

Gerhard Hetzer

### **On the Romanian Campaign of the Central Powers 1916/17**

A French-language guidebook about Romania, published in Bucharest in 1940 before the territorial changes of the second Vienna award, explained the battlefields of summer 1917 in Moldavia as sites of victories that the Romanian force, which was inferior in numbers and equipment, achieved against German and Austro-Hungarian troops. In a museum in Mărășești, the Croix de Guerre that Marshall Joffre awarded the city in 1920, with its railway junction that had been fought over three years previously, was shown. The meaning of these memoirs for Romanian self-confidence, wounded by earlier defeats and then the armistice of December 1917, as well as by the Treaty of Bucharest of May 1918, was also, consequently, clear in travel literature. These memoirs were part of the official founding history of Greater Romania, which came into being in 1919, and of the legitimization of the sacrifices made towards the state unity of Romanians. These also bore witness to reverence for the regime in the inter-war period, as did – with, respectively, their own accents – Nicolae Ceaușescu and the post-communist governments since 1990. The tenacious resistance that the Romanian troops achieved against the campaign of the 9<sup>th</sup> German army in Focșani in 1917 was recognized by Field Marshal August von Mackensen. The Romanians had, according to the notes of the well-known commander of the army group composed of various Central Power contingents, recovered from their setbacks and been well trained and equipped by the French and English. A Romanian-Russian offensive in July 1917 at the Putna and the Siret, which had been broken off after initial success, preceded this. The leader of the French military mission, General Henri-Mathias Berthelot, placed, in his reports to the war ministry in Paris, the responsibility for this on the political leadership in Russia, which he said had lost its nerve after military defeats in east Galicia and because of the signs of disintegration in its own units.

To be abandoned by allies that they had provided relief for along the fronts in France, in Volhynia, in the Baltic region and at the Isonzo with their own entrance to the war in August 1916 would become one of the national traumas in Romania. After 1918, open and veiled accusations in politics and in the media of the victorious powers also contributed to this. They were targeted at the approach of the Bratianu government in the years 1914 to 1916, which was one of watching and sounding out respective fortunes of war, and at the separate peace of Bucharest of 1918. At the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, with Bratianu also appearing as a representative of a victor state, the most important territorial goals were achieved. At the

beginning of the world war, this could only have been dreamed of. The Kingdom of Romania had been, since 1883, in a secret alliance with the Triple Alliance powers, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy, which was renewed again in 1913. However, relations with Austria-Hungary had deteriorated massively since the Bosnian crisis in 1908 and the Balkan wars. The signs of rapprochement with France, which had become increasingly clear since 1911, had strengthened the traditionally already strong cultural connections, and had also become visible in Romanian military affairs. At the beginning of August 1914, the Romanian crown council, reflecting Italy's position, said no to the case for the alliance and decided for armed neutrality.

Irredentism, accompanied by a Latin sense of mission, wanted to free the Romanian-descended populations in Transylvania, the Banat, Crişana (Körosvidék) and Maramureş (Máramaros) from the harsh hand of Hungary. In Bukovina, however, it was also directed against the more tolerant Austria. It grew from the conflicts of the Magyarization policy in the past decades, but was also fed by the evaluation of figures and events from distant times – for example of the Voivode Michael the Brave (Mihai Viteazul), who was successful in uniting Wallachia, Transylvania and Moldavia politically for a short time around 1600 and was seen as a victim of the malice of an imperial general; and of the Wallachian peasant revolt of 1784. In June 1914, Bratianu and the Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov had, in the entourage of a visit of the tsar in Constanţa, taken an excursion to the Carpathians, which had taken them, at the Predeal pass, for a short, but symbolic, stretch over the Hungarian border to Transylvania. And Sazonov had, at the beginning of October 1914, in a secret agreement, assured Bucharest of Russian acceptance of Romanian territorial claims at the cost of the Danube monarchy, in return for “friendly neutrality” in the current war.

