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THE FOREIGN POLICY OF JÓZEF PIŁSUDSKI AND JÓZEF BECK,
1926-1939: MISCONCEPTIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS¹

Interwar Poland is hardly mentioned in current American textbooks on the history of twentieth-century Europe, and even then the information is generally sparse and often misleading. Poland makes an appearance with the Versailles Treaty of 1919, generally considered a bad treaty whose German-Polish settlement is sometimes judged as contrary to the principle of self-determination. Polish armed resistance against the Germans in September 1939 generally goes unmentioned and the Soviet attack on Poland is often explained as dictated by Soviet security. There is usually very little mention of Polish foreign policy, yet it should be studied as a factor in international politics in the interwar period, especially in the years from Hitler's rise to power in Germany to his attack on Poland, sparking the outbreak of WW II. The pre-Hitler period is often passed over lightly although it contains the roots of Western attitudes toward Nazi Germany. In fact, before adopting the policy of appeasement toward Hitler, Britain, whose decisions ultimately determined French policy, assumed that German demands for the revision of the Versailles Treaty of 1919, particularly the German-Polish settlement, must be satisfied to secure lasting peace. One should bear in mind that despite her defeat in November 1918, Germany was still the greatest industrial power in Europe; France feared Germany but needed her coal and steel, while Britain needed the German market for her goods. Britain also needed peace in Europe to devote her limited armed forces to the defense of her overseas Empire. Finally, Eastern Europe was not seen as a sphere of vital British interests. All these factors contributed to the belief of all British governments that the Polish-German frontier — not recognized by Germany — should be revised in her favor. This meant, above all, the return to

¹This is a much expanded version of the paper read in my absence by Dr. Patrice Dabrowski at the panel "Commemorating Piłsudski II: Military and Diplomatic Themes," at the ASEEES annual convention in Los Angeles, November 17, 2010. I wish to thank her for reading it and the panelists for their comments. I also ask the indulgence of readers for including some background material which is familiar to them, but not to most American historians of twentieth-century Europe and their students, to whom this paper is dedicated.

Germany of the preponderantly German port city of Danzig — made a self-governing Free City by the Treaty of Versailles — and also the preponderantly Polish-speaking Polish Pomerania, awarded by the treaty to Poland. The Germans called it the Polish Corridor because this narrow neck of land separated East Prussia from the rest of Germany. French governments came to accept the British view and saw the Franco-Polish alliance (1921) as less an advantage than a burden. Few people realized at the time that all German statesmen before Hitler aimed at the return not just of Danzig and the Polish Corridor but also most, and if possible all the territory of Prussian Poland as well as eastern Upper Silesia, even though the vast majority of the inhabitants of these territories were Polish.

At the same time, Poland was often criticized for taking too much former Russian territory after its victory over the Red Army in 1920, a view shared by the Soviet leadership with émigré Russian politicians, most of the European Left, most Western governments, and most Western and Russian historians today. While Moscow officially recognized the Polish-Soviet frontier established in March 1921 by the Treaty of Riga, the Comintern (Communist International) claimed to support the principle of self-determination and questioned Poland's right to both her western and eastern frontiers, but especially the eastern, Polish-Soviet frontier. Few Anglo-American historians of twentieth-century Europe mention Józef Piłsudski's original aim of establishing a Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian federation allied with an independent Ukraine. When this goal proved unrealistic due to the Lithuanian and Ukrainian desire for independence and the Polish-Soviet War, he aimed at a strategically defensive frontier. The Treaty of Riga gave Poland less than Piłsudski wanted, but even so the majority of the population east of the Bug and San rivers — roughly equivalent to the Curzon Line of July 1920 and the eastern frontier of Poland since 1945 — was Ukrainian and Belarusian, plus a significant number of Jews. Nevertheless, Poles formed an overall minority of about 40% with majorities in the cities and regions of Białystok, Lwów (Ukr. Lviv), and Wilno (Lith. Vilnius). In view of all the factors mentioned above, every Polish foreign minister had a very difficult task before him: how to secure the existence of an independent Poland between her two traditional enemies, neither of whom viewed its frontiers with her as acceptable, while her Western ally France agreed with the British view on the need to revise the Polish-German settlement established by the Versailles Treaty of 1919 and also concluded an alliance with the USSR in 1935.

In this paper, I will discuss two key features of Polish foreign policy in the period 1933 — 1939, both of which were strongly criticized or even condemned at the time, and are still criticized or condemned by historians and journalists today. These two features are: (1) the Polish-German Declaration of Non-Aggression of January 26, 1934, which was the joint achievement of Piłsudski and Foreign Minister Józef Beck, and (2)

Polish foreign policy during the Czechoslovak Crisis of 1938, culminating in the annexation of two-thirds of western Cieszyn (Teschen) Silesia, known in Polish as *Zaolzie* (the land across the Olza river), after the Munich Conference of September 29, 1938. At this conference, the leaders of Britain, France and Italy agreed to Adolf Hitler's annexation of a part of Czechoslovakia, the highly industrialized, mainly German-speaking Sudetenland (formerly, with the rest of Czechoslovakia, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), but postponed for three months decisions on Polish and Hungarian claims to Czechoslovak territory.

Before discussing Polish foreign policy, however, a few words are needed about Western perceptions of Piłsudski (1867-1935). He directed Polish foreign policy in the first years of independence as well as after his seizure of power in May 1926. A socialist leader in the struggle for independence before 1914, organizer of Polish legions in World War I, head of state in 1918-22, victor over the Red Army in 1920, and in power from 1926 to his death, he is recognized by most Poles as the greatest Polish statesman of the twentieth century. In English-language historical literature and reference works, however, his policies are generally criticized and he is often described as a dictator.² In fact, he was not a dictator, but developed an authoritarian form of government after seizing power in May 1926 and aimed for good relations with both of Poland's great neighbors. It is also worth noting that the Polish victories over the Red Army in 1920, which prevented the further spread of Soviet communism westward, are generally ignored in Anglo-American histories of twentieth-century Europe, while Piłsudski's previous march with Simon Petliura's Ukrainian divisions to Kiev (April-May 1920), if mentioned at all, is generally condemned.³ The

² For a discussion of negative views of Piłsudski, see Cienciala, "Józef Piłsudski w Anglo-Amerykańskich informatorach i podręcznikach historycznych po drugiej wojnie światowej. Zagadnienie mitu-stereotypu negatywnego" [Józef Piłsudski in Anglo-American Reference Works and History Textbooks after World War II. The Problem of the Negative, Mythical Stereotype], in Wojciech Wrzesiński, ed., *Polskie mity polityczne XIX i XX wieku* [Polish Political Myths of the 19th and 20th Centuries] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 1994), 167-194. For a positive but often ignored English-language study of Piłsudski's seizure of power, see Joseph Rothschild, *Piłsudski's Coup d'Etat* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966).

³ See: Cienciala, "Historiografia anglosaska o wojnie polsko-sowieckiej i zwycięstwie polskim nad Armią Czerwoną w 1920 r." [English-language Historiography on the Polish-Soviet War and the Polish Victory over the Red Army] in: Anna M. Cienciala, Piotr Wandycz, eds., *Wojna Polsko-Bolszewicka 1919-1920 w ocenach historyków* [The Polish-Soviet War of 1919-1920 as Evaluated by Historians] (Warsaw: Instytut Józefa Piłsudskiego, 2003), 41-54. A recent world history handbook states that Piłsudski "led an unsuccessful

exception to this general condemnation is the textbook on European history by the best-known Western historian of Poland, Norman Davies. His work on the Polish-Soviet War is excellent although partly outdated, while some of his statements about Piłsudski and the Bolsheviks are somewhat strange.⁴ Another exception is the balanced account given in *Wikipedia* under “Polish-Soviet War” (accessed November 2010), which has a good reading list.

Anglo-American historians of twentieth-century Europe also generally ignore the fact that Piłsudski originated the policy of “equilibrium” — that is, balancing between Germany and the USSR — a policy carried out by his disciple, Beck, deputy foreign minister, 1930-1932, and minister from December 1932 until September 1939. The policy of equilibrium stemmed from Piłsudski’s view, expressed to then Foreign Minister August Zaleski in May 1926, that the two canons of Polish diplomacy were “one, strict neutrality between Germany and Russia, so that each of them would be absolutely certain that Poland would not go against it with the help of the other, and two, alliance with France and Romania as a guarantee of peace.”⁵

attack on the USSR in 1920.” See Józef (Klemens) Piłsudski, 1867-1935, *Dictionary of World History*, (NTC Pocket References, NTC Publishing Group, Lincolnwood, Illinois, 1997), 287. In a highly praised book, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm writes that the war was “provoked by the territorial ambitions of Poland” which “now demanded its eighteenth century frontiers [...]... Yet the Polish workers failed to rise and the Red Army was turned back at the gates of Warsaw” (p. 70).

⁴ Davies gives a very good, brief account of the war and its significance in his textbook, *Europe: A History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 934-937. In *White Eagle-Red Star: The Polish-Soviet War, 1919-1920* (London: Macdonald, 1972; reprinted, London: Pimlico, Random House, 2003), Davies compares Piłsudski to a “rhinoceros” ... “indestructible, myopic, unpredictable” (p. 66). He also compares the Bolsheviks, after their arrival in Poland, to “unruly toddlers who had strayed from curiosity out of their political nursery and into the street” (p. 159). For a more recent study of the Polish-Soviet War, see Adam Zamoyski, *Warsaw 1920: Lenin’s Failed Conquest of Europe* (London: Harper Press, 2008). See also Piotr S. Wandycz’s excellent diplomatic study, *Soviet-Polish Relations 1917-1921* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967). For a detailed study of the negotiations leading to the Treaty of Riga, see Jerzy Borzęcki, *The Soviet-Polish Peace of 1921 and the Creation of Interwar Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Cienciala review, *Slavic Review* 68, no. 3 (2009): 667-668.

⁵ Cited by Piotr S. Wandycz in his article “The Place of the French Alliance in Poland’s Foreign Policy,” in *Bâtir une Nouvelle Sécurité. La coopération militaire entre la France et les États d’Europe centrale et orientale de 1919 à 1929* [Building New Security : The Military Cooperation between France and the States of Central and Eastern Europe from 1919 to 1929] (Château de

The policy of equilibrium was based on Poland's agreements with her two great, predatory neighbors: (a) The Polish-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of July 25, 1932, valid for three years, and (b) The Polish-German Declaration of Non-Aggression of January 26, 1934, valid for ten years. In the Polish-Soviet Pact, both sides agreed on the peaceful resolution of international disputes as well as that existing obligations were not obstacles to the peaceful development of their relations. They renounced the use of war and undertook not to aid the state committing aggression against the other party to the pact, or to participate in any clearly aggressive agreements against the other party.⁶ In the Polish-German Declaration of Non-Aggression (not pact, because the German Foreign Ministry objected to the word as implying recognition of the Polish-German frontier), each party recognized the other's international commitments as well as the Pact of Paris (Kellogg-Briand Pact, 1928) that renounced wars of aggression and agreed to settle disputes by direct negotiations; if these failed, they would use other available procedures. The Polish-German declaration was, in turn, balanced in May 1934 by the extension of the Polish-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact until December 31, 1945.⁷

Vincennes : Centre d'Études d'Histoire de la Défense et Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, 2001), 189. The Franco-Polish alliance and military conventions were signed in Paris on February 19 1921; they concerned mutual aid against German aggression. The Polish-Romanian defensive alliance and military conventions were signed in Bucharest on March 3 1921; they concerned mutual aid in case of Soviet aggression and were renewed twice in the 1930s.

⁶ For the Polish text of the Polish-Soviet Pact of 1932, see Tadeusz Cieślak, I.A. Chrienow et al., eds., *Dokumenty i materiały do stosunków polsko-radzieckich, Tom V, Maj 1926-Grudzień 1932* [Documents and Materials on Polish-Soviet Relations, vol. V, May 1926-December 1932] (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1966), doc. 322; parallel Russian volumes were published in Moscow. For the English translation, see Stanisław Biegański et al., eds., *Documents on Polish-Soviet Relations 1939-1945*, vol. 1. 1939-1943 (London: Heinemann, 1961), doc. 6. The pact was to be automatically extended for two years, unless denounced by one of the two parties; for its extension in May 1934, see n.6 below.

⁷ For the Polish text of the Polish-German Declaration of 1934, see Tadeusz Jędruszczak and Maria Nowak-Kielbikowa eds., *Dokumenty z dziejów polskiej polityki zagranicznej 1918-1939, tom II, 1933-1939* [Documents on the History of Polish Foreign Policy 1918-1939, vol. 2, 1933-1939] (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1996), doc. 8. For the English translation of the equally valid German text, see *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, ser. C, v. II (published jointly by His Majesty's Stationery Office, London, and The Department of State, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1959), doc. 219; the same volumes in both series, C and D, were published in French and German. For the extension of the Polish-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, see

These two agreements were the basis of Polish foreign policy until war loomed on the horizon in spring 1939; they were also based on the principle that Poland could never be dependent on either Germany or Russia. A concise statement defining Polish foreign policy was made in January 1935 by Beck to French Foreign Minister Pierre Laval, to whom he repeated what Piłsudski had told former Foreign Minister Louis Barthou during the latter's visit to Poland in April 1934:

Polish policy is based on the following elements: I. Our geographical location and historical experience both show that our decisive problems consist of Poland's neighborly relations with Germany and Russia. These problems absorb most of our political work and our limited means of action. History teaches us that the greatest catastrophe to affect our nation resulted from the activity of those two states. And secondly, in the desperate situation in which we then found ourselves, no state in the world could be found to hasten with help to us.

Therefore, our key interests depend on the solution of this basic problem. A further conclusion is the conviction that Warsaw's policy can never depend either on Moscow or Berlin. I am recalling this conversation [between Piłsudski and Barthou] because these are the limits of what is politically possible for us. Facts and concepts that go outside these principles will always force us to say: *non possumus* [we cannot].

