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GREAT BRITAIN AND THE ROMANIAN TERRITORIAL CONCESSIONS IN DOBROGEA AND TRANSYLVANIA (1940)

This study explores, based on Romanian and British diplomatic sources, some aspects of the international context in which Romania ceded to Hungary part of the historical region of Transylvania, and to Bulgaria - part of the historical region of Dobrogea. The British perspective on the Romanian-German, Romanian-Soviet, Romanian-Hungarian, and Romanian-Bulgarian relations was analyzed in the context of those territorial concessions, as well as the way in which this perspective, in turn, was influenced by the evolution of Romanian-British and Soviet-British relations in the context of British war policy - in general, and in south-eastern Europe - in particular.

Keywords: Romania, Great Britain, U.R.S.S., Germany, Dobrogea, Transylvania, Balkans, international relations, World War II.

The fact that following the Soviet occupation of Eastern Moldova (Bessarabia) and towards the end of July, the British-Romanian relations were on the verge of reaching the breaking point can be gathered not only from diplomatic sources, or the Romanian or British press, but also from military sources documenting the contacts between British and Romanian servicemen. On 25 July, the liaison officer of the Romanian General Staff informed *ex officio* the British Military Attaché Macnaab of the Staff's official position on several issues pertaining to British-Romanian relations. First of all, the Romanian General Staff was convinced that Britain was seeking and actively working to somehow provoke a conflict between Romania and the Soviet Union, as a preliminary step towards the ultimate goal of embroiling the Germans in conflict with the Soviets; there was some truth in this assumption, as numerous British diplomatic cables reveal the fact that the British were hoping for a Soviet-German clash over Romanian oil or over the control of the Danube delta, and, for this reason, regarded as a positive development the possibility of further Soviet encroachments against Romania; on the other hand, the same diplomatic sources exhibit no evidence to support the assertion that the British were actively working to accomplish this

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goal: for one, Britain had way too little influence over or in Romania to achieve this, and it had virtually no means of leverage or influence over Stalin, who, as Halifax and other British diplomats have repeatedly emphasized was pursuing an entirely independent foreign policy, and was completely out of reach of the British in this regard; moreover, in spite of nurturing some hopes in this regard, the British was assuming correctly that Stalin, out of the fear of provoking a conflict with Germany he was trying to postpone for as long as he could, would not risk a serious attempt of jeopardizing the Romanian oil industry¹. Next, the Romanian General Staff was wholly shaken by the defeat of France, and was resolutely confident in the final German victory, believing that England would fall “in a matter of days” once the German invasion started “in the earnest”. Moreover, the Romanian high-ranking officers believed that, after the fall of France, German victory was desirable, since the British victory would have meant, according to them, the conquest by communism of entire Europe. For such reasons, the Romanian superior officers believed, according to Macnaab, that it was in the whole interest of Romania to engage in “intimate cooperation” with and even “subservience” to Germany, and were ready to do their “utmost” to accomodate her needs to the limit of their ability. An interesting point made by a Staff representative to Macnaab was that the Romanian officers were resigned that Romania would lose Transylvania and Dobrogea, as with the German help they hoped to recover Bessarabia; this is particularly intriguing because this view would, to a certain extent, become a matter of policy of the subsequent Romanian regime, although Antonescu has never resigned to and accepted the loss of the portion of Transylvania to Hungary. Macnaab was moreover informed by the liaison officer that it was pointless for him to ask any questions in an official capacity, as he had orders to refuse to answer anything the Attaché would ask. Macnaab’s impression was that it was entirely pointless to attempt to approach the Romanians, who were “totally defeatist” and “so rotten with German propaganda that they would not listen to reason”². While it might be considered that the term “subservience” which the British often employed in this timeframe to describe Romania’s perceived relation with Germany was too categorical to accurately reflect the matter, it was not, in any case, far from the truth. In one instance that proves this latter assertion, Ribbentrop had complained to Manoilescu (the Romanian Foreign Minister) that Gafencu, the former Foreign Minister and now Romania’s Minister at Moscow, was conveying to the Soviets that Romania was still on the side of

¹ *Halifax to Hoare*, no. R1113/392/37 of 19 January 1940, A.N.I.C., f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 3494, r. 292; *Hoare to Foreign Office*, no. 558 (R6415/G) of 24 June 1940, A.N.I.C., i. 3494, r. 290; *Cripps to Halifax*, no. 399 of 1 July 1940, in T.N.A., CAB 66/9 Original Reference 221 (40)-270 (40), 1940 24 Jun-19 Jul, p. 171; *Idem*, *Cripps to Halifax*, no. 408 of 2 July 1940, p. 173; *Idem*, *Memorandum by Halifax. Comments on the recent conversation between his Majesty’s Ambassador at Moscow and M. Stalin*, 9 July 1940, p. 169-170; *Idem*, *Cripps to Halifax*, no. 404 of 2 July 1940, p. 172.

² *Macnaab to War Office, M.I. (J.I.C.)*, no. 1430 of 25 July 1940, A.N.I.C., f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 3494, r. 292.

England. To this, Manoilescu replied that, if Gafencu “was not acceptable to the Axis, he would be recalled within 24 hours”³.

