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МАЛАЯ АНТАНТА: ПРОБЛЕМЫ, ПРОТИВОРЕЧИЯ И КРАХ ЧЕХОСЛОВАЦКО-ЮГОСЛАВСКО-РУМЫНСКОГО АЛЬЯНСА (1920–1938)

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Аннотация. Рассматриваются формирование, развитие и постепенный распад Малой Антанты – регионального союза, в который входили Чехословакия, Югославия и Румыния в 1920–1938 гг. Анализируются причины образования этого блока, выявляются ключевые аспекты его функционирования и последующего ослабления, а также отслеживаются реакции государств-членов на ревизионистские угрозы в контексте меняющегося международного порядка. Изучаются как внутренние, так и внешние факторы, которые определяли политику государств Малой Антанты. Особое внимание уделяется вопросам безопасности, дипломатии и экономики в рамках их сотрудничества, а также растущим разногласиям между членами альянса, вызванным различиями в геополитических приоритетах и влиянием сильных стран, в частности нацистской Германии и фашистской Италии. Делается вывод о том, что, несмотря на первоначальные усилия по объединению и координации действий государств-членов, Малая Антанта не смогла адаптироваться

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к меняющимся международным условиям, ослабевающей поддержке со стороны Франции и различиям, вызванным неодинаковыми политическими системами и уровнем экономического развития стран, которые входили в блок. Эти факторы привели к распаду формирования до начала Второй мировой войны.

Ключевые слова: Малая Антанта; Чехословакия; Румыния; Югославия; региональный альянс; межвоенный период; ревизионизм; Центральная Европа; Балканы.

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МАЛАЯ АНТАНТА: ПРАБЛЕМЫ, СУПЯРЭЧНАСЦІ І КРАХ ЧЭХАСЛАВАЦКА-ЮГАСЛАЎСКА-РУМЫНСКАГА АЛЬЯНСУ (1920–1938)

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Анатацыя. Разглядаюцца фарміраванне, развіццё і паступовы распад Малой Антанты – рэгіянальнага саюзу, у які ўваходзілі Чэхаславакія, Югаславія і Румынія ў перыяд 1920–1938 гг. Аналізуюцца прычыны ўтварэння гэтага блока, выяўляюцца ключавыя аспекты яго функцыянавання і наступнага аслаблення, а таксама адсочваюцца рэакцыі дзяржаў-членаў на рэвізіянісцкія пагрозы ў кантэксце зменлівага міжнароднага парадку. Даследуюцца як унутраныя, так і знешнія фактары, якія вызначалі палітыку дзяржаў Малой Антанты. Асаблівая ўвага надаецца пытанням бяспекі, дыпламатыі і эканомікі ў рамках іх супрацоўніцтва, а таксама супярэчнасцям паміж членамі альянсу, якія былі выкліканы адрозненнямі ў геапалітычных прыярытэтах і ўплывам моцных дзяржаў, у прыватнасці нацысцкай Германіі і фашысцкай Італіі. Робіцца выснова аб тым, што, нягледзячы на першапачатковыя намаганні па аб'яднанні і каардынацыі дзеянняў дзяржаў-членаў, Малая Антанта не здолела адаптавацца да зменлівых міжнародных умоў, аслабленай падтрымкі з боку Францыі і адрозненняў, што былі выкліканы неаднолькавымі палітычнымі сістэмамі і ўзроўнем эканамічнага развіцця краін, якія ўваходзілі ў блок. Гэтыя фактары прывялі да распаду фарміравання да пачатку Другой сусветнай вайны.

Ключавыя словы: Малая Антанта; Чэхаславакія; Румынія; Югаславія; рэгіянальны альянс; міжваенны перыяд; рэвізіянізм; Цэнтральная Еўропа; Балканы.

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THE LITTLE ENTENTE: PROBLEMS, CONTRADICTIONS AND THE FAILURE OF THE CZECHOSLOVAKIAN-YUGOSLAVIAN-ROMANIAN ALLIANCE (1920–1938)

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Abstract. This study explores the formation, development, and gradual dissolution of the Little Entente – a regional alliance comprising Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania in 1920–1938. The objective is to analyse the reasons for the formation of this bloc, to identify the key factors in its functioning and eventual weakening, and to trace how the member states responded to revisionist threats within the context of changing international order. The study examines both the internal and external factors that shaped the policies of the Little Entente states. Particular emphasis is placed on the security, diplomatic, and economic dimensions of their cooperation, as well as on the growing rifts among members resulting from divergent geopolitical priorities and the influence of the great powers, particularly nazi Germany and fascist Italy. The study concludes that, despite initial efforts at unity and coordinated action, the Little Entente ultimately failed to adapt to changing international conditions, weakening French support, and differences stemming from different political systems and economic levels of its members. These factors led to its de facto demise before the outbreak of World War II.

