

THE INTERRUPTION OF THE BRITISH-ROMANIAN RELATIONS IN 1941

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(Abstract)

The study analyses the withdrawals of the British Legation from Bucharest and of the Romanian Legation from London.

The research was undertaken at the Central Historical National Archives of Romania in Bucharest where the author studied the microfiches of the Public Record Office of the Great Britain, Foreign Office, Political, 371/29992, 371/29993 and 371/29994.

The United Kingdom declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939.

The British Legation could not gather military, political and economical information as the new regime in Romania had invited the troops of Nazi Germany in the country. As the British found themselves implied only in formal activities, they decided to withdraw the Legation on February 15, 1941 and the Romanian Government acted on reciprocal basis but few Romanians returned from the London staff.

The study deals with the preparations needed to withdraw the two Legations and the modalities required for the British and Romanian staffs for departure.

General Ion Antonescu, Romanian Prime-Minister and de facto ruler of the country, was more than pleased with the British proposal of the interruption of bilateral relations.

In the autumn of 1940, the first German troops entered Romania in large numbers as General Ion Antonescu headed the National Legionary State. On October 8, Reginald Hoare, the British Minister in Bucharest, received from the Foreign Office discretionary authority as to the timing of the Legation withdrawal.¹ Already on November 4, he admitted to the Foreign Office: "This country is already an enemy protectorate and the occupation is daily more effective. It is an open question how long we should be able to remain...".² After Antonescu defeated the Legionary Movement in January 1941, he kept for himself not only the chair of the President of the Council of Ministers, but also became Minister for Foreign Affairs for five months.

On February 5, the Foreign Office notified the

Chiefs of Staff about the British Legation's withdrawal, although the Chiefs preferred the opposite from the military point of view. John Dill, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, would notify about it to British General Archibald Percival Wavell, Commander-in-Chief Middle East Command which organized the Expeditionary Force for Greece.³

Admiral of the Fleet Dudley Pound, who chaired the Chiefs of Staff Committee, considered the British Legation's withdrawal insufficiently justified, remembering the sudden withdrawal of the British Embassy after the German-French armistice which damaged the British relations with the Vichy Government.⁴

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¹ Maurice Pearton, "British Policy towards Romania: 1939–1941," in Dennis Deletant, Maurice Pearton, *Romania Observed: Studies in Contemporary Romanian History* (Bucharest: Encyclopaedic Publishing House 1998), 93.

² Cited by *Ibid.*

³ The letter of Major-General Hastings Lionel "Pug" Ismay, the representative of the Minister of Defence in the Chiefs of Staff Committee, of 08.02.1941 to Orme Sargent, Deputy Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office (hereafter FO), The Microfiches of Great Britain, Public Record Office, Foreign Office (hereafter PRO FO), 371/29993, 9–10.

Minutes of Meeting of a Chiefs of Staff Committee no. 41 (46) of 08.02.1941, *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

At the Chiefs of Staff Committee, Phillip Nichols of the Foreign Office explained that Hoare was permitted to decide the time of withdrawal as long as the Legation had a reasonable staying. Until then, the Legation had to gather important political and military information but the flow of intelligence reduced as Germans did not allow it. The withdrawal could be considered by Romanians and Germans as a reason for the bombing of oil fields and refineries.⁵

P. Broad, the representative of the Special Operations Executive, informed the Chiefs of Staff Committee that special activities could not begin unless the withdrawal took place.⁶

Hugh Montgomery Knatchbull Hugessen, the British Ambassador in Turkey, had already notified Hoare on February 5, 1941, about the small and unprepared house in Istanbul.⁷ British Ambassador in Turkey managed to persuade by payments the Turkish Government to send in Constanza on February 14 the ship "Izmir" that could accommodate over 100 persons at first and second classes and 30 persons at third class.⁸ Required by the Dutch Minister in Bucharest and gladly accepted by Eelco Nicolaas van Kleffens, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Government in Exile of the Netherlands in London, the Dutch staff would embark in the same ship.⁹

