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DOI: https://doi.org/10.59295/DIA.2025.2.09
CZU: 94:327.8(410:498)"1938"
Orcid ID: 0009-0007-5033-127X

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



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Domentii de preocupare: istoria contemporană, istoria relațiilor internaționale.
Cărți publicate: *Statele Unite și problema Basarabiei*. Iași: Editua Academeiei Române, 2019. *România și Puterile Aliate*. Chișinău: Bons Offices, 2023.

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(Part II)

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

Diplomația română, Marea Britanie și criza sudeților (1938)
(partea II)

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

Hitler's 12 September 1938 speech in Nuremberg in which he openly questioned the existence of Czechoslovakia by denouncing it as being in flagrant violation of the rights of Germans, Hungarians, Slovakians and Poles to self-determination, sparked internal violence in Czechoslovakia and thereby generated a situation that could be used by the German dictator as a necessary justification for implementing his military plan ("Operation Green", which Hitler introduced to his generals as early as 20 May 1938, and was drafted in 1937) of invading the South-Eastern neighbor. Romanian diplomats in London were reporting that, faced with the imminence of war, "Chamberlain, being the one who inaugurated the policy of taming Germany through concessions, was forced now to pursue it to its limits", and although his 15 September trip to Berchtesgaden was appreciated by Romanians as considerably augmenting the chances of preserving the peace, they were also noticing that it came at the prince of a humiliation for the Prime Minister, and probably also at that of sacrificing the integrity of Czechoslovakia [1, f. 192]. Although information on the substance of Daladier's subsequent 18 September discussions with Chamberlain in London was being kept under a tight lead, the Romanian Legation in London was able to report back home that the British and French have agreed to pressure Czechoslovakia to let Hitler have its territory inhabited by a German majority in return for security guarantees, and that Beneš was so far resisting the disintegration of his country; aside from this, the Romanian diplomats were, for obvious reasons, very preoccupied with finding out how would the Polish and Hungarian territorial claims against Czechoslovakia be assessed by the British [2, f. 193], [3, f. 194], [4, f. 196], [5, f. 197-199]: the Romanians were watching closely the representations made by Polish and Hungarian ministers in London with the goal of securing for their co-ethnics the same rights as those that would be granted to the Germans, at that such representations were so far getting evasive and general responses from Halifax [6, f. 201]. Similarly, Romanians were well aware that, at his 22 September meeting with Chamberlain at Bad Godesberg, Hitler now rejected the former's offer to Germany to incorporate Sudetenland, and was now demanding the full liquidation of Czechoslovakia as a state by means of partition of its territory between Poland, Hungary, and the Reich [7, f. 200]; the German dictator, however, was forced to back down and accept the British Government's terms, after the latter rejected Hitler's new demands as humiliating and warned him that it would not tolerate unilateral actions [8, p. 728], while the Romanian Legation in London reported that the Government's readiness to wage war was manifested in decisive preparations, such as the evacuation of children from London, or dispatching the fleet into the Mediterranean to keep in check Italy [9, f. 206], [10, f. 207] who, since 18 September, was publicly on Hitler's side. The resolution of the crisis reached at the Munich 29 September Conference was, thus, very much in accordance with the British terms and wishes, so much that Hitler himself felt cheated and out-smarted by Chamberlain, and was, in fact, enraged that the latter did, in the end, achieve his goal of avoiding the war (at that stage) in spite of his every provocation [11, p. 732-733]. When Chamberlain informed the Czechs, who were ready to defend their sovereignty, that they were alone in facing Hitler, he certainly kept in mind the latter's assurance that the Sudetenland was his last territorial claim in Europe, and this delusion was further strengthened by the fact that, in the aftermath of the Conference, Hitler readily signed the lateral declaration proposed by Chamberlain concerning the renunciation of war between the two nations, which was later hailed as the proof of success in securing the "peace of our times". The outcome of the crisis was reported by the Romanian diplomats in London to have been greeted as an immense success in Britain, yet they were also pointing out the fact that the British public opinion was entirely overlooking the immensity of sufferings imposed on Czechoslovakia through unorthodox diplomatic methods, the consequence

of which, Grigorcea correctly predicted, could not be fully understood at that time [12, f. 209].