Meanwhile, the British continued to closely watch the evolution of the dispute of Transylvania, as Ribbentrop has received Manoilescu and Gigurtu (the Romanian Prime Minister) at Salzburg, on 26 July 1940, on which occasion he has accused the Romanians of previously having a pro-British foreign policy, and informed them that his Government viewed the Hungarian and Bulgarian territorial claims against Romania as entirely justified; the matter was already decided in principle, as in his correspondence with Hitler, Carol had already agreed to yield to these demands, but on that occasion, Ribbentrop warned Gigurtu and Manoilescu that Romania had to go further than “minor border rectification”, to which the Romanian ministers seemed to agree, although, privately, the officials from the Romanian M.F.A. were expressing their hope to the British Legation in Bucharest that the new Hungarian-Romanian border would coincide with the Sighet-Arad line, or with the line of the Western (Apuseni) Mountains. The British diplomats were right to suspect that Gigurtu was hoping to return from Salzburg with German security guarantees but that he had received none⁴, as, indeed, Ribbentrop had told emphatically the Prime Minister that before the matter of Hungarian and Bulgarian claim was solved, the German-Romanian relations would not change an iota⁵.

Although the British diplomats from the Foreign Office, as well as those working in Bucharest, were confident that Stalin would not double-cross Hitler on Romania, they were noting that the Romanian government was “completely in the dark as to their position vis-à-vis Germany and Russia” and that Manoilescu himself was very afraid of the perspective of the Soviets taking advantage of a German invasion of Britain to further advance into Romanian territory; this supposition seemed to be based also on the finding that the Soviets were keeping in Bessarabia more land and air fighting machines than were necessary for the defense of that territory. Thus, at the beginning of August, the British diplomats believed that the Romanian Government was failing on all fronts, as they could not obtain specific German support against the perceived Russian threat, and they were also bound to lose Transylvania and Southern Dobrogea; for these reasons, the Government was growing increasingly unpopular, while the Iron Guard and the National-Peasant Party (whose leader, Maniu was, according to the British, in contact with the Soviet embassy in late July 1940) were advocating for the formation of a National Government that would refuse any further territorial cessions⁶. From London, Florescu was reporting back home the rather objective impression

³ *Record of the Conversation between Ribbentrop, Ciano and Manoilescu, on 31 August 1940 in Viena, in Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918–1945, Series D, v. X, p. 570–575.*

⁴ *Hankey to Halifax, no. 814 of 31 July 1940, FO 195/2462, f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 2468, r. 303.*

⁵ *Record of the Conversation between Ribbentrop, Gigurtu and Manoilescu on 26 July, at Fuschl, in Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918–1945, Series D. Vol. XIII, p. 301.*

⁶ *Hankey to Halifax, no. 826 of 2 August 1940, FO 195/2462, f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 2468, r. 303.*

that though there existed in London certain hopes that the Hungarian-Romanian dispute would degenerate into an open conflict which would invite a Soviet intervention, the official position of Great Britain was not to support the Hungarian claim, but to maintain that since the Transylvanian issue was one among neighbors, it should have been up to them to settle it⁷; this stance was entirely rational from a British standpoint, given the fact that both Hungary and Romania were considered to be enemy-controlled countries and, as such, there was little to no incentive for the British to formally support one or another. The Turkish ambassador in London, Aras, was advising the Romanian legation there that the best course for Romania would have been to reach a direct understanding with the Hungarians and Bulgarians and to avoid arbitration by the Axis. Although this was hardly feasible, the rationale underpinning the Turkish suggestion was rather objective, as they pointed out correctly that a “unilateral” arbitrage by the Axis would antagonize the Soviet Union⁸, as it did happen in fact. This episode also shows that the Turks were promoting a Balkan policy quite distinct from that which the British envisaged for them. It is clear that the Turks were far from assuming an assertive posture in the region and from seeking to align themselves with the U.S.S.R. to fend off the German drive towards the Straits, as the British would have liked them to act.

The British Government nurtured a hope, and this seems to be another reason for which they refused to support the Hungarian claims in Transylvania, that the situation created by the general hostility in Romania towards the Hungarian demands would metamorphose into a sweeping national movement that would result in a change of Government and a consequent reversal of Romania's foreign policy back to independent neutrality⁹. The British Legation in Bucharest believed that, if the Romanian Government resisted the claims of the Hungarians, the latter would attempt to invade Romania, and a war would break out which would disrupt all the communications in the Balkans, including the traffic on the Danube; alternatively, the British believed that to avoid this latter scenario, Hitler would have to call off Hungarians, and since that would have been the second time he did so, his image would suffer a significant loss of prestige; the intuition was correct, as Hitler had personally told the Hungarians that he does not oppose their invasion of Romania, provided that the Hungarians were sure that they could quickly defeat the Romanian Army, to avoid the previously outlined scenario stemming from the prolongation of the hostilities, while also telling Csáky (Hungarian Foreign Minister) and Teleki (Hungarian Prime Minister) that he, himself, doubted that Hungary could

⁷ Florescu to R.M.F.A., no. 884 (R 48768) of 9 August 1940, A.M.A.E.R., f. 71/Anglia, v. 14 f. 35.

⁸ Florescu (Romanian Charge d'Affairs in London) to R.M.F.A., no. 866 (R 47271) of 1 August 1940, A.M.A.E.R., f. 71/Anglia, v. 14, f. 7-8.