Due to Antonescu's return of influenza after a week, Alexandru Crețianu, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, informed the British Legation that he would receive Hoare on February 10.¹⁰ Hoare insisted for an audience but he received a diplomatic reply in the negative although Hoare knew Antonescu would receive the French Military Attaché even though they had not met each other but British Minister decided to make another try.¹¹

The British withdrawal note was delivered on February 10 and criticized the Romanian

Government for allowing the presence of German Army while Crețianu expressed Antonescu's concern in regard to how the Romanians would find means of transport in order to return.¹²

What was the real state of mind in Romania in this matter? Hoare did not require a farewell visit to the powerless King Michael as this "would perhaps be painful for both of us."¹³ On February 13, Dimitrie Jurașcu, head of Consular and Affairs of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and former Minister in Norway, told Hankey, Secretary of the British Legation, that Romania would preserve the army in order to throw away the Germans at the proper time! When leaving, the British provided Iuliu Maniu, the opposition's leader, a transmitter, the only one considered to lead a resistance movement but, in the summer of 1941, Serviciul Special de Informații (Romanian Counter-Espionage Service) discovered a group of Romanians that sent to British Intelligence Service (MI6) in Istanbul a number of fifty-three political, military and economical messages.¹⁴

The British leaving was scheduled for February 15 by means of the Turkish ship anchored at Constanza. Hoare insisted the same facilities should be granted to the Romanian staff in London by the Foreign Office.¹⁵

On February 13, 13,00, Hoare succeeded in paying a farewell visit to Antonescu.¹⁶ The Romanian Government declined using a ship for the withdrawal of the Romanian Legation and asked the British that the Romanians should leave by plane. The Romanians' number should rise as many as 25, but Hoare took into account several would refuse to return. The Antonescu Government required

¹² Hoare's telegram no. 307 of 10.02.1941 to FO, *Ibid.*, 139.

Hoare's Report no. 32 of 10.02.1941 to Churchill and Hoare's Note no. 21 of 10.02.1941 to "General Antonescu, Conducator and Minister for Foreign Affairs", *Id.*, 371/29994, 57–59.

¹³ Hoare's letter of 14.02.1941 to Ralph Clarmont Skrine Stevenson, Principal Private Secretary to the Foreign Secretary, Gheorghe Buzatu, Marusia Cârstea, "Românii în arhivele britanice și americane," in Gheorghe Buzatu, *Românii între est și vest* (Iași: Tipo Moldova, 2011), doc. no. 26, 1424.

¹⁴ Valeriu Florin Dobrinescu, Ion Pătroi, *Anglia și România între anii 1939–1947* (București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1992), 104.

Adrian Vișțalaru, "Romanian Diplomats in the Scandinavian Countries (1916–1947)," *The Romanian Journal for Baltic and Nordic Studies*, Volume 6, Issue 2/2014:158.

¹⁵ Hoare's telegram no. 316 of 11.02.1941 to FO, PRO FO, 371/29993, 11.

¹⁶ Gheorghe Buzatu, Marusia Cârstea, Stela Cheptea, *Pace și război (1940–1944). Jurnalul mareșalului Antonescu (comentarii, anexe, cronologie)*, vol. I, *Preludii. Explozia. Revanșa (4. IX. 1940–31.XII.1941)*, Ediția a II-a, revăzută și adăugită (Iași: Tipo Moldova, 2011), 254.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷ Knatchbull Hugessen's telegram no. 255 of 5.02.1941 to Foreign Office (hereafter FO; repeated as FO's telegram no. 169 to Hoare), *Id.*, 371/29992, 102.

⁸ Knatchbull Hugessen's telegram no. 281 and 286 of 10.02.1941 to FO (repeated as FO's telegrams no. 204 and 206 to Hoare), *Ibid.*, 158–160.

⁹ Anthony Eden's Letter no. 10 of 10.02.1941 (signed by Nichols) to George Nevile Maltby Bland, the British Minister to the Government in Exile of the Netherlands in the United Kingdom, *Id.*, 371/29993, 22.

¹⁰ Hoare's telegram no. 296 of 9.02.1941 to FO, *Id.*, 371/29992, 131.

