



1946. THE “STRAITS CRISIS” AS REFLECTED IN THE INTELLIGENCE REPORTS OF THE ROMANIAN MILITARY ATTACHÉ TO THE REPUBLIC OF TÜRKIYE OFFICE’S SECRETARY

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The “Straits Question” has long been a factor of tension in the Black Sea area, because of Russia and later the Soviet Union’s desire to control the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, mainly with the aim of turning the Black Sea into a “Russian lake”.

After the end of the Second World War, in full ascension as a victorious country and in the tradition of Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union tried to take control of the Straits through political and military pressure to the detriment of Türkiye, although the Soviet Union had signed the Montreux Convention in 1936, which established the predominant role of the Republic of Türkiye in the control of naval traffic in the Straits, especially in wartime.

The atmosphere so heavy with tension from the autumn of 1946, when the outbreak of a war between the USSR and Türkiye seemed inevitable, is reflected in the intelligence reports prepared by the secretary of the Office of the Romanian military attaché to the Republic of Türkiye. The documents include the first defence measures taken by Türkiye at a political and military level, the effects of the “Straits Crisis” on the Turkish population and the beginning of the process of Türkiye’s rapprochement with the USA and the Great Britain, a process that ended with the accession of the Republic of Türkiye to NATO in 1952.

Keywords: 1946; Straits Question; Montreux Convention; Cold War; Türkiye; Soviet Union;

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INTRODUCTION

The end of the Second World War meant for the Soviet Union not only return to the great power status of the Russian Empire before 1917, but also gaining the status of a superpower, against the background of the military and economic exhaustion of Great Britain and France, a status shared during the Cold War only with the United States of America.

If, internally, the USSR continued the Stalinist policy of terror and repression, externally, the directions that guided the foreign policy of Imperial Russia from Peter the Great onwards were resumed. An important objective was, just as before 1917, seizing control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits, which had an essential role for the USSR, on the one hand, in order to turn the Black Sea into a “Russian lake” (a Soviet one, more precisely), and, on the other hand, to ensure the unhindered access of Soviet military ships to the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea in view of a future expansion of the political-military influence of the USSR in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East (Fontaine, 1992, p. 31).

Although the USSR had ratified the Montreux Convention of 1936, which established the predominant role of Türkiye in the control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, after the end of the war, the Soviet state initiated an aggressive policy of revising this convention and imposing the Soviet Union’s control over the Straits, *manu militari*, if necessary.

The desire of the USSR to respect the clauses of the Montreux Convention, as it had committed itself in 1936, was practically non-existent. In November 1940, during his visit to Berlin, V.M. Molotov, the People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the USSR (in March 1946, the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Affairs changed its name to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) requested Adolf Hitler, the leader of Nazi Germany, the revision of the convention to allow unrestricted passage through the Straits only for ships of the Black Sea

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littoral states (including the USSR, of course) and the establishment of Soviet land and naval bases in the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles (Ibid., pp. 189-190) .

“DIPLOMATIC WAR” OVER THE STRAITS

The USSR did not wait until the end of the Second World War to demand a change in the status of the Straits. In October 1944, I.V. Stalin, the leader of the Soviet Union, requested it from the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, during the talks in Moscow, but without specifying, in concrete terms, what the USSR's demands were – except to diminish the predominant role of Türkiye. The British leader agreed in principle to the revision of some articles of the convention, while Stalin wanted a new convention (Hasanli, 2011, p. 39).

A few months later, at the Yalta Conference in February 1945, the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, and the US President, F.D. Roosevelt, agreed in principle to the revision of the clauses of the Montreux Convention, but with the proviso that they would not affect the sovereignty of Türkiye. The British and American leaders did not want the Soviets to gain an important role in the Eastern Mediterranean and, above all, in the oil areas of the Middle East by radically changing the status of the Straits (Ibid., p. 39).