⁹ Foreign Office to Knatchbull-Hugessen, no. 753 (10/976/40) of 8 August 1940, F.O. 195/2462, f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 2468, r. 303.

score such a victory¹⁰. For such reasons, the Legation believed that the Romanian Government should be encouraged to offer resistance to the Hungarian claims in Transylvania¹¹.

Such was the state of the British-Romanian relations right before the Vienna Diktat (30 August) and the Treaty of Craiova (7 September¹²), whereby Romania ceded a significant portion of Transylvania to Hungary, and the southern portion of Dobrogea to Bulgaria, respectively. As the news and rumors with regard to the evolution of the Transylvanian dispute were intensifying, the British public opinion and the Romanian Legation in London was reporting back home that the British "political circles" and the press became very supportive of Romania; it is possible for these manifestations to have been orchestrated by the British Government, who might have adopted the strategy to encourage Romania to militarily resist the Hungarian demands, although no proof of this supposition was found among the records we have seen. The fact remains, however, that right before the Vienna Diktat, in London, the circumstances of the abrupt deterioration of the British-Romanian relations (that are not reflected in this paper) "have been completely forgotten"¹³. A few days before the Diktat, Manoilescu has informed the British diplomats in Bucharest that no pressure was being exerted on Romania by the Soviet Government over Romanian-Bulgarian relations, although Manoilescu informed Le Rougetel (British Charge d'Affairs in Bucharest) to have been aware that the Soviets have previously tempted Bulgaria to demand from Romania the whole region of Dobrogea so that a common Bulgarian-Soviet frontier could be established. According to the British, the greatest fear Manoilescu had right before the Vienna Diktat was his old obsession with the idea that, in a scenario in which Germany became tied in the West, the Soviet Union would make further territorial demands and even potentially attempt to interfere in the Hungarian-Romanian dispute¹⁴. It is quite clear that the Soviet threat was perceived as most imminent and pressing by the Romanians even in the circumstances in which the Hungarian-Romanian tensions over Transylvania were reaching their peak in August 1940, as illustrated by the fact that more army divisions were being kept East of Carpathian Mountains, then in Transyl-

¹⁰ *Record of the conversation between Hitler, Ciano, Teleki, Csáky and Ribbentrop, at Munich, on 10 July 1940*, in *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, Series D, vol. X, Washington, 1957, p. 179-182.

¹¹ *Le Rougetel to Foreign Office, no. 807 of 12 August 1940*, FO 195/2462, f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 2468, r. 303.

¹² An official announcement was made however, on 21 August, specifying that Romania has agreed, in principle, to the restoration of the 1912 border with Bulgaria, and that the rest of the details would be settled in a comprehensive bilateral treaty which would bring result in a final and friendly solution of the dispute: Idem, *Florescu to R.M.F.A., no. 972 (R 55696) of 7 September 1940*, A.M.A.E.R., f. 71/Anglia, v. 14, f. 89, f. 114

¹³ *Florescu to R.M.F.A., no. 930 (R 5391)*, A.M.A.E.R., f. 71/Anglia, v. 14, f. 75.

¹⁴ *Le Rougetel to Foreign Office, no. 1002 (R 7417) of 27 August 1940*, A.N.I.C., f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 3494, r. 283.

vania¹⁵. The Foreign Office officials were themselves in the dark about the Soviet intentions in the Balkans, although they agreed that it was, for the most part, the fear of the Soviet Union that “brought Romania to heel at Vienna”. They knew that in Vienna, Manoilescu was informed by Ciano and Ribbentrop that their respective governments agreed to guarantee Romania’s territorial integrity provided that the latter would unconditionally agree with a German-Italian arbitration of the Transylvanian dispute¹⁶. Based on this, the British drew the incorrect conclusion that the Soviet Union would “for the moment” be intimidated and abstain further aggressive towards Romania¹⁷, which conclusion was based on the underestimation of the Soviet readiness to challenge the new status quo established without their agreement in the Balkans; on the other hand, the Soviets did not halt their aggressive incursion into the Romanian territory after Vienna, as the British expected, quite the opposite, they intensified them as a means to make their point fully understood by Hitler. This was the Soviet way of showing that they were not intimidated by the German-Italian border guarantee given to Romania. Of course, the border incidents deliberately provoked by the Soviets, especially in Northern Moldova and in the Danube Delta, did not go as far as to degenerate into a full-blown invasion, and from this perspective, the British were correct to anticipate that the Soviet Union would not invade Romania, else that would have meant them publicly calling the bluff of the Germans on the matter of the guarantee, in which case a Soviet-German war was inevitable unless Hitler wished to see the “worthlessness of the German guarantees [being] broadcast to the rest of the world much to our [British] advantage”^{18, 19}. The British Legation in Bucharest would soon send reports that proved that the Foreign Office officials were wrong to assume that the Soviets were intimidated by the German offer of protection to Romania. The Soviet warplanes were crossing the border and attacking Romanian military aircraft in Romanian airspace right at the time when the Vienna meeting was about to begin; moreover, Le Rougetel was reporting back home that, in the previous “few days”, there have been nearly 100 casualties in the skirmishes at the Romanian-Soviet border²⁰, and that Romanian war planes

¹⁵ *Weekly resume no. 50 of the naval, military and air situation from 8 August to 15 July 1940*, W.P. (40) 317, T.N.A., CAB 66/10 Original Reference 271 (40)-320 (40), 1940 17 Jul-19 Aug, p. 248.