This took place in the last days of King Charles I's life, who, being descended from the House of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, had provided support for fundamentally Triple Alliance-friendly politics. The Austrian envoy at that time in Bucharest, Ottokar Czernin, described the consternation of the king and the mood in the Romanian general public when the ultimatum to Serbia from July 1914 became known in his memoirs of the world war years. The new king, Ferdinand I, who was much more of the 20<sup>th</sup> century than his deceased uncle, thought less dynastically and more in the categories of Romanian party and parliament politics, and paid anxious attention to the press in the capital, as the hub of various economic interests. His wife made no secret of her Entente-friendly stance.

The Central Powers had a strategic military interest, with the ally slipping off, in not having any new enemies in their flank. However, they also obtained grain and oil on a large scale, which were necessary for mechanized war, from Romania, which became, in the war years, more and more important for them as a supplier. The Hungarian Prime Minister Tisza rejected, however, further concessions to the Romanians or even surrenders, which might have offset the promises of the Entente.

The Entente had pushed, more and more vehemently and threateningly, for a decision in Bucharest since June 1916. This took place against the background of the success of the Russian Brusilov Offensive and the haltingness of the German attack at Verdun. When Italy entered the war in early 1915, Bratianu had still been evasive. Now, he believed he could not delay any longer if Romania wanted to secure the advantages that lay on the victor's side. Promises of military consignments and of diversionary attacks on the Thessaloniki front were supposed to make entrance to a war on two fronts easier for the kingdom. In this way, on August 17, 1916, a treaty of alliance and a military agreement with France, Italy, England and Russia came about. After the crown council had consented, war was declared on Austria-Hungary, on August 27. On the evening of this day, Romanian troops crossed the Transylvanian border, accompanied by the ringing of the kingdom's church bells. The German Reich, Turkey and Bulgaria took sides with the Danube monarchy in the coming days.

Romania was not prepared for a war of this size. Industry was concentrated on a few points and inefficient, there was a lack of skilled employees. The railway network was not closely knit. The mobilization preparations, which had been intensified since early 1915, with the purchase of armaments in England and the building up of stores could not, naturally, offset the structural deficits. This made itself noticeable immediately after the beginning of action through supply problems. The kingdom was able to send 850 000 men into the field in August 1916, numerically an imposing force, which lacked, however, experience in modern warfare, seasoned officers and corporals, and heavy artillery, machine guns, airplanes and telecommunications systems.

In the first days, the Romanian forces in Transylvania advanced quickly, coming up against only weak k.u.k. forces. They secured the exits of the Carpathian passes, occupied Braşov

(Kronstadt) and Făgăraș (Fogaras) and came within a few kilometers of Sibiu (Hermannstadt) and Sighișoara (Schäßburg). The 9<sup>th</sup> Army, formed anew from German and Austro-Hungarian formations under the supreme command of the former German Chief of Staff Erich von Falkenhayn, struck back at the end of September and forced the Romanians out of the occupied territories. Elite units, such as the Alpenkorps, which had already been deployed to Tyrol, Serbia and before Verdun, were present among the German troops. Falkenhayn took away this insight from the Romanian campaign for his memoirs, published in 1920: that the individual opposing soldiers acted bravely, but their leadership hitherto appeared to be hesitant, unsure and operating incoherently. The feared trespass of the Romanians in the direction of the Hungarian lowlands did not come to pass. The Romanian army leadership of 1919 did not want to repeat this error when they confronted the troops of the Hungarian Republic of Councils and advanced to Budapest. But now, in September 1916, the Romanians stumbled into a pincer movement: as early as the end of August, Mackensen's army group, with Bulgarian, German and Turkish units, had begun an assault in Dobruja, which quickly led to the taking of important positions. The offense was aimed at the harbor city of Constanța and forced the Romanian high command to move forces to and fro. In November, Falkenhayn's troops succeeded in breaking through the Carpathians into Wallachia along the rivers Jiu (Schil), Olt (Alt) and Argeș (Argisch) against, in places, bitter resistance. At the beginning of December 1916, the capital, Bucharest, fell. The Romanian court and the government fled to Jassy in north Romania. After a withdrawal that had high losses and was, in places, chaotic, Romanian and Russian formations were able to build up a new defense line in Moldavia. Around two thirds of the country was occupied by the Central Powers, the administration accepted, with Mackensen, a German governor. To hinder future use of the oil wells of Ploești, English detachments had lit fires.

