

# MEMORY TRACES OF A DIPLOMATIC INCIDENT. EXPLORING MNEMONIC DENSITY OF THE “TILEA AFFAIR”

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims at restoring the domestic mnemonic dimension of the “Tilea Affair” as a diplomatic incident, in order to reconfigure its functioning and symbolic significance on the floor of European and international performed diplomacy. The paper also explores the mnemonic density of this representative diplomatic incident of contemporary history of Romania, staged in London in March 1939. As such, the paper embraces an interdisciplinary perspective in order to complete the picture of the existing investigations with the Romanian political and diplomatic memoirs of the time, as well as with the effervescence of diplomatic exchanges in the major Western chancelleries, in the context of the imminent outbreak of the Second World War. The results show that the real focus is to be placed on the further functioning of the “Tilea incident” as a *dispositif* acting within the diplomatic charged arena of the era, which was pushed to anticipate, rearrange, readapt and take action, given the magistral performance and diplomatic indiscretion of V.V. Tilea.

**Keywords:** diplomatic incident, mnemonic density, Tilea Affair, Romania, Second World War.

## INTRODUCTION

Extensive research in political sociology defines memory as “encompassing both the development of collective forms of remembering the past and political uses of history” (Neumayer 2023, 116). The first orientation initiated by M. Halbwachs was called “sociology of memories” and is aimed at exploring “the social conditions of the emergence, evocation and formulation of individual memories”, while the second “deals with the elaboration of mnemonic public policies through institutional actions and collective mobilizations” (*idem*). This second one is considering “biographical and historical experiences, the reasons and motivations of the social actors who formulate ‘historical memories’ and other

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‘policies of memory’” (Lavabre 2016, 12, *apud* Neumayer 2023). In addition, Laure Neumayer (2023) states that “the various ways by which political and social actors perceive and relate to certain historical events, according to the identities they construct, the interests they defend and the strategies they devise to define, maintain or improve their position in society” (*idem*). This involves a mandatory focus on agency for “identifying empirically the configurations of actors originating narratives about the past, along with their motivations, their strategies and the meanings they ascribe to them” (Neumayer 2023, 117). The main aim would be to understand “how discourses about the past are connected to the institutional, social and political context of their elaboration and of their reception”, because “focusing on agency calls for empirically grounded work that reconstructs the configurations of actors involved in the appraisal of the past and the power relations that structure these configurations” (Neumayer 2023, 126).

From a different perspective, E. Zerubavel (2003) is exploring the “social construction of historical continuity and discontinuity” (Zerubavel 2003, XI–XII) that is the “social structure of memory” (Zerubavel 2003, 1), pointing out that: “I am primarily interested not in what actually happened in history but in how we remember it.” (Zerubavel 2023, 2). As such, in relation to this “social shape of the past”, some historical events are more eventful than others, given their “mnemonic density” that is, the “perceived density” reflecting “how intensely we actually remember different historical periods” (Zerubavel 2023, 25–26) or historical events, across the various “historical narratives” surrounding them.

The history of universal diplomacy is strewn with incidents, all surprising, of course, by their incidental and, most often, non-accidental nature. What they all have in common is their *mise en scène* by a protagonist, acting in specific configurations of actors and power relations, and generating specific narratives. In the literature dedicated to “international incidents”, for instance, the fundamental concern of specialists in law studies, international relations and political science is rather to investigate the context of bilateral and/or international relations at the time of the “incident” and, respectively, its consequences, i.e., the regulation of the situation and therefore the restoration of cordial relations or, on the contrary, the onset of the crisis, by “closing the embassies”, or even the beginning of a real conflict. As such, an important set of studies focuses on the in-depth documentation of the incidents in question and their impact, starting with the methodological design on international incidents developed by W. Reisman (1988) in international law studies, the significance of diplomatic incidents in international relations (Kennedy and Nielsen 2002) or further reflections on what makes diplomatic a historical incident (Bély and Poumarède 2010).

The present study focuses on the investigation of a “diplomatic incident” generically called the “Tilea Affair”, which took place in London in March 1939 – perhaps the most reverberant diplomatic incident in Romania’s recent history. Our approach is interdisciplinary, borrowing concepts and method from political

sociology, communication studies and memory studies, in order to reveal the dense memory debate around the subject, as registered in the Romanian political and diplomatic memoirs of the era, with a less explored focus until now, that is, the relationship between agency and memory.

Although the international scholarly literature has already analysed it in depth since the late 1970s (see Quinlan 1978; Lungu 1985; Haynes 2000; Aster 2002), it has been less circulated in the Romanian literature before (Buzatu 1988) and after the fall of communism (Constantiniu 2011), and, only more recently, in tangential relation to its mnemonic traces in the political and diplomatic memoirs of the era (Arhire 2017). The explanation remains simple: most of the documentary archives, diaries and political and diplomatic memoirs of the time were hidden from the public eye for a long time, and the publication of those saved from the persecution of communism was launched relatively late in post-socialist Romania. In this regard, this paper aims at completing the picture of the existing investigations with the Romanian political and diplomatic testimonies of the time, as well as with the effervescence of diplomatic exchanges in the major Western chancelleries, in the context of the imminent outbreak of the Second World War.

Considering the fact that diplomatic incidents are “of utmost importance not because some of them [...] may occasionally escalate to produce a violent conflict, but because they serve as a vehicle for the constant performance of some important functional and symbolic adjustments in the diplomatic system that otherwise would be very difficult to perform” (Cornago 2018, 72), this paper looks further to the performative dimension of this incident on the international diplomatic arena, by also revealing some less known Romanian considerations and narratives of the era as circulated within the “specific configuration of the actors” (Neumayer 2023) involved. As such, the main aim of the paper is to restore the domestic mnemonic dimension of the “Tilea Affair”, in order to reconfigure its “instrumental and symbolic understanding” (Faizullaev 2013) on the floor of European and international performed diplomacy, in March 1939, as well as to explore its “mnemonic density” (Zerubavel 2003). Consequently, this paper will clearly not solve the various dilemmas raised by the investigated incident which seems to still leave traces in scholar literature, and the most probably in international diplomatic practice as well, knowing that, “once a diplomatic incident has been solved it leaves no traces”, as already stated by N. Cornago (2018, 71).

#### METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Scholarly literature dedicated to diplomatic incidents has not yet found a comprehensive definition of the term. However, Noé Cornago (2018, 65) points out that “Certainly, some diplomatic incidents can serve as triggers for violent

conflicts, but many others can be considered, conversely, as a sort of early warning against that very possibility”. This last supposition is the exact situation circumscribing the “Tilea Affair”, also explaining the diplomatic effervescence around it. By extrapolation and given the media coverage of the event in the era, a plausible possibility could be explored, that is the one of the existence of both political and diplomatic historical narratives around it, susceptible to be linked to the recent scholar extrapolations on the subject and, in consequence, able to reconfigure the “mnemonic density” (Zerubavel 2003) of the diplomatic incident.

Moreover, Cornago (2018) identifies four “prisms of interpretation” or “modes of existence of the diplomatic incident”:

(1) “The phenomenology of diplomatic incidents as *discrete events*, or a set of related events, rooted in some discernible causes, susceptible to being managed and able to produce a variety of more or less controllable consequences; (2) their consideration as memorable moments or *plots* that provide the material for the narratives of national pride and shame cultivated by national diplomatic history and popular historiographies; (3) their functioning as *dispositif* through which diplomatic system anticipates and performs—as exemplified by the concentration of incidents on reciprocity, immunity or inviolability or more recently racial or gender equality—its constant legal and institutional adaptation to the changing functional and normative imperatives of the wider global system; (4) their transfiguration through new forms of mediatization into transnational *media events*, whose eruption and effects ostensibly exceed the capabilities of public and digital diplomacy techniques of control” (66).

This scheme of interpretation does raise a series of research questions related to the incident under investigation: (1) in relation to the nature of the event, could the “Tilea Affair” be considered an (*in*)*discrete incident* or rather a *plot*?; (2) in terms of diplomatic performance, how this diplomatic incident could be interpreted, in Foucault’s terms as a *dispositif*, aimed at recalibrating the power relations just before WWII?; (3) in terms of “transfiguration”, and given the intense media coverage of the era and its mnemonic echoes, is it possible to reconfigure the “mnemonic density” of the “Tilea Affair”, by linking the past and the present, via the political and diplomatic memoirs of the era, the diplomatic archives and the recent scholar investigations dedicated to it?

Starting from these research questions, this paper is structured as an exploratory essay, conducted into an inductive approach, aimed at completing the picture of the Tilea diplomatic incident with its Romanian mnemonic traces. In order to do that, various memorial, research-based, historical and diplomatic sources are put together, as to assess its mnemonic density, 85 years after its *mise en scène*.

### THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

In the context of the great economic crisis of the late 1920s, all the discourses of the European interwar period are marked by the omnipresence of the idea of crisis. In the early 1930s, the European continent discursively conveyed the transfigured image of a generalized spiritual crisis, affecting both old and newly built national identities after the Great War, but also the European culture itself. The latter has peace at its very centre, so desired after the First World War, even if the territorial (and identity) wounds left by the First World War were not yet closed. It is not surprising that we are dealing with a context conducive to what was generically called a “diplomatic incident”. In relation to the known conceptual developments of crisis, Coral Bell (1971) advances the concept of ‘pseudo-crisis’ for defining exactly those situations which do not have the potential to produce the “turning point” (Bell 1971, 9–10) that is war, but participate in the making of the diplomatic *dispositif* conducting to it.

The European crisis, in all the forms it took at the time, quickly left its mark on international relations, where the main attack at the end of the interwar period was directed towards national sovereignty. In this context, the signing of the various treaties is eloquent for the analysis of the way in which the European and international diplomatic world was being restructured, by defining concrete and, initially, transparent future alliances. The Anti-Comintern Pact signed between Germany and Japan on November 25, 1936 and to which Italy joined a year later, on November 6, 1937, and then Hungary on January 13, 1939, as well as the Non-Aggression Pact signed between Germany and the USSR on August 23, 1939, remain fundamental. Western Europe, and in particular France and Great Britain, are trying to maintain cordial relations with the USSR and a “*diplomacy of appeasement*”<sup>2</sup> with Germany, which inevitably leads to the “abandonment of Czechoslovakia” (Constantiniu, 2011) by the Munich Agreement<sup>3</sup> (September 29 1938) which culminated with the disintegration of Czechoslovakia through the “Prague Coup” (March 15, 1939), proclaiming the independence of Slovakia, while the Czech Republic passed under the protectorate of the Reich. During these turbulent times, the Eastern European states initially strove to strengthen the Balkan Entente around Turkey, and, in parallel, to defend their cause of independence and territorial integrity in the British, French and other

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<sup>2</sup> Considered by Romanian historian F. Constantiniu (2011) a “policy of conciliation” (351) or, as explained by Gh. Buzatu (1988), “Between November 1937 and March 1939, Great Britain and France excelled in promoting a policy of understanding, in a practical way of conciliation, towards the German Reich.” (10).

<sup>3</sup> The Munich Agreement was concluded at the international conference attended by Germany, Italy, France and Great Britain (29-30 September 1938). According to the Agreement, Czechoslovakia was forced to cede to Germany the area of the Sudeten Mountains (northwest of the country).

chancelleries<sup>4</sup>. The USSR's relations with Turkey remained close until the end of August 1939, after which they were ignored, when Europe was divided into two large spheres of influence. We should not forget the bilateral pacts concluded between newer and older European states whose prior motivation was to maintain European peace, such as: the Polish-Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty (July 25, 1932); Polish-German Non-Aggression Treaty (January 26, 1934); The German-British declaration of non-aggression (September 30, 1938), the German-French declaration of non-aggression (December 6, 1938) etc., but also the exhausting negotiations for the conclusion of other agreements of this kind, such as those between England, France, Poland and Russia (summer of 1938); Romania and Hungary; Romania and Bulgaria, etc. – all doomed to failure.