In re-born Poland — just as at the end of the eighteenth century — it was clear that we had to achieve good fortune with these two partners by ourselves.

In this concise statement, Beck explained why Poland could not participate in multilateral agreements that would endanger her bilateral agreements with Germany and the USSR. On this occasion, Beck also disagreed with Laval's flattering statement that Poland was a Great Power; he said she was not such because she conducted a regional, not a global policy.⁸

Dokumenty z dziejów, 2, doc. 22; English text in *Documents on Polish-Soviet Relations*, 1, doc. 10.

⁸ "Notatka z rozmów Pana Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych Becka z Ministrem Spraw Zagranicznych Francji, Lavalem, dnia 16 i 19 stycznia w Genewie" [Note on the conversations of Foreign Minister Beck with French Foreign Minister Laval, 16 and 19 January 1935 at Geneva], Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, sygn. 108, Archiwum Akt Nowych [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ref. no. 108, Archive of Modern Documents], Warsaw; translated by Cienciala. I thank Dr. Hab. Docent Marek Kornat for making this document available to me. Louis Barthou paid a state visit to Poland in April 1934; on his policy aims, see Piotr

The first of the two bilateral agreements mentioned above, the Polish-Soviet pact of July 1932, was in line with the budding Franco-Soviet rapprochement of the time, so it was welcome to Poland's ally, France. This was not, however, the case with the Polish-German Declaration of Non-Aggression which, negotiated independently of France, was a shock to Paris, arousing suspicions of Poland that grew stronger over time. It was described by British historian Hugh Seton-Watson as the first breach in the French alliance system, that is: the Franco-Polish alliance and military convention signed in Paris, February 19, 1921, and the Franco-Czechoslovak alliance, signed in Paris, January 25, 1924. France signed these alliances to restrain Germany in the East after the Anglo-American guarantee to aid her in case of German aggression in the West fell through with the U.S. rejection of membership in the League of Nations and thus the Versailles Treaty. According to Seton-Watson, the declaration began a period of Polish-German cooperation that helped Hitler rearm, isolate Austria, and finally dismember Czechoslovakia. Beck's policy allegedly aimed at the German destruction of Bolshevik Russia, with some territorial gains for Poland, and then Polish neutrality in a war between Germany and the Western Powers. Seton-Watson wrote the classic statement of British interwar left-wing intellectuals' views of Polish foreign policy of the time. Part of this statement reads:

The basis of Polish policy, then, was not love of Germany but a combination of territorial greed, fear of revolution on the part of the landowners and colonels, mistrust of the strength and will to resistance of the Western Powers, and the supreme confidence of Colonel Beck in his own Machiavellian genius. This policy played an important part in the preparation of German plans for Eastern Europe.⁹

In 1962 Seton-Watson explained that his book — written during his military service in World War II — reflected the British mood and hopes of the time, which he shared. As it turned out, his description of what he called Polish, or Beck's foreign policy, was to influence several generations of English-

S. Wandycz, *The Twilight of French Eastern Alliances 1926-1936* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), ch. 11. In January 1935, the French government was trying to mount an "Eastern Locarno" pact, involving the USSR, Germany, and Poland. The aim was to use Moscow to check Berlin; the project did not get off the ground because Germany rejected it, so Poland's rejection was not decisive for its failure.

⁹ Hugh Seton-Watson, *Eastern Europe Between the Wars, 1918-1941* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1962) (3rd ed.), 389.

speaking historians up to the present.¹⁰ The durability of these views is evident in a textbook on interwar Europe written by a Canadian historian of twentieth-century international relations and published in 2006. The author claims that Piłsudski and Beck envisaged joining Hitler in a crusade against the Soviet Union.¹¹ Indeed, the European left-wing press saw the Declaration of Non-Aggression, like the Soviet press which inspired it, as a class-based anti-Soviet policy. Rumors or outright charges that it contained a secret protocol directed against the USSR circulated for years to come. Not only were they a staple of Soviet histories of the interwar period, but they are still touted by the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. An alleged documentary film shown on a Russian state-owned TV channel in late August 2009 depicted Polish Foreign Minister Józef Beck as a German agent.¹²

There was, of course, no secret protocol to the Polish-German agreement of 1934, nor was it a breach in the French alliance system,

¹⁰ Seton-Watson, *ibid.*, xii. For a critical study of interpretations of the declaration, see Cieniala, "The Declaration of Non-Aggression of January 26, 1934 in Polish-German and International Relations: A Reappraisal," *East European Quarterly*, 1, no. 1 (1967): 1-30, and *idem*, "Polish Foreign Policy, 1926-1939. 'Equilibrium: Stereotype and Reality,'" in Alexander Korczyński and Tadeusz Świętochowski eds., *Poland Between Germany and Russia 1926-1939: The Theory of Two Enemies* (New York: Piłsudski Institute of America, 1975), 44-59. For a detailed study of contemporary reactions to the Polish-German declaration in Western and East European countries as well as by Poland's German minority, see Mieczysław Wojciechowski, ed., *Deklaracja polsko-niemiecka o niestosowaniu przemocy z dnia 26 stycznia 1934 r. z perspektywy Polski i Europy w siedemdziesiątą rocznicę podpisania* [The Polish-German Declaration on Excluding the Use of Force of January 26, 1934, from the Perspective of Poland and Europe on the Seventieth Anniversary of its Signing] (Toruń: Centrum Edukacji Europejskiej, 2005).

¹¹ Martin Kitchen, *Europe Between The Wars* (New York and London: Pearson/Longman, 2006) (2nd ed.), 187. For a repetition of Seton-Watson's view of Beck's policy without citing the source, see Adrian Webb, *The Routledge Companion to Central and Eastern Europe since 1919* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 11.

¹² On the charges of a secret protocol directed at the USSR, as recorded in diplomatic documents, see Marek Kornat, "Pakt, którego nie było...(Pogłoski o rzekomym tajnym układzie polsko-niemieckim w latach 1934-1938)" [The Pact which did not exist...(Rumors about an alleged, secret Polish-German Pact in the years 1934-1938)], in *idem*, *Polityka równowagi 1934-1939. Polska między Wschodem a Zachodem* [The Policy of Equilibrium 1934-1938. Poland between East and West] (Kraków: Arkana Historii, 2007), 229-306. The Russian TV documentary was titled "Sekrety Tainykh Protokolov" [The Secrets of Secret Protocols]. The film was shown on channel "Rossiya" on August 21, 2009.

although French diplomats and military leaders saw it as such. In fact, this was hardly the case because the alliances hardly constituted a “system.” France’s allies, Poland and Czechoslovakia, were deeply divided by a territorial dispute as well as very different perceptions of the USSR. Furthermore, France had been trying to water down the Polish alliance for years. The beginnings of this French policy were described and analyzed by Piotr S. Wandycz in 1962 but it did not become more widely known, at least to French speakers, until 1981. The author of a masterly French analysis of this process traced it to the victory of the “Cartel des Gauches” (Left-Wing Coalition) in June 1924, followed by French negotiations for the Locarno Treaties of October 1925.¹³ In fact, the roots of Polish policy leading to the German-Polish agreement of 1934 go back to the Locarno Treaties, when Germany recognized her post-World War I western frontiers, which were then guaranteed in a Treaty of Mutual Guarantee, signed by Belgium, Britain, France, and Italy. To balance this, France signed separate Treaties of Mutual Assistance with her allies, Czechoslovakia and Poland, but French military aid to each country was now dependent on the machinery of the League of Nations: France could only come to their aid if they were the victims of unprovoked aggression and the League of Nations Council failed to reach unanimous consent in identifying the aggressor. Germany signed arbitration treaties with all her neighbors, including Poland, but frontier issues were excluded in its arbitration treaty with the latter, and Germany also rejected a French guarantee of the treaties.¹⁴ It is worth noting that the Soviet government saw the Locarno Treaties as directed against the USSR, evidently assuming that the signatories would aid Poland or/and Romania in a war with Soviet Russia, which was most unlikely given the wording of the formula on aid to be extended by League members to victims of unprovoked aggression. Furthermore, German-Soviet relations, established by the

¹³ See Georges-Henri Soutou, “L’Alliance franco-polonaise 1925-1933 ou comment s’en débarasser?” [The Franco-Polish Alliance 1925-1933, or How to Get Rid of it?], *Revue d’Histoire Diplomatique*, 2/3/4 (1981): 295-348. For a succinct description of the French alliance system up to 1936, see Piotr S. Wandycz, *Twilight*, 3-16. For a well-documented study of French security policy as well as French views of Polish-Czechoslovak relations and efforts to establish military cooperation between them, see Isabelle Davion, *Mon voisin, cet ennemi. La politique de sécurité française face aux relations polono-tchécoslovaques entre 1919 et 1939* [My Neighbor, that Enemy: French Security Policy in the Face of Polish-Czechoslovak Relations between 1919 and 1939] (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2009).

¹⁴ On the Locarno Treaties, see Wandycz, *France and her Eastern Allies*, ch. 13, and idem, *Twilight*, ch. 1; also Anna M. Cienciala and Titus Komarnicki, *From Versailles to Locarno: Keys to Polish Foreign Policy 1919-1925* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1984), chs. 9 and 10.

Rapallo Treaty (April 1922), were excellent at this time. Reinforced by the Treaty of Berlin (April 1926), they included secret Soviet-German military cooperation, especially the development of war planes, tanks, and parachute troops — which allowed Germany to bypass the Versailles Treaty prohibition of offensive weapons for German armed forces.¹⁵ Gustav Stresemann, who supported this policy, received the Nobel Peace Prize for the Locarno Treaties, together with French Prime Minister Aristide Briand and British Prime Minister Austen Chamberlain. German-Soviet military cooperation was a constant threat to Poland until Hitler ended it in 1933 as part of his anti-communist policies.

The clear discrimination of Poland and Czechoslovakia in the Locarno Treaties was mainly due to British policy, for Britain had refused to include Poland and Czechoslovakia in a Franco-British security agreement as proposed by the French in December 1921. She also refused to sign “The Geneva Protocol” in 1924. The protocol, worked out by Polish Foreign Minister Aleksander Skrzyński and Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Edvard Beneš, mandated compulsory arbitration; if this failed, League of Nations members were to come to the aid of any member who was the victim of aggression. A year later, Skrzyński signed the Locarno Treaties for Poland, believing that she must be part of the European political system. Piłsudski (out of government since May 1923) was outraged. Beck noted that the marshal condemned the Locarno Treaties for consolidating the unequal balance between East and West [in Europe] and set himself the goal of redressing it.¹⁶

¹⁵ German Foreign Minister Stresemann obtained a formula on aid to victims of aggression that allowed Germany to safeguard its relations with the USSR. It stated that each member of the League of Nations was to extend aid as far as its geographical and military position allowed; see Cienciala and Komarnicki, *From Versailles to Locarno*, 265. For the Soviet interpretation of the Locarno Treaties as directed against the USSR, see *Istoriia Diplomatii* (2nd ed.) (Moscow, 1965) vol. 3, and *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (Moscow, 1979), both cited by D. Asanov, in [http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Locarno Treaties of 1925](http://encyclopedia2.thefreedictionary.com/Locarno_Treaties_of_1925) (last accessed November 25, 2010). On German-Soviet military cooperation in the 1920s and early 1930s, see Yuri Dyakov and Tatyana Bushuyeva, *The Red Army and the Wehrmacht: How the Soviets Militarized Germany and Paved the Way to Fascism, 1922-1933* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1995).

¹⁶ On Skrzyński, see Piotr S. Wandycz, *Aleksander Skrzyński. Minister Spraw Zagranicznych II Rzeczypospolitej* [Aleksander Skrzyński: Foreign Minister of the Second Polish Republic] (Warsaw: Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 2006); Cienciala review, *TPR*, 52, no. 1 (2007): 115-120. For Piłsudski’s comment on Locarno, see *Polska polityka zagraniczna w latach 1926-1932**. Na podstawie tekstów min. Józefa Becka opracowała Anna M.

Redressing the balance in Poland's favor, however, was not feasible for several years after Locarno because neither Weimar Germany nor the USSR accepted its frontiers with Poland, even though Moscow had recognized them in the Treaty of Riga of March 18, 1921.¹⁷ Weimar Germany aimed at the recovery of most — and if possible, all — of former Prussian Poland, especially the preponderantly German Danzig, as well as the Polish-speaking “Polish Corridor” separating East Prussia from the rest of Germany, both established by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Piłsudski and Beck, as well as most Poles, considered both as vital to Polish independence, and both were to figure prominently in the approach to war in 1939. Some Anglo-American historians of twentieth-century Europe, however, do not seem to know the origins of these settlements and their primary importance to Poland, so it is useful to summarize the main facts. Danzig had been the port city of pre-partition Poland; it was taken by Prussia in 1793, despite strong resistance by its German-speaking citizens, who revolted unsuccessfully against Prussian rule in 1797. The American, British, and French members of the Commission on Polish Affairs at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 had advocated awarding Danzig, as well as Polish-speaking regions in the southern part of East Prussia and the railway from Warsaw to Danzig, to Poland. They argued that it was more equitable to give twenty million Poles free access to the sea at the expense of two million Germans (estimated to live in future Poland) than to satisfy the Germans by leaving Danzig and the Polish Corridor to an aggressive Germany. This, it was argued, would make Poland a vassal state, and in any case most of the population in the Polish Corridor was Polish. However, when the French government agreed to accept an Anglo-American guarantee in case of German aggression against France, it also agreed to a compromise solution for Danzig in the shape of a self-governing Free City, with Polish rights therein and under the protection of the League of Nations. A contributing factor to this decision was President Woodrow Wilson's desire to have a precedent for the port city of Trieste, which he did not want awarded either to Italy or to Yugoslavia. Also, it was decided that plebiscites would be held in southern East Prussia. They took place as the Red Army

Cienciała, [Polish Foreign Policy in the Years 1926-1932,* edited by Anna M. Cienciała, based on the texts of Minister Józef Beck] *printing error: the end date should be 1939 (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1990), 25-26. An unauthorized Polish edition appeared as *Ostatni Raport* [Final Report] (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1987). For the French translation with extensive appendices, edited by Jadwiga Beck et al., see Józef Beck, *Dernier Rapport* (Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1951), 5-6; the English version, *Final Report* (New York: Speller & Sons, 1957), has only skeletal appendices but some interesting photographs.

