Hi-story lessons.

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17.04.1916

Romania's participation in the First World War

The causes of the First World War must be sought in the evolution of international relations during the last part of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. It became clear that a redrawing of the world map was desired, especially by the Central Powers. The pretext of the war emerged in 28 June 1914, when the Austro-Hungarian crown prince Franz Ferdinand was assassinated, in Sarajevo, by a Serbian student.

On 28 July 1914, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia and, during the days that followed, the war became European. Initially, it was believed that the war would be short, but the two combatant military blocs, the Central Powers and the Entente, were to confront each other for four years, a period during which fronts and alliances were to change each year. The entrance into the war of states such as the Ottoman Empire, Japan or the United States confirmed its extension globally.

At the moment of the war's outbreak, Romania was still allied with the Central Powers. However, the Romanian political elite was divided into two main camps regarding participation in the war. On one side were the Germanophiles, represented by Petre P. Carp and Constantin Stere, who supported the idea of entering the war on the side of the Central Powers, according to the 1883 treaty. They considered Germany to be the main power in Europe and an ally that would protect Romania from Russian expansionism. On the other side, the Entente supporters, represented by Ion I.C. Bratianu, Take Ionescu, Nicolae Filipescu (or Nicolae Iorga), who favoured entering the war on the side of the Entente, with the main objective of achieving national unity (however, without Bessarabia!). The liberal government led by Ion I.C. Bratianu considered that Romania could not miss the opportunity the war presented for liberating territories inhabited by Romanians and ruled by Austria-Hungary. Other political leaders, such as Titu Maiorescu and Alexandru Marghiloman, preferred benevolent neutrality in favour of the Central Powers. Although he was also a supporter of the alliance with the Central Powers, King Carol I eventually had to agree with the decision of the Crown Council that took place in Sinaia, on 3 August 1914 and which decided that Romania would remain neutral for the moment. Carol I died shortly after and his nephew, Ferdinand I who acceded him was a sympathiser of the Entente.

During the neutrality period (1914-16), Romania was contacted by representatives of both camps, each trying - by means of pressure and promises - to participate in the war for its respective side. The

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strategic positioning of the country on the flank of the two alliances in conflict, but also its army of 600,000 people, were sufficient reasons for each camp to deploy intense diplomatic efforts for the alliance with Romania.

While the Central Powers recognised Romania's right to Bessarabia, the Entente offered Transylvania, Banat and Bukovina to the Romanians. Thus, after several negotiation rounds, on 4 August 1916, Romania signed an alliance treaty and a military convention with the Entente. The treaty provided for the rights of Romania to the territories inhabited by Romanians in Austria-Hungary: Transylvania (with Crisana), the whole of Bukovina and Banat. The military convention established that Romania would declare war on Austria-Hungary in a maximum of ten days and specified the military assistance the Entente had to provide to the new ally: Russia vowed to begin a strong offensive in Eastern Prussia and support the defence of Dobruja and the other Allies to open a front in Thessaloniki against Bulgaria and send 300 tons of munitions daily to Romania.

On 14 August 1916, Romania declared war on Austria-Hungary (but not against Germany). Of the four Romanian armies, one was mobilised to defend the southern border and three led the offensive in Transylvania, which corresponded to national ideals and less to applying military strategy. Romanian troops crossed the Carpathians and liberated several towns, coming close to Sibiu, Sighisoara and Hunedoara. The climax of the campaign was the liberation of Brasov. The population over the Carpathians received the Romanian troops with much enthusiasm.

But the successes gained in Transylvania were quickly overshadowed by the catastrophe in the south, in Turtucaia. Here the emphasis fell quickly on the lack of organisation and war training that characterised the Romanian army, including at command level. The situation was exacerbated by the allies' neglect of some of its commitments established by the military convention, especially the offensive promised on the Thessaloniki front, which should have blocked Bulgarian troops. In these conditions, surrounded by German and Bulgarian troops led by Field-marshal von Mackensen, the Romanian army suffered a dreadful defeat in Turtucaia, on 24 August/6 September 1916 (approximately 35,000 soldiers were killed in action or taken prisoner). The bold operation designed by General Averescu, of attacking German and Bulgarian troops from the flanks, was unsuccessful; the Romanian army was ultimately pushed north of the Danube.

