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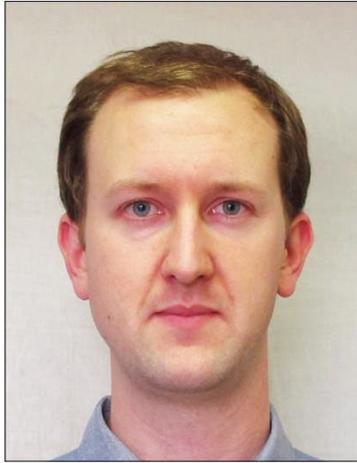
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ANGLO-ROMANIAN RELATIONS AND THE SOVIET UNION, 1939-40: THE BRITISH GUARANTEE & TRANSYLVANIAN CRISIS

Abstract

This article examines the problems that existed for British policy makers in their attempts to build a consistent and coherent long term policy towards the Soviet Union while balancing competing objectives such as maintaining an anti-revisionist stance against aggressor states. It argues, first, that the 1939 guarantee to Romania was an instrument of declaratory politics for Britain that represented a statement against changes by force, but not revision writ large and, second, that it undermined British efforts to provoke Romanian resistance in 1940. In both cases, this was largely because Germany and Romania correctly perceived that there was no genuine Anglo-Soviet understanding to underpin it.

Keywords: Declaratory politics, British Foreign Office, Transylvanian Crisis, anti-revisionism, irredentism, Anglo-Soviet relations

Introduction

The territorial and national disputes in South-Eastern Europe provided major dilemmas for Britain as it tried to build some sort of coalition against Hitler and Mussolini before the outbreak of the Second World War. The unilateral British guarantee to defend Poland against German aggression, made by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain in the House of Commons on March 31, 1939 and subsequently extended to Romania and agreed to by the French in April, represented a stand against treaty and frontier revision by force, but not against revision as such. In addition, the guarantee excluded the Soviet Union, despite Romanian concerns about Soviet revisionist intentions. The British Government still considered some revision of Romania's borders, in particular the region of Dobruja shared

between Bulgaria and Romania, to be reasonable even though it could not publicly voice such views. In the end, Britain went to war in September 1939 in the guise of an anti-revisionist power, despite its inner reservations.

Romanian diplomacy was never truly independent and always sought outside support. In June 1940, with the Soviet Union, Hungary and Bulgaria harboring historical and persistent irredentist ambitions, Romania lost France, her only real ally among the Great Powers in favor of preserving the territorial *status quo*. The Soviet Union was the first to annex Romanian territory in a move that my research suggests was privately welcomed in the Foreign Office where there were hopes of further Soviet demands that might embroil Germany and the Soviet Union. The Soviet ultimatum to Romania sparked off the inevitable Hungarian demand for Transylvania and British diplomacy worked hard to exploit possibilities it believed inherent in the Transylvanian problem. By encouraging Romanian resistance to the cession of Transylvania to Hungary, Britain hoped to topple the pro-German government of Romania's King Carol II, replacing it with a more pro-western government. At the very least, Britain believed it could cause trouble for the Germans in an economically important and sensitive area. Its efforts failed from the outset because it was unable, but above all unwilling, to either reach an understanding with the Soviet Union to recognize its annexations or guarantee Romania's territorial integrity against further Soviet aggression. The British Government understood that Britain's fate lay in maintaining some kind of successful collaboration with the Soviet Union and there was no question of accepting any Romanian veto on Anglo-Soviet dialogue.

The inter-war period

Despite Britain's generally critical attitude towards Romania at the 1919 Peace Conference, the British Government never officially supported Hungarian revisionism during the war years. British leaders were the friendliest toward the Romanian cause in Bessarabia during the Peace Conference and the first years thereafter because British policy at this time was focused on improving Anglo-Romanian relations while trying to weaken Russia. Britain was the Great Power which insisted the most on signing the Bessarabian Treaty between Great Britain, France, Italy and Japan, on one hand, and Romania on the other officially recognising the unification of Bessarabia with Romania at Russia's expense. Although

Britain was the first of the five signatory countries to ratify it in 1922,¹ attitudes underwent several changes and the Allies soon left the region in a virtual power vacuum. London left it to Paris to organize the area politically through the Little Entente between anti-revisionist Yugoslavia, Romania and Czechoslovakia. By 1934, Britain would only give her “benevolent approval” to France’s project to reorganize her system of alliances in Eastern Europe and include the Soviet Union.²

Throughout the inter-war period, Romania viewed alliances as a vital part of its security system. Having achieved its territorial objectives after the First World War, the Romanian Government strove to protect its new frontiers and maintain the *status quo*. This involved preventing any revision of the peace treaties, especially the Treaty of Trianon with Hungary. Romania grew increasingly fearful that Britain would revise its initial friendly policy during the 1930s as London avoided involvement in the French alliance system in Eastern Europe and steadily refused to be drawn into guaranteeing these states. Alarmingly for Bucharest, various British governments showed a willingness to discuss revision of the Treaty of Versailles; a revision of that treaty could open the possibility of a revision of the Trianon Treaty.³

France’s system of alliances collapsed following Hitler’s march into Austria in 1938. After the Anschluss, or union, of Austria with Germany, the British and French largely left it to Germany to exploit the region economically. They showed little eagerness to engage economically with potential allies such as Bucharest to try to bolster the Romanian economy. In November 1938, Chamberlain and Foreign Secretary Edward Halifax were evasive and noncommittal when meeting Romania’s King Carol II. The British Prime Minister stated that he had not assigned Central and South-Eastern Europe to Hitler as a sphere of interest, but “that natural forces seemed...to make it inevitable that Germany should enjoy a preponderant position in the economic field”.⁴ One of the main difficulties was the wide difference between Romania’s internal prices and those on world markets, particularly for wheat and oil.⁵ Paul Hehn argues that this refrain gradually became official British policy from this point on.⁶ However, I would argue that a more hands-off attitude began to prevail earlier during Chamberlain’s appeasement period, when Halifax made it dangerously clear to Hitler that all that worried England was that any frontier alterations should come about peacefully without “far-reaching disturbance”.⁷ Meanwhile, ex-enemy countries such as Bulgaria and potentially pro-Axis countries such as Hungary could expect even less

sympathy.⁸ Apart from Turkey – an important area of strategic interest and a bulwark against German, Italian or even Soviet ambitions – Britain preferred to stay well out of the region.

