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Abstracts

FRANCESCO CACCAMO, Un'occasione mancata. L'Italia, la Cecoslovacchia e la crisi dell'Europa centrale, 1918-1938

The end of World War I, with the break-up of the Habsburg Empire and the temporary eclipse of Germany and Russia, allowed Italy and the newly created Czechoslovakia to acquire a substantial influence over Central Europe – an influence far superior to their own strengths. Through the territories gained at her north-eastern frontier, Italy became the only victorious great power directly bordering with the region; moreover, the acquisition of the ports of Trieste and, eventually, Fiume/Rijeka, raised hopes of attracting a substantial share of its trade. From her side, Czechoslovakia enjoyed a special position among the small and medium local powers thanks to the prestige of her founding fathers Masaryk and Beneš, to the development of a relatively successful democratic regime and to her economic solidity. Under these circumstances, the economic and political stabilization of Central Europe rested largely on the capability by the two countries to engage in friendly dialogue and to develop mutual cooperation. Specifically, such cooperation was a prerequisite for the preservation of Austria's independence, in order to avoid the Anschluss and the imposition of German hegemony over the heart of the continent.

Despite these points of contact, distrust and misunderstanding prevailed. By the aftermath of the Great War, Italy and Czechoslovakia followed different paths. While the former was alienated by her wartime allies over the Adriatic question and was critical about some aspects of the Central European settlement arranged at the Paris Peace Conference, the latter identified her destiny with the integral maintenance of the status quo and with close alliances with France and Yugoslavia. With the march on Rome, differences in the realm of foreign policy were sharpened by the ideological contrast between Mussolini's fascism and the democratic ideals supported by Masaryk and Beneš. However, there was still room left for compromise. This was demonstrated by contacts between Rome and Prague after Hitler's rise to power and by attempts to elaborate a Danubian Pact including some form of guarantee for Austrian independence. In the end, only Mussolini's involvement in the Abyssinian war, his decreased interest in Austria and his growing reliance on Nazi Germany led to the failure of Italo-Czechoslovak cooperation. This "missed opportunity" contributed heavily to the developments afflicting Central Europe in the late 1930s, the Anschluss, the break-up of Czechoslovakia herself and, eventually, the outbreak of World War II.

Keywords:

*Italian Foreign Policy
Czechoslovakia 1918-1938
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