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THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE VERSAILLES SYSTEM  
IN CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE  
(1919 - 1939)

The resolution of the Treaty of Versailles and other peace treaties of the period determined the basic principles of the Versailles system, which reflected the compromise made by the victorious powers. At the same time, however, a considerable role was played by a number of other factors which came to light during the actual development of the system. Among these were the conflicting views of the victorious powers, the October Revolution in Russia and its consequences, the national-independence movements, the withdrawal of the United States from the body of signatories (which were at the same time the guarantors of Versailles), the Soviet-Polish war, conflicts among the states, the Hungarian Revolution, economic difficulties and facts resulting from the independent actions of nations at first approved, or of necessity tolerated by the victorious powers, which were considered the chief creators of the post-war state of affairs.

Among the factors which influenced the Versailles state of affairs, a vital role was played by the conflicts between France and Great Britain. These were based on their struggle for hegemony, and were manifested especially in their attitude to defeated Germany<sup>1</sup>. Having penetrated its very life-blood, these conflicts threatened the existence of the Versailles system from the very beginning.<sup>1</sup> The dissatisfaction of Italy and Japan with the spoils of war can only be treated as a lesser factor.

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<sup>1</sup> The following devote some attention to them: J. M. Keynes, *The Economic consequences of the Peace*, London 1920; J. Bainville, *Les conséquences politiques de la paix*, Paris 1920; M. Mourin, *Histoires des nations européennes*, vol. I, Paris 1964, p. 54; L. Ivanov, *Anglo-francuzskoe soperničestvo 1919 - 1927 g.g.*, Moskva 1928; Viscount D'Abernon, *Diary*, vol. II, pp. 23 - 24.

<sup>1</sup> Ch. Mowat, *Britain between the Wars 1918 - 1940*, London 1962, p. 158.

Taking into consideration the variety of factors influencing the development of the order established by Versailles, one must state, that in the final result it was unfavourable to the defeated states, neither did it fully satisfy the victors. To some extent it was a compromise with the prevailing sympathies for liberation and democracy, but at the same time it froze the social *status quo* and impeded the aspirations towards social changes. It introduced a greater democracy in international relations and at the same time it continued to sanction legally the dominant position of the great powers. Therefore, one can agree that the order created by Versailles satisfied no one in full. For some it deserved the name of the Dictate of Versailles, by others it was treated as a compromise caused by the necessity of the moment. For isolated Soviet Russia the Versailles system meant the stabilization of the capitalist structure and the consolidation of the hostile alignment of the Entente, which denoted the maintenance of a permanent threat.

The system of Versailles aroused still more opposition in Central-Eastern Europe. Among the Western States the question of the unsatisfactory stabilization in Central-European affairs was raised more than once and to an excessive degree in connection with frontier and national conflicts, the weak economic structure of these countries (generally agricultural) and their lack of political stability in internal affairs. These convictions proved to be unfounded, for some of the newly emerged states already on the threshold of their independent existence proved to be sufficiently strong and responsible to maintain the *status quo* of Versailles. This became especially obvious, where the suppression of revolutionary movements and the defence of the capitalist system were concerned. It was only the emergence of the Little Entente (Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Rumania), which led to the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution and the defeat of those who aimed at a revision of Hungary. In 1921, Poland brought about the conclusion of the Treaty of Riga and an alliance with Rumania, which determined the boundaries of the Treaty of Versailles' domain in the East.<sup>3</sup> At the same time the Franco-Polish alliance was drawn up. France also tightened its relations with other states, especially with Czechoslovakia, and the so called Eastern Alliance was drawn up and played an important role in the history of Europe between the two world wars.

Symptoms both of weakness and of strength were revealed in the first years of the functioning of the Versailles system in Central-Eastern Euro-

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<sup>3</sup> "Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej" ["Journal of Laws of the Polish Republic"], 1921, No. 49, entry 300 and No. 89, entries 556 and 557.

pe (1920 - 1932). The withdrawal of the United States from the active concert of European powers and the resulting dependence of the system on the entente between France and Great Britain led with surprising speed to a deepening and sharpening of conflicts among the powers. This was especially evident in the issue of reparations.<sup>4</sup>

An important weakening factor was the difficult economic situation, which was more or less evident in almost all the countries, not excluding the victorious powers and which found its expression in the calling of the Genoa meeting in 1922.<sup>5</sup> The economic difficulties were particularly severely felt by almost all the Central-European states which were poorly industrialized, with the exception of Czechoslovakia.

An essential role was played by the situation in the Reich, which was charged with revolutionary sentiments.<sup>6</sup> Governing circles were filled with anxiety about public feeling in Austria, which found itself in the catastrophic situation of being a truncated state, incapable of an independent existence without external support.<sup>7</sup>

The vision of social upheaval in Berlin as also in Vienna seemed to disturb the capitalist (or Versailles) state of affairs, all the more so since the existence of Soviet Russia was a focal point of burning interest for the working masses, which had experienced the war and had been hard-pressed by the post-war difficulties.

In the first years the revisionist aims of the dissatisfied states were considered as only a potential threat. This became obvious in Hungary's policy, which did not for a moment renounce its claim to its lost lands, and in Bulgaria's concealed revisionist aims, likewise in the spreading nationalistic legend about the wrong suffered by Germany and the growth of the idea of revenge.

The anti-Soviet policy of the Versailles system also contained a potential danger. The German-Soviet rapprochement of 1922 in Rapallo political-

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<sup>4</sup> Formally speaking France and Czechoslovakia were joined by the treaty of alliance and friendship of the 25th of January 1924. Czechoslovakia unwilling to commit itself against Germany avoided the conclusion of a military convention. See: P. S. Wandycz, *France and Her Eastern Allies 1919 - 1925*, Minneapolis 1962, pp. 398 - 399, also p. 292; E. Beneš, *Paměti. Od Mnichova k nové válce a k novému vítězství*, Praha 1947, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> S. Mikulicz, *Od Genui do Rapallo [From Genoa to Rapallo]*, Warszawa 1966, pp. 13 - 176.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. L. Zimmermann, *Deutsche Aussenpolitik in der Ära der Weimarer Republik*, Göttingen—Berlin—Frankfurt a/M, pp. 173 - 175; I. M. Lemín, *Vnešnjaia politika Velikobritanii ot Versala do Locarna 1919 - 1925*, Moskva 1949, p. 358.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. Kozieński, *Sprawa przyłączenia Austrii do Niemiec po I wojnie światowej (1919 - 1922) [The Question of Linking Austria to Germany after the First World War 1919 - 1922]*, Poznań 1967, p. 201.

ly and psychologically shook the structure of Versailles, and exerted an influence on the policy of the victorious powers especially in relation to Germany.<sup>8</sup>

Already at that time no contribution was made to the preservation of post-war relations by the policy of Italy, since it was dissatisfied with those resolutions of the peace treaties, which did not meet with its territorial demands or its aspirations as an imperial power.<sup>9</sup> Italy's negative attitude took on an increasing importance in the conditions of Franco-British rivalry.

In the first post-war period the system of Versailles was exposed not only to the destructive activity of the dissatisfied states, but also to the fact that those states which were interested in preserving the force of the treaty's resolutions, did not always contribute to its maintenance on account of their own relationships. Putting aside the conflicts and animosity of the great powers, it appears essential to consider Polish-Lithuanian, Polish-Czechoslovakian, Italo-Yugoslavian and also Yugoslavian-Rumanian relationships, which were all charged with territorial conflicts. Although conflicts among the states belonging to the Versailles group did not touch on matters having a more essential importance for their existence, they did not after all remain without influence on the breaking up of unity in more important matters.<sup>10</sup> They created a state of tension and uncertainty and generally favoured revisionist aims. In the twenties' the influence of France and the still existing feeling of solidarity among the post-Versailles states contributed to the blunting of feelings of animosity and the relief of situations of conflict. In the later period the situation changed for the worse.

Another weakness of the system, which deserves greater attention, was inherent in the multi-national structure of the Eastern and Central-European states. Almost all of them contained within their borders a considerable percentage of national minorities, which of course were not integrat-

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<sup>8</sup> The consequences of Rapallo and its influence on the policy of the great powers is treated among others by the following: W. N. Medlicott, *British Foreign Policy since Versailles*, London 1940; H. Helbig, *Die Träger der Rapallo-Politik*, Göttingen 1958; E. H. Carr, *Berlin—Moskau. Deutschland und Russland zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen*, Stuttgart 1954; W. von Blücher, *Deutschlands Weg nach Rapallo*, Wiesbaden 1951.

