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Article

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CES Working Papers

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Suggested Citation: Aioanei, Alexandru D. (2021) : Redefining British policy at the beginning of the Cold War: South-East Europe in London's foreign policy strategies, CES Working Papers, ISSN 2067-7693, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iasi, Centre for European Studies, Iasi, Vol. 13, Iss. 2, pp. 213-229

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/286655>

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Redefining British policy at the beginning of the Cold War. South-East Europe in London's foreign policy strategies

Alexandru Dumitru AIOANEI*

Abstract

Great Britain played a significant part in the endeavours directed at organizing the peace process in the aftermath of the Second World War. A series of myths were consequently associated to its actions and foreign policies-related decisions, myths that still surface to the present day in some areas, especially with regard to London's attitude towards Eastern-European countries. Our study proposes a more nuanced approach of the events of the first post-war years, focusing primarily on the impact the domestic situation of the Empire had upon its foreign policy decisions. Our research is based on the recent contributions of several British and Eastern-European researchers who shed new light on Great Britain's attitude towards South-Eastern Europe. Our study discusses the factors that influenced the foreign policy decisions taken by London with regard to that region, by attempting to analyse the general framework from less explored perspectives.

Keywords: British foreign policy, Cold War, Eastern Europe, Ernest Bevin

Introduction

Stefano Dejak, an Italian journalist specialized on the British area, wrote in 1993 that it was the right time for the history of Great Britain to open towards the public (Dejak, 1993, p. 47). In Romania, after three decades of free access to the western literature, there still exists a series of myths related to the end of the Second World War and its aftermath. “The Western betrayal” associated with the Yalta Conference is one of those myths nurtured by this refusal of British historiography to open towards the public. In February 1945, at the meeting of the Three Great Powers in the beautiful Crimean resort of Yalta, Great Britain allegedly consented to the division of influence in Europe, leaving Romania and the rest of Eastern Europe in the area of Soviet interests. When I talk about Eastern Europe, I am referring in particular to Romania, Bulgaria, Greece and Balkan countries. Great Britain's interests and attitude of in this part of Europe made historians reconsider their positions. A

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country's foreign policy, especially during the challenging aftermath of a great war, is directly influenced by the internal, political and economic difficulties that the respective country must face. Much has been written in Romania about Britain's role in South-Eastern Europe after the Second World War, yet little attention has been paid to the domestic realities of the British Empire. This is to say that London's foreign policy and attitude towards the Soviet Union was insufficiently contextualized in Romanian research on history and international relations. Our study aims at revisiting the objectives of Great Britain's foreign policy at the beginning of the Cold War, as well as the attitude London displayed towards Eastern Europe in this context.

Romania was one of the countries which felt betrayed following the peace process established in the first post-war years. The anti-communist political elite in the South-Eastern European countries had great expectations with regard to London's involvement in blocking the extension of the Soviet influence. They were thus disappointed when Great Britain allowed Moscow to take political control, hoping to rescue its economic interests in the region. At the time, many people did not understand that Britain was forced to act on several levels and its resources, as well as its capacity to take action more firmly were strongly affected. Great Britain was confronted with a domestic economic crisis, had to face the Soviet Union's expansionist policy and to deal with the conflicts arising in its colonies, all these events taking place in a more and more polarized context. Our study aims at pointing out that Great Britain withdrew from areas it regarded as strategic not because it wanted to, but because it no longer had the financial and logistic capacity to defend its interests in those areas.

Our study is structured into three sections, in an approach that starts from a general perspective and advances towards a particular one. Thus, in the first section we discuss Great Britain's domestic situation, marked by the change of government in 1945 and various attempts to identify solutions for post-war economic and financial recovery. The second section focuses on the challenges brought by the international context, which London had to face, as well as on its efforts to save its great power status. The third section is dedicated to Great Britain's attitude towards South-Eastern Europe, where it had both political and economic interests and where it acted differently, depending on each particular country. Our study aims at providing a thorough analysis of the factors that determined the British policy in the area, inviting to a whole new perspective upon the events.

