

Mariusz Wołos

AN ALLY FOR SHOW. SOVIET DIPLOMATS AND THE VISIT OF GENERAL WŁADYSŁAW SIKORSKI TO THE SOVIET UNION IN 1941

ABSTRACT

Władysław Sikorski's visit to the Soviet Union in 1941 was one of the most important events in relations between the Polish government-in-exile and the Kremlin. Soviet diplomats prepared for the arrival of this Polish guest with great care. This was demonstrated by a special memorandum prepared on General Sikorski by the Fourth European Department of the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs for their superiors, tracking his whole life and emphasising his anti-Piłsudski and anti-German stance. The deputy head of the Soviet diplomatic apparatus, Andrey Vyshinsky, shouldered the burden of contacts with Poles on behalf of the foreign affairs ministry. The Polish side did not manage to use Sikorski's visit to ensure that the Soviets fulfilled their commitments resulting from bilateral pacts signed in summer 1941: accelerating the process of freeing Polish citizens from jails, gulags and special settlement areas; employing all those fit for military service to form an army; redeployment of the army being formed to areas where it would be easier to obtain British provisioning aid; and evacuation of 15,000–20,000 soldiers to the United Kingdom and Egypt. The Soviet dictator, Joseph Stalin, was personally involved in hosting General Sikorski as this was a very important visit to him. This was expressed in the granting of loans to Poland to organise an army in the Soviet Union and aid for Polish citizens, as well as a number of minor concessions. A declaration on friendship and mutual support was ceremonially signed. The Soviet side ensured that Sikorski's visit was publicised in the press and on the radio, even filming the more important events for propaganda purposes. His radio address was translated into many foreign languages. This was important for Stalin, who exploited the visit of this Polish guest to reduce anti-Soviet moods, not only among Poles living in the Soviet Union, but also among Soviet citizens mindful of the scale of repressions in the 1930s. In reality, the alliance with Poland, including the formation of a Polish army in the Soviets, had been a burden on Stalin from the outset. However, Sikorski's visit at a time of particular danger to the further existence of the Soviet state suited him well. Hence the hypothesis that the Soviet dictator treated his Polish partner as the titular "ally for show", both for his own citizens and for international opinion.

KEYWORDS:

Polish-Soviet relations 1939–1945; Soviet diplomacy; Władysław Sikorski; Joseph Stalin; Andrey Vyshinsky; Stanisław Kot

MARIUSZ WOŁOS

professor, employed at the Institute of History and Archival Research of the Pedagogical University of Kraków and the Tadeusz Manteuffel Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. Between 2007 and 2011, he was Director of the Research Centre of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Moscow and a Permanent Representative of the Polish Academy of Sciences to the Russian Academy of Sciences. His research focuses on the history of diplomacy in the twentieth century, the history of the Soviet Union, the Polish independence movement before and during the First World War, contemporary Russian and Polish historiography, and national minorities in Europe.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6943-1069>

In a report addressed to the Soviet People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Vyacheslav Molotov, half a year after Polish Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief Władysław Sikorski's visit to the Soviet Union, Ambassador Alexander Bogomolov, accredited by the government in exile in London, wrote the following:

Sikorski is a Polish nationalist, but he relies on England, and since he acts on England's behalf, he acts cautiously, fulfilling the class objectives of both English imperialism and Polish fascism.

The purpose of Sikorski's visit to Moscow was to inspect the army and examine a situation that was very tough for us at the time. His visit came to nothing. The loans he received met with a rather cool reception here because they only formalised the actual state of affairs. The irate émigrés believe that we have an unpayable debt to Poland, and if we do anything for the Poles, then accepting this help by the Poles is a great stunt for them and a great concession to their self-love. I am speaking, of course, about today's nobility, not the Polish nation, with whose moods I am unfamiliar.¹

Leaving aside the ideological slogans, of which there was no shortage in Bogomolov's report – the array of statements going well beyond the diplomatic craft and his overt dislike of the Polish authorities to which he had submitted his letters of credence – the question remains whether his

¹ *Dokumenty do historii stosunków polsko-sowieckich 1918–1945. 1939–1945. Część 1. Wojna i rozejm (1939–1942)*, ed. by Łukasz Adamski and others, IV (Warszawa: Centrum Polsko-Rosyjskiego Dialogu i Porozumienia, 2021), pp. 354–55.

verdict on Sikorski's visit to the Soviet Union was warranted. This issue will be the main focus of my enquiry, but I must also point out that Soviet diplomats in the period in question played only an auxiliary – one might say informational and organisational – role. This was not just because the role of diplomats often becomes marginal in periods of military conflicts, but also due to the specific nature of the Soviet system. In this case, it was the fully-fledged Stalinist totalitarianism – with an extremely vertical power structure, in which the deciding vote in any important question issue belonged to the dictator, namely Joseph Stalin – that sidelined diplomats.² This mechanism also applied, inevitably, to the case of Sikorski's visit to the Soviet Union in late 1941. In the documentation I analysed, we can find clear evidence of this.

The idea of General Sikorski paying a visit to the Soviet Union appeared in Soviet diplomatic documentation as early as the first half of October 1941. In a diary entry for 10 October, Ivan Maisky, the Soviet ambassador to the United Kingdom, who knew the Polish politician well, wrote that Bogomolov had visited him that evening with the information that Sikorski would travel to Moscow without delay. Maisky gives the reason for this step as being the Polish politician's intention to show the world in a quite ostentatious manner the alliances that connected him with the Soviets at such a critical juncture for them, notwithstanding the fact that the recently formed Polish Armed Forces in the Soviet Union were not yet ready to participate in battle.³

The matter quickly gathered pace. Two days later, Bogomolov received instructions from his government to relay Moscow's positive response to Sikorski. Then, on 14 October, at a meeting between the Polish ambassador in the Soviet Union, Stanisław Kot, and deputy people's commissar for foreign affairs, Andrey Vyshinsky, it was confirmed that Sikorski would be received "in line with international custom". This was not quite a precise response to the Polish diplomat's question about officially inviting Sikorski as a guest of the Soviet government. Vyshinsky also emphasised that the initiative of a visit to the Soviet Union had come from Sikorski, not from Moscow.⁴ I note this detail as it was particularly significant from a propaganda point of view, and it also casts the Polish leader in the role of suppliant to the Soviet hosts, which can hardly be seen as accidental.

² On Stalin's position as a dictator among the Soviet elite, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team. The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin. Waiting for Hitler, 1929–1941* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), pp. 56f.

³ Ivan Majskij, *Dnevnik diplomaty. London: 1934–1943*, ed. by Aleksandr Čubar'jan, 2 vols (Moskva: Nauka, 2009), II, p. 57.

⁴ *Dokumenty vnešnej politiki SSSR* (hereafter DVP), 24 vols (Moskva, 1959–2000), XXIV (2000), p. 367.

