

Great Power Meddling in Central Europe: 1914–45

Written by Aliaksandr Piahanau

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ALIAKSANDR PIAHANAU, MAR 12 2019

This is an excerpt from *Great Power Policies Towards Central Europe 1914–1945*. Get your free copy [here](#).

In the first half of the 20th century Central Europe repeatedly set the stage for Great Power rivalry and conflict, as well as political, economic and cultural exchange. With a touch of irony, contemporary Hungarian writer Lajos Grendel described the region as a mere sum of small landlocked countries that could be occupied by foreign armies from any direction and whose inhabitants and governments faced multiple foreign interferences during their lifespans. Indeed, during the Great War, the interwar period and World War 2, the area situated between Germany and Russia became the target of covert or direct expansion.

The context of Great Power meddling in Central Europe in the period 1914–45 offers numerous perspectives. The multiple and often conflicting regional viewpoints about national identity, frontier and territory had not only underpinned regional interstate antagonisms, but at the same time provided a platform for Great Power interference. This collection of studies provides an overview of the various forms and trajectories of Great Power policies towards Central Europe between 1914 and 1945. This involves the analyses of perspectives, such as the diplomatic, military, economic or cultural policy of Weimar and Nazi Germany, tsarist and Bolshevik Russia, Great Britain, and the US on Central European countries, like Hungary, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Czechoslovakia and Romania. The contributions of established as well as emerging historians from different parts of Europe are aimed at enriching the English language scholarship on the history of international relations.

The volume is divided into three parts and, in total, contains eight papers. The first part, entitled 'Geopolitics and Security,' illustrates how two European continental powers – Germany and Russia, whose frontiers set the limits of Central Europe, programmed their regional agenda and tried to implement it. Their ultimate objective was the expansion of influence in the region. The Great War brought military defeat, political and economic weakness, international humiliation and isolation for both powers. Despite the fact that they fought in different camps during the war, Moscow and Berlin soon entered into cooperative relations that lasted until the early 1930s and which were briefly re-established in the first years of World War 2. Using the examples of Hungary and the three Baltic countries, this part illustrates how the German *Reich* and the USSR built relations with the small regional countries, assuring their loyalty through classic 'carrot and stick' methods.

The opening paper is written by Ignác Romsics, in which he analyses German foreign political thought and the gradual alteration of Berlin official attitudes towards Hungary from the end of the Great War to the Nazi occupation of Hungary in 1944. Its primary focus is the analysis of Hungary's changing role in German military and economic strategy towards East Central Europe, and the impact of international developments on German actions and policy towards Hungary. Romsics demonstrates the underlying differences and occasional similarities of the various German *Mittel-Europa* plans at the beginning of the century, the concept of *Lebensraum*, as well as German domination over the continent during the Second World War – *Pax Germanica*.

The next contribution deals with Soviet Russia's policies towards Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia during the interwar period. Its authors, Oleg Ken and Alexander Rupasov, argue that these three Baltic countries, despite their apparently limited political and economic values, occupied a disproportionately important role in the foreign policy-

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planning of Moscow. In their detailed analysis, Ken and Rupasov uncover the evolution of Communist Russian elite views on the limits of Baltic States' independence. They demonstrate that in the early interwar years, Moscow searched for the most appropriate political relations with Kaunas, Riga and Tallinn through trade, investments and corruption. However, the Bolsheviks failed to assure the unique Eastern orientation of the Baltic governments and, after a short but dynamic stage of the Litvinov peaceful diplomacy in 1933–35, Moscow suddenly refused any further rapprochement with them. Ken and Rupasov conclude that the USSR succeeded in establishing its complete control over the Baltic republics only with the help of Nazi Germany as a part of a Stalin-Hitler deal on the remapping of Central Europe in the autumn of 1939.

The second part, 'Economy and Diplomacy,' brings our attention to the Central European involvement of the two Great War winners – Great Britain and the United States. Due to their geographic positions, which prioritized ocean communications, but not Europe's heartland, these Anglo-Saxon powers had a rather distanced approach and limited interests in Central Europe. Nevertheless, as the following three papers will indicate, London and Washington exercised a profound influence on the political architecture of the region through diplomatic channels and economic leverage.

Here, the first contribution is offered by Tamás Magyarics, who investigates UK–Hungary relations in the 1920s. Magyarics starts with the assumption that soon after the First World War, Whitehall revised its negative attitude on its vanquished enemy – Hungary. London realised that without Hungary's reconstruction, (Central) Europe's peace and prosperity could not be achieved. Magyarics argues that through investment and financial penetration in Hungary, Britain also wished to balance the French, and later the German, influence in the region. At the same time, this economic expansion was also supposed to strengthen the sterling and help Britain repay the loans it owed to the US. However, the paper concludes that as Britain was no party to the revanchist endeavours of the Magyar governments, the two countries started to drift apart again in the late 1920s.

