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## THE MOLOTOV-RIBBENTROP PACT AND THE BRITISH SECURITY GUARANTEES FOR ROMANIA (SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 1939)

PACTUL MOLOTOV-RIBBENTROP ȘI GARANȚIILE DE SECURITATE  
BRITANICE OFERITE ROMÂNIEI. (SEPTEMBRIE-OCTOMBRIE 1939)

Acest studiu descrie evoluția aspectelor politice și diplomatice ale relațiilor româno-britanice din primele două luni ale celui de-al Doilea Război Mondial. Această evoluție este analizată pornind de la impactul pe care Pactul Ribbentrop-Molotov și izbucnirea războiului l-au avut asupra sa. Studiul se concentrează asupra unei perioade scurte de timp, evidențind și explicând modul în care considerentele strategice britanice, dictate de scopul de a înfrînge Germania și influențate decisiv de intrarea sovietică în război, au determinat politica Londrei față de România și actualizarea atitudinii britanice față de garanțiile de securitate oferite anterior. Astfel focalizat, studiul presupune familiarizarea prealabilă a cititorilor, cel puțin în termeni generali, dar corecți, cu o serie de alte circumstanțe, evenimente și procese (cum ar fi circumstanțele în care britanicii au oferit României garanțiile de securitate din 13 aprilie, relațiile României cu Polonia din perspectivă britanică, atitudinea britanică față de revizionismul maghiar și bulgar, politica britanică față de problema petrolului românesc, relațiile turco-britanice, negocierile trilaterale turco-franco-britanice din vara și toamna anului 1939, politica externă a României în general și relațiile româno-germane și sovieto-române în special, etc) care au avut o influență directă sau indirectă asupra problemei analizate.

**Cuvinte cheie:** Marea Britanie, Basarabia, România interbelică, garanții de securitate.

The immediate consequences of the signing of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact were regarded by Romanian diplomats in London as „incalculable”, but their reports to the Romanian Ministry for Foreign Affairs (R.M.F.A.) reflected the conviction that Stalin’s move did not change Britain’s decision to militarily oppose Nazi aggression<sup>1</sup>; R. Hoare<sup>2</sup> also assured Gafencu that England’s intention to decla-

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<sup>1</sup> *Florescu to R.M.F.A., no. 1057 of 22 August 1939*, f. 368-369 in A.M.A.E.R., fund 71/Anglia, v. 10; at that time, Radu Florescu was Counselor at the Romanian Legation in London.

<sup>2</sup> Reginald Hoare served as Britain’s Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Romania between 1935 and 1941.

re war on Germany if it attacked Poland was not affected by the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and that public opinion and the British parliament were unanimous in supporting the Cabinet's approach<sup>3</sup>; among other things, we might add here that the fact that England renewed its commitment to Poland and even strengthened it by signing a Treaty of Mutual Assistance on 25 August 1939 demonstrates the unfoundedness of biased insinuations or interpretations questioning the seriousness of British intention to oppose the Nazi aggression through military means. It seems that those who were in fact willing to strike a deal with the Nazis did so using such insinuations as a pretext (based on the «The thief shouts „Catch the thief!” louder than everyone else» principle), and the Romanian Legation in London was reporting back home the fact that British official circles appreciated the Soviet step as a desire to „let the capitalist countries go to war while Russia secures an expectative position in Europe”<sup>4</sup>; on September 7, 1939, Stalin confirmed the correctness of this assumption in a meeting attended by members of the Comintern and the Politburo<sup>5</sup>. Regarding the viability, in the aftermath of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, of the security guarantees offered by Britain to Romania on 13 April, Alexandru Crețianu<sup>6</sup> was expressing undue optimism when he concluded that despite some „perplexities about England's attitude toward Hungary's territorial claims, it must be emphasized that both the text and the spirit of the Franco-English guarantee leave no doubt as to guaranteeing our territorial integrity”<sup>7</sup>.

The Romanian Minister in London, V. Tilea reported to R.M.F.A. the fact that diplomats accredited in the British capital circulated concerning information about the impact that the Soviet-Nazi agreement would have on Bessarabia and Transylvania<sup>8</sup>. Shortly after the conclusion of the Soviet-Nazi pact, Halifax personally conveyed to Tilea his opinion that there was a possibility that the agreement would involve a division of Poland, but also that, as England's position was determined, the fate of peace or war was entirely in the hands of Germany; Tilea, for his part, assured Halifax that although the Soviet-Nazi agreement had greatly complicated Romania's position, its foreign policy remained unchanged. Tilea also conveyed to Gafencu – the Romanian Foreign Minister, his view that the agreement between Hitler and Stalin proved that Germany could not be relied upon in the effort to resist Soviet revisionism (which was a fair assessment) and that, for such end, Romania could only rely on British support (a rather wishful thinking based on the misunderstanding of the situation)<sup>9</sup>. After the conclusion of the pact, the British ambassador to Moscow, Seeds, famously accused

<sup>3</sup> Hoare to Gafencu, 23 August 1939 in A.M.A.E.R., fund 71/Anglia, v. 7, f. 156.

<sup>4</sup> Florescu to R.M.F.A., no. 1058 of 23 August 1939, in A.M.A.E.R., fund 71/Anglia, v. 10, f. 370.

<sup>5</sup> Ivo Banac, *Diary of Georgi Dimitrov*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, pp. 115–116.

<sup>6</sup> Alexandru Crețianu was Secretary General at the Romanian M.F.A.

<sup>7</sup> Al. Crețianu, *Securitatea României în cadrul angajamentelor internaționale, 25 August 1939* in A.M.A.E.R., Fund 71/România, vol. 7, f. 152.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, *Tilea to R.M.F.A., no. 1094 of 2 September 1939*.