<sup>9</sup> H. M. Maxwell, P. Cremona, *Italy's Foreign and Colonial Policy 1914 - 1937*, London—New York—Toronto 1938, pp. 215 - 239.

<sup>10</sup> A particularly vivid example of this appeared in the disagreements between Poland and Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovak policy, which treated a rapprochement with Poland with reserve, frustrated attempts to bring Poland into the Little Entente. See A. Gajanová, *ČSR a středoevropska politika velmoci (1918 - 1938)*, Praha 1967, p. 104.

ing factors in the individual state organisms. Numerous national minorities also constituted a source of irritation in international relations and did not augment the authority of the states concerned especially since minority treaties empowering the League of Nations to interfere in the defence of minority rights were forced on Poland, Czechoslovakia, Rumania and Yugoslavia. The question of minorities, often raised at the Geneva forum — chiefly by Germans — became an opportunity to voice revisionist claims.

A new period in the history of post-war Europe began in 1923 — the period of Locarno. That is when the main pillar of the structure established at Versailles was erected: i.e., the Franco-British Entente. The occupation of the Ruhr Basin caused a sharp crisis in the relations between Paris and London, the latter of which declared itself against too rigorous an execution of the peace resolutions. London strove in this way to spare the Reich and to loosen the bonds of Rapallo. The continued existence of the Versailles system was made doubtful. Nevertheless, Paris, finding itself in a weakened position due to Washington's support of London, showed itself to be ready for concessions and thus the system established at Versailles did not disintegrate, but was amended. A political and diplomatic conflict was waged for many months about the proposed scope of the amendment.

The interest and international position of France as well as consideration of the forces supporting the functioning of the Versailles system in its unmodified form, required that any changes in favour of the Reich should be minimal. France in particular could not afford to ignore the opposition of its Eastern allies, especially those which were directly threatened: i.e., Poland and Czechoslovakia.<sup>11</sup> Being unable to withdraw either completely or formally from the Versailles system and faced by such a situation, London aimed at such concessions favourable to Germany which might act as a balance to France and draw Germany away from Rapallo. British policy, therefore, effected the conclusion of a treaty in 1925 at Locarno, which did not violate the resolutions of the Treaty of Versailles in the legal sense. It achieved this by finding a point of contact between Berlin's demands and the limit in concessions which the pro-Versailles block was willing to make.

Nevertheless Locarno and the policy which it inaugurated, had a significant influence on the durability of the post-war order. The Locarno resolutions did in fact accomplish a factual revision of Versailles on two important issues: they distinguished between the possibilities of revising the Reich's Western and Eastern frontiers and freed the Reich from the obligations arising out of Article 16 of the League of Nations' pact. The

<sup>11</sup> Cf. W. Bałcerak, *Polityka zagraniczna Polski w dobie Locarno* [*Polish Foreign Policy during the Period of Locarno*], Wrocław 1967, p. 97.

political position of France was weakened while that of Great Britain, which was well disposed towards revision in the East, was augmented.<sup>12</sup> Germany, aiming for a revision of its frontiers, now entered into the concert of powers as an equal. This was caused by a general increase in revisionist tendencies,<sup>13</sup> including those of the dissatisfied states of Central Europe. It was moreover highly significant, that they tried to realize these aims in a peaceful way, in an atmosphere of pacifism, with the help of the League of Nations, which according to the aim of its creators was after all supposed to be a guarantee and guardian of the Versailles system.

The Hungaro-Italian rapprochement, which in 1927 found its expression in the shape of an alliance, was not without influence on the growth of revisionist aims. Italy's premier, Benito Mussolini, the next year publicly declared himself for the first time in support of a revision of the peace treaties.<sup>14</sup>

The growth of revisionist activities after 1925, legalized to some extent, did not remain without influence on the sentiment concerning the durability of post-war relations among Eastern and Central-European states and on their belief in the security based on the system of Versailles and the obligations of the great powers.<sup>15</sup>

New answers were increasingly sought to the problem of ensuring state security. This type of tendency was obvious in Polish policy and appeared also in Czechoslovak, Yugoslavian and Rumanian policy.

Warsaw tried to strengthen its alliance with France, which was weakened by Locarno, by tightening its alliance with Rumania<sup>16</sup> and by a rapprochement with Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.<sup>17</sup> Polish policy treated the

<sup>12</sup> T. Komarnicki, *Piłsudski a polityka wielkich mocarstw zachodnich [Piłsudski and the Policy of the Great Western Powers]*, "Niepodległość," vol. IV, 1952, p. 79.

<sup>13</sup> Ossolineum Library — Wrocław, A. Wysocki, *Dzieje mojej służby [The History of My Service]*, ms. p. 259.

<sup>14</sup> In the speech of the 5th of June 1928 in the Senate. B. Mussolini, *Scritti e discorsi del 1927 al 1928*, Milano 1934, pp. 203 - 228.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *O Československé zahraniční politice 1918 - 1939*, Praha 1956, p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> The years 1926 - 1929 marked a definite revival in Polish-Rumanian military contacts. Cf. S. Gaur, *Les relations entre la Roumanie et l'U.R.S.S. depuis le traité de Versailles*, Paris 1936, p. 93.

<sup>17</sup> See W. Balcerak, *Stosunki polsko-czechosłowackie w okresie kształtowania się systemu lokarneńskiego (1923 - 1925) [Polish-Czechoslovakian Relations during the Development of the Locarno System]*, "Studia z dziejów ZSRR i Europy Środkowej," vol. II, pp. 228 - 285 and *idem*, *Sprawa polsko-czechosłowackiego sojuszu wojskowego w latach 1921 - 1927 [The Question of the Polish Czechoslovak Military Alliance during 1921 - 1927]*, *ibidem*, vol. III, pp. 213 - 225; H. Bułhak, *Z dziejów stosunków wojskowych polsko-czechosłowackich w latach 1921 - 1927 [From the History of Polish-Czechoslovak Military Relations during 1921 - 1927]*, *ibidem*, vol. V, pp. 135 - 145.

rapprochement with these last two countries as a possible insurance against the West. In order to insure itself against the East, Poland tried to better its relations with the U.S.S.R., on the one hand, and to accomplish a rapprochement with Turkey on the other, and to win over the Soviet Union's neighbours to form a security group. Prague undertook efforts towards a strengthening of the Little Entente. It tried to support an independent Austria, and to pacify the Balkan situation, mediating for example in the Bulgaro-Yugoslav conflicts in the question of Macedonia and in the Italo-Yugoslav conflict in respect of the Albanian problem.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, in order not to draw Germany's revisionist ambitions towards themselves, Czechoslovak politicians tried not to antagonize that country.<sup>19</sup> It was also chiefly on account of this consideration that they approached with reserve a closer rapprochement with Poland, which more than any other state seemed to them to be threatened by a conflict with the Reich.

Yugoslavia, feeling itself to be threatened by increasingly dynamic Italian imperialism<sup>20</sup> and being especially sensitive to the subject of the restoration of the Habsburgs, showed less interest in tightening the bonds of union with the remaining states of the Little Entente, with Hungary or with Poland.<sup>21</sup> This is because it feared the possibility of jeopardizing its relations with Germany (which was also opposed to the return of the Habsburgs). Belgrade strove, with increased energy, to gain the political and economic support of France and also Great Britain.

Neither was Rumanian policy after Locarno distinguished for its efforts towards a consolidation of the Little Entente.<sup>22</sup> It showed on the other hand a tendency to strengthen its alliance with Poland and a significant activity aiming at a formal ratification by the powers of the *fait accompli* of its possession of Bessarabia. It was so far successful, that allied relations

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<sup>18</sup> P. Hradečný, *Italo-južoslavské soupeření o Albánii a československá zahraniční politika ve 20-tých letech. Československo a Južoslávia*, Bratislava 1968, pp. 35 - 351.

<sup>19</sup> In his interview with the London General Press agency of the 13th of August 1930 the President of Czechoslovakia T. Masaryk, recognizing the so-called Polish Corridor as one of the chief dangers threatening peace, expressed his belief that Germany would never reconcile itself to its existence.

<sup>20</sup> In 1967 Yugoslav-Italian relations became strained on account of the strengthening of Italy's position in Albania and there was even the danger of armed conflict, see: H. M. Maxwell, P. Cremona, *Italy's Foreign and Colonial Policy 1914 - 1937*, London—New York—Toronto, 1936, pp. 101 - 114.

