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French policy and Italy in Central Europe: cooperation between allies and battles for influence

Abstract

During the 1919-1920 Paris peace negotiation, Georges Clemenceau's cabinet aimed at securing the territory of France by different means: reducing the political, economic and military power of Germany, extending the wartime alliances with countries of the Entente, building an "Eastern Barrier" comprised of new allies between Germany and the revolutionary Russia. The idea was also to replace the former Russian ally by successor states of the former Empires: Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians (future Yugoslavia).

This policy had to be accompanied by a projection of the French influence in Central Europe, where Paris intended to replace the former German influence, thanks to a network of new alliances. But it also involved a real cooperation with the wartime allies and the new states against the German influence. This cooperation was particularly important in the establishment of the boundaries in Central Europe. In this area, the Allied diplomats and military had to work together in the final determination of the borders of the new States. The French military missions played an important part in this work and the French influence was very decisive inside the commissions of the Paris peace negotiation and the commissions for the establishment of the boundaries. However, the French political and military staff who often headed these bodies could not act only according to their objectives and had to deal with their allies.

France and Italy, despite the opposition which could exist between them because of their respective strategic aims or territorial appetite, had to work together. The United States, France and Great Britain could not fulfil the promises of the treaty of London towards Italy and a clash happened very early in Paris. The issue of the Balkan has divided France and Italy, Clemenceau remaining reluctant to recognize an equal position of power to Rome. The Fiume issue and to disagreement that led the Italian delegation to leave the table of negotiation have overwhelmed the attention of historians. However, without denying the importance of these events, both countries were expected to consider together peace building in Europe, especially in Central Europe. Peace keeping operations in Upper Silesia, thanks to stationing of armed forces between German and Polish opponents, had been an opportunity for a military cooperation between France, Italy and Great-Britain. This was followed by the diplomatic resolution of the dispute at Geneva, in which Italy took its part. In the same time, this cooperation was also combined with economic and political rivalry, particularly in the Danubian region. Poland and Czechoslovakia, where the French military missions made efforts to reduce the influence of the Italian one and vice-versa, have been significant sites of the rivalry between the two powers. Such situations have made the French diplomacy experience the real presence of Italy in the European concert.