1. Great Britain – a country facing a crisis at the end of the war

Dean Acheson, former State Secretary of the American government stated in his discourse at United State Military Academy West Point that “*Great Britain has lost an empire and not yet found*

a role” (Barker, 1971, p. 3). This is by far the most accurate and concise depiction of Great Britain’s position on the international stage in the first decades after the war. At the end of the Second World War, Great Britain was forced to reconsider its entire foreign policy. Coming out of the war more fragile than ever, London became dependent on the United States, both economically and militarily. According to Anne Deighton (1993, p. 10), the relationship between Great Britain and the United States was extremely complex and went far beyond London’s pursuit for American protection.

At the end of the Second World War, Great Britain found itself in very different situation than the one in 1939. For Gladwin Jebb, the head of the Foreign Office Economic and Reconstruction Department, London’s objectives after the war were: reviving the exports, limiting the power of Germany and Japan, consolidating the army forces with the aim of increasing collective trust and security, maintaining its authority in the colonies, and free trade (Kent, 1993, p. 1).

However, a new competitor for Britain’s maritime and commercial status was looming at the horizon. After 1941 the United States gradually began to overtake Britain in exports to the Middle East. Washington’s economic interests in Asia and Africa threatened the British authority in the area (Kent, 1993, p. 5). Ever since the war, there had been rumours within the Foreign Office that it would be difficult for Britain to regain its position in areas such as Southeast Asia. While some officials claimed that Britain should give up some of the Asian colonies for the sake of a more liberal image of the country, others believed that London should not give up the empire since that was, in fact, the very reason of the fight against Hitler (Kent, 1993, p. 3-4).

Towards the end of the war, British officials were debating several scenarios regarding Britain’s post-war evolution and the contradictions between different centres of power became obvious. The soldiers were already showing signs of an anti-Soviet attitude and started to put pressure on political decision-makers to adopt a firm position against the Soviet Union (Kent, 1993, p. 69). Whereas the British officers were impressed with the military capacity of the Soviet Union, the diplomats were rather preoccupied with a reviving Germany (Nistor, 2016, p. 232). Political groups in London carried out discussions about how close the connection with the Soviet Union should be and how much reconstruction help should be granted to Germany (Greenwood, 2000, p. 10-13). After 1945, more and more information provided by the army and the secret services indicated that Britain’s next adversary would be the Soviet Union rather than Germany (Nistor, 2016, p. 235). In this new context it became increasingly obvious that the alliance concluded with the United States during the war should be consolidated, as the American power was needed for the preservation of the empire and the Commonwealth (Kent, 1993, p. 11).

Right after 1945, one of the priorities of the British government, whether Labour-oriented or conservative, was to maintain the great power status in the context of rapid political and ideological changes (Deighton 2010, p. 113). Before the Potsdam Conference, Orme Sargent warned with regard to the tendency of the United States and the Soviet Union to treat Great Britain as a secondary partner and close deals behind London's back (Kent, 1993, p. 53). According to him, the relation between London and Moscow was essential for the preservation of the Empire and for the British interests in Europe. However, the attempt to preserve the Great Power status required new diplomatic initiatives. In 1945, the idea of establishing tighter economic relationships with France and Western Europe started to gain ground. Moreover, colonies belonging to other countries were perceived by the British diplomats as areas of potential interest. Duff Cooper considered that the African and European connections established by London and Paris were helping the imperial strategy, whereas Edmund Hall Patch regarded the overseas territories belonging to Holland, Belgium and France as good markets for Great Britain. The American claims with regard to the free trade and the conditions they imposed for the loan granted in the summer of 1945 actually reset the imperial policy, orienting it towards the collaboration with Western Europe (Kent, 1993, pp. 116-117). This aspect raised the issue of correlating the economic interests in the colonies with the new political orientation (Kent, 1993, p. 121). Some important institutions, such as *The Treasury*, supported the idea of closer relations with the colonies, for two very clear reasons. First of all, goods that were urgently needed could be found there and secondly, those overseas territories had significant financial liquidity in pounds (Kent, 1993, p. 125). The Commonwealth Relations Office was convinced that a European trade union was not in the best interest of the dominions, whereas Colonial Offices favoured an arrangement either between the colonies and Great Britain or between the colonies and European Customs Union (Kent, 1993, p. 140).