¹⁶ *Record of the Conversation between Ribbentrop, Ciano and Manoilescu, on 31 August 1940 in Vienna*, in *Documents of German...*, Series D, v. X, p. 570-575.

¹⁷ (*Indecipherable Signature, possibly C. P. B. Peake*) *Minutes to Bucharest telegram no. 1002, 3 September 1940*, A.N.I.C., f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 3494, r. 283.

¹⁸ *P. Nichols' and A. Cadogan's minutes to Bucharest telegram no. 1002, of 3 and respectively 4 September 1940*, A.N.I.C., f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 3494, r. 283.

¹⁹ *Idem, Foreign Office to Le Rougetel, no. 858 (R 7417/9/37) of 5 September 1940*.

²⁰ The British Military Intelligence reports were noting that, by losing Bessarabia, Romania lost also at least eighteen aerodromes and landing grounds, and although none of these had too big of a importance to the Romanian airforce, the establishment of the new frontier on the Prut river meant that two of the most important Romanian air bases, those of Iași and Galați, would lose their strategic importance, since starting with 28 July 1940 they were within miles of the

were being shot down by Soviet fighters in Romanian airspace²¹. This led the British diplomats working in Romania to conclude that, even though the Soviet Union might have still been acting in concert with Germany, “independent action on their [Soviet] part can no longer be excluded”²². Cripps (British Ambassador at Moscow) was reporting to the Foreign Office that Molotov had even repeatedly summoned Gafencu (on 19 and 29 August) to hand him protest notes concerning these incidents, accusing the Romanian servicemen of provoking them and warning Gafencu that the “matter may assume a serious aspect” and that “Soviet Government have placed entire responsibility for possible consequences of above-mentioned activities on Romanian Government”. The latter, however, disputed these accusations and replied that it was the Soviet border guards who were firing upon the Romanian servicemen; Gafencu also conveyed to Molotov that the Romanian soldiers had been instructed “to avoid any incidents likely to prejudice good neighborly relations”²³. Given the fact that all the sources indicated clearly that the Romanian authorities were extremely anxious to avoid further Soviet encroachments, it seems highly unlikely that such skirmishes have been provoked by the Romanians. On the contrary, it would be safe to infer that the Soviets provoked them to signal their displeasure about Romania accepting the imminent German arbitration on the Transylvanian dispute. This was also the opinion of the British diplomats, who, however, believed that it was not likely that the Soviets had any serious designs beyond that scope, and if such designs ever existed, they had must have been trumped by the German guarantees. Although the British would have been themselves glad to find ways to reassure the Romanians that the Soviet Union had no plan to invade Western Moldova to determine the government in Bucharest to resist satisfying the Hungarian claims in Transylvania, the situation at the border was so serious in terms of ongoing clashes, and the Soviet military and diplomatic pressure so heavy upon Romania, that, on the day of the Diktat, Le Rougetel was reporting that civilians began fleeing and evacuating their property from the border region and the town of Galați²⁴. The British Legation in Budapest was reporting to the Foreign Office

Soviet border: *Weekly resume (no. 44) of the Naval, Military and Air situation, from 27 June to 4 July 1940, 5 July 1940, W. P. (40) 250*, in T.N.A., CAB 66/9 Original Reference 221 (40)-270 (40), 1940 24 Jun-19 Jul, p. 146.

²¹ Coincidentally, or not, the British military intelligence was reporting that, simultaneously with the Soviet incursions in the Romanian air space, Hungarian war planes were regularly infiltrating in Transylvania as far as Brașov, and that they were being engaged by Romanian air fighters: *Weekly resume (no. 53) of naval, military and air situation, 29 August – 5 September 1940, W.P. (40) 361*, T.N.A., CAB 66/11 Original Reference 321 (40)-370 (40), 1940 19 Aug-14 Sep, p. 166.

²² *Le Rugetel to Foreign Office, no. 1016 (R 7423) of 28 August 1940, F.O. 371/24983, A.N.I.C., f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 3494, r. 290.*

²³ *Cripps to Foreign Office, no. 711 of 30 August 1940 (R 7388/9/37), F.O. 371/24968, A.N.I.C., f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 3494, r. 283;*

²⁴ *Idem, Le Rougetel to Foreign Office, no. 1027 of 29 August 1940 (R 7395).*

that the Germans took full advantage of this situation to threaten Romania that if it did not accept the arbitration, then she would be invaded simultaneously by Hungary and the Soviet Union²⁵. The way in which the Soviet pressure upon Romania played right into Germany's hands made Halifax conclude that „there has certainly been [Soviet-German] collusion over the Transylvanian settlement”²⁶. This conclusion was suffering from a lack of precise knowledge about what were the specific areas of the Nazi-Soviet cooperation, and thus was incorrect; the Diktat caused the German-Soviet relations to reach a new low since the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact: the Soviets refused to recognize the exclusivity of German interests on the Danube or in Romania and went so far as to propose to repeal Article III of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, which provided for the maintenance of contact between the governments of the two states for consultations and the exchange of information on matters affecting their common interests²⁷. In the wake of the Diktat, the Romanian Legation in London was reporting back home that the majority of the British papers depicted the arbitration as unfair to Romania²⁸. Some British diplomats, both in Bucharest and at the Foreign Office²⁹, believed that the Diktat offered a good opportunity for mending the bilateral relations, but that could not happen due to the negative evolution of other aspects of the British-Romanian relations that are beyond the scope of this paper.