Interwar Romanian diplomacy highlights a system of alliances considered by historians as “admirable in the logic of its articulation” (Constantiniu 2011, 352), with one fundamental exception – the economic dimension of the relations with Western Europe (especially with Great Britain and France, which remained “fragile” (*idem*) throughout the period). This is not the case of the economic relations with Germany, considered as advantageous by both sides: Romania's oil and grain exports to Germany were “rewarded” with state-of-the-art industrial products. While Great Britain and France were still hesitant to strengthen their alliances with Eastern Europe, Germany was preparing an economic treaty with Romania that would be signed on March 23, 1939. A few days earlier, the “Tilea incident”, staged by the Romanian minister in London, Viorel Virgil Tilea, occurs – an event considered by some Western historians (Gilbert and Gott 1963, 229; Aster 2002, 153 and 170), a trigger for the creation of alliances leading to World War II.

European historiography, as more recently reconsidered, puts the Tilea diplomatic incident at the very centre of the diplomatic effervescence around the Danzig situation, in the way that it has generated the reconfiguration of the British conception and will of action in the light of the newly revealed intentions of Hitler in Eastern Europe. For instance, Greenwood (2002[1986]) underlines that:

“The two weeks between Tilea's *démarche* and the guarantee to Poland was a period of intense activity which saw the British consciously reviving and developing the concept of a barrier to Hitler. [...]. The British needed to associate Poland with the Four-Power Declaration not out of their worries for Polish security but because of their fears for Rumania. This involved two

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<sup>4</sup> “After the Munich Agreement, however, in order not to antagonize Hitler, London returned to a cautious and hesitant policy towards South Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, the British kept a close watch on Romania. While outwardly during the winter of 1938-1939 there appeared to be a relaxation of international tensions, the Foreign Office became increasingly worried about Hitler's future plans. Reports from various sources indicated that Hitler was bent on war, and that one of the possible targets was Romania.” (Quinlan 1978, 151).

specific factors: Poland's ability to provide assistance if Rumania became the victim of a German attack; and her value as a participant in a bloc which would send a signal to Berlin that in any future conflict (which at this juncture seemed most likely to arise through German aggression on Rumania) Germany might have to fight a war on two fronts. This was a logical approach, attempting to embrace Chamberlain's developing suspicion of Hitler, his desire to marginalize the growing critics of appeasement, his continuing determination to try to avoid war, and his reluctance to break with the tradition of avoiding commitments in eastern Europe" (231–232).

During the late 1980's in communist Romania, the "Tilea incident" was extensively researched under the coordination of historian Gh. Buzatu, within the "A. D. Xenopol" Institute of History and Archaeology of the University of Iași. The event opens the work dedicated to the "secret" history of the Second World War (Buzatu 1988), thus responding to some questions already launched by other European and international historians also trying to understand the deep meaning of V. V. Tilea's *gesture*.

The context in which the event was to take place is described by Grigore Gafencu, the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, as a "particularly difficult situation" (Gafencu 2011 [1944] 481) for Romania, especially given the tense relations with Germany developed by force of circumstances at the beginning of 1939. The most resounding event (see also Watt 1989, 173–174) had been the execution of the Iron Guard's leader, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, exactly "the day after Hitler had received the king [Carol II] at Berchtesgaden", which "might have seemed, on the other hand, to be a defiance that the king was throwing at his overpowered host just a few hours after they said goodbye" (*idem*). Consequently, the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs noted: "Romania's name had been put on the pillar of infamy, and its future was threatened. [...], no one could have prevented Germany from undertaking a "punitive expedition" against Romania. The only effective security measure that Romania could undertake was to conclude an agreement with the Reich..." (Gafencu 2011, 481–482).

#### THE PERFORMING ACT: (IN)DISCRET EVENT OR PLOT?

While preparing the negotiations with Germany for the economic agreement to be concluded, Grigore Gafencu issued a diplomatic note for warning Romanian ambassadors in France and Great Britain about the new situation. This information is also confirmed by the literature. For instance, according to the findings of Dov Lungu (1985) in the archives of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

"Thus, before making any decision regarding the ongoing economic negotiations with Germany, the Romanian king and his government sent what

amounted to both a warning and a plea for help to the western powers. A similar message was to be conveyed to Paris and London through the Romanian representatives in those capitals. On the same day in which Gafencu received the British and French ambassadors, Sir Reginald Hoare and Thierry, he instructed Gheorghe Tătărescu and Viorel Tilea ‘to draw insistently the attention of the governments to which you are accredited to the huge consequences deriving not only for Central Europe, but for all of Europe, from the growing belief which no Western declaration or deed contradicts, that there is only one arbiter left in Europe who decides upon the security, the independence and the peace of nations’” (Lungu 1985, 391–392).

The warning is also referred and served as an argument by Rebecca Haynes (2000) to attest Gafencu’s diplomatic manoeuvre in relation to the Western European cabinets : “In compliance with Carol’s views, on 16 March Gafencu issued orders to Tilea, the Romanian minister to London, and Gheorghe Tătărescu, ambassador to Paris, to draw the attention of the British and French foreign offices to the dangers of having ‘only one arbiter left in Europe who decides upon the security, the independence and the peace of nations’” (Haynes 2000, 76–77).