¹⁷ For the Treaty of Riga, see n. 3 above.

was advancing on Warsaw in 1920 and, as the mostly Protestant Poles were promised extensive cultural rights, the majority voted for Germany. The “Polish Corridor” (annexed by Prussia in the First Partition of Poland, 1772) was awarded to Poland on ethnic grounds. Indeed, according to the Prussian Census of 1910, 42.5% of the population was German (a percentage probably lower in reality because the census **did not include children, and it shrank rapidly after 1918 when many Germans opted to leave**). Despite these facts, some Anglo-American historians state today that the Polish Corridor was preponderantly German, so awarding it to Poland violated the principle of self-determination.¹⁸ Another German grievance against the Versailles Treaty was the division of Upper Silesia. President Wilson and the Peace Conference experts had advocated the award of the whole of this heavily industrialized province on an ethnic basis to Poland, but British Prime Minister David Lloyd George persuaded Wilson and French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau against it so the Versailles Treaty mandated a plebiscite, which took place in March 1921. After three Polish uprisings, the League of Nations awarded the eastern part of Upper Silesia (East of the Oder River) to Poland in 1922, mainly on the basis of the plebiscite results there, although the overall vote including the preponderantly German western part of the region (not claimed by the Poles) gave a majority for Germany. Special arrangements were made to preserve the economic unity of the province, allowing Germany to import 500,000 tons of coal a year duty free; she ceased to do so in 1925 when she began a tariff war with Poland.¹⁹

¹⁸ On arguments in 1919 for leaving Danzig and the Corridor in Poland, see Cienciala, “Danzig and the Polish Corridor at the Paris Peace Conference,” in Paul Latawski, ed., *The Reconstruction of Poland, 1914-23* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 72-75; also idem and Komarnicki, *From Versailles to Locarno*, ch. 4. In the 1921 Polish census the Germans accounted for 29.5% in the Polish Corridor and 6.0% in 1931; see census and plebiscite tables for Prussian Poland and East Prussia in Richard Blanke, *Orphans of Versailles: The Germans in Western Poland, 1918-1939* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 244-245, reproduced in Cienciala, *Hist.557, Nationalism and Communism in East Central Europe*, <http://web.ku.edu/~eceurope/hist557/index.htm>, Lecture Notes 11. On the Polish Corridor as mainly German, thus violating self-determination, see William R. Keylor, *The Twentieth-Century World: An International History* (3rd ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 83; Anita Prażmowska, *Ignacy Paderewski: Poland* (London: Haus, 2009), 103; and Peter Neville, *Tomáš Masaryk and Eduard Beneš: Czechoslovakia* (London: Haus, 2010), 79.

¹⁹ For an excellent summary and analysis of Polish issues at the Paris Peace Conference, see Piotr S. Wandycz, “The Polish Question,” in *The Treaty of Versailles. A Reassessment After 75 Years*, ed. Manfred F. Boemeke, Gerald D.

Please note the correction:

could not, of course, include unborn children in 1910-1918, but given the high Polish birthrate of the time, the German percentage would be lower still by 1919.

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These settlements, probably the most equitable that could be made at the time, were highly resented by Germany, whose claims for their return enjoyed much sympathy in the West, especially in Britain, which traditionally viewed Eastern Europe as a sphere of German and Russian interests and — in the interwar period — only of German interests. In a letter written after the Munich Conference to the British Ambassador in Paris, Sir Eric Phipps, British Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax wrote that Germany could now do what she wanted in the region and it was none of Britain's business, adding: "Incidentally, I have always felt myself that, once Germany recovered her normal strength, this predominance was inevitable for obvious geographical reasons." He also thought that Danzig and the Corridor were the most harmful decisions of the Versailles Treaty. Indeed, a Foreign Office paper of February 1933 had suggested the best solution would be the return of Danzig to Germany and a German corridor through the "Polish Corridor."²⁰ This was totally unacceptable to the Poles because it

Feldman and Elisabeth Glaser (Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 313-336. For details on working out the Danzig, Polish Corridor and Upper Silesian settlements in 1919, see Cienciala and Komarnicki, *From Versailles to Locarno*, chs. 2-4, and Kay Lundgreen-Nielsen, *The Polish Problem at the Paris Peace Conference: A Study of the Policies of the Great Powers and the Poles 1918-1919* (Odense, Denmark: Odense University Press, 1979). See also James Headlam-Morley, *A Memoir of the Peace Conference 1919*, ed. Agnes Headlam-Morley, Russell Bryant and Anna M. Cienciala (London: Methuen, 1972). For census and plebiscite figures in Upper Silesia, see Blanke and Cienciala in n.17 above. James Headlam-Morley was an expert on Germany in the British Delegation, 1919, and worked out the Free City of Danzig articles of the Versailles Treaty (100-108) with American expert Dr. Sidney, E. Mezes. He was later Historical Advisor to the Foreign Office.

²⁰ On British sympathy for German claims to Danzig and the Corridor, see Cienciala, "German Propaganda for the Revision of the Polish-German Frontier in Danzig and the Corridor: Its Effects on British Opinion and the British Policy-Making Elite in the Years 1919-1933," *Antemurale* 20 (1976): 77- 129. Halifax to Phipps, November 1 1938, cit. Cienciala, "The Munich Crisis of 1938: Plans and Strategy in Warsaw in the Context of the Western Appeasement of Germany," in Igor Lukes and Erik Goldstein, *The Munich Crisis, 1938: Prelude to World War II* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1999), 69; Halifax on Danzig and the Polish Corridor, May 1938, cit. Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers 1938-1939: A Study in the Interdependence of Eastern and Western Europe* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul; Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1968), 87-88; R.M.A. Hankey, "Memorandum regarding Danzig and the Polish Corridor," 1 February 1933, The National Archives, London, F.O. 417, 33, pt. XXVII. Robert Maurice, Alers Hankey (1905-96) was First Secretary at the British Embassy, Warsaw, 1936-39; acted as the F.O. expert on

would have left their access to Danzig and the nearby port city of Gdynia dependent on (nonexistent) German good will. German policy was directed at revising the Versailles Treaty and, as stated earlier, this generally meant a return to the German eastern frontier of 1914.²¹ By the mid-nineteen thirties, the bulk of Polish foreign trade went through Danzig and Gdynia. The latter was a Polish port city built in the Polish Corridor, beginning in 1923, to give her port of her own and to supplement Danzig; it carried about half of the trade by 1938. Thus, the existence of the Free City of Danzig, with guaranteed Polish economic and cultural rights therein, as well as the existence of the Polish Corridor were, for the vast majority of Poles, synonymous with Polish independence. As noted above, the Allied experts in the Commission on Polish Affairs at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 had agreed and even advocated the award of Danzig to Poland.

Piłsudski saw his chance to redress the imbalance created by the Locarno Treaties after Hitler came to power in early 1933. The Führer had earlier issued the same vituperations and claims against Poland as the German statesmen before him. Therefore, on March 6, the day after the Nazi electoral victory in Germany, Piłsudski sent additional Polish troops to strengthen the garrison at the Polish arms depot serving Polish warships at Westerplatte in the Bay of Danzig. This was a warning to Hitler that Poland would fight if he tried to seize the Free City, where the Nazis were very active. Hitler took note of the warning and showed interest in improving relations with Poland, aiming to draw her away from France. Piłsudski, who had signed the Franco-Polish alliance in 1921, never thought of giving it up but was glad to improve relations with Germany. Polish-German talks began after Hitler withdrew Germany from the League of Nations as well as the Disarmament Conference in October 1933, which led to negotiations for the Polish-German Declaration of Non-Aggression signed on January 26, 1934. Now the Western Powers had no more incentive, at least for a while, to discuss the return of Danzig and the Corridor to Germany. An anecdote attributed to Piłsudski at the time had him say that Poland had moved on the Western menu from the place of hors d'oeuvres to that of dessert.²² The

Polish affairs in WW II; and had a distinguished diplomatic career. The solution he proposed had been discussed in the Foreign Office since 1919, especially in 1925 in connection with Stresemann's proposal of a Western security pact, which led to the Locarno Treaties; see Cieniala and Komarnicki, *From Versailles to Locarno*, ch. 9.

²¹ On German revisionist goals and tactics at this time, see Harald von Riekhoff, *German-Polish Relations, 1918-1933* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), ch. 9; favorable review by the then dean of Polish diplomatic historians of the interwar period, Henryk Batowski, *Przegląd Zachodni*, 1973, no. 4: 353-358.

²² Cit. Cieniala, *Poland and the Western Powers*, 16 and n. 37.

view he expressed to his closest military and foreign policy advisers was, however, pessimistic. According to a politician close to Piłsudski, in March 1934 the marshal said he thought good Polish-German relations might last for perhaps four years and he could not guarantee more. According to a general, in April that year Piłsudski said: “Having those two pacts [with Germany and Russia] we are sitting on two stools — that can’t last long. We must know... which one we will fall off first and when.”²³ This is remarkably similar to the opinion of an American historian, Henry L. Roberts, who called the policy of equilibrium (which he attributed to Beck) a dubious proposition of “riding two horses at once.” The policy of equilibrium, given Poland’s predatory neighbors was, however, the only one she could pursue as long as it was possible to do so, while maintaining her alliance with France. It is also clear that Piłsudski’s distrust of Soviet Russia did not blind him to the threat of Nazi Germany.²⁴

The policy initiated with the Polish-German Declaration of Non-Aggression did not — as per Seton-Watson and others — aim at cooperation with Nazi Germany against the USSR and gaining territory in Soviet Ukraine. Both Piłsudski and Beck refused to take up such German suggestions. In fact, Beck told the U.S. ambassador in Warsaw, Anthony J. Drexel Biddle, in June 1938 that Poland would never agree to a German march through Polish territory to Soviet Ukraine. On the contrary, said Beck, Poland would resist such a German move because a German occupation of Ukraine would threaten Poland’s peace and independence. He also said that in such a case Poland would face possible defeat, but she

²³ For Piłsudski in March 1934, see Kazimierz Świtalski, *Diariusz 1919-1935* [Diary 1919-1935] (Warsaw, 1992), 660-661, cit. by Kornat, *Polityka równowagi*, 313. For April 1934, see General Kazimierz Fabrycy in Tytus Komarnicki, ed., *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka (1935-1945)* [Diary and portfolios of Jan Szembek (1935-1945)] (London: Polish Research Centre, Orbis, 1964), 1: 155 [henceforth *Szembek*]. This volume contains documents for the years 1934-1935 and the 1935 diary of Jan Szembek, Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in 1935-39.

²⁴ On two horses at once, see H.L. Roberts, “The Diplomacy of Col. Beck,” in Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert, eds., *The Diplomats: 1919-1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960 [2nd printing]), 599. For a series of excellent studies of the policy of equilibrium, see Kornat, *Polityka równowagi 1934-1939*. For the claim that Piłsudski’s “ingrained hostility to Russia blinded him and his followers to the growing threat of Nazi Germany,” see Jan Palmowski, *Oxford Dictionary of Contemporary World History: From 1900 to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003 [2nd ed.]), 513.

would “bleed” Germany while war between Britain and France in the West would prevent the Germans from reaching their goal.²⁵

After Piłsudski’s death on May 12, 1935, Beck continued the Marshal’s foreign policy goals and methods. Since Beck was presented mainly as a pro-German statesman in Soviet, East European Communist-era historical as well as in post-Soviet studies, and is still presented as such in many Anglo-American studies, a brief biographical-political sketch is in order. Born in Warsaw on October 4, 1894, Beck was, against his parents’ wishes, baptized in a Russian Orthodox Church because his mother belonged to the Uniate or Greek Catholic Church, which had been forcibly incorporated into the Russian Orthodox Church, but was baptized in a Catholic Church several years later. Beck’s father, an active socialist but not a revolutionary, was sentenced for illegal activity, imprisoned for a few months in Russia, and then exiled to Riga, whence he moved with his family to Austrian Poland and settled in Limanowa. Young Beck grew up in a patriotic Polish household. He completed high school in Kraków; briefly studied engineering at the Lwów Politechnic, but transferred to the Export Academy in Vienna in 1913-1914. When war broke out, he immediately volunteered for Piłsudski’s Legion (part of the Austro-Hungarian army), serving in the artillery; he was decorated for bravery in a battle with the Russian army in 1916. When Piłsudski broke with Germany and Austria-Hungary in summer 1917 and was interned in the German fortress of Magdeburg, Beck was interned in Sopron, Hungary. He left (on a holiday pass!) in early 1918 to work for Piłsudski’s secret Polish Military Organization [Polska Organizacja Wojskowa, P.O.W.] in revolutionary Russia; its job was to find Polish soldiers and officers formerly in the Russian army as well as prisoners-of-war from the German and Austro-Hungarian armies, and bring them home to join the Polish armed forces there.