<sup>9</sup> *Tilea to R.M.F.A., no. 1070 of 26 August 1939* in A.M.A.E.R., fund 71/Anglia, v. 10, f. 376-380.

the Soviet government of bad faith. Yet the Cabinet, faithful to its characteristic consistent, calm, and rational manner, remained fully aware of the fact that in the eventuality in which Britain became engaged in conflict with Germany, it had absolutely nothing to gain by adopting a hostile attitude towards the U.S.S.R.. This is precisely why Tilea informed the R.M.F.A. that the British authorities were asking the English press „to write with care and tact on the topic of the future Soviet foreign policy”, and that, for the same reasons, a reserved tone was also imposed upon the public discourse on Italy<sup>10</sup>.

Regarding the attitude on the eve of the war adopted by Romania towards Poland, Tilea informed the Foreign Office of the fact that it will be one of benevolent neutrality, while also making gratuitous political or propagandistic statements, such as that „...of great importance for the whole of Europe is for Romania to be strengthened and emerge powerful at the end of the war, in order to be able to save, as in 1919, the whole of Europe from Bolshevism”<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, and this highlights clearly the essence of the so-called „equilibrium policy” pursued by Carol II, the King of Romania, the latter charged Gigurtu<sup>12</sup> to travel to Germany to meet with Goring on September 9 to convey him „his word that the declaration of neutrality was only a step towards an alliance with Germany”<sup>13</sup>.

The outbreak of hostilities brought the issue of Romanian oil to the forefront of the British government’s attention. The economic and trade aspects of the Romanian-British relations are not the subject of this paper, yet the oil matter, in the context of the British blockade of Germany, had such a prominent weight in the general equation of the Romanian-British relations, that we must assume it to be known, at least in general terms, by the readers.

The outbreak of war accelerated Britain’s policy of diplomatic pressure on Romania to determine the latter’s alignment with the objectives of the British strategy, despite Bucharest’s official declaration of neutrality of September 6. During the timeframe analyzed in this paper, ie the first two months of the war, the British policy towards Romania followed the course assumed in the summer of 1939. In the framework of this policy, and from a British-assumed perspective, Romania had to reach comprehensive agreements with Hungary<sup>14</sup> and Bulgaria to prevent the latter two from aligning with Germany’s foreign policy that,

<sup>10</sup> Tilea to R.M.F.A., no. 1111 of 5 September 1939 in A.M.A.E.R., fund 71/Anglia, v. 10bis, f. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Idem, Tilea to R.M.F.A., no. 1078 of 26 August 1939, f. 392-394.

<sup>12</sup> Romanian pro-German politician and Prime Minister in July-September 1940.

<sup>13</sup> Record of the Conversation between Ribbentrop, Gigurtu and Manoilescu on 26 July, at Fuschl, in *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, v. 13, p. 301.

<sup>14</sup> In fact, since June 1939, Hungarian diplomats in London have been working to change Britain’s attitude towards Hungarian territorial claims in Transylvania, alleging that the already issued British security guarantees to Romania have indirectly contributed to the intensification of the persecution of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania and that, in this situation, Hungary could no longer contemplate an exclusively peaceful solution to its territorial claims: *Halifax to O’Malley*, no. 32 of 15 iunie 1939, in DBFP, third series, vol. VI, 1939, London, 1953, p. 77-

to that end, fueled their revisionist hopes. The conclusion of such agreements was regarded by the British as a key step necessary to be taken in order to reach their main foreign policy goal in south-eastern Europe: the establishment of a bloc of allied neutral states acting as a bulwark against German expansion in the Balkans. However, and the British knew this, such agreements could only be reached on the basis of Romanian territorial concessions in Dobrogea and Transylvania. From the first days of the conflict, Alexander Cadogan (the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs) asked Tilea about the actions taken by Romania in order to reach an agreement with Hungary, but received only an evasive answer<sup>15</sup>, while at Sofia, the British Minister George Rendel explained to the Bulgarians the reasons for Britain's entry into the war through statements conveyed in such terms that were interpreted by Romanian diplomats as clearly encouraging Bulgarian revisionism<sup>16</sup>. The Romanians were guessing correctly, up to a certain point, what was the situation in terms of actual British intentions. Given that Germany, by occupying the western half of Poland, reached the northern border of Romania, Rendel was of the opinion that that would have been enough to force Romania, through the pressure exerted jointly with Hungary and Bulgaria (by virtue of the revisionist claims of these states), to enter into the political sphere of influence of the Reich. In order to avoid the «vast» consequences of Germany's capture of Romania's potential, Rendel suggested to Halifax that

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78; Halifax informed Gafencu, through the British Legation in Bucharest, about the content of this effort. Although the British government refused to express its view on the veracity of such allegations, still, in connection with the deterioration of the security climate in Europe, Halifax expressed concern regarding what he considered a dangerous situation determined by the deterioration of the Romanian-Hungarian relations, and asked the Romanian government to avoid situations which would further strain the aforementioned relations: Idem, *Halifax to Le Rougetel*, no. 298 of 8 August 1939, p. 629-631; more interesting seems to be what the British government had to say about the Hungarian claims: Halifax told Gafencu that the British government intended to let the Hungarians know that it „had no wish to close their mind to the existence of this issue or to the importance that the Hungarian government attach to it” expressing the view that the matter could be resolved by peaceful negotiations in a calm atmosphere, but that the existing situation excluded, for the time being, such prerequisites: Idem, *Halifax to Le Rougetel*, no. 299 of 8 August 1939, p. 631-632. Gafencu was unpleasantly surprised by the British approach: Idem, *Le Rougetel to Halifax*, no. 288 of 10 August 1939, p. 641-642. The Romanian prime minister, Armand Călinescu was infuriated by the British approach, which he considered to be putting him, who „dammed the totalitarian tendencies in Romania” and was „basing the country's independence policy on the foundation of friendship with France and England”, in an impossible situation. Călinescu warned the British that their attitude was undermining his position, as the Romanian public opinion was against any territorial cession and would have regarded with hostility the British approach if it gained knowledge of it: Idem, *Le Rougetel to Halifax*, no. 292 of 11 August 1939, p. 660-661. Accordingly, Halifax promised not to make any reference to Hungarian territorial claims in British correspondence with Hungarian diplomats: Idem, *Halifax to Le Rougetel*, no. 309 of 14 August 1939, p. 687.

