

THE FRENCH DIPLOMACY AND THE GERMAN COLONIAL REVISIONISM

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Rezumat. Revizionismul colonial german, de la sfârșitul anilor '30, s-a dovedit o provocare subtilă. Germania avea interesul să testeze reacțiile Angliei și Franței. De aceea, regimul național-socialist a procedat cu prudență, încurajând manifestările neoficiale (precum cele ale „**Ligii coloniale germane**”, conduse de bătrânul general von Epp). Dacă Anglia, inclusiv la nivel oficial, manifesta înțelegere, în schimb Franța era extrem de ostilă oricărei forme de retrocedare colonială. Prin urmare, diplomația franceză a cules numeroase informații de la reprezentanții săi acreditați la Berlin și Londra, în special în perioada octombrie 1937-octombrie 1938. Din luna noiembrie 1938, **Quai d'Orsay** a realizat că problema colonială a reprezentat doar **un exercițiu de retorică** al germanilor. Confirmarea a venit și după fatidica zi de 22 iunie 1940, când Germania victorioasă nu a manifestat nici un fel de pretenții coloniale.

Abstract. The German colonial revisionism, at the end of 1930s, proved to be a subtle challenge. Germany wanted to see the reactions of England and France. That is why, the nationalist-socialist regime behaved carefully, encouraging the unofficial manifestations (such as the ones of “The German Colonial League”, ruled by the old general von Epp). Unlike England, which proved to be understanding, France was extremely hostile to any kind of colonial retrocession. Therefore, the French diplomacy gathered numerous information from its representatives approved in Berlin and London, especially between October 1937 – October 1938. Since November 1938, **Quai d'Orsay** realized that the colonial problem had represented only a **rhetorical exercise** of the Germans. The confirmation also came after the fatidic day of 22 June 1940, when the victorious Germany did not show any colonial requests.

Keywords: colonial revisionism, von Epp, England, France, Germany, Oswald Pirow, Africa.

Owing to some factors which are related to its own history, Germany manifested late colonial requests. That is why its presence in Africa was limited to a reduced number of territories: **Togo** in West Africa, **Cameroon** on the central-west side, **Tanganyika** and **Ruanda-Urundi** in East Africa and the possession **South-West Africa** (the present day Namibia).

At the end of World War II, as a consequence of its defeat, Germany was forced to give up the colonial empire¹. Its former possessions were redistributed to

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¹ Vezi art. 119 al Tratatului de pace de la Versailles, în *Relații internaționale în acte și documente (International Relationships in legal papers and documents)*, vol. I (1917-1939), București,

the winners, as territories under the mandate of the Society of the Nations, as follows: Togo, divided between the Englishmen (28 400 km², that is 1/3 of the territory, an area known as Togoland) and the French (56 000 km², being the equivalent of 2/3 of the whole); Cameroon, similarly divided, the Englishmen getting 89 720 km² (1/5 of the territory), the remaining 4/5 (432 000 km²) being given to France; **Ruanda-Urundi** (26 338 km² and 27 816 km² respectively) required by Belgium; South-West Africa (825 560 km²), given to the South-African Union.

The loss of the colonies was perceived as a supplementary humiliation in the different layers of the German society. The elections from November 1932 brought to power the nationalist-socialist regime, and the racial component of its policy did not present any regrets related to the former “colonial glory”. The Nazi ideologists were convinced that “for a racial state, the colonization involves a mortal risk of cross-breeding”¹. Even in **Mein Kampf**, Hitler wrote superciliously: “if the evolution of France will continue in this actual style for 300 more years, the last remains of **the Franc blood** will disappear in the **mulatto African-European state** which is about to constitute itself.”² The leader of the German fascist regime also restated his colonial position in the interview given to the English newspaper *Daily Mail*, published on 5 August 1934. **The Führer** stated that: “I will not sacrifice any lives of the Germans to get a colony. We all know that the former German colonies are an expensive luxury even for England”³. And yet, since 1934, the first signs of the German colonial revisionism have begun to appear. France was vitally interested in the new developments. Here there are the reactions of the diplomacy in Hexagon as they appear in the collection **Documents diplomatiques français (1932-1939), II-e série (1936-1939)**, the volumes VII, XII and XIII.