<sup>21</sup> Yugoslavia's attitude to the Turco-Polish initiative for a closer rapprochement was one of reserve. In its relations with Poland it stopped short at the conclusion of a treaty of alliance in 1927.

<sup>22</sup> S. Graur, *Les relations...*, p. 93.

with Poland were revived and tightened and soon after, on the 16th of September 1926, the Italo-Rumanian treaty of alliance was signed and the Italians recognized Rumania's right to Bessarabia.<sup>21</sup> It must be stressed that the rapprochement between Bucharest and Rome took place during a period of tension in Italo-Yugoslav relations. The tensions threatened an armed conflict and at the same time moreover Italy was throwing wood on the fire of Bulgaro-Yugoslav relations over the question of Macedonia.

Summarizing what has been said above, one can assume, that the efforts made on the part of individual states to maintain the *status quo* of Versailles, did not always contribute to the strengthening of that system, on account of the differences between these same states. In more than one case they were the result of narrowly considered interests, disclosed differences in attitudes which produced the exact opposite effects, since they created greater possibilities for revisionist forces.

The process of the gradual disintegration of the Versailles camp in Central-Eastern Europe already evident in the second half of the twenties', became particularly dangerous in the conditions of the dominance of the Locarno policy in international relations, during the period when the authority was weakened and when Briand led the policy of Franco-German reconciliation.<sup>24</sup> Besides, pacifism increasingly permeated the international atmosphere, weakened solidarity and sowed harmful illusions, to the effect that peace could be maintained by partial concessions and recompensation of the severe conditions dictated to the defeated states by the resolutions of the peace treaties.

The Locarno policy also contributed to the diminution of the League of Nations' role as a factor strengthening the order established by Versailles. Nevertheless, Franco-British cooperation in Geneva and the entry of Germany into the League in 1926 contributed to its wide popularization and to particular circumstances which that organization was experiencing in 1926 - 1932. One must remember, however, that the state of affairs of the League of Nations was then based on both pacifist and revisionist premises. Germany and other dissatisfied states, acting within the scope of the League, hoped to bring about a revision of the resolutions of the Treaty based on Article 19.<sup>25</sup> Calculations dealing with this matter were quite

<sup>21</sup> The treaty provided among other things, for political and diplomatic help in the eventuality of a conflict between one of the parties and a third state, "à titre réciproque," "Europe Nouvelle," Feb. 2, 1927.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. M. B a u m o n t, *La faillite de la paix (1918 - 1939)*, Paris 1951, pp. 316 - 339.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from the Reich's Minister for Foreign Affairs, A. Stresemann's to the former successor to the throne of the 7th of September 1925. G. Stresemann, *Vermächtnis, der Nachlass in drei Bänden*, Berlin 1932, vol. II, p. 553; W. v o n R h e i n h a b e n, *Von Versailles zur Freiheit*, Hamburg 1928, p. 147.



realistic, since the Western powers and the groups of states interested in maintaining peace, seemed to favour revision of the treaties. In such a situation the League of Nations became rather a place of auctions and a warden of some sort of peace rather than of the peace of Versailles.

The peace desired by the pacifists was to be maintained above all at the cost of the revision of the frontiers of the Central and East European countries. The ephemeral character of the Central European states was the subject of polemics and discussions in those days as was the necessity, in the name of peace, of changing Poland's Western frontier in favour of Germany.<sup>21</sup> Briand, the helmsman of long standing in French politics, who on the one hand supported the idea of European unity,<sup>27</sup> was on the other hand the author of the saying that spiteful draughts reign in the so called Polish corridor and are in the long run impossible to tolerate.<sup>28</sup> The peace of the pacifists was in principle also to be an anti-Soviet peace, since they were concerned with strengthening the anti-Soviet currents in German politics and to direct the expansion of the Reich towards the East. The increased popularity and activity of the League of Nations on revisionist

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<sup>21</sup> We find the following quotations of famous people in one of the many pacifist publications, which appeared in France towards the end of the twenties' and in the thirties'. E. Berli: "*La France n'a jamais approuvé toutes les stipulations du traité. Mais elle n'a jamais songé à en exiger la révision. C'est que le traité, quand même, la favorise. Seulement, elle pense qu'elle y acquiesce, non parce qu'il la favorise, mais parce qu'il est traité.*" Edouard Pfeiffer (secretary of the Fédération Internationale des Partis Radicaux): "*La question de l'Anschluss? S'il devenait une réalité, la France subirait un grave défaite diplomatique, mais ce ne serait pas un casus belli.*" Reste seul le corridor polonais. L'Allemagne considère le status quo actuel comme inacceptable. Cela ne veut pas dire qu'elle songe à la guerre, mais elle pourrait être entraînée dans une guerre à cause de cette question. Si nous sommes des amis de la Pologne, nous ne pouvons pas être hypocrites, et il faut nous dire: s'il y avait des troubles à l'est de l'Europe devrions-nous nous laisser entraîner dans une guerre, parce que nous voudrions respecter les traités? Certainement, disent certains hommes politiques de droite et l'on connaît le mot de Franklin-Bouillon «notre frontière est sur la Vistule». Quelle que soit notre sympathie pour la Pologne, nous ne pourrions accepter cette thèse. Si nous étions Polonais, est-ce que notre intérêt bien compris ne consisterait pas à envisager à l'amiable le règlement de la question du corridor?" Arthur Fontaine (director of the International Office for Work): "Je suis, dans l'ensemble, d'accord avec M. Pfeiffer. Il dit qu'une seule question se pose, celle du corridor polonais. C'est peut-être la plus importante, mais non la seule; et je ne dis que si, après l'avoir résolue d'autres revendications surgissaient aussitôt, nous n'aurions nullement fait un pas en avant vers l'apaisement, mais bien plutôt un pas en arrière." (*Problèmes franco-allemands d'après-guerre*, Paris 1932, pp. 38, 50 and 60).

<sup>27</sup> In the memorandum of the 1st of May 1930, "Union fédéral européen." See: V. Tanculesco, *La Petite Entente et l'Union Européen*, Paris 1931.

<sup>28</sup> J. P. Boncour, *Entre deux guerres 1919 - 1934*, Paris 1946, vol. II, pp. 167 - 168.

principles and in an atmosphere of pacifism also had unfavourable consequences in another field. This was its contribution to a type of psychological disarmament of society and political circles both in Western and Central-European Countries and to a deadening of the senses against the danger of revision.

The dulling of society's sensibility by the atmosphere of pacifism, already popularized in the last years of the twenties', had all the more meaning, since from 1929 economic difficulties connected with the universal economic crisis lessened the attention paid to the maintenance of the Versailles system.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile the rather pressing for economic self-sufficiency among the individual Central-European states had a bearing on their foreign policy in the spirit of the increased domination of separate and different state interests.

The increasing revisionist tendencies and the accumulating economic difficulties created favourable conditions for undertaking much more decisive efforts in the matter of changing the *status quo*. German politicians also seemed to be of the same opinion. Whereas in the years 1926 - 1930 Germans concentrated their revisionist offensive in the international arena on the issue of minorities, treating the customs war with Poland rather in the context of bilateral relations, in 1931 they undertook an attempt charged with possible consequences at accomplishing an economic Anschluss of Austria, by way of an Austro-German customs union.<sup>30</sup>

Faced with the unexpected attempt radically to change the Versailles structure, Europe's reaction was that of opposition. France, the states of the Little Entente and Poland took a position against the Austro-German customs union. Italy did not react particularly favourably to it. Although Italy was dissatisfied with some of the conclusions of the peace conference, it still stood by the resolutions of Versailles and was concerned with maintaining an independent Austria.<sup>31</sup> Berlin had to withdraw in view of the unfriendly and reserved stand taken by London. An attempt at economic Anschluss appeared to be premature.

The unsuccessful attempt at an Anschluss had an influential effect on strengthening the position of France which had been impaired by Locarno; although this was also the result of French efforts, which aimed at a stabilization of the prevailing state of affairs. These found their expression among other things in the so called Tardieu plan of 1932, which established

<sup>29</sup> These difficulties found their expression among others in the discussions of the Little Entente conference in Strbska Pleso (25 - 27 June 1930). The conference tried to find a solution by way of an economic rapprochement. See M. Matitch, *Projet d'Union Danubienne. Le point de vue Yougoslave*, Paris 1933, pp. 178 - 180.