Britain's guarantee

Britain was unwillingly drawn into South-Eastern Europe following Germany's occupation of the rest of Czechoslovakia by bluff and political intrigue in March 1939. Hitler's actions abrogated the agreements reached with Great Britain and France at Munich in September 1938. London was focused on the German threat to Poland which might destroy the European balance of power and the Italian threat in the Mediterranean against the sea route to the Middle East and India. South-Eastern Europe, Romania and Transylvania in particular, were somewhere in no-man's land in between.⁹

Hitler's march into Prague marked the end of the British policy of Appeasement and a new policy of British and French unilateral guarantees in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. However, the British guarantee represented a political reaction rather than the formation of close ties with Poland or Romania. As Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office Alexander Cadogan recorded in his diary on March 20, "as long as Hitler could pretend he was incorporating Germans in the Reich, we could pretend that he had a case. If he proceeded to gobble up other nationalities, that would be the time to call "Halt!"".¹⁰ According to Halifax, the British public now feared that Hitler's real goal was to conquer Europe - and Romania appeared to be the next victim.¹¹ Parliament and public opinion demanded action, and an appeal from Virgil Tilea, the Romanian Minister in London, three days later appeared to offer the perfect opportunity. Tilea told Halifax that Germany had demanded a monopoly of Romania's exports and the restriction of Romanian industry in Germany's favor in return for which Germany would guarantee the Romanian frontiers. This, the Romanian minister reported, appeared to his government to be "something very much like an ultimatum".¹²

As Anna Cienciala points out, Tilea's *démarche* in London should also be seen in light of Romania's fear of Hungary. When Hungarian troops advanced into Subcarpathian Ruthenia on March 15, Bucharest feared that the Hungarians might also try to reclaim some of the territories lost to Romania in 1919. They reacted to this situation by proclaiming a partial

mobilization and seeking support in the West by spreading rumors of a German ultimatum.¹³ Tilea, a young and passionate Anglophile who had only arrived in London in February, had little previous diplomatic experience.¹⁴ Although he was exaggerating, Halifax was sufficiently alarmed. My research shows that the Foreign Office proceeded with devising a plan to guarantee Romania even after the British minister in Bucharest, Reginald Hoare, reported that the Romanian Foreign Minister told him that the Germans had never threatened them with an ultimatum and that economic negotiations were in fact proceeding normally.¹⁵ Two days later Hoare met King Carol II who also stated that there had been no ultimatum. The King added, however, that "Roumania would resist German pressure but could not do so indefinitely without support".¹⁶ While these statements perhaps reduced the urgency of assisting Romania, Britain's policy remained the same. On March 18, the British Chiefs of Staff advocated taking a stand against German dominance of Romania as it would threaten British interests in Greece, Turkey and the Mediterranean. However, they strongly advised against Britain taking a stance alone or supporting Romania unilaterally.¹⁷

The Soviet factor

Since Romanian-Soviet and Polish-Soviet relations were as bad as, if not worse than, between any of these states and Germany, Britain was presented with a dilemma. Bucharest and Moscow did not re-establish diplomatic relations until June 1934 and Moscow never recognized the loss of Bessarabia. At the outset of the 1939 discussions with Britain and France, the Romanian minister in Paris raised no objection to an approach being made by the French Government to Moscow, but begged that the French Government would not involve the Romanian Government. He explained that the Soviet Union was not popular in Romania, particularly among the upper classes, some of whom preferred Hitler to Stalin.¹⁸ Despite British attempts to draw in the Soviet Union into efforts to defend countries threatened by Germany, it soon appeared clear that London and Paris had a choice between working with the Soviet Union *or* with countries in immediate danger of succumbing to German influence.

British officials believed that to side with Moscow risked driving Romania and Poland into Germany's arms or at a very least make it more difficult for Bucharest and Warsaw to make independent foreign

policy decisions. Siding conclusively with Romania and Poland, British officials seemed to think, would only run the risk of driving the Soviet Union into isolation, from which it was assumed she would emerge in her own good time and in her own interest, in opposition to Germany. The British Government never seriously considered that the Soviet Union might emerge as a fellow conspirator with Germany against the ruling international system, as she did in August 1939 with the Nazi-Soviet Pact. The Soviet problem remained the continuing theme of British diplomacy in the months before the outbreak of war and returned throughout the Transylvanian crisis.

My own perspective is that British officials hoped that even if Soviet-Polish arrangements were unpractical, Poland and Romania might be brought together through the lever of the British guarantees. However, this was soon dismissed by the two countries. Polish Foreign Minister Colonel Joseph Beck believed that any Polish promise of aid to Romania would be viewed by Budapest as Polish recognition of Romanian claims in the territorial dispute between the two countries and would drive Hungary towards an alliance with Berlin. In the end, the Poles gave no undertaking to come to Romania's help if attacked; they merely agreed to pursue this question in direct talks with the Hungarian and Romanian Governments.¹⁹ On the other hand, the Romanians did not want to wait for any discussions with Poland since they believed a unilateral British guarantee was urgently needed to strengthen their position with Hitler. France agreed. Thus, by April 13, the British Government had decided in deference to Paris to give Romania the guarantee she asked for without awaiting the outcome of the proposed Polish-Romanian talks and, once more, without consulting the Soviet Union. Britain had switched from a "free hand" policy to a policy of unilateral commitments which ensured that if she was involved in war in Europe it would be with the support of weak rather than strong states.²⁰

