly East-European politicians perceived other "national interests" more important.

This suggests that it was perhaps not so much that the confederation plans were dropped because the Allied great powers accepted Soviet influence in East-Central Europe (as existing historiography usually puts it) than the other way round: the deep regional conflicts that came to the surface, the incompatibility of local political strives and the difficulties in designing any workable confederation plan might have been one of the factors in the Western decision to let the region go.

This doesn't mean however that the blame for letting East-Central Europe fall in Soviet hands should be transferred from western powers onto irrational local nationalists. A great part of regional tensions were the products of the post-First World War peace system, which was designed by the then great-power victors, and which in many cases was in contradiction with its declared principle of national self-determination. These very tensions were reflected both in the conflicts of the East-Central European émigrés and in the problem areas which caused the most headache to the American and British planners.

American and British planners sought to ease these tensions, which had been exploited by Germany and the Soviet Union, by suggesting border corrections. However some of these would have meant taking away territories from "friendly" states and/or rewarding "enemies", which was hardly attainable politically after the war.

All this suggests that the provisions of the Versailles peace system was not only a factor in the outbreak of the Second World War, but also one in the beginning of the Cold War, as it created conditions that rendered unfeasible regional cooperation as a forceful counterproposal and counter-policy against the Soviet imperial ambitions.

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