The Romanian army had, up until then, suffered a loss of nearly 250 000 men to death, injury and imprisonment. Typhus, starvation and cold claimed further victims in the first months of the year of 1917. The mortality rate was also high among Romanian prisoners of war, it still exceeded, in the prisoner of war camps in Austria-Hungary and Germany together with Italians and Serbians, the mortality of the soldiers of the western powers and the tsar's army. The soldiers of the Central Powers who had ended up in Romanian hands met a bitter fate. In June 1918, the main committee of the German Reichstag addressed their mortality rate, and the figures presented there by a representative of the foreign office experienced heavy criticism, both at the time, as underestimated, and also in the time to come. A documentary

about the camp north of Jassy, Sipote, with a mortality rate of over 90 percent among the German prisoners, appeared in 1929 in Munich in its third edition.

In early 1917, there were feverish efforts to reform and augment the hard-hit Romanian army. The French military mission, which had been active since mid-October 1916, grew to include nearly 1200 instructors and other specialized workers – gunners, pilots, technicians and doctors. Its leader, Berthelot, acquired the role of inspector general with direct access to the king. The military mission also instructed on the waging of trench warfare. Weapons and munition came now, first and foremost, from France. They had to be transported through Russia, and in particular through Archangelsk and the new harbor Murmansk. Apart from that, Russia was only half-heartedly involved in the support of the Romanian army, its troops in Moldavia and Dobruja always served its own strategic policies. A Romania that was self-confident and richly remunerated by the Entente for a change of alliance did not lie in the interests of the traditional Russian Balkan policy, which, moreover, had to take into account Greater Romanian ambition toward Bessarabia. It was important to France to secure itself ongoing political and economic influence in the country, it also supported Greater Romania propaganda and the corresponding committees in the Entente countries and the neutral states. The influx of volunteers from the reservoir of Romanian-descended soldiers of the k.u.k. army, which were in Russian imprisonment, remained, to be sure, far short of hopes and propagandistic announcements. Berthelot thought, in May 1917, that ten Romanian divisions were, as far as morale and state of health went, ready for attack within a month. He assessed the state of the Russian troops in north Romania much more skeptically. They were effected by the revolutionary incidents in Petrograd, which also made an impression on the Romanian population. In April 1917, King Ferdinand promised, for the time after the war, comprehensive agriculture reforms in favour of small farmers and agricultural workers, who made up the greatest proportion of his soldiers, as well as reform of voting rights.

After the October revolution, the position of the Romanian army, still belligerent on a frozen front, which the Russian troops then left, became more and more precarious. One day after the beginning of armistice negotiations in Brest-Litowsk, the commander in chief of the Romanian and Russian troops in Romania petitioned the Central Powers for the negotiation of a ceasefire, which led to the signing of the Armistice of Focșani on December 9, 1917. With this, the battles were, largely, terminated. Romania followed the path towards a peace treaty without the contracting parties of August 1916. After further maneuvering and waiting from

Bratianu, an ultimatum from Mackensen on March 5, 1918 forced a pre-peace treaty in Buftea, which was followed by the Treaty of Bucharest on May 7, 1918. This was signed by a new Romanian prime minister, who saw the Central Powers as representatives of German-friendly politics and who had warned against the adventure of entering the war. This treaty, which provided for the surrender of large parts of Dobruja and various Carpathian passes, as well as the use of crude oil deposits by the Central Powers, was, however, never ratified, the king refused his signature. This made the return of Romania to the side of the victors of November 1918 and the reclamation of the surrendered territories with the seal of the Paris suburb contracts of 1919/20 easier.

As in all erstwhile warring nations, the memories of the Great War, the “Marele Război” were, in Romania, persistent, always present companions of the currents of foreign and internal politics in the period between the world wars. Relationships with Germany, France and the Soviet Union formed, in the course of this, a triangle. The neighbors in the west and the south, Hungary and Bulgaria, saw their borders with Romania as wounds that should not scar over. The dramatic changes in the years 1940/41 were already laid out in the decisions of 1919/20.

### **Citation**

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