Although Britain was ostensibly joining France in resisting German revisionist threats to Poland and Romania, Britain was not declaring itself to be an anti-revisionist power in my view. The guarantees represented a British and French undertaking to give these two countries "all the support in their power" in the event of a clear threat to their independence which they themselves "considered it vital to resist with their national forces".²¹ When Tilea asked whether the proposed guarantee would apply against all countries, i.e., against the Soviet Union, as well as against Germany, Cadogan pointed out to him

that the whole basis of the arrangement which he had proposed was that of resistance to the threat of German domination in Europe and that all that we were trying to do was devised with that object. We had never considered the question of guaranteeing either Poland or Roumania against the Soviet [Union].²²

Although King Carol II would have preferred a treaty specifically guaranteeing Romania's frontiers, he was relieved to have a British and French promise to support Romania against an attack by Germany or Hungary.²³

Hoare understood that if Britain did not help King Carol II to meet the Soviet threat Romania would inevitably turn to Germany. He therefore suggested extending the guarantee to cover attack by the Soviet Union in December 1939, at a time when Red Army reverses in Finland produced an atmosphere of anti-Soviet euphoria among British diplomats and others in South-Eastern Europe.²⁴ The Soviet invasion attracted strong public support for Finland in Britain, causing great embarrassment to the British Government. Hoare's suggestion received a skeptical reaction in the Foreign Office. Fitzroy Maclean, the principal official responsible for the Soviet Union, who had just spent three years there, commented that "it is not at present our intention to declare war on the Soviet Union, for we have nothing to gain by so doing".²⁵ Moreover, Laurence Collier, his superior, also rejected Hoare's proposals, writing that: "I suppose it is natural for diplomats in countries adjacent to the Soviet Union...to regard Stalin as a greater menace than Hitler, but I am convinced that it is *not* true."²⁶ Collier was the head of the Northern Department (which dealt with the Soviet Union) since 1933. He was an experienced diplomat in Russia during the First World War and a strong advocate of making common cause with the Soviet Union in the lead up to the outbreak of war, "despite the fact that he had no illusions about Soviet sincerity and did not believe in the long-term compatibility of British and Soviet interests".²⁷

From the outset, Britain and France undertook commitments without the resources to fulfil them. From Chamberlain's perspective, the guarantees were a diplomatic deterrent that would bring Hitler to his senses, and also a limited undertaking of a provisional nature whose extent and application would be decided by the British Cabinet, rather than a commitment to an irreversible policy.²⁸ The Cabinet was clear that neither Britain nor France could give direct help to Romania. Their assistance would have to take the form of pressure on Germany's western front.²⁹ In military terms it was

about as hard for the Western allies to help an isolated Romania as to help an isolated Poland. This was reaffirmed in a July 18, 1939 memorandum by the Chiefs of Staff:

As a general point, we would emphasize that the fate of Poland will depend upon the ultimate outcome of the war, and that in turn, will depend upon our ability to bring about the eventual defeat of Germany and not on our ability to relieve pressure on Poland at the outset. This must therefore be the overriding consideration which governs our choice of action.³⁰

Britain understood that its guarantee to Romania was unconvincing if Poland was reluctant to reinforce it. Therefore, it immediately asked Turkey to guarantee Romania; in return, Britain would guarantee Turkey.³¹ However, the Turkish Government remained skeptical. Although an interim agreement was signed on May 12 to co-operate in the Mediterranean area, Anglo-French talks with Turkey were still unresolved by the outbreak of Second World War.³² Meanwhile, British and French efforts to reach political or military agreement with the Soviet Union failed, largely because the Romanians and Poles feared the Soviet Union as much as Germany. Bucharest, Warsaw and the Baltic States worried about provoking Germany and, furthermore, did not want to give Moscow any excuse to send troops into their territory.

Despite the guarantee, Anglo-Romanian relations became briefly strained at this time as the Foreign Office mishandled pressure from Budapest and Bucharest. The British guarantee to Romania had angered the Hungarians who had recovered territory in Slovakia and Ruthenia thanks to Hitler and were now eager to reclaim Transylvania from Romania. The guarantee represented a new barrier to this aim. Gyorgy Barcza, Hungarian minister in London and a committed Anglophile and Germanophobe, was keen to draw attention to the "important territorial problems existing between Hungary and Rumania in consequence of the unjust conditions of the Treaty of Trianon".³³ In a sign of British anxiety over Hungarian neutrality, the Foreign Office hastily suggested to the Romanians that the British Government might reply to the Hungarians that they had "no wish to close their minds to the existence of this issue", but were "convinced that territorial questions cannot in the present strained atmosphere be profitably discussed".³⁴ Bucharest reacted with such hostility that the British quickly withdrew their suggestion and promised that no reply would ever be sent to Hungary without previous consultation with Romania.³⁵ In my assessment,

Foreign Office officials were cautious during the Transylvanian crisis a year later as a result of this fiasco prompting Halifax to step in decisively to steer policy in support of Romania.

The Soviet annexations

Ultimately, the Soviet Union, and not Hungary, was the first of Romania's revisionist neighbors to demand Romanian territory. The initial reaction in the Foreign Office to the Soviet ultimatum on June 26, 1940 and rapid subsequent annexation of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina was resigned and passive. Officials were doubtlessly more preoccupied with the fall of France just days before, but their initial impression was that Moscow had acted *without* consulting Germany and Italy, though it seemed probable that the Germans at least were informed a few hours before the ultimatum to Romania was delivered.³⁶ In Bucharest, Hoare surmised that the annexation was almost certainly part of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. However, if the Germans were accomplices to the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia, they were thought not to be accomplices to the precise timing. Hoare pointed to efforts by the Germans to remove the German minority from the area in the preceding months whereas the timing of the annexation resulted in a significant loss of agricultural investment for the Germans.³⁷

My examination of relevant documents strongly demonstrates that the Soviet occupation of Bessarabia was broadly welcomed by British officials since it might forestall Germany. From Bucharest, Hoare pointed to the strategic importance of the region; he argued that Bessarabia would have been an excellent point of attack into Ukraine for the Germans and the best protection for the Soviet Union against such a maneuver would be to acquire the line of the Carpathian Mountains and the Danube Delta. This might indicate further Soviet demands; the minister highlighted that the occupation of Bessarabia was carried out at a speed and manner calculated to impress the Romanian army and people with the complete futility of further resistance.³⁸ He considered the situation following the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina on July 1 to be very fluid and that a further Soviet advance into Romania could not be ruled out.³⁹ In London, the annexation of Bessarabia was understood on historical grounds, but Stalin's desire to annex northern Bukovina left officials wondering if he had further designs on Romania.⁴⁰ There was

disappointment in the Foreign Office that the rumors of a further Soviet ultimatum were without foundation since this would have brought a German-Soviet clash closer.⁴¹

