

The Political-Military Situation in Europe Until the Outbreak of the 2nd World War (1919-1939)

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Following the signature of the Versailles Treaty on 28 June 1919 and of the subsequent Treaties, the societies of that time having undergone the hardships of the 1st World War, devoted themselves to an effort to solidify peace. Nevertheless, it was apparent that there existed a discord among the victors of the war, in respect to the essence of the desired peace and security.

France was possessed by a complex of fear and insecurity vice the defeated Germany, as a result of the notion that, when Germany would stand firm, it would pose again a threat for France's territorial integrity. Its persistence for the imposition of unbearable terms (financial, territorial, etc) on Germany, considered as the sole responsible for the war, became a point of friction with Great Britain and the United States of America. In parallel and in order to insulate its neighbouring country, French diplomacy launched a series of alliances with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The political-military agreements with Belgium and Poland, as well as the support for the Little Entente (Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia) aimed at establishing a ring to encircle Germany.

On the other hand, the British diplomacy pursued the restoration of its economic influence on the European markets and a balance of power. The establishment of a strong country out of partnerships of smaller countries – what France pursued – was in contradiction with the British interests. According to financial circles in Great Britain, the economic restoration of Germany would serve as the basis for the restoration of prosperity in Europe and in the world.

However, post-war Europe saw the emergence of political regimes that expressed different ideologies; Italy was the first to see the rise in power of fascism, led by Benito Mussolini; shortly before, the Bolsheviks had seized power in Russia in 1917. Alongside, the Republic of Weimar, as the regime in Germany after the war is known, could not meet its economic obligations stemming out of Versailles Treaty. The frictions among the victorious allies that from that moment on acted in favour of their proper interests on the issue of reparations by Germany, provoked a breach in their lines. The rejection of Versailles Treaty by the US Senate precisely reflected this lack of understanding among them. The fears of France were confronted by the conciliatory attitude of Great Britain, and US indifference.

France, aiming at forcibly obliging Germany to abide with the stipulations of the Versailles Treaty, proceeded to the military occupation of the industrial region of Ruhr (11 Jan 1923). This action provoked scores of reaction in Great Britain and the USA, even inside France. The bellows of Germany's economy stopped aspirating, while the US Ambassador in Berlin stated that: "the German people were treated more inferiorly than a subjugated tribe". Moreover, the risk was visible for Germany to come closer to the Soviet Union, after the restoration of their diplomatic relations by the Treaty of Rapallo (16 Apr 1922). At that time, the Soviet Union sought a rupture of the "capitalistic" front, and its abstention from the League of Nations evidences this and implicitly shows its opposition to the technocrats of the West. Nevertheless, it faced enormous economic problems, which dictated a policy of conciliation, expressed by the temporary suspension of the "world revolution". By the end of 1924, the Great Powers with the exception of the USA had officially recognised the political regime of the Soviet Union. German-Soviet relations were enhanced by the Treaty of Berlin (24 Apr 1926). The Soviet Union moved one step forward, as regarded its involvement in the political becoming of Europe, while Germany, apart from the economic benefits, gained a means of pressure against the western powers.

In October 1929, the Economic Crash broke out in the USA, which was to expand and strike the financial markets at world scale. In Europe, the consequences of the crisis were mostly felt in Germany, due to the influx of numerous US capitals and investments. Gradually, bankruptcies followed one the other, inflation ran at excessive rates, together with unemployment. By 1932, the number of unemployed workers in Germany raised to 6 million. The paralysis of the economy weighed down the German people and the government could not meet its obligations. The miserable financial situation in Germany led to the termination of the war reparations (9 July 1932), but also to pushing of thousands of Germans into the hands of the German [Nazi] Workers Party of Adolph Hitler.

On 30 Jan 1933, Hitler was anointed as the Chancellor of Germany, a development that created new facts for the international political-military scene. The pursuit of the "vital space" and ensuring the "Lebensmittel¹" were the top of the agenda, included in his book "Mein Kampf²". An immediate quest for the German leader was to relieve his country from the unbearable terms of the Versailles Treaty and disorient his main opponents away from his true objectives with false pro-peace declarations.