<sup>15</sup> Tilea to R.M.F.A., no. 1112 of 5 September 1939 in A.M.A.E.R., Fund 71/Anglia, v. 10bis, f. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Eugen Filloti (Minister of Romania in Sofia) to R.M.F.A., no. 2482 of 8 September 1939. Anexă: Declarațiile ministrului Angliei la Sofia in A.M.A.E.R., Fund 71/Anglia, v. 8, f. 288-291.

the United Kingdom should take the initiative and prevent such an encirclement of Romania by mediating a Romanian-Bulgarian political agreement based on the cession of the southern part of Dobrogea (the «Quadrilateral»). However, the Romanians, unlike the British, were convinced, or at least seemed convinced, that Bulgaria had already and irreversibly entered the orbit of Germany and that, therefore, any attempts at Romanian-Bulgarian mediation were in fact futile; the British diplomats, who did not regard this thesis as accurate, were aware of the Romanians' refusal to discuss the matter and sensed that too much insistence on their part could have thrown Romania into the arms of Germany. Yet, on the other hand, they believed they needed to make to Romania clear the point that should the latter align itself with Hitler, such a desperate act would have still not been enough to secure its possession of the Quadrilateral, which the Germans would have had to use in any scenario as the main bargaining chip in their interaction with Bulgaria. Based on this rationale, the British diplomats in Sofia believed that the only choice Romania had was between bad and worse, that is, either to «offer» Bulgaria the Quadrilateral as soon as possible as proof of goodwill, or to postpone the inevitable cession until the Bulgarian threat materialized in the form of an ultimatum supported by the Germans, in which case the credit for this victory of the Bulgarians would have belonged to Hitler<sup>17</sup>. By mid-September, the British Cabinet agreed in principle with the above reasoning and authorized R. Hoare to convey to the Romanian government that it attached great importance to the strategic position of Bulgaria, considered in London to be the „key” of the Balkans, and on whose goodwill depended also to a large extent the aid that Romania could hope to receive from Turkey. However, being aware of the risk that such an approach entailed for the Romanian-British relations that could have been, by taking such an initiative, „irreparably affected at that extremely critical moment”, Halifax instructed Hoare not to make such representations unless in favorable chosen circumstances and in a form and language suitable to the sensitivity of the matter<sup>18</sup>. Hoare undertook to wait for the right opportunity in this regard but warned his superiors that territorial issues were viewed in Romania in a „desperately delicate” manner<sup>19</sup>. The Romanian and British diplomatic correspondence from September shows the persistent concern for Turkey's stance in relation to its obligations to Romania within the framework of the Balkan Entente, in relation to ongoing trilateral negotiations between Turkey, Britain and France, but also in relation to the support that the British and the French needed to obtain from the Turks with a view to upholding the guarantees offered to Romania on 13 April. One particularly problematic aspect of the matter is related to the fact that in May-June, in the context of the signing of the Anglo-Turkish provisional secu-

<sup>17</sup> *George Rendel to Foreign Office, no. 176 of 12 September 1939*, in A.N.I.C., fund Microfilme Anglia, inventory 3493, roll 282.

<sup>18</sup> *Idem, Foreign Office to Hoare, no. 385 of 14 September 1939*.

<sup>19</sup> *Idem, Hoare to Foreign Office, R. 7583/6499/57 of 15 September 1939*.

rity agreement, Romania opposed the British initiative of determining Turkey to subscribe, in precise terms, to Franco-British guarantees issued to Romania on April 13. This opposition was offered by the Romanians based on the rationale that such a step would have undermined the neutrality of the Balkan Entente in the eyes of Germany by the fact that a member of this alliance, ie Turkey, was committing to join the British in the event of a conflict in the Balkans. The problem was further complicated by the U.S.S.R.'s entry into World War II, as the September 17 Soviet attack on Poland indicated that aggression against Romania could come not just from the Nazis, but also from the Soviets. The Turkish Ambassador in London, Aras, had informed Halifax already since June that Turkey could not, by virtue of its agreements with the U.S.S.R., pledge to assist Romania against Soviet Russia. Even more significant for our topic is that, on that occasion, Halifax agreed with Aras, and even suggested him the possibility of an exchange of notes excluding Russia from the ranks of potential aggressors targeted by security guarantees, so that the Soviets would not oppose Turkey subscribing to these security guarantees offered by the French and British to Romania<sup>20</sup>. This makes it clear that even as early as June 1939, the British decision-makers of the highest level were clearly considering a scenario in which they would choose not to uphold their security guarantees to Romania should the latter be threatened by the U.S.S.R., as such a step would have simply been outside the scope of their general European policy<sup>21, 22</sup>. At the same time, the Balkan Pact Treaty of February 9, 1934, was a mutual security guarantee concerning strictly the Balkan borders of these states, and its jurisdiction was strictly defined as the Balkan Peninsula. Even if one of the signatories was attacked by a non-Balkan power, the Treaty

<sup>20</sup> *Halifax to Sir H. Knatchbull-Hugessen, no. 231 of 15 iunie 1939 in DBFP, third series, vol. VI, 1939, London, 1953, p. 82-83.* In June 1939, the Soviets supported the idea of Turkey joining the Anglo-French guarantees offered to Romania against Germany: Onur Isci, *Russophobic neutrality: Turkish diplomacy, 1936-1945*, A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Georgetown University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History, Washington, 2014, p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> Aras was referring to the 1925 Turkish-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality, which provided that neither of the signatories could enter into any „combination” with any of the other’s neighbors without his prior consent.

