THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM
DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD

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Abstract. *The study analyzes the international system in the interwar period, through the three major international relations theories: realism/ neorealism, liberalism/neoliberalism and constructivism. Interwar period is a special and complex one, delimited by the two great world wars, and our approach aims to show how this is reflected in the three major theories. Could the failure of the Westphalia system be explained through the prism of realism, or through liberalism, or through constructivism – or do all three converge in order to provide a comprehensive view of the causes that led to the outbreak of World War II?*

Keywords: *international system, interwar period, realism/neorealism, liberalism/neoliberalism, constructivism.*

The international system of the interwar period emerges in the history of international relations as a distinct stage that is delimited by the two world wars, the largest and most destructive in the history of humanity. This unique feature individualizes the interwar period in the history of mankind and enables a distinctive analysis, although systemic level analysis focuses on extensive processes, which developed along lengthy periods of time.

The interwar period was often defined in the literature of international relations as a period of "crisis", "transition" or as the "long ceasefire" because, only after the end of the second World War the international system was experiencing a profound change: from a many-poles system that existed for a long time, to the bipolar system dominated by two great powers (called from now on also superpowers). After 1945, the world was divided in two antagonistic systems, one democratic and the other dictatorial, with specific phenomena and manifestations, totally different in its international relations from those noticed during the period previous to the second World War. However, in the interwar period, although it lasted only 20 years (a brief period compared to the scale of history), international politics had certain characteristics that individualized it and distinguished it from the prewar era.

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The General Characteristics
of the Interwar International System

The international system, defined as "the largest conglomerate interacting units or as an interdependent unit, which has no other system superior to it"[1], continued to circulate around Europe between the two world wars. Europe was the center of the system, found in a much closer interdependence (compared to previous historical periods, both in political, economic or cultural terms) with the rest of the world. Here occurred phenomena that will later expand throughout the international system. Some of these phenomena were often contradictory or unilaterally interpreted.

The European System of Versailles, established at the end of World War I, had its known geographical configuration as a result of both the end of the war and an external impulse (a sign of decadence of the European power as the center of the system): as shown also in the 14 points announced by US President Woodrow Wilson. They have played an important role in the new territorial configuration of Europe, as the principle of national self-determination claimed by President Wilson was determinant in the process of disintegration of the three great empires – the Austro-Hungarian empire, the Ottoman empire and the Tsarists empire – a process that was to continue, some decades later, with the collapse of the colonial empires of France and England. Thus ended the concert of great powers established by the Vienna Peace Congress in 1815, whereby the European powers were dictating the politics and the borders of the old continent. The two Western allies, France and Britain, victorious at the end of the war, were characterized by the following aspect: "in the beginning, they had no desire and no plans to promote a peace based on nationality. On the contrary, both were leading multinational, polyglot empires.[2]" But the enunciation of the primacy of the principle of self-determination of peoples has allowed for a further accelerated process that started in the second half of the nineteenth century. Thus several new states appeared and others completed their process of state formation. National states were then key players in the Versailles system, although the Western powers remained great colonial empires, which provided them with the resources to assert continental power. The Versailles system meant though, for the European space, the disappearance of the multinational empires, as embodied and consecrated for several centuries; and it meant as well the appearance of several countries, created on the principle of nationality.

The peace treaties at the end of the first World War as they were designed by the great victorious powers, especially France and Britain, had, among their objectives, the elimination of the possibility of a new outbreak of war and peace enforcement on the European continent. But as most of the historians of the interwar period agree, nevertheless, they contained in themselves the triggering elements for the outbreak of the second World War, which had far greater amplitude

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[1] Barry Buzan, Richard Little, *Sistemele internationalîn istoria lumii. Reconfigurarae studiului international relations*, Iaşi, Polirom, 2009, p. 86.
[2] Paul Johnson*, O istorie a lumii moderne*, *1920-2000*, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2005, p. 28.