Beck’s reports from Russia impressed Piłsudski, who assigned him to in the Polish military intelligence service in 1920; sent him on special missions; and appointed him Military Attaché in Paris (also Brussels), where he served in 1922-1923 and was recalled to Warsaw in the fall of that year. The charge that Beck had been removed because he was caught trying to steal French military secrets for the Germans in Vienna was proved a

²⁵ For German attempts to discuss Polish-German cooperation against the USSR, see Cienciala articles listed in note 9 above as well as references to Göring, Hitler and Ribbentrop in her book, *Poland and the Western Powers*. For Ambassador Biddle’s report of 19 June 1938 on his conversation with Beck, see Phillip V. Cannistraro et al., eds., *Poland and the Coming of the Second World War: The Diplomatic Papers of A.J. Drexel Biddle, Jr., United States Ambassador to Poland 1937-1939* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University, 1976), doc. 4, cit. Cienciala, in Lukes and Goldstein, *Munich Crisis*, 59.

fabrication at the time, for the French newspaper that printed it had to recant and apologize. Information on this matter has been available for years but the charge is still repeated by some Western historians and by Russian media, which even cast him as a German agent as late as August 2009.²⁶ Most Western historians are also ignorant of the fact that Polish military authorities congratulated Beck for improving Polish-French relations, that he was made a *chevalier* of the French Legion of Honor in April 1923 and an officer of the same in 1927 — hardly decorations for a German spy. After obtaining a diploma from the Higher School of Military Studies for general staff officers in Warsaw (in which he obtained top ranking together with his colleague, Bolesław Wieniawa-Długoszowski), Beck received the rank of colonel of horse artillery. He worked as Piłsudski's chef de cabinet [CEO] when the marshal was minister of defense and later premier, in 1926-30; was briefly deputy premier in 1930 when Piłsudski was premier again, and deputy foreign minister to Zaleski in 1930-32, succeeding the latter as minister in November 1932.²⁷ Thus, while Beck had little diplomatic experience, he had intimate knowledge of the marshal's goals and methods. He was devoted to Piłsudski and determined to continue his policy of balancing between Germany and the USSR while maintaining the alliance with France. He also continued the marshal's policy of seeking closer relations with Britain and, like him, did not expect Austria and Czechoslovakia to survive unless supported by France and Britain, which

²⁶ A recent textbook states: "The arrogant and vulpine [sic] Beck had served as military attaché in France, whence he had been expelled on charges of spying for Germany." (Martin Kitchen, *Europe Between The Wars*, 106.) Its author evidently failed to read Piotr S. Wandycz's article, "Colonel Beck and the Roots of Animosity," *The International History Review* 3 (1981): 115-127. Until 2010, this periodical was published at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada, where Kitchen, the author of several books on twentieth-century international relations and now Professor of History Emeritus, taught for many years. On the same charges in the Russian media, August 2009, see Mariusz Wołoś, "Józef Beck niemieckim agentem? O historii pewnej plotki w retrospektywnym ujęciu... Inne oblicze historii" [Józef Beck a German Agent? On the history of a certain rumor... Another view of history], supplement to *Wiedza i Życie* nr. 6, (2009): 12-16; French version, "Józef Beck: espion allemand? Histoire d'une rumeur," *Revue Historique des Armées*, Paris, nr. 260 (3/2010): 45-53 (<http://rha.revues.org/index7045.html>). For Russian TV film, see n. 11 above.

²⁷ This brief biography of Beck is based on Marek Kornat, "Józef Beck — Zarys biografii politycznej (1894-1932)" [Józef Beck — Outline of a Political Biography, 1894-1932], *Niepodległość* 55 (2005): 36-106. See also short biographical-political sketch of Beck covering his life and policies up to September 1939, in Cienciala, ed. Beck, *Polska polityka zagraniczna*, 17-44.

both statesmen considered doubtful. (Czechoslovak statesmen expressed the same opinion about Poland and did not want any alliance with her to avoid involvement in a Polish-German war.) Piłsudski, for his part, had a high opinion of Beck. The marshal rarely praised any person who worked for him, but a former prime minister recalled his statement to Beck at a meeting of former prime ministers in spring 1934: “In my work on Poland’s foreign policy I found an especially able and intelligent co-worker in the person of the foreign minister. I cannot compliment you enough, Mr. Beck.”²⁸

There is no document specifying Piłsudski’s instructions to Beck on what policy to follow after his death. Beck notes, however, that at the turn of 1931-1932 the marshal agreed with his view that the outstanding issues to be settled were the following: Danzig, the Minorities Treaty, Lithuania, and Teschen Silesia.²⁹ Beck handled these problems according to Piłsudski’s wishes. The Polish-German Declaration of Non-Aggression of January 1934 was followed by better relations between Poland and the Free City of Danzig, which the marshal called the touchstone of Polish-German relations and Beck always considered as such.³⁰ The formal German recognition of the Free City’s status and of the Polish-German frontier was the perennial goal of Polish foreign policy. The Nazis won the city elections in 1935 but were generally kept in check by Berlin until spring 1939, while Poland quietly granted asylum to anti-Nazi refugees. The Minorities Treaty, which all new East European states had to sign in 1919, safeguarded minority

²⁸ For Piłsudski and Beck on Austrian and Czechoslovakian survival, as well as T. G. Masaryk’s and Edvard Beneš’s statements on Poland, see Cienciala in Lukes and Goldstein, *Munich Crisis*, 53-55. Piłsudski’s praise of Beck was cited in a letter to him by former Premier Janusz Jędrzejewicz dated February 27, 1940, when Beck was interned in Romania, cit. Cienciala, Beck *Polska polityka zagraniczna*, 108; English translation, Cienciala; text also in Waław Jędrzejewicz, ed., *Kronika życia Józefa Piłsudskiego 1967-1935. Tom Drugi. 1921-1935* [Chronicle of the Life of Józef Piłsudski. Vol. 2. 1921-1935] (London: Polska Fundacja Kulturalna, 1977), 476.

²⁹ See Cienciala, Beck, *Polska polityka zagraniczna*, 54-55.

³⁰ For Piłsudski on Danzig as the touchstone of Polish-German relations, see, for example, Beck’s instruction of March 25, 1939, to Ambassador Józef Lipski on the latter’s forthcoming conversation with German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, in Stanisław Żerko, ed., *Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne 1939. Styczeń –sierpień* [Polish Diplomatic Documents 1939. January — August] (Warsaw: Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 2005), doc. 137; English translation in Waław Jędrzejewicz, ed., *Diplomat in Berlin, 1933-1939: Papers and Memoirs of Józef Lipski, Ambassador of Poland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 506-507; same in Włodzimierz Borodziej, Sławomir Dębski, eds., *Polish Documents on Foreign Policy, 24 October 1938 — 30 September 1939* (Warsaw: The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2009), doc. 67.

rights in these states while Germany, with a Polish minority of about one million (approximately the same as the number of Germans in Poland), did not have to sign it. Members of the German minority in Poland were encouraged by pre-Nazi governments to use the League of Nations as a forum to protest real or imagined violations of their rights, while the Polish minority in Germany had no such recourse and had a difficult existence even after the Declaration of Non-Aggression.³¹ In November 1937, however, the Polish and German governments signed a declaration on the rights of their respective minorities.³² The Polish government could do nothing to aid its minority in the USSR, which numbered about two million after the Treaty of Riga, tens of thousands of whom managed to repatriate to Poland. It was greatly reduced during the years of forced collectivization in 1930-32, mainly in Ukraine, and was to suffer greatly during the Stalin Terror.³³ Moscow did not sign the Minorities Treaty and the Comintern supported the inclusion of Poland's eastern territories in the Belorussian and Ukrainian Soviet Republics. It is not surprising, therefore, that Beck declared Poland's abrogation of the Minorities Treaty when the USSR joined the League of Nations in September 1934, while confirming the constitutional rights of minorities in Poland. Lithuania had broken off all relations with Poland after the Polish seizure of Wilno in 1920, although in a plebiscite boycotted by the Lithuanian minority, the Polish majority in the region voted for union with Poland in 1922. Lithuania, whose constitution named Wilno as the country's capital, rejected all efforts, including Piłsudski's, to re-establish normal relations. When Hitler annexed Austria in March 1938, the Polish Government feared he might annex the preponderantly German port city of Klaipėda (German: Memel) in Lithuania and place German troops on the Polish-Lithuanian border. Beck then decided to send an ultimatum to the Lithuanian government demanding the establishment of normal relations. The pretext was the accidental shooting of a Polish soldier by a Lithuanian

³¹ On the Minorities Treaties of 1919, see Carole Fink, "The Minorities Question at the Paris Peace Conference: The Polish Minority Treaty, June 28, 1919," in Boemeke et al., *The Treaty of Versailles*, 249-274; also Fink, *Defending the Rights of Others: The Great Powers, the Jews, and International Minority Protection, 1878-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³² For the Polish text of the Polish-German declaration on minorities of November 5, 1937, see Jędruszczak and Nowak-Kielbikowa, *Dokumenty z dziejów*, 2, doc. 60; English translation of the equivalent German text, *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, D, vol. 5 (London, Washington, D.C., 1953), doc. 18.

³³ The Polish minority in the USSR suffered the greatest losses of all national minorities during the Stalin Terror; see Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), ch. 3; National Terror, 89 ff; figures, 103.

frontier guard. The ultimatum (with a forty-eight hour limit) was used because it was clear that only the threat of force would persuade the Lithuanian government to re-establish normal relations while Wilno remained in Poland. The Lithuanian government acquiesced.³⁴ This left the issue of Danzig and the Polish Corridor and that of Cieszyn Silesia or Zaolzie, which Piłsudski, like most Poles, aimed to unite with Poland. In 1932, it was agreed that no political relaxation was possible in relations with Czechoslovakia without an improvement of the fate of Poles in Zaolzie.

While carrying out Piłsudski's foreign policy objectives, Beck never wavered in observing the marshal's key principles of foreign policy. Aside from the priority of Poland's relations with Germany and Soviet Russia, the marshal also held that there should be no bowing unless it was necessary. This was directed at what the marshal considered Polish servile behavior toward France and translated as insistence that the Polish nation and its representatives be treated with dignity. Beck expressed this by being stiff and sometimes abrupt when subjected to patronizing treatment by French statesmen, and such behavior was often seen as arrogance. Of course, Piłsudski did not need to stress the old Polish slogan *Nic o nas bez nas* ["Nothing (is to be decided) about us without us"]. It was the rallying call of both Polish nobles against the king in pre-partition Poland — meaning he could decide nothing without their consent in the Sejm [Parliament] — as well as Polish workers and their supporters in the Solidarity movement of 1980-1981 and Solidarity underground structures in 1981-89. To Piłsudski and Beck this principle meant that Poland would not accept any decisions made by the Great Powers in matters that involved her interests. Beck's insistence on this principle was misread, especially by the French, as a pretension to Poland's great power status — a claim he denied while admitting that she was a regional power. Finally, there was the principle of "Honor." The old Polish military motto, inscribed on army sabers, was: *Bóg, Honor i Ojczyzna* ["God, Honor and Fatherland"]. Honor meant honorable behavior according to the traditional noble code and holding others to the same standard. Above all, however, honor meant that Poles were bound to defend their independence; to give it up without a fight was considered dishonorable and shameful.

We now come to the most frequently condemned feature of interwar Polish foreign policy, condemned not only by Soviet, Russian, and most Western historians but also by many Polish historians today, that is, the method used to gain Zaolzie from Czechoslovakia on September 30, 1938. This policy should be viewed in both the international and national contexts

³⁴ For the Polish text of the ultimatum of 17 March 1938, see Marek Kornat, ed., *Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne 1938* [Polish Diplomatic Documents 1938] henceforth *PDD 1938* (Warsaw: Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 2007), doc. 56.

of the time. In the first — and decisive — international context, Britain and France wanted to avoid war with Nazi Germany. Therefore, they followed the policy of “appeasement,” allowing Hitler to begin openly rearming Germany in 1935. The following year, they allowed him to militarize the Rhineland, which had been demilitarized to provide security for France. This demilitarized area was also crucial for France’s immediate aid to her Eastern allies, if attacked by Germany, since France could start military action in German territory bereft of German troops and without having to cross the Rhine. Finally, French, British, and Italian leaders agreed at the Munich Conference of September 29, 1938, to Hitler’s annexation of the Sudetenland, the predominantly German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia. Poland, and Beck personally, were and still are excoriated for using an ultimatum, that is, the threat of force, to annex the western part of Zaolzie, after the Munich Conference. This action is still widely condemned as Polish cooperation with Hitler, and even as initiated by him.³⁵

In evaluating Polish policy toward Czechoslovakia in 1938, one must bear in mind the national context, that is, the history of Zaolzie and its place in Polish-Czechoslovak relations. The area east and west of the Olza River, formerly known as the Duchy of Teschen, was part of the region of Moravská Ostrava. The duchy had been part of Poland in the twelfth century; from the mid-fourteenth century it was part of Bohemia, which was defeated and annexed by Austria in 1620. Meanwhile, the duchy was ruled by the Silesian branch of the Polish Piast dynasty until it died out in 1625, when it came into the possession of the Austrian Habsburgs and stayed as such to November 1918. At that time, Zaolzie, covering two thirds of the western part of the duchy, had a clear Polish majority, a fact recognized in the agreement concluded by local Polish and Czech councils to divide the area into Polish and Czech administrative regions. The Czechoslovak government, however, did not recognize the local agreement; it claimed Zaolzie as part of the historic lands of the Bohemian Crown. It also claimed that Czechoslovakia needed the region’s Karvina coal mines, which provided high-grade coking coal for the steel and engineering industries of the region, as well as the town of Cieszyn because it was the key railway junction between Bohemia and Slovakia. Piłsudski sent a special delegation

³⁵ Winston Churchill expressed general British opinion — and general Western historical opinion today — when he wrote of the Poles: “We see them hurrying, while the might of Germany glowered up against them, to grasp their share of the pillage and ruin of Czechoslovakia.” (Winston S. Churchill, *The Gathering Storm* [Boston and London: Houghton Mifflin, 1948, reprint 1983], 323.) Harrison Keylor writes that the Polish government added its demand for Teschen “at Hitler’s urging” and acted “as a silent partner of Germany, to acquire economically valuable territory at Czechoslovakia’s expense.” (Keylor, *The Twentieth-Century World*, 82.)

to Prague to negotiate an agreement with the Czechoslovak government in December 1918, but the delegates found it unwilling to do so. In early 1919, just before elections to the Polish parliament, and while most Polish troops were fighting the Ukrainians over Eastern Galicia and resisting the Red Army elsewhere, Czech troops moved into the region and, after some bloodshed, took it over. They were forced to leave by the Western Allies, but the latter awarded the region to Czechoslovakia in late July 1920, as the Red Army was advancing on Warsaw. Furthermore, at that time, French military supplies for the Polish army were denied transit through Czechoslovakia, and a Hungarian proposal to send troops through Czechoslovak territory to help the Poles was rejected. The Allied decision and the Czechoslovak actions noted above were bitterly resented in Poland, as was the Czechoslovak government's support of massive Czech settlement in the predominantly Polish areas of Zaolzie and its policy of assimilating the Poles, especially through the schools.³⁶

All the above factors made Zaolzie a very emotional issue in Poland, poisoning Polish-Czechoslovak relations. These were worsened by the asylum granted in Czechoslovakia — mainly in Subcarpathian Ruthenia — to Ukrainian nationalists who had fought against the Poles in East Galicia in 1918-1919, as well as to those who later actively opposed Polish rule. Every political leader and party in Poland, except the communists, believed that Zaolzie must be united with Poland. Even General Władysław Sikorski, a bitter opponent of the Beck-Piłsudski policy of good relations with Germany, was ready to offer Prague an alliance with Warsaw if he came to power — but only if Zaolzie went to Poland.³⁷ The Poles also resented the Czechoslovak-Soviet Alliance of May 1935, which was the eastern pendant to the Franco-Soviet Alliance concluded at that time.

