

# WAR, DIPLOMACY AND MEDIA: BRITISH -SOVIET TREATY FROM MAY 26, 1942 IN SWEDISH PRESS COMMENTARIES

*Emanuel Plopeanu*

“Ovidius” University of Constanța, e-mail: [emmiplp@yahoo.com](mailto:emmiplp@yahoo.com)

## **Abstract:**

*The Soviet – British treaty is very well known. It represents the end of a road that began in December 1941, through Anthony Eden’s visit to Moscow. On that occasion Stalin forwarded a project that, actually, divided the mutual domination in Europe and modified the frontiers. But the final treaty, signed on May 26, 1942, doesn’t mention anything about the territorial changes discussed in Moscow. On Berlin’s instructions, some Swedish journals published articles regarding the so-called „territorial clauses” which, in fact, don’t exist in the actual treaty. We consider these standpoints as an episode in a „war of nerves”, which caused significant damages to the Allied cause, at public opinion level.*

## **Rezumat:**

*Tratatul sovieto-britanic din 1942 este binecunoscut. Acesta este finalul unui traseu ce a început în decembrie 1941 prin vizita lui Anthony Eden la Moscova. Cu acea ocazie, Stalin a înaintat un proiect care, în fapt, împărțea dominația comună în Europa și modifica frontierele. Dar tratatul final, semnat la 26 mai 1942, nu menționa nimic cu privire la schimbările teritoriale discutate la Moscova. La ordinele Berlinului, câțiva ziariști suedezi au publicat câteva articole privind așa-numitele „clauze teritoriale” care, în realitate, nu existau în tratat. Considerăm publicarea acestor articole ca un episod în „războiul de nervi” care producea daune însemnate cauzei Aliaților la nivelul opiniei publice.*

**Keywords:** Swedish press, spheres of influence, media war, British – Soviet treaty

## **I. Basic considerations. Subject motivation**

This diplomatic moment has been very intensely analyzed by historiography and, today, it is no more a gap to fill with regards to the substance of the pre-concluding talks and the treaty itself. This document means an end road for some negotiations, which were started in December

1941, with the visit of the chief of the Foreign Office, Anthony Eden, in Moscow. This reunion provoked very intense academic commentaries, especially related to the Soviet designs towards its Western boundaries and the future of Europe. A last contribution, known to us, that of the Russian historian, Oleg Rzheshevsky, published in 1995 in *Bulletin of International Committee for Second World War History*, seemed very useful to us, bringing into academic debate unpublished documents from the Soviet archives, including treaty and secret protocol drafts forwarded by Stalin and the main decisions adopted for finalising the treaty in its May 26 form.

The object of our paper is the way in which the Swedish press analyzed the British - Soviet Treaty. Why Swedish? Because in the same journals from that country the analyses and commentaries around this treaty superseded (to preview the conclusions) even the Moscow talks (as we will see below in these the pages) and they were insistently promoted. Our selection was made from the Romanian diplomatic reports in that country and these documents weren't limited only to the national journals. At the same time, the very large number of press quotations plays an important role in the activity of informing and, why not, in the future peace initiatives of Romania. At that moment, however, press commentaries came to strengthen the political option of Romania, which explained the frequently quotations thereof.

Without claiming that this paper will offer new information about the inter-Allied relations during that period of time, we only wanted to bring to light the way in which bilateral negotiations (in our case, the British - Soviet ones) gave rise to several interpretations (objective, subjective or even totally disproportioned compared to the actual significance of one or another of the diplomatic moments mentioned). Last but not least, our paper intended to underline, at least as a nuance, the importance of the political influence on press commentaries.

## **II. Diplomatic background**

Starting with December 15, 1941, Anthony Eden was I. V. Stalin's<sup>1</sup> special guest in Moscow. Since the first meeting, Stalin proposed to the chief of the Foreign Office two treaty projects: one for mutual military assistance and another for settling the post-war problems and stated that he wanted an agreement (*practical arithmetic*) and not only a declaration

---

<sup>1</sup> Llewellyn E. Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1962), 191.

(*algebra*)<sup>2</sup>. The second treaty has attached a secret protocol. How does this draft look like? *Poland* was to be enlarged to the West and its Eastern frontier should pass along the Niemen. *Czechoslovakia* would be restored to its former frontiers including Sudetenland. Moreover, the territory of *Czechoslovakia* was to be enlarged in the South at the expense of *Hungary*. The same restoration occurred in the case of *Yugoslavia*, which could be expanded at the expense of *Italy* (Trieste, Fiume, islands in the Adriatic Sea). *Albania* might be reconstituted as an independent State under other States' guarantee of its independence<sup>3</sup>. *Turkey* might receive the Dodecanese, a region in *Bulgaria*, South *Burgas*, populated by Turks, and, perhaps, some territories in *Syria*. *Bulgaria* would be punished for its behaviour during the war and ought to endure a small territorial loss on her Yugoslavian frontier and it would be absolutely sufficient for *Bulgaria* to have one sea port, respectively *Varna*.