The German colonial revisionism reached its highest point in 1937. Attentive at the events in the capital city of Germany, the French ambassador François-Poncet communicated to his foreign affair minister that since September 1937, the German newspapers had begun to write, “almost every day”, about “the moral, legal, economic and political arguments of the German pretensions”⁴. He also warned against the spirit of solidarity manifested by Mussolini who, on 28 October 1937, had asked for being recognized to Germany «its proper place under the Africa sun»⁵. This “colonial axis” of the fascist states made the French

Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1974, p. 56.

¹ Pierre Guillaume, *Le monde coloniale, XIX^e-XX^e siècle*, Paris, A. Colin, 1974, p. 55.

² *Ibidem*.

³ Martin Gilbert, Richard Gott, *Conciliatorii (The Conciliators)*, București, Editura Politică, 1966, p. 127.

⁴ *Documents diplomatiques français* (from now on referred to as *DDF*), *II-e série (1936-1939)*, Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1966, tome XII, the document no. 165.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

diplomat remind his superior that “1938 was meant to be a colonial year”¹ for Germany.

The general Ricker von Epp, the colonial resurrection champion of 1930’s Germany, was **Statthalter** of the Reich from Bavaria (1933-1945) and president of **The German Colonial League**. Even if he occupied an inferior position, he was famous among the Nazis, due to his age (in October 1938 he had turned 70, being fatuously celebrated) and, especially, due to his vital role played during Hitler’s ascension. The ambassador François-Poncet warned the minister Bonnet that von Epp “was tirelessly militating”² for regaining the former colonies. In his turn, the French representative in Berlin, Montbas, revealed Bonnet the basic terms of general von Epp’s speech at the beginning of the lectures of “The Colonial School” of the Nazi Party: «[Germany] does not ask for anything which does not belong to it; it asks for its possessions which were stolen (...), that is its whole colonial empire. The injustice should be repaired and the mandatory powers should give again **the legal owner** the stolen territories»³. He hoped that Germany «would regain one day the place beside the important colonial powers»⁴.

However, in the following period, the German media, which was strictly controlled by the regime, decreased the intensity of the colonial revisionism. That fact made François Poncet suspect that, in fact, Germany wanted to reach an agreement with England and France⁵. But when the Führer was in the middle of a crowd, he loved to use the demagogic language; thus, on 8 November 1938 in München, Hitler stated that he did not want anything from England and France, except for “retrocession of the territories which had been once taken from us under false juridical pretences”⁶. And he ended: “We have always stated that this is not a reason for war, but a matter of justice”⁷.

The signals received from the capital city of England are also extremely interesting. Thus, even since 20 November 1937, the French ambassador in London, Corbin, wrote his Foreign Affairs Minister Delbos that, “in that particular autumn, the English media campaign in favour of the German colonial retrocession reached a climax”⁸. In fact, the English media voiced an official plan, plan, elaborated by the Foreign Office. So, in the same letter, Corbin wrote to Delbos that the British Foreign Affairs Ministry wanted “the possible retrocession to Germany of a part of Togo and Tanganyika”⁹. Only that, the British wanted

¹ *Ibidem*.

² *Ibidem*, p. 279.

³ *Ibidem*, the document no. 239, p. 413.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 414.

⁵ *Ibidem*, the document no. 165, p. 281.

⁶ *Ibidem*, the document no. 289, p. 512.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*, tome VII, the document no. 256, p. 461.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

“sacrifices” for the others, too: the Italians in Ethiopia, which had just been conquered, and the French in Cameroon. The allusion to Cameroon irritated the French who remembered “the Agadir crisis” in 1911, when the Germans had to give the Germans 275000 km².¹