It was, however, the international context which was decisive for Polish policy in 1938. An important factor to be noted before the Czechoslovak crisis began in earnest (in May 1938) is that Beck knew of British willingness to accept border changes favoring Germany in East Central Europe which would, of course, affect Poland. In early December

³⁶ For the best account of the Teschen/Zaolzie issue in the first postwar period, see Wandycz, *France and Her Eastern Allies*, ch. 3. For the next ten years, see idem, *Twilight*. For the first five years of Czech rule in Zaolzie, see Ellen I. Paul, *Conflict and Cooperation: Poles and Czechs in Czech Teschen Silesia, 1920-1926* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, 1999). Map: *Wikipedia*, Śląsk Cieszyński.

³⁷ On Polish political leaders, including General Sikorski, supporting the cession of Zaolzie to Poland, see the report of the Czech journalist Vaclav Fiala to President Beneš on his talks in Poland in April 1938, per Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers*, 66-69; brief mention by idem in Lukes and Goldstein, ed., *Munich Crisis*, 58.

1937, the German Foreign Ministry informed a member of the Polish embassy in Berlin of Lord Halifax's statements to Hitler at their meeting in Berchtesgaden on November 19, 1937. Halifax, then Lord President of the Council, spoke for Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain when he told Hitler that Britain would not insist on maintaining the status quo of 1919 (that is, the Versailles Treaty). Therefore, changes were possible — provided they were carried out peacefully. Here Halifax mentioned Austria, Czechoslovakia and Danzig.³⁸

It was in the dual international and national context described above that Beck set out Polish policy on Czechoslovakia in early January 1938. At this time, the Nazi Sudeten German Party (SGP) was growing ever louder in its resentment of Czech rule. (It was not known at the time that Hitler planned to use the principle of self-determination, identified with the SGP, to destroy Czechoslovakia, the ally of France and of the USSR, and then proceed to attack France and conquer Western Europe.) Beck stated that any Czechoslovak decision favoring one minority would be viewed by Poland as an unfriendly act if not applied to the Polish minority.³⁹ A few days later, on January 14, 1938, he learned from his conversation with the Führer in Berlin that the latter planned to move against Austria, which he planned to unite with Germany; also that he viewed Czechoslovakia as being under Soviet influence, but would seek a peaceful agreement with it on the treatment of the German minority — unless compelled to do otherwise. Hitler also declared that Polish rights in Danzig and its legal status would not be diminished. At this time, Beck also spoke with Hermann Göring, marshal of the Luftwaffe and head of Germany's Four Year [Rearmament] Plan, who said he considered the further existence of Czechoslovakia in its present shape as impossible. When Beck learned of German plans to takeover

³⁸ On Halifax's statements to Hitler, see report by Stefan Lubomirski, counselor at the Polish Embassy, Berlin, on his conversation with Ernst von Weizsäcker, German secretary of state for foreign affairs, December 2, 1937, in Z. Landau and J. Tomaszewski, eds., *Monachium 1938. Polskie dokumenty dyplomatyczne* [Munich 1938. Polish Diplomatic Documents] (Warsaw: PWN, 1985) doc. 1 [henceforth *Monachium*]. For Halifax's report on his conversation with Hitler, 19 November 1937, see *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, 2nd ser., v. 19 (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1982), doc. 336, p. 345; see also Halifax's account and later thoughts taken from his diary in The Earl of Birkenhead, *Halifax. The Life of Lord Halifax* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1965), 368-374; the photo of Halifax meeting Hitler at Berchtesgaden, facing p. 370, is misdated as 1938.

³⁹ Beck speech to the Sejm [modern spelling of Sejm] Commission on Foreign Policy, January 10, 1938 in Józef Beck, *Przemówienia, deklaracje, wywiady* [Speeches, Declarations, Interviews] (Warsaw, 1939), 331-340.

Austria, he did not oppose them since it was obvious that Britain and France would not oppose Hitler.⁴⁰

Beck welcomed Hitler's assurance regarding Danzig because he feared the status of the Free City might be revised or even abolished at the forthcoming meeting of the League of Nations on account of Nazi violations of the Danzig constitution, whose official protector was the League of Nations, while its real guarantors were France and Britain. Therefore, at the same time as keeping in touch with Berlin, Beck continued Piłsudski's policy of seeking closer relations with London. At the League of Nations meeting in Geneva on January 26, 1938, when told by British Foreign Secretary Antony Eden that, except for France, Belgium and Holland, Britain could only act through the League, Beck repeated to him what he had said to Chamberlain in London in 1937: that Poland was the only country on the Continent which could extend aid on land to these countries [by attacking Germany if it attacked France]. He also said that Poland had confirmed her commitments to France as an ally, that future European arrangements must allow France and Poland full freedom to carry out their alliance obligations, and inquired about possible Polish purchases of heavy anti-aircraft artillery from Britain. In view of his knowledge of Halifax's statement to Hitler and what he had heard from Eden, it is not surprising that, on February 28, Beck told Göring that Poland was interested in a region of Czechoslovakia, Moravská-Ostrava, which included Zaolzie.⁴¹

Nevertheless, as H. L. Roberts wrote, Beck and key Polish decision-makers did not plan to help Hitler dismember Czechoslovakia.⁴² It is also clear that, assuming Czechoslovakia would collapse without Western support (as Czechoslovak leaders had assumed earlier about Poland), the Polish government did not want Germany to absorb or otherwise dominate the whole country. Many Polish diplomatic documents were destroyed or lost in September 1939, but among the survivors is one that outlines Beck's policy aims, at least as they existed in the spring of 1938. In a letter of April 12, 1938, the Polish Under-Secretary of State, Jan Szembek, wrote that the worst solution for Poland would be German domination of all of

⁴⁰ For the Polish record of the Hitler-Beck conversation, Berlin, January 14, 1938, see *Monachium*, doc. 6; Kornat, *PDD 1938*, doc. 10; English translation in Jędrzejewicz ed., *Diplomat in Berlin*, doc. 77; for the Beck-Göring conversation of January 13, 1938, see *Monachium*, doc. 6; *PDD 1938*, doc. 9; Eng. trans., *Diplomat in Berlin*, doc. 76.

⁴¹ For the Beck-Eden Conversation, Geneva, January 26, 1938, see *PDD 1938*, doc. 14, cit. in Cienciala review article of same, *TPR*, 54, no. 2 (2009): 250. Beck had confirmed Poland's obligations to France as an ally during the visit of French Premier Yvon Delbos in Warsaw in late 1937. For the Beck-Göring conversation of February 28, 1938, see *Monachium*, doc.10; *PDD 1938*, doc. 37.

⁴² H.L. Roberts, *The Diplomats 1919-1939*, 611.

Czechoslovakia. Therefore, German annexation of the Sudetenland was acceptable to Warsaw, provided it was accompanied by the separation of Slovakia from the Czech lands and its union with Hungary, the return [to Poland] of Silesia [Zaolzie], and the establishment of a Polish-Hungarian frontier.⁴³ At the same time, however, Polish decision-makers believed, as did the army and the majority of Polish public opinion, that Poland could not be on Germany's side in a European war. In late May, as Hitler was stoking the Czechoslovak crisis (which burst out in full force after the Czechoslovak Army mobilized in May on faulty intelligence of an impending German attack), Beck rejected French Foreign Minister George Bonnet's request that Poland support a British (but not French) warning to Berlin not to sharpen the German-Czechoslovak dispute, which might lead to war. At the same time, however, while re-stating the Polish demand for equal treatment of the Polish minority with other minorities in Czechoslovakia, Beck reaffirmed Poland's readiness to fulfill her treaty obligations to France and proposed a discussion "of new phenomena" with Bonnet. This proposal was, however, rejected by the French Foreign Minister, a staunch appeaser who favored loosening French ties with Poland.⁴⁴

Beck summed up his view of the situation at two special conferences, probably in late May or sometime in June 1938. In his later report on "The Political Preliminaries to 1939," Beck wrote that at these conferences he stated his view that the Czechs would not fight; the Western countries were not morally or materially prepared to intervene to the Czechs' advantage; and that Russia [sic] was conducting an action rather in the nature of a demonstration. It seemed, he said, that she was more interested in poisoning Czech-German relations than helping the Czechs. In any case, careful observation of Soviet territory did not show any military preparations to intervene, while the "purge" of the Red Army officer corps left the army in very bad shape. Finally, Beck wrote, he always added that Poland should not be the first to undertake any action against the Czechs. He also said that if his hypothesis should prove mistaken, Polish policy must change within

⁴³ *PDD 1938*, doc. 86, cit. in Cienciala review of same, *TPR*, 54, no. 2 (2009): 249. Later, Beck envisaged an autonomous Slovakia within Hungary.

⁴⁴ Beck's instructions of May 24 to Polish Ambassador Juliusz Łukasiewicz, in Paris, *PDD 1938*, doc. 118; Łukasiewicz report on his conversation with Bonnet, May 27 [should be 26], *Monachium*, doc. 87, *PDD 1938*, doc. 126; English translation of the Bonnet-Łukasiewicz conversation in Waław Jędrzejewicz, ed., *Diplomat in Paris: Papers and Memoirs of Juliusz Łukasiewicz, Ambassador of Poland* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1970), 91-99; see also Cienciala in Lukes and Goldstein eds., *Munich Crisis*, 59.

twenty-four hours because, in case of a real European war with Germany, Poland could not be, even indirectly, on Germany's side.⁴⁵

Indeed, at around this time Beck tried to sound out the French and British attitudes toward German expansion in Eastern Europe through the U.S. ambassador to Poland, Biddle. In mid-June, in the same conversation in which Beck told Biddle that Poland would not agree to German transit to Soviet Ukraine, he also told the ambassador that the armies of Poland, Romania, and perhaps Yugoslavia, could offer effective resistance to Germany — but only in conjunction with the Western Powers. As he put it, if France and Britain engaged German armies in the West, “Poland would march not for Czechoslovakia but against Germany.” Biddle also reported Polish hopes that, after the current crisis was resolved, France and Britain would support an East European bloc to check German expansion.⁴⁶ There was, however, no Western response to these suggestions, nor could there be since both France and Britain wanted to avoid war with Germany.

It would take too much time and space to list all the developments in the period from May to late September 1938.⁴⁷ Suffice it to say that Beck made Polish claims to Zaolzie clear to the Czechoslovak government as well as to the British, French, German and Italian governments, especially when the crisis heated up in the second half of September. He also warned Hitler that Poland would stand by its demand for a key railway junction in the northern part of Zaolzie, where the German minority demanded union with Germany. In fact, as the Poles learned from the French on September 27, on a German map given to Chamberlain when he met with Hitler at Godesberg on September 22-23, Bohumin was marked for immediate German annexation while a large part of Zaolzie was marked for a plebiscite. Beck immediately instructed Ambassador Józef Lipski to present Polish claims to Hitler.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, on September 22-23, the Sudeten German Party also

⁴⁵ Summary of Beck's account, Cienciala in Lukes and Goldstein, *Munich Crisis*, 56; Polish text in Cienciala, Beck, *Polska polityka zagraniczna*, 217-218.

⁴⁶ See Ambassador Biddle's report of June 18, 1938, in Cannistraro et al., *Poland and the Coming of the Second World War*, doc. 4, pp. 208 ff., cit. Cienciala in Lukes and Goldstein, *Munich Crisis*, 59.

⁴⁷ These developments are described in many studies of the Czechoslovak crisis, for example, Lukes and Goldstein, *Munich Crisis*. For Polish policy adjustments, see Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers*, chs. 2-4; documents in *Monachium* and *PDD 1938*.