The next chapter moves us to the eve of World War 2. In it, Sorin Arhire tells the story of fluctuating British relations with Romania, which, in his view, became particularly dynamic in the late 1930s. As Arhire stresses, after Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland in 1936, London significantly increased its interests in Romania. Their rapprochement culminated in April 1939, when London (and Paris) guaranteed the independence of Romania. However, a pro-Western orientation did not offer real protection to Bucharest, which, after the Allies's debacle of 1940, was forced to give up a third of its territory to its neighbours (Russia, Hungary and Bulgaria). Seeking international protection, Bucharest allied with Berlin and even joined its anti-Soviet invasion in June 1941. That, along with the anti-Semitic campaign and persecution of British citizens in Romania, drastically affected the Whitehall mood in 1941: in February 1941, London suspended its diplomatic relations with Bucharest and, in December, it declared war on Romania.

The relationship between the US and Czechoslovakia is the topic of the next contribution. Its author, Artem Zorin asserts that the United States had a special role in the fate of Czechoslovakia. To demonstrate this, Zorin examines the development of US policy between 1918 and 1945, particularly focusing on the American attitude towards the fate of Czechoslovakia. Zorin demonstrates that while Washington maintained friendly relations with Prague; at the same time, it had a cautious and pragmatic position regarding the economic and diplomatic issues of Czechoslovakia. Thus, during the Prague-Berlin quarrel of 1938–39, the White House decided not to interfere in the conflict, but adhered to the policy of non-recognition of the Nazi occupation of Czech lands. Zorin points out that America provided an important support for the Czechoslovak exiles during World War 2. Nevertheless, at the end of the war, Washington distanced itself from guaranteeing Czechoslovak independence and its incorporation into the Soviet sphere of influence.

The third and final part, 'Propaganda and Perceptions,' seeks to investigate concepts, ideas, motives and values that stood behind Great Power decision-making. The last three contributions scrutinize the conceptual side of international relations, from discursive practices to personal biases. Examining cases from Germany, Russia and the United States, they study the interrelations between individuals, groups and mass convictions.

War propaganda, as a means of social mobilization, is the topic of Ivan Basenko's chapter. He reflects on the Polish question, which was barely presented in imperial Russian press before 1914; and then became one of the major

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sources for the tsarist anti-German campaign. The Polish question was integrated into the official tsarist concept of 'sacred struggle' between 'Germandom' and 'Slavdom.' The hidden message of this propaganda, according to Basenko, was to urge Poles to support Russia against the Central powers and to motivate other imperial subjects to fight for the 'liberation' of Poles. Using prominent daily newspapers of Kiev, the centre of the Southwestern region of Russia, Basenko explains how printed media reflected the Petrograd policy towards Poland and Germany.

Agne Cepinskyte's study examines the 'Baltic dream' of 1920s Germany. More precisely, Cepinskyte investigates Weimar geopolitical understanding of the place of the East Baltic countries (especially, regarding their German minorities), and how these lands were interlinked with Germany. Focusing on speeches and government records of the prominent Weimar statesman Gustav Stresemann, Cepinskyte portrays the hidden layers of the Second *Reich* political thinking. The author underlines that Berlin became particularly interested in Baltic-Germans not least because they would potentially help Germany build a bridge to economic markets in the East. The main argument here is that the early interwar diplomacy of cooperation was at odds with the interests of the increasingly active conservative circles in the *Reich*. Thus, Cepinskyte believes that Weimar foreign policy makers had to balance between friendly relations with the Baltic States, and the accusation of betrayal of the Baltic-Germans.

The concluding chapter is written by Halina Parafianowicz, who evaluates the personal impact of US President Herbert C. Hoover (1929–33) on the relations between the US and Poland. An emblematic leader, glorified by his role in American relief for post-war East-Central Europe, Hoover enjoyed the image of being a distinctive friend of Poland. According to Parafianowicz, the early years of his presidency witnessed the symbolic strengthening of Polish-American relations. Nevertheless, Parafianowicz accurately points out that Hoover's *Polonophilia* was not as strong as Warsaw wanted it to be. In fact, Poland occupied a marginal place in US diplomacy under Hoover, who was preoccupied with the devastating effects of the Great Depression on the US as well as Europe. This led to the decline of bilateral economic relations. Under Hoover, the Washington-Warsaw political atmosphere was seriously damaged because of the propagation in official American circles of the idea to revise the German-Polish border in favour of Berlin.

About the author:

Aliaksandr Piahanaŭ received his PhD from Toulouse University, France. His latest book is *Great Power Policies Towards Central Europe 1914–1945* (2019)