The British were correct to estimate that the role Germany played in the cession of Southern Dobrogea was minor compared to that it played in the Transylvanian dispute. This was indirectly confirmed to the Romanian Legation in London by the Bulgarian Minister in that capital, who conveyed to Florescu that his (Bulgarian) government has officially expressed gratitude to the British Government for “the constancy with which the Foreign Office has supported” the Bulgarian claim on Southern Dobrogea and that they were thankful for the support also received from the Soviet Union and Germany in their quest to regain that region. The British diplomats also concluded correctly that, after the surren-

²⁵ *Greenway (Budapest) to Foreign Office, no. 360 of 1 September 1940, A.N.I.C., f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 2468, r. 303.*

²⁶ *Idem, Halifax to Knatchbull-Hugessen (19/1152/40) of 5 September 1940, F.O. 195/2462; This conclusion was incorrect. In reality, the Germans did not consult the Soviet Union on their intent to formulate a solution to the Transylvanian dispute, and this gave the Soviets the occasion to blame Germany of breaching the Article III of 23 August 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact: Беседа полномочного представителя СССР в Германии, А. А. Шкварцева, со статс-секретарём МИД Германии, Э. Вайцзекером, 9. Sept 1940; Беседа Наркома Иностранных Дел СССР, В. М. Молотова, с послом Германии в СССР, Ф. Шуленбургом, 9 sept. 1940, в Документы внешней политики СССР. Том 23. Кн. 1. 1 января — 31 октября 1940 г. — М.: Международные отношения, 1995, p. 581-586.*

²⁷ *M. Țurcanu, O cronică a relațiilor sovieto-germane (aprilie 1939-iunie 1941) in Revista de istorie a Moldovei, 2017, p. 125-126.*

²⁸ *Florescu to R.M.F.A., no. 956 (R 54663) of 2 September 1940, A.M.A.E.R., f. 71/Anglia, v. 14, f. 94.*

²⁹ *Le Rougetel to Foreign Office, no. 800 (R 7451/392/37) of 1 September 1940 and the P. Dixon's minutes to it, F.O. 371/24988, A.N.I.C., f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 3494, r. 292.*

der of Eastern Moldova and Northern Transylvania, the cession of this region was not considered a big loss in Romania, and that Hitler demanded no price be paid by the Bulgarians for his support to their cause; the Bulgarian Minister in London also confirmed to Florescu that the Germans asked of nothing in return for their assistance in that matter³⁰. Rendel – the British Minister in Bulgaria, was of the opinion that there was no reason why Hitler would have taken the approach of attempting to exact an immediate return, since, in those circumstances, he was in the position to get anything he wanted from that country³¹. Another interesting thing to notice was the difference in optics between Romanian and Bulgarian perspectives on the situation in the Balkans. Although the role played by the Germans in settling the Southern Dobrogea dispute made both Bulgaria and Romania politically dependent on the Reich, the Bulgarians were much less willing to assume the role of German clients. The reason for this resided in the different attitude the Bulgarians had towards the Soviet Union for which many Bulgarians had traditional sympathies; moreover, as explained to the Romanian legation by the Bulgarian Minister in London, Sofia believed (rather correctly) that the Soviet Union would react negatively to a single Great Power, be it Germany, or another one, extending its hegemony over the Balkans, and would, in such an eventuality, be prepared to move unilaterally to attempt to establish naval bases along the Black Sea coast, to ensure its control over the Straits. While this latter assumption was, perhaps, exaggerated, it was nonetheless correct in discerning that the ultimate Soviet objective in the region was the exclusive control of the Straits. Florescu subscribed to this perspective, suggesting to his government the realistic conclusion that, in the circumstances defined by the above-mentioned Soviet stance, and the “solidity of the Anglo-Saxon resistance against Germany”, a stable order in the Balkans could not be set up unilaterally by the latter, but could only be the result of a balanced agreement reached by a concert of Great Powers³². Additionally, in a few days, the Romanian Legation in London would be informed by the Bulgarian minister that his country was supporting the Soviet membership in the Danube European Commission³³. The British perceived clear enough that Bulgaria had a different relation to Germany than Romania, this being obvious from the fact that the British have not abandoned the hopes of attracting Bulgaria, instead of Romania in the formation of an anti-German Balkan Bloc, following the Treaty of Craiova. The Greeks and especially the Turks were very much for exploring this possibility, and the British believed it to be real,

³⁰ Florescu to R.M.F.A., no. 990 (R 57269) of 14 September 1940, A.M.A.E.R., f. 71/Anglia, v. 14, f. 126.

³¹ Rendel to P. Nichols (204/24/40), 5 october 1940, F.O. 195/2462, A.N.I.C., f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 2468, r. 303.

³² Florescu to R.M.F.A., no. 990 (R 57269) of 14 September 1940, A.M.A.E.R., f. 71/Anglia, v. 14, f. 127-128.

³³ Idem, Florescu to R.M.F.A., no. 1001 (R 58945) of 21 September 1940, f. 135.

although thought that, for the time being, it would have been unwise to make any definite moves on the matter, as they assessed correctly that the Bulgarians were “sated with Dobrogea and in a sort of after-lunch condition”, while being at the same time “mesmerized by Germany”; for these reasons, the British diplomats thought it would be wise to wait until the German influence, that was correctly assessed to have the upper hand in Bulgaria at that particular conjuncture, would have waned, before attempting any steps to approach the Bulgarian government on matters concerning the possible formation of a Balkan alliance³⁴.

