

ROMANIAN DIPLOMACY, BRITAIN AND THE SUDETEN CRISIS (1938) (PART I)

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Abstract. This study examines England's attitude toward German aggression against Czechoslovakia (1933–1939) and its impact on Anglo-Romanian relations. British foreign policy was heavily influenced by its ties with Hitler's Germany, adopting a permissive and reactive approach, never seizing the initiative from Berlin – except for the attempted "Stresa Front". England continually adjusted its stance toward Romania, France, and the USSR based on Anglo-German dynamics, which dictated European politics until the outbreak of war. To understand Britain's policy toward Romania, one must analyze Anglo-German relations, as these influenced London's decisions more than Romania's own actions. Under King Carol II, Romania's foreign policy aligned with passivity and accommodation of German revisionism. While England, as a major power, could afford to explore political options (some flawed), Romania, far more vulnerable, lacked the same flexibility. The study highlights how international power dynamics shaped Romania's precarious position in pre-WWII Europe.

Keywords: Romania, Britain, Germany, international relations, Second World War.

Diplomația românească, Marea Britanie și criza studențească (1938) (Partea I)

Rezumat. Prima parte a acestui studiu analizează atitudinea Angliei față de agresiunea Germaniei împotriva Cehoslovaciei (1933–1939) și impactul acesteia asupra relațiilor româno-britanice. Politica externă a Angliei a fost puternic influențată de relațiile cu Germania lui Hitler, adoptând o abordare permisivă și reactivă, fără a prelua inițiativa de la Berlin. Singura excepție a fost încercarea de a forma „frontul de la Stresa”. Anglia și-a ajustat constant poziția față de România, Franța și URSS în funcție de dinamica relațiilor germano-engleze, care au dictat cursul politicii europene până la izbucnirea războiului. Pentru a înțelege politica britanică față de România, este esențial să examinăm evoluția raporturilor germano-engleze, deoarece acestea au influențat mai mult decât acțiunile proprii ale României. Sub domnia lui Carol II, politica externă românească s-a aliniat pasivității și acomodării față de revizionismul german. În timp ce Anglia, ca mare putere, și-a permis să exploreze opțiuni politice (unele eronate), România, mult mai vulnerabilă, nu a avut aceeași flexibilitate.

Cuvinte-cheie: România, Marea Britanie, Germania, relații internaționale, Al Doilea Război Mondial, România, Marea Britanie, Germania, relații internaționale.

Romanian diplomats keeping track of British foreign policy were aware, by March 1936, of the fact that London's attitude towards Germany was slowly changing, and that the lawmakers would generally support the government's rearmament plans [1, f. 52]. Yet, when Hitler sent the German military forces into Rhineland, the same diplomats were anticipating the fact that Britain would not take any action in order to enforce the relevant clauses of the Versailles (1919) and Locarno Treaties (1925) which Hitler has denounced unilaterally accusing the French of previously breaching the latter agreement by signing the 1935 mutual assistance pact with Soviet Russia. That was the case in part because London regarded Hitler's action as justifiable – as British Secretary of State for War Alfred Duff Cooper famously deemed it as signifying nothing more than the fact that Germany was “reoccupying its own territory” [2, p. 266], but partially because the German dictator was careful enough to accompany his actions with the well-known promises of eventually rejoining the League of Nations, of signing an air pact outlawing bombing as a means of waging war, and of potentially signing a non-aggression treaty with France, all of which, the Romanian diplomats believed that “have been put forward in a way that takes into account the British public opinion, the goals of the British government, and will be generally welcomed here [in London]” [3, f. 59-60]. This is a classic example of the British being tricked by Hitler into believing that his foreign policy was ultimately just a limited and rational effort of attempting to secure for Germany its rightful place on the international arena and in the European balance of power. It must be pointed out here that, despite failing at that point to grasp Hitler's true intentions, the British still took one important action meant to balance-out their appeasement policy. That was the Government's declaration of 19 March 1936, publicly linking UK's security with that of France, whom, however, they previously persuaded not to intervene against Hitler's action in Rhineland. Additionally, in the face of the approaching Anschluss – depicted by Hit-

ler as a domestic German (“family”) affair [4, f. 411-412], and of his increasingly loud (by late 1937) demands for the Sudetenland autonomy, Foreign Secretary Eden warned on 21 December 1937 Germany that Britain was not lacking Allies, indicating that London was willing, in those circumstances, to consolidate its ties with Turkey and Romania, and pointing out that precisely such “friendships” were those factors maintaining stability [5, f. 429-430].