in human and material losses than the first World War. If during the second decade of interwar period peace seemed to be definitively instituted in Europe, during the third decade, stimulated also by the Great Depression (1929-1933), when parliamentary democracies have proven their inability to find effective solutions – the effect being "the blooming of the dictatorial regimes"[3], the specter of war began to be visible again, although less at the level of the decision-making elites of the great victorious powers. The desire of France to bring Germany to its knees, especially in terms of economic relations, the conciliatory policy led by Britain – determined by its old concept according to which Britain had the role to ensure the balance of power on the continent – the inability of the two great powers to notice the real intentions of the Nazi regime in Germany – were as many causes that led to the outbreak of WWII. During that time, however, the perception of a new world conflagration approaching appeared only when it could not be avoided anymore, both in the academic environments (with some notable exceptions[5]) and in what concerned the leaders of the European democracies[4]. Until the last moment, France and Britain had hoped to be able to avoid another global conflagration, and in this sense they made numerous concessions to the Nazi regime, concessions which went up to agreement for the division and disappearance of national states (see the case of Czechoslovakia).

How is the interwar period seen and analyzed in the most important theories of international relations? Do they succeed in explaining both the configurations and the phenomena characteristic of the period between the two world wars, or in providing sustainable theoretical answers to the impossibility to maintain peace in the world and to the outbreak of World War II? Of the many theories of international relations (not always clearly delineated, with a variety of classifications thereof[6]), we have chosen the three major commonly recognized theories: realism/ neorealism, liberalism/neoliberalism and constructivism.

Realism and neorealism

Realists built their theories mainly on two fundamental concepts: power and the balance of power. The international system is, for these theorists, an anarchic one, which is not governed by any laws or norms, where the states compete among themselves in order to seize as much power as possible. "International politics as a struggle for power" is the basic principle of realist analyses and "the

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[3] Serge Berstein, Pierre Milza, *Istoria Europei*, vol. 5, *Secolul XX (din 1919 până în zilele noastre)*, Iași, Institutul European, 1998, p. 12.

[4] See, for instance, Cristi Pantelimon, „Jacques Bainville și România. Un autor „necunsocut" despre un stat promițător", in *Revista de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale*, no. 3, 2013.

[5] Among the European political leaders who had the intuition of the outburst of a new World War many years before it begun is also the Romanian historian and diplomat Nicolae Titulescu. See Nicolae Titulescu, *Politica externă a României (1937)*, edition attended by George G. Potra, Constantin I. Turcu, Ion M. Oprea, Bucharest, Editura Enciclopedică, 1994.

[6] See, for example, Martin Griffiths, *Relații internaționale. Școli, curente, gânditori*, Bucharest, Editura Ziua, 2003; Șerban Filip Cioculescu, *Introducere în teoria international relations*, Bucharest, Editura Militară, 2007.

immediate aim"[7] of the actors of the international scene while "power politics"[8] is the main characteristic of international relations, or, as Carr considered, "power represents always an essential element of politics"[9]. In Hans Morgenthau's vision, the most influential realist theoretician, power does not mean "man's power over nature" but "we mean man's control over the minds and actions of other men" and political power implies "the mutual relations of control among the holders of public authority and between the latter and the people at large"[10]. From the perspective of realism, the great powers in the system are those which take important decisions for the entire system (or decisions they take for their foreign policy can affect the entire system), and small and medium member states can not have a significant role in decisions taken in the international system as a whole, but possibly only in the regional subsystem to which they belong.

For Hans Morgenthau, international politics during the interwar period is a classical manifestation of imperialist politics, which he opposes to the so-called "politics of the *status quo*" (related to the maintaining of the existing balance of power, at a certain moment, in the international system). "The European *status quo* of 1914 was characterized by the concert of great powers consisting of Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy and Russia. The victory of the Allies and the peace treaties created a new *status quo* which was the fruition of the imperialistic policies of France. The new *status quo* established the hegemony of France, exercised in alliance with most of the newly created nations of Eastern and Central Europe."[11] On the other side, Germany, until the arrival of the Nazi in power, attempted to obtain concessions for the difficult conditions imposed within the *status quo* adopted through the Versailles Peace Treaty. After 1935, Germany led an imperialist politics as a reaction to the imperialism of the other European great powers. But until the attack on Poland in 1939, Germany had the intelligence to sustain that all its demands, including the military and territorial ones, were actions that did not exceed the *status quo* constructed at the end of the World War I, but merely reparations owed to Germany. France and England, especially, followed such a politics of concessions, trusting that in this way they were going to avoid triggering a new war. But in September 1939, when the war erupted, the force relations between Germany and the other great European powers were reversed in favor of the former.