⁴⁸ For this information, see Beck's instructions to Ambassador Lipski to present Polish demands to the German government according to the attached map [not preserved but marking territory claimed by Poland]; Lipski did so the same day, see *Monachium*, docs. 388, 390; *PDD 1938*, docs. 314, 316; Eng. trans., *Diplomat in Berlin*, docs. 108, 109; see also Cienciala in Lukes and Goldberg, *Munich Crisis*, 60, 63.

claimed the region. News of the SGP claim, as well as the expectation of Western acceptance of German claims, were connected both with the stationing of Polish troops on the border with Czechoslovakia and the Polish government's attempt to stage a local Polish uprising in Zaolzie, which fizzled out. It should be noted that on the first day of the Godesberg meeting, Hitler demanded the withdrawal of Czech troops and the entry of German troops by September 28, but extended the date the next day to October 1 and sent his demands to Prague. Chamberlain was willing to accept them, but the British government decided to take a stand and put the navy on alert, while the French army called up the reservists. There was an international crisis and the Czechs, who had accepted the cession of the predominantly German part of the Sudetenland under Western pressure a few days earlier, were now told they could mobilize. France and Britain, however, only wanted to save face and sought a peaceful resolution of German claims, so they gratefully accepted Mussolini's proposal of a conference. Thus, on September 29, at Munich, the British Prime Minister Chamberlain, the French Prime Minister Eduard Daladier, and the Italian head of state, Benito Mussolini, agreed to Hitler's demand for the cession of the predominantly German part of the Sudetenland to Germany. The German Army was to come into the area beginning on October 1. An "International Commission" — composed of the German Foreign Secretary, the British and French ambassadors in Berlin and a representative to be named by the Czechoslovak government, which had not been consulted on these terms — was to oversee the occupation as well as the plebiscites to be held in ethnically mixed areas. Britain and France agreed to participate in an international guarantee of the new Czechoslovak frontiers against unprovoked aggression, while Germany and Italy undertook to guarantee it after the Hungarian and Polish claims had been settled. The Czechoslovak government was simply informed of the Great Powers' agreement. (In fact, there were no plebiscites and no international guarantee of the remaining Czechoslovak state.)

With the announcement of the Munich Conference decisions on the morning of September 30, 1938, it was clear that German troops would enter the Sudetenland beginning on October 1, while Poland (which claimed Zaolzie) and Hungary (which claimed southern Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia) were to wait three months for the examination of their claims unless separate agreements were reached in the meanwhile. Everything now depended on the decision of President Beneš: would he reject the Munich verdict and fight — in which case France was bound to come into the war as an ally of Czechoslovakia, and so would Poland as an ally of France — or would he accept it? Beck discussed with the chief of the Polish General Staff, General Waclaw Stachiewicz, possible military aid to Czechoslovakia if the latter fought, but Beneš accepted the Munich verdict at noon on September 30. Three days earlier, the Polish government had made its second explicit proposal tending to the same end: a plebiscite in the part of

Zaolzie inhabited by a strong proportion of Poles — the areas were marked on a map — followed by its immediate cession to Poland and a plebiscite on disputed territories. This was to be the basis of a bilateral agreement on Polish-Czechoslovak relations. The Polish envoy in Prague, Kazimierz Papée, was empowered to begin preliminary negotiations, but there was no answer until September 30. The Czechoslovak answer, handed to the Polish envoy in Prague an hour after Beneš accepted the Munich decisions, was received in Warsaw sometime in the afternoon of that day. It was judged inadequate because, while accepting the need to rectify the frontier, it rejected plebiscites and the immediate transfer of some territory. Instead, it proposed the establishment of a Polish-Czechoslovak commission that would begin its work on October 5, completing it between October 31 and December 1.⁴⁹

That same afternoon, Beck spoke at a special conference held at the Royal Castle and proposed drastic Polish action. According to the notes of Deputy Premier Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski, Beck said that what happened at Munich was reminiscent of the Four Power Pact projected four years earlier. [This is a reference to the agreement by Britain, France, Germany and Italy to revise disputed frontiers, signed in July 1934 but not implemented.] Beck said he believed that one must quickly, and as drastically as possible, oppose such methods of settling territorial disputes. Only determined action could save Poland from another Munich. Speaking of Zaolzie, he warned that immediate action was necessary because “if we hesitate and delay, Germany may seize this valuable and highly industrialized patch of land, eliminating Polish claims to Zaolzie for a long time to come.” He then mentioned that the Polish government had demanded, and received, the Czechoslovak government’s agreement in principle to equal treatment with the German minority. Since Prague was to cede territories inhabited by Germans to Germany, Poland must demand the same for her claim, and he proposed sending an ultimatum to Prague. Kwiatkowski wrote that he was the only person to disagree, suggesting a diplomatic procedure instead, but was overruled. As for Beck himself, he wrote later that in view of the expansion of German territory very near to the Polish frontier and especially to Zaolzie, which was so valuable for Poland, also in view of the violation by the four Powers of the sovereign rights of nations and the integrity of national territory, he was convinced that Poland must immediately react to both these developments. Therefore, he stated that in view of the above circumstances, General [Władysław] Bortnowski “must march into Zaolzie and against Munich.” That evening, Beck told Szembek that the British ambassador told him the Czechs had informed London they had agreed to the Polish demands

⁴⁹ For the Polish demands to Prague of September 27 and the Czechoslovak reply three days later, see *Monachium*, docs. 374, 439; *PDD 1938*, doc. 307 (Polish note of Sept. 27).

and would cede the counties of Cieszyn and Frysztat to Poland, while the French ambassador said his government had told the Czechs they should send a reply more in line with Polish demands.⁵⁰

Consequent to the decision, an ultimatum was sent to Prague in a coded radio message, also carried by a pilot dispatched in a special plane, demanding the Czech evacuation and transfer of two western counties of Zaolzie [Cieszyn and Frysztat] within twenty-four hours, while other issues raised by the Polish note of September 27, including plebiscites in other areas, would be left to a later understanding between the two governments. The ultimatum had a time limit of noon, October 1. The French and British ambassadors in Warsaw pleaded for Polish acceptance of the Czechoslovak offer to negotiate; Chamberlain offered his mediation, President Franklin Roosevelt appealed for a peaceful settlement of Polish claims, and the French government was already pressing the Czechoslovak government to accept Polish demands. By the evening of September 30 it was, however, too late to stop the Polish action. The ultimatum was sent; it was presented in Prague a little after midnight and accepted the next day, October 1, at 11.30 a.m. with a request for a one-hour extension for the formal acceptance (that is, 1 p.m. on October 1), which was granted.⁵¹ Polish troops moved into the counties of Cieszyn and Frysztat the next day, and the annexation of Zaolzie was supported by all political parties as well as the vast majority of Poles. Western public opinion condemned the Polish action, although the British and French governments had advised the Czechs to accept the Polish demands. Now, however, their media, along with Soviet media, had a field day. Beck's name has been blackened by this action ever since,

⁵⁰ For the Polish text of Kwiatkowski's notes of the castle conference of Sept. 30, 1938, see Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski, "Józef Beck," *Zeszyty Historyczne*, Paris, Institut Littéraire, 1986, nr.76, p.27; this was a reprint of the original published in a Polish underground periodical, *Arka*, no. 12, Kraków, 1985; English translation, Cienciala; see also same in Lukes and Goldberg, *Munich Crisis*, 66. For Beck's version, see Cienciala, Beck, *Polska polityka zagraniczna*, p. 223, trans. Cienciala. That day, Secretary of State Jan Szembek noted the "special conference" held at the President's office and the decision reached by its members: the President [Ignacy Mościcki], Minister Beck, Marshal [Edward] Śmigły [-Rydz], Premier [Felicjan] Sławoj-Składkowski and Kwiatkowski. He also noted that the Czechoslovak reply was received just when the Polish ultimatum was being drafted in his office, and was judged inadequate; see *Szembek* 4: 284.

⁵¹ For the Polish ultimatum to Prague, see *Monachium*, docs. 446-450; *PDD 1938*, docs. 352, 353. On Western appeals to Poland and Czech acceptance of the ultimatum, see Cienciala in Lukes and Goldstein, *Munich 1938*, p. 67; Polish documents: *Monachium*, docs. 455-458; *PDD 1938*, docs.359 ff; *Szembek* 4: 440-444.

overshadowing the Western Powers' betrayal of Czechoslovakia, particularly by its ally, France. This condemnation also came to overshadow Beck's success in turning the British guarantee of Polish independence (March 31, 1939) into a provisional mutual aid agreement (April 6, 1939) and then alliance between the two countries (August 26, 1939).

What did Poland gain with Zaolzie? In economic terms, in the period October 1938-September 1939 the region produced 52.2% of Polish coking coal, 67% of its pig iron and 38% of its steel. Production in all three categories was more than Poland needed but, given time, it would have allowed a major increase in her armaments instead of strengthening Hitler, while in the short term she could, of course, export the surplus. The Polish-Czechoslovak negotiations led to the cession of a few areas in Orava as well as Spis and Čadca in the Tatra mountains, deemed important for military reasons (mountain passes). Although most of the land gained was Polish, it included some Slovak villages, which led to great Slovak resentment. All in all, Poland gained a significant increase of its industrial production, 869,000 km. of land and 258,000 mostly Polish-speaking people.⁵²

The Polish use of the ultimatum in demanding Zaolzie from Czechoslovakia is known; what is less known is, as mentioned earlier, that Beck also tried to achieve three other goals on 1938. The first was the creation of a common Polish-Hungarian frontier in Subcarpathian Ruthenia, which failed then due to regional rivalries (see below), to be annexed six months later in mid-March 1939. The second was the inclusion of an autonomous Slovakia within Hungary. As it turned out, Hitler established an "independent" Slovakia at the same time as he seized the Czech lands in mid-March 1939, but minus the predominantly Hungarian-speaking areas granted earlier to Hungary. Beck's third and most important goal was Hitler's formal recognition of the status of the Free City of Danzig and of the Polish-German frontier. When, however, Ambassador Lipski presented all these proposals to the Führer on September 20, Chamberlain had already

⁵² For the economic and population figures, see Piotr S. Wandycz, *The Price of Freedom. A History of East Central Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 208. For a detailed description of the industry of Zaolzie as well as Austrian and Czech census figures and ethnic maps, see Dr. B[ogusław] Kożusznik, *The Problem of Cieszyn Silesia: Facts & Documents* (London, October 1943). (The back cover has the address: Central Depot, 91Queen's Court, Queensway, London, W.2.) The author, a physician from Zaolzie, was at the time — as stated on the cover — a member of the Polish National Council, an advisory body consisting of the leaders of political parties. For maps of Zaolzie as annexed by Poland in early October 1938, as well as the Spis, Beskid, Pieniny mountains, and Orava areas annexed on the basis of agreements signed on November 30, 1938, see *Monachium*, 519-522, *Wikipeda*, Śląsk Cieszyński.

signified his agreement in principle to Hitler's demands for the cession of the preponderantly German-speaking Sudetenland on the basis of self-determination; the British and French leaders had agreed to this and mandated the cession to Czechoslovakia. Thus Poland had no leverage in Berlin. Indeed, Lipski's proposals, made on Beck's express instructions, elicited Hitler's reply that Danzig was covered by the Polish-German declaration of 1934 — but also the suggestion of a 30 meter-wide German Corridor through the Polish Corridor to accommodate a superhighway connected with railways.⁵³ This was the opening shot in German diplomatic pressure on Poland to agree to the return of the Free City to Germany, with guaranteed Polish rights, and to an extra-territorial German Corridor through the Polish Corridor. Later German proposals included compensation for Poland in Soviet Ukraine. The Polish government played for time and finally rejected the German demands on March 25, 1939, five days before being offered, and accepting, the British guarantee of Poland's independence.⁵⁴

As mentioned earlier, Beck's major regional goal during the Czechoslovak crisis of 1938 was to secure a common frontier with Hungary in Subcarpathian Ruthenia. This was to be the keystone of his projected Polish-Hungarian-Romanian (and possibly also Yugoslav) bloc, which he had briefly mentioned to American Ambassador William Bullitt in June 1938. The goal of "The Third Europe" was to stem further German expansion in Eastern Europe. Beck worked for this together with the Hungarians and tried to secure Romanian support. He discussed it with King Carol II of Romania in mid-October 1938, but the project failed to get off the ground. This was partly due to Romanian reluctance to give up receiving military supplies from Czechoslovakia, and partly to the clash of Hungarian and Romanian claims— not to speak of the Hungarian revisionist demand regarding Transylvania — but most of all due to the lack of any Western

⁵³ Lipski report on conversation with Hitler, September 20, 1938, *Monachium*, doc. 246; Kornat, *PDD 1938*, doc. 248. For the English translation, see Jędrzejewicz, ed., *Diplomat in Berlin*, 408-412. The author of this article erred in her book, stating that Hitler proposed a thirty mile-wide German Corridor through the Polish Corridor, see *Poland and the Western Powers*, 119.

⁵⁴ On German demands, Beck's play for time and the British guarantee, joined by France, of March 31, 1939, see Cieniala, *Poland and the Western Powers*, ch. 6, 7; also idem, with the benefit of French and British archival and published documents unavailable earlier, "Poland in British and French Policy in 1939: Determination to Fight — or Avoid War?" *TPR* 34, no. 3: 199-226; slightly abbreviated reprint in Patrick Finney, ed., *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Arnold, 1997), 413-433.

support for this endeavor. Mussolini, who wanted to expand Italian influence in the Balkans, had been inclined to support the project but backed out.⁵⁵

Thus, all that Poland gained from the Czechoslovak crisis was Zaolzie. Could Beck have satisfied Polish territorial claims on Czechoslovakia — claims that had the support of the majority of Poles at the time — in some way other than by the threat of force? On the one hand, the Czechoslovak government's agreement of September 30 to the rectification of the frontier along with an offer of negotiations seemed to offer Poland an acceptable way of obtaining the territory both without Western mediation and without incurring the black public image that has stuck to Beck ever since. On the other hand, the procedure proposed by the Czechs would take some time, which Hitler could use to pressure the Polish government into accepting German demands regarding Danzig and the Corridor. These were, in fact, formulated officially to Lipski as "suggestions" by Ribbentrop in late October 1938. In exchange, Ribbentrop offered the possible extension of the Polish-German agreement (1934) for twenty-five years. He also proposed that Poland join the Anti-Comintern Pact (Germany, Italy, Japan) and suggested a joint German-Polish policy toward the USSR. Lipski warned Ribbentrop that he did not see the possibility of a Polish-German understanding on the basis of reuniting Danzig with Germany. He did not speak about the Corridor issue, and the Polish government never took up the Anti-Comintern proposal. It should be noted that at this time there was more talk by Danzig Nazis about the city's return to the motherland and therefore more friction with Poland.⁵⁶ Hitler might well have found a pretext to move German troops into Zaolzie — perhaps in answer to an appeal by the local German minority, supported by the Sudeten German Party — and then offer it to Poland. In his conference speech of September 30, Beck had mentioned not only the danger of German expansion very near the Polish frontier, especially Zaolzie, but also that only drastic Polish action could prevent another Munich. He presumably had in mind a meeting of the same Western

⁵⁵ For "The Third Europe" project, see Kornat, *Polityka równowagi*, ch. 7; also Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers*, ch. 5.