As for the Western states, Stalin expressed the possibility that Great Britain could have terrestrial and naval bases in France, Belgium, Holland, Norway, Denmark, with guarantees of ingress and egress to and from the Baltic Sea for some States<sup>4</sup>. Regarding Germany, Stalin appreciated as „absolutely necessary” to separate Rhineland from the rest of Prussia (eventually it could be transformed into an independent state, or protectorate, which could be discussed later on). *Bavaria* should be, probably, an independent state and *Austria* should be reconstituted as an independent state<sup>5</sup>.

At the end of the proposals, of course, time had come for claims. *Restoration of the Soviet frontiers before June 22, 1941*, (the Soviet - Finnish in 1940, including assignation of Petsamo to the Soviet Union, the Baltic republics, Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, the Soviet-Polish frontier as we mention above). The conclusion of a military alliance between Romania and the Soviet Union, with the latter's right to have military, air and naval bases on the first one's territory was taken into account. A similar „scheme” was also seen for Finland<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Oleg Rzheshesvsky, „The Grand Alliance. New Documents and Commentaries”, 1945: *Consequences and Sequels of the Second World War*, Montreal, 18<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Historical Sciences Bulletin, n° 27/28, (September 2), 19.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Regarding Romania, besides all the aforementioned, the „transferring” of the Danube Delta to the Soviet Union „for assuring security” was referred to<sup>7</sup>.

The protocol means virtually a redrawing of frontiers and an allotting of spheres of influence. The British Foreign Ministry answered that he could not sign such document without preliminary consultation with his colleagues. Stalin agreed with that point of view but he considered that the question of the Western frontier should be settled immediately<sup>8</sup>.

Finally, on May 20, Eden submits to Molotov, in London, the *Mutual Assistance Treaty*, for twenty years, which didn't mention anything about frontiers<sup>9</sup>. On May 24, Molotov cabled to Moscow that the bilateral treaty was „unacceptable [...] an empty declaration of which the Soviet Union doesn't need”<sup>10</sup>. On the same day, Molotov received surprising instructions from Stalin: „we have received the draft treaty Eden handed to you. We do not consider it an empty declaration and acknowledge that it is an important document. It lacks the question of the security of frontiers, but this is not bad, perhaps, for this gives us a free hand. The question of frontiers, or to be more exact, of the guarantees for the security of our frontiers at one or another section of our country, will be decided by force [...] It is desirable to sign the treaty and then fly to America”<sup>11</sup>. Finally, the treaty was signed on May 26; the first part thereof mentioned the mutual support and each party's pledge not to conclude separate peace. The second part, which had to remain in force for twenty years, stipulated the basis of the post-war collaboration, for resistance against a future aggression and for post-war reconstruction, also. Article 5 „takes into consideration the United Nations' interests”, both countries undertook to „act according to the principle of non - territorial aggrandisement for themselves and the non - intervention in the internal affairs principle”<sup>12</sup>. We could easily observe the Soviet Union important setback, during those five months which followed the Anthony Eden's visit to Moscow. The *waiting* factor was taken into consideration. Stalin realised the importance of maintaining good relations with the United States and the importance of

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Woodward, 195.

<sup>10</sup> Geoffrey Roberts, „Ideology, Calculation and Improvisation: Spheres of Influence and Soviet Foreign Policy 1939 - 1945”, *Review of International Studies*, 25 (1999): 664.

<sup>11</sup> Rzheshesvsky, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Woodward, 196.

non-entering into contradiction with the principles of war and peace publicly stated by the United States' policy makers.

### **III. Press reaction**

In the June 12, 1942 issue of *Helsingborgs Dagblad* (pro-German, anticommunist and nationalistic but not pro - Nazi) an article, with a significant title, was inserted: *The New Holly Alliance*. It expressed the „world's astonishment" about the announcing of successive visits of Molotov to London and Washington<sup>13</sup>. At the same time, there was underlined the belief that „a character like Molotov did not travel so far, assuming so much risks if it wasn't necessary for him to be in Washington and London. The presence of Mr. Maiski and Mr. Litvinov in London and Washington wasn't sufficient for maintaining close relations between the Allies"<sup>14</sup>.

The next lines of the article made major references to the content of the bilateral talks in London, concluded by the above mentioned treaty. According to the Swedish journal, the question of the second front was debated and both parties promised that neither of them would sign a separate peace treaty. The Swedish reader was reminded that a similar pledge has been made before, during World War I, yet it was not kept, under the very well known conditions. The article listed possible Soviet targets within the Baltic States re-annexation, as well as Karelia and Hangö Peninsula, or obtaining some military bases in Norway and Sweden; all of that would be perceived by the British Government as conquests. „But Eden avoided talking about these things"<sup>15</sup>.