The role of the great powers is visible and manifested as such since 1919, within the frameworks of the Paris Peace Conference. "The main allied and associated powers (the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy and Japan) elaborated important decisions before they discussed them in the conference; on the other hand, if 30 powers instead of five were to debate, no decision would

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[7] See Hans G. Morgenthau, *Politics among nations. A struggle for power and peace*, New York, A. A. Knopf, 1948.
[8] See, Martin Wight, *Politica de putere*, Editura ARC, 1998.
[9] E. H. Carr, *Criza celor douăzeci de ani (1919-1939). O introducere în studiul international relations*, Iași, Polirom, 2011, p. 111.
[10] Hans G. Morgenthau, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
[11] Hans Morgenthau, *op. cit*., p. 35.

have ever been taken."[12] To the protests of some of the other participant states, the answers of the great powers were related to the material and human contribution that these states brought to the victory of the Allies. They thus arrogated the right to establish the peace conditions, to the detriment of inclusively some of the countries which were their allies during the war, but which represented no economic, military, human or geographical power comparable to their own.

"Thus the period between the two world wars stands in fact under the sign of balance of power by alliances and counter alliances, although in theory the principle of balance of power was supposed to have been superseded by the League of Nation principle of collective security."[13] Even the League of Nations (established in 1919, as the first international organization which had among its purposes the eradication of war as a method dedicated to resolving international conflicts) is submitted to the same analysis of power by Hans Morgenthau: "The ability of the League of Nations to prevent war was predicated upon the unity of its members and especially of the great powers"[14]. The principles on which the League functioned were undermined by the interests of the great powers and by their wish to preserve their power or obtain more power within the system. Created by the great powers with the purpose of maintaining international peace and order, the League of Nations was undermined precisely by its creators and, as following, the failure of the organization is largely their own doing.

On the other hand, another realistic thinker, Henry Kissinger, considers that the very ignoring of principles assuring the balance of forces led to a failure to maintain peace after World War I. They "imposed to Great Britain and France the closing of the anti-German alliance that was to censor the revisionist impulses of their unsettled neighbor."[15] France and Great Britain were each in its turn weaker than Germany and were able to oppose Germany only through an alliance, but this alliance was not accomplished, Great Britain maintaining its imperialist illusions and considering that it is above the balance of powers on the European continent, evaluating that Great Britain's role was merely to ensure a balance between France and Germany.

The change brought about by neorealism in the understanding of the classical theory of international politics is realistic by the fact that it proposes a systemic vision, hence the name of structural realism.

For Kenneth N. Waltz, "a system is composed of a structure and of interacting units. The structure is a system-wide component that makes it possible to think of a system as a whole."[16] He sustains that "a good theory of international relations must be systemic, since how the relationship among states are organized strongly affects governments' behavior toward one another"[17]. Based on his theory Waltz

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[12] Martin Wight, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
[13] Morgenthau, *op. cit.,* p. 142.
[14] Morgenthau, *op. cit.,* p. 378.
[15] Henry Kissinger, *Diplomația*, Bucharest, Editura All, 2013, p. 231.
[16] Kenneth N. Waltz, „Political structures" in Robert O. Keohane (editor), *Neorealism and its critics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 70.
[17] Robert O. Keohane, „Realism, Neorealism and the Study of World Politics", in Robert O. Keohane (editor), *Neorealism and its critics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 14.

differentiates international systems according to the number of poles of power
which interact, and in his view the most stable international systems are the ones
with the smallest number of poles of power (but not just one, uni-polarity being
considered an exception in the history of humanity because it usually has a
reduced resistance). For Waltz "in the many-pole systems, there are too many powers
to allow any of them to establish clear and fixed boundaries between their allies
and their adversaries, and too few to maintain the effects of abandonment at a
lower level."[18]

In Waltz's opinion, the many-poles system that was a characteristic of the
interwar period had many deficient aspects (beyond the inherent faults that he
identifies for this type of system), the result being an inclination toward the
initiation of the second World War: "Until 1945, the system of nation-states was
a many-poles one, always formed out of five powers or more[19]." Within this
system any state was able to deal with almost any other state, even being able to
close a "pact with the devil"[20] only to avoid military defeat. This way it was
possible for Hitler's Germany to arrive at an agreement with the Soviet Union,
a communist country, which was an inconceivable fact in the epoch due to the
ideological antagonisms of the two totalitarian states.

