

**ROMANIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS DURING 1916-1918****Elena-Steluța DINU<sup>1</sup>****ABSTRACT:**

*THE ISSUE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IS ONE OF ACTUALITY AND INTEREST FOR EUROPEAN HISTORIOGRAPHY IS INTEREST IS BASED ON THE NEED TO KNOW THE LINKS BETWEEN STATES. THROUGH THE FOLLOWING SYNTHESIS WE INTEND TO CONVEY A MORE OBJECTIVE AND REALISTIC VIEW ON MILITARY AND DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN ROMANIA AND RUSSIA DURING THE EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION OF ROMANIA IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR DURING 1916-1918, WHEN THE TWO COUNTRIES WERE THEORETICALLY ALLIED AND WERE PART OF THE SAME POLITICAL-MILITARY GROUP, NAMELY THE ENTENTE. IN THIS TIME INTERVAL ROMANIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS WERE MAINTAINED AT A LEVEL OF MUTUAL DISTRUST, WHICH DAMAGED MILITARY COOPERATION, CULMINATING IN THE SEVERANCE OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS AND SEIZURES OF ROMANIAN THESAURUS FROM MOSCOW.*

**KEYWORDS:** ROMANIA, RUSSIA, WORLD WAR I, THE ENTENTE, CENTRAL POWERS, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS.

On 4/17 August 1916, King Ferdinand convened at Cotroceni, a Crown Council<sup>2</sup> attended by Crown Prince Carol and twenty-one statesmen, among them Ion I.C. Brătianu. This Council had been convened not to take a decision that had already been taken, but to get the support of all politicians in favor of Romania entered the war alongside the Allies. Most of those present supported the point of view of the king. Exception made Titu Maiorescu and Alexandru Marghiloman who were in favor of maintaining neutrality so as Petre P. Carp who argued again that Romania would have to participate in the war alongside the Central Powers and, implicitly, against Russia.

Romania declared war on Austria-Hungary on the evening of 14/27 August 1916, immediately after the debate of the Crown Council at Cotroceni.

The reason that Romania entered the war is clear from the Proclamation of King Ferdinand I of 15/28 August 1916, on the occasion of the declaration of war to complete the nation: "our ancestors were able to establish the Romanian State through the Union of Romanian principalities, through the War of Independence, ... today it is given to us to complete their work ...: the union of Romanians on both sides of the Carpathians ... an undivided and free Romania from Tisa to the Sea<sup>3</sup>".

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<sup>2</sup> Ion Mamina, *Consilii de Coroană* (Bucharest, 1997), 58-53.

<sup>3</sup> Marta Bibescu, *Un sacrificiu regal: Ferdinand al României* (Bucharest, 2000), 59-61.

Respecting the treaty of alliance with the Entente, Romania engaged all the human and available material against Austria-Hungary. According to the plan of campaign for 1916<sup>4</sup>, two fronts had to be opened: north and north-west or south Transylvanian front or front of Dobrogea. The general front opened on the Carpathians and along its southern border had a length of about 1500 km.

On the other hand, shortly after the outbreak of Romanian offensive across the mountains, Germany (August 28), Turkey (30 August) and Bulgaria (September 1) declared war on Romania. So, in addition to considerable length, Romanian front had, as well, a disadvantageous form<sup>5</sup>.

Since early days appeared some deficiencies due mostly to the attitude of allies who did not complied with their obligations under the agreements which had been concluded with Romania. Such a deficiency was represented by slowness with which the Allies supplied the Eastern front with materials, weapons and ammunition, as a hindrance to the successful implementation of the Romanian army's war plan. By November 1917 supplies arrived on a detour, via Russian ports of Arkhangelsk on the White Sea and Vladivostok from the Pacific<sup>6</sup>. Thus, the Romanian army was not insured in sources of supply.

From a military perspective, the period Romania entered the war was not favorable. Romanian intervention occurred at a time when theaters of military actions in Europe, in general offensive efforts from the Allies ceased: Russian military offensive in Galicia, commanded by General Brusilov, Franco-British offensive on the River Somme, as also the German offensive in Verdun had been stopped. Central Powers forces were not heavily engaged, having a certain freedom of action by which they could achieve overwhelming superiority on the Romanian front<sup>7</sup>.