Churchill's response to the social provisions of the Beveridge Report and his overall narrow-mindedness when it came to social reforms resulted in the creation of an anti-conservative front in Great Britain which proved to be strong enough to produce surprises in the first post-war elections. According to David Howel, "Bread and butter plus a dream" was the central message that ensured Clement Attlee's victory in July 1945 (Jefferys, 1992, p. 5). The new Labour government, which carried out a programme that focussed on reconstruction, had to deal with serious challenges from the very beginning: the domestic economic crisis, the endeavour to save the country's interests in the colonies and the attempt to limit the spread of communism (Deighton, 2010, p. 117). Hugh Dalton, an important Labour-oriented economist, identified at the time six main directions of action for the British government: bringing the industry back to the stage of production in times of peace,

maintaining a high rate of employment without inflation, implementing a series of social reforms, relaxing the fiscal pressure specific to the war period, nationalizing a series of important industrial branches and rebuilding commercial relations. Yet, as they were about to discover, the price they had to pay for defeating Hitler was an enormous one (Jefferys, 1992, p. 15).

In 1944, Great Britain directed 53.4% of the total expenses to support the war effort (Howlett, 2004, p. 2). Britain came out of the war with a significant deficit in the external balance, a current account deficit of 1/6 of the GNP, a budget deficit of 1/6 of the GNP and a debt that was double the budget (Howson, 2004, p. 142). The British government responded to the situation with a two-fold strategy. First of all, they tried to maintain the interests at a low level through the so-called “cheaper money policy”. This strategy generated consumption growth and actually put extra pressure on the current account deficit. The strategy was thus abandoned in 1947 (Howson, 2004, pp. 147-148). Jim Tomlinson (2004, p. 192) claimed that the Labour’s obsession with keeping the interest rates low turned the issue of payments into an issue of exchange rates.

The other form of response to economic challenges was the transfer of a series of important economic units to state ownership. The victory of the Labour Party in July 1945 paved the way for the most important transfer of ownership from the private area to the state in the modern history of Great Britain. This decision did not face any strong opposition, as both parties believed that certain economic companies were too important to be allowed to go bankrupt. Moreover, some believed that such measures would help these companies become increasingly efficient and thus resources would be distributed more equitably (Hannah, 2004, pp. 88-90). The aim of the Labour Party in the period 1945-1951 was to increase the efficiency of entire economic systems, a fact that had a major impact on the whole economy. Nationalization meant, first and foremost, the radical reorganization of companies from a managerial viewpoint, an aspect which placed most small companies into a difficult situation (Hannah 2004, pp. 93-94). Some authors consider that starting with 1945 one can speak of semi-planned economy in Great Britain (Tomlinson 2004, p. 189).

In the fall of 1945, England had very few solutions for the economic problems threatening it and consequently, in the attempt to maintain its global position, resorted to the help of the United States (Geiger, 2004, p. 62). Washington granted England a loan of approximately 4 billion dollars with 2% interest, but the loan came with a series of conditions: the rapid convertibility of the pound, the sponsorship of an economic conference and the elimination of discrimination against importers in dollars (Geiger, 2004, p. 65). The loan helped the Americans impose their own perspective on international trade (Geiger, 2004, p. 71). On the other hand, Britain’s reputation overseas was not exactly flattering, the Americans perceiving it as an old, obsolete empire that actually intended to use

its resources to save its influence (Childs, 2005, p. 11). John W. Young (1997, p. 154) claimed that during the war Britain and the United States shared the same values, but had different interests.

John Maynard Keynes stated that once the “Lend and Lease” programme stopped, Great Britain was facing a “financial Dunkirk”. The effects of the American loan were actually insignificant and the convertibility of the pound proved to be a failure. In addition, the fuel crisis in 1947 deepened the crisis the United Kingdom was challenged with at the time (Jefferys, 1992, pp. 15-19). Meanwhile, the conflicts at the top of the Labour Party and a failed attempt to replace Attlee with Ernst Bevin, the minister of Foreign Affairs, significantly diminished the population trust in the government (Jefferys, 1992, pp. 27-32).

In search of a middle ground

Some historians, such as Elisabeth Barker (1971, p. 54), believe that Ernest Bevin and Clement Attlee made great efforts to keep the secret of the domestic economic problems, attempting thus to play the part of a great economic power in Europe, even if London had a very feeble economic position. Bevin was convinced that Great Britain’s economic recovery depended on its ability to preserve its Great Power status (Kent, 1993, p. 132). The war experience forced the Labour Party to adopt a non-ideological policy aimed at preserving the country’s great power status. In this respect, Bevin drafted the plan for an alliance of the western states under London’s economic leadership (Greenwood, 2000, pp. 35, 41).