Keywords: Little Entente; Czechoslovakia; Romania; Yugoslavia; regional alliance; interwar period; revisionism; Central Europe; Balkans.

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Introduction

The end of the World War I marked the beginning of a new chapter for Europe. The great empires that had existed for centuries suddenly lay in ruins. From their ashes arose new states, including the Czechoslovak Republic (here and further CSR), the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (here and further Yugoslavia)[1], and Hungary, which viewed itself as the heir to the Kingdom of Hungary and claimed its historical territories. On the other hand, the CSR claimed today's Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia, Yugoslavia demanded Croatia, Slavonia, Vojvodina, as well as western Banat, and Transylvania and the eastern part of Banat were to be incorporated into Romania [1, p. 28; 2, p. 25; 3, p. 122]. However, Budapest was unwilling to accept the loss of these region, which represented two-thirds of the original territory of the Kingdom of Hungary and 3 mln Hungarians. This led to armed conflict with the CSR and the Kingdom of Romania in 1919 [1, p. 28; 4, p. 22; 5, p. 41]. Despite the fact that the Czechoslovakian and Romanian borders with Hungary were definitively demarcated in the summer of that year, Budapest still considered the «seceded» territories as its own. The definitive signing of the peace treaty with Hungary took place a year later, on 4 June 1920, at the Grand Trianon Palace [2, p. 24]. The outcomes of the conference left the Hungarians with feelings of bitterness and injustice, prompting efforts to revise the contents of the peace treaty [2, p. 26; 5, p. 42]. From the outset, Hungary thus appeared to its neighbours as a threat, and by refusing to accept the terms of the Treaty of Trianon, it compelled them to take joint steps to ensure the protection of their own states [2, p. 26]. As the allied powers adopted a rather lax stance towards Hungarian revisionist ambitions, the neighbouring states were compelled to pursue closer cooperation, primarily to ensure mutual protection [6, p. 41]. This led to the formation of the so-called Little Entente.

Research methodology

This study employs a historical-political analytical approach, focusing on the development, operation and dissolution of the regional alliance known as the Little Entente. The core of the research lies in the analysis of scholarly secondary literature, which provides a framework for understanding the broader context of foreign policy strategies and the internal dynamics of the member states. Selected primary sources from the Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, the National Archives and of the Czech Republic and the Archives of Yugoslavia were also used to supplement the interpretation.

Analytical and comparative methods were employed to compare the stances of individual states on issues of security, cooperation, and responses to revisionist threats. Emphasis was also placed on domestic factors influencing the alliance's cohesion, such as differing geopolitical interests, economic imbalances, and differences in regime orientation.

The study aimed to reconstruct the main stages in the development of the Little Entente, and to gain a deeper understanding of the internal and external factors that influenced its functioning and contributed to its failure. At the same time, the study aims to analyse how the positions and responses of the member states evolved in the context of growing revisionist pressures and dynamic international changes during the interwar period.

Results and analysis

Collaboration between Czechoslovakian, Yugoslavian and Romanian statesmen began during the World War I and intensified significantly after the conflict ended [7, p. 134]. Well aware of the threat posed by their neighbour's revisionist tendencies, these states sought to eliminate them. At the Paris peace conference, Czechoslovakian representatives advocated for a shared border with Romania in the strategically important region of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, and for the creation of a corridor stretching through Burgenland to ensure direct contact with Yugoslavia [8, p. 36; 9, p. 268]. However, the idea of a common border between the two Slavic states was opposed by the world powers, each presenting different reasons for rejection. Only France expressed support for this proposal [10, p. 17]. Conversely, the United States and Great Britain pointed to ethnographic

[1]In 1929, the official name of the country was changed from the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. This change established the use of the term «Yugoslavia» throughout the entire period under review.

and military obstacles respectively, while Italy viewed the creation of a shared border between CSR and Yugoslavia as a threat to its own interests [11, p. 18]. During the Paris negotiations, diplomats and politicians from these states began coordinating their approach to the Hungarian question, a process that gradually led to the formation of the alliance known as the Little Entente – a term originally coined by the Hungarian press as a derogatory label for the alliance [12, p. 81–82; 13, p. 136]. Although the political leaders of states neighbouring Hungary had contemplated the cooperation as early as 1919, the necessary agreements to establish this alliance bloc were not concluded until the beginning of the next decade [13, p. 132–133].