⁵⁶ See Lipski's note on his conversation with Ribbentrop at Berchtesgaden on October 24, 1938, full Polish text in *PDD 1938*, doc. 400, 729-730. English translation in Jędrzejewicz, ed., *Diplomat in Berlin*, doc. 124, 452-453; partial reprint in Włodzimierz Borodziej, Sławomir Dębski, eds., *Polish Documents on Foreign Policy, 24 October 1938-30 September 1939* (Warsaw: The Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2009), doc. 1, p. 3, henceforth *PDFP*. On Danzig Nazis and calls for the return to Germany in late October 1938, see Jan Szembek's note on his conversation with the Polish Commissioner General in the city, Marian Chodacki, October 28, 1938, *Szembek 4*: 333. Ambassador Lipski viewed the tense situation in Danzig as part of a German offensive to regain the city, *ibid.*, 334.

heads of state in three months' time to examine — and settle — Polish and Hungarian claims if no agreements had been reached in the meantime. They might even consider settling Hitler's demands on the Danzig-Corridor issue — in his favor.

Ultimately, even though Polish-Czechoslovak negotiations on the transfer of remaining territory were concluded and agreements were signed on November 30, 1938, the form of presenting its demands to Prague two months earlier, that is, the ultimatum, gave Poland a very bad public image both at the time and in the history books. Beck has been charged recently by a Polish historian with ruining Poland's reputation, or at least strengthening its image as a *de facto* ally of Germany, isolating it from its French ally and other Western states.⁵⁷ One may note, however, that Poland's reputation was already bad, due to accusations regarding the Polish-German Declaration of Non-Aggression as well as the formally good relations between the two countries since that time, which were suspect to and greatly resented by France. As noted earlier, the declaration was interpreted as a secret alliance by most communist sympathizers and socialists in Western Europe, not to mention the USSR. Beck also knew that if Hitler publicized German demands regarding Danzig and the Polish Corridor, they would meet with general Western support, particularly in Britain. Finally, one may assume that, since Western governments and public opinion welcomed the Munich Conference decisions on Czechoslovakia as saving the peace, they would very likely have accepted peaceful Polish-Czechoslovak negotiations for the transfer of Zaolzie. Therefore, it was not the official principle of Poland's demand for equal treatment of the Polish and German minorities of Czechoslovakia on the basis of self-determination, but rather the method chosen to secure the territory that proved unacceptable to Western governments and public opinion. In hindsight, it seems that Beck should have accepted the Czechoslovak offer of September 30, even at the risk of a sudden German takeover. It would be unrealistic, however, to expect such a decision from the contemporary Polish decision-makers, led by Beck, so the ultimatum can be judged as regrettable, but it must be viewed in the context of the Munich agreement as well as Polish interests, public opinion, and the dramatic conditions of the time.

The Polish ultimatum to Prague certainly led to frosty Polish relations with France and Britain. Relations with France soon recovered, however, and Beck worked successfully to improve relations with Britain. At the end of November, he instructed the Polish Ambassador in London,

⁵⁷ For these charges, see Stanisław Żerko, *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie 1938-1939* [Polish-German Relations 1938-1939] (Poznań: Instytut Zachodni, 1998), 464, and idem, "Dylematy Józefa Becka" [The Dilemmas of Józef Beck] in *1939. Jak rozpętała się II wojna światowa*, in *Polityka*, wydanie specjalne [How the Second World War Broke Out. Special edition of *Polityka*] 3/2009, 67-68.

Edward Raczynski, to see British Foreign Secretary Halifax and explain Polish foreign policy aims to him. With regard to Czechoslovakia, the ambassador was to say that Poland had been ready to settle her demands regarding that country together with the Western Powers [that is, at Munich]. Since that proved unfeasible, she did so independently “without any debts of gratitude to anyone, including Germany.” (The ambassador carried out Beck’s instruction on December 15).⁵⁸ The Beck initiative began a period of improved relations which accompanied Hitler’s destruction of the Czechoslovak State in mid-March 1939, leading to the British guarantee of Polish independence at the end of that month, to a provisional mutual aid agreement a few days later, and finally to a treaty of alliance in late August 1939.

Soviet-Polish relations also improved after a short period of tension caused by the Soviet threat of September 23, 1938, to abrogate the Polish-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact if Polish troops moved into Czechoslovakia. Beck answered the same day that the Polish government was not obliged to explain its policy to anyone.⁵⁹ This was in keeping with his belief that Soviet policy had the character of a demonstration rather than action, that is, for show. It should be noted, however, that on September 27 visible Soviet military preparations were reported by Polish diplomats in the Minsk region, and there was a Polish protest against Soviet planes over-flying the frontier.⁶⁰ It was no coincidence that the Czechoslovak reply, dated September 22, to the Polish demand of September 21 for an immediate decision on Polish inhabited territories analogous to the Czechoslovak decision on the German problem — i.e., the cession of Zaolzie — arrived in Warsaw on September 26, just before Soviet military activity on the Polish-Soviet frontier was observed. In fact, Beneš had asked for Soviet pressure on Poland.⁶¹ Soviet as well as some Western historians have claimed that the

⁵⁸ *PDD 1938*, docs. 435, 448; English translation of Beck’s instruction, *PDFP* doc. 19; see also Cienciała, “Minister Józef Beck i Ambassador Edward Raczynski a zbliżenie polsko-brytyjskie w okresie październik 1938 — styczeń 1939” [Minister Beck, Ambassador Raczynski and the Polish-British Rapprochement in the Period October 1938 — January 1939] in Henryk Bułhak et al., eds., *Z dziejów polityki i dyplomacji polskiej. Studia poświęcone pamięci Edwarda Raczynskiego, Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej na wychodźstwie* [From the History of Polish Policy and Diplomacy. Studies in Memory of Edward Raczynski, President of the Polish Republic in Exile] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 1994), 348-363.

⁵⁹ See *PDD 1938*, docs. 268, 273.

⁶⁰ *PDD 1938*, docs. 297, 317.

⁶¹ Czechoslovak letter to President Mościcki, Sept. 22, 1938, *Szembek* 4: 438-439; *Monachium*, doc. 360; on Beneš appeal to Moscow, see Cienciała in Lukes and Goldstein, *Munich Crisis*, 61-62.

Soviet Union stood ready to help the Czechs if only the Red Army could transit through either Poland or Romania,⁶² although it seems more likely that the Red Army might have moved into Poland. There is, however, no documented Soviet request to the Polish Government to agree to the Red Army's transit through Poland to Czechoslovakia, nor is there a documented plan of Soviet military operations. Also, it seems rather unlikely that Stalin would have tangled with Hitler even if France and Britain had done so — and from reading their diplomatic correspondence he knew that they did not want to fight Germany but sought a peaceful satisfaction of Hitler's demand.⁶³ If the Western Powers had given strong indications of readiness to fight Germany, it seems possible that Stalin could have sent the Red Army into southeastern Poland. In fact, according to the memoirs of General Maurice Gamelin, then head of the French General Staff, on September 26

⁶² Hugh Ragsdale shows, on the basis of declassified Soviet documents, that the Red Army vastly increased its forces on the Soviet frontier with Poland in late September 1938 (when Britain placed her navy on alert and France called up her reservists), suggesting they could have marched into Bessarabia (now Moldova and Transdnistria). See Ragsdale, *The Soviets, the Munich Crisis, and the Coming of World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); for the author's earlier statements on this topic and comments by Mark Kramer, see "Soviet Actions during the Munich Crisis," *Kennan Institute Report* 15, no. 18 (1998). On Red Army concentrations on the Polish frontier, see also M.I. Myeltukhin, "Krasnaya Armiya w uslovyakh narastaniya mezhdunarodnogo krizisa 1938-1939" [The Red Army in Conditions of the Growing International Crisis, 1938-1939] in N.S. Lebedeva, Russian Academy of Sciences, and M. Wołoś, Permanent Representative of The Polish Academy of Sciences, Y.K. Korshunv compiler, *Myukhenskoye Soglashenye 1938 goda: The Munich Agreement of 1938: History and Modernity* [Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of World History, 2009], 231-232. For a rejection of the claim of Soviet readiness to help Czechoslovakia in 1938, see Igor Lukes, "Stalin and Czechoslovakia in 1938-39: An Autopsy of a Myth," in Lukes and Goldstein, *Munich Crisis*, 13-47; critical review by Milan Hauner, *International History Review* 23 (March 2001): 195-196.

⁶³ On diplomatic correspondence from and to London, Paris, and Prague, available to Stalin and Molotov in the 1930s, see Vasili S. Khristoforov, Chief of Registration and Archival Fonds (Collections), Department of the Federal Security Service of Russia, in the Russian-language volume edited by *Myukhenskoye Soglashenie*, 342-343. On the five former Cambridge students, then members of the Foreign Office, who supplied Soviet agents with intelligence on British policy, see Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), ch. 4; on a Soviet agent in the F.O. cipher department, see D. C. Watt, "Francis Herbert King: A Soviet Source in the Foreign Office," *Intelligence and National Security*, 3, no. 4 (1988): 62-82.

— that is, during the crisis — the Soviet military attaché in Paris spoke of thirty divisions and cavalry units on the frontier with Poland, as well as tanks and most of the Soviet air force.⁶⁴ As mentioned earlier, no military plan for such action has surfaced so far, but the pro-Soviet Czechoslovak envoy in Moscow, Zdenek Fierlinger, reported the expectation that in case of “a favorable development,” the USSR would try to establish a common border with Czechoslovakia.⁶⁵ This would, of course, have meant Soviet annexation of at least part of southeastern Poland (former East Galicia). Indeed, as Richard Raack has shown, Soviet Deputy Commissar for Foreign Affairs Vladimir P. Potemkin wrote, under an assumed name, about a new partition of Poland in *Pravda* before the Munich Conference in 1938; he also told a French diplomat in October 1938 that it was inevitable. Stalin, of course, shared Lenin’s view that there would be a second “imperialist” war, and saw it as the prime occasion for Soviet action and expansion. As he said at a party conference in 1925, if such a war broke out, the USSR would come in to add the decisive weight to the scales — the weight that would tip them.⁶⁶ In Potemkin’s article and his later statement, Stalin might have been advertising his terms for aligning either with Hitler or the Western Powers in the expected “imperialist” war. Ultimately, he chose Hitler.

Some historians and other authors writing on the history of the immediate prewar period claim even today that Hitler’s demands were reasonable and should have been accepted by the Poles, thus preventing the outbreak of the World War II. This claim ignores the fact that Hitler was not a reasonable and responsible statesman and that his aim was to build a great German empire. In mid-March 1939, he broke his word, given at Munich, that he would not seek territory with non-German populations, by annexing the Czech lands and destroying the Czechoslovak state. It is also known that, on hearing of the Polish rejection of his demands for Danzig and a German Corridor through the Polish Corridor, the Führer issued a directive on March 25 to the head of the German General Staff. He wrote that, not wishing to drive the Poles into the arms of Great Britain, he did not want to resolve the Danzig issue by force. He would consider a military occupation of the city only if the Polish government indicated it could not justify a voluntary surrender to its people and would therefore welcome a [German] “fait accompli.” After citing the above statement, the British historian A. J. P.

⁶⁴ See Maurice Gamelin, *Servir* (Paris: Plon, 1946) 2: 356, cit. Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers*, 132.

⁶⁵ For Fierlinger’s report of September 23, 1938, see Cienciala in Lukes and Goldberg, *Munich Crisis*, 62-63.

⁶⁶ On Stalin and the second imperialist war; his plans for Poland; Potemkin’s article and oral statements on the partition of Poland and Soviet-German negotiations in 1939, see R.C. Raack, “His Question Asked and Answered. Stalin on ‘Whither Poland?’” *TPR* 55 (2010), no. 2: 195-216.

Taylor concluded that “Hitler’s objective was alliance with Poland, not her destruction.”⁶⁷ He did so by omitting the next paragraph where the Führer wrote that a resolution of the problem in the near future required favorable political conditions. Poland would then be so beaten down that she would not count as a political factor for decades. Hitler envisaged extending the German frontier from the eastern coast of East Prussia to the eastern tip of [Upper] Silesia, but noted that out-settling [Poles] and resettling [Germans] were still open questions.⁶⁸ Indeed, although Hitler repeated his allegedly reasonable demands in his speech to the Reichstag of April 28, 1939, his primary goal was always to gain *Lebensraum* for the German people, which he envisaged in Poland and the USSR. As he told Göring and high German army officers on May 23, 1939, Danzig was not the objective — it was to gain *Lebensraum* in the East, and settle the land with Germans to secure nourishment for the German people.⁶⁹

Despite the fact that the above documents have been available in print for over fifty years, some Anglo-American and Russian historians still express the view that Hitler’s demands should have been accepted and that, by rejecting them, Poland bears responsibility for outbreak of World War II. Taylor also called the Poles “political gamblers” and opined that sober statesmen would have surrendered, seeing the dangers confronting them and their country’s inadequate means to deal with them.⁷⁰ This view was then

⁶⁷ A.J.P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1961; Atheneum, New York, 1961), 210. This was also the theme of Patrick J. Buchanan’s book *Churchill, Hitler and Unnecessary War: How Britain Lost its Empire and the West lost the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2008). The best critique of Taylor’s treatment of Polish foreign policy is by Piotr S. Wandycz, “Poland Between East and West,” in Gordon Martel, ed., *The Origins of the Second World War Reconsidered: The A.J. P. Taylor debate after twenty-five years* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 187-209.

