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## PARADIGM SHIFT IN THE FRENCH FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE IN 1917–1918

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In 1914, when World War I broke out, the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe were living in the territories of three empires, Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Russia. By 1918–1919, however, the region became a zone of newly formed or substantially transformed small countries, with radical changes to the administrative frameworks of their lives. Contemporaries were already fully aware of the active role France played in bringing about these changes. Depending on personal involvements, later evaluations have to this day ranged from glorifying praise to embittered resentment, often stereotypical and exaggerated. Utilizing the findings of an already abundant literature on the topic, the paper attempts to present and especially interpret the process of transformation which took place in the approach of French foreign policy related to the region principally in 1917–1918.

We can affirm that the French foreign policy paradigm in relation to East-Central Europe went through a radical transformation during World War I. While earlier the French foreign policy administration did not support the independence efforts of the nationalities of the region usually living within an empire (in consideration of the interests of the allied Russia and, in the case of the Austro–Hungarian Empire, for the sake of maintaining the European power balance), the French government became more and more interested especially in the Polish and the Czech from 1916. This change was mainly due to the new challenges posed by the war theatres, and not to the pressure from the extremely active French Slavists and Czech emigrant politicians, or the pressure of the French public opinion for that matter. The utilization of the nationality question as a weapon by the Central Powers as well as the growing problem of the lack of supply of soldiers for the French army put the issue of the military deployment of the Czech prisoners of war and

the Polish on the agenda. Their military involvement strengthened the political position of the Polish and Czech emigration in France more and more. These emigrant organizations were considered to be the most recognized organs of the peoples represented by them internationally as well. Nevertheless, the factor that influenced the East-Central European policy of France the most was the dropout of its Russian ally from the war due to the Bolshevik revolution from November 1917. That is why Paris was forced to look for another counterpoise in the back of Germany instead of Russia. For the majority of the French population, the demographic advantage, the economic and military power of Germany and its presumed goals of European hegemony were considered to be an even more serious challenge at the breakout of the world war than the consequences of the 1870 French defeat<sup>1</sup>. After the shrinking and collapse of the empires in East-Central Europe, the solution seemed to be the creation and reinforcement of a zone of France-friendly nation-states, of which the programme of the termination of the Habsburg Monarchy was a logical consequence. Thus we can declare that the foreign policy of France with respect to the region was determined during World War I by security policy considerations – as always throughout the centuries ever since early modern history.

In 1917–1918, Paris was more pro-active in this region than its Anglo-Saxon allies, who usually followed France with more or less delay, for example, when it came to the recognition of the emigrant organizations and cooperation with them. Undoubtedly, the bigger activism of the French foreign policy could be put down also to the fact that it was France that suffered the biggest losses in terms of human lives. Moreover, after the dropout of the Russian ally, it was up to France to affront the increased German danger

<sup>1</sup> Allain J-C, Guillen P., Soutou, G-H., Theis L., Vaisse M. Histoire de la diplomatie française. Tome II. De 1815 à nos jours. Paris, 2005. P. 287.



directly. After the failure of the secret separate peace talks with the Habsburg Monarchy, the influence of France grew within the Entente, and it had a major impact on the policy of its partners in the matter of Austria–Hungary, too<sup>1</sup>.

After this general overview, let us attempt to offer a more sophisticated explanation for the underlying reasons. The prolonged transformation of the French foreign policy in relation to East-Central Europe – it started in January 1916 and lasted for nearly three years – can be put down to the deep divide over the issue within the ruling French elite. There were two conceptions that competed with each other: the relatively new principle of the nations' right to self-determination and the contemporary version of the traditional power politics, that is the need to preserve the European concert based on the equilibrium of the five big powers (United Kingdom, France, Austro–Hungarian Empire, Germany and Russia). The advocates of the first conception are referred to as «Progressives» while the latter are called «Conservatives».