Following this diplomatic instruction issued on March 16, 1939, V.V. Tilea, the Romanian Ambassador in London, has received an anonymous phone call in the very morning of March 17, 1939, at 6 a.m., and “The caller spoke of harsh economic and political demands made by Germany on Romania” (Haynes 2000, 77). Tilea’s mandate in London (both on behalf of Carol II and the Government) was clearly aimed at strengthening bilateral relations with Great Britain. Therefore, Tilea went to the office of Lord Halifax, the coordinator of the Foreign Office of Great Britain, on March 17, 1939, where he met with the Deputy Under-Secretary of State, Sir Orme Sargent (*cf.* Constantiniu 2011, 354), to inform him about the situation in Romania<sup>5</sup> insisting that, in the context of the negotiations of the German-Romanian economic agreement, the government of Prime-Minister Armand Călinescu had received “a kind of ultimatum” from the part of the representatives of Germany, namely the threat that the Reich would invade and occupy Romania if the latter did not accept the German claims stipulated in the draft commercial agreement. Tilea declares to him that “the Romanian Government had information about Germany’s intention to ‘disintegrate Romania in the same way as it had disintegrated Czechoslovakia’” (Constantiniu 2011, 354), and to Lord Halifax that, “during the Romanian-German economic negotiations, the Reich had presented ‘something akin to an ultimatum’, demanding a monopoly on Romanian

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<sup>5</sup> “Without being instructed by Bucharest, on 14 March he called on the British Foreign Office for an interview. To the Deputy Under-Secretary of State Sir Orme Sargent, Tilea pointed out his anxiety about the threatening situation in Eastern Europe, and urged him to announce the upcoming commercial mission to Romania at once, and to raise the British Legation in Bucharest to an embassy. But to Tilea’s disappointment Sargent, who had more pressing problems to deal with, would only promise that “*his suggestions would be considered*” (Quinlan 1978, 153).



exports and the subordination of industrial production to German interests” (*idem*). In the official documents, it is recorded that Tilea has addressed the same questions to his both British interlocutors: “how will the British Government react in the event of a German aggression against Romania?” (*idem*). The next day, on March 18, 1939, the British Prime Minister Chamberlain debated in his cabinet meeting the new “troubled” situation of Europe, considering that Germany’s approach to Romania actually signified Hitler’s desire to dominate all of Eastern Europe (*cf.* Buzatu 1988, 11). On the same day, the international press headlines the news regarding Germany’s ultimatum to Romania, “specifying Tilea as the only source” (*idem*).

The diplomatic archives of the United States in 1939 reveal even more concrete details on the way the information was passed by Tilea to the Western chancelleries. As such, the first telegram of Kennedy, the American Ambassador to the United Kingdom, confirms that Tilea also called to his cabinet asking for a private meeting, and informed him about his further steps in relation to the British officials:

“The Rumanian Minister just called to see me. He is on his way to the Foreign Office with instructions from his Government to try and get some idea of what England proposes to do. He is going to ask them three questions: (1) Does England propose to do anything at all? If not Rumania will make the best deal she can. (2) Are they going to draw a line somewhere in Europe beyond which Hitler must not go that will just include Turkey, or will it possibly include Rumania and Yugoslavia? (3) If the Rumanians fight, will England give them any support? He said that the German demands, made about a week or 10 days ago, were economic and really meant the end of Rumania, and have been turned down by the Rumanians. The Germans ordered them (1) to stop certain industries, (2) to give them oil concessions and (3) to become nothing but an agricultural country. Germany in turn would take all their exports. He said this is an impossible situation for them and they will not agree. He also said that all their orders for armament were with the Czechs and they have all been stopped, with the result that they find themselves with practically no armaments and they are asking England to sell them some of theirs, even if they are antiquated.” (740.00/827: Telegram of the Ambassador in the United Kingdom (Kennedy) to the Secretary of State. LONDON, March 17, 1939–6 p. m. [Received March 17–5:23 p. m.], in *Foreign Relations...* 1956)

On the evening of March 18, 1939, King Carol II has noted in his daily diary: “In the evening, I receive news that Tilea, in London, has behaved like an idiot, taking unauthorized initiatives” (Carol II 1997, 40). The rumour was quickly denied by the authorities in Bucharest, as the King notes in his diary entry of Monday, March 20, 1939: “Then, the case of Tilea was studied, who even allowed

himself to tell the English official bodies that Wohlthat<sup>6</sup> would have given us an ultimatum. When a denial was issued by the Government, he added that he knows that this is what happened as he says. [...]. We decided him to be immediately called to the country to give explanations” (*ibidem*, 41). The day seems to be dedicated to Romanian-British relations at the King’s cabinet: “In the morning, Călinescu and Gafencu, to reconsider the situation. Seeing that the West is beginning to move, perhaps also following our cry of alarm, we decided to send to England and France information on our point of view (see the annex<sup>7</sup>). Drafted for the most part by me, it contains, in the essential parts, that if we are attacked, we will defend our borders with the greatest stubbornness, that we do not want a pact of mutual assistance, but we would like a guarantee of our borders, and that we ask for help in armaments.” (*ibidem*, 41). Subsequently, the King notes Sir Reginald Hoare’s visit “on Halifax’s orders” (*ibidem*, p. 42), accompanied by Grigore Gafencu, a visit that occurred “following Tilea’s blunder” (*idem*). The result is the promise that a British commission will travel to Bucharest to clarify “certain issues of Anglo-Romanian collaboration” (*idem*), which was announced in the British Parliament a few days later regarding the sending of an “economic commission” to Romania (*ibidem* 49, entry of March 28, 1939).

Tilea delayed his return to the country, and his visit to Carol II’s cabinet took place, according to the King’s daily notes, on April 1, 1939: “In the afternoon, Tilea, whose head I washed for the *undiplomatic method* with which he acted in London. *However, I can’t help but admit that the effects were good, that he is the one who caused all this fuss.* He says he has very good hopes for financial aid and armaments, talks about the possibility of a loan of £10 million. He also believes in the possibility of giving us warships. I asked for 2 Siks” (*ibidem* 53, entry of April 1, 1939).