A few weeks later, the USSR moved on to the next stage. On 19 March 1945, the head of Soviet diplomacy, V.M. Molotov, denounced as expired the non-aggression treaty concluded with Türkiye in 1925. Ankara was willing to conclude an alliance treaty on the model of those concluded by the USSR with Great Britain and France, but Moscow replied in June 1945 that the conclusion of a Soviet-Turkish treaty entailed the revision of the Montreux Convention and *the establishment of a permanent Soviet military base in the Dardanelles*. At the same time, the USSR also demanded the return of the Kars and Ardahan vilayets, which Soviet Russia had lost as a result of the Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty, in 1918. Consequently, Ankara was no longer willing to conclude a treaty with the USSR (Fontane, 1992, p. 43).

At the Potsdam Peace Conference in the summer of 1945, when the US and Great Britain were asking for the USSR help to defeat

Japan, Stalin asked the allies for free and permanent access of Soviet warships to the Straits and a Soviet base in the Dardanelles, for the defence of the Straits, *together* with Türkiye. If Stalin's demands had been accepted, the area of the Straits would have become, *de jure*, a Turkish-Soviet *condominium*, because, subsequently, in a short time, given the military potential of the USSR, as well as the status of a great victorious power in war, the Straits would have come under the exclusive control of the Soviets. Moreover, at Potsdam, the Soviets also claimed the vilayets of Kars, Ardahan and (in addition) Artvin.

The Anglo-Americans feared that, under the pretext of changing the status of the Straits and territorial claims, the USSR sought to overthrow the Turkish government, impose a puppet government, and finally include Türkiye under the Soviet sphere of influence, which would have imposed the USSR as a major player in the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East area. The American and British leaders have asked for the internationalisation of the Straits control, provided that Türkiye's sovereignty and security were not diminished. In the end, a protocol was signed deciding that the revision of the Montreux Convention should be carried out through negotiations between the Turkish government, on the one hand, and the governments of the USA, Great Britain and the USSR, on the other (Hasanli, 2011, pp. 89-90).

On 2 November 1945, the US made public a set of four principles as the basis of negotiations at a future international review conference of the Montreux Convention:

- 1) The straits should be permanently open to commercial shipping of all countries;
- 2) The straits should be permanently open for the warships of the countries bordering the Black Sea;
- 3) Warships belonging to non-riparian countries of the Black Sea cannot have access to the Straits, except upon consent from the riparian states or the United Nations;
- 4) In the process of amending the text of the convention, the League of Nations should be replaced by the United Nations Organization (Ibid., p. 100).

Basically, the American proposals rejected the USSR's goal to take control of the Straits. The Soviet Union retaliated with an aggressive



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Facing the prospect of an attack by the Red Army, the Republic of Türkiye responded by postponing the demobilisation of the contingents called to arms during the war and, at the same time, announced in clear and firm terms the decision to defend its national territory by military means.

press campaign focused on Soviet territorial claims to areas in eastern Türkiye and by massing Soviet military units in the USSR's border area with Türkiye. Facing the prospect of an attack by the Red Army, the Republic of Türkiye responded by postponing the demobilisation of the contingents called to arms during the war and, at the same time, announced in clear and firm terms the decision to defend its national territory by military means (Fontaine, 1992, p. 44).

On 7 August 1946, the USSR issued a diplomatic note requesting considering the development of a new status of the Straits *only by the countries bordering the Black Sea*, the denial of access to the Straits for warships belonging to non-Black Sea countries not – except in some well specified cases – and that Türkiye and the Soviet Union were in charge of the military protection of the Straits to prevent their use for purposes that were hostile to the countries bordering the Black Sea (Hasanli, 2011, p. 184).

The US responded on 19 August 1946 that the establishment of a new Straits regime could not be made by the Black Sea riparian countries alone and that Türkiye must retain its predominant role in the defence of the Straits, with the assistance of the United Nations Security Council. In the following days, Great Britain and Türkiye issued notes with similar content (Ibid., p. 188).