In this context, obligations that had been assumed by the Romanian allies were not fulfilled: the offensive from Thessaloniki against the Bulgarian troops ten days before Romania entered the war was not carried as planned; the offensive against the Germans in the west was not resumed or Brusilov's offensive in Galicia against the Austro-Hungarian army did not occur.

Therefore, we can say that the time Romania entered the war was not favorable to Romanian army, but rather favored the allied armies. Romanian intervention released Verdun, facilitated the victory of the Italians in Corso, decreased pressure on the Russian front and even facilitated occupation of Monastir by Sarrail.

In their view, the Romanian army military action should integrate Allied coordinated effort especially since, entering the war, the Romanian army was placed in direct extension of the Russian front.

Filling initial positions on the battlefield and overcoming bad time of Romania's entry into war did not pave the way for a fruitful collaboration between Romania and Russia as the Russian front headquarters avoided to engage with all the forces promised, thus contributing to increased difficulties of Romanian army to face the enemy<sup>8</sup>.

Romanian Army was not supported by any of the two fronts. Romanian General Staff had to transfer on the southern front a third of the number of troops, weakening the power of combat troops in Transylvania. In the Carpathians, the Russians did not send suitable forces through the gorges of Moldova, to strengthen the advance of Romanian Army in

<sup>4</sup> *Istoria militară a poporului român*, vol. V, *Evoluția organismului militar românesc de la cucerirea independenței de stat până la înfăptuirea Marii Uniri din 1918* (Bucharest: Ed. Militară, 1988), 363-368.

<sup>5</sup> *Istoria militară*, 498.

<sup>6</sup> Keith Hitchens, *România 1866-1947*, translated by George Potra and Delia Răzdolescu (Bucharest: Ed. Humanitas, 1996), 284.

<sup>7</sup> Ion Cupșa, *Armata română în campaniile din anii 1916-1917* (Bucharest: Ed. Militară, 1967), 178.

<sup>8</sup> Ion M. Oprea, *România și Imperiul Rus*, vol. I (1900-1924) (Bucharest: Ed. Albatros, 1998), 101-102.

Transylvania. The four Russian divisions stood inactive in Bessarabia. The inaction of Russian troops on the front was also felt in Dobrogea<sup>9</sup>.

Russian military command avoided to engage with all the forces they had promised, adding to the difficulties of the Romanian army and then to its withdrawal on shorter lines than the initial.

Since the end of September, instead of granting the promised aid, General Mihail V. Alexeev – Chief of Staff Czarist – proposed abandoning Oltenia and west Muntenia and suggested withdrawal on a defensive line from Dorna to Brasov to Bucharest and beyond, along the Danube to Constanta. The concept of General Alexeev to spare Russian army and shorten the front line was assumed also by the next commander of the Russian army, General Gurko<sup>10</sup>. To this is added the fact that the French and English war material for Romanian army very late from Russia.

The existence of Romanian state was always an obstacle to traditional Russian policy trends. Romanian-Russian divergences were apparent past in the background. Only the common interest, the defeat of Austria-Hungary, made possible an alliance between Romania and Russia. But this alliance was "the black dot of our policy of war."<sup>11</sup> Length of the front, the lack of technical equipment of the Romanian Army, inefficiency of Romanian-Russian collaboration, failure to fulfill commitments by other allies, contributed to the outcome of Romanian campaign of 1916. After several months of confrontation, at the end of 1916, the front line was stabilized along the Carpathians, Lower Siret and Danube.

More than two-thirds of the Romanian territory was occupied by troops of the Central Powers, including Oltenia, Muntenia and Dobrogea. Within the Romanian territory occupied by the troops of the Central Powers was imposed military administration whose primary goal was the requisition of oil, grains, and provisions.

Although an important part of Romanian territory was occupied, including the capital, the enemy's plan was not fulfilled, the Romanian government and army continued to exist as a belligerent power<sup>12</sup>. Since the 12/15 November 1916, the king, the royal family and authorities went to Iași, which became the temporary capital of a much reduced Romanian state<sup>13</sup>.

Resistance in Moldova still lasted over a year, the Central Powers troops failed even to the last moment to get full and decisive military victory decisive. The Romanian army was not destroyed as planned.