The “Tilea incident”, as it was first qualified by Gafencu (1942, 138; entry of July 30) and then by Romanian historians (see Buzatu 1988; Constantiniu 2011) or the “Tilea Affair”, according to the qualification of international historians (see Quinlan 1978; Aster 2002; Haynes 2005) or “Tilea’s indiscretion” (Gilbert and Gott 1963) or “*Tilea’s démarche*” (Lungu 1985, 394; Greenwood 2002 [1986], 231) or “Tilea episode” (Greenwood 2002[1986], 231; Watt 1989, 169) is, in fact, a „diplomatic incident”<sup>8</sup>, as clarified by R. Haynes (2000), who further explained it as the effect of “Tilea’s unilateral policy in London” (*ibidem*, 83). The incident remains shrouded by mystery for several decades, raising substantial questions on

<sup>6</sup> Helmut Wohlthat, German economist, representative of the German Ministry of Economy, the main negotiator of the Economic Agreement concluded with the Kingdom of Romania on March 23, 1939.

<sup>7</sup> The annex invoked in the Diary is missing both from the edition cited above (Scripta Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997), and from the larger edition of King Carol II’s Diary (Ed. Silex, Bucharest, 1995, vol. I).

<sup>8</sup> “The diplomatic incident known as the ‘Tilea affair’ of March 1939.” (Haynes 2000, 68).

several levels: first, regarding the “veracity” of the information regarding the ultimatum (see Haynes 2000, 76), then about the anonymity of the private and reliable “source” that Tilea invoked when transmitting this “information” (see Aster 2002); subsequently, on a potential involvement of the Government in Bucharest and King Carol II – a sort of a high-level plot aimed at provoking an engaged reaction of Western European cabinets in the defence of Eastern Europe. Those last possibilities were quite quickly excluded by historians and researchers, and so was the premiss of a governmental plot.

Moreover, the four variants still unsolved regarding the identity of Tilea’s source are: Nicolae Malaxa through Adrian Dumitrescu (manager of the Malaxa industrial company), industrialist Max Auschmitt, Armand Călinescu (acting Prime Minister) and respectively, Gheorghe Tătărescu (Romania’s Ambassador in Paris, former prime minister). Thus:

“During his cross-examination by Sir Alexander Cadogan on 18 March, Tilea informed him that the anonymous caller through whom he had received the information regarding the severe demands being made by the German economic negotiators had been ‘a private source’. On further questioning, he declared his informant ‘to be the general manager of a big Romanian industrialist, who had come especially to Paris to pass the news on to him’. A letter written by Tilea in 1946 reveals the caller to have been Adrian Dumitrescu, general manager of the industrialist Nicolae Malaxa, who had been ordered by Malaxa to inform Tilea of the German economic demands” (Haynes 2000, 84).

#### ***QUID PRO QUO – OTHER MEMORY TRACES***

However, beyond the letter addressed by Tilea to Malaxa in 1946, the above statements are also supported by two other notes of King Carol II dated March 20 and 23, 1939, respectively. Indeed, the King invokes on March 20 a “conference... provoked by Malaxa, who had great fears tonight about the drafting [of the Commercial Treaty with Germany]” (Carol II 1997, 41). Subsequently, on March 23, the King underlines Malaxa’s dissatisfaction with the economic agreement with Germany: “Malaxa, very violent on the question of the Treaty. After he had pushed for its creation, today, when he believes that certain interests of his could be harmed, he is violently against it. He wanted the industrial formula to contain a peremptory clause regarding the existing industries. It was a disaster, in my opinion, because, implicitly, I recognized their right to interfere in this matter” (Carol II 1997, 45).

Aster (2002) indicates the great industrialist Max Auschmitt, managing director of the Iron Factories and Domains in Reșița, the largest joint stock company in interwar Romania. She invokes information according to which Max

Auschmitt was in Paris at the time, from where the mysterious phone call for Tilea was initiated. Aster also cites the memoirs published in 1970 by Oliver Harvey, Lord Halifax's principal private secretary, who confirms that on the same day he received a phone call from Princess Bibescu in Paris who shared with him her concern about the situation in Romania, as she had been informed by the president of the council, Armand Călinescu (Aster 2002, 156). Finally, Lord Llyod specified, in a secret information document sent to Halifax that Tilea's secret informant had been Tătărescu, a fact that was not completed and therefore not elucidated later in Llyod's memoirs (see Aster 2002, 161–162).

A *coup de théâtre*, indeed! Princess Martha Bibescu's Political Diary (1979) indicates very close relations with V.V. Tilea at the time of the diplomatic incident: first she recalls him in her note from Paris of March 15, 1939: "Tilea telephoned me yesterday [March 14], to speed up my arrival. I thought he was only aiming to combat Anton [Bibescu's] malicious rumours, but he also had more serious motives" (Bibescu 1979, 50). Rushed to London that evening, the Princess receives Tilea on the morning of March 17:

"Tilea arrives at my place at 9:30 a.m. He is in a state of indescribable agitation and has a very unhappy air:

– I have terrible news from Transylvania. The Germans are at our border. They claim to us: "Give up industry and remain an agrarian state. In this case, we guarantee your borders." Gafencu lost his head... In Bucharest, they are all crazy. All our weapons [ordered at the Skoda plants] fell into German hands – they were still in Czechoslovakia. We are lost." [...]. In his opinion, it is only a matter of hours. Transylvania will be torn away from Romania and placed under the leadership of a German general and a certain *gróf* [*n.a. count*, into Hungarian]. Tilea speaks with unparalleled pain and his despair has a resonance of authenticity.

I promise him that I will do all I can during my stay here. But what exactly? We'll see" (Bibescu 1979, 50–51).