<sup>22</sup> There are, nevertheless, other, internal British documents signed by Halifax and in which the State Secretary for Foreign Affairs expresses the opinion that the guarantees covered also Romania’s eastern border against a potential Soviet attack: *Halifax to P. Lorraine (Ambasadaorul britanic la Roma), no. 274 of 21 iunie 1939, DBFP, third series, v. VI, London, 1953, p. 127.* The existence of such contradictory documents issued by the same source and at about the same time proves just how complicated the matter was in itself. It also serves as testimony to the fact that such documents should never be unequivocally regarded as „documentary evidence” of the veracity of intentions and dispositions. Thus, the example of this obvious contradiction shows cases why such primary sources should never be looked at outside the context of general and particular circumstances in which they were issued. In our particular case, it is worth looking into who were those to whom these dispatches containing such contradictory considerations were being sent.



was envisaged to be activated only if another Balkan state joined that attack, and only against that Balkan aggressor; moreover, according to the R.M.F.A., Turkey has signed the Balkan Pact Treaty under the secret reservation that Turkey “will in no case admit to being considered engaged in taking part in any acts directed against the U.S.S.R.”<sup>23</sup>.

The circumstances of the outbreak of the war forced also an important change in the British strategy towards Romania approved by the Chiefs of Staff Committee of the British Imperial Defense Committee on June 2, 1939, and which was that in the event of a conflict, the British government should not „under any circumstances want Romania to remain neutral”<sup>24</sup>. In the first days after the outbreak of war, the Chiefs of Staff Committee revised its position, opposing the French pressure<sup>25</sup> directed towards an immediate Romanian involvement in the war on the side of the Allies. The revision was based on the grounds that such a move, due to Romania’s geographical location and limited capabilities, was perceived as having little practical value and potentially entailing the adverse effect of the probable entry of Hungary and Bulgaria into the war on the side of Germany, while the U.S.S.R. could have not been expected to miss such an opportunity to annex Bessarabia. At the same time, the British military was of the opinion that neutral, Romania retained the possibility to limit the access of the Nazis to its natural resources, while if it had been occupied, the Germans would have seized all the Romanian wheat and the oil wells, which even if destroyed, could have been rebuilt in a matter of weeks. Consequently, the Chiefs of Staff Committee recommended postponing Romania’s entry into the war for when it could have been properly supported, and its involvement could have had a direct influence on the outcome of the conflict<sup>26</sup>. The Foreign Office diplomats agreed with the opinion of top British soldiers, being also aware of the fact that the Poles told the Romanians that they would not ask for military aid if Hungary remained neutral and that they, in their turn, would not get involved in a potential Romanian-Hungarian conflict unless Germany supported the Hungarians<sup>27</sup>. The British government, which was, moreover, worried about the potential consequences of

<sup>23</sup> Al. Crețianu, *Securitatea României în cadrul angajamentelor internaționale, 25 August 1939* in A.M.A.E.R., Fund 71/România, vol. 7, f. 146-148.

<sup>24</sup> *Position of Romania in Time of War. Memorandum for official submission to the C.I.D. (Committee for Imperial Defence)*, annexed to Philip Nichols (*Șef al departamentului Sud of cadrul Foreign Office*) către Ingram, nr R.6101.87/G of 25 iulie 1939, in A.N.I.C., fund Microfilme Anglia, inventory 3494, roll 281.

<sup>25</sup> Pressure was also exerted through the French ambassador in Bucharest on R. Hoare to determine him to join France’s efforts to persuade the Romanian government to go to war, an initiative that surprised the Foreign Office: *Philip Nichols Maiorul Cornwall-Jones, no. R6811/G of 27 August 1939* in T.N.A. CAB 66/1 *Original Reference 1 (39)-50 (39)*, 1939 3 Sep-25 Sep, f. 29-31.

<sup>26</sup> *Idem, War Cabinet. Chiefs of Staff Committee. Position of Roumania. Report C.O.S. (39)5 by C. I. N. Newall, Dudley Pound, E. Ironside, 4 sept. 1939*, f. 25-28.

<sup>27</sup> *Idem, Hoare to Foreign Office, no. 328 of 26 August 1939 and Hoare to Foreign Office, no. 317 of 24 August 1939*, f. 32-34.

Romania's entry into the war on Italian policy, was so keen as to avoid Romania's involvement in the war, that it went as far as to exact from the French government the promise to avoid putting any pressure in this regard upon the Romanians without coordinating such actions with them first<sup>28</sup>. If, from a legal standpoint, Romania did not owe Poland any support in the wake of the German attack<sup>29</sup>, then the Soviet attack on September 17 put Romania in a position where it had to fulfill its legal obligation as an ally. However, Carol's government decided not to do so, and Tilea justified this decision in London by referring to the „special situation” of Romania, which, if it had fulfilled its obligations, would have probably been forced to engage on two fronts against both Germany and Soviet Russia, with Hungary and Bulgaria waiting for the right time to take action. Tilea found complete understanding at the Foreign Office, which understanding must be linked to the fact that the British, whose goal - that guided as a cardinal point their entire foreign policy since September 3 - was the defeat of Nazi Germany, did not intend to engage in any conflict with the U.S.S.R. to help Poland or Romania. Yet reflecting the same British approach was also the news that Tilea sent to Gafencu on September 17 informing him that “the unilateral guarantee is not yet effective in the East”<sup>30</sup>. At the same time, even after the Soviet intervention, the Chiefs of Staff Committee under the War Cabinet continued to regard Germany as the primary danger to Romania and believed that the latter would be the former's next victim. According to the Committee's reports, in such a scenario Britain would not have been able to provide immediate assistance to Romania, ie to immediately implement the provisions of the April 13 guarantee, but would have had to limit its response at continuing to mount economic pressure upon Germany, as well as at consolidating its military capabilities in the West until it had become able to take effective offensive action against Germany<sup>31</sup>. Moreover, allied military experts recommended that Romania should not be supplied with spare war material, as even armed, Romania could have been „easily” defeated and conquered by Germany, in which case this equipment would have fallen into the hands of the Nazis. On the other hand, they were of the opinion that armed

<sup>28</sup> Idem, *Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 12 September 1939*, W.P. (39) 25, f. 207.