It would be right to point out here the fact that, just like not all British statesmen were fooled by Hitler's daring foreign policy (the first and foremost example in this regard is, of course none other than Churchill), Romanian diplomats such as V. Grigorcea – Romanian Minister in Great Britain – whose perspicacity was quite extraordinary especially in comparison with the general dullness characteristic to the Romanian political leadership of that time, have demonstrated an acute understanding of the general situation and of the overall trend of British policy towards Germany, as well as of what the consequences of this policy would amount to for smaller Central and Eastern European states. Thus, on the eve of the Anschluss, and after the 12 February 1938 meeting at Berchtesgaden, Grigorcea was informing the government in București of the wrong assessment of the situation by the U.K. government in the person Secretary Eden, who has declared to the Romanian Minister that Italy was the great loser of the Anschluss, while Grigorcea himself has correctly concluded that the Stresa Front was all but dead and that Italy has given up upholding Austrian sovereignty [6, f. 23-24], partially due to its ideological affinity with Germany, with whom by that time it decided to become allied, but also because of what the Romanian diplomat perceived as a hesitant manner in which London attempted to threaten Rome with isolation in connection with the latter's aggression in Ethiopia and involvement in the Spanish Civil War. Grigorcea also noted the indifference with which the general public and the media have contemplated the Anschluss, and anticipated correctly that no general plan such as those

discussed at that time and championed by Halifax or Chamberlain, of settling all outstanding issues between U.K. and Germany, be it centered on the idea of returning some German colonies, or offering Berlin some economic advantages, or accepting a German political and economical preponderance among the countries situated on the course of the Danube river, could ever succeed, since it would be nothing but “a construction with no fundament, because it doesn’t take into account the specific psychology of the leadership of the Third Reich”. Accordingly, the Romanian Legation was, in February 1938, of the opinion that the U.K. government did not have a coherent European policy, but was rather concerned with maintaining the integrity of the Empire threatened from Berlin, Rome, and Tokyo. Yet its response, “lacking any psychological consideration”, of making advances, in turn, to Rome and Berlin, has created an appearance of weakness instead of reason, and thus has accomplished the opposite of the intended, ie the consolidation of the alliance between dictatorships. Moreover, the Romanian Minister has anticipated correctly that the result of this would be the soon-to-come delimitation of spheres of interest between Germany and Italy in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and that a similar indifference was to be expected of Britain when the turn of Czechoslovakia came, for whom, Grigorcea believed, London “would not move a finger”. The general conclusion which the Romanian Legation drew from the Anschluss was that Britain had no desire to oppose the German expansion towards SouthEast, and that Romania could not count on any efficient support from London in this regard [7, f. 7-13]. Another reason for which the Romanian diplomats were skeptical of Chamberlain’s ability to assess correctly the security situation in Europe, was due to their belief that the latter was, at least to some extent, under the influence of Hitler’s British sympathisers, among which Minister Grigorcea counted the “group of Lords” led by those of Londonderry and Astor, as well as the U.K.’s ambassador in Berlin – Neville Henderson, all of whom, believed Grigorcea, were unit-

ed in the delusion that Hitler was, in fact, acting as a bulwark of civilisation against Bolshevism and for this reason should be allowed to dominate the Danube basin countries [8, f. 80]

The foreign policy disagreements within the British Government were not unknown to the Romanians, who have appreciated Eden’s resignation as a diplomatic victory for Italy and especially for Germany, and a fatal development for Czechoslovakia, as it was further signaling the lack of British desire to contain Berlin’s expansion [9, f. 17-19]. The Anschluss being concluded, pressure was beginning to mount upon Czechoslovakia, and the Romanian Legation in London was warning the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bucharest that the right understanding of the unfolding Sudetenland crisis would be critical for the future foreign policy of Romania [10, f. 91] (who was an ally of Czechoslovakia in the Petite Entente). Although Paris and Prague were actively pressing London to sign a common Franco-British declaration of “active resistance” against a likely German incursion on the territory of its South-Eastern neighbor, the Romanians speculated correctly that such designs would not materialize [11, f. 45-46], as they were aware of Chamberlain’s position being that Britain had no obligation towards Czechoslovakia other than those it had towards any other member of the League of Nations [12, f. 51-52]; this Chamberlain’s thesis was further strengthened through the position assumed by British dominions who refused to support any guarantees that would get them automatically in a state of war with Germany anywhere else than in France and Belgium [13, f. 58-59], and although Chamberlain emphasized (in his 24 March 1938 milestone speech on foreign affairs and rearmament) that Britain would fight Germany in order to defend Belgium or France, he also stated Britain does not want to fight alongside the latter should it decide to honor its obligations to Czechoslovakia under the 1925 Franco-Czechoslovak mutual assistance treaty, but admitted that if a European war broke out in the event of a German attack upon against Czechoslovakia it was likely Britain would be