¹¹ Hoare's telegram no. 297 of 9.02.1941 to FO, *Ibid.*, 133.

as the British should withdraw on February 15, warned about refusing any postponement and if the Romanian staff in London did not leave the United Kingdom, Romania would not allow the ship to leave Constanza!¹⁷

Antonescu warned Hoare that he would remain as guest until the Romanians returned; consequently, British Minister insisted to Foreign Office to keep the ciphers.¹⁸

When Antonescu inquired if Romania would be bombarded until Romanians came back, Hoare assured him about impossibility of the action.¹⁹ Antonescu had already ordered the anti-air artillery to be prepared in order to defend Bucharest, the oil region of Prahova, the Cernavodă bridge and intensified the surveillance of the remaining British and their Romanian agents.²⁰

The Romanian Government's insistence for the simultaneous departures of Legations were based on the fact the British required the end of relations but Hoare believed that although Antonescu's opinion was correct, the international media sympathized with the Great Britain in this matter as the United Kingdom was at war with Germany while Romania remained formally neutral.²¹

The Foreign Office did not expect to be faced with such rigidity from the Romanian Government and informed Chargé d'Affaires Radu A. Florescu about the discord and proposed six places in the plane to Lisbon on February 15, but the rest of Romanians should leave by a ship seven days later. The Foreign Office proposed to Hoare to inquire the Romanian Government in this matter, if not the British Government would try to find extra places.²²

Finally, Antonescu accepted as a part of diplomats to leave Great Britain by plane and the last by ship on February 22 although all British Mission, including Hoare, could exit Romania on February 15.²³

Usually, the Romanian people blamed the British for this interruption as the British-Hungarian relations continued to exist although

Hungary had not supported the British foreign policy in the Interwar period.²⁴

On February 13, Florescu notified the Romanian Ministry for Foreign Affairs upon his resignation although six members of the Romanian Legation wished to return but none was a diplomat. Diplomats Matyla Costiescu Ghyka, Bianu, Stîrcea and Munteanu had already resigned, diplomat Vardala was ill but Ion Puşcaru remained at his post in order to organize the departure. Worried about repercussions, the Foreign Office tried to persuade Florescu to leave by plane to Lisbon and there he should explain to his Government why he did not wish to return.²⁵

Military attachés Captain N. Ţenescu, V. Barbu, A. Nicolae, I. Felea and C. Făgărăşanu accepted to return but Florescu did not change his mind and Foreign Office thought to expel him.²⁶ Florescu tried the only possible solution as he decided to work at the sixth passenger.²⁷ Finally, Mrs. A. Tomescu agreed to be the six passenger in the plane to Lisbon.²⁸ On February 15, Mrs. Tomescu fainted, remained in Great Britain and became a clerk at the Swedish Legation.²⁹

On February 12, Eden was questioned in the House of Commons in regard to the withdrawal. Although the questions referred to the severe limitation of bilateral relations (if Romania was an enemy state, if Great Britain had to declare war on Romania due to the latter's alliance to Nazi Germany or if it was true that the Germans captured the British military equipment sent previously to Romania), Eden offered a "diplomatic" answer: "I have chosen the word of this Note, which was sent on my instructions, with some care. I prefer to leave it there".³⁰

The withdrawal of the British Legation continued to create emotion in the Foreign Office so they required information from the United States Embassy in London and the British Consulate-General in Istanbul.³¹

¹⁷ Hoare's telegrams no. 327 and 328 of 13.02.1941 to FO, PRO FO, 371/29993, 50.

¹⁸ Hoare's telegram no. 332 of 13.02.1941 to FO, *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁹ Hoare's telegram no. 333 of 13.02.1941 to FO, *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁰ *Stenogramele şedinţelor Consiliului de Miniştri. Guvernarea Ion Antonescu*, vol. II (*ianuarie-martie 1941*), Ediţie de documente întocmită de: Marcel-Dumitru Ciucă, Aurelian Teodorescu, Bogdan Florin Popovici (Bucureşti: Arhivele Naţionale ale României, 1998), 209–214.