<sup>29</sup> Due to their alliance being focused exclusively on the eastern flank; in March-April 1939, when Hitler's next most likely target seemed to be Romania, the Poles employed this very rationale to oppose the British initiative of transforming the Polish-Romanian mutual defense agreement into an *erga omnes* alliance: *Appendix V. Instructions to the British Military Mission to Moscow. Staff conversations with Russia. Memorandum for the guidance of the U.K. Delegation in DBFP*, third series, vol. VI, 1939, London, 1953, p. 772; *Securitatea României în cadrul angajamentelor internaționale, 25 August 1939* in A.M.A.E.R., Fund 71/România, vol. 7, f. 144-145.

<sup>30</sup> *Tilea to R.M.F.A., no. 1163 of 17 September 1939* in A.M.A.E.R., fund 71/Anglia, v. 10bis, f. 81-82.

<sup>31</sup> *War Cabinet. Chiefs of Staff Committee. The possible course of the war: appreciation 18 September 1939. Report, C.O.S. 39 (35), T.N.A. War Cabinet Memoranda W.P. (39) 1 – W.P. (39) 50*, vol. I, f. 280-281.



Turkey could have successfully resisted Hitler and, also due to its strategic position, considered it to be the „key” to the security of the British positions in the Near and the Middle East and therefore recommended „maximum” support being provided to that country<sup>32</sup>.

Although Halifax had warned the British government since September 12 about the possibility of an attack against Poland from the East<sup>33</sup>, opinions were divided within British government officials and parliamentarians with regard to the Soviet motives behind this action, as well as with regard to what the British government’s reaction should have amounted to. Chamberlain, for instance, labeled the move as „cynical”<sup>34</sup>, but the British were not sure that it was carried out in close cooperation with the Nazis, with whom the Soviets have, in fact, coordinated as early as September 10 even the official pretext for their attack upon Poland, ie the “need” to protect the Ukrainians and Belarusians „threatened” by Germany<sup>35</sup>. For instance, the British ambassador in Moscow was of the wrong opinion that the Soviet action surprised the Germans<sup>36</sup>. On the other hand, Churchill can be said to have been enthusiastic about the news of the Soviet invasion and accepted (or, rather, pretended to accept) the arguments of the U.R.S.S. at face value<sup>37</sup>, which demonstrates (once again) how easy it is for greatest statesmen to transition from loyalty to cynicism, when the interest dictates it. The British government’s official statement of 19 September 1939 rejected the pretext invoked by the Soviets for the invasion and vowed that the Soviet aggression «could not change the determination of the British government, supported by the whole country, to fulfill its obligations to Poland and to continue the war until its goals are achieved»<sup>38</sup>; however, these goals were only those we briefly outlined above and amounted to the defeat of Germany. This was also pointed out by Halifax to the Polish ambassador in London, Raczynski, who was also shown that, since the secret protocol of the Polish-British Mutual Assistance Agreement was stipulated to be automatically activated only in the case of a German attack, the British Cabinet did not consider itself compelled to declare war

<sup>32</sup> Allied Permanent Military Representatives, Gwydyr House, 28 September 1939, *Military Strategy to be adopted in the Near East including the Balkans*, in T.N.A., *Memoranda W.P (39) 51 – W.P. (39) 100*, v.2, f. 122, 129.

<sup>33</sup> Keith Sword, *British Reaction to the Soviet Occupation of Eastern Poland in September 1939* in *The Slavonic and East European Review* Vol. 69, No. 1 (Jan., 1991), p. 84.

<sup>34</sup> Chamberlain’s 20 September speech in the House of Commons, in HC Deb 20 September 1939 vol 351 cc975-1024, available at [https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1939/sep/20/war-situation#S5CV0351P0\\_19390920\\_HOC\\_309](https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1939/sep/20/war-situation#S5CV0351P0_19390920_HOC_309), retrieved on 9 April 2020.

<sup>35</sup> M. Țurcanu, *O cronică a relațiilor româno-germane (aprilie 1939 – iunie 1941)*, in *Revista de istorie a Moldovei*, nr. 2 (110), Chișinău, 2017, p. 120.

<sup>36</sup> Keith Sword, *British Reaction to the Soviet Occupation of Eastern Poland in September 1939* in *The Slavonic and East European Review* Vol. 69, No. 1 (Jan., 1991), p. 86.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Kitchen, *Winston Churchill and the Soviet Union during the Second World War* in *The Historical Journal*, vol. 30, No. 2 (Jun., 1987), p. 415.

<sup>38</sup> The Romanian version of this statement is to be found in A.M.A.E.R., Fund 71/Anglia, v. 8, f. 293.

upon the U.S.S.R.<sup>39</sup>. From the British point of view, the situation created through the Soviet aggression against Poland generated a number of potential opportunities. Among these was counted the new circumstance defined by the fact that the buffer zone between the two totalitarian regimes had disappeared and the British were expecting, as a result, that the tension between them would increase (as it would indeed happen), and that the Germans would thus be forced to keep a large number of divisions in the East. The British perceived also the risks entailed by this situation: they worried that if they treated U.S.S.R. on par with the Reich, they would thereby force the conclusion of a *de jure* Soviet-Nazi alliance, with the potentially fatal consequence that the combination of the technological, industrial, military, and material and human resources potential of the two totalitarian regimes could have for the fate of the Western democracies. However, and this was also due to the fact that the public was not aware of the secret protocol signed by Poland and Britain, the international public opinion was critical of London's decision not to aid Poland against the Soviet aggression. For instance, in the US, that decision was regarded by many as proof that London was waging an imperialist war in which it pursued selfish aims<sup>40</sup>. Very soon, on September 28, the Soviets signed the Boundary and Friendship Treaty with the Nazis, and, in a joint statement, Molotov and Ribbentrop called on France and England to end the war against Germany, threatening to otherwise offer a coordinated German-Soviet response<sup>41</sup>; After this step, following which the British could no longer justify in their own eyes the Soviet aggression as being undertaken on «strategic grounds», they sought their way out of this predicament by entirely accepting the justification invoked by Soviets for attacking Poland - ie the defend the Ukrainians and the Belarusians. The exchanges of populations and territories undertaken by the Nazis and the Soviets on the occasion of the signing of the aforementioned treaty were chosen by the British as indirect proof of the veracity of that justification<sup>42</sup>. On the other hand, the Soviets were not inflexible in their relations with the British at that point. Maisky hastened to restore the prestige of the Soviet state marred by the agreement with the Nazis and assured the British officials that the U.S.S.R. did not want to see Nazi Germany emerge victorious as that would have meant the undisputed hegemony of that „capitalist” power over Europe from the Atlantic to the shores of the Black Sea. He, moreover, suggested that it would have been possible, in those circumstances, for Britain and the U.S.S.R. to sign a new Soviet-British trade agreement, but also to identify a form of cooperation based on the shared goal of containing the Nazi expansion in the Balkans<sup>43</sup>. As

<sup>39</sup> Sword, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 91.