Ambassador Kot pursued the subject, intending to capitalise on Sikorski's visit as a form of pressure on the Soviet authorities with the objective of accelerating the process of freeing Polish citizens from prisons, gulags and special settlement areas, using all those fit for military service to form an army, moving the forces being created to areas where it would be easier to receive provisioning aid from the British, and finally evacuating 15,000–20,000 soldiers to Britain and Egypt. Getting ahead of events, we should note that these procedures generally ended in failure.⁵ At a meeting with the Polish ambassador on 22 October, Molotov stressed that he understood the purpose of Sikorski's visit well, but he stopped short of an unequivocal confirmation that the Soviet side still wished him to come. He replied indirectly, as it were, by noting the possibility of receiving the Polish prime minister not in Moscow but in Kuybyshev, to which the central Soviet organs were being gradually transferred owing to the progress of the German offensive. At this stage of negotiations, no firm date for Sikorski's trip had yet been fixed. Molotov declared, however, that he would keep Stalin informed and instruct Ambassador Kot as to the results of his conversation with the Soviet dictator.⁶ The question of the visit began to drag on, with the final decision – regarding both the date and the nature of the meeting – depending on Stalin's will. Over the next few weeks, the Polish ambassador informed his Soviet interlocutors of the stages of General Sikorski's trip to North Africa and the Middle East, but without receiving any specific information on the organisation of his stay in the USSR in return.⁷

At a cabinet meeting in London (27 October), Sikorski discussed the plans for his visit to the Soviet Union. The prime minister made his trip conditional on obtaining “a guarantee of a positive solution to all the demands made in the Polish-Soviet agreement and the Polish-Soviet military pact”. He was referring to documents signed a few months earlier which, referring to the conditions named above, regulated the mutual inter-state relations.⁸ Sikorski was sure to assert that a threat to abandon the visit could have an impact on not only Bogomolov but also the Soviet government, in the sense that he was willing to enact the resolutions of the agreements in question. In this case, the Polish prime minister was referring to the dispatches of Ambassador Kot. Yet Sikorski was too optimistic, as he would soon find out. At a meeting with Deputy Prime Minister Stanisław

⁵ *Protokoły posiedzeń Rady Ministrów Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, ed. by Marian Zgórnjak, Wojciech Rojek, and Andrzej Suchcitz, 8 vols (Kraków: Secesja, 1994–2008), III (1996), pp. 264–65 (also footnote 10); *Sovetsko-pol'skie otnošenija v 1918–1945 gg. Sbornik dokumentov v četyrech tomach*, ed. by Michail Narinskij and Artem Mal'gin, 4 vols (Moskva: Aspekt Press, 2017), IV, pp. 219–20.

⁶ DVP, XXIV, pp. 376–79.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 395–97.

⁸ *Protokoły posiedzeń Rady Ministrów Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, III, pp. 239–40.

Mikołajczyk and Foreign Minister Edward Raczynski at Stratton House, Bogomolov, in response to the instructions received by Moscow, stated firmly that the Soviet government was implementing the resolutions of the agreements formed with the Polish side, but that he saw as impossible making Sikorski's visit dependent on Moscow fulfilling any conditions (6 November).⁹ At the next cabinet meeting, Raczynski called Bogomolov's tactics "typical eastern 'face politics' [sic], an attempt to keep up appearances, as if everything were in order" (7 November).¹⁰ However, the matter went much deeper. It concerned not so much the tactics of Bogomolov, who was only an instrument in the hands of his superiors in Moscow, as the tough approach of the Kremlin decision makers towards their weaker Polish partner, which they did not intend to abandon even at a time of defeats on the front line and the absolutely real possibility of a disruption to the entire Soviet structure. Interestingly, some Polish politicians spoke out against checkmating Moscow by withdrawing Sikorski's travel plans, since these tactics would not bring the desired outcome and could be used for propaganda purposes by the Germans and Italians as well as negatively impacting the British or US stance on Polish issues. This was the view of Stanisław Stroński, the information minister.¹¹

The positions of Polish and Soviet diplomats regarding the conditions of Sikorski's trip clashed at Raczynski's meeting with Bogomolov (8 November). The latter admitted that the conditions of war made it difficult to implement the resolutions of the agreements signed with Poland. He also expressed his surprise that the Soviet government was expected to "give a travel deposit", especially as "true friendship does not look around for profit". Bogomolov also made a telling suggestion: Sikorski could have his demands satisfied during his stay in the Soviet Union.¹² This was a well-thought-out tactic that from Moscow's perspective could scupper the conditions set by the Polish government while also encouraging Sikorski to visit. And this indeed happened, which essentially meant a concession from the Polish side. Sikorski's visit was important to the Soviets, and this determined their moves in contacts with the representatives of Poland. They were even willing to resort to outright lies. Bogomolov replied to Sikorski's memorandum of 16 October 1941 with a significant delay, for it did not happen until 14 November. He informed that all Polish citizens subject to release from prisons, gulags and sites of forced settlement had

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 273–78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 280.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 280–83 (both quotations).

been freed, as had Polish officers located on the territory of the Soviet Union.¹³ But this was very far from the truth.

The Soviets also repeated this lie about all Poles being freed from prisons and gulags to representatives of other countries, including the British ambassador to the USSR, Stafford Cripps, in a discussion with Vyshinsky in Kuybyshev (3 November). The deputy head of the Soviet diplomatic apparatus even claimed that information about Poles being kept in captivity, and especially cases of starvation, were untrue and stemmed from enemy sources. He also took the opportunity to make it clear that the best solution would be direct Polish-Soviet talks without intermediaries, including the United Kingdom. Cripps also adopted the role of advocate for the Polish side. Asked by Vyshinsky about the conditions set by Sikorski as a *sine qua non* condition for his arrival, Cripps replied that:

[...] according to the information he had received from London, General Sikorski does not see a visit to the USSR as possible given the lack of agreement on these matters, but this should not be treated as a condition. He, Cripps, would not call it a condition. He thinks that Sikorski simply does not consider coming to the USSR as useful before these issues have been resolved.¹⁴

As late as 12 November, in a conversation with Vyshinsky, Ambassador Kot underlined that Sikorski's visit would be a turning point in Polish-Soviet relations, whereas the trip failing to happen would indicate a deterioration. He also noted that the Polish prime minister's temperament and conduct often fell well short of diplomatic standards, and that this hardly diplomatic behaviour might be displayed if he deemed that the idea of his trip to the Soviets was received in an unfriendly manner in Moscow. Yet Vyshinsky's stance remained firm. He asserted that the Soviet side was positive about the idea of a visit but "does not regard it as possible to link this trip to any conditions, especially those set in the form of an ultimatum".¹⁵ Kot refuted the accusations of an alleged ultimatum made by the Polish side but gratefully accepted Vyshinsky's proposal to set up a meeting for him with Stalin. The tone of the discussion changed immediately. Furthermore, the deputy head of the Soviet diplomatic apparatus asked the Polish ambassador for the names of people

¹³ Ibid., pp. 310–11 (also footnote 5), 317–18.