The first of the three agreements that formed the Little Entente was signed by the CSR and Yugoslavia. The signing was prompted once again by Hungary's actions. Under the pretext of providing military assistance to Poland in its war against Soviet Russia (a conflict in which the states that would form the future Little Entente maintained neutrality), Hungary planned to occupy the territory of Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia [13, p. 138; 14, p. 39]. The political leaders in both Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia perceived Hungary's intentions as a direct threat and decided to act accordingly [13, p. 138–139]. On 31 May 1920, the Czechoslovakian General Staff formally requested that the Ministry of National Defence of the Czechoslovak Republic urgently conclude a treaty with Yugoslavia, considering such a pact to be a vital element of national defence[2]. Just one day after the Czechoslovak foreign minister E. Beneš arrived in Belgrade, on 14 August 1920, a two-year alliance convention was signed. This was directed against Hungary, which was seeking to revise the Treaty of Trianon (it later emerged that Hungarian regent M. Horthy had even discussed launching a joint offensive against CSR and Austria with Germany) [6, p. 40; 13, p. 139]. From Belgrade, E. Beneš travelled east to Bucharest, where he signed a preliminary protocol with Romanian foreign minister T. Ionescu on 17 August 1920 [13, p. 140]. However, following an attempt by the deposed Hungarian king and Austrian emperor Charles I to reclaim the Hungarian throne, this preliminary protocol was replaced on 23 April 1921 with an alliance convention. Its provisions were similar to those of the Czechoslovakian-Yugoslavian treaty of August 1920 [8, p. 134]. This king's «adventure» precipitated the formation of the Little Entente and strengthened mutual relations between its members [4, p. 24; 15, p. 16]. The final step in forming the alliance was the conclusion of a convention between Romania and Yugoslavia, negotiations for which had begun as early as summer 1920. However, the treaty was not signed until a year later, on 7 June 1921 [10, p. 21]. Unlike the previous conventions, this one addressed not only the implementation and protection of the of Treaty Trianon, but also the provisions of the Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine [8, p. 134].

An allied bloc was thus formed, which, comprising nearly 50 mln inhabitants, became a significant politic, economic, and military force in Central and Southeastern Europe. Its importance extended beyond the regional level, as its member states were part of the French alliance system [15, p. 11; 16, p. 67]. A key unifying factor for the Little Entente members was not only the defence of borders and enforcement of the peace settlements concluded in Paris, but also, over time, the pursuit of state integrity and the pacification of tensions within Europe [14, p. 36–40]. From a legal standpoint, however, the Little Entente cannot be considered a unified alliance in its early years. Its members operated on a bilateral basis, without a supranational structure to coordinate their joint activities. It should be noted that the alliance was not founded on an explicitly anti-Hungarian agenda. Rather, its goal was to compel Hungary to accept the post-war European order and lay the groundwork for future cooperation with Budapest [17, p. 23].

Between 1921 and 1922, military agreements were signed that, like the political treaties, retained a bilateral character [13, p. 145]. Specifically, military conventions were concluded on 2 July 1921 between the CSR and Romania, on 1 August 1921 between the CSR and Yugoslavia, and on 23 January 1922 between Yugoslavia and Romania. However, in 1923, a unified military convention was concluded to regulate the number of mobilised units in the event of a Hungarian attack [18, p. 28]. Even before the finalisation of the military treaties, the alliance faced its first serious challenge in autumn 1921, when the former Hungarian king, Charles I, made a second attempt to restore Habsburg rule in Hungary. This did not go unanswered by the states of the Little Entente, with the CSR taking the lead, since Hungarian king's ascension to the throne would have placed him in a position to assert the restoration of the Kingdom of Hungary within its historical borders – an act legitimised by his coronation oath of 1916 [6, p. 37; 10, p. 26]. This threat prompted the member states to declare a mobilisation, and even to threaten military intervention against Hungary [13, p. 145]. The sovereign action of the Little Entente states, undertaken independently of the Triple Entente, led to a temporary easing of tensions. Charles I failed in his bid to reclaim the throne, and the Habsburgs were formally dethroned in Hungary [6, p. 45; 13, p. 147].