The Equatorial French Africa (EFA), a loss which was considered at the time as an «**African Alsacia Lorena**»². Unlike the government in London, the French government strongly rejects any colonial concession towards Germany. Its position is based on the similar reaction of the whole society: media, non-governmental organizations, and common people. In order to prevent a British unilateral reaction, Corbin asked the titular of **the Foreign Office**, lord Halifax, for a levee, where he reminded him that Paris was “against the principle of returning the German colonies”³. When the storm became less violent, Corbin noticed that the Englishmen’s “efforts” had not brought about a special impression in Berlin. On November 3rd, 1938, relaxed, he wrote that the Germans did not give the colonial regulation with the Englishmen “any emergency character”⁴. The Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain was the only one who seemed to understand nothing. Blinded by the belief that he would save the European peace, the British Prime Minister “was thinking to make some concessions to Germany in the colonial empire, as an exchange for some guarantees regarding Austria and Czechoslovakia”⁵. But the results of the Conference in München (29-30 September 1938) affected Chamberlain’s belief in the possibility of an “honest” arrangement with Hitler. Dedicated to his European perspective, the nationalist-socialist leader confessed to the British ambassador in Berlin, Neville Henderson, that «the problem of the colonies could wait for four, six or even eight more years»⁶. A few days later, while being in Rome, Hitler declared to François-Poncet, now the titular of the Embassy in the capital city of Italy, that «this problem could be dealt with in five or six years»⁷. The less enthusiastic attitude of the German nationalist-socialist leader towards the black continent “was dictated by his central-European policy”⁸: “Hitler wanted to become the referee of the European policy: a more adventurous Bismarck, a luckier Wilhelm the 2nd”. To him, Africa was not an attraction”⁹. The minister Bonnet also received an encouraging signal from the new French ambassador in

¹ *Ibidem*.

² Camille Fidel, *La Paix Coloniale Française*, Paris, Sirey, 1918, p. 80.

³ *DDF, II-e série (1936-1939)*, tome XII, the document no. 258, p. 442.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*, the document no. 295, p. 534.

⁶ M. Gillbert, R. Gott, *op. cit.*, p. 534.

⁷ *DDF, II-e série (1936-1939)*, tome XII, the document no. 390, p. 781.

⁸ Viorel Cruceanu, *Istoria decolonizării Africii (The History of Africa’s decolonization)*, Bacau, Editura Corgal Press, 2010, p. 63-64.

⁹ M. Gilbert, R. Gott, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

Berlin, Robert Coulondre. Thus, in a letter dated on 19 November 1938, he wrote that, when the credentials were presented, the leader of the German diplomacy, von Ribbentrop stated: «the colonial problem is not considered as being an actual one...»¹.

On 24 November 1938, the meeting between Daladier and Chamberlain in Paris evolved in the same way. Referring to the colonial problem, the resident from **10 Downing Street** stated that “he had no proposal to make regarding the German requirements”². As a reply, Daladier reminded his guest that “the French public opinion is unanimous in refusing Germany any colonial concession”³ and, therefore, the policy of the French government in this respect “remains a strictly negative one”⁴.

The rapid evolution of the events in the Central Europe represented a serious warning signal for the British government. On 15 December 1938, Corbin could send Bonnet the result of the interpellation of the labourist deputy Noel Baker, on December 7th. **The Colonial Office** Minister firmly replied that “the English government did not intend any colony transfer”⁵.

The Foreign Affairs Ministry paid the appropriate attention to the other factors involved in the problems under discussion. It is especially related to the statements of the South African defense minister, Oswald Pirow, who made a long European tour in the autumn of 1938. Pirow’s long visit to London brought about an intense correspondence across the English Channel. Thus, in the letter sent by Corbin to Bonnet, on 11 November 1938, there was expressed Pirow’s worry regarding the “indigene threat”⁶, that being the reason why he wanted “the German administration to be substituted to the Belgian and Portuguese considered as being too liberal”⁷. To Pirow, the nationalist-socialist doctrine offered “all the necessary guaranties”⁸ against “the emancipation attempts of the Black race”⁹. Besides, since 26 October 1938, Corbin had even mentioned a plan for redistributing the African colonies, made by Pirow. According to the South-African leader, the new German colonial empire was to include Togo, Cameroon, the septentrional half of Angola (a Portuguese colony), extended by the meridional half of the Belgian Congo, as well as the territories of Ruanda-Urundi (under Belgian mandate), extended with a band along the Lake of Tanganyika¹⁰.

¹ *DDF, II-e sèrie (1936-1939)*, tome XII, the document no. 332, p. 645.