¹⁴ Iz dnevnika A. Ja. Vyšinskogo. Priem posla Velikobritanii St. Krippsa 3 nojabrja 1941 goda, 4 November 1941, Archiv vnešnej politiki Rossijskoj Federacii, Moskva (hereafter AVP RF), f. 06: Sekretariat V. M. Molotova, op. 3 AVTO, p. 4, d. 31, k. 19–21 (translated into English from the author's Polish translation).

¹⁵ Iz dnevnika A. Ja. Vyšinskogo. Priem pol'skogo posla g. Kot i 1-go sekretarja posol'stva g. Arlet, 12 nojabrja 1941 goda, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 4, d. 31, k. 80.

in the USSR whom Sikorski was particularly interested in. He suggested providing them on lists drawn up in advance to speed up the search.¹⁶ This was an evident nod to the Polish prime minister – a gesture of goodwill and an additional argument to convince Sikorski that a visit to the Soviet Union made sense.

The Soviet side was also quick to make concessions in other matters, including minor ones. Here are some examples. The Soviets agreed to tolerate the presence in Tashkent of Jan Kwapiński, a delegate of the Polish embassy, despite having indicated several times previously that his stay had not been agreed with them.¹⁷ Henryk Sokolnicki, the Polish embassy's counsel, tried to obtain additional rooms for the embassy in Kuybyshev on the grounds of General Sikorski's imminent arrival as the building on Chapaevskaya Street was too small to meet its vast needs.¹⁸ Vyshinsky promised to investigate, doubtless intending to consult his superiors and the "neighbours", as the Soviet political police were known in the terminology.¹⁹ They did not have to wait long for the results. Just two days after meeting Sokolnicki, Vyshinsky declared that the Polish embassy in Kuybyshev would receive "for Sikorski and permanent use" an additional eight or nine rooms in a building on Tolstoy Street.²⁰ These concessions, which essentially cost the Soviet authorities little, can hardly be seen as chance occurrences.

Shortly after his conversation with Vyshinsky, Ambassador Kot flew to Moscow, where he was received by Stalin on 14 November. This was a turning point in the preparations for Sikorski's visit. During their two-hour meeting, in which Molotov and Wiesław Arlet, the first secretary of the Polish embassy, also participated, the Soviet dictator uttered the customary words: "...if Sikorski comes to the USSR, he will be our guest and we will find a common language with him".²¹ Stalin also asked about the date of the Polish prime minister's arrival, but Kot was unable to give a precise answer as he was not in direct contact with Sikorski, who was in Egypt at the time. But the case took a turn for the better. The next day, Molotov received Kot and discussed with him a series of issues that were to be the subject of Sikorski's talks, including the situation of Poles in the Soviet Union, the formation of the Polish army, and

¹⁶ Ibid., k. 81.

¹⁷ Iz dnevnik A. Ja. Vyšinskogo. Priem pol'skogo posla Kot i 1-go sekretarja posol'stva Arlet, 19 nojabrja 1941 goda, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 4, d. 31, k. 114.

¹⁸ Kujbyšev kak centr sovetsko-amerikanskich otnošenij 1941–1943 gg. Sbornik perevodov inostrannykh dokumentov, ed. by Aleksandr Buranok and others (Samara: NTC, 2017), p. 169 (here a photograph of the Polish embassy building in Kuybyshev).

¹⁹ Iz dnevnik A. Ja. Vyšinskogo. Priem sovetnika pol'skogo posol'stva Sokol'nickogo, 17 nojabrja 1941 goda, 18 November 1941, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 4, d. 31, k. 107.

²⁰ Iz dnevnik A. Ja. Vyšinskogo. Priem pol'skogo posla Kot i 1-go sekretarja posol'stva Arlet, 19 nojabrja 1941 goda, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 4, d. 31, k. 114.

²¹ DVP, XXIV, p. 421.

the securing of supplies for its soldiers. The head of the Soviet diplomatic apparatus suggested unambiguously that the best solution would be for Sikorski to arrive first in Kuybyshev, and once the latter would choose an appropriate moment to travel to Moscow. Molotov avoided specific details, explaining that it was necessary to consult with members of the Soviet government, particularly Stalin.²² The dictator was indeed interested in the details of the mutual relations, including the publication of a Polish newspaper in the Soviet Union. Molotov sent the appropriate orders to Vyshinsky regarding speeding up the publication of the press organ targeted at Poles.²³ This question too can be regarded as the Kremlin nodding to Sikorski.

According to Vyshinsky's diary entry, Ambassador Kot, having returned to Kuybyshev, shared his impressions from his visit to the Kremlin, saying that "Comrade Stalin expressed a wish to take part in the rebuilding of the Polish state, but without interfering in Poland's internal affairs" (19 November).²⁴ If he did indeed utter these words and the record of the deputy head of the Soviet diplomatic apparatus is accurate, from today's perspective they sound rather like a grim joke. It is unclear whether the Polish ambassador interpreted them as such or treated them as a declaration of goodwill from an ally. The latter seems more likely. Kot's discussion with Vyshinsky took place in a good atmosphere, and both sides were highly courteous. The deputy head of the Soviet diplomatic apparatus wrote in his diary:

Finally, Kot, referring to Comrade Stalin's words, once again returned to the question of an amnesty. He expressed his hope that everything in this matter would be done before Sikorski's arrival. One must particularly consider the impending cold, which will be hard to bear for Polish citizens staying in the North.

I replied that, to us, Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin's word is law. We should now check our lists, because our data are sometimes inconsistent with those of the embassy.²⁵

On 22 November, Ambassador Kot also discussed Sikorski's imminent visit with another deputy head of the Soviet diplomatic apparatus, Solomon Lozovsky, this time specifying the date of the Polish prime minister's arrival (no earlier than 27–28 November).²⁶

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 426–29.

²³ *Iz dnevnika A. Ja. Vyšinskogo. Priem pol'skogo posla Kot i 1-go sekretarja posol'stva Arlet, 19 nojabrja 1941 goda*, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 4, d. 31, k. 112, 115.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, k. 113.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

²⁶ DVP, XXIV, pp. 443–44.