The idea of a “third force” started to come up in the discussions of the British cabinet as early as 1944; it referred to a form of organization of the Western European countries that would counter-balance the increasing influence of both the United States and the Soviet Union. At the time, it was not very clear how far the Soviet influence would go and a confrontation between East and West could not be clearly predicted. British political leaders were simply expressing concerns with regard to the lack of a Western power able to counterbalance the events taking place in the East under Soviet patronage. The main concern was the fact that the lack of a power that could ensure stability in Western Europe would actually increase the level of attractiveness for the Soviet Union (Greenwood, 1993, p. 57).

Klaus Larres claims that Great Britain was reluctant to the idea of a Western Europe Union (Lares, 1993, p. 72). However, the involvement in the organization of a Western block was an opportunity for Great Britain to prove to the United States, the Soviet Union and the Dominions not only that it was willing, but also that it was perfectly capable of getting involved in the peace process

(Greenwood, 1993, p. 57). At the same time, Ernst Bevin was worried about the Soviets' possible reactions to his policies towards Western Europe (Greenwood, 1993, p. 57). According to the British perspective, France was one of the pillars of the future western block. In September 1947, Ernest Bevin told the French prime-minister, Paul Ramadier that if their countries coordinated their actions and considered the common use of the resources from their colonies, they could occupy a place on the international stage that would be comparable to that held by the United States or the Soviet Union (Greenwood, 1993, p. 65). The main objective was for Britain to become less dependent on the United States. The Dunkirk Treaty concluded in April 1947 was also perceived as an alternative in case the United States retreated from Europe into a new wave of isolationism (Lares, 1993, p. 72). Despite his efforts, Bevin's European plans were hampered by the tensions between the allies, the political situation in France, which was on the verge of surrendering to communism, and the domestic economic crisis (Greenwood, 1993, p. 65).

Although in the first months of 1946, Bevin seemed willing to justify the behaviour of the Soviet Union in the occupied countries, the destructions that occurred during the war, Moscow's pressures targeted at Turkey, the desire to impose a base in the straits and the actions in Iran subsequently made him reconsider his attitude and perceived these challenges as a possible *casus belli* (Greenwood, 2000, p. 15). In April 1946, the *Russia Committee* was established within the Foreign Office with the aim of analyzing the Soviet Union's intentions and the way in which these intentions could affect the global interests of Great Britain (Greenwood, 2000, p. 18). The British government also directed a series of actions towards the relationships between the political parties, in the attempt to design policies that would limit the spread of communism. After January 1948, Bevin tried to turn London into the capital of social-democracy, blocking the ascension of communists in the syndicates. Reformed social-democracy was to offer an alternative to communism, not only in the British Isles, but also worldwide (Deighton, 2010, pp. 123-124). Ernst Bevin is regarded by some historians as one of the most important heads of the Foreign Office, as he was able to deal with the imperial problems and the beginning of the Cold war although the resources were seriously diminished (Young, 1997, p. 147).

Whereas Churchill was a prime-minister who had full control over the foreign policy, Attlee gave all the freedom of action to Bevin, his foreign minister. The latter was a former union member with no sympathy for the Soviet Union. He hated his meetings with Molotov, whom he held responsible for the death of a huge number of peasants. During one of these meetings the British official allegedly showed his worker's hands to the Soviet foreign minister, probably trying to

humiliate him by implying that the latter had never worked with his bare hands and could not grasp the meaning of hard work (Rothwell, 1982, p. 233).

The council of foreign ministers held in Moscow at the end of 1947 somehow sealed the cold relations established between the three great powers. The meeting was adjourned on the 15th of December without a clear decision with regard to Germany and without setting the date for the next meeting. After the split in December 1947, the collaboration between Great Britain and Western Europe gained a strong military dimension (Kent, 1993, p. 156-157). The tensions soon contaminated the economic level and smaller states began to feel the repercussions. The unification of the Anglo-American areas and Germany's industrial reconstruction were perceived in Moscow as serious threats for the very existence of the Soviet state as a great economic power (Pechatnov, 2010, p. 106).