⁶⁸ *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, D (London, Washington, D.C. 1956), 6, doc. 99. Hitler’s proposed annexation line indicates he meant to recover Prussian Poland as it existed in 1914, plus all of Upper Silesia, which was also part of Prussia at that time.

⁶⁹ See *Documents* cit. above, doc. 433. For the most authoritative interpretation of Hitler’s foreign policy, see Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler’s Germany: Starting World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), and idem, *Germany, Hitler and World War II: Essays in Modern German and World History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁷⁰ *Taylor, Origins*, 251. For a recent Russian claim that Poland was to blame for the outbreak of World War II, see Sergei Kovalev’s article on the Russian government website, May 25, 2009, *Window on Eurasia*, June 4, 2009, and the report in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 6, 2009; it was removed after a protest by the Polish government.

extrapolated into a Polish tendency to commit national suicide. One American historian even cites Balzac's statement "You only have to show a Pole a precipice and he will throw himself over it."⁷¹ Niall Ferguson also writes in this vein, stating that in 1939 the Poles "were suicidally determined to fight."⁷²

Poles were not suicidal in 1939 — after all, at that time they had alliances with Britain and France — but Poland's terrible fate inspired even some Polish historians to argue that Poland should have joined Hitler in attacking the USSR, thus avoiding the enormous losses she suffered in World War II. One of them even imagined Beck and Hitler presiding over a victory parade in Red Square.⁷³ Beck, however, understood what Hitler had in mind for Poland if she bowed to his demands. The Polish foreign minister's comment on the idea of a Polish-German war against the USSR — recorded when he was interned in Romania — reads: "We would have defeated Russia, and afterwards we would be taking Hitler's cows out to pasture in the Urals."⁷⁴ Although Beck did not know it, Nazi plans envisaged, after victory over the USSR, deporting much of the Polish population to Siberia and settling the land with Germans.

As mentioned earlier, Beck managed to turn the British guarantee of Polish independence of March 31, 1939, into a provisional agreement on mutual aid, signed on April 6, which became a treaty of mutual aid — that is, an alliance — on August 25, 1939. Diplomatic historians of this period know that the British and French governments sought not to help or safeguard Poland as such, but rather to prevent or at least delay German

⁷¹ For the quotation from Balzac (without giving the source), see Roland N. Stromberg, *Europe in the Twentieth Century*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 239.

⁷² See Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 379; reviewed by Cienciala in *TPR* 53, no. 1 (2008): 97-103.

⁷³ See "Rozmowa w Profesorem P. Wieczorkiewiczem" [A Conversation with Prof. P. Wieczorkiewicz] *Rzeczpospolita*, 17 September 2005. Grzegorz Górski pursued the same train of thought in his book *Wrzesień 1939, rozważania alternatywne* [September 1939; Alternative Considerations] (Warsaw: Bellona, 2000).

⁷⁴ Beck statement, as recorded in the unpublished memoirs of Polish diplomat Jan Bociński in The Józef Piłsudski Institute, London, Collection 50, p. 57, cit. Marek Kornat, "Polska między Niemcami a Związkiem Sowieckim (1938-1939)" [Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union, 1938-1939], in Sławomir Dębski and Mikhail Narinski, eds., *Kryzys 1939 roku w interpretacjach polskich i rosyjskich historyków* [The Crisis of 1939 in the Interpretations of Polish and Russian Historians] (Warsaw: Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 2009), 361.

aggression against Poland, which would mean war. Beck, for his part, believed that Poland's alliances would prevent a German attack, giving him the chance to reach an agreement both satisfactory to Hitler and protecting vital Polish interests. Both London and Paris, however, hoped for another international conference — though this time with the loser, Poland, present — to transfer Danzig and the Polish Corridor to Germany, and they made no plans to attack Germany as they committed to do if she attacked their ally. The Polish government, especially Beck, cannot be blamed for believing that Poland's allies would carry out their commitments. It was, after all, reasonable to expect them to attack Germany when she was fighting Poland, rather than wait for Hitler to attack them with full force in their turn, which is what actually happened. Nor can Beck and the Polish government be blamed for preventing a Franco-British-Soviet alliance in 1939.⁷⁵ Stalin was clearly unwilling to go to war with Nazi Germany not only in 1938 and 1939 but also in 1941. He knew the Red Army was not ready to fight the German Wehrmacht, so he refused to believe warnings of Hitler's plan to attack the USSR and reports of German troop concentrations on the Soviet western borders right up to June 22, 1941.

In conclusion, what kind of verdict does Józef Beck deserve? Taylor's judgment that "Beck, the foreign minister, always possessed complete self-confidence, though not much else" indicates his ignorance of Polish foreign policy. Furthermore, in his book he called the appeasement of Germany at Munich "the triumph of all that was best and most enlightened in British life." Few historians today know that Taylor, who had opposed Munich in 1938, wrote this when he viewed war as the greatest of all evils and was actively supporting the movement for unilateral British nuclear disarmament.⁷⁶ Beck must have been anathema to Taylor for rejecting

⁷⁵ On French and British aims in 1939 and their dishonest military commitments to Poland, see Cienciala, "Poland in British and French Policy in 1939: Determination of Fight — or Avoid War," in Patrick Finney, ed., *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Arnold, 1997), 413-433; this is an abbreviated version of the article published in *TPR* 34, no. 3 (1989): 199-226. On Poland and the French, British-Soviet and German-Soviet negotiations preceding the signature of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, see Cienciala, "The Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 23, 1939: When did Stalin Decide to Align with Hitler, and was Poland the culprit?" in M.B.B. Biskupski, ed., *Ideology, Politics and Diplomacy in East Central Europe* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 147-226.

⁷⁶ On Beck and Munich, see A.J.P. Taylor, *Origins*, 80, 189. On Taylor's support for unilateral British nuclear disarmament while writing the book, see A.J. P. Taylor, *A Personal History* (New York: Atheneum, 1983) 225-230. When the author of this article met Taylor in London in 1968 and asked whether

Hitler's proposals, then resisting German aggression, and thus setting off World War II.

In view of the knowledge available to historians today, Beck can be seen as a remarkable Polish statesman who did the best that could be done to steer Poland between the Scylla of Nazi Germany and the Charybdis of the USSR. He is charged with being misled too long by the belief that Hitler intended to maintain good relations with Poland.⁷⁷ This is, at best, a misinterpretation. Like most statesmen of the time, Beck did not believe that Hitler would risk another war with the Western Powers, which is not the same thing as trusting in Hitler's good intentions toward Poland. Moreover, in 1936-38 he tried to interest the British in Polish military help for France, Belgium and Holland in case of war, and hinted in June 1938 at the possibility of a Polish-Hungarian-Romanian bloc which could fight Germany in the East if Britain and France fought her in the West. He did not oppose a compromise solution to the Danzig problem as long as it did not threaten vital Polish interests, but what Hitler wanted was the end of Polish independence.⁷⁷ Beck does not deserve the charge of cooperating with Hitler, either in 1934 or in 1938.⁷⁸ The Polish-German Non-Aggression Declaration did not contain any secret, anti-Soviet protocols, nor did it ruin or undermine the French alliance system in Eastern Europe, since France had been trying to neuter or even get rid of her alliance with Poland at least since the Locarno Treaties of 1925. In 1938, expecting the demise of Czechoslovakia, Beck was a realist in preparing to gain Zaolzie for Poland — acting parallel to but not with, or for Hitler — and in trying to obtain German agreement to a common Polish-Hungarian frontier as the keystone for a future anti-German bloc, while also seeking a formal German recognition of the status of Danzig as a Free City and of the Polish-German frontier. Finally, he always believed that Poland could never side with Berlin in a European war.

In a rare, positive evaluation of Beck's policy, written almost fifty years after opposing his proposal of sending an ultimatum to Czechoslovakia, Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski wrote that the whole, layered historical past and even tactical arguments favored Beck's policy toward Czechoslovakia in 1938. He noted that Wincenty Witos, head of the Polish

he had written the book to provoke a reaction, he angrily replied: "I meant every word I said."

⁷⁷ For a critical study of Beck's policies in 1938-39, see Żerko, *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie*. For a polemic with his views, see Marek Kornat, "W związku z książką Stanisława Żerki o stosunkach polsko-niemieckich 1938-1939" [In Connection with Stanisław Żerko's Book on Polish-German Relations, 1938-1939], *Dzieje Najnowsze*, 2000, nr. 4: 71-90.

⁷⁸ See Gerhard L. Weinberg, "A Proposed Compromise over Danzig in 1939?" in his *Germany, Hitler and World War II*, 121-128.

Peasant Party, then in Czechoslovak exile, condemned Prague's policy regarding Zaolzie, while Maciej Rataj, former speaker of the Sejm, told the Czech journalist Vacláv Fiala he could not follow any other policy than Beck. Kwiatkowski concluded with a judgment of Beck's foreign policy, especially in 1939:

Finally, in the name of objectivity, one has to say that it is easy to criticize Beck's actions because, like every active individual he made many errors and mistakes. But it is very difficult even today, after the great drama of war, to find another, fundamentally different alternative to Polish policy at that time. Two such different concepts were then hiding in dark, political corners of Poland. One proclaimed the desire for a complete capitulation to the Soviets with the alleged goal of defending Poland against the expected Nazi aggression. The other suggested fraternization with Hitler against the expansion of greedy Stalinist communism. Beck decisively and categorically rejected these two depraved political options. He chose a rocky, difficult road full of visible and hidden dangers, but a simple and Polish road.⁷⁹

Professor Adam Daniel Rotfeld, Polish Foreign Minister in 2005, has also praised Beck. He reminded his fellow Poles on May 5, 2009, of Beck's speech delivered in the Polish parliament exactly seventy years earlier. On that day, Beck gave the Polish reply to Hitler's speech of April 28, in which the Führer had abrogated both the German-British naval agreement of 1935 and the Polish-German Declaration of Non-Aggression of 1934, while repeating his demands for the return of Danzig and a German Corridor through the Polish Corridor. Beck ended his speech with the statement:

Peace is a valuable and desirable thing. Our generation, which has shed its blood in several wars, surely deserves a period of peace. But peace, like almost everything in this world, has its price, high but definable. We in Poland do not recognize the concept of "peace at any price." There is only one thing in the life of men, nations and states which is without price, and that is honor.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ On Witos and Rataj, see Eugeniusz Kwiatkowski, "Józef Beck," *Zeszyty Historyczne* nr. 76 (see n. 49 above), p. 27; conclusion on Beck, p. 32.

⁸⁰ *PDFR*, doc. 108; reprint from *The Polish White Book* (New York: Greystone Press and Wydawnictwo "Rój" in exile, 1942), doc. 77. See also J.H. Harley, *The Authentic Biography of Colonel Beck* (based on the Polish of Conrad Wrzos, Introduction by Count Edward Raczyński) (London: Hutchinson & Company, n.d.), 184-193, photograph facing p. 156. The book was most likely

Rotfeld commented that Beck's great merit was not to give in to Hitler's blackmail. His statement in the Polish parliament was welcomed by Poles; it showed courage and reasonable political thinking. The Polish Foreign Minister could not prevent Nazi aggression, but he was responsible for the fact that the German invasion of Poland met with armed resistance.⁸¹

Historians might well consider the most likely results of the alternative history consequent on the acceptance of Hitler's demands by Beck in 1939. Germany was not ready to invade the USSR in the fall of 1939, even with a satellite Poland in tow, but she could have attacked France as Hitler had planned to do after defeating Poland. His generals, however, persuaded him to wait due to severe losses by the Luftwaffe, which also used up its entire bomb stock in Poland. He would have defeated France even faster than in 1940 and then demanded — as Hitler did in summer 1940 — that Britain accept German domination over Europe. In the fall of 1939, Britain would have been much weaker than it was a year later, and who knows if Churchill would have been as successful then in getting the government to reject Hitler's proposals as he was in May 1940?⁸² As it turned out, Poland's lonely fight against Nazi Germany gained precious time for her allies. It was wasted by France, whose military leaders rejected the idea of a repeat, successful German *Blitzkrieg* in the West, particularly in France. But it was used to the full by Britain, which produced about 600 fighter planes per month between fall 1939 and fall 1940. Some of these planes were flown by the Polish pilots who made up ten percent of RAF pilots active in the Battle of Britain in mid-September 1940.⁸³

Beck died of tuberculosis in a dilapidated village schoolhouse in Romania on June 5, 1944, on the eve of the successful Allied landing in northwestern France. He was buried in a Bucharest cemetery, but his remains were repatriated and interred with honors in the Powązki Military Cemetery in Warsaw on May 24, 1991. He deserves a fair reassessment for continuing Piłsudski's policy of equilibrium between Nazi Germany and the USSR, working to secure important gains for Poland in the Czechoslovak crisis of 1938, and finally as the statesman who refused even to consider Poland as a vassal state, let alone an ally of Germany.

printed in summer or early fall 1939; it was taken out of circulation by the new Polish government established in Paris on September 30, 1939.

⁸¹ Report on Adam D. Rotfeld's speech, cited in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, May 5, 2009.

⁸² See John Lukacs, *The Duel: Hitler vs. Churchill, 10 May — 31 July 1940* (London: Bodley Head, 1990).

⁸³ For a recent work on Polish pilots and their service in World War II Britain, see Lynne Olson and Stanley Cloud, *A Question of Honor: The Kościuszko Squadron; Forgotten Heroes of World War II* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2003).