Romanian army reorganization took about five months; meanwhile the Command and Romanian troops had the support of the French mission, led by General Henry M. Berthelot.

Under the new conditions following the first campaign, the Romanian government tried to update the commitments made by the Allies to Romania to convince on the importance of this theater of war in Romania. In this respect, Brătianu urged to participate in Petrograd Conference of January 19 / 1 February 1917. Brătianu received assurances from the British and French representatives that financial problems and the supply of arms remained fixed under the previous agreements<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Constantin Kirițescu, *Istoria războiului pentru întregirea României 1916-1919*, vol. I (Bucharest: Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1989), 573-575.

<sup>10</sup> Leonid Boicu, Vasile Cristian, Gheorghe Platon, eds., *România în relațiile internaționale 1699-1939* (Iași: Ed. Politică, 1980), 404.

<sup>11</sup> Kirițescu, *Istoria războiului*, 576.

<sup>12</sup> *Istoria militară*, 497.

<sup>13</sup> Gheorghe Platon, ed. *Istoria Românilor*, vol. VII, tom II *De la independență la Marea Unire (1878-1918)* (Bucharest: Ed. Enciclopedică, 2003), 436.

<sup>14</sup> Dumitru Preda, *România și Antanta. Avatururile unei mici puteri într-un război de coaliție, 1916-1917* (Iași: Institutul European, 1998), 191-192.

Plans to coordinate military efforts on both fronts, settled at conferences in Chantily, Rome, Petrograd, were not implemented because of military and political failures<sup>15</sup>.

Shortly after the conference in Petrograd, the Russian Revolution occurred in February 1917, resulting in regime change: in 3/16 March 1917 Tsar Nicholas II abdicated in favor of his brother Grand Duke Michail, who next day gave up the throne. Russia was proclaimed a republic. Thus, Romanov dynasty came to an end<sup>16</sup>.

Russian provisional Cabinet gave in 14/27 March, a statement that the Russian authorities will respect the obligations made to their partners. However, the regime change and confusion in the management of the power occurred in the country, had important consequences for subsequent situation on the Eastern front.

In the context of the fall of tsarist, hoping to improve relations with the Russian Provisional Government Lvov, Kerensky, the head of the Romanian government together with General Prezan paid a visit to Petrograd in late April 1917. Though, significantly improved after the visit, the Romanian-Russian relations were maintained at a level of mutual distrust, which damaged the military cooperation<sup>17</sup>. Romanian government was worried about the disintegration of the Russian units, especially, since there were many Russian soldiers on the front in Moldova and on its territory. "Revolutionary" agitation of Russian troops on the Romanian territory led to moments of tension between the two, yet partners.

Those events determined the Western allies: France, Britain, seconded by Italy, to intensify efforts in order to strengthen and maintain political and military combat capability of the whole eastern front, especially since the Romanian army reorganization was successful. For this purpose a general Romanian-Russian combat plan was developed<sup>18</sup>.

When the great offensive in this area of the front was prepared, the Russian army had to defend the alignment which was intended for switching to offensive battle, a section four times higher than the Romanian army. But to low combative capacity of the Russian army was added also its collapse that quickly deepened in the months May-June 1917, on the eve of the Battle of Mărăști, Mărășești and Oituz (July-August).

Even in the early days of implementation of the plan of battle, Russian divisional commander, General Scerbacev received an order from the head of the Provisional Government, Kerensky, to cease all offensive whereas the situation in Russia, suddenly worsened, no longer allowed Russian troops to take large-scale operations.

At Mărăști, Russian units, being disorganized, attended only sporadically and only at the beginning of the fight. Consequently, Romanian divisions had to face almost themselves pressure from the troops of the Central Powers. Moreover, during resistance in Mărășești and Oituz disorganized Russian troops were engaged only in certain battles. In these circumstances, the Romanian army had to replace the Russian units – who refused to fight and retreated to defend areas of the front left uncovered – even during the fighting that lasted until the end of August 1917<sup>19</sup>.

Despite flaws of large Russian units in the summer of 1917, the Romanian Army demonstrated its ability to struggle and resistance, preventing the Central Powers plan to take Romania out of battle and take their share of the Romanian state.