Besides the problems in Europe, London was dealing with a series of challenges in the colonies. In the Near East, the Labour Party agreed with the division of Palestine (Childs, 2005, p. 27). In India, violent events occurred more and more often, with numerous revolts of the soldiers of the new Indian marine forces recorded in 1946. In this context, the official transfer of power was sealed on the 15th of August 1947, and the last British troops left in February 1948 (Childs, 2005, p. 28). Although their promise to the colonies had been unprecedented development, once they got the power, the Labour party realized that the financial situation would prevent them from achieving their initial plans (Childs, 2005, pp. 29-30). As far as the overseas territories were concerned, British politicians shared the same views. Even the English communists, despite the criticism they occasionally directed against the post-war colonial policies, organized no campaigns against it (Redfern, 2004).

This adaptation of the idea of Commonwealth to the new post-war realities represented, according to some authors, a "nation-building" process. The new image of the empire involved an attempt at establishing a series of partnerships between the former mother country and the new countries belonging to the Commonwealth, which was at the same time part of a global mechanism of resistance against the spread of communism (Deighton, 2010, p. 114). According to some historians, the war effort and the initiation of the de-colonization process created a new state. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can be perceived, as David Edgerton (2019, p. 26) remarked, as a new country, born after the dissolution of an empire. Great Britain was alone in the period 1940-1941 and this resulted into a rewriting of the war history from a national perspective. The political class redefined its policies in terms of national interest. Both parties considered themselves national by nature; the conservatives aimed at reinstating authority and had an imperial agenda, whereas the Labour party claimed to represent all social classes, namely the entire nation (Edgerton 2019, p. 43). Even the economy was regarded from a national perspective after 1945.

British economy became at the time a system that produced instead of just importing or exporting goods.

2. Great Britain and South-Eastern Europe at the end of the war

Elisabeth Barker describes Great Britain's policy in South-Eastern Europe as "a story of last-minute improvisations". London's actions in this part of Europe have always been shadowed by a feeling of fear: the fear of provoking Hitler, the fear of annoying Mussolini, the fear of irritating Stalin (Barker, 1976, p. 5). The war had greatly diminished Great Britain's capacity to carry out military actions in the area, despite its efforts to support guerrilla troops or espionage actions (Barker, 1976, pp. 41-50). After the war, Greece remained the main pillar of the British policy in the area.

The main issues regarding South-Eastern Europe were clarified from the beginning of the war. The Soviet Union had requested a military base and the guarantee of friendly relations with Romania since 1941, when Stalin asked Anthony Eden that Britain acknowledged the territorial changes in the area. Despite the fact that the British diplomats insistently pleaded against discussing border-related issues before the end of the war, Moscow's claims were eventually accepted (Rothwell, 1982, pp. 88-89). The attention paid by the Soviets to territorial issues in Eastern Europe was accurately interpreted by many of the Foreign Office official as an increased Soviet influence in the area (Rothwell, 1982, p. 97).

Romania was one of the Balkan countries where Great Britain had the best political contacts, doubled by economic interests (Barker, 1976, p. 224). The insistence with which during each meeting the Soviets raised the issue of border recognition and the interest in establishing military bases in Romania made the British realize that they would not be able to act in this area without Moscow. At the beginning of the following year, London announced Washington that no action was possible in Romania without Russia's involvement. At the end of August 1943, Ivan Maisky, in a discussion with Eden, raised the issue of establishing areas of influence (Barker, 1976, p. 135).

Churchill's plan to bring Anglo-American troops to the Danube through the Balkans before the arrival of the Red Army was rejected in Tehran (November 28 - December 1, 1943) (Pearson, 1998, pp. 121-122). At the end of 1943, the Foreign Office presented the British government with a document entitled "Soviet Policy in Europe", which stated that the Soviet Union would not provoke Western powers and that Britain would have to maintain its influence in several European countries. The document suggested that London was forced to conclude an alliance with the Soviet Union in order to stop Germany (Kent, 1993, p. 13).