Reflecting in February 1941, Hoare speculated that if war between Romania and the Soviet Union had begun in 1940, the Romanians would doubtlessly have been quickly pushed out of Bessarabia. The war might not have ended on the River Pruth border between Bessarabia and Romania, and Germany clearly could not have allowed the Red Army to approach the valuable Ploiești oil-fields.⁴² During the crisis, there was some speculation that King Carol II's request for an interview with Hitler in July 1940 was connected to a further Soviet move against Romania. But it was believed that in that event it was unlikely that Germany would help defend Romania.⁴³ Foreign Office officials rejected Romanian attempts to persuade the British Government that Stalin had further designs against Romania.⁴⁴ Ian le Rougetel at British Legation reported that the "Soviet bogey" was been used by Germany to deter both Hungarians and Romanians from resorting to hostilities.⁴⁵ All speculation about Soviet intentions was prohibited in BBC broadcasts.⁴⁶

In line with this BBC approach, British Ambassador Stafford Cripps was instructed to avoid discussing Soviet claims on Bessarabia and the recent annexation of the Baltic States when he met Stalin.⁴⁷ If the Baltic States was raised, the newly appointed ambassador was instructed to "affect to believe that the Soviet Government's recent action was dictated by the imminence and magnitude of the German danger threatening Russia".⁴⁸ The British Government first sought better relations with the Soviet Union, and possibly an understanding over South-Eastern Europe, before the fall of France in mid-June when London was trying to back its ally in search of help in the most unlikely quarters. As the situation grew more critical, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill sent a personal message to Stalin through Cripps proposing Anglo-Soviet consultation in face of the prospect of German hegemony over the Continent. Above all, Cripps was instructed not to give Stalin "the impression that we are running after him".⁴⁹ Cripps concluded from his meetings that the Soviet Union intended to maintain its position of "benevolent neutrality" towards Germany, but might change its policy later on. Therefore he "urged that it would be unwise to make difficulties over our attitude towards the Soviet annexation of the Baltic States".⁵⁰

Cripps had long held a benign view of Soviet policy and documents reviewed by this author include his frank and imprudent admission to

Stalin that he personally did not believe that the old equilibrium could be restored.⁵¹ The ambassador informed London that he believed that if *de facto* recognition of at least some Soviet territorial gains was not granted by the British Government all hope should be abandoned of any improvement of Anglo–Soviet relations and a “considerable degree of worsening” should be anticipated. Whilst the US could “still no doubt afford to antagonize the Soviet Government by adopting a moral attitude” the British Government, on the other hand, could not incur “a risk of driving the Soviet Government into closer relations with Germany”.⁵² The British Cabinet was not prepared to go as far as Cripps wished; it sought to preserve its flexibility toward the Soviet Union and wait on events, a passive hostility Martin Folly has aptly termed a “policy of reserve”.⁵³ Strategy was designed to preserve room for maneuver, at a difficult time for Anglo-Soviet relations when Moscow was viewed as fundamentally uninterested in productive dialogue through normal diplomacy.

Above all, Stalin perceived Britain as a defender of the *status quo* against Hitler. He told Cripps that during the pre-war negotiations with Britain and France the Soviet Union had wanted to change the old equilibrium in Europe, for which the two countries stood, but Britain and France had wanted to preserve it. Germany, on the other hand, had also wanted to change the equilibrium, and “this common desire” had “created a basis for the rapprochement with Germany”.⁵⁴ Molotov made it clear to Cripps twelve days before the Soviet ultimatum to Bucharest that the Soviet Union had a special interest in Romania.⁵⁵ My research shows that following the annexation, Stalin was quick to deny any further Soviet interest in Romania to the British ambassador.⁵⁶ He later reiterated that Soviet demands were clear and public in the notes which had passed and that the Soviet Union “had henceforth no designs whatever on that country”.⁵⁷ Cripps reported to Halifax that he was certain that Stalin had no intention of going further into Romania or indeed the Balkans.⁵⁸ In light of this, Halifax spoke to Soviet Ambassador Ivan Maisky, although without raising the matter directly. At the end of a nondescript conversation, it was Maisky who suggested that “he did not anticipate that his Government had any further desires to satisfy in the Balkans”.⁵⁹ My interpretation suggests that the Foreign Secretary and officials in the Foreign Office accepted these voluntary assurances at face value.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Halifax warned his Cabinet colleagues that they should “bear in mind the difficulty of assessing M. Stalin’s sincerity”.⁶¹

The 1940 Transylvanian crisis

The Soviet ultimatum to Romania sparked off the inevitable Hungarian demand for Transylvania. The Soviet Government privately supported Hungarian claims because of its own dispute with Romania over Bessarabia and northern Bukovina. Perhaps Moscow was also seeking to counterbalance Germany's aid to Romania in its dispute with Hungary.⁶² The British Government was well aware of the Soviet position through Royall Tyler, an American and adviser to the League of Nations' Financial Committee at the Hungarian National Bank, who wrote memoranda about Hungary for the Foreign Office. Tyler was a Hungarophile in whom Prime Minister (since February 1939) Pál Teleki and Admiral Miklós Horthy had implicit trust, even to the extent of letting him in on certain confidential decisions and secret plans.⁶³ In Budapest, Teleki informed him that the Soviet Government was willing to support Hungary's revisionist demands in Transylvania. Tyler underlined this by emphasizing Hungary's anti-German position in his reports.⁶⁴ Teleki was not exaggerating. Molotov summoned the Hungarian minister to Moscow, Jozsef Kristoffy on July 4, 1940, to tell him that the Soviet Government regarded the Hungarian claims on Transylvania as reasonable and would support them at the peace conference.⁶⁵ When the Hungarians enquired if Budapest could count on the friendly attitude of the Soviet Union in case the crisis would require an armed solution, Molotov reaffirmed Soviet support and added that the Soviet Union never acknowledged the Paris Peace Treaties and the Treaty of Trianon because these treaties created a Romania which was "equally harmful and unjust" to the interests of Hungary, the Soviet Union and Bulgaria alike.⁶⁶ Once again, on the same day that Red Army troops entered Bessarabia, the director of the South-Eastern European Division of the Soviet foreign ministry, Dekanozov, summoned Kristoffy to tell him that "the Hungarian position on Transylvania was identical in many ways with the Soviet position towards Rumania on the Bessarabian question".⁶⁷