Review of the treaties was also sought by Italy; this is why Rome was satisfied with the election of Hitler. Mussolini, soon after his accession to power, abandoned any hesitance characterising the external policy of his predecessors, and inaugurated a more dynamic and active policy. His policy was axed on the neutralisation of the French-British presence in the Mediterranean Sea. Moreover, at that time there were conflicting interests

¹ Means for living

² My Combat

of both countries, in the Balkans and the European region around Danube River.

The withdrawal of Germany from the League of Nations on 19 Oct 1933, and its persistence on the equalisation in the armaments issue, should have really alarmed British and French leaders. Nevertheless, Hitler knew how to exploit the weaknesses and differences of his opponents. The biggest of the successes of the German diplomacy was the British-German naval agreement of 18 June 1935, which literally cancelled the restrictions imposed on the German naval forces. Shortly before, Hitler had reinstated the obligatory military service as a response to the increase of the military service in France and the armaments of the Soviet Union. At the same time in October 1935, Italy invaded Abyssinia (Ethiopia), an area where Great Britain and France had own interests. In fact though, both countries refrained from adopting drastic measures to avert the anticipated Italian attack. Sanction that would be imposed on Italy proved to be void. The same hesitance was shown by both countries the following year, when the German troops invaded the demilitarised zone of Rhineland.

The foundations of peace and the climate of political cooperation and rapprochement were mined by both the aggressive policy of Hitler and Mussolini and the yielding of the western powers. In particular, the inability of France to confront Hitler, led into loosening of its ties with Central and Eastern European countries, a fact that opened the field for German action, as it is described in a later period.

The prelude of the emerging war conflict between democratic and fascist regimes was the Spanish Civil War that broke out in July 1936. The promises of the Great Powers not to intervene, even indirectly, were not kept. Germany and Italy assisted the Nationalists of General Franco with both personnel and means; while the Soviet Union, as well as France, sent troops in support of the democratic forces, who had won the February 1936 elections. The victory of the Nationalists of General Franco threw Spain in the hands of the fascists.

The superb cooperation between Germany and Italy during the Spanish Civil War served as the basis for the future closer ties among the two countries and opened new dimensions for their political cooperation. Realisation of Italy's expansionist plans in the Mediterranean Sea region faced the strong opposition from Great Britain and France, and preconditioned the support of Germany that had no direct interest for this space. On the contrary, it was the countries of the European region around Danube River that were within the sphere of interests of both Germany and Italy. In order to ensure the support of Germany in the Mediterranean Sea, Mussolini ceded to the German perspectives. This yielding of the Italian leader was shown during the signing of the Austrian-German Agreement (11 July 1936), while in November of that year he advocated for the "Berlin-Rome Axis". One year later, Italy joined the German-Japanese Pact and, at the same time, withdrew from the League of Nations. The

"Berlin-Rome Axis" would not only be an obstacle to the communist threat, but also a strong response to the French-British coalition.

The policies of the two western democracies against this opponent were not identical. On one side, Great Britain sought a more consenting way, in order to loosen the ties of Italy from Germany, promising serious concessions. On the contrary, France was committed by agreements and alliances with countries of Central and Eastern Europe, thence had little space for political manoeuvring; on the other hand, Great Britain was not disposed to enter a war in favour of a smaller country. Hitler was the one that profited of that situation, in order to realise his "Pan-Germanic" vision that took shape with the "Anschluss"³ of Austria on 13 Mar 1938. Taking of serious measures against the expansionist policies of Germany and Italy did not exist in the terminology of the British and French diplomacy.