In February 1944, the Foreign Office was presented a document outlining the Soviet foreign policy and its possible impact upon the British interests, especially in the areas of Turkey, Bulgaria, and the straits (Kent, 1993, p. 15). A Soviet occupation of the straits would have provided Russia with the opportunity to reach British territories in the Suez Canal area and the North African coast very easily, by air. However, Churchill was willing to give the Soviets free access to the straits. In order to partially limit the Soviet expansion, the British also considered the occupation of Bulgaria. The idea was quickly abandoned, as it would have been difficult to justify since Turkey was not at war. In the spring of 1944, Churchill began to fear isolation and was worried about the bilateral agreements between the United States and the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Moscow's insistence in organizing popular fronts in the freed areas, even in Italy, made his fears more acute. The entry of Soviet troops into Romania gave Churchill dark premonitions about the Soviets' behaviour in the East. For this reason, the core objective of the percentage agreement concluded in October 1944 was to delimit the spheres of Soviet influence and to make sure that Greece would remain in the British area of interest (Kent, 1993, pp. 23-24). The British needed to preserve their position in the Mediterranean Sea and Middle East and the fastest answer Foreign Office was able to provide to the speedy evolution of things in that part of Europe were those percentages written on a piece of paper (Paraskevov, 2011, p. 245).

Foreign observers could clearly see the path Romania was forced to follow. For Mark Ethridge, the attitude displayed by both Great Britain and the United States in Moscow in 1944, gave the Soviets the impression that Romania and Bulgaria had been abandoned to the Soviet Union. After the Yalta Conference, both powers attempted to re-establish the balance, but they succeeded only partially in defending the interests of the two countries (Burger, 2000). Many telegrams presenting the situation in Romania and the Soviet actions received the same answer, as London's policy towards Bucharest was subsumed to the percentage agreement (Percival, 1997, p. 48). Dennis Deletant maintains that the British Legations in Romania were unaware of the agreement between Churchill and Stalin. On the 4th of November 1944, the British prime-minister wrote to his foreign minister, Anthony Eden that the British could be no more than "spectators" in Romania and he complained that Le Rougetel "evidently does not understand that we have only a ten percent interest in Roumania" (Deletant, 1995, p. 136).

According to Marc Percival, the percentage agreement was a personal project of Churchill's, who wanted to impose clear limits to the Soviet offensive. The British Prime Minister agreed to expand the influence of Kremlin in the neighbouring countries as long as he was allowed to have friendly relations with the Turkish and Greek governments. London agreed to treat Romania as a

defeated enemy, as the Soviets did. On August 24, 1944, London officials suggested to the BBC to refrain from referring to the Romanians as allies or showing much enthusiasm when mentioning them. Percival points out that after May 1945, no British document referred to the percentage agreement. Furthermore, after Churchill left the position of Prime Minister, this agreement was never invoked as a justification of British policies in Romania (Percival, 2005, pp. 92-98).

At the end of 1944, the British military and diplomats accepted the idea of Soviet domination over Eastern, Central and Balkan Europe, with the exception of Greece. (Percival, 1997, p. 39). In the summer of 1945, it became increasingly clear that the British had to keep Turkey in their sphere of influence, as a connection to the Middle East. While opposing any Soviet claim in the area, London held control over the Suez Canal and had 10,000 troops in Egypt. Any concessions made to Russia in the straits could later impact on the situation in Suez and Gibraltar (Percival, 1997, p. 62). In fact, as Vasil Paraskevov rightfully pointed out, Soviet actions such as the communization of Bulgaria strengthened London's desire to save Greece and Turkey. The main response of the British to Moscow's aggressive policies to impose the Soviet system in Bulgaria was to postpone the resumption of diplomatic relations and to recognize the Bulgarian government until after 1947 (Paraskevov, 2011, p. 249).

Ivor Porter, witness and participant in the events of 1943-1945, describes England's policy in South-Eastern Europe and especially in Romania as lacking consistence. On the one hand, London had to accept the idea of unconditional surrender, as proposed by Roosevelt and immediately embraced by the Soviets, and on the other hand, Churchill asked the satellites to recover and help bring the war to an end. According to Porter, the idea of unconditional surrender was a wrong decision in the case of Romania, especially taking into account that the British chiefs of staff were willing to accept a rehabilitation of our country (Porter, 1991, pp. 131-133).

The evolution of the political situation in Romania presented Churchill with further challenges. He repeatedly demanded Anthony Eden to ensure that the British representatives in Romania did not open an anti-Russian front in Romania, as this could affect the British interests and actions in Greece (Chiper et al, 1993, pp. 122-124). Churchill did not need trouble in Romania. He accepted Russia's freedom of movement in Eastern Europe in order to prevent its interference in other areas (Deletant, 1995, 110). When the Moscow newspapers started to publish critical articles with regard to the situation in Greece, British diplomats seemed taken aback, since, as they claimed, London remained neutral in Romania (Chiper et al, 1993, pp. 134-135).