As for the first group, the «Progressives»: the question of the nations' right to self-determination had been present in the French intellectual life since the 1830s as a result of the wave of empathy for the Poles (preceded by the empathy triggered by the cause of the Greek) and it remained on the agenda till 1918, the transformation of East-Central Europe<sup>2</sup>. There was an increasing interest for this region in the public opinion, university circles and certain political groups (radicals, radical Socialists, a part of the Socialists and certain groups of the classical right-wing). More information became available, and there was a greater willingness to find an answer to the self-determination demands of the peoples of the region<sup>3</sup>. Since the end of the 19th century, having seen the crises and wars on the Balkans, the Russian pogroms and the recurrent massacres in the Ottoman Empire, numerous experts and politicians came to the conclusion that multi-ethnic dynastic empires had become outdated, and East-Central Europe should be reorganized according to

a nation-state model<sup>4</sup>. The most enthusiastic flagbearers of the peoples' right to self-determination in France were associated with the radical party. Their ideas seemed progressive and even revolutionary in those times<sup>5</sup>. The President of the Central Office of Nationalities (*Office central des Nationalités*) set up in 1911 was Paul Painlevé, independent Socialist representative, then Minister of Defence and Prime Minister, who most probably outlined a foreign policy alternative versus the dominant policy of alliance with Russia<sup>6</sup>. When he held a speech in 1912 in Médan on the anniversary of Émile Zola's death, he criticized the government's Russian-friendly power policy and shared his conviction that the Austro–Hungarian Empire should be brought down in order to reorganize Europe, and the oppressed nations of the Russian Empire should be liberated. He suggested that France should take the lead in the movement of the oppressed peoples of East-Central Europe, thus ensuring its influence over them<sup>7</sup>.

The other group, the «Conservatives», was mostly composed of government politicians. Their circles were characterized by indifference for East-Central Europe, ignorance and great caution in the name of realism because they did not see any foreign policy opportunities in this initiative that could have been used to take revenge on Germany<sup>8</sup>. All French Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers during World War I belonged to this group. They focused on the geostrategic interests of France for the most part, and after the war, they strived to restore the «European concert» that looked back on a

<sup>4</sup> Soutou G-H. *Diplomatie de guerre (Chapitre XIX) // La Première Guerre mondiale. Volume II, États.* Paris, 2014. P. 539, 560-561.

<sup>5</sup> *Recherches sur la France et le problème des nationalités pendant la première guerre mondiale (Pologne, Ukraine, Lithuanie) / Ed. Soutou G-H.* Paris, 1995. P.6; Soutou, G-H. *La France et le problème des nationalités pendant la guerre de 1914-1918: le cas de la Serbie // Balcanica (XLV).* 2014. P. 371.

<sup>6</sup> Soutou G-H. *Jean Pélissier et l'Office Central des Nationalités, 1911–1918: un agent du gouvernement français auprès des Nationalités // Recherches sur la France et le problème des Nationalités pendant la Première Guerre mondiale (Pologne, Ukraine, Lithuanie).* Paris, 1995. P. 15-16.

<sup>7</sup> Soutou G-H. *Les grandes puissances et la question des nationalités en Europe centrale et orientale pendant et après la Première Guerre mondiale: actualité du passé? // Politique étrangère №58:3.* 1993. P. 701; Allain J-C. et al. *Histoire de la diplomatie française.* P. 288.

<sup>8</sup> Marès A. *Construction, déconstruction et marginalisation de l'Europe centrale dans le discours français.* P. 203.

<sup>1</sup> Ádám M. A. *Kisantant, 1920–1938.* Budapest, 1981. P. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Marès A. *Construction, déconstruction et marginalisation de l'Europe centrale dans le discours français // L'Europe médiane au XXe siècle. Fractures, décompositions – recomposition – surcompositions.* Prague, 2011. P. 202.

