

Overreliance on Alliances: Romania's Failed Security Policy in the Interwar Period

-Abstract-

Vlad-Cristian Gheorghiu

In 1940, Romania gave up without a fight over 100 000 square kilometers of its national territory, in which more than 7 million people, mostly Romanians, lived. The Soviet Union annexed Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, Hungary occupied parts of Transylvania, while Bulgaria took Southern Dobruja. For over two decades before that, the country had relied on a series of different alliances to secure these precise borders. The Little Entente was formed between 1920 and 1921, along Czechoslovakia and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, to safeguard the West and Transylvania against a revisionist Hungary. The Polish-Romanian alliance, created in 1921, was meant to deter an attack from the Soviet Union, while the Balkan Entente was a pact signed in 1934, consisting of Romania, Türkiye, Greece and Yugoslavia, with the purpose of restraining Bulgaria. By the start of the Second World War in 1939, all of these treaties were virtually obsolete.

In contrast to its extensive international efforts, Romania neglected its military for the better part of the interwar period. It was only after 1936 that the government decided to change course, investing in the development of the state's military industry. In addition, significant contracts were signed with foreign suppliers for the delivery of rifles, machine guns, howitzers, mine throwers or tanks. Yet, only a negligible part of these contracts were honored by 1939. Romania was thus left defenseless in 1940, in the face of aggression from its neighbors.

Highlighting the little leverage minor powers possess in international politics, this paper examines Romania's defense policy between the end of the Great War and the beginning of the Second World War. In this presentation, I argue the lack of investment in its army for more than a decade left Romania overly reliant on its fragile alliances and the League of Nations' ability to maintain the status-quo. Moreover, the military potential hampered the alliances' capability to defend, as all operational plans envisioned in the 1930s took the intervention of France and the United Kingdom for granted. Studying this issue presents valuable insights for the larger topic of the relation between small states and alliances.