The Soviet Union obligingly increased tensions on the Moldavian frontier when the Romanian delegates were pressurized by Germany prior to the Second Vienna Award. A German guarantee of Romania's frontiers upon acceptance of German arbitration was then offered as an additional inducement – this had been King Carol II's objective for the previous two months. The Germans also led the Romanians to understand that they would favor Romania over Hungary in the future. Therefore, the Romanian Government accepted arbitration, comforting itself with the optimistic

belief that it was unlikely to lose too much territory since the Germans had hitherto supported the Romanian arguments in favor of an exchange of population rather than the Hungarian proposition of transfer of territory. The Romanian Government was genuinely surprised and dismayed when Germany and Italy awarded two-thirds of Transylvania to the Hungarians on August 30. In addition, the Romanian Minister of Propaganda told le Rougetel that Bucharest was informed that if Romania did not accept Axis arbitration by 3.00 a.m. on September 1, Romania would be invaded by Hungary and the Soviet Union simultaneously.⁶⁸ The fact that the threat of Soviet invasion was used at the Vienna talks was sufficient proof in the Foreign Office of Soviet collusion in the scheme.⁶⁹

My research suggests that there was much regret in the Foreign Office that there appeared to be no chance of further Soviet aggression on Romania because of the German and Italian guarantee of Romania's frontiers. A Soviet advance would mean

either that Germany would have to go to the assistance of Romania, i.e., a war between Germany and the Soviet Union or the worthlessness of the German guarantee would be broadcast to the world, much to our advantage.⁷⁰

Both scenarios were considered improbable in London since all available evidence seemed to show that the Soviet Union was afraid of Germany and anxious to placate her.⁷¹ The volatile situation on the Bessarabian frontier had appeared to create ample pretexts for further Soviet intervention whenever it pleased. Although the Soviet Union had allowed the situation on its Romanian frontier to deteriorate, Halifax thought it improbable that it intended to take advantage of incidents to make further demands on Romania after the German guarantee of Romania's borders at the Second Vienna Award, whatever its previous intentions may have been.⁷² The Soviet communique on September 13 to remind Germany that the latter's guarantee to Romania must not be interpreted as denying the Soviet Union its say in Balkan and Danubian questions and that Moscow was prepared if necessary to exploit the nuisance value of "frontier incidents," was dismissed as a face-saving exercise by Cripps and officials in London.⁷³

“Maniu or nothing”

My research leads me to conclude that Tilea’s intervention appears to have been a catalyst for British policy during the Transylvanian Crisis of 1940. He advised the British to encourage resistance in Transylvania, in particular by Romanian opposition leader Iuliu Maniu and his political party, to any concessions by Romania to Hungary. The Romanian minister was optimistic that strong Romanian opposition to any concessions to Hungary at Germany’s bidding might even force Hitler to back down from supporting Hungary’s claims since his over-riding desire was to prevent any conflict in the Balkans.⁷⁴ Philip Nichols, the Head of the Southern Department (whose responsibilities included Romania), bluntly told Tilea that he doubted the effectiveness of Romanian resistance.⁷⁵ In private Foreign Office discussions, Nichols sought a flexible response where Britain remained open to modifications obtained by peaceful negotiations between the interested parties while at the same time encouraging the Romanians to “resist all *excessive* demands”.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, Orme Sargent, the deputy undersecretary of state who supervised the Southern Department’s work, found Tilea much more persuasive. Sargent, who was never very pro-Hungarian,⁷⁷ disliked Nichols’ suggestions and did not wish to start a long debate on what constituted “excessive” territorial demands or to sit on the side-lines.⁷⁸

Ultimately, Halifax also found Tilea compelling⁷⁹ although the Romanian’s impact was possibly not as significant as his role in the crisis leading up to the British Guarantee a year earlier since his views already reflected those of the British Legation in Bucharest⁸⁰ and Halifax was already psychologically predisposed to siding with Romania. Halifax instructed Sargent to tell Hoare a few days later on August 6 that Hungary was a lost cause, whereas encouraging Romania to resist might lead Germany to resort to forcible intervention with a chance of embroiling herself with the Soviet Union.⁸¹ Instructions along these lines were sent to Hoare later that same day.⁸² The Foreign Secretary thereby finally dismissed assertions made the previous month by Owen O’Malley, the British minister in Hungary, that this was the time for “the complete reversal” of the British attitude over Transylvania in a pro-Hungarian direction in order to bring Germany and the Soviet Union into conflict. Halifax argued that to incite the Hungarians against the Romanians might not bring German-Soviet conflict closer since the Soviet Union was not considered ready to fight Germany yet. In any case, Hitler was

judged to be firmly against any war between Hungary and Romania that could jeopardize his oil supplies from Romania.⁸³ Meanwhile, the British Government deliberately kept its hands free in public. On September 5, Halifax emphasized in the House of Lords that Britain had never supported a policy based on a rigid adherence to the *status quo*. He rejected the Second Vienna Award in the House of Lords as “a dictation by the Axis Powers, imposed on Roumania under duress”.⁸⁴ Churchill made a similar statement in the House of Commons, but added some remarks favorable to Hungary; stating that: “Personally...I have never been too happy about the way Hungary was treated after the last war.”⁸⁵