<sup>3</sup> Marès A. *Construction, déconstruction et marginalisation de l'Europe centrale dans le discours français.* P. 203.



hundred years of history<sup>1</sup>. The problematics of the nationalities was of secondary importance to them in comparison with the former<sup>2</sup>. In their view, it was necessary that the allied great powers oversee the national movements and keep them under control according to their own interests. Nevertheless, this also allowed for the cautious and gradual considering of national progression, as it could be observed during the Balkans wars of 1912 and 1913. For them, the fundamental principle was not the peoples' right to self-determination, but that the nations would be recognized by the allied great powers<sup>3</sup>. The caution of the French leaders during the war was only increased by the widely spread suspicion that the leaders of East-Central Europe working for the creation of independent states were, in fact, allied with Germany. This assumption pertained especially to the Ukrainians and the Balts. But it was raised several times in relation to the Serbs as well that they might sign a separate peace treaty with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Negative assessment may have been reinforced by prejudice about the underdeveloped culture of the region in question<sup>4</sup>.

The several-decade debate of the two camps was illustrated by two seminal historical works of the French intellectual discourse. The views of the «Progressives» were represented by the book series edited by Ernest Lavisse (*Histoire de la France contemporaine depuis la Révolution jusqu'à la paix de 1919*), the closing volume of which (written by Lavisse and published in 1922) emphasized the Messianic role of France, which defended the nationalities after turning out victorious in the world war. On the other hand, the eight-volume work of Albert Sorel published between 1885 and 1904 (*L'Europe et la révolution française*) reflected the stance of the «Conservatives», criticizing the nationality policy of Napoleon III, which contributed to the creation of the unified Italy and Germany. The intellectual debate, which had been

pursued for a century, was now rekindled by the Great War<sup>5</sup>.

In his book entitled *Requiem pour un empire défunt*, Ferenc Fejtő puts the ideas and activities of the leaders of the group that we have referred to as «Progressive» into the light of modern French history and observes that for them, the aim of the fight to be fought till the «total victory» and the ultimate annihilation of the enemy was ideological in nature. It was a continuation of the conflict that had opposed the Conservative and the Republican France with each other ever since 1793. In his view, the heirs of the «anti-monarchist and anti-clerical Jacobin French republic» wanted to wage this ideological war on the international level and turn Europe into a republic. They saw an arch enemy in the Austro-Hungarian Empire regarded as the citadel of clericalism and monarchism. According to Fejtő, this is what explains their receptiveness to the arguments of the emigrants having arrived from the Monarchy<sup>6</sup>. He considers freemasonry as the flagship and the headquarters of this combat<sup>7</sup>. The Masonic Congress of the Allied and Neutral Countries was held in Paris on 28–30 June 1917, which took a stand in its resolution in favour of the freedom of the oppressed nations of the Monarchy, emphatically demanding independence for the Czech<sup>8</sup>. The thick monograph of Antoine Marès about the Czech politician Edvard Beneš also mentions the French Masonry as a key player in the transformation of East-Central Europe, which energized the Slav nations of the Habsburg Empire. As opposed to Fejtő, however, he does not regard freemasonry as a decisive actor, only as one of the important factors<sup>9</sup>. Georges-Henri Soutou also highlights the recurring Masonic connections of the European radical nationalist movements and the French radical Socialists<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Recherches sur la France et le problème des nationalités pendant la première guerre mondiale (Pologne, Ukraine, Lithuanie). P. 7, 17, 372.

<sup>6</sup> Fejtő F. Requiem pour un empire défunt. Histoire de la destruction de l'Autriche-Hongrie. Paris, 1988. P. 307-310; see also: Winock M. and Azéma J-P. La troisième république. Paris, 1976.

<sup>7</sup> Fejtő F. Requiem pour un empire défunt. P. 337.

<sup>8</sup> Majoros I. Franciaország a nemzetközi kapcsolatok rendszerében (1871–1940). MTA doktori disszertáció. Budapest (manuscript), 2003. P. 195.