In the realm of international affairs, the Little Entente aligned itself with France, with all three of its members concluding bilateral treaties with France during the 1920s (CSR in 1924, Romania in 1926, and Yugoslavia in 1927). Paris sought to use this alliance to create a barrier against the expansion of communism from the Soviet Union into Europe [4, p. 26]. However, French politicians were not the only ones attempting to influence developments in the region. Italy, seeking to assert itself at France's expense, aimed to increase its

[2]Archiv Ministerstva zahraničních věcí. F. Malá dohoda. Kn. 1. S. 2.

influence in Southeastern Europe [16, p. 72]. In 1924, the Pact of friendship and cordial cooperation between Italy and Yugoslavia was signed in Rome [19, p. 168]. France disapproved of this move, correctly interpreting it as Italian dictator B. Mussolini's efforts to weaken Paris' ties with the Little Entente states and to undermine the alliance's stability [20, p. 310]. Nevertheless, the pact received the support of E. Beneš, and only a few months later, CSR concluded a similar Pact of cordial cooperation with Italy. Subsequent developments in the Adriatic, reflected in the Italian-Albanian treaty of 1926 and the Italian-Romanian treaty of 1927, which tightened the noose around Yugoslavia, prompted Yugoslavia to strengthen its ties with France through the aforementioned bilateral treaty of 1927, and also highlighted the need for closer cooperation within the Little Entente. According to the Yugoslavian leadership, regional treaties could serve as instruments for maintaining peace in Europe [5, p. 90; 10, p. 73; 21, p. 42].

It should be noted that despite efforts at rapprochement among the individual members of the Little Entente, their respective national interests, largely shaped by their geographical position, often drove a wedge between them. For instance, both CSR and Romania viewed the Soviet Union as a threat, whereas Yugoslavia did not, due to its geographical position. Conversely, Yugoslavia feared Italy, whereas Romania sought to deepen its cooperation with it. Germany, on the other hand, posed a danger only to CSR [10, p. 16; 12, p. 87]. A clear example of these conflicting interests was the Romanian-Italian treaty of friendship and cordial cooperation, concluded in 1926, which was directed against both Yugoslavia and the Little Entente as a whole [22, p. 174].

Despite the above-mentioned controversies, it is undeniable that the member states of the Little Entente genuinely sought to cooperate. Their collaboration was evident, for example, at the economic conferences in Portorose (1921) and Genoa (1922), where they jointly opposed economic proposals put forward by the Hungarian delegation [10, p. 27; 23, p. 517]. Prior to the latter conference, a preparatory meeting of experts was held to ensure that the allies presented a uniform position in the negotiations [24, p. 39]. At the Genoa conference, Poland also aligned itself with the states of the Little Entente. As early as 1921, Poland had expressed interest in joining the bloc, a proposal that was supported by Romania and Yugoslavia. However, the proposal met with firm opposition from Czechoslovakia [10, p. 27; 25, p. 75]. From the very beginning, the Little Entente saw the gradual development of mutual relations among its members that extended even beyond the alliance itself. This trend was also evident in the cultural sphere. For instance, the Czechoslovakian-Yugoslavian League of Mutual Cooperation was founded in 1921, and a year later, the dynastic marriage was concluded between Yugoslavian King Alexander I Karađorđević and Romanian Princess Maria [26, p. 145; 27, p. 16–22]. This marriage also had political significance, as it marked the end of disputes concerning the demarcation of borders [26, p. 146]. Independent of official government initiatives, the Women's Little Entente, a feminist organisation, was established in 1923. It united women's rights movements from Central and Southeastern European countries including CSR, Yugoslavia, Romania, Greece, Poland, and Bulgaria. Apart from the demands that were considered as standard for feminism at the time, its members advocated for world peace, cordial relations among the founding states, and even aspired to influence foreign policy matters [28, p. 37–39].

From 1922 onwards, the foreign ministers of the Little Entente states held regular biannual meetings to discuss the international situation and to coordinate their positions on current issues [25, p. 78]. In 1929, the Belgrade conference adopted a protocol to extend the alliance treaties for a further five years. At the recommendation of the League of Nations, the General act for conciliation, arbitration, and judicial settlement was also signed, intended to strengthen the bloc's position within the international arena [21, p. 42]. This document was particularly significant in terms of changing the structure of the Little Entente – it was the first time that all three member states had jointly signed a political document [15, p. 54–59]. Meetings of Little Entente leaders also took place within the military sphere. General staff conferences served as forums for discussing defensive mechanisms, coordinating joint actions and planning potential operations in the event of interventions against member states. The international situation and the threats it posed to the alliance were also regular topics of discussion. The allies also addressed questions of construction and location of military production facilities, standardisation of armaments, and supervision of their production and distribution. In this field, Czechoslovakian arms manufacturers held a dominant position, supplying military materiel to both partners [10, p. 129–133, 203–204]. A major obstacle to executing joint military operations was the absence of a shared border between Yugoslavia and the CSR. This presented logistical challenges, particularly with regard to the supply of munitions and military equipment. To mitigate these issues, the two states collaborated to develop a military-industrial base also in the Balkans [29, p. 400–405].