Romanian victories in the summer of 1917 did not improve the overall situation on the Romanian front and behind the front. The situation was critical: general results on both

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<sup>15</sup> Preda, *România și Antanta*, 193.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Milza, Serge Berstein, *Istoria secolului XX. Sfârșitul „lumii europene” (1900-1945)*, vol. I (Bucharest, 1998), 85.

<sup>17</sup> Oprea, *România și Imperiul Rus*, 116.

<sup>18</sup> Preda, *România și Antanta*, 196-199.

<sup>19</sup> Platon, ed., *Istoria Românilor*, 440-445.

fronts of the Entente, the lack of connection between them, the distrust by Russian troops, military disorganization in Thessaloniki, isolation of Romania from Italy<sup>20</sup>. Using the difficulties of the Triple Entente, military headquarters of the Central Powers army unleashed a powerful offensive which allowed at the end of 1917 and in early 1918 to bring victory on all fronts.

To this was added evolution of events in Russia, where after the coup of 25 October / November 7, 1917, "October Revolution", the Bolsheviks" took power, the new government called "Council of People's Commissars" with Lenin as chairman, seconded by Trotsky and Stalin. The next day was given "Decree on Peace „through which the Bolsheviks proposed to all belligerent states to start negotiations immediately for the conclusion of peace, a peace without annexations. They linked, using this formula, obtaining peace to solving territorial problems and the right of nations to self-determination<sup>21</sup>.

In these circumstances, hostilities ceased on the eastern front at December 1, 1917, four days later was signed the armistice with the Central Powers and peace talks was started. Russian exit from the war also involved Romania exiting from battles. With no other alternative, the Romanian government accepted the proposal of the Russian general D.S. Scerbacev made to representatives of the Central Powers for an armistice with the Romanian-Russian troops on Moldavian Romanian front. The armistice was signed in Focșani on the 26 November / December 9, 1917, despite opposition of Western allies<sup>22</sup>.

Due to the thorny issue of Bessarabia relations between Romania and Russia became worse, culminating in the severance of diplomatic relations.

Following the Revolution of February 1917, the fall of the Tsar and of proclaiming the Russian provisional government of the right of peoples of the Russian Empire to "have their own" national movement of the Romanians in Bessarabia intensified, following a series of political training for separation of Bessarabia from the Russian Empire.

These preparations led to the proclamation by Congress of Moldavian soldiers in Chisinau that opened proceedings on 20 October / November 2, 1917, of territorial and political autonomy of Bessarabia in the Russian Federative Republic. The Congress also decided to convene the Country's Council, which met for the first time on 21 November / December 4, 1917, when Ion Inculeț was elected president of the national Supreme Court. On 2/15 December, the Council of State proclaimed the Moldavian Democratic Republic tied with Russia as a federative state. The Board Director General was elected as executive organ<sup>23</sup>. On 24 January 1918, the Country's Council proclaimed Bessarabia an independent republic, and on 27 March / April 9, 1918, adopted the decision of union of Moldavian Republic with Romania<sup>24</sup>.

Between the proclamation of the republic and independence occurred a series of events (Bolshevik occupation, arrest of some of the leaders of the national movement of Bessarabia). After the armistice with the Central Powers, disorganization of the Russian army became total on the Romanian front. On their way of withdrawal Bolsheviks soldiers went through Bessarabia, where they indulged in robbery actions, causing a state of disarray and uncertainty. Towards the end of December 1917, Chief of Staff of the Red Army in Bessarabia, after occupying Chisinau, put pressure on legal authorities to call Russian military to establish order in Bessarabia. Without getting those demands, detachments of repression were sent in order to install Bolshevik control in Bessarabia. The situation became

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Renouvin, *Primul război mondial*, translated by Lucia Popa (Bucharest: Ed. Corint, 2001), 104.

<sup>21</sup> Renouvin, *Primul război mondial*, 105-107.

<sup>22</sup> Platon, ed., *Istoria Românilor*, 448.

<sup>23</sup> Alexandru Boldur, *Istoria Basarabiei*, 2nd edition (Bucharest: Ed. Albatros, 1992), 499.

<sup>24</sup> Ion Nistor, *Istoria Basarabiei* (Chișinău, 1991), 282.

serious in early January 1918, when gangs of Russian soldiers caused great unrest, leading to even open attacks against the legal authorities in Chisinau<sup>25</sup>.

