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British approaches to the problem of peace settlement in Central and Eastern Europe after the First World War (1918 – 1919)

The problem of the peace settlement in Central and Eastern Europe after the First World War can be considered firstly as a part of the broader problem of the transformation of principles underlying the organization of the European states system, and secondly, in a narrower sense, as the question of the new balance of power in the region.

Both aspects of the problem were recognized by British policymakers and foreign policy experts at the end of the First World War. The collapse of the great European empires left the map of Europe, in the words of Jan Smuts, “dotted with small nations, embryo states, derelict territories”. The reorganization of Europe along the principle of nationality multiplying the number of nation states in Central and Eastern Europe led to the danger of outbursts of national rivalries (which before the First World War were controlled by the empires responsible for the maintenance of order within their borders) and the prospect of a new European conflagration. To prevent such an outcome, a new system of maintaining peace and order was needed. One of the possible solutions, considered by British policymakers, was entrusting the League of Nations, regarded as the successor to the empires, with the functions of control.

At the same time many were skeptical about the League ability to fulfill such a role. Foreign Office experts suggested that the traditional British doctrine of the balance of power should be the guidance to the solution of the problems of peace settlement in Eastern Europe. The main aim was to prevent German or Russian

dominance there. Reorganization of the region along the principle of nationality seemed to serve this goal by weakening Russia and depriving Germany of her ally – Austria-Hungary. However, the vision of the future of the region was not free of contradictions. The newly established states were hardly regarded as pillars of the new balance. The recognition of the fact, that “both Russia and Germany are bound in the end to recover, and in the view of their numbers are bound to be the two strongest powers in East Europe”, as it was stated in the Foreign Office memorandum of the 9th of December 1918, left the question open, as to whether it was possible to create a durable regional order without the participation of these two countries.