<sup>41</sup> Țurcanu, *O cronică*., p. 121.

<sup>42</sup> Sword, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>43</sup> M. Carley, „A Situation of Delicacy and Danger”: *Anglo-Soviet Relations, August 1939-March 1940*, in *Contemporary European History*, vol. 8, No. 2 (Jul., 1999), p. 180-181.

for Romania and its relations with England, the Soviet invasion of Poland, which decided the fate of that country unexpectedly quickly, exempted it from the duty to provide a transit corridor (through Constanța and on its territory) for the intended Franco-British aid; but the manner in which the Romanian authorities interned the Polish government aroused the indignation of the British government, Halifax being of the opinion that this action produced a „deplorable” impression as it was taken under German pressure and that Romania’s attitude was „all the more deplorable as it had received guarantees against German aggression”<sup>44</sup>.

The nature of the duplicitous attitude of the British cabinet towards the Soviet invasion of Poland should be understood and noted due to essential similarities between the latter’s international situation and that of Romania, and especially from the perspective of their relationship with Great Britain. Romania, whose security relations with Britain were still based on the unilateral security guarantees of April 13, did not have a strictly defining agreement defining German aggression as its object, agreement that could have been invoked by the British to justify the discrimination they made between Soviet and Nazi aggression, but this did not mean that, with respect to the newly emerging Soviet threat, London could not get rid of its obligations to Romania just as easily. Above have been highlighted the early signs of the shaping of this attitude, and in the following, it will be seen precisely how it played out. Thus, even though in June 1939 Halifax was stating that the security guarantee granted to Romania was valid in the event of any attack from any direction<sup>45</sup>, the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact made the British re-evaluate their attitude towards the possibilities generated by the new configuration of international relations in Eastern Europe. The island press correctly interpreted the Soviet invasion of Poland as evidence of the division of Eastern Europe into spheres of influence, intuiting that this deal would have wide repercussions, including on Bessarabia<sup>46</sup>. The Romanian government has reacted negatively to these observations of the British press concerning the potential consequences of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact for Romania. They were labeled by Gafencu as „biased and likely to unjustifiably alarm our public opinion”; the real problem was, however, that from September 1939 and up to June 1940, the Romanian statesmen were fighting, with all the perseverance that they were capable of, against believing in the imminence of the Soviet danger despite all the contrary signs and the fact that warnings in this regard were coming from all directions<sup>47</sup>, which warnings Carol’s government did not want to take into account, with Gafencu instead choosing to believe „the reassuring explanations

<sup>44</sup> *Minutes of the meeting no. 22 (39) of the British War Cabinet*, in *War Cabinet Conclusions W.M. (39) 1 – W.M. (39) 66*, 3 sept. – oct. 1939, vol. I, Printed for the War Cabinet, November, 1939, p. 175.

<sup>45</sup> *Halifax to P. Loraine (ambasadorul britanic la Roma)*, no. 274 of 21 iunie 1939, DBFP, third series, vol. VI, 1939, London, 1953, p. 127.

<sup>46</sup> “Daily Herald” of 23 September in *A.M.A.E.R.*, Fund 71/Anglia, v. 18, f. 249.

<sup>47</sup> Mihai Țurcanu, *Statele Unite și problema Basarabiei*, București-Brăila, 2019, p. 253

given to us by the various Soviet diplomats<sup>48</sup>, to the detriment of the analysis made by his own diplomats. Thus, towards the end of September, Tilea reported to his superiors from the R.M.F.A. his conclusion that the U.S.S.R. had „resumed” its imperialist policy - this time on a Bolshevik ideological basis, and that he himself was sure that Stalin was pursuing the occupation of „at least” Bessarabia and that, in this sense, the Soviet dictator had secured the support of Germany<sup>49</sup>, but also of Italy, as Italy’s military attaché in London, Colonel Ruggieri, conveyed to the Romanian diplomat that the Soviet-Nazi agreement targeted also Bessarabia, about which Ruggieri was of the opinion that it should have been ceded by Romania. In such a scenario, Ruggieri assured Tilea that Italy would have attempted to influence Hungary and Bulgaria to refrain from action against Bucharest, and warned him that Romania could, otherwise, share the fate of Poland<sup>50</sup>. At the same time, Tilea correctly predicted from London that the moment of the intensification of military activities in the East could be chosen by the Soviets as the most favorable for action against Romania<sup>51</sup>. Halifax was clearly concerned about Bessarabia when he asked the Soviet Ambassador Maisky on September 28 about the Soviet intentions towards Romania, a question to which he received no reply<sup>52</sup>, but the British Secretary of State was aware that, only two days before, Maisky had informed Beneš that “The U.R.S.S. intends to ask Romania for Bessarabia as soon as possible”<sup>53</sup>. It can, however, be added that these demarches were of a general nature and were made for informational purposes, as we know from the diary of his personal secretary, Oliver Harvey, that Halifax was at that determined not to honor the British guarantee in the eventuality of the Soviet attack, even if Romania opposed such an attack militarily (as the provisions of the guarantee required it to do), because „nor can we, in fact help Romania against Russia *even if we would*, as Turkey would not help us against Russia”<sup>54</sup>.