The change of government in London in the summer of 1945 also brought a new perspective on foreign policy. Since the war, Bevin had been campaigning for British influence in Greece and the

Eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea. His imperial strategy was marked by the idea of an equal relationship between the mother country and the colonies and an accentuated anti-Russian sentiment, rooted in his trade union activity (Kent, 1993, p. 77). The Labour supporters hoped for a foreign policy that would be closer to the Soviet Union rather than to the United States. In fact, when he received the news from Potsdam, Stalin was less than happy about the result of the British elections. Ernst Bevin confirmed his worries on the 20th of August 1945, when, in his first parliament discourse as the head of the Foreign Office, he declared that the governments established in Bucharest, Sofia and Budapest were not representative and a totalitarian system had been replaced by another (Barker, 1971, p. 45). Bevin's tough line of action was frowned upon by certain members of the Labour Party. He was labelled as "the Americans' servant" by some of his party members who sought to cast a no-confidence vote against the British Foreign Minister in November 1946 (Deighton, 2010, p. 122).

In their effort to turn London into a European capital of social democracy, the Labour Party tried to cultivate a certain independence of Romanian socialists from the communists. Some leaders of the Labour Party visited Romania in the period 1946-1947, hoping that the Romanian social-democrats would adopt a more independent attitude and oppose the communist policies that affected the property rights and the business of the British companies. All these attempts were, however, in vain (Dudoiu, 2012).

The main discussions at the Potsdam conference focused on issues related to compensation, the straits and joint agreements regarding the Mediterranean area. The results were far from spectacular. Anthony Eden had become aware that London had a diminishing capacity to influence things and had high hopes for the United States, although he acknowledged that the interests of the two countries did not always overlap. (Neiberg, 2018, pp. 273-274). Truman allegedly declared afterwards that he was in quite good terms with Stalin and there were no major tensions during the discussions, except for those caused by the issue of American political representatives in Romania and Bulgaria (Neiberg, 2018, p. 392). However, Washington and London refused to acknowledge the pro-communist governments in Sofia and Bucharest unless they accepted to include members of the opposition. This aspect, correlated with the tensions in Iran, made the Soviets feel threatened by a new American offensive. Consequently, at the Foreign Ministers Conference in London, Moscow decided to consolidate its power in the Balkans and Molotov was assigned the mission to hold his position and allow no concessions with regard to Romania (Pechatnov, 2010, p. 106).

Anglo-American cooperation was not particularly close at the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers in December 1945. Bevin was afraid that James Byrnes was going to be very conciliatory with the Soviet Union and tried to make Truman was aware that Moscow was going to ask for its

rights in Eastern Europe to be respected before promising to respect the Anglo-American interests in other areas (Rothwel, 1982, p. 241). The British foreign minister was eventually forced to adjust his policies towards Romania and Bulgaria according to the perspective of the United States. The Iranian crisis at the beginning of 1946 would subsequently lead to a more unitary vision of the two states in their relation with the Soviet Union (Kent, 1993, p. 93-94). Any confrontation between Great Britain and the Soviet Union on particular issues such as the Mediterranean Sea consolidated the hypotheses concerning the spheres of influence. While the Soviets abandoned their imperialist claims in the Mediterranean and the Far East, they became more and more determined to make no concessions in Bulgaria, Romania and Poland (Kent, 1993, p. 89).

The Balkans occupied a special place in the post-war British policy. Greece was essential for the control over the Mediterranean Sea. At the same time, the other states could become important elements in the attempt to limit the spread of the Soviet influence. This was the reason that motivated London to support federative projects. Despite the fact that in 1942 the exiled governments of Greece and Yugoslavia signed an agreement in this respect, things remained unresolved because of the evolution of the war and the territorial claims formulated by each state (Rothwel, 1982, pp. 195-196). The presence of the Soviets in Bulgaria starting with the fall of 1944 brought them too close to the straits and allowed them to threaten the British influence in Turkey and Greece (Rothwel, 1982, p. 210).