Global instability necessitated the consolidation of relations within the Little Entente alliance. In 1930, at a conference held in Štrbské Pleso (Slovakia) a supplementary agreement was signed to amend the bilateral treaties of 1920–1921. This document was significant because it legally defined the Little Entente as an allied bloc. Until then, the meetings of its members had not been legally binding, but had been based on the conclusions of the 1922 Belgrade conference, where it was agreed that meetings would occasionally be held to discuss international issues. However, by signing the

supplementary agreement in Štrbské Pleso, the member states committed to holding regular meetings at least once per year. The agreement also codified the principle of unity within the alliance when dealing with other actors. A new provision permitted a designated delegate or delegation to represent the Little Entente as a whole in international forums [15, p. 19, 56, 80].

In the early 1930s, however, the alliance found itself caught between two «millstones»: Italy and Germany, whose increasingly aggressive foreign policies threatened its very existence. Another negative phenomenon of this period was the attempt to revise the borders, as well as the tendency of the great powers to make decisions on international issues without prior negotiation with the smaller states – an approach that was later reflected in Mussolini's 1933 proposal for the Four-power pact [30, p. 148]. In these circumstances, the conference in Belgrade at the end of 1932 witnessed a proposal to strengthen the Little Entente as a political alliance. This would enhance its international credibility and transform it into a more influential actor in Eastern Europe [30, p. 158; 31, p. 129–131]. In response, the Organisational pact was signed in 1933 [31, p. 129–131]. This convention elevated the alliance to a higher international entity, with the newly established Permanent Council of the Little Entente acting as its governing body and effectively replacing the meetings of foreign ministers [10, p. 121; 32, p. 91]. From then on, conferences were to be held at least three times a year, and the allied conventions were to be extended indefinitely [31, p. 131–132]. The adopted decree was intended to guarantee cohesion among the states of the Little Entente in matters of foreign policy, and thus strengthen its international position and prevent possible border revisions [33, p. 340]. The alliance's cohesion was to be ensured through tripartite treaty-making, requiring the consent of both allies before any member could conclude a treaty with a third country [10, p. 121; 31, p. 131–132].

A few weeks after the Organisational pact was signed, France, Great Britain, Germany, and Italy began international negotiations to form the so-called Four-power pact. The Permanent Council of the Little Entente labelled this effort as a covert attempt to revise the post-war European order [34, p. 99; 35, p. 17]. Smaller states, including those of the Little Entente, voiced objections, viewing the bloc as a threat. Above all, they feared the cooperation of Italy and Germany, and the potential destabilisation of the borders established by the Versailles peace system [34, p. 94]. For this reason, they urged Great Britain and especially France, not to join the bloc – a plea that went unheeded, as it later transpired [10, p. 124; 34, p. 94]. The Little Entente opposed the emerging directorate independently as well, rejecting the dominant position of the four powers and the revision of borders, and striving to limit its influence to internal relations among its members [36, p. 321–325]. Ultimately, due largely to the extensive diplomatic efforts of the Little Entente's representatives, the Four-power pact was not implemented as originally intended – only a fraction of the original proposals were adopted [34, p. 98].

Cooperation between the states of the Little Entente also extended into the economic sphere, though it should be noted that this cooperation was disproportionate. The agrarian countries of Romania and Yugoslavia primarily traded with the relatively industrialised Czechoslovakia rather than with each other, since their exports consisted largely of similar agricultural products [23, p. 514–515; 37, p. 3]. For CSR, however, its most important trade partners were Germany and Austria. It imported only a small portion of commodities from the southeast, which caused general tension within the alliance [17, p. 25; 37, p. 12–13]. Despite the Germany's, Austria's, and Hungary's defeat in the war, commercial ties with these countries remained active, raising concerns among the Little Entente states about their potential return to pre-war strength. This led to efforts aimed at weakening their economic power [17, p. 25]. In terms of foreign policy development, Czechoslovakian military products became an important trade item for the Little Entente, supplying its allies with armaments [23, p. 520]. The Škodovka and Zbrojovka factories exported arms to Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakian firms similarly engaged in supplying armaments to Romania [38, p. 198; 39, p. 236]. In the early years of its existence, just as in the political sphere, the economic relations among the Little Entente allies operated on the principle of bilateral agreements. The lack of cohesion and absence of an overarching economic cooperation treaty is reflected in the fact that CSR and Romania were members of the Mitteleuropäische Wirtschaftstagung (1925), while Yugoslavia was not [23, p. 529–530].

