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Paris Conference between the representatives of the major states of the armies of the Little Entente and France on the subject of liaisons and transmissions (1936)

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Abstract. Apart from some high-level mission visits, we cannot record any contacts with a concrete agenda between representatives of the major French, Romanian or Little Entente states for the years 1930-1936. An exception was the Paris Conference between the military representatives of the Little Entente and those of France, held between 14th and 16th of December 1936, with the aim of signing an "Agreement concerning the organisation and functioning of liaisons between the General Headquarters of the Little Entente and France in the event of mobilisation or political tensions".

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Apart from some high-level mission visits, we cannot record any contacts with a concrete agenda between representatives of the major French, Romanian or Little Entente states for the years 1930-1936. An exception was the Paris Conference between the military representatives of the Little Entente and those of France, held between 14th and 16th of December 1936, with the aim of signing an "Agreement concerning the organisation and functioning of liaisons between the General Headquarters of the Little Entente and France in the event of mobilisation or political tensions".

The initiative came from the Little Entente following the June 1936 Chiefs of Staff Conference in Bucharest. The General Staff of the Czechoslovak Army was appointed to contact the French War Ministry. After these steps had been taken, General Ludvík Krejčí sent to Bucharest a copy of the reply from the Department of Defence in Paris, which, referring to the proposal received, stated: "I have the honour to inform you that I see nothing but advantages in carrying out this project. The text attached to your letter will serve as a basis for discussions, but it also seems to me appropriate to take advantage of the planned meeting to amend or clarify some provisions of the existing agreements, taking into account the results of the discussions held so far".¹ In particular, it was proposed that the participants should: finalise the agreements on courier aircraft journeys, carry out actual tests to assess the delays caused by the encryption or decryption of messages and study possible measures to reduce them; update the texts in force with regard to the new means which had appeared after the signing of the agreements (new radio-telegraph stations, submarine cables under construction). This reply also included a new element concerning an area which had not previously been under the scrutiny of the French

military leadership, namely: "The presence, for each of the General Staffs concerned, of the Chief of the Operations Office, or of the qualified representative, will make it possible to address various questions relating to operations during the conference"².

Unusual was also the reaction of the Chief of the Romanian General Staff who, while communicating to the Romanian military attaché in Paris the composition of the delegation – composed of him and Major Aldea, head of the 4th Transmissions-Engineers Bureau, who was the expert on the issue of links – made the express specification to discuss only the issues concerning transmissions. "Matters relating to operations will be dealt with only after a conference of the Chiefs of Staff has established the general framework"³. Such an approach may have been the consequence of Romania's attempts to appease its ally Yugoslavia, which was increasingly reluctant to deepen military relations with France. These reservations were even voiced by Charles II during his visit to England in July 1937. A conversation between the French ambassador in London and Charles II on this occasion is eloquent in this respect. "As is only natural," the diplomat noted of his discussions with the Romanian sovereign, "I take this opportunity to say, with the same sincerity with which he spoke to me, of the disappointment which the weakening of the links connecting the states of the Little Entente with each other and with France, and especially the postponement of the pact which was planned between us, which affects France much less than it affects these countries and the cause of peace... As for Romania, if, he says (King n.n.), has taken the attitude which I am pointing out and which I regret, it is not because his feelings have changed, but Romania has been obliged, in order to maintain Little Entente, to adopt an intermediate attitude between that of Czechoslovakia and that of Yugoslavia"⁴. In fact, even during the Paris conference, Belgrade would take a special attitude, speeding up its work.

According to the report of the military attaché, Colonel G. Potopeanu, and forwarded to Bucharest on 18th of December 1936, during the Conference the organisation and functioning of the communications between France and the Little Entente were discussed and established in detail. The idea of ensuring links between the four General Staffs had been launched as early as March 1934, when at the Bucharest Conference of the Chiefs of the operational commanding bodies of the armies of the Little Entente, were proposed some ways to establish links with the French General Staff by signing a joint agreement. The French response was favourable, inviting representatives of the Allies to Paris to establish the framework of the agreement. The Yugoslav General Staff argued that it was not ready and proposed postponing the meeting until the autumn of 1934, after the Prague Conference of the Little Entente, where it was requested to conclude bilateral agreements between France - Romania and France - Yugoslavia on the subject, as such agreements already existed between France and Czechoslovakia. The Romanian General Staff finalised this agreement in July 1935, while the one with Yugoslavia had not yet been concluded by that date⁵. The procrastinations continued, so that the planned meeting to finalise the agreement could not take place until the end of 1936.