On 24 September 1946, the USSR made public a new note, addressed only to the Turkish government, in which it warned Ankara that if it refused the joint defence of the Straits or took military measures in the Straits with the help of non-Black Sea states, these actions *would be considered by the USSR as taken against the security of the Black Sea area*. The USSR asked Türkiye for bilateral negotiations on the common defence of the Straits until the convening of a future conference to review the Montreux Convention, (Kuniholm, 1994, p. 372).

THE “STRAITS CRISIS” AS SEEN BY A ROMANIAN NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICER

A period of uncertainty followed, a real “*war of nerves*”, generated by the fact that it was not known how far the Soviet Union was willing to go in imposing the objectives announced by the note of 7 August 1946.

Suggestive testimonies about the unfolding of the “*Straits Crisis*” in the fall of 1946 can be found in the intelligence notes sent by the secretary of the Office of the Romanian military attaché to the Republic of Türkiye. At the end of 1945, the mandate of the Romanian military attaché in Ankara, Colonel Constantin Lupescu, ended and a new Romanian military attaché in Türkiye would only be appointed in 1949 – therefore, the current problems of the Romanian military attaché were addressed by the logistics Master Sergeant Barbu Nanu, who held the position of secretary of the Office of the Romanian military attaché to the Republic of Türkiye.

With the cleverness and practical spirit characteristic of the Romanian non-commissioned officer (especially in the logistics branch), Barbu Nanu managed to capture in his intelligence reports sent to the 2nd Intelligence Section of the General Staff the atmosphere heavy with tension in the fall of 1946 and its effects on the morale of the Turkish population. From the content of the notes, it seems that the sources of the Romanian non-commissioned officer were, first of all, the Turkish press, and, above all, the discussions heard on the street, in markets and shops or in cafes, managing to bring first hand testimonies of the effects of the “*Straits Crisis*” on the public opinion in Türkiye. The possible contribution of some personnel from the Romanian diplomatic corps in Türkiye (the press attaché, for example) must also be taken into account in gathering and synthesising the intelligence material.

It should be mentioned that, in January 1947, after reading the intelligence reports prepared by Barbu Nanu, the Deputy Chief of the General Staff, Brigadier General Nicolae Cambrea, acknowledged the activity of the Romanian non-commissioned officer through a resolution on one of these reports: “*Use for a documentary on Türkiye. One must stimulate the zeal of the informant who was able to capture such general outlines without proper training*”. (Arhivele Militare Naționale Române/AMNR, Microfilme collection, roll P II 8.158, c. 84).

In one of these reports, the Romanian non-commissioned officer made an expressive presentation of the effects generated among the Turkish population by the Soviet diplomatic note of 24 September 1946: “*This note caused great concern and anxiety. The Turkish population*



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of the regions of Artvin, Kars and Ardahan began to sell their possessions and withdraw inside Türkiye. The commander of the 3rd Army stopped [the population exodus], prohibiting any sale and withdrawal from this area.

In the rest of Türkiye, the population is quite calm, knowing that the problem of the Straits is the problem of the Mediterranean Sea and Suez, and the problem of Türkiye is the problem of the Anglo-Americans and that they will help them in a possible emergency (sic!). Anyone asked about a surrender to the USSR clearly answers: «We will fight!». Otherwise, the opinion of the diplomatic corps is that the Turks will fight at the risk of being defeated and left alone by their Anglo-American allies". (Ibid., c. 47) .

In an intelligence report dated 21 October 1946, the NCO emphasised the support given to Türkiye by the USA and Great Britain and the echoes of that policy among the Turkish population, as well as the propaganda carried out by the Turkish government to maintain the morale of public opinion, including by launching rumours about the US bringing atomic weapons (15 atomic bombs!) in Türkiye: "The notes of the USSR amending the Montreux Convention have caused great unease in Turkish political and military circles. [...] The Turks are determined not to agree with the article relating to the joint defence of the Straits together with the Russians, and, according to their assertions, would defend themselves in case of danger, whatever the result.