<sup>30</sup> E. Zöllner, *Geschichte Österreichs*, München 1966, pp. 509 - 510.

<sup>31</sup> H. M. Maxwell, P. Cremona, *Italy's Foreign...*, pp. 149 - 150.

an economic rapprochement of the Danube states, and in the bringing about of a relaxation in relations between Prague and Budapest, the latter of which was interested in French financial help.<sup>32</sup>

The order of Versailles seemed at the beginning of the thirties' to be strengthened by the marked tendency towards a rapprochement in Franco-Soviet relations,<sup>33</sup> by the conclusion of a Polish-Soviet non-aggression pact in 1932 and by the talks, mediated by Poland and conducted between Soviet Russia and Rumania, which aimed at concluding a similar pact.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, despite certain signs seeming to attest to the strengthening of the Versailles order in Central-Eastern Europe, the chief trend of events was directed at a further.

Already at the time of the conclusion of the Austro-German customs union affair (in September 1931) by the Council of the League of Nations, Japan carried out an armed aggression against China in Manchuria, thus violating the League of Nations pact. Nevertheless, Geneva did not treat Japan as the aggressor and did not impose the sanctions prescribed by Article 16 (partly devaluated by Locarno). This was the first time that the guarantees of the League were not carried into effect. The two chief powers of the League showed themselves to be undecided, as were also the United States.

The disarmament conference, which began in February 1932, did not realize the hopes placed in it to strengthen the peace based on the supremacy of the Versailles order. It showed that the dissatisfied countries with Germany in the lead were not aiming at disarmament, but under the slogan of equality of armament they were aiming at greater armament. A declaration was issued on the 11th of December 1932 by Great Britain, France and Italy regarding Germany's right to equal armament, thus making a step in the direction of a revision of the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>35</sup> The event was far-reaching in its consequences. These powers met Germany's aims half-way in the hope of winning it over to cooperation and to draw it away finally from the policy of Rapallo.<sup>36</sup>

The tendencies in the policy of the great powers, to appease Germany at the cost of concessions forced on smaller states, became continually more pronounced and were revealed in a particularly distinct way in 1933 in the Four-Power Pact. This pact shook the whole system of Versailles and led to basic changes in the international situation.

<sup>32</sup> A. Gajanová, *ČSR...*, p. 290.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. W. E. Scott, *Le pacte franco-soviétique. Alliance contre Hitler*, Paris 1965, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> S. Graur writes about these talks in *Les relations...*, pp. 119 - 122.

<sup>35</sup> E. N. Dzelepy, *La nouvelle triplique*, Paris, p. 40.

<sup>36</sup> W. E. Scott, *Le pacte franco-soviétique...*, p. 113.

The creation of a directory of four powers dividing Europe into spheres of influence could only mean the commitment of Central-Eastern Europe to Germany and Italy. It was moreover bound to direct their expansion towards the U.S.S.R. At precisely this time the latter, after years of a negative approach to Versailles as an act hostile to itself in the post-war conditions, was manifesting its own ambition to maintain the existing state of affairs. It became evident that the system of Versailles was characterized by a passive anti-Sovietism; in the face of a possible expansion of the fascist states and the tendency of Western powers to direct this towards the East, Versailles even came to symbolize for Soviet Russia a dam of defence against the flood of expansion.<sup>37</sup>

The danger inherent in the possible realization of the Four-Power Pact aroused the states of Central-Eastern Europe to defend the existing state of affairs. Poland and the states of the Little Entente, already disturbed somewhat earlier by the policy of the great powers, reacted with decided opposition and solidarity.<sup>38</sup> A consolidation of the Little Entente was brought about and expressed in the conclusion of an organizational pact.<sup>39</sup> A rapprochement between the states of this group and Poland came about and a concerted pressure was also brought to bear on France. In consequence France amended the proposed pact. The Four-Power Pact divested of a satisfactory revisionist attraction no longer appealed to Berlin and died a natural death.<sup>40</sup>

In the altered international situation, the Western powers still showed a readiness to make concessions to Germany, which was openly attacking the Versailles *status quo*.<sup>41</sup> Neither the solidarity nor the aim of the states supporting the maintenance of treaties in Central-Eastern Europe lasted long.

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<sup>37</sup> The French government tried at the time to come to an understanding with Germany at the cost of a revision of Polish frontiers and directing their expansion to the U.S.S.R. See: R. Kvaček, *Nad Evropou zataženo. Československo a Evropa 1933 - 1937*, Praha 1966, p. 42; "Wiadomości," Aug. 6, 1958.

<sup>38</sup> R. Kvaček, *Nad Evropou zataženo...*, pp. 28 - 29, 125; *Diariusz i teki Jana Szembeka (1935 - 1945)* [*The Diary and Portfolio of Jan Szembek (1935 - 1945)*], London 1964, vol. I, pp. 19 - 38; J. Beck, *Dernier rapport. Politique polonaise 1926 - 1939*, Neuchâtel 1951, pp. 39 - 43, 268 - 271.

<sup>39</sup> E. Beneš, *Paměti...*, p. 38.

<sup>40</sup> Baron Aloisi, *Journal*, p. 127.

<sup>41</sup> P. Boncour declared on the 14th of November 1933 in the House of Deputies, that an understanding between the great powers should be aimed for and any attempt to encircle Germany should be opposed, "Le Temps," Nov. 16, 1933.

First of all the paths of Poland and Czechoslovakia parted.<sup>42</sup> Upon Hitler's coming to power, Warsaw brought about an incidental trial of strength and achieved the conclusion in 1934 of a non-aggression pact with Germany and the tempering of anti-Polish revisionist action. The Policy of balances was begun. This meant among other things Poland's freeing itself from the somewhat burdensome French tutelage, and the aim of directing German expansion to the South-East, as well as the refusal to enter into the Eastern pact. Polish policy also aimed at bringing about closer relations with Hungary, loosening the Little Entente and at a rapprochement with Yugoslavia. In 1934 the Polish government failed to respect the resolutions of the treaties regarding minorities.<sup>43</sup>

Prague on the other hand, avoiding in 1933 the conclusion of a closer alliance with Poland for fear of offending the Germans,<sup>44</sup> was faced by an increased threat of danger after the German-Polish non-aggression declaration was signed and sought new guarantees of its safety by a consolidation of the Little Entente,<sup>45</sup> and also by a Czechoslovak-Soviet and a Franco-Soviet rapprochement.<sup>46</sup> Minister Beneš, in contrast to the helmsman of Polish policy — Pilsudski followed by Beck—believed in the efficacy of pacts of collective security, a belief which he expressed in his hopes regarding the Eastern Pact and to a certain extent the League of Nations.<sup>47</sup> Czechoslovak policy, finding favourable conditions in Paris, contributed to the entry of the U.S.S.R. into the League of Nations in 1934 and to a Franco-Soviet rapprochement.

Other Central-Eastern states, being similarly conscious of the disturbing changes which were taking place in the international arena, endeavoured to insure themselves as effectively as possible. They counted little on the guarantees of the League and so, wanting to strengthen their positions

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<sup>42</sup> R. Kvaček, *Nad Evropou zataženo...*, pp. 31 - 32; J. Beck, *Dernier rapport...*, p. 54.

<sup>43</sup> Although this move was a threat to the authority of the League of Nations, it did not evoke any sharper reaction from its members. Cf. W. Michowicz, *Walka dyplomacji polskiej przeciwko traktatowi mniejszościowemu w Lidze Narodów w 1934* [Poland's Diplomatic Struggle Against the Minorities Treaty in the League of Nations in 1934], Łódź 1963.

<sup>44</sup> See: *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, Series 2, vol. IV, No. 298; M. Pułaski, *Stosunki dyplomatyczne polsko-czechosłowacko-niemieckie od roku 1933 do wiosny 1938* [Polish-Czechoslovak-German Diplomatic Relations from 1933 to Spring 1938], Poznań 1967, p. 54.

<sup>45</sup> See: R. Kvaček, *Nad Evropou zataženo...*, pp. 45 - 46.

<sup>46</sup> S. I. Prasalov, *Československo-sovětské smlouva o vzájemné pomoci z roku 1935*, "Studie z dějin československo-sovětských vztahů 1917 - 1938," Praha 1967, pp. 79 - 125.

<sup>47</sup> R. Kvaček, *Nad Evropou zataženo...*, pp. 66 - 94.