The Foreign Office hoped to topple King Carol II's pro-German government and replace it with a more pro-western government by encouraging Romanian resistance to the cession of Transylvania to Hungary. At the very least, Britain believed it could cause trouble for the Germans in an economically important and sensitive area. British officials believed that Maniu and his mass peasant party appeared to provide a useful way to influence developments in Romania, certainly compared to neighboring Hungary. Maniu was arguably the most respected politician in the country and leader of the party which commanded the loyalty of most peasants and the majority of Transylvanians. He was from Transylvania and had done much to unite it with Romania after the First World War.⁸⁶ Maniu did not support Romania's shift to support the Axis Powers and proposed a “Government of National Concentration”, representing all the political forces of the nation, after the Soviet annexations. This idea had some merit in British eyes as a desperate alternative to King Carol II's government⁸⁷ but the king rejected the idea.⁸⁸

Ultimately, British efforts to instigate Romanian resistance failed because it was unable, but above all unwilling, to reach any understanding with the Soviet Union to either recognize its annexations as Moscow wished or to guarantee Romania's territorial integrity against further Soviet aggression as Romanians wished. Maniu explicitly sought an Anglo-Soviet understanding to assure Romania that the Soviet Union would not attack and dismember it if Romanians resisted the Hungarians in Transylvania as Britain wished. He feared that Stalin would exploit the weakness of the Romanian Government by declaring that the Romanian Government cannot keep order, and march further.⁸⁹ This was not a far-fetched scenario; there was even some speculation in the Foreign Office that the Soviet Union would move southwards into Moldavia the moment Hungary took over Transylvania.⁹⁰ Maniu was all too aware that Moscow

had exploited the chaos of the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 to claim that Poland had “ceased to exist” as a pretext for the Red Army’s invasion to protect its “Slavic brothers” in eastern Poland.⁹¹ The Soviet ultimatum to Romania stated that it never accepted the seizure of Bessarabia in 1918 and demanded the cession of the northern part of Bukovina to the Soviet Union as “a means of compensation for the great loss which has been caused to the Soviet Government and the population of Bessarabia by the twenty-two years of Roumanian domination”.⁹² This appeared to suggest that Stalin might harbor further designs on Romania.

Maniu thus exposed the declaratory and limited nature of Britain’s guarantee. The British Government never seriously considered extending the guarantee to Romania to cover attack by the Soviet Union as discussed above. Rather, they wished to encourage Romanian resistance – even a futile struggle against the Red Army – since it might help embroil Germany and the Soviet Union. Earlier in January 1940 when the Romanian foreign minister expressed his belief that Turkey would be prepared to move in conjunction with Britain and France in the event of an attack on Bessarabia, the Foreign Office believed it was not in the British interest to make the Romanians realize that they were over optimistic, since to do so might shake their apparent resolve to resist an attack on Bessarabia.⁹³ Maintaining the illusion of British assistance was still important two months before the Soviet annexation. When the Chiefs of Staff sought a slight tone down in the wording of the guarantee, since they correctly pointed out that assistance would only be feasible if Italy was neutral and Turkey gave her consent, Sargent considered it unnecessary to modify the original version because it gave the Romanians “the impression that we should like to help them and that if we were able to help them we would do so effectively”.⁹⁴ Cadogan and Halifax promptly agreed.⁹⁵ At the time of the Soviet annexation, there was little consolation for Tilea. R.A. Butler, Parliamentary Under-Secretary, speaking on Halifax’s behalf, simply stated that “no occupation of territory of a friendly government could be a matter of indifference to H.M.G.”.⁹⁶ Tilea understood that the circumstances did not involve Britain in any implementation of its guarantee, but he shared Maniu’s concerns that Romania would share the fate of Poland, except that in this case the Germans would follow the Soviets, thus making sure that the British guarantee would not be implemented.⁹⁷

Despite Britain’s weak and somewhat contradictory position, my research reveals that for British policy makers, Maniu’s ineptitude and hesitant nature explained in large part the failure of their efforts to instigate

resistance. Officials faulted the rigid, principled stance taken by Maniu in relation to Romania's territorial integrity, highlighting what they perceived as his cautious nature, historical nostalgia, naivety, and blind stubbornness. Maniu was clear when explaining Romania's position to Hugh Seton Watson, then attached to the British Legation: he opposed a pro-German policy for obvious reasons, a pro-British policy was "impossible because of geographical reasons", and a pro-Soviet policy was "impossible because of the general atmosphere of bitterness and hatred against Russia".⁹⁸ Seton Watson, widely considered sympathetic to Romania,⁹⁹ was scathing in his criticism following his interview, surmising that Maniu had "returned to his customary attitude, that of waiting and doing nothing, refusing to compromise himself, but never taking any initiative". He concluded pessimistically that Maniu's National Peasant party "for the moment has more or less ceased to exist."¹⁰⁰

There was little sympathy or understanding for Maniu's position in the British Government. Hoare considered Maniu too negative and denounced him for setting impossibly high terms for entering the General Ion Antonescu government that replaced King Carol II.¹⁰¹ Officials were frustrated that any prospect of resistance disappeared "when Maniu threw in his hand".¹⁰² Britain's direct support for Maniu even appeared in danger as a result of the "feeble part which he has played throughout the Transylvanian crisis".¹⁰³ Moreover, the poor impression lingered. In February 1941, Hankey, one of the few who had initially appeared to have some hope in Maniu, reported that:

My general impression of the conversation was that though Maniu's intentions are the very best, he is sadly lacking in inspiration and is in fact, as I have often observed, terribly negative. However, there is nobody else in view who could head a patriotic movement, and so at present it is Maniu or nothing.¹⁰⁴

My analysis suggests that this negative appraisal was part of a wider perception of Balkan leaders. In the words of historian and former wartime Foreign Office official Elisabeth Barker, the Balkans was always politically unstable from the British perspective; its leaders clamored for British help but refused British advice.¹⁰⁵ Maniu had certainly refused British advice, but he had not simply "clamored for help" without trying to act. Three weeks before the Second Vienna Award, Hankey reported without comment or further detail that Maniu was in indirect touch with the Soviet