²¹ Hoare's telegram no. 336 of 13.02.1941 to FO, PRO FO, 371/29993, 61.

²² FO's telegram no. 216 of 13.02.1941 to Hoare, *Ibid.*, 53.

²³ Hoare's telegram no. 337 of 14.02.1941 to FO, *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁴ Hoare's telegram no. 334 of 13.02.1945 to FO, *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁵ FO's telegram no. 219 of 14.02.1941 to Hoare, *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁶ FO's telegram no. 222 of 14.02.1941 to Hoare, *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁷ Meeting between Nichols and Florescu of 13.02.1941, *Ibid.*, 76–77.

²⁸ FO's Note of 14.02.1941 to the Portuguese Ambassador in London (R. 1180/80/37 in FO), *Ibid.*, 92–93.

²⁹ Dumitru G. Danielopol, *Jurnal londonez*, Ediţie îngrijită de: Valeriu Florin Dobrinescu şi Valeria Dumistrăcel (Iaşi: Institutul European, 1995), 197.

³⁰ Parliamentary questions in regard to the withdrawal of the Diplomatic Mission, PRO FO, 371/29993, 73.

³¹ Nichols's Minute of 16.02.1941 to Alexander Cadogan, Permanent Under-Secretary of FO, *Ibid.*, 108.

On February 16, 9,55 a.m., the Foreign Office deciphered the British Legation in Sofia's telegram about the departure of British staff from Bucharest and their arrival in Constanza on February 15, 7,00 a.m.³²

On February 17, 19,45 p. m., the news of their arrival in Istanbul the previous day reached the Foreign Office.³³

Later, United States Embassy in London notified the Foreign Office about the departure from Bucharest by train on February 14th, 10 p. m., the Turkish ship "Izmir" left Romania the following day, 4 p. m. Until Constanza, two representatives of the Romanian Ministry for Foreign Affairs and one of the United States Legation accompanied the British.³⁴

At British suggestion, the Romanian Government designated the Swedish Legation in London to represent the Romanian interests in the Great Britain and the British Empire.³⁵

The British consuls in Romania were withdrawn, just as the career Romanian consuls, but the British authorities could taken into custody the latter if charged with espionage activities. The honorary Romanian consuls lost their diplomatic privileges but if they held British citizenship or another citizenship of a country allied of the United Kingdom, they could keep informally some privileges and also informally could assist Romanian citizens in need. All Romanian consuls lost the right to use cipher telegrams.³⁶

At the inquiry of British Embassy in Moscow

FO's telegram no. 47 of 16.02.1941 to the British Consul-General in Istanbul, *Ibid.*, 111.

³² The telegram of Rendel (British Legation in Sofia) no. 247 of 15.02.1941 to FO, *Ibid.*, 109.

³³ Paton's telegram (en clair) from Istanbul of 17.02.1941 to FO, *Ibid.*, 113.

³⁴ RBI Dispatch of the US Chargé d'Affaires in London no. 2839 of 18.02.1941 to FO (the note is the substance of a telegram of 17.02.1941 sent from Bucharest by Franklin Mott Gunther, US Minister), *Ibid.*, 115.

³⁵ The note of Gustaf Björn Prytz, Swedish Minister in London, no. 11 of 15.02.1941 to A. Eden, Foreign Secretary, *Ibid.*, 121.

Copy of the Dominion Office's telegram no. 161 of 13.03.1941 to the Government of the Commonwealth of Australia, *Ibid.*, 123.

Copy of the Dominion Office's telegrams nos. 56, 119, and 130, of 4.04.1941 to the Governments of Canada, New Zealand and the Union of South Africa, *Ibid.*, 122.

Nichols's note of 05.03.1941, Id., 371/29994, 27.

Valeriu Florin Dobrinescu, Ion Pătroi, *Anglia și România între anii 1939–1947*, 104.