<sup>9</sup> Marès A. Edvard Beneš, de la gloire à l'abîme. Un drame entre Hitler et Staline. Paris, 2015. P. 97-98.

<sup>10</sup> Soutou G.-H. Les grandes puissances et la question des nationalités en Europe centrale et orientale. P. 701.

<sup>1</sup> Allain J.-C. et al. Histoire de la diplomatie française. P. 288.

<sup>2</sup> Hermet G. Histoire des nations et du nationalisme en Europe. Paris-Seuil, 1996. P. 158-164.

<sup>3</sup> Soutou G.-H. Les grandes puissances et la question des nationalités en Europe centrale et orientale. P. 699; Recherches sur la France et le problème des nationalités pendant la première guerre mondiale (Pologne, Ukraine, Lithuanie). P. 7; Soutou G.-H. La France et le problème des nationalités pendant la guerre. P. 371.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. P. 370-371.



While we can observe the interaction of the «Progressive» and the «Conservative» currents in the decision-making of the French government in relation to East-Central Europe during World War I, we could rise the question – which were the principal factors affecting the position of Paris? From the domestic political forces, it was especially the Radical Party that tried to influence the actions of the government. When in July 1918 the French government stated its intention clearly to support the Yugoslav, Polish and Czechoslovakian efforts, the decision was forced by the House of Representatives, and within that, the Radicals, while Clemenceau was opposed to it<sup>1</sup>. Without their insistence, the Prime Minister would have been inclined to stick to his extremely cautious position regarding the nationalities of East-Central Europe, ensure the reinvigoration of the Russian ally and not leave any power vacuum in the back of Germany<sup>2</sup>. The person who played a key role in putting pressure on the Prime Minister was Henry Franklin-Bouillon, a Radical Socialist representative, the President of the Foreign Policy Committee of the House of Representatives, who set up the Bureau of Nationalities (Bureau des nationalités) in 1918<sup>3</sup>. As a member of the semi-official French delegation, along with Minister of Armament Albert Thomas, he took part – as it has been mentioned before – in the Congress of the so-called oppressed nations of the Monarchy in April 1918 in Rome, the success of which also contributed to the finalization of the resolution of the French government<sup>4</sup>.

From the foreign policy factors, the influence of the British was only collateral. London and Paris fundamentally agreed that after the war, Germany would have to be substantially weakened and its European hegemony terminated. However, the British saw it much less feasible to push back Berlin's influence over East-Central Europe. Therefore their primary focus was the securitization of Western Europe (France, Belgium, the Netherlands) and of the

Middle East<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, the French foreign policy was much more heavily influenced by Wilson's new diplomacy. In light of the Soviet-Russian separate peace in March 1918 and the Romanian separate peace in May as well as the strengthening of the Alliance of the Central Powers, he became a genuine flagbearer of the peoples' right to self-determination<sup>6</sup>. Coerced by Wilson, the French government had no choice but to accept the nationality principle, if reluctantly, but also in order to legitimize its own policy to some extent<sup>7</sup>. This influence was especially strong in relation to the creation of the Baltic states and Czechoslovakia<sup>8</sup>.

From the East-Central European emigrant movements, the Czech movement proved to be especially influential. Its success was facilitated by its carefully constructed multi-layer network of social relations. From autumn 1915, the Czech cause was widely promoted in the French press. During this campaign, the negative presentation of the involvement of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was accompanied by a description of the services that the Czech could offer to the cause of the Entente. Thus the Czech gradually appeared on the horizon of East-Central European expectations of France as potential new and reliable allies<sup>9</sup>. The discourse announced by the Czech exile politician Tomáš G. Masaryk in October 1915 at King's College, according to which the only way to stop the German expansion was the creation of an independent Czech state and the dissolution of the Monarchy, was repeated over and over. The power of their message was amplified by their peculiar way of argumentation, which simultaneously played on sentiments («the defence of the oppressed») and applied legal arguments (peoples' right to self-determination). In the emotionally charged atmosphere of the era, they exploited all instances of persecution to demonstrate that the Austrians were driven by the same hatred of the Slavs as the German, and that the Czech support the Entente courageously<sup>10</sup>. The programme of the destruction of

<sup>1</sup> Soutou G.-H. *Diplomatie de guerre* (Chapitre XIX). P. 571-572.