Halifax's general assessment of the dismemberment of Romania was that it was the “direct outcome of the Axis policy, though it is impossible not to take into account the part played by the Soviet Union and its extremely shrewd ruler”. After the territorial integrity guarantees given by the Germans to the Romanians virtually tied the latter to the former in every way (for instance, according to “reliable reports”, the British Intelligence community concluded that, at Vienna, the Romanians gave the Germans the right to use their airbases³⁵), Halifax's view was that Britain should resort to seeking to support any elements of opposition existing in Romania, to hinder as much as possible Hitler's objective in that country which he, Halifax, assessed to be to augment even more his political control so as to ensure that the oil output and transportation are increased and improved. The State Secretary believed the Romanian oil to be very important for the Germans at that particular time and was expecting them to send large numbers of technicians to ensure an increased and constant flow of that commodity³⁶. Although Halifax did not expect the Romanian opposition to rally itself to the cause of the Allies “as long as the world is not certain that we may not be invaded”, nevertheless he believed it was necessary to encourage the resistance in Romania; in the meantime, Halifax believed that the British should “drum” the “Romanian debacle” as a psychological and propaganda weapon in dealing with the rest of the Balkans and Turkey, by pointing out that “this is what happens when a country fails to stand up to Germany: the more you seek German protection, the more is taken from you, and there is no end to the process. Romania, from being a thriving and prosperous country, is reduced to a mere rump of herself, completely subservient to and dominated by her

³⁴ *Knatchbull-Hugessen to Rendel, 10/1088/40, of 16 September 1940, A.N.I.C., f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 2468, r. 303.*

³⁵ *Weekly resume of the naval, air and military situation, 5-12 September 1940, T.N.A., CAB 66/11 Original Reference 321 (40)-370 (40), 1940 19 Aug-14 Sep, p. 245.*

³⁶ According to the calculations of Hankey's Committee, the British were expecting that by June 1941 the oil situation of Germany, notwithstanding the Romanian and Soviet supplies, would become so serious that she would be forced to undertake decisive moves to either end the war, or obtain access to new oil sources, in the absence of which the situation would become disastrous towards the end of 1941, even if Germany managed to somehow dislodge the Royal Navy from the Mediterranean and ensure the flow seaborne supply of Soviet and Romanian oil: *War Cabinet. Future Strategy. Appreciation by the Chiefs of Staff Committee, W.P. 40 (362) of 4 September 1940, T.N.A., CAB 66/11 Original Reference 321 (40)-370 (40), 1940 19 Aug-14 Sep, p. 174.*

so-called protector, who is, in reality, her greatest oppressor”³⁷. There was, no doubt, much truth in the characterization which Halifax gave to the pinnacle of Carol’s “balanced policy”. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that, although the British knew and acknowledged in rather precise terms the role played by the Soviets in the dismemberment of Romania, yet in their official rhetoric and propaganda in the Balkans, Halifax would not instruct his representatives to also “drum” the fact that the Soviet threat played an enormous part in Romania’s fate in 1940, while, moreover, knowing from Stalin himself that the Soviet Union still coveted one objective in the region, namely the control of the Straits. The British propaganda would, of course, keep silent in this regard because that would have contradicted the objective of the British Government to push the Turks and the Balkan states towards the Soviet Union, so that the latter would assume, preferably in tandem with Turkey, the establishment of an anti-Axis front in the region. This different British attitude displayed towards the Soviet Union in comparison to that towards Nazi Germany was regarded extremely negatively in Romania. It was, nevertheless, entirely intentional and reflected not a pro-Soviet sympathy, but a realistic and rational approach (albeit from a self-centered perspective) dictated by the evolution of international relations in the context of the war that was leaving little room for ethical and moral considerations. Aside from this, Halifax nurtured no illusions or sympathies towards the Soviet Union, whose policy he described as “opportunist and realist [...] aimed at deriving the maximum of benefit from the world situation with the minimum of risk and trouble”. He was also, up to a certain point, correct in assessing that Stalin’s main consideration in implementing this policy was his fear of Germany’s military might and that he would do nothing that would disturb the German-Soviet relations. Halifax was, however, prone to absolutize this conclusion and to underestimate the strength of the will of the Soviet dictator to promote his policy and agenda, even when that meant, cautiously and in a calculated manner, antagonizing Hitler. Based on this considerations, and displaying a remarkable foresight, Halifax drew, in early September 1940, the correct conclusion that any “radical improvement” in the British-Soviet relations was extremely improbable, and that, “in any case [minus that of a German attack on the Soviet Union – M.Ț] Stalin has no wish to see a British victory and would only be too glad to take advantage of our difficulties in order to further Soviet interests at our expense in the Middle East and elsewhere”. Moreover, Halifax intuited that even if Germany suffered setbacks in the war, Stalin would continue to support Hitler materially, in order to prolong the hostilities and wreck the maximum amount of havoc he could, until Germany became weak enough to be ripe for Sovietization, in which instance Halifax thought Stalin might opportunistically intervene in the war against Hitler³⁸. From Moscow, Cripps was assessing that Stalin was far from regarding the Germans as being

³⁷ *Halifax to Knatchbull-Hugessen (19/1152/40) of 5 September 1940, F.O. 195/2462, A.N.I.C., f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 2468, r. 303.*