Meanwhile, preparations for Sikorski's visit were ongoing in the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs (NKID). On 15 November, Georgy Pushkin, who was responsible for Polish affairs, prepared a very extensive report on the Polish prime minister.²⁷ This document was compiled on the basis of materials kept in the Fourth European Department of the Soviet foreign affairs minister, where Pushkin was the deputy director. The memorandum was undoubtedly intended for a small group of people in the highest positions in the Soviet Union, including Stalin. A reading of it, notwithstanding the errors in Sikorski's biography, allows us to make several reflections. First, Pushkin emphasised the Polish prime minister's political path, which had led from him being "the closest supporter and a fervent admirer of Józef Piłsudski" to becoming his declared opponent. This opposition can hardly be seen as accidental, and it also matched the repeated declarations of Sikorski himself, who firmly dissociated himself from the politics of the supporters of Piłsudski and Józef Beck. Second, the memorandum paid significant attention to Sikorski's views, which he expressed publicly after the signing of the Franco-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance in 1935, regarding guarantees of collective security and the concept of the Eastern Pact, including Poland's participation in it. It was stated that, unlike the stance of the Polish government at that time, he backed such solutions, which were also promoted by Moscow. The document cited an article that the Polish politician had published in February 1936 in *Kurier Warszawski*.²⁸ Third, not only Sikorski's pro-French sentiments but also his anti-German ones were underlined, with an emphasis on the threat from the Third Reich, citing a passage from his well-known book *Modern Warfare*, published in 1934.²⁹ Fourth and finally, the memorandum emphasised the Polish prime minister's decisive contribution to the negotiations and the signing of a pact with the Soviet Union in July 1941, disregarding the opposition of such cabinet members as August Zalewski, General Kazimierz Sosnkowski and Marian Seyda, whose names also feature in the document. Pushkin also added that Sikorski's statement on London radio, following the signing of the pact and on the inviolability of

27 *Dokumenty do historii stosunków polsko-sowieckich 1918–1945*, IV, pp. 199–205.

28 The article in question, written by Sikorski in Paris, was entitled 'Wokół paktu wschodniego' [On the Eastern Pact] and published in *Kurier Warszawski* on 25 February 1936, no. 55 (evening edition), pp. 1–2. The author points to the "Alleged superiority of the German race, [which] supposedly justifies the theories of violence proclaimed by the ideologues of National Socialism". Sikorski perceived the concept of the Eastern Pact as one possible pathway to bringing about peaceful relations in Europe in the future by accepting guarantees of collective security in the form of an effective bulwark against the dangers of war. This vision was identical to the French stance. The general wrote, for instance, that "Poland does not wish to and must not be a marching ground for the armies of any of its large neighbours. It does not have either the intention or the desire to choose between these extreme alternatives imposed on it from the outside. Moreover, the Polish nation does not nurture hostile, let alone aggressive feelings towards either the Soviet Union or the German Reich. For these reasons, no fundamental obstacles exist preventing us from participating in an Eastern pact tailored to Polish needs".

29 Władysław Sikorski, *Przyszła wojna. Jej możliwości i charakter oraz związane z nią zagadnienia obrony kraju*, foreword by Tadeusz A. Kisielewski (Kraków: Universitas, 2010), pp. 66–95.

Poland's 1939 borders, encountered an appropriate reaction from the Soviet press. Taking as our starting point Bogomolov's description of the Polish prime minister quoted at the beginning, Pushkin's memorandum can be regarded as substantive and objective, or even as containing a tinge of sympathy for Sikorski's views and actions, especially compared to other key figures of the Polish interwar and wartime political scene. It is difficult, however, to say whether the Soviet decision makers' reading of this document served only to give them an idea of whom they would soon be dealing with, or maybe it also raised a minimal degree of greater sympathy for the Polish prime minister. Of course, I am posing this question not so much rhetorically as perversely. Knowing the course and outcome of the discussions held with Sikorski in the Kremlin, as well as the Soviet elite's relations with the Polish government in exile, I would side firmly with the former.

Sikorski's speedy arrival in the Soviet Union was of interest to the diplomatic corps accredited in the country. Among others, the Czechoslovak envoy, Zdeněk Fierlinger, asked Vyshinsky whether the Polish leader's stay was connected to the signing of any agreement between the two governments. The deputy head of the Soviet diplomatic apparatus confirmed Sikorski's visit but also declared that a pact had already been signed and there would be no further document.³⁰ The course of events showed that this did not entirely reflect the truth. On the other hand, we know that the Polish and Soviet governments' joint declaration, whose content was otherwise rather vague, was a rather spontaneous initiative, contrary to the practice of Soviet diplomats, which would prepare such significant documents extremely meticulously, considering every word contained in them.³¹ As early as 5 December, the declaration was read out in 16 languages on Soviet radio, with plans to distribute its contents in six further languages, including Chinese and Turkish.³² The impetus, then, was quite extraordinary. Interestingly, the Polish-Soviet declaration caused confusion among Comintern activists. In February 1942, Sofia Dzerzhinskaya approached the general secretary of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, Georgi Dimitrov, to enquire how the Polish station of the Comintern radio broadcaster, of which she was in charge, should react to the Polish-Czechoslovak declaration on postwar plans to establish a confederation of the two states. Hitherto, Soviet propaganda had emphasised the unity and friendship of all Slavic

³⁰ DVP, XXIV, pp. 441–42.

³¹ For the differing Polish versions of the document, see, e.g., *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne 1941* (hereafter PDD 1941), ed. by Jacek Tebinka (Warszawa: Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 2013), pp. 842–43; *Dokumenty do historii stosunków polsko-sowieckich 1918–1945*, IV, pp. 218–19 (also footnote 120); for the Russian version, see *Sovetsko-pol'skie otnošenija v 1918–1945 gg.*, IV, pp. 250–51.

³² Report of D. Polikarpov to V. Molotov, 5 December 1941, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 19, d. 244, k. 8.

nations and a resultant emphasis on the importance of the Polish-Soviet declaration from December 1941.³³ In other words, Comintern faced the dilemma of whether to officially contest the idea of a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation, since the document signed by Stalin and Sikorski referred to a postwar “assurance of a lasting and just peace [...] by way of a new organisation of international relations based on the unification of democratic countries and a permanent alliance”.³⁴ It would soon turn out that this contradiction had been resolved unequivocally: fierce criticism of the concept of a Polish-Czechoslovak confederation began, which became a guideline for not only Comintern agencies³⁵ but also Soviet diplomats.³⁶

Just before Sikorski’s visit, there was a clash at the diplomatic level. Ambassador Kot lodged a strong protest in response to the resettlement of at least 36,000 Polish citizens, including women and children, from Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan without appropriate security and guarantees of decent living conditions in their new place of residence. He also used an argument that he saw as valid, telling Vyshinsky: “I cannot shake off the thought that there is an inclination to spoil the atmosphere before Sikorski’s arrival”.³⁷ Vyshinsky rejected the charges, emphasising that the influx of Poles to Uzbekistan had not been negotiated with the appropriate authorities and that their uncontrolled movements must have caused shortages of provisions, lack of work, and consequently bad living conditions. The Soviet diplomat categorically denied that the actions of the Soviet side were meant to worsen mutual relations. Both sides, however, stuck to their positions (25 November).³⁸