In its final part, the article we mentioned pointed to the treaty's goal (assuring peace in Europe) without omitting, however, the declarations of Sir Stanford Cripps according to which it was, frankly speaking, a Soviet peace and not a British one, the United States and Great Britain being interested in defending other parts of the world. The logic conclusion was that „Great Britain and the United States [...] cannot avoid the Russian influence over all European people. Soviets are chosen by England to be the „Europe sword", since France couldn't do this anymore"<sup>16</sup>. And - in the opinion of the Swedish journal - "even if Molotov abandoned what he himself called conquests, it must be reminded that there is something else

---

<sup>13</sup> Arhivele Ministerului Afacerilor Externe (A. M. A. E.), fond 71/1939, Al Doilea Război Mondial, vol. 160, Acorduri 1941 - 1943, f. 86.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., f. 87.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

he could count on – the internal bolshevism”. In the end, straightforwardly and without any alternative, it was stated that „this is the case if Russians win”. But the hope still remains: “[...] guns haven’t spoken their final word, yet”<sup>17</sup>. And, as the Swedish feelings towards one or another of the belligerents were very well known, it’s hard for us not to read between these lines the hidden (more or less) wish regarding the winner of the war. In this respect, we can bring forward one example only. On August 10, 1944, the United States’ Ambassador in London, John G. Winant, sent a record of his conversation with his Swedish colleague, Hägglöf. According to the latter, the Swedish Government didn’t have any intention to follow the Turkish example by totally ending the commercial relations „at the last moment, when the Germany imminent defeat is absolutely sure”<sup>18</sup>. Over one day only, the United States’ Ambassador to Sweden (Johnson) described, in a diplomatic message, a meeting with a Swedish high official who stated that „now, when the issue of the war with Germany is drawing near to a settlement, to hurt the bleeding animal is totally repugnant to the Swedish thinking. He personally cannot help but feel ashamed if Sweden would give a blow to the German dying war machine in the name of some material benefits. The Swedish Government would never agree to make its country a second <<Turkey>>”<sup>19</sup>.

Turning back to the press commentaries, the article quoted above is not even close the end of the media debate. The June 23 issue of *Göteborgs Morgen Posten* (*pro* – Nazi) published (according to a commentary of the Romanian Legation in Stockholm) “the secret clauses of the Soviet – British Pact”<sup>20</sup>. This was based on „information received from the diplomatic representative of an Allies friendly country and it created much stir in Sweden”<sup>21</sup>.

But what did, according to the Swedish journal, the Soviet – British treaty stipulate? The recognition „on principle” of the „Soviet views regarding its own security and its strategic frontiers with Finland, the Baltic States and Romania” was one of the points. Moreover, Finland, parts of Northern Scandinavia, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States. Diplomatic Papers, 1944*, vol. IV, *Europe* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1966), p. 602.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 607.

<sup>20</sup> A. M. A. E., fond 71/1939, Al Doilea Război Mondial, vol. 160, Acorduri 1941 – 1943, f. 112.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

„were recognised as a part of the Russian sphere of influence”<sup>22</sup>. The Soviet Union also received the right to have bases and garrisons „for preventing future attacks of the Axis Powers”. A supplementary clause to the third article gave Moscow the possibility to exert political and military control in Finland, Germany, Romania and Bulgaria „in agreement with England”<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, on the same occasion, an understanding regarding Iran was reached<sup>24</sup>.

As we can easily see, press commentaries exceed by far – maybe deliberately – the terms of the Stalin – Eden’s talks in December 1941, as well as the treaty in May 1942, which does not include any references to frontiers, territories, spheres of influence. And it didn’t include any kind of secret clauses. Could we talk, in that case, about a tentative of „intoxication”, from Germany, in order to paint the Allied efforts in very dark colours and to consolidate the will of some Axis allies to fight against the Bolshevik danger? As showed before, it was stated that the source of information was not German or Finnish<sup>25</sup>. To the end of the article the reliability of that source was underlined again; although the paper declared itself aware of the “impression which could be provoked upon Sweden and upon the whole world”<sup>26</sup>, the lack of doubt about this information was decisive in taking the decision of publishing it without hesitation, “even risking criticism in our country and abroad”<sup>27</sup>.

The media „fire” started by the *Göteborgs Morgen Posten* spread very fast. On June 23, the *Aftonbladet* (pro – Nazi) was headlined: *The secret clauses of the Russian pact. Northern Scandinavia in the Russian sphere of interests. Sensational declarations in GMP over Moscow – London gamble*<sup>28</sup>. In addition to *Göteborgs Morgen Posten*, these clauses included also a guarantee for the Soviet Union regarding the freedom of navigation from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea and from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea.