The British government tried to preserve its economic interests in South Eastern Europe, where the English capital was consistently present in the interwar period. Romania was one of the countries where London wanted to regain its economic positions, a fact that became obvious as early as the autumn of 1944. The British Legation in Romania had a significant number of specialists in oil and agricultural issues. First of all, the British wanted to reopen the English oil companies, as oil represented a strategic resource in the new international context. Last but not least, London has always viewed Romania as a possible source of agricultural products that would constitute essential supplies not only for the British population at home, but also for the colonies. Oil was one of the issues that impacted deeply on the relation between Great Britain and Romania, respectively the Soviet Union in this part of Europe (Aioanei, 2020).

In March 1946, the British army was against any concession made for the Soviet Union with regard to the straits, whereas the Foreign Office already doubted London's capacity to save Turkey (Kent, 1993, p. 96). Clement Attlee's belief that the Mediterranean Sea was one of the three defence pillars of Great Britain was regarded as a victory of the supporters of the imperial view. However,

the financial issues Attlee was confronted with made him think very seriously about the withdrawal from the Mediterranean (Kent, 1993, p. 97).

Some analyzes of the time are very critical against Britain's foreign policy after the Second World War. In 1959, Peregrine Worsthorne wrote in the famous magazine "Foreign Affairs" that one could hardly identify a period in history when Britain was as passive in its global role as it was after the Second World War. The author tried to provide a series of explanations: the polarization of the international context, the loss of the empire, the difficulty of accepting a secondary role on the new global stage (Peregrine, 1998, p. 420). Worsthorne speaks about a bias towards compromise that could be identified in both political groups. After the war, the socialists no longer believed that they could build a new world, while the conservatives had no hope that the old world could revive. Both parties focused on the foreign policy, being interested in what other countries could do for Great Britain rather than in what Great Britain could do for other countries (Peregrine, 1998, p. 429).

Conclusions

Great Britain was one of the countries that South-Eastern European states hoped would protect them against the Soviet expansion. Despite being the only Western European country that fought against Hitler for more than three years, Great Britain was unable to use this symbolic capital to defend its strategic objectives once the war was over. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Britain went through a challenging period in which it tried to redefine and reinvent itself from several perspectives. First of all, London was facing the loss of its status as a great power and was forced to assume its position as a country with a secondary role in international politics. Secondly, the end of the war brought substantial economic changes, which structurally transformed the British economy, changed its objectives and brought unprecedented challenges. All these aspects had a major impact on the way it managed its interests overseas.

At the end of the war, Britain no longer had the resources or the capacity to defend its interests in all parts of the world. London was forced to retreat from several regions of the world and make consistent efforts for the defence of a few key points that would ensure the survival of the empire and would secure its economic recovery. Eastern Europe was one of those areas it had to give up. Despite not being one of the first-rank regions from a strategic point of view, the British capital had a consistent presence in the area, and London hoped to regain its former economic position. However, the evolution of events rendered this endeavour fruitless. The economic crisis and the financial dependence on foreign aid, the problems that occurred in the colonies and the American suspicions

of “British imperialism” seriously affected the British Empire’s ability to interfere in areas that were under Soviet control. The challenges Great Britain faced in the first years after the war exceeded by far its resources. The British political leaders tried to preserve the country’s great power status and impose London as an important pillar in the peace organization process. Yet, Great Britain continued, for a long period of time, to be a great power seeking a path to follow in the new post-war world.

In the aftermath of the war, both Great Britain and the South-European countries passed through a series of systemic transformation processes. England was forced to reconsider its role on the international political stage, by applying economic measures previously unheard of, such as the nationalization of entire industrial sectors, thus rethinking its relations with its overseas territories. At the same time, most Southern-European countries entered the Soviet area of influence, being thus subject to accelerated communization processes. Greece, in turn, was caught in a civil war that was to represent a huge impediment in the after-war reconstruction process. All these realities represented challenges for Great Britain in terms of its relations with the countries in the area, forcing the British government to adopt different strategies. As a result, Great Britain retreated sooner from countries such as Bulgaria, while still trying to defend its economic interests in Romania, for instance, or employing all means to defend its political and economic position in other countries, such as Greece.

Acknowledgements: This study was supported by project **PN-III-P1-1.1-MC-2019-2418**, financed by UEFISCDI, Romania.

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