The Soviet government put a great deal of effort into organising Sikorski’s stay, while also securing information from intelligence sources. Their Polish guest was joined on the journey from Kuybyshev to Moscow (2 December) by representatives of the NKID: Fyodor Molochkov, head of the Protocol Department, and Nikolai Novikov, who was then a young diplomat. On behalf of the People’s Commissariat for Defence, meanwhile, Col. Vladimir Evstigneev was present. Actually a military intelligence officer, in February 1942 he was appointed head of the Department

³³ *Litva v politike SSSR i v međunarodnyh otnošenijach (avgust 1940 – sentjabr’ 1945 gg.)*, ed. by Al’gimantas Kasparavičius, Česlovas Laurinavičius and Natal’ja Lebedeva, SSSR i Litva v gody vtoroj mirovoj vojny. Sbornik dokumentov, II (Vilnius: Lietuvos istorijos instituto leidykla, 2012), p. 542.

³⁴ *Dokumenty do istorii stosunków polsko-sowieckich 1918–1945*, IV, p. 219.

³⁵ As early as 2 January 1942, Dimitrov informed Vyshinsky that not only before Sikorski’s visit, but also after its conclusion, there had been “anti-Soviet and antisemitic work” going on in the ranks of the Polish Army in the East”, albeit in a more covert form than previously; see *Posle 22 ijunja 1941 g.*, ed. by Natal’ja Lebedeva and Michail Narinskij, *Komintern i vtoraja mirovaja vojna*, ed. by Kirill Anderson and Aleksandr Čubar’jan, II (Moskva: Pamjatniki istoričeskoj mysli, 1998), p. 173.

³⁶ For more, see Marek K. Kamiński, *Eduard Beneš kontra gen. Władysław Sikorski. Polityka władz czechosłowackich na emigracji wobec rządu polskiego na uchodźstwie 1939–1943* (Warszawa: Neriton, 2005), pp. 106f.; Valentina Mar’ina, *Sovetskij Sojuz i čecho-słowackij vopros vo vremja Vtoroj mirovoj vojny. 1939–1945 gg.*, 2 vols (Moskva: Indrik, 2009), II, pp. 101–48.

³⁷ Iz dnevnika A. Ja. Vyšinskogo. Priem pol’skogo posla Kota i 1-go sekretarja Arlet, 25 nojabrja 1941 goda, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 4, d. 31, k. 153.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, k. 152–58.

of External Contacts of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Red Army.³⁹ Security was provided by five NKVD functionaries.⁴⁰ Since Sikorski was treated as an official guest, Molochkov asked his superiors for the costs of the visit to be covered by the Soviets, and Molotov agreed.⁴¹ Novikov had accompanied Ambassador Kot in mid-November on his trip from Kuybyshev to meet Stalin in Moscow. Soon afterwards, he was specially posted to accompany the Polish delegation. Years later, he described Sikorski's visit in his diaries, noting the special treatment the guest had received, including the use of a luxury Douglas aeroplane as well as Soviet fighter planes to accompany it near Moscow. Vyshinsky and Novikov also accompanied Sikorski on his tour of the places where the Polish army was being formed. The Soviet diplomat would later write:

Vyshinsky and I, accompanying the Polish prime minister and commander-in-chief, at every opportunity tried to avoid participation in the endless procession of protocol receptions – so as not to violate etiquette, of course. On that trip, stretching over seven days, we had diplomatic issues to resolve. Vyshinsky and his assistants dealt with these, but I also dealt with them, frequently together with Vyshinsky. Usually the first secretary of the Polish embassy, Arlet, would come to see me in our saloon carriage with his stereotypical *démarches* and memoranda prepared on the train. Vyshinsky dealt with some of the issues raised by the ambassador on the spot, but we referred the majority of them – which necessitated examining documents and contact with the competent bodies – to the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs.⁴²

Late in the afternoon of 1 December 1941, Sikorski received Vyshinsky in the Polish embassy building in Kuybyshev, with Ambassador Kot and the embassy's first secretary, Alexander Mniszek, present. This was one of the Polish guest's first official contacts with a high-ranking Soviet official. Vyshinsky's description of the meeting gives a good account of the atmosphere of the talks, the issues discussed, and both sides' stances:

³⁹ Vjačeslav Lur'e and Valerij Kočik, *GRU. Dela i ljudi* (Sankt-Peterburg–Moskva: Neva, 2003), pp. 238–39; Michail Alekseev, Aleksandr Kolpakidi, and Valerij Kočik, *Enciklopedija voennoj razvedki 1918–1945 gg.* (Moskva: Kučkovo Pole, 2012), p. 301.

⁴⁰ Spisok lic, vyletajuščich v Moskvu 2 dekabnja 1941 goda, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 19, d. 244, k. 11.

⁴¹ O prebyvanii V. Sikorskogo v SSSR, 30 November 1941, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 19, d. 244, k. 18.

⁴² Nikolaj Novikov, *Vospominanija diplomata. Zapiski 1938–1947* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo političeskoj literatury, 1989), pp. 103–10 (translated into English from the author's Polish translation).

In the first part of the meeting, the discussion stuck to protocol and was very general. The questions of opening a second front against the Germans in the West, the military operations in Libya, Japan's position etc. were discussed. In this part of the meeting, nothing interesting and worthy of note was talked about.

In the second part of the meeting, Sikorski and Kot raised a whole host of specific issues.

For example, Sikorski said that he had today visited the evacuation point for Poles in Kuybyshev, where he had viewed the deprivations [лишения] of his fellow citizens. Having said that, his mood clearly changed, and he took on a concerned air.

I noted that difficulties are inevitable in the conditions of war, but we were trying to keep them to a minimum.

Kot made a request regarding his representative being sent to Vladivostok with the purpose of receiving and distributing the goods sent to them from the USA. This is also essential because the Americans are demanding information on who will receive their goods. I replied that I would familiarise myself with the problem and respond later. I added that we had dealt positively with the matter of exemption of goods from customs duty. In response to this, Kot said that our government was demanding port fees. I promised to investigate the issue.⁴³

The above quotation proves one more thing. Even the deputy head of the Soviet diplomatic apparatus did not have the power to adjudicate on matters of secondary importance, hence his cautious deferral of responses. Even minor matters were the decision of a small committee, and, in reality, Stalin in person.