<sup>2</sup> *Recherches sur la France et le problème des nationalités pendant la première guerre mondiale* (Pologne, Ukraine, Lithuanie). P. 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Recherches sur la France et le problème des nationalités pendant la première guerre mondiale* (Pologne, Ukraine, Lithuanie). P. 10, 32, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Soutou G.-H. *La France et le problème des nationalités pendant la guerre*. P. 390.

<sup>5</sup> Soutou G.-H. *L'Europe de 1815 à nos jours*. Paris, 2007. P. 166.

<sup>6</sup> Soutou G.-H. *Les grandes puissances et la question des nationalités en Europe centrale et orientale*. P. 703.

<sup>7</sup> Soutou G.-H. *Diplomatie de guerre* (Chapitre XIX). P. 571.

<sup>8</sup> Soutou G.-H. *L'Europe de 1815 à nos jours*. P. 168.

<sup>9</sup> Marès A. *Edvard Beneš, de la gloire à l'abîme*. P. 68.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* P. 73.



Austria-Hungary was completed by sketching up a credible alternative: they wished to call to life a Czechoslovakian-Romanian-Yugoslav alliance that would cooperate with Poland in order to stop the German encroachment<sup>1</sup>. The advocacy potentials of the Czech organization were further increased by the fact that the East-Central European emigrants living in France – especially the Czech and the South Slavs – cooperated with each other closely during the war: for instance, they formed a solid unity against the separate peace efforts of the Monarchy<sup>2</sup>.

According to Fejtő, the freemason lodges, which had a decisive influence over the press and the political life, served as a crucial hinterland for the propaganda activities of Masaryk and Beneš in France<sup>3</sup>. Antoine Marès also talks about freemasonry as an important base of the social networking of the Czech emigration. In his book about Beneš, he claims that the publication of the Beneš' brochure *Détruisez l'Autriche-Hongrie !* would have been financed by the masonic lodge Grand Orient<sup>4</sup>. According to him, these threads would also explain the tightness of the Czechoslovakian–Yugoslav relations. However, he has found no evidence that the main leaders of the Czech emigrants, hence Masaryk, Beneš and their fellow Milan R. Štefanik would have been freemasons during the war<sup>5</sup>.

The French government circles did not see clearly in the matter of the complicated evolution of the nationalities of the region, thus e.g. about the effects of the diversion activities of the German among the Polish and the Ukrainian, whose leaders were also deeply divided. The obscurity was aggravated by the fact that experts and “fake experts” often put forth essentially diverging views<sup>6</sup>.

The extremely poor French knowledge about the region, coupled with the increased strategic importance of the latter, generated a high demand for intermediaries who could

pass on seemingly reliable knowledge about East-Central Europe. Besides the French Slavists, the political emigrants originating from this region played a crucial role in that: they provided visibility for their people and «comprehension» for their demands on behalf of the allied great powers<sup>7</sup>. From the end of the 19th century, the intellectuals having emigrated from this region became the visible imprints of the increasingly active national movements, the “matrices of self-identity”<sup>8</sup>. Masaryk and Beneš acted as knowledgeable experts of the region, and by delivering a coherent programme, they were able to influence the international decisions affecting their nation<sup>9</sup>.

The question arises: Was it the collapse of the empires that enabled the foundation of the nation-states in East-Central Europe? Or, maybe, the dissolution of the continental empires resulted from the development of the regional national movements? Finally, did the congenial propaganda activities of the individual emigrations play a decisive role<sup>10</sup>? In my opinion, all these components were at action simultaneously, mutually reinforcing each other.