In the evening, the Princess agrees with the Vansittart<sup>9</sup> family to organize a dinner to which Tilea would be invited; the situation is discussed at length, and Vansittart calls on the USSR ambassador to Great Britain, Ivan Maiski, to "ask Russia for help" (*ibidem* 52). The situation is supplemented with new information: "The truth is that, at Downing Street, a cabinet meeting was held this afternoon, to decide how to help Romania. The news that Bucharest denies the ultimatum irritates the Prime Minister. Although, by the way, an economic ultimatum is just as serious as a political one. [...]. This tragic denial – they have lost their heads, as Tilea said." (Bibescu 1979, 53). The Princess's meetings with Tilea are almost daily during this time in London.

<sup>9</sup> Sir Robert Gilbert Vansittart was a Principal Diplomatic Counsellor of the Secretary for Foreign Affairs of the British Government.

On March 19, 1939:

“The meeting with Tilea, who suffers a lot.

“Gafencu has lost his head,” he repeats to me. How should I deal with them. Those in Bucharest are angry with me. They have asked me to deny the economic ultimatum. In fact, I told Lord Halifax that the information came to me from unofficial sources. But it’s not true! Armand Călinescu and Grigore Gafencu have informed me” (Bibescu 1979, 53–54).

On March 20:

“The Romanian Government denies the rumours about the economic ultimatum addressed by Germany. Bucharest had to give this denial and I have the impression that it does it with regret. German newspapers accuse Tilea and Vansittart of concocting the lie with the economic ultimatum” (M. Bibescu 1979, 58).

On March 21, Princess Bibescu specifies her role in the unfolding of events:

“My host and friend, K. Walter Elliott, Minister of Health, tells me:

“We owe you, Martha, the meeting of the Council of Ministers.”

“Thank you,” adds [Robert] Bearnays<sup>10</sup>, “Lord Halifax found out the news from the Ministry of Health, before the Foreign Office passed it on to him<sup>11</sup>” (Bibescu 1979, 58–59).

Bach in Romania, Martha Bibescu met with the Gafencu family in Mogoșoaia, on April 15, when she noted:

“Gafencu claims that he stopped the German invasion by signing a trade treaty. He is very angry with Tilea:

– I would say that the king makes two policies – mine and Tilea’s?...

When I was in Berlin, Hitler wanted to talk to me. I know the French got angry, but what was I supposed to do?” (Bibescu 1979, 71).

<sup>10</sup> Under-Secretary of State at the Ministry of Health.

<sup>11</sup> Watt (1989) confirms the saying of Princess Bibescu: “The Foreign Office’s reaction was immediate. Lord Halifax had already heard the same story from a fellow Cabinet minister, Walter Elliot. He in turn had had it via his junior minister, *Robert Bernays, who had had it from Princess Marthe Bibescu, a woman-of-letters, an inveterate habitu  of political and artistic salons in London and Paris. She in turn claimed to have heard the story directly from the Romanian Premier, Calinescu, by phone from Bucharest.* She had in fact been urgently invited to London by M. Tilea to aid his intrigue. Robert Boothby, Churchill’s maverick ally, later claimed to have master minded the scheme. It is possible that a similar story had reached Vansittart by his private grapevine. A cipher clerk in the German Legation in Bucharest, a former member of the Austrian diplomatic service, was ordered to commit suicide in April for what he said about the Tilea episode in his cups in a Bucharest nightclub.” (170).

However, the in-depth research in the diplomatic archives of the time led by Dov B. Lungu (1985) came to the conclusion that the reliable source could not have come, in any way, from the representatives of the power in Bucharest: Gh. Tătărescu, Romania's Ambassador in Paris, is excluded from the very beginning, given the fact that he had received the same official information from Gafencu. Meanwhile, the official Romanian and French documents about his bilateral talks in France do not record any ultimatum, not even economic. Likewise, King Carol II and Prime Minister Armand Călinescu are excluded. Unfortunately, in the editing memoirs<sup>12</sup> promised by V.V. Tilea in the 1960s, the author of the "incident" does not reach the moment March 1939.

The mnemonic density of this diplomatic affair is also illustrative for the general state of confusion marking those times. For instance, Watt (1989) underlines that, when he officially released the denial about the so-called "German ultimatum", "M. Gafencu was, no doubt, more than a little embarrassed by the degree to which M. Tilea had improved on his original instructions. He was, however, shading the truth a little himself; as well he knew" (Watt 1989, 172). The stage quickly becomes too confusingly busy; each and every one of the actors involved seems to be protagonists, as well as their potential interests. Both the diplomatic archives and the consulted memoirs confirm the fact that Tilea was performing the play of his life, involving everyone by spreading the news – his news – to all the diplomates, politicians, businessmen, *habitué.e.s* of their cercles, present both in London and in Paris, and of course journalists.

#### RECONSIDERING THE DIPLOMATIC *DISPOSITIF*

In addition, the consequences of the event are very diverse. A potential invasion of Romania would have unequivocally meant the beginning of the war, as confirmed by the reactions that followed Tilea's announcement in London. Thus, "Joseph Kennedy, the wealthy American Ambassador to England, believed that in February the British Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax came to the opinion ... *"that England must fight if Hitler enters Rumania. He is not inclined to think an entrance into Hungary should provoke a war because, he says, Hungary is at the present minute honeycombed with Nazism. But on a step into Rumania he believes that England cannot wait any longer"* (Kennedy to Secretary of State, March 18, 1939, State Department Telegram, No. 360, 740.00/630, *apud* Quinlan 1978, 151–152). Consequently, Great Britain finally reacted, together with France, declaring

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<sup>12</sup> A version edited by his daughter, Ileana Tilea, was published in London in October 1998 – *Envoy Extraordinary: Memoirs of a Romanian Diplomat* (Ed. Haggerston Press).

themselves guarantors<sup>13</sup> first for Poland, and then for Greece and Romania respectively, in the event of a potential attack on the integrity of these states by the Reich.