The overall analysis that Waltz applies to the interwar system emphasizes the
flexibility and the fluctuations of an unpredictable system, which is in fact an
unstable one: "The difficulties from any many-poles system emerge when some
states are threatening other states, while the alignments are uncertain."[21] English
and French policies in the '30s are clarifying in this respect, because "as the
German threat was increasing, some British and French leaders could entertain
the hope that, if their countries kept away, Russia and Germany were going to
counterweight each other or fight each other endlessly."[22]

 Neither the system of collective security of the League of Nations, nor the
old system of balance of power anterior to World War I, could preserve peace
and prevent war. "To preserve the system, at least one strong state must overcome
the pressure of ideological preferences, the insertion of previous relations and
the conflict of interests of the moment, adding its force to the peaceful side. That
strong state must do whatever the requirements of the moment are imposing."[23]

Liberalism and neoliberalism

The interwar period is often considered a time of idealism in international
relations, equal to the beginnings of liberal thought in international policy. Liberal
theory brings a major change in the analysis of international politics underlining
that domestic policy has a tremendous influence upon the relations of that state

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[18] Waltz, p. 229
[19] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Teoria politicii internaționale*, Iași, Polirom, 2006, p. 224.
[20] Waltz, p. 227
[21] Waltz, p. 225.
[22] Waltz, p. 225-226.
[23] Waltz, p. 225.

on the international stage. At the same time the distinct behavior of democratic states in their foreign politics is noticeable when compared with states that have different domestic regimes. The title of idealism is provided through political actions sustained by the great democratic powers, which are maintained by the theoretical support of the Kantian idea of perpetual peace. In the specialized literature of liberal inspiration, preceding World War I and until that of World War II, we find ideas sustaining that men are good by nature and guided by moral principles. Also man is considered guided by reason and by this capacity he has the capacity to avoid war, as long as the state, through each man, respects the norms generally accepted by international society.

Even though Norman Angell is considered the first liberal theoretician who had his works in print before World War I[24], the period between the two world wars is the time when the principles of liberalism in international relations are launched and applied. Maybe the most important writers of the time were John Hobson and Alfred Zimmern, two "idealists" authors, but who had the capacity to warn the world about the risks to which the stability of the interwar international system was subjected. If Hobson was a supporter of collective security and of a League of Nations with the power to resolve conflicts among the states (but warned the allies from the first World War "about the danger of avenging Germany"[25]), Zimmern remained known mostly for his work published in 1936 *The League of Nations and the Rule of Law – 1918-1935*, which announced in fact the failure of the League of Nations, especially due to the incapacity of both states and individuals to learn the liberal ideas that would help them progress, and due to the lack of the "harmony of interests" that should rule in liberal societies[26]. Liberal ideas about international politics, sustained by the two authors, were applied afterwards, in the postwar epoch, in the space of western democracy, within an international context that favored their development.

But the liberalism of the international politics from the interwar period has a source in the very action of one of the great powers of the world. The famous 14 points of the declaration of the President of the USA, Woodrow Wilson, which provided the basis for the creation of the Society of the Nations, are an expression of the principles of liberalism applied in international politics. Human rights, the rule of law, the elimination of economic barriers for international trade, the rethinking of the colonial system, the absolute freedom of navigation, the redefinition of European borders on the principle of the right to free national self-determination, the constitution of an organization that will guarantee the security of the states[27] (collective security was to replace the system of the balance of power that dominated the European policy until 1914) are the cardinal

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[24] Norman Angell who published his main work, entitled *The Great Illusion,* in 1910 (republished in three consecutive editions) sustained that war is obsolete.