² *Ibidem*, the document no. 390, p. 781.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*, tome XIII, the document no. 142, p. 278.

⁶ *Ibidem, II-e sèrie (1936-1939)*, tome XII, the document no. 294, p. 533.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Vezi Ibidem*, the document no. 217, p. 379.

Pirow's plan did not include the territory of Tanganyika (under English mandate) and, of course, South-West Africa (under South-African mandate). Such a diplomatic "delicacy" was meant to preserve the relations between the

United Kingdom and South Africa, severely affected by the pro-Germanic sympathies of numerous ministers belonging to the government in Pretoria. Corbin approached Pirow in London who, emphasizing again his obsessive "indigene threat", stated that «it is compulsory to give again a colonial empire to **the Reich**»¹. But the omission of Tanganyika and South-West Africa "clearly disappointed the German leaders"², since Bonnet was amended in Berlin, on 26 November 1938, from Berlin, by the ambassador Coulondre.

The Nazi officials' discontent was also reflected in the insignificant details of the protocol: even if Pirow had arrived in Berlin on 15 November, he met Hitler only on 24 November and only for an hour and a quarter. In this respect, Coulondre also mentioned that Pirow had not been invited to dinner by Hitler, even if it had been previously intended. Pirow's impressions, which were thoroughly communicated by Coulondre to Bonnet on 1 December 1938, seem very interesting to us. Thus, the French ambassador noticed that Pirow "clearly concluded" that, as far as "the important aspects of his general policy"³ were concerned, Hitler "was extremely irresolute"⁴. The South-African minister was surprised by the contrast between 1934's Hitler, "resolute" and "without any hesitations"⁵, and 1938's Hitler, caught between two rival clans: "the tough ones" of the regime (Goebbels, Hess, Himmler) and the advocates of **the Reich** admission in "the international network" (Goering, Funk, Lammers)⁶. That's why, Pirow was thinking that "**the Führer** did not abandon either the hope or the intention to approach England"⁷. After his visit in Berlin, the South-African minister understood that his plan had become caducous; his deception had been obvious in Lisbon, where he did not even mention the colonial problem, fact found out by Corbin from his Lusitanian homologue in London⁸.

Pirow's declarations produced only waves. The French diplomacy followed them with a real interest, even if since the end of November 1938 it had had clear signals that Hitler did not intend to take the risk in Africa. Hitler's expansionist policy had, as we mentioned above, other priorities. Moreover, after 22 June 1940, Germany did not ask for any colonies, even if France had been defeated. Only in November 1940, at the German Foreign Affairs Ministry was there

¹ *Ibidem*, the document no. 294, p. 533.

² *Ibidem*, the document no. 411, p. 811.

³ *Ibidem*, tome XIII, the document no. 7, p. 10.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 10

⁸ *Ibidem*, tome XII, the document no. 324, p. 634.

elaborated a plan which took into consideration the creation of a vast colonial empire, which was to include the African territories from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean, limited in the North by Sahara, and in the South by the South-African Union¹. It is interesting the fact that the new colonial territory (perfectly covering the so called the Black Africa) was intended to be economically integrated to the Germany's requirements, as well as to the necessities of its European areas of influence (Romania was also included). It is also necessary to mention that "this vast colonial empire had to be ruled by the victorious Germany, as one of the major results of the World War 2"². So, the vassalage of the Black Africa was meant only after the completion of hostilities and it was to be sanctified by treaties of peace, which meant the defeat of both France and England. Due to Churchill's determination, England could not be defeated. In parallel, the French resistance was structured on the African land where, under the rule of General Charles de Gaulle, "the Independent France" was constituted. The war cabinet in London and De Gaulle movement managed to coagulate the energies of the African colonies which, due to its people and resources, decisively contributed to the final defeat of the fascist tyranny³. That is why, the results of the World War II also influenced the colonial world, completely differently than Hitler had imagined, but also Churchill or de Gaulle. The new international atmosphere started a new course: the one of Africa's evolution to independence.

¹ *L'Afrique et la seconde guerre mondiale*, Paris, UNESCO, 1985, p. 61.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 67.

³ About the substantial share of people and natural resources of the African colonies, see V. Cruceanu, *op. cit.*, p. 68-73.