*vis-à-vis* the great powers, aimed at regional agreements with states in a similar situation. Thus the Little Entente was maintained despite the fact that the danger of Hungarian revisionism was being pushed into the background by the growing threat to Czechoslovakia by the Reich and to Yugoslavia by Italy, and by the increased doubts of Rumania as to the fate of Bessarabia. In 1934 the so called Baltic Entente was formed with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to the North of Poland and the Balkan Entente with Rumania, Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey to the South. Nevertheless almost all these countries wished to remain outside the arena of any future great conflicts. Even Czechoslovakia, which was vitally interested in maintaining an independent Austria, showed itself to be uninterested in the matter of the Anschluss.<sup>48</sup> This is why that country was so obviously unwilling to make any ties with Poland — being the country around which smaller groupings would naturally collect to form a broader camp — since it was especially exposed both politically and strategically and could draw these other countries into the whirlpool of dangerous events.<sup>49</sup>

Some states were unwilling to form while others distrusted the possibility of forming a greater Central-East European block having satisfactory defensive strength in the face of the decreasing influence of France, which was withdrawing more and more obviously behind the Maginot line, and in the face of Great Britain's increasing willingness to make concessions. Consequently individual states tried to reach an agreement with Germany or with Italy. They were persuaded to this not only by factors of security, but also by economic considerations, i.e. the need to find other sources of financial support instead of the French.

In their feverish search the governments of the Eastern and Central European states seemed not to notice the possibility of relying on the Soviet Union. It appears to be quite certain that the chief reason for the unwillingness to attempt a rapprochement with the U.S.S.R. was anti-Soviet prejudices. Another important reason was the fear of offending Germany, Italy or other states having an anti-Soviet policy. Besides, some politicians were still waiting to see the effect of the U.S.S.R.'s activity as a member of the League of Nations.<sup>50</sup>

The lack of solidarity in foreign policy among the Central-European powers (which became obvious in the mid thirties'), the loosening of

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<sup>48</sup> In his exposé of the 21st of March 1934 Beneš declared that the matter of the Anschluss was no "axis" of Czechoslovak foreign policy and that the possibility of its coming into effect was taken into consideration. *Zahraniční politika*, 1934, p. 167.

<sup>49</sup> M. Pułaski, *Stosunki dyplomatyczne...*, p. 54.

<sup>50</sup> V. I. Popov, *Diplomatičeskie otnošenija meždu SSSR i Anglij (1929 - 1938 g.g.)*, Moskva 1965, pp. 192 - 442.

their ties with France, the antipathy and even animosity which was manifested towards the Soviet Union, all contributed to a great extent to the weakening of the Versailles order, if only by emboldening the dissatisfied states.

Despite the encouragement received both from London and from Paris, Hitler's Germany withdrew from the League of Nations and the Disarmament Conference as soon as the end of 1933. After this, once it had strengthened its position by concluding a non-aggression pact with Poland, Germany started its intensive action of economic and political penetration in the Danube region.<sup>51</sup> German diplomacy worked towards the disintegration of the Little Entente. Germany increased its infiltration into Austria, preparing the Anschluss from the inside<sup>52</sup> and tried to isolate Czechoslovakia.<sup>53</sup> In 1935 Germany introduced a national military service in violation of Clause V of the Treaty of Versailles.

At the same time Italy signed the Rome protocols, which were also signed by Austria and Hungary, in order to strengthen its position in the Danube area. It tried to win over Poland and Rumania.<sup>54</sup> Finally in the autumn of 1935 Italy decided on an armed aggression against Abyssinia, thus violating the treaties and the League of Nations pact in an inexcusable manner.

These moves, clearly aimed at the resolutions of Versailles, did not evoke a fitting reaction. From among the great powers only the U.S.S.R. decidedly came out against Italian aggression.<sup>55</sup> Great Britain and France, fearing to offend Italy and cause its transference to the German side, tried rather to come to terms with the aggressor.<sup>51</sup> In effect the aggressor remained unpunished and the aggression itself was sanctioned by a num-

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<sup>51</sup> The primary object became Yugoslavia, with which the Reich concluded a trade agreement on the 1st of May 1934. Next, by means of similar agreements, Germany bound to itself Hungary, Rumania and Bulgaria already becoming their chief contracting party by 1937 and making them economically dependent on itself. See: V. K. Volkov, *Germano-jugoslavskije otnošenija i razval Maloj Antanty 1933 - 1938*, Moskva 1966, pp. 133 - 148; W. Grabska, *Ekonomiczna ekspansja Niemiec na wschód w latach 1870 - 1939 [Germany's Economic Expansion in the East during 1870 - 1939]*, Wrocław 1964, pp. 185 - 186.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. J. Gawroński, *Moja misja w Wiedniu 1932 - 1938 [My Mission in Vienna 1932 - 1938]*, Warszawa 1965, pp. 276 - 295.

<sup>53</sup> Z. Avramowski, *Nastojanja Nemačke da odvoji Jugoslaviju od Čehoslovačke i Rumunije putem zbliženja s Madjarskom (1935 - 1936)*, in: *Československo a Juhoslavia. Z dejin československo-juhoslovenských vztahov*, Bratislava 1968, pp. 285 - 300.

<sup>54</sup> See among others Gawroński, *Moja misja w Wiedniu [My Mission in Vienna]*, p. 354.

<sup>55</sup> *Istorija diplomatii*, vol. III, Moskva 1965, pp. 622 - 624.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, vol. III, pp. 617 - 621.

ber of states belonging to the League of Nations. A mortal blow was dealt to the organization of Geneva.

At a time when the crisis of the Versailles system was deepening, the German armies entered the demilitarized area of the Rhine on the 7th of March 1936, thus violating not only the resolutions of the peace treaty, but those of the Locarno treaty, which Germany itself had voluntarily accepted. The unilateral repudiation of Locarno by Hitler's Germany revealed in a particularly eloquent manner the fiasco of the Locarno policy. Central-Eastern Europe awaited with particular tension the reaction of the Locarno powers.<sup>57</sup> The disintegration of the order established by Versailles and also the checking of German aims at expansion both depended on what the powers would do.

Warsaw and Prague tried to encourage their ally France to intervene. For this reason they did not hesitate to declare their readiness to support the latter's armed intervention.<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless, Paris would not consider such a move without the support of London, while the latter would not be persuaded to change from a policy of concessions.

The inactivity of the powers of the old Entente in March 1936 sealed the fate of the system of Versailles in Central-Eastern Europe. The period of final disintegration lasting until September 1939 began at this time.

Above all the activity of the revisionist powers increased as also their aim at an understanding with Hitler's Germany. Mussolini came out with an open attack against the system of collective security represented by the League of Nations.<sup>59</sup> Italian diplomacy worked energetically at dismembering the Little Entente and the Balkan Entente and at winning over Poland, Hungary, Rumania and Yugoslavia to a political camp under the hegemony of Rome. Italian policy became more anti-Czechoslovakien.<sup>60</sup> German-Italian rapprochement was achieved at the end of 1936 and was crowned a year later by the entry of Italy into anti-Comintern pact.<sup>61</sup> Mussolini no longer showed his old hostility in the matter of the Austrian Anschluss.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Mussolini had also counted on a much more effective reaction of the great powers. See: B. Aloisi, *Journal...*, pp. 358 - 359.

<sup>58</sup> J. Beck, *Dernier rapport...*, p. 113; E. Beneš, *Paměti...*, p. 21.

<sup>59</sup> Among others in the speech given in Milan on the 1st of November 1936. B. Mussolini, *Scritti e discorsi del l'Impero*, Milan 1936, pp. 201 - 210. On the 29th of June 1936 the Italian government wrote a memorandum to the League of Nations about revising the pact. H. M. Maxwell, P. Cremona, *Italy's Foreign...*, p. 238.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. B. Celovsky, *Das Münchener Abkommen von 1938*, Stuttgart 1958, p. 8.

<sup>61</sup> After minister Ciano's visit to Germany a protocol on Italy's entry into the pact was signed in Rome on the 6th of November 1937; E. Wiskemann, *L'Axe Rome - Berlin. Histoire des relations entre Hitler et Mussolini (1934 - 1945)*, Paris 1950, pp. 81 - 82.

<sup>62</sup> J. Gawroński, *Moja misja... [My Mission...]*, p. 359.