³⁶ FO's telegram no. 135 of 13.03.1945 to the Governments of Canada, Commonwealth of Australia, New Zealand and Union of South Africa, PRO FO, 371/29993, 124.

in what concerned the attitude of the pro-British Grigore Gafencu, Romanian Minister in Moscow, Foreign Office forbade any official contact as in all such cases but foreign head of missions might officially contact British Missions; privately, discussions could be discretely be engaged but British officials should abstain any approach.³⁷

The Foreign Office designated the United States Legation in Bucharest to represent the British interests in Romania.³⁸ After December 12, 1941 when Romania declared war on the United States, British interests were represented by the Swiss Legation at Bucharest.³⁹ As the United States Government considered Romanian ministers as mere puppets, President Roosevelt postponed until June 1942 the issue of a declaration of war on Romania but this happened in order to meet a harmonious cooperation with the Allies.⁴⁰

Iuliu Maniu, the opposition's leader, declared himself ready to make personal sacrifices for democracy and Allied victory, including some sabotages, but he hoped for the cancellation of the second Vienna Award (August 30, 1940) which granted the North-Eastern Transylvania to Hungary, at Germany and Italy's dictate; instead, Hoare warned Maniu in that meeting of February 10 about the Hungarian support of the British public opinion due to Antonescu Government's recent events (the presence of German troops, the torture of several British nationals for espionage activities etc).⁴¹

Only on December 7, 1941, the Great Britain declared war on Romania.⁴² Despite Prime-Minister Churchill's reluctance as he considered

³⁷ The telegram of Richard Stafford Cripps, the British Ambassador in the Soviet Union, no. 120 of 11.02.1941 to FO and FO Circular no. T. 10078/10078/377 of 22.08.1938, *Ibid.*, 44–46.

³⁸ The telegram of S.F. Stewart, Under-Secretary of State for India, no. 3868 of 9.04.1941 to the Government of India, *Ibid.*, 126.

³⁹ Buzatu, Cârstea, Cheptea, *Jurnalul mareșalului Antonescu*, 252.

Mircea Ionnițiu, "American-Romanian Relations during the reign of King Mihai," in *The United States and Romania. American-Romanian Relations in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Paul D. Quinlan (Woodland Hills, California: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1988), 88.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

Joseph F. Harrington, Bruce J. Courtney, *Relații româno-americiane (1940–1990)*, Traducere de Mihaela Sadovschi, Prefață de V. Fl. Dobrinescu (Iași: Institutul European, 2002), 32.

⁴¹ Hoare's telegram no. 317 of 11.02.1941 to FO, PRO FO, 371/29993, 39.

⁴² Valeriu Florin Dobrinescu, *Emigrația română din lumea anglo-saxonă* (Iași: Institutul European, 1993), 90.

East-Europeans as friends of the British that were obliged by Hitler to ally with Germany, Stalin insisted and succeeded to determine the British Government to take that step.⁴³ This happened in a time when Churchill and Eden desperately looked for allies.⁴⁴

The British Minister did not pay a farewell visit to King Michael as they both personally could not believe their eyes the severity the bilateral relations have reached but Antonescu trusted that Germany would protect Romania against Communism and there was no place for the British.

The process of withdrawal implied the use of means of transport for the personnel. Due to the war in Europe, a careful attention regarded the assurance of ships and planes.

15 February 1941 represented the first and only interruption of the British-Romanian relations that would be overcome only five years later.

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⁴³ *Corespondența Președintelui Consiliului de Miniștri al URSS cu Președinții SUA și Primii-miniștri ai Marii Britanii din timpul Marelui Război pentru apărarea patriei 1941–1945*, vol. I (București: Editura de Stat pentru Literatură Politică, 1954), doc. no. 19, Churchill's dispatch of 7.11.1941 to Stalin, 35. Paul D. Quinlan, *Ciocnire deasupra României. Politica anglo-americană față de România (1939–1947)*, Traducere de Gheorghe Onișoru (Iași: Centrul de Studii Românești-Fundația Culturală Română, 1995), 68.

⁴⁴ Alan Farmer, *Marea Britanie: Politica externă și colonială (1939–1964)*, Traducere: Simona Ceașu, Ediția a 2-a (București: Editura BIC ALL, 2000), 21.

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