Now the new two-part agreement has been negotiated and signed, setting out the course of action for two scenarios.

Each of these two parts incorporated all the usable prescriptions of the old bilateral agreements (France - Czechoslovakia, France - Romania, France - Yugoslavia), improved and fine-tuned according to the progress made in the meantime in the technical field.

Due to the fact that the transcription of such voluminous documents took a rather long time, that the entry into force of the measures set out in Hypothesis b) required the approval of the respective governments and, above all, that the Yugoslav delegate had limited powers and had set the condition of completing the work within three days, only the new matters were

definitively drafted, leaving the complete drafting of the documents to be done by the French Staffs (Army and Air Force) and sent to the other participating Staffs by courier.

Once the French government had ratified the agreement, the French General Staff would notify the General Staffs of the Little Entente that the new agreement was entering into force. In fact it did not enter into force immediately, but thirty days after receipt of the telegram. Until then - if necessary - use was made of existing bilateral agreements⁶.

Specifically, the Conference programme was very full and, according to the Report⁷ prepared by the Romanian delegation and submitted to the General Staff, the main elements under consideration were:

1. Revision and improvement of the private agreements, in accordance with the results of the trials carried out in 1936 and with the new means of international transmission, controlled by France and the Little Entente states. These consisted of the new (French) submarine cable Tunis - Igalo (the mouth of the Cataract), which greatly facilitated telegraphic communication between France and the Little Entente. Very powerful new short-wave radio stations (in particular the Czechoslovak station at Poděbrady, with 20 Kw antenna for short-wave and 300 Kw for long-wave). Organisation of radio guidance and the use of radio broadcasting for air-couriers.

Together, these achievements significantly altered the possibilities of communications between the Little Entente and France.

2. Discussion and agreement of the common and non-common parts of the particular agreements.

3. Discussion of the elements of a general agreement and determination of its component parts for each of the two possible war situations:

- all states of the Little Entente and France simultaneously and jointly engaged in a conflict;

- only some of these states engaged in the conflict, the others neutral.

The conclusions of these discussions led to:

1. Conclusion of a "General Agreement" covering the organisation and operation of communications between France, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia in two parts:

- the first containing the rules applicable in the event that all signatory States are simultaneously and jointly and severally engaged in the conflict;

- the second, containing special rules to be applied when only some of those states will be engaged in the conflict, the others neutral, but nevertheless interested in facilitating liaisons and transmissions between those engaged in the conflict.

This new agreement is based on the Draft Agreement of June 1936 and the existing particular agreements, revised and improved.

2. Keeping the particular agreements in force only until the new (common and general) agreement is ratified.

As the drafting and transcription of the complete annexes to the new General Agreement took several days and the Yugoslav delegation had limited powers and only 4 days time, the work finally completed was reduced to: the conclusion of a Minutes signed by the heads of all delegations, recording the discussions and decisions reached at the conference; the drafting of the text of the General Agreement, with its two component parts; the drafting of the general considerations and principles underlying the new communications plan consisting of the annexes to the new agreement and the drafting of the new parts inserted in these annexes.

It was established and recorded in the Minutes that:

1. The French General Staff (Army and Air Force) were to complete the work of the Conference with the parts retained from the old particular agreements.

2. The papers thus prepared shall be sent by courier to the other General Staffs, who shall communicate their approval to the French General Staff.

3. The receipt of all acceptances will be communicated by telegram by the General Staff of the French Army to the other interested General Staffs; the new agreement will enter into force 30 days after this telegraphic communication.

The main communications rules established by the new agreement were as follows:

a. For the first situation of war (all states of the Little Entente and France engaged simultaneously and jointly in the conflict):

1. Wired telegraph, the main medium, duplicated or replaced if necessary by wireless telegraphy (t.f.f.).

The main telegraph route was the Paris-Marseille-Tunis-Igalo-Belgrade-Orşova-Bucureşti-Praga cable (between Igalo, possibly Belgrade-Praga air line).