Hungary came out emphatically with demands for the revision of the treaty signed in Trianon, directing its territorial demands in the first place against Czechoslovakia. It sought support for its claims in Berlin and in Warsaw, the latter of which stood by the *status quo* established in Versailles. Having little hope of avoiding the Anschluss, Budapest increasingly began to loosen the ties binding it to Vienna in order not to antagonize Germany. Besides, it wanted to obtain the vital freedom of movement necessary to tighten its relations with Poland, which did not want to become involved in the Austrian affair.<sup>63</sup> The disappearance of an independent Austria, moreover, created the practical possibility of a revision of the Czechoslovak frontiers.

In most of the capitals of Eastern and Central European states, which stood by the maintenance of the Versailles *status quo*, faith in the guarantees of the League and the great powers was lost after the 7th of March 1936. A belief in the impossibility of maintaining the post-war state of affairs became prevalent. It was realized after all, that if France could not react decisively in the defence of its own interests and if it did not find support in Great Britain in matters not only directly concerning Paris, but to a great extent London, as well then one could not count upon its more effective action in defence of the eastern allies.<sup>64</sup> Consequently the atmosphere of expectancy, anxiety and nervous activity, which weighed heavily over international relations in 1932 - 1935, became predominant after March of 1936.

The attitude taken by Paris especially by London increased the difficulties in assessing the international situation and led in fact to a general disorientation. Whereas France, despite its passivity concluded in 1935 an alliance with the U.S.S.R. and still aimed at conjuring away the increasing danger by the realization of an eastern alliance,<sup>65</sup> Great Britain continued its policy of concessions.<sup>66</sup> The British government, acting under the influence of that part of public opinion which was overwhelmed by

<sup>63</sup> A. Wysocki, *Dzieje...* [Works...], vol. II, p. 345. Cf. H. Batowski, *Le voyage de Joseph Beck en Roumanie en Octobre 1938*, "Annuaire Polonais des Affaires Internationales," Warszawa 1959 - 1960; M. Pułaski, *Stosunki dyplomatyczne...* [Diplomatic Relations...], pp. 158 - 159.

<sup>64</sup> M. Stojadinović, *Ni rat ni pakt. Jugoslavija izmethu dva rata*, Buenos Aires 1963, p. 465.

<sup>65</sup> W. E. Scott, *Le pacte franco-soviétique...*, 181 - 214.

<sup>66</sup> During his talks with Hitler in November 1937 the British minister of foreign affairs stressed the fact that the British government supported a revision of the Treaty of Versailles, and pointed to Gdańsk, Austria and Czechoslovakia as primary objectives. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the U.S.S.R., Moskva 1957, *Documents and Materials Relating to the Eve of the Second World War*, vol. I, No. 19, pp. 24, 25 and 31). Cf. also M. Stojadinović, *Ni rat ni pakt*, p. 465.

the spirit of appeasement, still wanted the Reich to return to Geneva, hoping to arrive at a cooperation of the Locarno type and guided by a vision of peaceful revision of the treaty resolutions. It was chiefly for this reason that London was opposed to a reorganization of the League of Nations in the spirit of transforming its organization from one having a universal character into one which would be an European guarantor against the German danger. Such was the objective of the U.S.S.R.

In the lands of the Baltic, Vistula and Danube it was understood that the old order would collapse unless the powers showed enough will and energy in their defence.<sup>87</sup> Each country feverishly and without the necessary deliberation sought new guarantees of its security. Regional understandings — especially those forming a vital factor in the stabilization of the Little Entente and the Balkan Entente — revealed symptoms either of expansion or of slow death.<sup>88</sup> Bilateral alliances lost their meaning. In the politics of the individual states the motto: save yourselves who can, became almost obligatory. Since there existed no belief in a solution based on the solidarity of the block of threatened states, the greater part of the political combinations depended on one or another of the powers.

Prague counted on the support of the U.S.S.R. However, the resolutions of the Czechoslovak-Soviet alliance were only obligatory in conjunction with the simultaneous cooperation of the Franco-Soviet alliance, which itself depended on the positive attitude of London.<sup>89</sup>

The fact that French policy conformed to London's caused those states, whose fate was controlled by the Western powers, to turn especially in the direction of London. Statesmen, politicians and Polish, Yugoslav, Czechoslovak and Rumanian diplomats made many trips to the Thames, just as in the twenties' they had made them — to the Seine. They were concerned with sounding out the limits of Western concessions, with winning financial and political support and with gaining help in their increased attempts at rebuilding their armed strength; besides these considerations they were concerned with external effects. On the whole, however, the results proved to be negative and necessarily inclined them to attempt an understanding with the opposing side. In the capitals of Central-Eastern Europe, therefore, the tendency to come to an under-

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<sup>87</sup> A French monthly magazine "Affaires Étrangères" (April, 1936) drew attention to this fact, stating that the crisis caused by the violation of the Locarno treaties, first localized in Western Europe, was now spreading over South-Eastern Europe and it called upon the powers to regroup their forces.

<sup>88</sup> See: W. K. Volkov, *Germano-jugoslavskije otnošenija...*, pp. 148 - 194; R. Kvaček, *Nad Evropou zataženo...*, pp. 317 - 339.

<sup>89</sup> S. I. Prasolov, *Československo-sovetská smlouva o vzájemné pomoci z roku 1935*, "Studia z dějin československo-sovetských vztahu 1917 - 1938," Praha 1967, p. 96.

standing with Berlin increased. The latter's influence in Central-Eastern Europe towards the end of the thirties' had a hypnotic and paralyzing power. The Polish Minister Beck travelled to Berlin, as did the Prime Minister of Yugoslavia Stajadinović, the Rumanian regent Prince Paul and also Rumanian Ministers and politicians, representatives of the Baltic states and others. Germany and Czechoslovakia even had secret though ineffective talks from November 1936 to March 1937 about improving their relations.<sup>70</sup>

Faced by the activity of Hitler's growing forces, their increased external infiltration, together with the Italo-German rapprochement, which was in the process of being concluded, and the increasingly illusory nature of help from the Western powers, the Austrian authorities, their strength failing, tried to defend themselves against the Anschluss.<sup>71</sup>

Besides the advances made towards Germany, the diplomatic activity of the Central-European states signified the wish to establish good relations with Italy, Hungary, Bulgaria and other states. This became especially evident in Yugoslavia's foreign policy. After the 7th of March 1936, the opinion almost wholly accepted in Belgrade was that although one should still try to win Western help, it was necessary to rely on one's own resources and on new solutions for the problems of foreign policy.<sup>72</sup> Above all, there was already towards the end of 1936 a significant improvement in Italo-Yugoslav relations,<sup>73</sup> and in March of the next year a treaty of alliance and cooperation was signed.<sup>74</sup> In January of 1937 a Bulgaro-Yugoslav pact of eternal friendship was signed. Both these acts stabbed at the Little and Balkan Ententes. Yugoslavian diplomacy also displayed a significant activity tending towards a relaxation of tension and a possible rapprochement with Hungary, using Polish mediation for this.<sup>75</sup>

Neither was Rumania satisfied with trying to arrange a proper *modus vivendi* without commitments merely with Germany.<sup>76</sup> It also tried to have

<sup>70</sup> R. Kvaček, *Nad Evropou zataženo...*, pp. 303 - 316.

<sup>71</sup> J. Gawroński, *Moja misja...* [*My Mission...*], pp. 359 - 367, 368 and ff. Cf. Beneš, *Paměti...*, p. 23.

<sup>72</sup> M. Stojadinović, *Ni rat ni pakt.*; p. 463.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 450 - 451.

<sup>74</sup> The treaty of friendship between Yugoslavia and Italy of the 25th of March 1937. K. H. Volkov, *Germano-jugoslavskije otnošenija...*, p. 175.

<sup>75</sup> *Diariusz i teki...*, [*Diary and Portfolio...*], vol. III, p. 206; Archiwum Akt Nowych, MSW, P. III. 6017, 6018.