Eastern Europe was indeed in danger, as accepted by the British officials, after the Tilea incident and has led to “galvanizing the Western democratic powers”, as farther explained by the American Ambassador in London (740.00/655: Telegram of The Ambassador in the United Kingdom (Kennedy) to the Secretary of State. LONDON, March 22, 1939–7 p. m. [Received March 22–4: 40 p. m.], in *Foreign relations...* 1956). As such, Watt (1989) states: “The Foreign Office’s reaction was immediate” (170).

This event is performed as a decisive turning point on the European diplomatic arena:

“Tilea’s ultimatum triggered a formidable change in British foreign policy. Within hours of his historic conversation with Halifax, the Foreign Office began to look for a way to protect Romania from aggression, which ultimately led to British and French guarantees to Romania, Poland, and Greece. In less than a month England largely reversed her traditional policy towards Eastern Europe, and became fatefully committed to defend these countries against Hitler” (Quinlan 1978, 155).

In addition, Quinlan (1978) states that this marks in fact the real beginning of the Romanian-British bilateral relations in terms of diplomacy:

“Surprisingly, historians have largely ignored Britain’s relations with Romania before the Tilea affair. Studies of the origins of World War II say little about Romania until the middle of March 1939 when suddenly the fate of this small Balkan country becomes of prime importance to the security of the Western Powers. Was Britain’s interest in Romania something that sprang up overnight, or had it been developing gradually?” (147).

Also, Haynes (2000) notes that the story of the German ultimatum addressed to the Romanian Government was still considered, even after the rumour was refuted by the Romanian officials, as well-founded and true. The British author states that the main causal relationship to be established with Tilea’s “gesture” is the policy in Bucharest of the Minister of Foreign Affairs’ Grigore Gafencu:

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<sup>13</sup> “On March 31, 1939, he [Hitler] learned that the Western states were determined to stop his offensive. N. Chamberlain announces in the House of Commons that Great Britain and France will support Poland if it is attacked. (de Launay 1988, 31) [...]. The British Prime Minister continues his braking action. On 6 April, he signed a pact of mutual assistance with Colonel Beck, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Poland. [...]. On April 13, Paris and London responded, extending their guarantee to Greece and Romania.” (de Launay 1988, 32). The moment is considered by Grigore Gafencu to be that of awakening Europe “affirming again in the face of danger, its unity and solidarity.” (Gafencu 1992 [1946], 35).

“Despite all the ink which has flowed on the ‘Tilea affair’ and the German ‘ultimatum’, there has been little attempt to link Tilea’s statements to the question of a German territorial guarantee for Romania. Yet the ‘Tilea affair’ is only fully explicable against the background of Gafencu’s attempts to win a guarantee of Romania’s territorial integrity from the Germans. As well as its importance to the development of Romanian-British relations in 1939, the ‘Tilea affair’ tells us much about Romania’s relations with Germany and suggests that the forced pace of Gafencu’s conciliation of Germany was not favoured by all members of the Romanian political and economic leadership” (Haynes 2000, 76).

The thesis presented above insists on G. Gafencu’s desire to obtain, politically and diplomatically a guarantee against the Reich regarding the territorial integrity of Romania; indeed, it is known that all Romanian diplomatic efforts in that period were aimed at the independence and territorial integrity of Romania, especially after the occupation of Czechoslovakia, but also in the context of the mobilization of Hungarian armed forces on the Transylvanian border. However, both the notes of King Carol II and those of Gafencu support the idea that that a narrow economic agreement with Germany remained the only solution: “but this agreement, designed to calm German anger and create a German interest in not attacking Romania, had to impede the freedom of action of the Romanian government, not to divert it from its old friendships and to exclude any political or ideological interference in Romanian affairs. The field that was most naturally offered to such a transaction was the economic field” (Gafencu 2011 [1944], 481–482). In fact, this was the mandate assumed by Grigore Gafencu when he took over the portfolio of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on December 23, 1938: “I had an urgent mission to fulfil: to appease the anger that was smouldering in Berlin and which, in an era when there was no longer European solidarity, could be fatal to my country. I agreed to negotiate an economic agreement, which was the only way to avoid transactions that would have burdened our politics and friendships” (Gafencu 1992 [1946], 34–35).

Information revealed later confirms the intention of Germany to advance eastwards, as can be seen from the Report of March 19, 1939 of the French ambassador in Berlin, Robert Coulondre, sent to the French Government and quoted by Gafencu in 1946 (*cf. idem*): “It is possible that tomorrow the Reich will resort, against Romania and Poland, to methods that have served it so well against Austria and Czechoslovakia.” The fears are later reconfirmed, in Gafencu’s opinion, by the fact that “in the luggage of the German occupation troops in Bohemia there would be found proclamations into Romanian” (*idem*). Meanwhile, given that the western guarantee reached in April 1939 was only covering the independence cause for Romania, and not the integrity of its territory as wished by the Romanian officials, the Commercial Pact with Germany was eventually signed.



Regarding the real motivation on which Tilea's action in London was based, the main question that arose concerned Tilea's lack of diplomatic experience, even though his preferences for Great Britain were known and confirmed by his previous activities. His profile is deeply investigated in order to test this rather anecdotal perspective<sup>14</sup>, underlining his non-professional way of performing diplomacy. As such, Quinlan (1978, 153) underlines Tilea's governmental expertise on economic issues, but not as "a professional diplomat", a perspective also attested by Dov Lungu (1985, 393), who states that "he was only a second-rate Romanian politician who had just recently become a diplomat owing to his proximity to the king. He was overzealous and gullible, and did not understand all the subtleties of the complex game of equilibrium between the Great Powers played in Bucharest by King Carol and his government. Not surprisingly, even before the 'ultimatum' incident, Gafencu did not trust Tilea and seemed to have left him without adequate information on plans devised in Bucharest."

