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23 August 1944. Its internal and external consequences

The act of 23 August 1944 deeply and undoubtedly marked the subsequent evolution of Romania. Over the years, this event was differently evaluated as a 'coup d'état,' 'armed insurrection,' 'antifascist and anti-imperialist revolution of social and national liberation,' etc. Regardless of what name it was given, it decisively influenced Romania's subsequent history, quickened the fall of the Third Reich and reduced the length of the Second World War.

The overthrow of the Ion Antonescu regime took place in an extremely complicated internal and external context: Soviet troops had already occupied the north-east of Romania since March 1944 and the evolutions on the front outlined the fact that sooner or later the Red Army would continue its advance on Romanian territory; in the west, the Allies, after landing in Normandy, moved towards Paris and in the south they had already liberated a part of Italy. The conclusion of a truce between Romania and the Allies for the purpose of the country's exit from the anti-Soviet war and to obtain more favourable conditions was vital for the country. But meetings held over the years between official or non-official representatives of Romania and representatives of the Allies in Stockholm, Ankara, Cairo etc. always stopped due to the sine qua non condition of unconditional surrender.



The act of 23 August 1944 was conceived by a coalition made up of representatives of the Royal Palace (which acted with the agreement of King Michael), interwar democratic parties (Liberal, Peasant and Social Democratic) and the Communist Party, with the collaboration of some higher rank officers from the army. It was, in fact, a real fight between two projects of saving the country, promoted both by the group around the monarch and by the group associated with Marshal Antonescu, for the purpose of concluding a truce with honourable conditions for Romania. The outcome, favourable to the king, was achieved by a coup d'état through the arrest of Ion Antonescu and the other members of government at the Royal Palace followed by rapid military action.

King Michael was planning a meeting with Antonescu on 26 August 1944 at which he intended to ask for the last time for Romania's withdrawal from the war. The succession of events and the imminent departure of Marshall Antonescu to the front, determined the rescheduling of the operation. Antonescu was called for an audience with the king on 23 August, at 4 pm and during the discussion that followed he refused to accept the country's exit from the war arguing that, among other reasons, there had been a

'lack of concrete guarantees offered to Romania' for ending the anti-Soviet war. Antonescu would also have wanted the uncoupling from Germany to be made with Hitler's acceptance, a polite intention which would have been a risk. Under these conditions King Michael ordered the arrest of the Marshall and his collaborators. Antonescu was taken into custody by a group led by Emil Bodnaras and kept for several days in a safe house of the Communist Party. Then he was turned over to the Soviets who brought him to the USSR. On being brought back to Romania he was tried, sentenced to death and executed on 1 June 1946.

The fall of the Antonescu government was followed by the first political and military measures in reaction to the new situation: a new government was formed, led by General Constantin Sanatescu, decree-laws were promulgated concerning general amnesty, abolition of forced labour camps, release of political prisoners, re-establishment of the democratic framework for the development of the country. In Bucharest the army occupied the main state and military institutions and German military objectives were blocked and isolated. During the evening of 23 August, at 10 pm, the proclamation by King Michael to the country was broadcast on the radio; it announced the changes undergone at the level of Romania's political leadership, its exit from the alliance with Germany and joining with the Coalition of Allied Forces. The same evening the king met with the German ambassador in Bucharest and was informed of the request that Nazi troops peacefully withdraw from Romanian territory.

Totally surprised by these events, Hitler nevertheless ordered the repression of the Romanian insurrection, so that during the next day armed fighting spread across the whole country. The capital was liberated on 26 August and, on 25 October 1944 the last Romanian territories under fascist occupation, the towns of Carei and Satu Mare, were liberated. After liberating national territory and practically cancelling the arbitrary decision taken in Vienna in August 1940, Romanian soldiers participated together with Soviet ones in the liberation of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and some parts of Austria.

From a military and strategic point of view, Romania's act of 23 August 1944 deeply modified the balance of forces in South-Eastern Europe at a moment when it was not very clear that Nazi Germany would be defeated. German defences fell in the southern flank of the Eastern front, thus making the broadest opening in their military operations and a huge dislocation at the fronts from the Carpathians to the Danube and the Balkan Peninsula. Romania's gesture also increased the internal crisis of Germany's allies: Croatia, Bulgaria, Finland and Hungary, speeding up their exit from the fascist camp.

On the logistical level, the events of the summer of 1944 stripped Nazi Germany of big reserves of raw materials, especially oil, taking into account the fact that in 1944 oil wells from the Prahova Valley, which covered a third of German needs, were still under Nazi control, together with those from Hungary, Galitzia and Austria, which were less important. A few days after the beginning of the 23 August insurrection, the US publication *The Christian Science Monitor* noted the following: 'Equal in importance with the military strike given to the Nazis by the loss of Romania are the economic losses. They strip them of the main producer of cereals in the Balkans and also of the only important source of natural oil products.'

The main beneficiary of the coup d'état was, in all aspects, the Soviet Union. During the night of 23 August 1944, Romanian troops ceased fighting against Soviet troops as decreed in the proclamation of King Michael. In spite of this, Soviet troops did not receive the order from Moscow to stop treating Romanians as enemies until 27 August. In the situation created immediately after 23 August, Romania

was militarily occupied by the USSR, which disarmed and then deported approximately 130,000 Romanian soldiers and officers to camps from Siberia.

After 23 August 1944, most internal political forces supported the necessity of the country's return to a democratic framework of development. Decree no. 1626 of 31 August 1944 partially reinstated the 1923 constitution. However, Romania's fate would be decided by secret agreements concluded among the great powers through which they divided spheres of influence in Europe. In October 1944, in Moscow, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill abandoned Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union through the percentage agreement 'checked' by Stalin with a blue pencil. Romania entered into the Soviet sphere to the extent that it experienced 90 per cent Soviet influence, compared to only 10 per cent western influence. Official releases broadcast after the Conferences of Yalta (February 1945) and Potsdam (July to August 1945) by leaders of the USSR, the USA and Great Britain, were only meant to create the impression that these powers were animated by the wish to accomplish a just peace and a world based on freedom and democracy.

For the Romanian people dramatic changes were to follow. By the will of Stalin, the force of the Red Army and the tacit agreement of the USA and Great Britain, a totalitarian regime was gradually established which was subservient to the great empire in the East and which kept Romania half a century away from a further development in agreement with democratic values and historical progress.

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