³⁸ *Ibidem.*

victorious in the war, and, for as long as this perception lasted, he believed that Stalin would reject any Soviet-German arrangement in which he would be forced to play a subordinate role; but the British ambassador in Moscow believed that if Germany would appear as likely to emerge victorious in Stalin's calculations, and given the strength of the Soviet Union as perceived by the British, it would have been "not impossible" that the Soviet dictator would prefer a Brest-Litovsk – type of treaty to the possibility of an outright defeat in a one-on-one fight with the Germans; from Moscow, Cripps was quite prophetically pointing out that, even if England proved a "too tough a nut to crack", it could not be altogether excluded that Hitler might gamble attacking the Soviet Union, even though in September 1940 he still seemed anxious to avoid the war on two fronts³⁹. Back in 1940, the equation of the Soviet-German relations, and specifically what it meant for the Balkans and Romania, was marked, even for the British, by so many unknowns, that they were afraid that any attempt to solve that puzzle could have easily descended into a the formulation of an "undigestible multitude of theories"; nevertheless, their understanding of the matter boiled down to a series of rather correct conclusions, such as those formulated by Halifax and outlined above; additionally, the British diplomats saw that whenever it was advantageous for the Soviets, the latter would readily collude with the Germans, and that both the former and the latter were glad to avoid, for the time being, any motives for serious confrontation; the British Ambassador at Moscow, Cripps, shared the rather objective understanding that, from a Soviet perspective, the collusion with Germany was entirely based on "selfish opportunism", while stressing his belief that the Soviet Union was not "any more selfishly opportunist than any other Power at the present moment. It seems to me the attitude of His Majesty's Government might be spoken of in similar terms. The truth is that in the stress of war, which is the most undiluted expression of power politics, every nation engaged or affected must regulate its policy by what is immediately necessary for its own salvation. This is precisely what Russia is doing and started doing a good deal before some others woke up to the necessity"; the Foreign Office diplomats, as well as those working overseas, displayed remarkable acuity in assessing that, notwithstanding these circumstances, both the Germans and the Soviets were fully aware that their true interests were irreconcilable, and that the evolution of their relationship was bound to be marked by this mutual understanding. They also assessed correctly that the fact that the Soviets and Germans colluded, to a certain extent and in order to attain their respective objectives at the expense of Roumania, did not mean that the same format for cooperation could have been reenacted south of the Danube, "because the further matters advanced into the Balkans, the more the latent Russo-German conflict must come to the surface". Cripps and Knatchbull-Hugessen – the British Ambassador in Turkey, both shared the cor-

³⁹ *Idem*, *Cripps to Knatchbull-Hugessen* (10/1264/40) of 26 September 1940.

rect perception, that the Balkans, and specifically the Straits would prove the “point of crystallization of Russo-German enmity”. The British knew, moreover, that the Soviets were very serious about establishing their control over the Turkish Straits, and the British intelligence was able to confirm that Stalin “definitely” rejected Hitler’s bait to abandon the objective of the Straits and to reorient the Soviet drive towards the Persian Gulf; the British believed that this German “temptation” was entirely unattractive for the Soviet Union, since, not only Persia was not in any way Germany’s to offer, but even if the U.S.S.R. reached the Persian Gulf, “she would find a navy outside the Straits of Hormuz just as she would find it outside the Dardanelles”. For such reasons, Knatchbull-Hugessen was correct to anticipate that “the latent Russo-German conflict must almost mechanically come more and more to the surface”, and that the Straits would prove the “ultimate battleground between Russia and Germany [and] the point where the conflict must inevitably come to the surface”. A point of interest resides in the conclusion that this correct understanding of the fundamental aspects of the German-Soviet relations has not changed since the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was announced, remaining pretty much constant throughout roughly a year, being regarded just as plausible in September 1940 as it was in September 1939. In September 1940, the British concluded that there were definite signs that the “honeymoon period of the Russo-German relations is over, but that is a long way off divorce proceedings”. This situation presented, in perspective, an important foreign policy and war-related opportunity for the British, for they anticipated that, when the Soviet-German partnership had inevitably crashed by hitting the Dardanelles stumbling block, they might be able to persuade Stalin that the presence of the British warships in the Marmara Sea was benefitting not only Turkey but also him. This consideration was based on the common geopolitical sense that dictates the understanding that a situation where Germany would be able to check the Soviet Union in both the Baltic and Black Seas, would be “excessively serious for the latter”. For this reason, and because they were aware that many stages would still have to be completed before the Soviet-German conflict over the Straits would materialize, the strategy of the British was to make everything possible to accelerate this tedious process, and to increase the friction between Berlin and Moscow in the Balkans by looking for some advantage which they could offer to the Soviets in the Black Sea, and which would bring the U.S.S.R. on the same side with Britain and Turkey “upon what is, to her [the U.S.S.R.] now, the most important question of all [ie, the Straits]”. It must be pointed out here, however, that the difficult part in this undertaking was that Britain had nothing of its own it could offer to the Soviet Union, but that, what Stalin coveted, belonged to Turkey, and the initiative to attempt to offer the Soviet Union advantages at the expense of Turkey was a highly risky one which, as Halifax warned his Cabinet colleagues, could have well send Turkey into Germany’s arm, which was the worst-case scenario for in the calculations of the Foreign

Office. However bold this strategy was, the British nevertheless embarked on it because the stakes already seemed to be as high as they could get in that war, and because “undue caution has already proved fatal often enough”⁴⁰.