[25] Martin Griffiths, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

[26] *Ibidem*, pp. 178-179.

[27] Darie Cristea, *Un secol de relații internaționale*, Bucharest, Editura Universității din Bucharest, 2013, pp. 25-27.

principles that stayed at the foundation of the reorganization of Europe after war. Here we have less to do with a liberal *theory* of international relations, as with their implementation as principles of international politics. What was called the idealism of the interwar period is, as a consequence, applicable to the European decision factors – and less to the liberal current of thought concerning international politics. It was less the failure of some liberal principles (as many of them were successfully applied after the end of the second World War, as, for instance, in the functioning of the United Nations Organization, in comparison with the functioning of the Society of Nations where they were not applied), than the failure due to the lack of support and of application structures for these liberal principles.

Neoliberalism develops the ideas of classical liberalism, and its core ideas are: the existence of progress in international relations, "the advance of liberal and democratic ideas"[28]; the idea that "the state is not a unitary actor" in international politics, but it "is composed of individuals, interest groups, bureaucrats, a system of rivalry and cooperation in various doses" "non-state actors are gaining more and more significance in international relations"; "member states' survival issue is addressed by ensuring military security, but it is not exclusive to the top of the hierarchy of priorities."[29] Whether the latter two features are not applicable to interwar international relations (international NGO's and transnational companies were beginning to play a significant role in international politics in the period of globalization), the first two can be applied to an analysis of the neoliberal period that we are considering in this study.

The idea of progress in international relations is supported by Keohane and Nye, who argue that "the failure of the idealist projects embodied in the League of Nations and the Briand Kellogg Pact" is not a deterrent and that "human beings learn from past mistakes", a proof in this sense being the "vast networks of interdependence of economic, technological, cultural and moral affinity"[30] that were developed after the second World War. But the experience of the first World War – which was considered in the period to be apocalyptic – an experience that, according to the idea of progress, should never be repeated, only after two decades took the form of a more far more devastating war than the first one. War thus seems to be the most difficult lesson for the human being.

The second feature maintains that the political elites of different countries have different interests and are competing for power (which may eventually weaken a state), the effect being also a different vision and action in the foreign policies of the respective countries. The idea can not be sustained though for the interwar period, as both the French political elites and the British ones promoted a coherent foreign policy regardless of which governments were in power. Rather it's another important issue in play, revealed precisely by the neoliberals, concerning the difference between democratic and totalitarian regimes. The great democratic powers of the interwar period did not notice that the totalitarian

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[28] Șerban Cioculescu, *op. cit.*, p. 102.
[29] Șerban Cioculescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-103.
[30] Robert Keohane, Joseph Nye, *Putere și interdependență*, Iași, Polirom, 2009, apud *Ibidem*.

states, both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, not only had another type of domestic leadership; but also that their action abroad was different from that of the democratic countries, war being for them an operational option, unlike the interwar democracies which excluded the idea of a new war.

Constructivism

Constructivism proposes "a theory of the international system as a social construction"[31], as stated by the founder of this current, Alexander Wendt. For constructivism the variables that are taken into consideration by the other theories in their analyses of international relations (as are, for instance, the military power, the international trade or the legislation and the international organizations) are important not because they are objective facts about the world, but because they have certain social meanings[33]. These meanings are a social construct resulting from the interweaving of beliefs, norms, ideas, history that should be taken into consideration when deciphering the behavior of states on the international arena. For Wendt, his theory is in contradiction neither with the neorealists, nor with the neoliberals, but it is, in a way, a completing one, noticing aspects which were disregarded by the other two theories, but which have a substantial influence in relation to the state's behavior on the international stage.