It is not my intention to recreate General Sikorski's visit to the Soviet Union and the talks he held there in detail. These issues have already been analysed by historians on many occasions and to varying degrees

⁴³ Iz dnevnika A. Ja. Vyšinskogo. Poseščenie Sikorskogo 1-go dekabnja 1941 goda, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 19, d. 244, k. 47–48 (translated into English from the author's Polish translation).

of precision, albeit with a distinct emphasis on Polish sources.⁴⁴ I would like, however, to address several questions that do not necessarily apply only to the actions of Soviet diplomats. The detailed research carried out in recent years by the Russian historian Vladimir Nevezhin unequivocally led to the conclusion that Sikorski's visit to Moscow – and particularly his meeting with Stalin, with an emphasis on the banquet which the Soviet leader held for his Polish guests on the evening of 4 December 1941 – was prepared on the one hand with remarkable panache, and on the other hand with equally remarkable reverence and precision. This was the case even if we take as a point of reference the Kremlin's receptions given around the same time for other not necessarily lower-status foreign delegations. It is worth adding that on 25 November the NKID Protocol Department prepared a detailed "Programme for Sikorski's stay in the Soviet Union", signed by Molochkov.⁴⁵ We should also emphasise that the final point of the document noted that the more important moments of the Polish politician's visit should be filmed.⁴⁶

Stalin conveyed the message to Sikorski through his diplomats to assure him that he was prepared to host the Polish prime minister again during his stay in the Soviet Union, regardless of how Sikorski and the head of the British Foreign Office, Anthony Eden, who was also planning a trip, resolved the problem of "their simultaneous presence in Moscow".⁴⁷ The dictator presumably knew about London's unwillingness to coordinate the two visits. He thereby put a spanner in the works of the allied states. Kot responded to this *dictum* by saying that Sikorski would like to meet

⁴⁴ See, e.g., *Protokoły posiedzeń Rady Ministrów Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej*, IV (1998), pp. 73–96; PDD 1941, pp. 829–84, 897–98; Stanisław Kot, *Listy z Rosji do Gen. Sikorskiego* (Londyn: St. Martin's Printers, 1955), pp. 191–229; Władysław Anders, *Bez ostatniego rozdziału. Wspomnienia z lat 1939–1946* (Londyn: Gryf, 1959), pp. 85–111; Marian Kukiel, *General Sikorski. Żołnierz i mąż stanu Polski Walczącej*, 3rd edn (Londyn: Polska Fundacja Kulturalna, 1995), pp. 184–90; Roman Wapiński, *Władysław Sikorski* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1978), pp. 299–303; Walentyna Korpalska, *Władysław Eugeniusz Sikorski. Biografia polityczna* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1981), pp. 230–34; Stanisław Zabiełło, *O rząd i granice. Walka dyplomatyczna o sprawę polską w II wojnie światowej* (Warszawa: PAX, 1986), pp. 71–73; Eugeniusz Duraczyński, 'Wizyta Sikorskiego w ZSRR', *Dzieje Najnowsze*, 4 (1994), 103–23; Eugeniusz Duraczyński, *Polska 1939–1945. Dzieje polityczne* (Warszawa: Bellona, 1999), pp. 199–203; Eugeniusz Duraczyński, *Stalin. Twórcą i dyktator supermocarstwa* (Warszawa: Bellona, 2012), pp. 416–19; Wojciech Materski, 'Walka dyplomacji polskiej o normalizację stosunków z ZSRR (czerwiec 1941 – lipiec 1942)', in *Historia dyplomacji polskiej, 1939–1945*, ed. by Waldemar Michowicz, V (Warszawa, 1999), pp. 251–65; Wojciech Materski, *Na widencie. II Rzeczpospolita wobec Sowietów 1918–1943* (Warszawa: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2005), pp. 639–54; Jacek Ślusarczyk, *Stosunki polsko-sowieckie w latach 1939–1945* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, 2000), pp. 160–66; Walentyna Parsadanowa, 'Polityka i jej skutki', in *Białe plamy – czarne plamy. Sprawy trudne w polsko-rosyjskich stosunkach 1918–2008*, ed. by Adam D. Rotfeld and Anatolij W. Torkunow (Warszawa: PISM, 2010), pp. 393–94; *Pol'sha v XX veke. Očerki političeskoj istorii*, ed. by Al'bina Noskova (Moskva: Indrik, 2012), pp. 320–23. For a broader perspective on Sikorski's conception regarding the Soviet Union in the period in question, see Anna M. Cienciąła, 'General Sikorski and the Conclusion of the Polish-Soviet Agreement of July 30 1941: A Reassessment', *The Polish Review*, 41 (1996), 401–34; Anna M. Cienciąła, 'General Sikorski a rewizja granicy ryskiej. Koncepcje powojennej granicy polsko-sowieckiej, listopad 1939 – maj 1942 roku', in *Z dziejów Europy Środkowej w XX wieku. Studia ofiarowane Henrykowi Batowskiemu w 90. rocznicę urodzin*, ed. by Michał Puławski and others (Kraków: Uniwersytet Jagielloński, 1997), pp. 127–41.

⁴⁵ Vladimir Nevezhin, *Zastol'ja losifa Stalina. Diplomatickie priemy 1939–1945 gg.*, III (Moskva: AIRO-XXI, 2020), pp. 95–96, 110, 139–44, 167, 231–32, 256, 260, 372, 434, 455–71, 532; Vladimir Nevezhin, 'Poljaki na diplomaticeskom prieme v Kremle (4 dekabnja 1941 g.)' (article forthcoming).

⁴⁶ *Sovetsko-pol'skie otnošenija v 1918–1945 gg.*, IV, pp. 213–14.

⁴⁷ Iz dnevnik A. Ja. Vyšinskogo. Priem pol'skogo posła g. Kot i 1-go sekretarja posol'stva g. Mnišek, 8 dekabnja 1941 goda, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 4, d. 32, k. 39–40.

Stalin again to discuss his planned trip to the United States, but he also hedged his bets by saying that his health might prevent such a meeting. The ambassador concluded the matter by promising that Sikorski would return to the Soviet Union once the formation of the Polish army was complete in order to take command of it. On 10 December, the Polish side officially informed that the Polish leader had left the Soviet Union without a repeated visit to Moscow or Kuybyshev.⁴⁸ It was to be the Polish prime minister and commander-in-chief's last visit to the USSR.