To this end:

- there are rumours about the concentration of 200,000 reservists;
- the preparation of the population through press propaganda began, of course accusing the Russians of trying to take their territories by force and not wanting peace.

For the non-literate, propaganda is done through various cartoons.

Otherwise, the Turks are basing these claims on the help of the Anglo-Americans, who have interests in the Mediterranean, Iran and Iraq. They know that the Straits question is an Anglo-American question, and the Turkish question is also an Anglo-American question, which they say they will not relinquish at any risk.

This belief is further increased by the frequent visits of the English and American fleets. Rumour has it that the answer to the second USSR

note will be identical to the first answer. The first note was discussed together with the ambassadors of the United States, England and France in Ankara, who, by the way, also drafted the response. But, still (sic!), the Turks, of course with the Anglo-Americans, want to convene a conference to pursue Russian goals. The ties between the Turks and the Anglo-Americans are quite close, they also have military missions in Ankara and work intensively. [...] In order to increase the morale of the army, the Turks circulated the rumour that, on the occasion of the visit to Istanbul, the ship "Missouri" also brought 15 atomic bombs (sic!)". (Ibid. , c . 48).

Another report highlights the reorientation of Turkish foreign policy from the neutrality promoted until near the end of the Second World War to the rapid rapprochement with the US and Great Britain to counter Soviet expansionist policy:

"Türkiye can no longer carry out its policy of duplicity during the war, when it declared that it would defend itself with arms against anyone who would seek to violate its territorial independence, thus shifting to the opposing side. To this end, it could balance its military forces by massing them at the most threatened frontier. Today it can no longer pursue this policy of duplicity and balance of military forces, and therefore, in the face of the so-called Russian claims expressed, they threw themselves, one hundred percent, into the arms of the Anglo-Americans, thus fixing their forces at the borders with Bulgaria and the USSR". (Ibid., c. 50).

The Romanian non-commissioned officer also recorded the first diplomatic actions that foreshadowed the "containment" policy of the USSR, formalised in March 1947 through the "Truman Doctrine", and which led, in the Near East area, in the years 1955-1956, to the establishment of the Baghdad Pact: "At the suggestion of Great Britain, Türkiye concluded treaties of friendship with Iraq and Lebanon and is about to conclude one with Egypt, for which purpose King Faruk came to Türkiye a month ago.

Through these treaties, the Anglo-Americans seek to reach the formation of the Greek-Turkish Pan-Arab bloc, thus making the cordon of the Mediterranean Sea, the defence of the Suez Canal – England's road to its dominions – and the cordon of defence of the oil



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concessions in the Middle East. For the formation of the oil concession cordon, it is said that the revolt in the south of Iran is due to the British. Also at England's urging, Türkiye is also looking for a rapprochement with Syria, in order to attract it to their side. No treaty of friendship can be concluded with Syria, because Syria has claims to the land of Hatay [former Sangeac Alexandretta, which became part of Türkiye in 1939]". (Ibis., c. 51).

Before Türkiye responded to the USSR note of 24 September 1946, the US and Great Britain made known, on 9 October 1946, their positions of firm rejection of Soviet requests for involvement in the direct control of the Straits.

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On 26 October 1946, the Soviet Union informed Britain that Moscow considered it premature to convene an international conference to revise the Montreux Convention. The USSR officially gave up its request to modify the clauses of the Montreux Convention on 30 May 1953 (Kuniholm, 1994, p. 372).

CONCLUSIONS

The outbreak of the "Strait Crisis" caused Türkiye to abandon the policy of neutrality that it had pursued for most of the Second World War, a war it entered only on 23 February 1945, after long delays and pressure from the allies.

The aggressive attitude of the USSR, which, under the pretext of changing the status of the Straits and territorial claims, showed signs that it wanted to include Türkiye in its sphere of influence, made the political leaders in Ankara to undertake a policy of rapid rapprochement with the USA and Great Britain, which led, after the US adoption of the "Truman Doctrine" in March 1947, to Türkiye's accession to NATO in 1952.

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