Legation.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, Maniu was “pragmatic” in British eyes, at least to some degree, since he was prepared to accept the loss of Dobrudja to Bulgaria. Despite this, the British were concerned in early 1941 that he “has a strange idea that the circumstances of the peace conference may be such that Great Britain’s diplomatic support of Roumanian claims would quite probably induce the Russians to retire gracefully”.¹⁰⁷ This gives an indication why Maniu decided to stay in Romania when he had appeared close to deciding to leave the country to establish a government-in-exile with British support. One plausible explanation is that Maniu expected a German-Soviet clash which would raise the question, for Romania, of recovering Bessarabia and northern Bukovina. Such a clash had been rumored in Bucharest for months and Maniu would have a political role to play in this which would hardly be approved by the British. He may also have wished to be with his people during a time of great danger and stress. The alternative theory advocated by his critics is that he was simply unable to make up his mind.¹⁰⁸

Maniu may have over-estimated Britain’s strength and power, and indeed British empathy for Romania’s concerns. However, London also over-estimated Maniu’s willingness to run big risks for the sake of vague British promises. It is unlikely that Maniu would have compromised himself by taking office just after the biggest debacle in Romania’s history – a debacle, moreover, that affected the districts where his supporters were in the largest majority – even if King Carol II had been willing to capitulate to him. Furthermore, Maniu stood for freedom of speech and democratic methods of government, which the Germans would not have allowed, and he disagreed profoundly with King Carol II’s latest policy of subservience to Germany.¹⁰⁹ In September 1940 General Antonescu came to power in Romania in partnership, at least at first, with the fascist-style Iron Guard, some of whom were under German control. As British freedom of action in Romania was drastically curtailed, General Antonescu agreed officially to recognize the National Peasants Party under Maniu and the Liberal Party under George Bratianu as legal political parties – a status that they had been deprived in 1938 by King Carol II’s authoritarian rule. Maniu obtained this concession by telling General Antonescu that opposition elements would turn communist if not allowed to operate openly. He argued that it was better to have legal parties controlled by a responsible leader.¹¹⁰ Foreign Office officials noted that this was a “novelty in a totalitarian state”.¹¹¹ From late 1942 both General Antonescu and the democratic Romanian opposition saw the Soviet Union as main threat to

an independent Romania. They saw territorial guarantees and guarantees of independence from the West as only hope of avoiding a post-war catastrophe. However, Maniu again failed to secure a British and US guarantee of Romania's territorial integrity in exchange for extricating Romania from the war. Once again, there was no question of accepting any Romanian veto on dialogue with the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

From 1939-41, Britain was a reluctant anti-revisionist competing against two totalitarian states working together to redraw the borders of South-Eastern Europe. Stalin exploited the situation to expand the Soviet Union's western borders; however, it was Hitler who derived the most benefit from revising the Versailles territorial settlements. Germany used the redrawing of borders in favor of its allies, or promises to do so, as a powerful tool for maintaining allies or gaining new alliances throughout the Second World War. Romania definitively joined the German camp after the loss of Bessarabia – in accordance with the August 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact – and northern Bukovina to the Soviet Union. It then aligned itself with Germany despite the loss of northern Transylvania and Southern Dobrudja to Germany's allies Hungary and Bulgaria. In 1941, the Romanian-Hungarian dispute was used by Germany as a lever to push both countries into the war against the Soviet Union. The Transylvanian issue was still being used as an instrument of German diplomacy in 1944, when there were increasing tendencies in both Romania and Hungary to drop out of the war and leave the German camp.

The 1939 guarantee to Poland and Romania was an instrument of declaratory politics for Britain in its efforts to discourage Germany and build an anti-German coalition in the region. It represented a statement against changes by force which failed to dissuade Hitler in 1939, but also was a significant factor in the failure of British efforts to persuade or cajole Maniu into meaningful action during the Transylvanian crisis. In both cases, this was largely because Hitler and Maniu correctly perceived that there was no Anglo-Soviet understanding to underpin British policy. This article argues that Britain ultimately failed in 1940 because it was caught between competing aims. On the one hand, it sought to influence developments in Romania through Maniu and his mass peasant party, perhaps with Maniu participating in the Romanian Government. However,

it also wished to embroil Germany and the Soviet Union, possibly in Romania, although officials conceded that this was still unlikely for a range of reasons. Above all, the British felt that they had a perfect right to explore any possible way to create friction between the two totalitarian powers and there was no question of accepting any Romanian veto on dialogue with the Soviet Union. This ruled out the Anglo-Soviet understanding Maniu sought as a prerequisite for action.

NOTES

- ¹ "The signing of the Treaty was a great success for Romania; because of this *de jure* recognition of the union, Bessarabia was to be considered Romanian territory, not a territory under the military occupation of Romania." Marcel Mitrasca, *Moldova: A Romanian Province Under Russian Rule : Diplomatic History from the Archives of the Great Powers*, New York, Algora Publishing, 2002, p. 12, p. 167.
- ² Paul D. Quinlan, *Clash over Romania: British and American Policies toward Romania, 1938-1947*, Oakland, California, American Romanian Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1977, p. 17.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- ⁴ *Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939* (DBFP) Third Series, vol. 3, London, H.M.S.O, 1950, p. 232.
- ⁵ Ivor Porter, *Operation Autonomous: With S.O.E. in Wartime Romania*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1989, p. 33.
- ⁶ Paul N. Hehn, *A Low, Dishonest Decade: The Great Powers, Eastern Europe, and the Economic Origins of World War II, 1930-1941*, London, Bloomsbury, 2002, p. 242.
- ⁷ Elisabeth Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War*, London, Macmillan, 1976, p. 7.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6-7.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- ¹⁰ David Dilks, ed., *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan O.M. 1938-1945*, London, William Clowes & Sons, 1971, p. 161.
- ¹¹ Edward Halifax, *Fullness of Days*, New York, Dodd Mead, 1957, p. 208-209; F. S. Northedge, *The Troubled Giant: Britain Among the Great Powers; 1916-1939*, London, London School of Economics and Political Science, 1966, p. 568.
- ¹² DBFP Third Series, vol. 4, London: H.M.S.O, 1951, p. 366-367.
- ¹³ Anna Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers, 1938-1939*, London, Routledge, 1968, p. 211-12.
- ¹⁴ See Sidney Aster, *1939: The Making of the Second World War*, London, London History Book Club, 1973, chapter three.
- ¹⁵ This was the same day as Tilea's meeting with Halifax. DBFP Third Series, vol. 4, London: H.M.S.O, 1951, p. 369-370.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 398.
- ¹⁷ Simon Newman, *March 1939: The British Guarantee to Poland, A Study in the Continuity of British Foreign Policy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1976, pp. 118-19.
- ¹⁸ Halifax memorandum to Cabinet on Anglo-French conversations, March 21, 1939, CAB/24/284.
- ¹⁹ DBFP Third Series, vol. 5, London, H.M.S.O, 1952, pp. 1-19, 30-6, 47-9.