In these circumstances, the Council of State requested the Romanian government to send troops to maintain security. Starting with 10/23 January 1918, the Romanian army entered Bessarabia, in order to ensure order and security of the Republic, then had to withdraw. With the support of the Moldavian National Guard, military units led by Ernest Broșteanu failed to fulfill its mission: Bolshevik troops withdrew across the Dniester River<sup>26</sup>.

Bolshevik government response resulted in breaking diplomatic ties with Romania and Romania's Thesaurus in Moscow was seized. On 15/28 January 1918, by the order of the Council of People's Commissars the Romanian diplomatic mission was asked to leave Russia. So, severance of diplomatic relations between Russia and Romanian occurred from the Bolshevik government initiative<sup>27</sup>.

On 27 January / February 9, 1918, Soviet Russia and the Central Powers signed at Brest-Litovsk peace. After that followed peace with Ukraine and the occupation of Russian and Ukrainian territories by the Austro-Hungarian armies. Thus, Romania had no possibility to receive foreign aid, or, in case of defeat, to withdraw the army. Under these conditions, at 5/18 March 1918, the preliminaries of peace were signed at Buftea and on 24 April / May 7, 1918 Peace Treaty of Bucharest<sup>28</sup>.

The Peace Treaty and its additional provisions brought Romania in a state of economic and political dependence to the Central Powers. State of war was replaced with state of occupation; the country was divided in two: occupied territory and Moldova to Mărăști where Romanian government continued to exercise administration and authority.

King Ferdinand refused to sanction the peace of 7 May, although the legislature voted it. Treaty of Bucharest conditions were not implemented, developments in the second half of 1918 and going war favored canceling the treaty.

The events of the battle fronts were held in favor of the Entente, while the Central Powers began defense. General Foch, supreme commander of the Allied armies in France responded the failed German offensive at Champagne with counteroffensive "second battle of the Marne" in July-August 1918 representing the signal defeat of the Central Powers<sup>29</sup>.

After German defeat on the battle of the Somme in the summer of 1918, German troops followed the Siegfried line so that in September began the German offensive of Allied troops<sup>30</sup>. On 12/25 September 1918 Balkan Entente armies pierced the Bulgarian front. In these circumstances, on 29 September Bulgaria capitulated and signed an armistice in Thessaloniki. Also Turkey, on Oct. 30 signed the armistice of Mudros, and on November 3, 1918 Austria-Hungary surrendered and signed an armistice with the Entente powers at Villa Giusti<sup>31</sup>.

After resuming the Entente offensive in the Balkans, the Romanian government led by General Constantin Coandă ordered the mobilization of Romanian Army to rejoin the battle with the Allies on 28 October / November 10, 1918, considering null the regime established by the Peace of Bucharest. Having declared war on Germany, Romanian troops entered simultaneously in the occupied territories.

<sup>25</sup> Oprea, *România și Imperiul Rus*, 174-176.

<sup>26</sup> Gheorghe Platon, *Istoria modernă a României* (Bucharest: Ed. Didactică și Pedagogică, 1985), 174-176.

<sup>27</sup> Oprea, *România și Imperiul Rus*, 194-195.

<sup>28</sup> Mircea N. Popa, *Primul război mondial. 1914-1918* (Bucharest: Ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1979), 420.

<sup>29</sup> Renouvin, *Primul război mondial*, 120-121.

<sup>30</sup> Renouvin, *Primul război mondial*, 123-125.

<sup>31</sup> Renouvin, *Primul război mondial*, 126-128.

We conclude that at the date of signing the armistice between the Allies and Germany at Compiègne (October 29 / November 11, 1918) as well as with the independent Hungary in Belgrade (October 31 / November 13, 1918), Romania was in the camp of the victors<sup>32</sup>.

At the end of World War I, national unity was accomplished by the Unification plebiscitary decisions of 27 March / 9 April (Bessarabia), 15/28 November (Bucovina), 18 November / 1 December 1918 (Transylvania). Without diplomatic support obtained during neutrality – the treaty of alliance and military convention signed with the Entente powers, coupled with participation in the war, Romania's representatives would not have been able at the Paris Peace Conference that ended the First World War, to obtain international legal consecration union of Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transylvania with Romania.

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<sup>32</sup> Platon, ed., *Istoria Românilor*, 452-453.

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