However, other authors who have studied the event consider the assessment to be unfair; Gh. Buzatu (1988), R. Haynes (2000) and S. Aster (2002) as well state that it was not the lack of diplomatic experience that determined Tilea to act in this way, but an implied form of assuming responsibility on a personal behalf, in order to trigger a real reaction from Great Britain and France. To confirm this perspective, Haynes (2000, 82) further adds: "He had long been known as an Anglophile and had undertaken some of his education at the London School of Economics. He had been a member of the Romanian legation in London immediately after the First World War and was co-founder and acting-president of the Anglo-Romanian Society. He received the CBE<sup>15</sup> in 1938 for furthering better relations between Britain and Romania. He was thus well known in both political and business circles in London" (Haynes 2000, 82).

Even if the secret documents and memoirs of Romanian and European personalities of the time did not elucidate the mystery that shrouded the Tilea affair in London, historians agreed that the main effect of Tilea's initiative to speak of a German "kind of ultimatum" to Romania in March 1939 led British and French officials to end the "policy of appeasement" with Germany that had lasted too long, given that Hitler's express desire was, in fact, war (Gafencu 1992 [1946], 85; de Launay 1988, 33 and 35). In addition, the officials in Bucharest were able to quickly assess the "opportunity" (Lungu 1985) of the wave of British sympathy for Romania, so as to diplomatically seek to guarantee the borders and, therefore, the territorial integrity of the country in the French and British chancelleries, while continuing the economic negotiations with Nazi Germany. Still, there is also the opinion that Tilea did not speak the truth about the ultimatum when performing the diplomatic play of his life: "And what he had to say to Halifax was both extremely

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<sup>14</sup> The one also adopted by Watt (1989).

<sup>15</sup> Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (CBE).

alarming and in its most important aspects almost certainly not true” (Watt 1989, 169) or, most often, that Tilea “was guilty of excessive zeal”, according to the opinion of Grigore Gafencu as expressed to the American Ambassador in Bucharest (762.71/44: Telegram of The Minister in Rumania (Gunther) to the Secretary of State. Bucharest, March 20, 1939–6 p. m. [Received March 21–6: 30 a.m.], in *Foreign Relations...* 1956). Nonetheless, everybody agreed that Tilea’s *démarche* was indeed a diplomatic success.

In this troubled context, the geographical situation of Romania within the demarcation line dilemma dividing the spheres of influence in Europe has still remained unclear, and hidden behind the closed doors of the Western cabinets, as also attested, for instance, by the diplomatic note of the American Ambassador to the United Kingdom:

“I told Halifax that it seemed to me that, when England and France got down to the last stages of a working agreement with Poland and possibly Rumania and Russia, in the event of acts of aggression by Hitler against them, it would become quite obvious that the assurances given might not be satisfactory to both France and England and they would then find it necessary to wash their hands of the whole of Southeastern Europe. Halifax said he did not believe that was the case. He felt that the inevitability of war sooner or later should be met right now and that the Prime Minister himself and the Cabinet are strongly of the opinion that a line should be laid down and a statement given to Berlin that if they cross that imaginary line the war is on. He is not quite sure whether they will want to include Rumania in that imaginary line.” (740.00/881: Telegram of the Ambassador in the United Kingdom (Kennedy) to the Secretary of State. LONDON, March 24, 1939–5 p. m. [Received March 24–6: 45 p. m.], in *Foreign Relations...* 1956).

## CONCLUSIONS

The term “indiscretion” was excessively used to define Tilea’s initiative of March 1939 in London. Given its *mise en scène* – no matter if spontaneous, instinctive, professional or well planned – excludes any possibility to qualify the event as a discrete incident. This was probably a choice, considering that, in August 1939, a Romanian ambassador was not in the position to “manage” or “control” (see Cornago 2018) a diplomatic *discretion* with Western cabinets, and even less any of its potential consequences. This makes the “Tilea Affair” an unusual diplomatic incident, which is probably the main explanation for so much questioning about authenticity in relation to its performance, during the last 85 years.

As regards the version of a high-level Romanian plot, the mnemonic density surrounding the event does suggest from time to time that some ingredients of a

plot were present. However, no real evidence was revealed until now to support this understanding, especially regarding the existence of a shared plan between different Romanian officials. Nevertheless, various sets of omissions in official diplomatic instructions and a general state of lack of trust dominating the relations between the various Romanian officials are often invoked. This makes the Tilea's performance even more dramatical, as also described within the Romanian memoirs of the era.

As such, the real focus is to be placed on the further functioning of the "Tilea incident" as a *dispositif* acting within the diplomatic charged arena of the era, which was pushed to anticipate, rearrange, readapt and take action, given the magistral performance of V.V. Tilea. Considering the effervescence of the Western powers' diplomatic exchanges in relation to it as revealed above, the Tilea incident was indeed a success, which was also accepted, for instance, by King Carol II himself in his memoirs and, in a way, by Minister Grigore Gafencu. In addition, the media coverage of the "Tilea affair", presenting him as the main protagonist of the news, was also considered by Western cabinets, even on the other part of the Ocean, as attested by the diplomatic archives, and generated an up-to-date evaluation of the situation of Romania, especially with regards to the economic implications. This also confirms both the "mnemonic" and "historical density" of the Tilea diplomatic incident, via its mnemonic and diplomatic strata, which participate to dramatize the "general shape" of the major narratives surrounding the year 1939 in the way that we use to remember it, along with its "chronological density" as a historical year (see Zerubavel 2003).

Further research should concentrate on content and discourse analysis of the media coverage of this diplomatic incident, by considering the perspectives advanced by the most representative western newspapers of the era, that is, its public "transfigurations", in explaining the various functioning and understandings of the Tilea Affair as a "transnational media event" (see Cornago 2018). This approach would better reveal its public assigned significance and political, diplomatic and economic implications, in relation to those already underlined by the memoirs and diplomatic archives, and complete the picture of its mnemonic density.

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