"The claim is not that ideas are more important than power and interest, or that they are autonomous from power and interest. Power and interest are just as important and determining as before. The claim is rather that power and interest have the effects they do in virtue of the ideas that make them up. Power and interest explanations presuppose ideas, and to that extent are not rivals to idealistic explanations at all. My claim is therefore different than the neoliberal argument that a substantial proportion of state action can be explained by ideas and institutions rather than power and interest."[33]

The understanding of the social context in which international relations unfold represents for constructivists an essential component which determines them to introduce in the theoretical debate ideas such as identity and belief. For the constructivists, any perceptions that the state entertains regarding its allies and adversaries (as well at the level of the state as at the level of decision makers), such as justice and fairness, are essential for the understanding of states' behavior. "How agents perceive the world is important in explaining their actions, and they always have an element of choice in defining their identities and interests."[34]

The norms that govern international society have themselves an important role in interpreting the mechanisms of international politics. Thus Wendt insists to "argue that, exactly as in the case of sociology, in the case of the theory of international relations it goes through constructivism to an approach that capitalizes not only the explanation and the causal analysis, but also

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[31] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. XIII.
[32] See *Ibidem*.
[33] *Ibidem*, p. 135.
[34] *Ibidem*, pp. 137-138.

comprehension and, implicitly, the constitutive analysis (not just the descriptive 'what', but as well the aspect conveyed by 'how' things happen)".[35] Nevertheless, constructivism granted a far larger attention than the other theories of international relations to the role that non-state actors play, such as the non-governmental organizations or the transnational corporations.

Constructivists did not offer much special importance to the interwar period, since their analyses stretch over larger periods of time. Buzan and Wæver divided the modern history of mankind into three large stages, according to what they call "regional security complexes"[36], the interwar period being just the final part of the modern era, which began in 1500 and ended in 1945. This is an epoch when states are the main players on the international scene, and when they start to create new regional complexes of security outside Europe. But for Europe, the world resumed to its own (European) region[37]. This statement is valid for the interwar period as well, against the background of "the returning of the USA to isolationism in security policy and to a chaotic behavior in international relations."[38]

The nationalist ideas of the European states have played, in the constructivists' views, an important role during interwar period. The impact registered by the first World War on mankind as a whole, from this point of view, in the case of some countries, proved to be insufficient for changing national mentalities. Germany, for example, did not succeed in modifying its nationalistic concept of itself, not even after its defeat in the first World War and the material reparations due to the winning states through the Versailles Treaty. On the contrary, ideas about the identity of the German state were exacerbated after Hitler's seizure of power, substantiated with extremist and xenophobic dimensions. Even more, the exacerbation of ideas concerning German identity overlapped the idea of a perpetual French "enemy", with which the Germans waged war so often during history. The perception of the enemy functioned as well on the French side, its expression being the will to bring the German enemy to his knees, through the enslaving economic provisions of the Peace Treaty, so that this enemy would never again be able to contest French supremacy on the European territory. This dichotomy was surpassed only by the project of the European community after the second World War, a project that changed mentalities to a great extent, both at the level of the political elites, and at the level of the population in the two countries. This idea of the enemy functioned in other European states too; generally in countries which considered themselves the inheritors of the old European empires, and which perceived their neighbors, the beneficiaries of the dismantlement of the empires, as enemies.

In general, constructivists define the interwar period as an interval characteristic for the end of modernity and of the Westphalia system, defining both European and world politics for several centuries.

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[35] Darie Cristea, *op. cit*, p.190.
[36] Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 14.
[37] *Ibidem*, p. 15.
[38] John Gerard Ruggie, *Constructiong the World Polity. Essays on international institutionalisation*, London and New York, Routledge, 1998, p. 204.

Conclusions

The three great theories of international relations offer each a different perspective on the international politics of the interwar period. And, paradoxically, each perspective founds its support in the practice of world politics in the epoch. If, for realism, the fundamental concept is power, for liberalism democracy takes the fore in terms of importance; and for constructivism the important thing is the social construction of the epoch. Power played, throughout the entire history of humanity, an essential role in inter-state relations, and during the interwar period it was also one of the elements that led to the outbreak of the second World War. But the war was initiated by one of the undemocratic countries, namely Nazi Germany, and not one of the democratic powers. At the same time, the norms established internationally at the end of the first World War were not observed by the actors of the European scene. The defeated countries developed anti-system conceptions and promoted ideas of "superiority" of their own nationality which had to impose their own rules on those considered to be enemy states.

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