As soon as the French have finished laying the Marseille-Candia cable, the Candia-Thessaloniki-Belgrade and Candia-Istanbul-Constanta-Bucharest routes will also be used.

2. T.F.F. will take place directly between France and each of the countries of the Little Entente in vocations and with definitive characteristics.

Listening will be organised in all the countries (the Little Entente and France) and will allow autonomous retransmission to recipients who are currently unable to correspond directly with the sender. The retransmission will be made by any available means, preferably by wire telegraphy.

In each country, radio correspondence (direct and relay) is carried out by a Radio Central Office linked by cable with broadcasters and receivers.

3. Air couriers will operate as needed following a system combining the means of two countries.

However, a regular air courier service was envisaged, for which purpose the countries concerned would study and develop the necessary means (long-haul aircraft, flying at very high altitude, guided by radio broadcasts).

4. The cipher remains as established by the particular agreements; however, for the ciphering of the circulars is adopted a common super-encryption different from the particular ones.

b. For the second situation (only some of the Little Entente states and France in conflict, the rest neutral):

- Transmissions were to be made directly between the States concerned, by the means provided for in the first hypothesis.

If necessary, the peacetime communications of neutral states could be used, their General Staffs taking steps to ensure that such correspondence was passed on to the addressee without delay by any means other than radio.

To this end recognition signals and codes have been established.

Members of the delegation also reported on the measures to be taken by Romania in two stages:

a. Immediately:

1. Organisation of the central radio office and preparation of the booklet with operating instructions.

2. Intervention with the Air Ministry to create a special liaison unit (a group of two squadrons with a total of 20-24 aircraft). The aircraft in its composition had to have a range of

at least 1000 km, flight ceiling over 6000 m, radio-guidance facilities, armament for self-defence and room for two men in addition to the crew.

3. Making the necessary appeals to the Romanian Post, Telephone and Telegraph Office for the resumption of the repair works at the Constanta-Constantinopol cable and for the construction of the two short-wave radio transmitters in 1937.

4. Study of the use of broadcasting for mobilisation.

5. The Ministry of National Defence to ensure the creation of General Headquarters' short waves stations and to intervene with the French General Staff for the mutual exchange of military missions in case of mobilisation.

b. After receiving the documents from the French General Staff: obtaining government approval for the application of the Agreement, Part II (neutral Romania), and drafting instructions for the application of the Agreement.

Noting the competence in the issues discussed of Czechoslovak officers who had done internships in units of the French army, the two Romanian delegates made pertinent proposals for the training of personnel who were destined to ensure the proper functioning of the liaison and communications system. Since good information in this direction could only be obtained by attending the courses of the French Transmissions Training Centre, the sending of a senior officer qualified in transmissions and able to work for a time at the General Staff appeared very necessary. This had been done until 1930. It was proposed that it should be resumed, possibly instead of sending a Romanian signal officer to Poland in 1937.

The two Romanian officers suggested the award of decorations to several French officers who had supported them: lieutenant colonel de France de Tersant Jacques, lieutenant colonel Magnin Pierre, captains Bisson Norbert, Romon Gabriel and Renard Raymond.

The implementation of the agreement was also delayed by the same partners - the Yugoslavs. When finalising the texts of the agreement there were minor differences over some technical details, which have been overcome. But beyond these the Yugoslav General Staff made implementation conditional on agreements to be reached in each case by the governments concerned and on the arrangements for liaisons being established at the same time. This was synonymous with the de facto cancellation of the agreement. Thus, until the Little Entente conference to be held in Prague in December 1937 the situation remained unresolved⁸, with the signing of the agreement only taking place in September 1938⁹.

References

- 1 A.M.R., M. St. M. fund, Section III Operations, file no. 1024, f. 124
- 2 Ibid, f. 121
- 3 Ibid, f. 125
- 4 Charles II in exile. Diplomatic documents. Selection of documents and introductory study by Valeriu Florin Dobrinescu and Ion Pătroiu. Vremea Publishing House, Bucharest, 2002, p. 48
- 5 A.M.R., M. St. M. fund, Section III Operations, file no. 1534, f. 109
- 6 Ibidem, no. 1024, f. 127-129
- 7 Ibid, f.136-143
- 8 A.M.R., M. St. M. fund, Section III Operations, file no. 1534, f. 111
- 9 Ibidem, file no. 1611, f. 5