dragged into it by force of unfolding new circumstances [14, f. 57-61]; the Romanian diplomats in Berlin noted the satisfaction with which such statements were received there [15, f. 54], while those in Moscow – the bitterness it caused in the Soviet capital [16, f. 56]. Although Chamberlain's statement that Britain could eventually get embroiled in a generalized European war caused by German pretensions in Czechoslovakia sparked optimism in Prague and Paris, the Romanian diplomats in London believed that it was rather a political declaration of reassurance for the British public opinion, sympathetic of democratic Czechoslovakia, and increasingly irritated by Hitler's uncontrollable rapaciousness; they warned the Romanian Foreign Minister, N.P. Comnen that Chamberlain would take no action to help Czechoslovakia, and pointed out correctly that his refusal to offer Prague security guarantees was also meant to deter France from taking any military action in favor of the former. Grigorcea predicted that Chamberlain would force the Czechs to issue concession after concession, and would not object even if the whole of Czechoslovakia would enter the German political sphere, "of course, with some sort of observance of appearances", as he thought that Chamberlain's strategy not to hinder the German the expansion in Central Europe would inevitably lead to a desirable (from British perspective, and according to Grigorcea) clash with the Soviets. This perspective of Grigorcea might seem out of touch with reality, but was certainly not regarded as such in 1938, for instance by the Soviets; it also had a very solid fundament in the thesis expressed by Hitler himself in *Mein Kampf* that the whole Prussian and later on German drive to expand in the West was a geopolitical mistake, and that, when the NSDAP would get into power, they would abandon this approach, and instead re-assume the drive started by the Teutonic Order in the East by reviving the "Drang nach Osten" nationalist XIXth-century concept.

The Romanian legation in London deemed the outcome of the situation of Czechoslovakia (with whom Romania was allied) of crucial im-

portance for the Romanian security and foreign policy, and warned the Romanian MFA that the British Prime Minister was prepared to sacrifice all of the Danubian countries „if not for one that has a resource which is extremely precious for the modern warfare: the oil...[and that] the idea that Germany could get to the Romanian oil was making the Prime Minister evidently nervous, as in such case a British blockade could not prevent the German access to this commodity" [17, f. 80-96]. Grigorcea's view of Chamberlain's readiness to "sacrifice" the Central and South-Eastern European Countries can be deemed as exaggerated, but only up to a point and in dependence on what the expression "sacrifice" would suppose. There is evidence, for instance, that high-ranking British statesmen such as A. Eden were of the opinion as early as 1936 that Germany could be granted economic preponderance in that region [18, p. 33].

The possibility of Romanian oil being used in the future war by Germany was a topic of debate in the British Parliament [19], and in the same context W. Churchill pointed out that Hitler was betting on successful blackmail rather than on actual force, predicting correctly that Romania could easily become a victim of the forceful diplomacy of Hitler, who could use the discontent of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania in order to enforce upon Romania "an obligatory alliance" [20]; due to stances as such, Churchill was, in early 1938, beginning to be regarded by the Romanian diplomats in London as an actor of "rare lucidity in Britan" [21, f. 85], and the leader of a conservative faction of representatives disenchanted with Chamberlain's reserved approach on the issues of Central Europe, although Romanians were aware of Churchill's own dilemma in approaching this issue since Britain was lacking a partner it could work in tandem with in that part of the continent; even though Churchill was already at that time contemplating and even exploring the possibility of an alliance with Soviet Russia, the latter was generally considered as unreliable and untrustworthy both in France and Britain [22, f. 79], and Vereker, the British Charge

d’Affaires in Moscow, was informing the Romanian Legation there, in May 1938, that the U.K. would not expose itself to war for the sake of the Komintern [23, f. 118].

As proven by the latter course of events and pointed out elsewhere in the Romanian historiography [24, p. 37-38], Chamberlain was neither afraid of Hitler, nor of losing the war which Britain wanted to avoid as a cruel and irrational possibility, but was prepared to fight if eventually dragged into it. But the Prime Minister was hoping that such a turn of events could be avoided by granting Hitler the privilege of uniting with the Reich the ethnic Germans living in Austria and Czechoslovakia on the basis of the self-determination principle which was denied to them in the aftermath of WW1. Chamberlain thought this to be a sensible policy, and it might have proven to be so, had Hitler himself been a rational politician as Chamberlain believed him to be, a delusion which the German dictator carefully nourished for as long as he could. In the meantime, as the Czechoslovakian crisis was deepening, the Romanians noticed that it was Chamberlain’s strategy to deepen ties with France so that it could keep the latter in the tightest possible embrace with the goal of limiting the scope of their alliance to the defense of the Rhine only, while further pressuring the Czechs into granting political concessions to the German minority, (a demand which the former were generally ready to accommodate, as the Czechoslovak Minister in London personally informed Grigorcea in April 1938) [25, f. 100, 102; 26, f. 87-88], and at the same time warning the Germans that the UK would not remain indifferent to a conflict where France’s fate would be at stake [27, f. 103-105]. In this context, the Romanian Legation in London was advising the MFA to approach realistically Romania’s relations with the UK whose “potentially very precious” friendship must be sought and cultivated, and with this goal in mind the Legation was recommending that the Government explore the potential of deepening the bilateral economic ties; however, the same diplomats were warning their superiors against the delusion that Brit-