However, in 1927, the Czechoslovakian side – seeking customs preferences for successor states in Geneva – attempted to negotiate «concessions» with its allies as well. At the Little Entente conference in Jáchymov in 1927, a plan for an economic Little Entente was proposed. This proposal was more of a response to Vienna's Anschluss aspirations than a genuine attempt to establish functional economic mechanisms [40, p. 276]. In 1929, at the Belgrade conference, a plan for close economic cooperation was approved [12, p. 83]. Four years later, Art. 7 of the Organisational pact established the Economic Council of the Little Entente, intended to serve as an advisory body to the Permanent Council [15, p. 93; 31, p. 132]. The aim of its establishment was not only to synchronise the economic cooperation but, also to create an effective plan for the exchange of goods [15, p. 93; 41, p. 267]. However, this idea was obstructed by the economic interests of individual countries, that were primarily focused on supporting domestic markets, as importing foreign goods had a negative impact on national economies. Another challenge was to harmonise

cooperation in the face of economic disparity between the countries [31, p. 136; 41, p. 268]. Nevertheless, the creation of the Economic Council helped revive the allies' economies, which had fallen into a deep depression following the Great Depression. Trade agreements on the exchange of goods between the Little Entente states were concluded at the council's first meeting in Prague[3]. The council's existence led to the revitalisation of economic cooperation and the establishment of the General Secretariat of the Little Entente, which dealt with the bloc's economic interests [41, p. 268].

Upon rising to power, the nazi elite in Berlin sought to exploit the aftermath of the Great Depression and the economic backwardness of Yugoslavia's and Romania's agrarian economies [42, p. 14]. They intended to assert their influence in the Balkans through economic support. Implementing this plan would result in the isolation of the CSR and the weakening of the Little Entente, which the Germans sought to break [43, p. 113–114]. This effort was aided by CSR's decision in 1930 to raise tariffs on agricultural imports, which aroused resentment among its allies. In response, representatives of Yugoslavia, Romania, and Hungary met, contradicting the conclusions of the Štrbské Pleso conference [10, p. 140].

Germany benefited from the situation. Unlike other European powers, Germany was not self-sufficient and sought to compensate for this by importing agricultural products from Eastern Europe. This would meet Germany's demands while also drawing countries such as Hungary, Yugoslavia or Romania into closer alignment with Germany itself [42, p. 14–16]. German activity in this region complicated the activities of the Economic Council. For example, Romania was pressured to develop economic relations with Germany only if it altered its foreign policy orientation [41, p. 268; 42, p. 41–42]. Finally, Italy also sought a role in this area, as it harboured similar ambitions to assert its position in this region [5, p. 24]. This ultimately led to a gradual divergence among the Little Entente states, which deepened further in the second half of the 1930s due to changes in the political positions of the individual member states. M. Stojadinović's rise to power in Yugoslavia, the subsequent sanctions imposed on B. Mussolini after his attack on Ethiopia, and the higher commodity prices that the CSR could not match opened the door wide to the German Reich Chancellor, A. Hitler, in Yugoslavia [41, p. 268–269]. Eventually, Yugoslavia became economically dependent on Berlin [44, p. 126]. Over time, Germany became the protector of the territorial integrity of the states in the Balkans, thus limiting the significance of the Little Entente as a defensive alliance [45, p. 150].

The shift in Europe's political landscape, driven by the rise of totalitarian regimes in Italy and later in Germany, triggered a cascade of events that had significant impact on the internal affairs of the Little Entente. These two countries' imperial ambitions and their growing international influence sparked a struggle for hegemony in Central and Southeastern Europe. The stability guaranteed by the Versailles system was increasingly undermined, forcing the members of the Little Entente to seek new strategic paths. However, the alliance lacked the capacity to respond adequately to these changing circumstances [46, p. 88]. The political rapprochement between the Little Entente states and Germany was triggered by the France's withdrawal from the region and its indifference toward the Little Entente alliance's fate – a stance already evident at the signing of the Four-power pact [42, p. 37; 47, p. 58]. Romania's proposal regarding the agreement with the Third Reich was intended to «awaken» France and encourage greater engagement and support. By contrast, Yugoslavia pursued the opposite goal, with its top political circles having maintained active contact with Germany since A. Hitler's rise to power [42, p. 37–38]. In 1934, Yugoslavia became the first member of the Little Entente to conclude a trade agreement with Berlin [44, p. 122]. By cultivating relations with Germany, Yugoslavian diplomacy aimed to counteract Italian ambitions in the region. The nazis, on the other hand, viewed Belgrade as an important factor in Balkan and Central European politics [42, p. 38; 44, p. 123]. The assassination of King Alexander I Karađorđević in 1934, met with a three-day national mourning period in CSR, and the subsequent rise to power of M. Stojadinović marked a definitive pivot in Yugoslavian foreign policy, which now leaned openly towards Italy and Germany[4]. This shift naturally caused anxiety in both the CSR and Romania, as well as in France [44, p. 123]. In Bucharest, the deterioration of relations with the Little Entente became particularly apparent following the dismissal of foreign minister N. Titulescu, in 1936 [46, p. 90].