On 1 December 1941 in Kuybyshev, Sikorski, in the presence of Ambassador Kot and General Władysław Anders, met Mikhail Kalinin, chairman of the presidium of the Supreme Soviet, as the nominal head of state. According to the diplomatic diary of Vyshinsky, who was also present at the meeting, both Sikorski and Kot clearly opposed Piłsudski and his supporters in the context of their attitude to not only the Soviets but also, interestingly, pre-revolutionary Russia. Equally important for our enquiry is the fact that the Polish prime minister's meeting with Kalinin was filmed, which was by no means the rule in those times.⁴⁹ A day-by-day account of Sikorski's visit was also relayed in the main Soviet press organs, such as *Pravda*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Izvestia*.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Stalin gave his approval to Sikorski's radio broadcast addressed to Poles in the Soviet Union but living under German occupation. He promised a translation of the Polish prime minister's words into many languages.⁵¹ And indeed, it was broadcast on the radio in some 17 languages, so the scale was indeed impressive in this case too.⁵² The Soviets also agreed to their Polish guest giving a speech in Buzuluk to the army that was forming.⁵³ With astonishing ease, the Soviet side also agreed to raise the amount of the loan given to the Poles to maintain the army to 100 million roubles, whereas as late as early November 1941, Vyshinsky had informed Kot of the Soviet government's decision to allocate a short-term loan of 65 million roubles until 1 January 1942, including the 39 million that the Polish leadership had already received.⁵⁴ Then, in the second half of November 1941 at the Polish ambassador's aforementioned talks with Lozovsky, only symbolic amounts had been mentioned: first 3 million, then 10 million roubles, which the embassy

⁴⁸ Iz dnevnika P.A. Bušueva. Priem 1-go sekretarja pol'skogo posol'stva Mnišek, 10 dekabnja 1941 g., AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 19, d. 244, k. 2.

⁴⁹ *Dokumenty do historii stosunków polsko-sowieckich 1918–1945*, IV, pp. 206–07.

⁵⁰ AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 19, d. 248 (here Soviet press cuttings about Sikorski's visit).

⁵¹ AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 19, d. 243, k. 9 (here a Soviet press cutting with a photo of Sikorski and the text of his speech); see *Sovetsko-pol'skie otnošenija v 1918–1945 gg.*, IV, pp. 233–36.

⁵² Report of D. Polikarpov to V. Molotov, 5 December 1941, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 19, d. 244, k. 8.

⁵³ *Sovetsko-pol'skie otnošenija v 1918–1945 gg.*, IV, pp. 252–54.

⁵⁴ Iz dnevnika A. Ja. Vyšinskogo. Priem pol'skogo posla S. Kota i 1-go sekretarja posol'stva Pol'si V. Arleta, 5 nojabnja 1941 goda, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 4, d. 31, k. 38–39.

could spend on supporting Polish citizens in the Soviet Union.⁵⁵ And it was this loan that was soon raised to 100 million roubles.⁵⁶ Ultimately, in January 1942, the Soviet government granted an interest-free loan of 300 million roubles to maintain the Polish army in the USSR, albeit with repayment conditions determined by Moscow, which did not necessarily meet the Poles' expectations.⁵⁷

This is certainly not to say that the Kremlin satisfied all Sikorski's wishes. For example, during his discussion with Vyshinsky, the Polish commander-in-chief expressed a desire to visit, along with General Anders, General Tadeusz Klimecki and Certified Lieutenant Colonel Michał Protasewicz, a section of the front of the battles taking place near Moscow. The deputy head of the Soviet diplomatic apparatus responded that this was not his area and promised to pass the request on to the military authorities.⁵⁸ Yet it was not met, and Sikorski and his officers were prevented from crossing this boundary of hospitality. Something of a memento for the Polish side was the arrest during the visit of Wiktor Alter and Henryk Erlich, Polish citizens involved in the formation of the Jewish Anti-fascist Committee and collaboration with Ambassador Kot. Asked about the reason for this step, Vyshinsky told the Polish ambassador that "there are serious compromising materials against these individuals", while also underlining the legitimacy of the charges against them (6 December).⁵⁹ Coming from the Soviet Union's prosecutor general and prosecutor in show trials of the Great Terror era, these words must have sounded threatening.

A special cultural programme was organised for Sikorski. In line with the *modus operandi* of the Soviet diplomatic service, detailed reports were written on each event. On 6 December, for example, a concert took place with a repertoire of Polish, Russian and Soviet composers. In his diary, Vyshinsky wrote that after the Polish national anthem and "The Internationale" were played, Sikorski said to him: "Our anthems blend together beautifully. I would like it to stay that way forever".⁶⁰ The Polish prime minister did not hesitate to exceed the canons of courtesy to demonstrate Polish-Soviet rapprochement. His words sound ironic, given the Soviets' policy towards Poland and the Poles since at least 1939 as well as the tragic plight of hundreds of thousands of Polish citizens in the USSR

⁵⁵ DVP, XXIV, p. 444.

⁵⁶ Materski, *Na widenie*, pp. 648–49.

⁵⁷ Magdalena Hułas, *Goście czy intruzi? Rząd polski na uchodźstwie wrzesień 1939 – lipiec 1943* (Warszawa: PAN, 1996), pp. 50–52.

⁵⁸ *Sovetsko-pol'skie otnošenija v 1918–1945 gg.*, IV, p. 232.

⁵⁹ *Iz dnevnika A. Ja. Vyšinskogo. Priem pol'skogo posla g. Kot i 1-go sekretarja posol'stva g. Arlet, 6 dekabnja 1941 goda*, 7 December 1941, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 4, d. 32, k. 28.

⁶⁰ *Iz dnevnika A. Ja. Vyšinskogo. Zapis' poseščenija koncerta v čest' gen. Sikorskogo, 6 dekabnja 1941 goda*, 7 December 1941, AVP RF, f. 06, op. 3 AVTO, p. 4, d. 32, k. 20–21.

at the moment they were being spoken in the theatre in Kuybyshev. It is worth adding that the diplomatic diary in which, with exemplary diligence, Vyshinsky recorded his interlocutors' words, if not necessarily his own replies, was by no means a personal memoir but an official document. His entries landed on the desks of Soviet decision makers, Stalin and Molotov chief among them.

Finally, I will again quote Bogomolov, who wrote to Molotov almost at the exact time of General Sikorski's departure from the Soviet Union:

The wisest among the Poles here is Sikorski, although his significance is not great because he tries to avoid the raindrops.

He does not lack the courage or political determination to decide on major bourgeois-revolutionary actions. To announce the abolition of landowners, titled or otherwise, drive the Piłsudskiites and Beckites out of the state apparatus, distribute land to great peasant owners, democratise Poland, and rely on peasants and the petty bourgeoisie. He wants to both keep the counts and be friendly with Stalin. He wants to become England's chief proxy in the battle with communism and Europe as well as to "begin a new life in love and harmony with the USSR".⁶¹

Bogomolov continued, in his customary manner, by grumbling about the Poles living in Poland, complaining to his superior that Stalin's recent reception of Sikorski had changed nothing in his attitudes to Polish emigration. As before, he had not received any invitations or telephone calls, but he had ascertained that the Poles were angry with Sikorski for his lack of a position on the inviolability of the prewar border with Soviet Union, and even his failure to emphasise Poland's power during his visit to Moscow. Bogomolov was sure to add that he recalled "for himself" Molotov's famous speech of 17 September 1939, and particularly the parts concerning the abilities of Polish state activists. This had led him to clear conclusions that he stated at the end of the document: "Much lofty honour, and no reason". He went even further in his arguments, concluding: "Polish fascism is in many respects identical to the German brand".⁶² It is difficult to determine unequivocally whether Bogomolov was writing what he really thought, or what was dictated by reason, as well as, perhaps, fear caused by memory of the Great Terror, which hit the Soviet diplomatic service

⁶¹ *Dokumenty do historii stosunków polsko-sowieckich 1918–1945*, IV, p. 224.