The Romanian government sought, at the end of September, to find out in an unofficial manner whether the guarantees were in any way affected by the new circumstances generated by the Soviet implementation of the secret provisions of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. Tilea took the necessary (but informal) steps,

<sup>48</sup> *Gafencu to Romanian Legation in London, no. 62463 of 5 October 1939, in A.M.A.E.R., Fund 71/Anglia, v. 10bis, f. 199; moreover, Gafencu asked Tilea to reach “insistently” the British news agencies and the British war censorship, in order to prevent the circulation of the news: Gafencu to Romanian Legation in London, no. 65182 of 17 October 1939 in A.M.A.E.R., fund 71/Anglia, v. 18, f. 253, Idem, Tilea to R.M.F.A., no. 1309 of 19 October, f. 254; Idem, Tilea to R.M.F.A., no. 1294 of 18 October, f. 255.*

<sup>49</sup> *Tilea to R.M.F.A., no. 1205 of 26 September 1939 in A.M.A.E.R., Fund 71/Anglia, v. 10bis, f. 140.*

<sup>50</sup> *Idem, Tilea to R.M.F.A., 123 of 28 September 1939, f. 172-174.*

<sup>51</sup> *Idem, Tilea to R.M.F.A., no. 1364 of 10 November 1939, f. 350.*

<sup>52</sup> *Idem, Tilea to R.M.F.A., no. 1212 of 28 September, f. 170-171.*

<sup>53</sup> *Confidential annex to W.M. (39), 28th Conclusions, Minute 8, in T.N.A., CAB 65/3 Original Reference (39) 4-(39) 66 Annexes, 1939 5 Sep-31 Oct, f. 59.*

<sup>54</sup> *The Diplomatic Diaries of Oliver Harvey, 1937-1940, London, 1970, p. 323.*

and Cadogan informed him that the guarantees had been given to Romania at a time when the imminent threat to the Romanian state seemed to come from Nazi Germany and therefore they did not cover Romania's eastern border. He added that Britain could look for ways to help Romania in the case of a Soviet attack, but only if Turkey's concurrence could be secured in this regard (being isolated from Romania, such assistance could have been provided by Britain only through the Turkish Straits)<sup>55</sup>. Tilea's request was discussed at the Sept. 29 Cabinet meeting, at which Halifax asserted that if the U.R.S.S. annexed Bessarabia, Britain would have had no more reason to declare war on it than it did in the case of the annexation of eastern Poland, a logic with which, continued Halifax, the French - who opposed any interpretation of the guarantee other than that directed against Germany - agreed<sup>56</sup> and that this should therefore be the official course of the Allies, while only the right manner for bringing the decision to the notice of the Romanian Government remained to be identified. The matter was discussed by the Cabinet on September 29, with most of its member expressing the opinion that the U.S.S.R., being a „non-European power,” the guarantees were not applicable to the eventuality of its aggression<sup>57</sup> (the form in which they were issued stipulated that they would be activated in case of aggression by a European power). On October 6, 1939, the War Cabinet approved the course proposed by Halifax<sup>58</sup>. Tilea understood correctly the true picture of the situation, reporting to his superiors from the R.M.F.A. that the issue, from the British perspective, amounted not just to the need to ensure the Turkish backing, but rather to the interest that Great Britain had in ensuring the neutrality of the U.S.S.R. in its conflict with Germany<sup>59</sup>. In line with his, on 10 October 1939, Halifax informed Tilea directly that „in the early phase the United Kingdom wanted to avoid complications with Russia at all costs” and that if Romania chose to ask Britain directly (ie, in a formal manner) if its guarantees were applicable in the event of a Soviet

<sup>55</sup> PRO, *Foreign Office: Roumania, British guarantee to Roumania, FO 371/23852*, in D. Funderburk, *Politica Marii Britanii față de România, 1938-1940*, București, 1983, p. 152.

<sup>56</sup> *War Cabinet 31 (39). Conclusions Of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 1 0 Downing Street, S. W. 1, on Friday, September 29, 1939, at 11-30 A.M in T.N.A.*, War Cabinet Conclusions, W.M. (39)1 - W.M. (39) 66, 1939, v.1, f. 170. The Romanian historiography often repeats the groundless assertion that one of the main, although indirect, causes that led to the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia of 28 June 1940 was the fall of France. The implicit rationale is based on the prejudice of France being what is called „a traditional ally” (whatever that means) of Romania, and, due to this, could or would have somehow deterred or prevented the annexation. The quoted source proves that the French themselves were far from sharing such prejudiced views.

<sup>57</sup> Louise Atherton, *Lord Lloyd at the British Council and the Balkan Front, 1937-1940*, in *The International History Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Feb., 1994), p. 39.

<sup>58</sup> *War Cabinet 39 (39), Conclusions of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 1 0 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Friday, October 6, 1939, at 11 - 3 0 A.M.*, in T.N.A., War Cabinet Conclusions, W.M. (39)1 - W.M. (39) 66, 1939, v.1, f. 216-217.

<sup>59</sup> *Tilea to R.M.F.A., no. 1235 of 5 October 1939 in A.M.A.E.R., Fund 71/Anglia, v. 10bis, f. 206.*

attack, then the latter would have „probably” had to give a negative answer<sup>60</sup>; Romanian diplomats, or at least those in London, assessed correctly what the general trend of the evolution of the problem was, and Tilea warned the R.M.F.A. not to force the Foreign Office to define its position in a categorical manner, as the answer would have been negative and it would have simply amounted „to an invitation to Russia to occupy us”<sup>61</sup>.