The days in the immediate aftermath of the Munich Agreement were being depicted by the Romanian Legation in London as a time when Chamberlain was entirely under the charm of Hitler, whom the former believed to be a "great man, entirely sincere, and charming". Such information the Romanian diplomats managed to gather from the entourage of the First Lord of the Admiralty, Alfred Duff Cooper, who has denounced the agreement and resigned in protest from the Cabinet; from the same source, the diplomats were reporting back home that secretly, Chamberlain has agreed with Hitler that the entire Danube basin was to become an area of exclusive influence of Germany who would also receive "colonial concessions" in return for a non-confrontational policy towards Britain. That was to be the basis of the new European order according to Chamberlain, and as perceived by Romanian diplomacy [13, f. 211-212], but, in the face of a mounting opposition to what might have been arguably described as a gradual vassalisation of Britain to Hitler, the Prime Minister was forced to camouflage his intentions; this deception was however, loudly denounced by the opposition, and, moreover, sensed by the public opinion, who, although welcoming happily the avoidance of war, was regarding unfavorably any alignment of Britain's foreign policy with that of Germany, against whom the former was forced to mobilize the Navy just days before [14, f. 161-162]. In the face of this opposition, and, as the Foreign Office informed Grigorcea, more with the goal of reassuring the latter against the belief that the UK government has left Czechoslovakia alone in the face of revisionist claims coming mounting from all quarters, London was prepared to guarantee latter's new frontiers [15, f. 217]. The Romanian Legation was especially concerned of the Hungarian claims against Czechoslovakia and pressed the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, Alexander Cadogan, to intervene through diplomatic channels at Budapest in order to preventively ensure that the Hungarians would not take any steps in this regard, although the Romanians were doubtful whether such diplomatic representations could have an effect during a time when it seemed that only "brutal strength mattered" [16, f. 218]; similarly, as Hungary was expected to claim Carpathian Ruthenia, the Romanian diplomats attempted to convince the Foreign Office of the necessity of preserving the common Romanian-Czechoslovakian border, but, in the light of the British aversion of getting involved in the European territorial issues, the Romanians didn't attach much hope to this effort as they already suspected that Britain would rather rely on Hitler to be the arbiter of the Polish and Hungarian claims [17, f. 236-237], a supposition that was confirmed in late October 1938 by the British Ambassador in Rome, the Earl of Perth, to the Romanian Minister in Italy – Duiliu Zamfirescu [18, f. 168].

Another point of interest in connection with the British attitude towards Czechoslovakia in the aftermath of the Munich betrayal, and which reported back home by the Romanians, was that the British, given Chamberlain's perceived approval of the German dominance over central Europe [19, p. 104], were now, by late November, in no hurry to issue the promised security guarantees to the now indefensible Czechoslovakia, as they were afraid such a step would be considered by Hitler an interference in "his exclusive domain"; as they believed it could reopen the crisis, the UK government thought that extreme caution had to be exercised in this regard, and also with regard to France's alliances with the Eastern European countries, among which was also Romania [20, f. 273]; this proves just how far Chamberlain was prepared to go to appease Hitler, how much was he ready to bet and sacrifice in his foreign policy blunder that gave Hitler an enormous advantage at the outbreak of the war. It was arguably Chamberlain himself who, by acknowledging Hitler as the master of Central Europe, has so greatly empowered him, to the point that the latter became more appealing as a potential partner to Stalin than the Allies, although in this context one should not forget of the role played by the

"natural" totalitarian affinity between the two dictators, and that the other common defining feature uniting them was their revisionism. Chamberlain's lack of proper understanding of the Nazi mentality was on full display in his 13 December 1938 speech to the Foreign Press Association, an event reflected in the Romanian press as well, and where the Prime Minister defended his policy of "making decisive and persistent efforts of eliminating the possible causes of war", against the alternative of "affirming that the war was inevitable and channelizing all the energies towards the nation's preparation for it"; thus, the head of the UK Government was still persevering in his unjustifiable optimism, reaffirming his belief (in spite of the evidently hostile rhetoric of the Nazi press of those days) that he has managed to ensure that never again will there be war between Britain and Germany [21].

Despite Chamberlain's attempts to save face after Munich, the Romanians Legation was reporting back home that the general feeling in Britain was one of bitter disappointment with the Government's achievements, as well an understanding that the Munich Agreement resulted, in fact, in a growing German resentment towards England. This situation was not made any better by Chamberlain's arguments that Britain could not have waged war against the Germans' right to self-determination, especially when the latter was supported by Mussolini (whose fleet in the Mediterranean was regarded in London as no lesser menace than the Wehrmacht's pressure against the Rhine) and with Poland displaying a duplicitous attitude; the argument that one of Munich's results was to obtain for Britain a break it needed to complete its rearmament program and gain new allies on the continent was also not considered satisfactory enough by the opposition who now demanded from the Government to know exactly where was the red line at which Britain was ready to oppose Hitler with arms. Such calls, led by Churchill, Duff Cooper, Hudson and others, were gaining more traction than ever, as was their (correct) warning that any new concession would cost Britain dearly in the economy of a future conflict, warning reported by the Romanian Legation back home.

It is important to emphasize here the fact, also pointed out by the Romanian diplomats at that time, that one of Chamberlain's main foreign policy goals (up until June 1940) was to create a breach in the Axis by somehow separating the German and Italian interests, either by promoting the conciliation between France and Germany, or by attempting to achieve a comprehensive and all-issues-solving deal between Italy and Britain in the Mediterranean, a geographical region which militarily, politically and commercially, was more important to London than continental Europe. If the British managed to achieve this goal, then, they hoped that Italian interests would clash with those of Germany in the Balkans and Romania, thus distracting Hitler's attention from those points of focus which worried the U.K. Of course, Chamberlain failed to assess correctly the ideological, and probably also psychological, affinity between the two totalitarian regimes, but also underestimated Mussolini's own ambitions of rebuilding the Roman empire on the Mare Nostrum principle, a strategy in the implementation of which he could count only on Hitler as a partner [22, f. 195-196].