⁶² *Ibid.* (both quotations).

particularly hard, to please his superiors in Moscow.⁶³ It is quite possible that one might not have contradicted the other in this case.

In conclusion, I return to the question asked at the beginning, which is the same as Bogomolov's claim that Sikorski's trip to the Soviet Union came to nothing, although my point of view is completely different from that of the Soviet diplomat. Indeed, the visit of the Polish prime minister and commander-in-chief to the USSR in late 1941 did not contribute to resolving problems in mutual relations. The fortunes of hundreds of thousands of Polish citizens in the Soviet Union essentially did not change.⁶⁴ The growing problem of recognition of their citizenship was about to ignite with renewed force. It is even hard to speak of acceleration of the process of freeing Poles from prisons, gulags or forced settlement areas. The fundamental issue of the future Polish-Soviet border remained unresolved.⁶⁵ There was also no solution to the problems with the formation, provisioning and equipping of the Polish Armed Forces in the Soviet Union, although figures of as many as 150,000 potential recruits had been mentioned in the talks. The fate of Polish officers, policemen and officials, the subjects of a strenuous search, had not been cleared up because the Soviet side had no plans to do so, feeding Sikorski and his entourage with lies and truly admirable platitudes. For some reason, however, Stalin agreed to receive the Polish politician and commander-in-chief. Furthermore, he ordered that the visit be prepared extremely meticulously, ensuring that it was publicised in the press and on the radio, and even filming the main events.

⁶³ Bogomolov was one of the Soviet diplomats who owed their careers to the victims of the Great Terror departing their positions. He arrived in diplomacy by way of recruitment conducted by Molotov in spring 1939, following long service in the Red Army (1919–1930) and teaching work as a lecturer and head of the Dialectical and Historical Materialism Department of Moscow State University. His diplomatic skills were rather unrefined, as noted by, among others, Edward Raczyński, who knew him well; see *Diplomatičeskij slovar'*, ed. by Andrej Gromyko and others, 3 vols (Moskva, 1984–1986), I (1985), p. 140; Sabine Dullin, *Des hommes d'influences. Les ambassadeurs de Staline en Europe 1930–1939* (Paris: Payot, 2001), pp. 275–76; Edward Raczyński, *W sojuszniczym Londynie. Dziennik ambasadora Edwarda Raczyńskiego 1939–1945* (Warszawa: NOWA, 1989), pp. 143–44, 169–70.

⁶⁴ Vyshinsky's words written after his conversation with the Polish ambassador on 16 January 1942 sound like a grim joke: "Kot also expressed the Polish government's gratitude for the granting of a loan of 100 million roubles. Information Minister [Stanisław] Stroński gave a radio broadcast on this subject on behalf of the government, emphasising to the people of Poland that the Soviet government was taking care of Polish citizens in the USSR", *DVP*, XXV, 1942 g., 2 vols (Tula: Grif i K, 2010), I, p. 80 (translated into English from the author's Polish translation).

⁶⁵ Soviet intelligence intercepted the correspondence of diplomatic posts accredited in Moscow. They were also familiar with the contents of the talks held during Sikorski's visit with Ambassador Cripps, including on the Polish prime minister's stance on the possibility of discussing with Stalin the question of the Polish-Soviet border. Translations of the documents were soon on the Soviet dictator's desk. By 14 December 1941, the head of the NKVD Intelligence Administration, Pavel Fitin, relayed the contents of Cripps's telegrams sent to London, in which he wrote: "During lunch, Stalin began to talk about Poland's eastern borders, but Sikorski avoided raising this issue on the basis that if he returned from Russia setting new borders, then 'the whole world would laugh at him'. Stalin referred to the situation with humour, saying that there were no difficulties that could not be overcome at a peace conference and expressing his hope that by the time it convenes they would come to a mutual understanding [on this matter]"; *Lubjanka. Stalin i NKVD – NKGB – GUKR «Smerś». 1939 – mart 1946*, ed. by Vladimir Chaustov, Viktor Naumov, and Nikolaj Plotnikov (Moskva: Materik, 2006), p. 323 (translated into English from the author's Polish translation).

This was for propaganda purposes. The appropriate message reached – as it was intended to – Soviet citizens as well as the international community.

I am uncertain whether Sikorski was entirely aware that he had once again so soon adopted the role of not only a genuine partner but also an ally for show. The first time this had happened had followed the fall of France in summer 1940, when the British, led by Winston Churchill, almost ostentatiously showed their compatriots that they were not alone on the battlefield, still had allies, and would not be struggling in isolation against the Germans. In a sense, Stalin reproduced this same model, but in a different context and with a contrasting message. The Soviet dictator knew very well that after the experiences of the Great Terror, including the NKVD's Polish operation, memory of which remained extremely strong and terrifying, trust in the Soviet government was limited, very shaky, and – seriously challenged by blows from the Germans – could dissipate entirely. In this most difficult period for him, it was important to have the loyalty of Soviet citizens, including the masses of Poles and people of Polish origin in the Soviet Union at the time. Stalin received detailed information on the anti-Soviet moods prevailing in the ranks of the Polish Army in the East from NKVD chief Lavrentiy Beria, even on the day of Sikorski's arrival in the USSR.⁶⁶ The dictator could not be unaware that many Poles – under German as well as Soviet occupation – had welcomed news of the outbreak of war between the Third Reich and the USSR and were by no means worried about the Red Army's defeats in summer and autumn 1941. Yet the vast majority remained loyal to the Polish government in exile under General Sikorski. They followed the actions of the Polish authorities in London with hope. To temper anti-Soviet moods, the Polish leader's visit suited the Kremlin down to the ground at the moment of the greatest threat to the Soviet government and Stalin himself. After the Germans were driven back from Moscow, the significance of Sikorski's trip would be reduced for the Soviet dictator – simply less important. The visit needed to be publicised as widely as possible, harnessed for propaganda purposes, and communicated to the world as evidence of allied relations. This was made easier by the fact that General Sikorski, who had quite different motives, himself suggested visiting the Soviet Union. Bogomolov was therefore wrong in his verdict that the trip came to nothing. For Stalin and his entourage, it came to a great deal in ways that were both very concrete and yet difficult to gauge.

Translated by BEN KOSCHALKA

⁶⁶ *Sovetsko-pol'skie otnošenija v 1918–1945 gg.*, IV, pp. 226–29.

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