The annexation of Austria gave Germany the possibility to exercise pressure on the countries of the European region around Danube River, in particular Czechoslovakia, a bastion of the anti-German policy of France and the Soviet Union. The agreements of Czechoslovakia with these two powers were the guarantee of its security and, in parallel, a thorn for Germany's expansionist policy; the latter initially restricted itself to the role of the supporter of the demands of the Germans of Bohemia. German-speaking populations of 3 million lived in the northern and western part of Czechoslovakia and had been demanding their union with Germany since 1919. Hitler used the Patriotic Front of the Sudeten Germans to provoke problems to the government in Prague, claiming the annexation of the territories inhabited by a majority of German-speaking populations. He explained that position to Neville Chamberlain, Prime-Minister of Great Britain during his visit on 15 Sep 1938. The pretext for the bloodless occupation of Czechoslovakia, just like of Austria, widely opened. Great Britain and France did not intend to lead Europe into war; thus, they opted for the mutilation of Czechoslovakia, as decided during the conference in Munich (29-30 Sep 1938), with the participation of Germany and Italy. The Soviet Union was not invited to the conference of the four powers, even if it was an ally of both France and Czechoslovakia. Indeed, it had repeatedly expressed its willingness to militarily assist Czechoslovakia, in case of German invasion, if France were to do the same thing.

This diplomatic manoeuvre of Germany and the submissiveness shown by France and Great Britain vice the German demands, provoked a rupture in the French-Soviet block and finally led to the annexation of the entire Czechoslovakia [by Germany]. The net of alliances of France with countries of Central and Eastern Europe was dissolved by the Munich Agreement, since it proved itself unable for the role of the power-protector, at least as required by those alliances. The declarations [British-German (30 Sep 1938) and French-German (6 Dec 1938)] that followed the Munich Agreement symbolised, as the Prime-Ministers of Great Britain and France thought, the willingness of the people for peaceful co-

³ Annexation

existence. Chamberlain's statement that "I believe that this is peace in our time", immediately after his return from Munich and the British-German declaration would smash on Hitler's expansionist policy to the East. The policy of appeasement and submissiveness, observed by Great Britain and France, was to be refuted once more, when the German troops entered Prague on 15 Mar 1939, and on 7 April when Italy occupied Albania.

After the annexation of Austria and the occupation of Czechoslovakia, Hitler thought that the circumstances were convenient for settling his disputes with Poland. The main points of friction between the two countries were the city of Danzig⁴ and the "Polish Corridor", issues that Poland did not wish to discuss. Pressures exercised by Germany on the Polish side awakened France and Great Britain to guarantee the security of Poland in case of German attack. In parallel, on 22 May 1939, Germany and Italy signed the "Steel Pact" providing for mutual assistance in case one of the parties involved were to be attacked by a third country. More than ever before, a new war threatened Europe.

Questions pended on the stance of the Soviet Union vice the two coalitions. If it was to join the French-British coalition, this would be enormously strengthened against the Axis. Nevertheless, the expansionist visions of the Soviet Union on territories of Poland and the Baltic States remained a serious obstacle for the formation of a common front against Axis forces. This is why Great Britain and France rejected the proposal of the Soviet Union for common provision of guarantees to these countries, in case of German aggression, fearing expansion of the Soviet domination to the eastern coasts of Baltic Sea.

The failure of the two western powers to attract the Soviet Union and the need to ensure the neutrality of the Soviet Union pushed Hitler into approaching Stalin. Despite that both knew of their imminent confrontation, they abided by their short-term plans and ceded to cooperation. This sham cooperation between Moscow and Berlin concluded a non-aggression pact (23 Aug 1939). A secret annex to it gave the Soviet Union freedom of action in the Baltic States, except Lithuania, which would remain under German influence. Moreover, Poland would be divided and shared between the temporary allies. The German-Soviet Pact made a strong impression and took the international political scene by surprise. Nevertheless and in spite of Hitler's expectations to the contrary, this time France and Great Britain did truly guarantee the security of Poland, and did not cede to the new demands of the German leader. Both western powers abandoned the catastrophic (as it proved to be) policy of appeasement and submissiveness. Any attempt to diplomatically settle the disputes between Poland and Germany failed, and on 1 Sep 1939 the German forces invaded Poland. The 2nd World War had just begun.

⁴ Now, Gdansk