As expected, the Swedish press commentaries weren’t left without reaction. On June 25, *Göteborgs Morgen Posten* hosted an official reply of *Reuters*. On this occasion, the information published by the Swedish journal was appreciated as “German propaganda [...] 100% false”<sup>29</sup>. This reply was

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., f. 83.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., f. 112.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., f. 83.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., f. 84.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., f. 81.

inserted together with those five points of the Soviet – British treaty and a reference to Anthony Eden’s declaration, on June 4, in the House of Commons. According to that “all the clauses included in the British – Soviet agreement will be published in a White Book. There are no secret clauses, or conditions or commitments from any part”<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, a declaration, in the same spirit of Veaceslav Molotov, was recalled by his British colleague on the same occasion. On the same page with the *Reuters* reply, *Göteborgs Morgen Posten* added that “we have our information from a source which is in on the same side with *Reuters*. Of course, we could not give names because this would lead to our correspondents’ compromising. Information come from a source not connected with the Germans or their Allies and it is not propaganda for we have no interest in publishing propagandistic information. We published this article [...] without any doubt regarding its authenticity”<sup>31</sup>. As we may notice, the trust in the source’s validity was reaffirmed, much more virulently.

The Swedish press didn’t hesitate to quote some reactions from the Axis countries, as for example Romania, to emphasize the serious nature of the disclosures that have been made. In *Dagsposten* (journal of the Swedish National Association, a pro-Nazi political group, supported by Berlin) on June 27, 1942, under the title *Bucharest: Military bases for Russians means the same thing as a Russian invasion* it was stated that „Romanian journals prove the profound impression made in all countries by the Swedish journal disclosures regarding the British – Soviet *Entente*. The press holds unanimous in appreciating that the Romanian policy is more justified than ever”<sup>32</sup>. Quoting *Universul*, (which, in its turn, referred to the supposed territorial secret clauses and to the spheres of influence settled in London), it was underlined that „what is extraordinary is the fact that Great Britain could sign an agreement by which it abandoned Europe, where, a couple of years earlier, it enjoyed influence and prestige”<sup>33</sup>.

#### **IV. Conclusions**

From the diplomatic standpoint we could talk about an important moment in the process of building the Great Alliance (the treaty between Great Britain and the Soviet Union, the end of the negotiations started in December 1941, in Moscow) and, from the media point of view, about a

---

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 82.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 85.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

spectacular moment, referring to what the press (the Swedish one) found (or was informed) about this treaty.

The Swedish press (some of the journals that were available to us) was divided between a pro-German attitude (*Helsingborgs Dagblad*) and even a pro-Nazi standpoint (*Aftonbladet*, *Göteborgs Morgen Posten*, *Dagsposten*). The so-called secret clauses of the May 26 treaty were presented with many details which exceed –and we stressed that aspect once again – even the negotiations from Moscow, in December 1941. It is obvious that, despite all given assurances, regarding the sources' complete impartiality, those Swedish journals interpreted the British – Soviet negotiations as a sharing of the continent, giving the public opinion details which could damage the war effort of the United Nations, at least at the perception level. In other words, it was a type of media war, but, at that point of the research, we could not state, beyond any doubt, (except for the case of *Dagsposten*) whether this moment has been operated by Berlin or whether it has been a personal option of the aforementioned journals, based on the sympathy for Germany.

We cannot conclude without bringing special thanks to Mr. Pär Nilsson, Senior Librarian at the Department of Collections, Newspapers and Ephemera from the National Library of Sweden, who offered us significant information about the political orientation of the quoted Swedish journals.

## **References:**

### **A. Archives:**

Arhivele Diplomatice ale Ministerului Afacerilor Externe (The Archives of the Romanian Foreign Ministry, A. M. A. E.), folder 71/1939, *Al Doilea Război Mondial (The Second World War)*, vol. 160, Acorduri 1941 – 1943.

### **B. Published documents:**

*Foreign Relations of the United States. Diplomatic Papers, 1944*, vol. IV, *Europe*, 1966. Washington: United States Government Printing Office.

### **C. Books:**

Anton, Mioara. *Propagandă și Război 1941 – 1944*, București: Editura Tritonic, 2007.

Roberts, Geoffrey. "Ideology, Calculation and Improvisation: Spheres of Influence and Soviet Foreign Policy 1939 – 1945", *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999): 655-673.

*War, diplomacy and media: the British-Soviet Treaty of May 26, 1942 in Swedish press commentaries*

Rzheshovsky Oleg. *The Grand Alliance. New Documents and Commentaries*. In *1945: Consequences and Sequels of the Second World War*, Montreal, September 2, 18<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Historical Sciences, n° 27/28 (1995).

Woodward Llewellyn E. *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1962.