<sup>76</sup> It was because of this, that it did not want to bind itself either to the states of the Little Entente or to the USSR. Cf. R. Kvaček, *Ke genezi návratu na jednotný pakt. Malé dohody, Československo a Juhoslavia*, Bratislava 1968, p. 311; E. Beneš, *Paměti*, p. 23; J. Gawroński, *Moja misja...* [*My Mission...*], p. 381; Cf. also N. Titulescu, *Documente diplomatice*, Bucuresti 1967, pp. 799 - 801.

the best possible and even close relations with Italy. Tendencies of this type became predominant in Rumanian politics throughout 1936.<sup>77</sup> During the period when the helm of foreign policy was left to Titulescu, Rumania could be seen to be trying for a rapprochement with the U.S.S.R. for reasons of security. Nevertheless Titulescu was removed from office and policy was changed, in the prevailing conditions of the existence of a Czechoslovak-Soviet and Franco-Soviet pact, such a policy would mean the taking up of an anti-German position and after the Berlin—Rome rapprochement an anti-Italian position. Titulescu's policy, besides, adversely affected relations with Rumania's ally, Poland, which appeared to be on very good terms with Germany and Italy.<sup>78</sup>

After the act of the 7th of March 1936 Poland continued a middle-of-the-road policy. This policy now entered its second phase: i.e. the period when it was necessary to make certain choices. However Beck did not want to stand on the side of either of the two great neighbours. He intended to continue a middle-of-the-road policy until such time as the safety of the state could no longer be ensured on the North-South axis. By doing this he hoped to avoid the necessity of making a choice between Germany and U.S.S.R. Mindful, therefore, of good relations with Berlin, Warsaw would neither agree to enter into an anti-Comintern pact,<sup>79</sup> nor accede to the German proposition of establishing a common anti-Soviet front.<sup>80</sup>

Poland's increased diplomatic activity concentrated instead on erecting a so called third power, that is a Central-East European block or rather several blocks of states. In the North the idea was still to ally the Baltic states to Poland. In the South on the other hand every effort was made to strengthen the alliance with Rumania and to effect a Polish-Hungarian-Yugoslav rapprochement, or in its broader application a Polish-Hungarian-Yugoslav-Italian rapprochement, and so far as it was possible also with

<sup>77</sup> Cf. N. Titulescu, *Documente diplomatice*, p. 801.

<sup>78</sup> We find information concerning the participation of Polish and German diplomacy in particular in the overthrow of Minister Titulescu, among others in the following sources: *Diariusz i teki...*, [*Diary and Portfolio...*], vol. II; *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918 - 1945*, Serie D (1937 - 1945), Baden-Baden 1950, doc. 149; S. Mikulicz, *Wpływ dyplomacji sanacyjnej na obalenie Titulescu* [*The Influence of the "Sanacja" Regime's Diplomacy on the Overthrow of Titulescu*], "Sprawy Międzynarodowe," 1959, No. 7/8, pp. 110 - 111.

<sup>79</sup> Among others the "Sunday Times" wrote about this (Sept. 14, 1937) on the authority of its Warsaw correspondent's information.

<sup>80</sup> *Diariusz i teki...* [*Diary and Portfolio...*], vol. II, p. 100; J. Gawroński, *Moja misja...* [*My Mission...*]; Cf. M. Wojciechowski, *Stosunki polsko-niemieckie 1933 - 1938* [*Polish-German Relations 1933 - 1938*], Poznań 1965, pp. 245 - 246.

Rumanian participation.<sup>81</sup> When it became obvious that such groups were impossible to form, there was an attempt to bring about a rapprochement between Hungary, Rumania and Poland.

In all its various attempts at integration Polish policy never considered the possibility of a rapprochement with Czechoslovakia. Old prejudices, the conflicts of the first post-war years, the attempts of 1933 at bringing about closer relations, which remained without results, above all a middle-of-the-road policy and the aim of directing German expansion towards the South-East, all contributed to the fact that Warsaw was not interested in supporting Czechoslovakia or defending its independence.<sup>82</sup>

Polish policy and that of other states towards Czechoslovakia during this period were a reflection of the situation in which that state found itself at the moment of the devaluation of the French guarantees. The irredentist activity of the national minorities, inspired externally, seemed to be tearing the multinational Republic apart.<sup>83</sup> Germany's and Hungary's revisionist pressure increased.<sup>84</sup> There seemed to be little chance for

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<sup>81</sup> Polish diplomatic action, aiming at the formation of a group of states between the U.S.S.R. and Germany, was the object of numerous commentaries and investigations by the European press. Thus, for example, the Austrian monthly "Paneuropa" (November 1936) wrote that Poland was becoming the centre of a new group of states, stretching from Finland in the North to Turkey in the South, which combined the aim of opposing both German and Soviet hegemony. The "Sunday Express" (Dec. 20, 1936) wrote about the "new" Polish policy, which strove to form a neutral block of states between the U.S.S.R. and Germany, and yet at the same time it expressed its doubts as to whether Poland would have sufficient strength for such a great enterprise.

<sup>82</sup> General Smigly-Rydz told his French interlocutors during his visit to Paris in 1936, that Polish obligations towards Czechoslovakia would come to no more than the obligations arising from membership in the League of Nations. Jan Szembek, the undersecretary of state in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, made a similar declaration to the representatives of British parliamentarians. See his *Diariusz i teki...* [*Diary and Portfolio...*], vol. II, p. 203; E. Beneš, *Paměti...*, pp. 57 - 58. See also: L. B. Namier, *Europe in Decay 1936 - 1940*, London 1950, p. 284; J. Kozieński, *Czechosłowacja w polskiej polityce zagranicznej w latach 1932 - 1938* [*Czechoslovakia in Polish Foreign Policy during the Years 1932 - 1938*], Poznań 1964, p. 117.

<sup>83</sup> See: J. Koutek, *Páta Kolona v ČSR*, Praha 1962; Cf. *Akten zur Deutschen Auswärtigen Politik 1918 - 1945*, Baden-Baden 1950, Series D, vol. II, pp. 3 - 9.

<sup>84</sup> In addition to the economic dependence of Central-European states on Germany, which of itself limited Czechoslovakia's chances to decrease its trade turnover with Germany, the anti-Czechoslovak propaganda of the German press was increasing. Already in March 1936 in the monthly "Volk und Reich" Georg Forsthofer, assessing the question of the birth of Czechoslovak statehood, declared that it was justified neither historically nor by the law of nations for self-determination. In the next months the anti-Czechoslovak campaign became stronger and harsher both in the field of press and of politics. At the same time Hungarian revisionist action

further existence of an independent Austrian state.<sup>85</sup> Yugoslavia, which was reputed to be a close ally of Czechoslovakia, was clearly moving away from it, so as not to commit itself in a conflict with Germany,<sup>86</sup> so as not to make an understanding with Hungary impossible and in order not to jeopardize its relations with Poland. Rumania acted with similar reserve especially from the year 1936.<sup>87</sup> Italy did not hide its inimical attitude. In the various combinations and attempts at forming Central-European defence groups Czechoslovakia was almost entirely overlooked, just as for that matter was Austria, which was similarly considered to be doomed.

Czechoslovakia made desperate efforts not to find itself in the fatal position of being isolated, and it tried to obviate this growing danger. Prague tried to carry Hodza's plan into effect,<sup>88</sup> i.e. the rapprochement of the states of the Little Entente and the Rome protocols and the petrification of the existing state of affairs in the developing economic-political situation, even by the maintenance of an independent Austria, the prevention of a further economic dependence of individual states on Germany, or the dulling of the blade of Hungarian revisionism. Czechoslovakia also undertook the Sisyphean task of saving the Little Entente, which was in the process of disintegration.<sup>89</sup> It tried to relax the tension existing between itself and Warsaw with a similar lack of success.

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concentrated on Czechoslovakia and the Hungarian-German rapprochement became obvious in a more significant way.

<sup>85</sup> Disbelief in the existence of Austria was expressed in the columns of contemporary European journals. Thus, for example, the Austrian periodical "Christlicher Standestaat" (April 1937), discussing about Austro-German relations, expressed the view, that in the case of a German attack on Austria the help of France, Great Britain and Italy would be unreal.

<sup>86</sup> During his talk with Hitler on the 17th of January 1939 Stojadinović assured him, that Yugoslavia would never sign a pact aimed against Germany and that it would not fight against that country. See M. Stojadinović, *Ni rat ni pakt*, p. 498.

<sup>87</sup> See: Ž. Avramovski, *Pitanje Sovjetsko-rumunskogo pakta, pad Tituleskua i posledice za Rumunsku spolinopolitičku orijentaciju*, "Istorija XX veka," Beograd 1965, vol. VII, p. 792.

<sup>88</sup> Hodza's plan was a desperate attempt to save Czechoslovakia's position in Central Europe, and especially that of the Little Entente weakened by German economic penetration. The move was, nevertheless, belated for already in 1936 it was impossible to make up for the mistakes of preceding years and to bind the states of the Little Entente with sufficiently strong economic ties. M. Pułaski, *Stosunki dyplomatyczne... [Diplomatic Relations...]*, p. 157.