ain could or would openly support Romania against Germany, except maybe in the form an amicable intervention or attempt to mediate a possible conflict. The Romanian Legation concluded that Chamberlain regarded Romania and Hungary, just like Czechoslovakia, as belonging to “the German sphere of influence”, and that an active British resistance could be contemplated only in the situation where Germany would menace Greece and Turkey and thus approach dangerously close the “limes” of the Empire. Until such a time came, the Romanians believed that Britain would not ramp up rearmament effort in which it was lagging behind Germany, notably in the air, partially because the forces on the left of the British political spectrum were stubbornly opposing such measures, and partially because that would have meant sacrificing the high standards of life which the British were enjoying and were not prepared to part with easily. For these reasons the Romanian government was being warned by its representatives in London, in May 1938, not to make the mistake of believing that with regard to its security own, Romania could rely on London [28, f. 106-114]. With regard to the suggested possibility of deepening the economic ties between the UK and Romania, the process indeed began soon after this note, with the June visit of the Counselor Gh. Tătărescu who has discussed with Halifax the prospect, both agreeing to continue talks in this regard [29, f. 131-133]. Although the initiative of expanding the aforementioned ties came up mostly from the British side during Tătărescu’s visit, it was soon thereafter dropped abruptly by the British Government. The Romanian Legation in London managed to find out that the cause for this sudden change of policy which was decided by Chamberlain had to be sought in a certain bargain suggested to the Prime Minister through “a Germanophile in his entourage” whereby Germany would agree to assume the Austrian debts, and to a general détente in its relations with Britain, should the latter accept Berlin’s “legitimate interests” in the Danube basin, where the British would not, under such

agreement, attempt to penetrate economically. It seems that Chamberlain, with an eye on the role of the mediator he was seeking the Czechoslovakian crisis, agreed to freeze the initiative of consolidating commercial ties with Romania so as to avoid additional tensions with the Reich; analyzing this episode, Grigorcea predicted correctly that when the sought British-German détente had failed, London would resume its attempt to improve economic links with Romania [30, f. 140-143]

Although the views of the Chamberlain Government were clearly different from those put forward by Churchill, (who was insisting that „the problem of nationalities” had to be solved within the framework of the Czechoslovakian sovereignty, and that any attempt by Germany to impose a solution by force outside of this framework would mean war with Britain [31]), and although by late August 1938 the cabinet still believed that friendly relations with totalitarian states were not impossible [32, f. 149] while adhering to the principles outlined by Chamberlain in his 24 March speech, the Romanian diplomats in London were reporting a gradual hardening of the stance assumed by the British government which was beginning to lean towards affirming the thesis-warning that “nobody should believe that the consequences of a conflict could be limited.” The Romanian diplomats believed that this evolution had to do, with three new aspects of the issue: 1) the fact that in its “moderate” approach on the issue the British managed to obtain the public backing of the U.S. Government, 2) the fact that the Czechs have been very responsive to Runciman’s mission and were showing a willingness to compromise which was appreciated in London and the same was now expected of Germany and 3) the fact that in the face situation defined by the previous two points, Hitler was resorting to the same tactics he employed in the case of Anschluss, i.e. attempting to sow internal disorder through local Nazis and by using as pretexts incendiary stories of ethnic German being attacked by organized and armed Czech communists; the British public opinion began

noticing such recurrences, coincidences and similarities in Hitler’s tactics and was becoming increasingly anti-Nazi, to the point where, according to the Romanian Minister in London, even the traditionally Germanophile newspapers were forced to assume a very reserved position [33, f. 172-174; 34, f. 176-179]. Despite this shift in the public opinion, Grigorcea made a very interesting and pertinent observation by pointing out that, at that point, should Hitler have pressed forward with his plan to annex the Sudetenland by pleading, “in a democratic form, and as an act of justice and natural right of all people”, for the Germans there to be allowed to decide their fate in a plebiscite, then the effect of such a plea on the British, who have themselves granted independence to Ireland and their dominions, would have been hard to predict [35, f. 183-184].

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