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The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and its importance

The rise of Nazi Germany had a major impact over the geopolitical situation on the European continent with its acts of force after 1936 starting with the remilitarisation of the Rhineland, the establishment of the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis and the conciliatory policy of the time led by France and Great Britain. Romanian foreign policy had to adapt to this uncertain and changing context. Without altering its traditional orientation towards France and Britain, Romania started to look for ways to accommodate itself to the new rising revisionist powers.

The appointment in December 1937 of the right-wing government led by the poet Octavian Goga, who had anti-Semitic views and clear sympathy for Germany and Italy, was a first step to this end. In order to appease discontent provoked in London and Paris, the government also included General Ion Antonescu as Minister of Defence, who was recognised for his Anglo-French orientation.



The Munich Agreement of 29 September 1938 and dissolution of Czechoslovakia alarmed Romania and the other small countries in the area which feared a similar fate. Complications over the international setting determined that Carol II made two official visits in November 1938, one to Britain and the other to France, which was followed by a private visit to Germany in order to test intentions of the great powers. Although the two traditional allies of Romania laid on sumptuous receptions, the leaders in London and Paris only offered unconvincing insurances. The meeting with Hitler in Berghof on 24 November also did not offer Carol II the necessary guarantees of Romania's territorial integrity.

The king's response was quick to follow; in order to remain Hitler's only possible interlocutor and in case Romania was forced to reorient itself towards Germany, the sovereign ordered the assassination of the leaders of the Iron Guard or Legionnaire Movement, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, during the night of 29/30 November 1938. After this incident, Romanian-German relations immediately deteriorated, but Germany's economic interests were too important for a possible break-up of relations with Romania.

Thus, in February 1939 Romanian-German negotiations began in order to sign an economic treaty meant to strongly integrate the Romanian economy into Germany's own, with the main resource at issue being Romanian oil. The government in Bucharest during this period was subject to extraordinary pressure mainly caused by the evolution of external events. The Czechoslovak crisis approached a tragic

ending. On 14 March 1939 Slovakia proclaimed its independence, while Hungarian troops entered Sub-Carpathian Ukraine; on 15 March the German army occupied Prague, and Bohemia and Moravia were incorporated into the Reich under the form of a protectorate. At the same time, Germany provoked the Polish crisis: on 21 March 1939 the Reich demanded that Poland return the city of Gdansk and a 'corridor' which would link it to Eastern Prussia and which would benefit from the extraterritoriality status.

In this tense environment, the so-called 'Tilea incident' took place. On 16–17 March 1939 Romania's Minister to London, Viorel Virgil Tilea, informed the Foreign Office that during economic negotiations Germany was prepared to send Romania an ultimatum suggesting that it may share Czechoslovakia's fate. The Romanian diplomat's declaration was officially denied by the Bucharest government but managed to seriously worry British public opinion. All this cascade of events contributed to a British policy response that saw it abandon its conciliatory tone and adopt a firmer attitude towards Nazi Germany.

On 23 March 1939, Romania signed its economic Treaty with Germany and hoped that, in exchange for some economic concessions the country would get recognition for its territorial status quo. After signing the treaty the Romanian government tried to postpone its application; economic agreements were also signed with France and Britain which were meant to appease the negative effects of the treaty with Germany. On 13 April 1939 the governments of France and Britain announced that they guaranteed the territorial integrity of Romania and Greece. Then, the British and the French governments began negotiations with the Soviet Union to create a common front against the Reich. However, the failure of these negotiations had a strong impact on Romania and other countries in Eastern Europe.

For Stalin, the choice was pretty simple. Britain and France did not offer anything concrete in exchange for participating in a conflict against Germany, while Berlin was ready to make significant territorial concessions but only to ensure Moscow's neutrality. At the same time, such an option would have seen Stalin attain one of his strategic objectives of the start of a war between capitalist countries which would have seen them tear themselves apart while increasing the power of the Soviet Union.

Thus, on 23 August 1939 the German-Soviet Non-aggression Pact (Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact) was signed. The pact was accompanied by an additional secret protocol which provided for the division of spheres of influence between the two powers, from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. Thus, Article 1 provided that 'in case of a territorial and political transformation concerning territories belonging to the Baltic States (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), Lithuania's northern border would represent the border of interest spheres, both for Germany and for the USSR. Concerning Lithuania, its interest towards the Wilno (Vilnius) territory was recognised by both parties.' In Article 2 the two countries decided to divide Poland among them: 'In case of territorial and political transformations concerning territories belonging to the Polish state, the interest spheres, both for Germany and for the USSR, would be approximately delimited by rivers Narev, Vistula and San. The issue if interests of both sides made it desirable to preserve an independent Polish state and the manner in which this state's borders would be established would be finally decided only during subsequent political events.' Finally, under Article 3 Germany agreed to Bessarabia's annexation by the USSR: 'In what concerns South-Eastern Europe, the Soviet side underlines its interest for Bessarabia. The German side declares its total political disinterest for these regions.'

As the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, von Ribbentrop, would mention the following year, Berlin's

'disinterest' in South-Eastern Europe up to Constantinople and the Straits only concerned the political aspect, as the Reich's economic interests in this part of the world were clear.

At the moment it was signed the German-Soviet treaty suited both parties: Germany was offered the possibility of liquidating the Polish state without a conflict with the USSR and also of beginning a war in the West against France and Great Britain without being forced to simultaneously fight on two fronts. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, received vast territories in the Baltic area and arrived at the mouths of the Danube by annexing Bessarabia. Moscow would also be offered a respite during which it could fortify its western border and strengthen its army; Stalin was convinced that the new war would be, like the first one, a long conflict and that time would work in his favour.

Only a week after signing the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact Germany attacked Poland and triggered the Second World War. On 17 September the Red Army invaded eastern Poland and got the latter out of the fight. A first objective of the additional secret protocol was thus fulfilled. Caught between two totalitarian giants and isolated from its traditional allies Britain and France which had guaranteed its integrity, Romania became 'an easy prey for the territorial appetites of its neighbours.'

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