In 1934, France attempted to counter the German threat by proposing the so-called Eastern pact (also known as the Eastern Locarno), which was to be a broad coalition of European states, including the CSR. However, Romania and Yugoslavia were not envisaged as participants, in order to prevent the nascent bloc from becoming involved in a potential Yugoslavian-Italian or Romanian-Hungarian war. This development revealed a stark contrast with the Little Entente's attempts, especially after the Organisational pact was signed, to present itself as a cohesive unit. Indeed, the Romanian side even warned of its potential dissolution [33, p. 347–352]. Divergences in international attitudes within the alliance, which was supposed to be uniform, also became evident during the formation of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, with regard to its recognition

[3]Národní archiv. F. Předsednictví ministerské rady. Škatuľa č. 4099. Schôdza č. XIII-3, Hospodářska Malá dohoda – první zasedání hospodářské rady v Praze, 23.02.1934. S. 468.
[4]Arhiv Jugoslavije. F. Centralni Presbiro. Škatuľa č. 38. Č. jednotky 449. Útržok z novín Venkov, 19.10.1934. S. 1.

(these relations were established as early as 1933 with the signing of the Convention on the definition of aggression). Yugoslavia did not participate in these relations, reflecting the growing influence of the Third Reich on its decisions [10, p. 127; 14, p. 50; 33, p. 346–347; 48, p. 20]. Under these circumstances, the CSR once again decided to act independently of its partners, but Romania eventually agreed to participate in the negotiations [14, p. 50].

Two years later, in 1936, recognising the growing threat posed by Germany's ambitions, the CSR proposed a plan to consolidate and unify the Little Entente. This plan comprised a so-called Unified pact (which was intended to protect alliance member states from attack by any country, not just Hungary), as well as a formal agreement between France and the Little Entente as a whole [15, p. 161]. However, both Yugoslavia and Romania rejected the plan, their positions already shaped by German influence [14, p. 53–54; 15, p. 168; 49, p. 58]. Backed by Germany, Yugoslavia fostered discords within the Little Entente alliance through international activities, thereby fulfilling the nazis' plans to destabilise the situation in this part of Europe [45, p. 151]. In 1937, Belgrade signed a Treaty of eternal friendship with Bulgaria, triggering concern in Romania (regarding potential Bulgarian claims to the historical territory of Dobruja). By contrast, Czechoslovakian diplomacy welcomed the treaty in the hope of securing Yugoslavian goodwill concerning matters relating to the Entente [15, p. 171; 46, p. 102; 47, p. 65]. Romania eventually formally accepted the agreement, but its underlying distrust towards Yugoslavia led it to strengthen ties with Warsaw. A further rupture in relations within the Little Entente, marking a further distancing of Yugoslavia from its allies, occurred with the formation of the Yugoslavian-Italian pact of friendship, the preparations for which M. Stojadinović kept secret from both CSR and Romania [47, p. 72–80]. Its signing provoked outrage among Yugoslavia's allies, with E. Beneš even calling it an act of hostility towards the CSR. From this point on, M. Stojadinović began to view the Little Entente as a mere formality [15, p. 177; 47, p. 82–83].

The definitive dissolution of the alliance began in connection with Berlin's expansionist policies. As early as 1937, the Little Entente allies appealed to the CSR regarding the Prague agreement with the Third Reich concerning the Sudeten German question. During this period, German influence over the Balkan members of the Little Entente was very intense, enabling A. Hitler to exert pressure on Prague via Romanian and Yugoslavian politicians [44, p. 131]. Both states expressed reluctance to defend the CSR against nazi aggression, against which no military convention had been concluded, and described the German claim to the Sudetenland as an internal matter of the CSR [44, p. 123; 50, p. 94]. On the contrary, during the Munich events (29–30 September 1938), both Belgrade and Bucharest requested German intervention concerning Hungarian involvement in the Czechoslovakian question, as this attack would draw both states into armed conflict [44, p. 132].