The French government used the national principle merely as a tactical weapon. In the end, Paris subordinated everything to the single objective of creating a counterpoise in East-Central Europe that could resist Germany. Therefore using the rhetoric of the liberation of «the oppressed nations», it promoted the creation of states involving a populous minority like Poland and Czechoslovakia<sup>11</sup>. It is important to underline that not even the French radicals wanted to enforce the purely national aspect over the strategic considerations. Even Franklin-Bouillon, the President of the Foreign Policy Committee of the House of Representatives, who was highly supportive of the Czech and Polish emigration, emphasized in July

<sup>1</sup> Ibid. P. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. P. 98-99.

<sup>3</sup> Fejtő F. Requiem pour un empire défunt. P. 341-342.

<sup>4</sup> Marès A. Edvard Beneš, de la gloire à l'abîme. P. 97. The author refers to Pozzi, H. Les Coupables. Documents officiels inédits sur les responsabilités de la guerre et les dessous de la paix. Éditions européennes, 1935. P. 322.

<sup>5</sup> Marès A. Edvard Beneš, de la gloire à l'abîme. P. 97-98.

<sup>6</sup> Recherches sur la France et le problème des nationalités pendant la première guerre mondiale (Pologne, Ukraine, Lithuanie). P. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Davion I. Conceptions de l'Europe centrale et orientale, des empires multinationaux à l'entre-deux-guerres/ L'Europe de Versailles à Maastricht. Moments, enjeux, acteurs. Éditions Seli Arslan, 2007. P. 52-53.

<sup>8</sup> Renouvin P. La Crise européenne et la Première guerre mondiale. Paris, 1969. Cited by: Davion, I. Conceptions de l'Europe centrale et orientale. P. 55.

<sup>9</sup> Marès A. Edvard Beneš, de la gloire à l'abîme. P. 117.

<sup>10</sup> Davion I. Conceptions de l'Europe centrale et orientale. P. 57 ; Davion refers to Milza, P. Les relations internationales de 1918 à 1939. Paris: Armand Colin, 1995. Also, see: Fejtő, Requiem pour un empire défunt.

<sup>11</sup> Soutou G.-H. Diplomatie de guerre (Chapitre XIX). P. 571 ; Soutou, L'Europe de 1815 à nos jours. P. 167-168.



1918 that «a barrier should be built from viable states against Germany», even at the price of «compromising the nationality principle»<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, politicians were also conscious of the risk of creating weak small states, which would «Balkanize» the region. In order to avoid that, many supported the creation of politically, militarily and economically strong «big nations» even at the price of letting one nation prevail over the other within the same country. The adherents of this conception strived to create multi-component, but more or less homogeneous states with a historically «more advanced» nation that would have the mission to lead the others. That was how they perceived the situation of the Serbs in Yugoslavia or the Czechs in

Czechoslovakia. The standardizing and centralizing French Jacobin model was also proposed as a potential analogy<sup>2</sup>. Philippe Berthelot, one of the influential French shapers of the Paris treaties did not even mention nationalities, but rather, he talked about the «four pillars» of French foreign policy in relation to East-Central Europe that would be France's allies in an effort to contain Germany. These allies included the resurrected Poland, Czechoslovakia patched together from historical Czech territories and regions inhabited mostly by Slovaks, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes born from the unification efforts of the Serbs and the South Slav peoples of the Monarchy and the enlarged Romania<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Soutou G.-H. Jean Pélissier et l'Office Central des Nationalités. P. 33, 37.

<sup>2</sup> Soutou G.-H. La France et le problème des nationalités pendant la guerre. P. 369-371, 395.

<sup>3</sup> Soutou G.-H. Les grandes puissances et la question des nationalités en Europe centrale et orientale. P. 705; Allain et al. Histoire de la diplomatie française. P. 297-298.