Halifax was right to allude that the dismemberment of Romania was the price that the country had to pay for Germany’s “friendship”; from the German perspective, imposing this sacrifice to Romania was an essential element in their strategy of paving the way to their control of the Balkan Peninsula by “pacifying” it first. This is, of course, true first and foremost about the cession of Northern Transylvania and Southern Dobrogea, while the matter of Eastern Moldova (Bessarabia) and Northern Bukovina belonged, from the German perspective, to an altogether different picture. The Vienna Diktat and the Craiova Treaty, concluded under the invisible but omnipresent “good offices” of Germany, constituted together an important victory for the German foreign policy, and a defeat for the Soviet and British diplomacies, as, through this settlement, not only Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary became essentially vassals of Germany, but the dismemberment of Romania also considerably weakened the Greek and Yugoslav positions. This defeat was fully acknowledged by Churchill in the British Parliament a few days before the Vienna settlement was reached, as the British Prime Minister lamented that before the war he had suggested the Foreign Office send a special British envoy to the Balkans, who would have had his quarters at Sofia, and the special objective of promoting Balkan unity. “One of his aims would have been to persuade Rumania, in return for the guarantee which we had given her, to make territorial concessions in the Dobrudja to Bulgaria. If that had been accomplished, a Balkan bloc might have been formed under British and Turkish auspices capable of affording effective resistance to Nazi aggression. What might have been done under British leadership is now being done under Nazi leadership”⁴¹. To be sure, the Chamberlain Cabinet pursued the same strategy, only not as aggressive and determined as Churchill was advocating, and the result of this was that a vague and informal agreement was previously brokered about Southern Dobrogea whereby Romania agreed to settle with Bulgaria at the future peace talks, while Bulgaria undertook not to attack Romania should the latter be forced to fight to fend off Hungarian or Soviet territorial demands⁴². Given how vague these commitments were, and also in the light of the fact that no meaningful progress was made towards the creation of a united and neutral Balkan bloc that would comprise also Bulgaria, it might be safely concluded that

⁴⁰ Idem, *Knatchbull-Hugessen to Rendel*, 10/1088/40, of 16 September 1940, FO 195/2462; Idem, *Cripps to Knatchbull-Hugessen* (10/1264/40) of 26 September 1940, FO 195/2462.

⁴¹ *Churchill’s speech in the House of Commons of 20 July 1940*, War Situation. HC Deb 20 August 1940, vol 364, cc 1132-274: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1940/aug/20/war-situation>, retrieved on 30.04.2021.

⁴² *Rendel to Foreign Office*, no. 339 of 29 June 1940, A.N.I.C., f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 2468, r. 303; Idem, *Knatchbull-Hugessen to Halifax*, no. 127 (10/259/40) of 1 March 1940; Idem, *Rendel to Knatchbull-Hugessen*, 10/215/40 of 20 February 1940.

Churchill was correct to blame the British diplomatic defeat in the Balkans on the previous cabinet.

In a speech given to the House of Lords, Halifax announced that Britain welcomed and supported the solution negotiated by Romania and Bulgaria with regard to the Southern Dobrogea dispute, based on the consideration stated by him that the British Government was not “rigidly” opposed to the modification of the status quo, but that it welcomed such an alteration provided that it was just, equitable and reached through negotiations and conventions conducted freely and peacefully, without constraint and aggression, between the stakeholders; for the same reasons, he announced that the British Government was rejecting and would not recognize the settlement reached at Vienna concerning Transylvania, a settlement that in London was regarded as a result of a diktat imposed by the Axis upon Romania through constraint⁴³. Halifax went on to declare, on the same occasion, that Britain would not recognize the territorial changes produced during the war unless such changes were accepted entirely freely by all interested parties. This statement was rather political and perhaps more of a piece of British propaganda, and certainly not a genuine representation of the British policy, for, on one hand, with all the stated British support for peaceful settlements of territorial disputes, Halifax has not hesitated to encourage the Bulgarians in mid-July, in a veiled but transparent enough manner, to resort to military means to annex southern Dobrogea⁴⁴; on the other hand, Britain’s future attitude towards the fate of Bessarabia would prove the Halifax’s emphatic statement of the British refusal to recognize annexations of the territories imposed under military threats could be amended when the British interests required it. However, concerning this, one must emphasize another circumstance to present a fuller picture of the matter, namely that, when Halifax advised Bulgaria to take action against Romania, the latter was already promoting a hostile policy towards Britain, and when, later on, London decided to recognize as legitimate the Soviet occupation of Bessarabia, Britain was in a state of war with Romania.

⁴³ Florescu to R.M.F.A., no. 972 (R 55696) of 7 September 1940, A.M.A.E.R., f.7 1/Anglia, v. 14, f. 113-114; this despatch contains a translation of the fragments of Halifax’s speech concerning Romania; *War Cabinet Conclusions* 241 (40) of 4 September 1940, T.N.A., CAB 65/9 Original Reference (40) 239-(40) 280, 1940 2 Sep-30 Oct, f. 16.

⁴⁴ Halifax to Rendel, no. 264 of 17 July 1940, (FO 2468/303), A.N.I.C., f. Mcf. Anglia, i. 3494, r. 283.