<sup>89</sup> Czechoslovak policy aimed above all at extension of the allies' obligations and at the conclusion of a uniform pact of alliance of the Little Entente. After that it desired to bring about an agreement between France and the Little Entente. Belgrade and Bucharest did not show any willingness to strengthen ties with Prague.

All this could, however, have little meaning at that time. The circle of indifference of some and the animosity of others inexorably tightened around the Republic.<sup>10</sup> The situation was all the more threatening, since the real value of the Czechoslovak-Soviet and Franco-Soviet pacts, on which its security was expected to be based, was to a great extent lessened by the lack of a frontier with the U.S.S.R. and depended on the armed intervention of defeatist France.<sup>11</sup> Besides this, the reserve felt towards Prague by the anti-Soviet Yugoslavian and Rumanian<sup>12</sup> governing circles was increased and Warsaw's inimical attitude and the hostility of Berlin and Budapest was intensified on account of the closeness of Czechoslovak-Soviet relations.<sup>13</sup>

Thus not long after the 7th of March 1936 the position of Czechoslovakia and Austria — the two states which were of great significance for the maintenance of the Versailles order in Central-Eastern Europe — betrayed symptoms of hopelessness.<sup>14</sup> The guarantees of the Western powers, on basis of which there was an effort to build the security of these states, took on an illusory character and the feeling of solidarity stemming from the interest in the aim for a maintenance of the *status quo* in the Versailles camp (which still existed formally on the strength of traditions) disappeared. The states of Central-Eastern Europe, constituting until 1936 to a certain extent at least a factor of opposition to the tendency for concessions in the politics of the great powers, could no longer be called such at the turn of 1937 and 1938. Neither Great Britain nor France, whose interests demanded, despite everything, that account should be taken of Poland's position and that of the Little Entente states, was any longer as embarrassed in its action as both had been for instance during the period when attempts were being made to realize the Austro-German customs union and the Four-Power Pact. Besides, the smaller states of Western

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At the beginning of 1937 Yugoslavia rejected the project of a closer alliance within a frame of alliance between the Little Entente and France, and Rumania soon followed this example.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. R. Kvaček, *Nad Evropou zataženo...*, p. 394 - 425.

<sup>11</sup> H. Batowski, *Sojusze wojskowe Czechosłowacji 1919 - 1938* [Czechoslovakia's Military Alliances 1919 - 1938], "Przegląd Zachodni," 1961, No. 2, p. 296.

<sup>12</sup> W. K. Volkov, *Germano-jugoslawckije otnošenija...*, pp. 117 - 133; cf. R. Kvaček, *Nad Evropou zataženo...*, pp. 334, 413.

<sup>13</sup> R. Kvaček, *Nad Evropou zataženo...*, pp. 303, 334 - 335, 411 - 413; W. K. Volkov, *Germano-jugoslawckije otnošenija...*, p. 131.

<sup>14</sup> In his talk given at a sitting of the commission for foreign affairs in the first half of November Krofta gave expression to this attitude to a certain extent, assessing the situation pessimistically as opposed to previous pronouncements.

and Eastern Europe (the so called Oslo group) tried at all costs to remain neutral.<sup>95</sup> The time of the Anschluss and of Munich was closing in.

The development of the international situation persuaded Hitler as early as November of 1937 to plan the accomplishment of the Anschluss and the occupation of the Sudeten land.<sup>96</sup> Mussolini's *carte blanche* removed the last difficulty. In March of 1938 the Anschluss became an accomplished fact. The territorial *status quo* of Central Europe was violated. Great Britain and France limited themselves to formal protests in Berlin.<sup>97</sup> There was no reaction to the Anschluss from the League of Nations. From among its members only the governments of the U.S.S.R. and far away Mexico protested.

The reaction to the Anschluss explains the speed with which Germany set about the liquidation of Czechoslovakia.<sup>98</sup> After a few months only (on the 29th of September 1938) Great Britain and France handed over to Germany the Sudeten land in Munich. The isolated Republic capitulated not only to German demands, but also to Polish and subsequently to Hungarian demands, as well as to the pressure of Western powers. The League of Nations, being in the process of disintegration, did nothing either then or in March 1939, when the Czechoslovak state ended its existence. Germany also managed to occupy Memel with impunity, while Italy occupied Albania.

However, although the Versailles structure in Central-Eastern Europe lost a number of pillars which had supported it for years, the destruction

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<sup>95</sup> Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Switzerland and Holland must be included among these states at this time. From 1937 on Belgium finally joined the "Oslo group." As a result of its persistent efforts, made from the 7th of March 1936, to achieve the status of a neutral state, Belgium achieved the Franco-British declaration of the 24th of April 1937 and was released from its obligations arising out of the Treaty of London, the Franco-British-Belgian arrangement of London and the Treaty of the 6th of March 1936 with France.

<sup>96</sup> See: Hossbach's protocol from the conference with Hitler on the 5th of November 1937, *Akten zur Deutschen Auswärtigen Politik 1918 - 1945*, Series D, vol. II, doc. 19.

<sup>97</sup> See among others: *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919 - 1939*, Third Series, vol. I, London 1949, No. 16.

<sup>98</sup> The British and likewise French press seemed more than once to encourage aggressors in this respect. Already in 1937, during the period when the Sudeten Germans' irredentist activity was increasing, none other than Arnold Toynbee himself wrote in "The Economist" (July 10, 1937) that the attitude of the Czechs to national minorities was by no means democratic and that one could talk of a policy to Czechisize the minorities. The revisionist tone of the British press increased during 1938. An article in "The Times" of September 7, 1938 is worthy of special note. Citing the appropriate voices of the Western press it tried to show, that Czechoslovakia should give up its frontier lands inhabited by national minorities.



of one more was necessary for its final annihilation and that was Poland, France's strongest military ally in the East — Poland, tied by a military alliance to Rumania, maintaining close relations with Hungary, friendly ones with Italy and representing the condition of the political independence of the Baltic states. Besides, the existence of a Polish state between the two great powers, whose rapprochement would always represent for the great powers of the old Entente a primary threat, constituted a fundamental condition of the functioning of the whole Versailles system.

The contemporary political structure centred in Western Europe—in London which attached special importance to the fact that the disappearance of Poland would disturb beyond any permissible limit the already somewhat tottering balance of power to Germany's advantage. From this point of view the matter of the liquidation of the Polish state meant the threat of a general conflict.

As a sort of determinant of the final frontier concessions, Poland received British guarantees besides the French. In the conditions of those times the final collapse of the system of Versailles in Central-Eastern Europe could only take place as the result of an armed conflict. Although the powers themselves contributed to the loosening of the system of Versailles, they were tied to it by their vital interests, so that in fact they could not quit it without putting up a fight. This led to September of 1939 and the beginning of the Second World War.

An examination of the complicated history, full of passion and conflicts, of Central-Eastern Europe during the interwar period from the point of view of the emergence, functioning and collapse of the order of Versailles invites one to select the chief factors which supported or weakened it.

One can state that the Versailles structure was lame and torn apart by conflicts from the beginning. The system of Versailles was supposed to defend peace, but at the same time it insured and served the interests of the imperial powers. It was to have a democratic and progressive spirit, but in fact it stood for a domination by conservative forces and the driving of Soviet Russia to the anti-Versailles camp was an expression of this. Nevertheless one must also state that despite these conflicts and despite various weakening factors, many of which had ceased to function the order created by Versailles remained untouched until the disputes between Great Britain and France led to the policy of Locarno and as long as that policy did not lead to the fortification and the activation of revisionist forces to the point where they threatened the vital interests of the smaller states of Central-Eastern Europe and where they created a sort of psychological disarmament manifested by pacifism and appeasement. Then those threatened states between the Baltic, the Black Sea and the Adriatic,

having lost faith in the guarantees based on the principles of collective security, began to search for their individual security, while the differences in their interests caused them to make this search in various different ways, which had no connection with the platform of solidarity of Versailles. This led to the relaxation of the system of Versailles in Central-Eastern Europe and, therefore, made things easier for revisionist powers led by Germany, which were increasingly strengthening their position in this region. The European balance was shaken. The Franco-British Entente, which still managed to survive was unable to restore the balance. The order created by Versailles, born in the midst of the hope of millions, definitely tottered in September 1939.

*(Translated by Barbara Klimas)*