The Hungarian narrative of restraint towards CSR remained relevant in Berlin until the fateful events of 1938, as the nazis sought to avoid escalating the conflict [43, p. 138]. German diplomacy had already engaged with Hungary on the Czechoslovakian question in 1937, advising Hungary to refrain from opposing the entire Little Entente and to focus solely on CSR [15, p. 186]. Hungary's goal was to break the alliance's unity by isolating CSR from its allies through bilateral agreements with Yugoslavia and Romania. However, both states opposed Budapest's plan, and negotiations ultimately resulted in the signing of the Bled agreement on 22 August 1938. In exchange for equal rights in militarisation, Hungary concluded a non-aggression pact with the Little Entente as a whole [39, p. 244–245; 43, p. 134; 50, p. 95]. Similar objective was pursued by German and Italian diplomacy, which made efforts to bring Yugoslavia closer to Hungary and thereby isolate it from its allies. Good relations with B. Mussolini and M. Horthy diminished the significance of the Little Entente for the South Slavs [43, p. 111, 129]. However, after earlier missteps, M. Stojadinović refused to sign a bilateral Hungarian-Yugoslavian treaty, as doing so would have completely discredited him in the eyes of the Yugoslavian public and the allies. Nevertheless, throughout 1938, he made several disparaging remarks about the CSR, even going so far as to label it a hostile country [39, p. 233; 43, p. 119]. Through its narrative, Yugoslavian diplomacy positioned itself as a mediator between Germany and the CSR, pressuring its ally to make concessions to the nazis [39, p. 234–235].

During the turbulent days of September 1938, Romanian diplomacy intervened to avert the looming conflict (Hungarian troops were then stationed at the Czechoslovak border) and sought support from Yugoslavia. However, M. Stojadinović's approval of the annexation of Czechoslovak territories inhabited by a Hungarian minority meant that he refused to assist his ally [50, p. 101–102]. It is important to note that Bucharest's initiative also pursued its own interests; during negotiations on the face of the CSR, both allies closely monitored Budapest's actions. In the event of Hungarian intervention, the Little Entente members would have been compelled to either engage directly in the conflict or to reckon with the emergence of a stronger Hungary aspiring to reclaim its former territories within their states [39, p. 258–267]. The concerns of Romanian and Yugoslavian politicians were ultimately «dispelled» by the Munich dictate, which determined the fate of the CSR. The Munich conference, together with the stances of Yugoslavia and Romania regarding the fate of the CSR, marked the definitive end of the Little Entente, which, however, had already long been dysfunctional by that point [10, p. 202].

Conclusions

The Little Entente alliance was formed in response to complex geopolitical developments in Europe following the World War I, by politicians from Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania. Initially focused on preserving the status quo established by the Paris peace conference and defending against Hungarian and Bulgarian revisionism, the alliance's remit expanded during its early years to encompass other areas of social life. The Little Entente's close ties with France and its allied system gave it a pan-European significance. Its political representatives often spoke out in international forums and intervened in European affairs to turn the tide in their favour. Their voices frequently resonated across European capitals. Despite efforts to foster continual rapprochement and strengthen the alliance, the Little Entente members could not withstand the pressure from the expanding totalitarian states. This was primarily due to their differing foreign policy ambitions and the resulting threats stemming from their position in Europe. Another significant factor in the failure of the Little Entente alliance was the low economic level of the Balkan members, which prevented them from harmonising their economies with those of the more developed and industrialised CSR. This caused them to align with states that were hostile towards their ally. The differing political regimes within the Little Entente countries undoubtedly played a role too: democratic in CSR, initially parliamentary but later authoritarian in Yugoslavia and Romania. Despite many attempts at rapprochement on this level, both Balkan states gradually fell into the orbit of nazi Germany and fascist Italy. These states which sought to dismantle the bloc at a time when France was losing its influence in the region. This only underscored the necessity for the Little Entente to align with a great power; without such backing, it was doomed to collapse, as it was not capable of competing with the great powers politically, militarily, or economically. International influence, support from Western powers, unity, and economic and military potential were all factors that the allies lacked to effectively confront the aggressive totalitarian states intent on breaking up the alliance. Nevertheless, the alliance was strong enough to effectively oppose certain threats and address regional problems, thus preventing earlier border changes in Europe.

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