The Sudeten crisis was the first serious foreign policy test in the interwar period for Romania's foreign and security policies, and one at which it failed. Although so did Britain, at least in case of the UK we can say that their failure was due to the short-sightedness and incorrect assessment of Hitler's ultimate foreign policy goals, which made the British bet that by sacrificing their pride and the integrity of Czechoslovakia, they could avert an unnecessary repetition of July 1914. Romania's failure, on the other hand, was one caused by the fact that its ruling class was lacking any kind of strategy whatsoever, was disoriented, hesitant and timid. Romania's strategy during the crisis, as was Grigorcea's own admitted stance in London [23, f. 206], was one of keeping a low profile, and we know of no documents or indication that would reflect any initiative on the part of Romanian

diplomats to coordinate with the UK government any sort of help to Czechoslovakia, with whom it was allied; Romania's role in the crisis was limited to not allowing the Soviet troops to cross its borders to fulfill the USSR's obligation under the 16 May 1935 Czechoslovak-Soviet Treaty of Alliance. The role of Germany's "stick and carrot" policy towards Romania in order to persuade her to stay neutral is significant. At the peak of the crisis, Goering repeated his 4 December 1936 verbal offer to guarantee Romania's frontiers against revisionist claims, instead demanding that it should not enter in any combinations with the U.S.S.R. against Germany, including denying the former the right of military passage [24, p. 43]. It must be emphasized, however, that Bucharest did agree to allow Soviet Air Force to enter its airspace to aid the Czechs [25], [26, p. 13], an aspect of which Halifax was well aware [27], although did not manifest much interest in [28, p. 92].

Still, Romania had one good and credible reason to not let the Red Army cross its borders, as the USSR was contesting Romania's sovereignty over the historically and ethnically Romanian territory of Bessarabia between Prut and Nistru rivers. The Romanian Minister in Bucharest pointed out that, although the issue of Bessarabia never emerged throughout 1938, still it was "beneath the surface an important and ever-present factor" [29]. The fear was that should the Russians be let into the country, they would end up refusing to leave Bessarabia, just as they did in 1878. Another reason (or subterfuge) invoked for its refusal to come to Czechoslovakia's aid was the latter's territorial dispute with Poland, Romania's other main ally in the region, or the fact that the Petite Entente was not envisaged to counter the threat of Germany, but rather that of the Hungarian revisionism. Invoking the later argument, from today's perspective at least, has proven to be of an ironic tragedy as it would be later on invoked in a similar fashion by several for Romania's allies when the country was dismembered by the revisionist neighbors in 1940. But perhaps the most important cause of Romania not coming to the aid of its democratic ally was that, as of February 1938, the political power became concentrated in the hands of the king Carol II. The king, under whose supervision Romania passed its first Nuremberg-emulating anti-Semitic legislation, was himself an anti-democratic politician who was dreaming of becoming (and even attempted to become) the leader of the Romanian Iron Guard, and when he was rejected by the Legionnaires, he created his own fascist-like movement and party, while outlawing all the other political formations, and began mimicking Mussolini, but only managed to become a caricature of the latter. Although Carol has displayed an assertiveness of a gangster in issues of economic and political corruption and machinations that ultimately saw him becoming the dictator of Romania, nonetheless, on the international arena he has proven himself to be weak, hesitant and afraid of taking any kind of decisive action to safeguard Romania's interests in the face of the German drive towards the Balkans. Although he genuinely disliked Hitler, he was just as scared of him, and could never bring himself to take a decisive stance by the side of the Allies, instead doing all in his power not to offend Hitler. In the end, it was precisely this policy of hesitance and attempt to please everyone, against which Machiavelli warned future political rulers as being the one with the most disastrous consequences, that managed to upset just about everyone – allies and enemies of Romania alike, and it ended just as Machiavelli predicted it would, with respect to Romania's territorial integrity and international reputation.

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29. Hoare was of the opinion that Carol chose to enforce direct dictatorship rule because he was not able to otherwise control Romania. The king's political proteges were so unpopular that they were unable to win general elections, even though the country had a „notoriously corrupt and inefficient parliamentary system" and the elections were manipulated, „including through the formation of bands of terrorists to regulate the conduct of the elections" [30, p. 2, 17].

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31. We might add here that the lack of sympathy was entirely mutual, as Hitler believed Carol to be a „through and through the corrupt slave of his sexual instinct" [32, p. 259].

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Citation: Țurcanu, M. Romanian Diplomacy, Britain and the Sudeten Crisis (1938) (Part II). In: Dialogica. Cultural Studies and Literature Scientific Journal, 2025, nr. 2, p. 80-85. https://doi.org/10.59295/DIA.2025.2.09

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