- 20 Northedge, *The Troubled Giant*, p. 575.
- 21 Hansard, *House of Commons Debates* Apr. 13, 1939 vol 346 cc13.
- 22 Brown minute, Jan. 27, 1940, FO371/24968/R1425.
- 23 DBFP Third Series, vol. 5, London, H.M.S.O, 1952, p. 66.
- 24 Hoare letter to Foreign Office, Dec. 8, 1939, FO371/24884/R421.
- 25 Maclean minute, Dec. 24, 1939, FO371/24884/R421.
- 26 Collier minute, Dec. 26, 1939, FO371/24884/R421.
- 27 Keith Neilson, *Britain, Soviet Russia and the Collapse of the Versailles Order, 1919–1939* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 33.
- 28 Cienciala, *Poland and the Western Powers*, p. 224.
- 29 Halifax memorandum to Cabinet on Anglo-French conversations, March 22, 1939, CAB/24/284.
- 30 Anita Prazmowska, *Britain and Poland, 1939-1943: the betrayed ally*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 167.
- 31 DBFP Third Series, vol. 5, London: H.M.S.O, 1952, p. 207.
- 32 Lewellyn Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* Vol. 1, London, H.M.S.O., 1970, pp. 23-27.
- 33 Barker, *British Policy*, pp. 7-8.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.
- 36 Cripps to Foreign Office, June 29, 1940; Sargent minute, June 30, 1940; Nichols minute, July 1, 1940, FO371/24968/R6648.
- 37 Hoare to Halifax, Aug. 8, 1940, FO371/24968/R6751.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 Hoare to Foreign Office, July 1, 1940, FO371/24984/R6667.
- 40 Dixon minute, July 27, 1940, FO371/24968/R6751.
- 41 Broad and Maclean minutes, July 11, 1940, FO371/24968/R6648.
- 42 Hoare to Eden, Feb. 21, 1941, FO371/29975/R4962.
- 43 Rose minute, July 22, 1940, FO371/24968/R6751.
- 44 Broad, Nichols, Sargent and Cadogan minutes, July 10 and 11, 1940, FO371/24968/R6648.
- 45 Le Rougetel to Foreign Office, Aug. 19, 1940 FO371/24992/R7352.
- 46 Stuart minute, July 12, 1940, FO371/24968/R6751.
- 47 Woodward, *British Foreign Policy*, p. 463.
- 48 Foreign Office to Cripps, June 24, 1940, FO371/24844 N5853.
- 49 Barker, *British Policy*, p. 25.
- 50 War Cabinet Conclusions, Aug. 13, 1940, CAB/65/8/37.
- 51 Cripps to Collier, July 16, 1940 FO371/24845 N6526.
- 52 Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Stafford Cripps' Mission to Moscow, 1940-42*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 65.
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 57 Cripps to Collier, July 16, 1940 FO371/24845 N6526.
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 72 Rose and Halifax minutes, Sept. 1 & 2, 1940, FO371/24968/R7395.
 73 Cripps to Foreign Office, Sept. 13, 1940, FO371/24968/R7650.
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 76 Emphasis in original document. Nichols minute, Aug. 2, 1940, FO371/24984/R6897.
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 81 Halifax to Sargent, Aug. 6, 1940, FO371/24984/R6897.
 82 Foreign Office to Hoare, Aug. 6, 1940, FO371/24984/R6897.
 83 Barker, *British Policy*, p. 64.
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 85 Hansard, *House of Commons Debates*, Sept. 5, 1940 vol 365 cc40.
 86 Barker, *British Policy*, p. 71.
 87 Hankey to Halifax, July 22, 1940, FO371/24992/R7352.
 88 Seton-Watson interview with Maniu, July 8 1940, FO371/24992/R7352.

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90 Rose minute, Sept. 1, 1940, FO371/24968/R7388.
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92 Hoare to Halifax, Aug. 8, 1940, FO371/24968/R6751.
93 Knatchbull to Bowker, Jan. 13, 1940, FO371/24968/R950. See also Brown minute, Jan. 10, 1940, FO371/24968/R470.
94 Sargent minute, Apr. 24, 1940, FO371/24889/R5032.
95 Cadogan and Halifax minutes, Apr. 24, 1940, FO371/24889/R5032.
96 R.A. Butler memorandum, June 28, 1940, FO371/24968/R6648.
97 *Ibid.*
98 Seton-Watson interview with Maniu, July 8 1940, FO371/24992/R7352.
99 His father, R.W. Seton Watson, was a British political activist and historian who played an active role in encouraging the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the emergence of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia during and after the First World War. Ion Antonescu considered him to be a 'good friend of Romania' and continued his stipend in 1941, noting that 'he always supported us in the matter of Transylvania.' See Holly Case, *Between States : the Transylvanian Question and the European Idea During World War II*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 65.
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104 Hankey to Eden, Mar. 10, 1941, FO371/29977/R2612.
105 Barker, *British Policy*, p. 3.
106 Hankey to Foreign Office, Aug. 7, 1940, FO371/24992/R6953.
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