When analyzing this episode, it is essential not to lose sight of two facts. *The first one* is that the British were absolutely certain at that time that the Turks would not take the step of joining the British had the latter intended to support Romania in the eventuality of a Soviet attack. In fact, as shown above, they have themselves put forward the idea of signing a Turkish-British agreement stipulating the exclusion of such a possibility at the time when the Foreign Office was trying to enlist Ankara’s support for the Anglo-French security guarantees (directed against Germany) to Romania. Thus, it could be concluded without exaggeration that through the answer given by Cadogan to Tilea, the British „washed their hands” in a very diplomatic manner of the obligation assumed through the guarantee issued to Romania and which, whatever may be said, was formulated in a general manner applicable to any threat at any of the borders of Romania. Although the issue remained the main topic of discussion between Romanian and British diplomats for the next couple of months, it was in fact and from a British-assumed perspective, perceived as settled, and the decision through which it was settled was assumed as a matter of governmental policy. Therefore the opinion, widely regarded in the Romanian historiography as a fact, and expressed, for example, by D. Funderburk in the terms that „...under certain circumstances, the United Kingdom was willing to extend the coverage of the guarantee beyond the original German threat” or that Britain “was ready to interpret the guarantee in a broader sense, with applicability in certain circumstances also to the [Romanian] eastern border” seems to have little to no basis in reality<sup>62</sup>. *The second fact* that we must keep in mind in is that the guarantees had an unilateral character because the Romanian government refused in March-April 1939 to engage in any kind of bilateral negotiations with the British and insisted that these guarantees should be offered to them in a categorically unilateral manner. That meant that not only Romania could have no say on the form or content of the guarantee, but also that, since it was the unilateral decision of the British to issue them, the guarantees were also their sole responsibility, and that they could, based on this consideration, also disavow them without breaching any contract, agreement, pact, etc. This was entirely acknowledged by the R.M.F.A., who, answering to an inquiry

<sup>60</sup> *Referat al M.A.S. cu privire la adresa secretă no. 7621/III of 29 October 1939 a Marelui Stat Major al Armatei române cu referință la problema garanțiilor*, in A.M.A.E.R., Fund 71/România, v. 7, f. 288-289.

<sup>61</sup> *Idem, Tilea to R.M.F.A., no. 1274 of 13 October 1939*, f. 247.

<sup>62</sup> Funderburk, *op. cit.*, p. 152-153.



of the General Staff of the Romanian Army with reference to the issue of guarantees, admitted that in March-April, Carol wanted at all costs to avoid having any discussions that “would have engaged the Romanian government in negotiations that could have resulted in commitments for Romania - something which it wished to avoid”. In these circumstances, the R.M.F.A. was of the opinion that Romania could not do much to influence France and England, which were „the sole judges with regard to what those guarantees given to us covered, in terms of their application and duration” and admitted that the Allies were “obviously free at any time to withdraw the guarantee they gave us unilaterally. They may at any time, based on one or another action of Romania, which they would interpret as contrary to their interests, withdraw their guarantee”<sup>63</sup>.

The reason why the British adopted this policy in relation to the Romanian-Soviet dispute over Bessarabia, must be sought exclusively in the fact that the adoption of a different policy would have been in dissonance with the supreme objective of Great Britain (as well as that of France), which was the defeat of Germany. All the secondary objectives and the actions taken in turn to achieve them were obligatorily subordinated to this main goal. Therefore, supporting Romania in the face of the Soviet threat (or, for that matter, Finland, Poland, or the Baltic States), simply did not fit into the logic of the actions the necessity of which was dictated by the imperative of the supreme objective. Gafencu was warned about this by the French ambassador to Bucharest, A. Thierry, when the former asked the latter on September 28, 1939, to clarify France’s position in relation to the guarantees offered to Romania. Thierry frankly stated on that occasion that the Soviet threat „will never divert England and France from the path on which they set out, namely that of fighting to the end, that is, until the final victory against Germany. The hopes of some Romanian pacifists ... namely that given the Russian danger, the western states must reach peace as soon as possible, will never persuade England and France to hurriedly receive a peace from Germany that would strengthen the Reich and weaken the Western Powers”<sup>64</sup>. This is where lie the roots of the main divergence between the position of Romania (but also that of Poland, Finland, etc.) and that of Britain (but also of France, or the USA), which divergence is beginning to take visible shape precisely from this period. Britain, to whom a Soviet threat in 1939-1940 did not seem like a realistic possibility, regarded Germany as the existential danger that needed to be removed and saw no reason to provoke the Soviet animosity and thus lay the foundations of a Soviet-German alliance. On the other hand, Gafencu was of the opinion that «England and France had to fight not one war, but two wars, and that one

<sup>63</sup> *Referat al M.A.S. cu privire la adresa secretă nr. 7621/III din 29 octombrie 1939 a Marelui Stat Major al Armatei române cu referință la problema garanțiilor*, in A.M.A.E.R., Fund 71/România, v. 7, f. 287, 294.

<sup>64</sup> *Referatul lui Gafencu cu privire la intvederea avută cu Ambasadorul Franței, A. Thierry, la 28 September 1939, la M.A.S. in A.M.A.E.R., fund 71/România, v. 7, f. 226-227.*

victory is not enough if it is not followed by a second victory...» and that the two western powers «would not be able to consolidate the European peace on a just basis” if they did not assume against Soviet aggression the same attitude they displayed against the Nazi one. The same thesis was also supported by the American Minister in Bucharest, F.M. Gunther who was of the opinion that Britain’s policy towards the U.S.S.R. proved that facts contradicted London’s rhetoric of describing itself as being engaged in a fight against aggression<sup>65</sup>. A glance at the politico-military map of Europe of that time would be enough to convince us that, depending on the perspective we assume, both rationales can be defended with similarly (if not equally) strong arguments. Each side was right in its own way, or perhaps none of them were; both of these assessments amount to the same conclusion iterated time and again throughout history, namely that being right or wrong in a moral (and therefore also subjective) sense has very little in common with what can or cannot be done objectively. That is not to say that the subjective psychological value of such considerations is negated, but only that succesful politics and policies, especially on the international arena, do not allow themselves to be guided by them.

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<sup>65</sup> *Gunther to the State Secretary, 21 februarie 1940, section I, 740.0011 European War 1939/ 1707, in A.N.I.C., fund Microfilme S.U.A., inventory 1804, roll 662.*