This decision was also the result of a strong German-Austro-Hungarian offensive unleashed on the Carpathian front in September and October. Forced to retreat to the line of the passes, Romanian armies staged a heroic resistance. Eventually, though, the Central Powers entered the Jiu Valley. On 2/15 November 1916 they conquered the town of Tg. Jiu, then occupied Oltenia and entered Walachia proper. In order to defend the capital, a defence line was built in the Neajlov-Arges area. But the line gave way. Romanian authorities left Bucharest, which was declared an open city. On 23 November/6 December 1916 the armies of the Central Powers occupied Bucharest and two thirds of the country fell under foreign military occupation. The royal family, the government and the parliament were forced to retreat to Iasi and in December a Romanian-Russian agreement was concluded to send Romania's gold reserves to Moscow.

The new front in Moldova was stabilised on the alignment of the Eastern Carpathians, Siret and Danube rivers. The Romanian army, supported by Russian troops, continued to fight, although most parts of the country were under foreign occupation and losses were estimated at 300,000 dead, wounded, missing in

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action or prisoners.

The Romanian army managed to recover with the support of the Entente during the winter and spring of 1917. The military leadership was changed through the promotion of generals such as Constantin Prezan, Alexandru Averescu, Eremia Grigorescu and Constantin Christescu. Substantial support came from the French Military Mission, led by General Henri Berthelot, who contributed to the training and reorganising of the army, even if sometimes at the price of hurting the pride of Romanian officers. Additionally, Berthelot emphasised the need for Romanian troops to continue fighting on national territory and not to withdraw in the south of Bessarabia, as some Russian commanders wanted.

An important role for strengthening trust in Romanian soldiers – most of whom were peasants – was played by the promise made by King Ferdinand in April 1917 that after the war they would receive land and voting rights. The message, conveyed during an address made on one of the king's visits to the front, was aimed both at restoring the morale of the army after the defeats of the previous years and at preventing any spread of the revolutionary mood from Russia, which had led to the fall of the Tsarist regime and an increase in Bolshevik agitation.

Reorganised and re-equipped with Anglo-French weaponry, with its morale boosted following the promise of land ownership, the Romanian army proved itself during the battles from the summer of 1917. During the Marasti offensive, from 11/24 July to 19 July/1 August, the Second Army, led by General Alexandru Averescu, in cooperation with the 4th Russian Army, liberated over 500 sq km and 30 settlements, thus also capturing a substantial quantity of military materials.

Between 24 July/6 August – 6/19 August, in Marasesti, the First Army, led by General Constantin Christescu, then by General Eremia Grigorescu, and supported by the 4th Russian Army, stopped the German-Austro-Hungarian offensive led by Field-marshal von Mackensen, which aimed to break the front and force Romania out of the war. Between 26 July/8 August – 9/22 August, in Oituz, the Second Army, led by General Averescu, stopped another German-Austro-Hungarian offensive, led by General Friedrich von Gerok, whose purpose was to pierce the Romanian-Russian defence in order to form a junction with troops led by Field Marshal von Mackensen. Romanian troops, supported by Russian soldiers, heroically resisted this move.

Thus, the invasion manoeuvre imagined by the Central Powers' command, whereby it envisaged catching the main Romanian and Russian forces in the Curve of Carpathians and in the Focsani 'gate' failed. In the summer of 1917, the Romanian front still held. The Romanian army had avenged the defeats from the previous years and had won everyone's respect.

But the course of events in Russia was unfavourable to Romania. The victory of the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 prompted Russia's exit from the war. The truce of 2/15 December, signed in Brest-Litovsk between the Central Powers and the Bolshevik government thus marked the end of the eastern front.

Isolated, Romania had to conclude a military truce in Focsani on 22 November/5 December 1917. Then, on 20 February/5 March 1918, the Averescu government signed a preliminary peace treaty with the Central Powers. It was hoped that the formation of a new government on 5/18 March, led by Alexandru Marghiloman, a Germanophile, would lead to better peace conditions. It was only an illusion. On 24

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April/7 May 1918, Romania was forced to sign the Peace Treaty of Bucharest with the Central Powers. This treaty, signed at the Cotroceni Palace, provided for the loss of Dobruja. Bulgaria occupied Cadrilater and a part of Constanța County, while the rest of Dobruja was under a condominium of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey. Invoking security reasons, Austria-Hungary occupied a surface of 5,600 sq km in the Carpathian Mountains, with the main mountain peaks, and moved the border on the southern and eastern slopes. In its turn, Germany received a ninety-year concession of a monopoly over Romania's oil, cereal trade, wood exploitation and processing. Most of the Romanian army was to be demobilised: only four divisions in Bessarabia remained with their wartime forces and eight divisions in Moldova were maintained with reduced forces.

In spite of these odds, King Ferdinand endlessly postponed a ratification of the treaty, which later made a resumption of hostilities possible. Romania thus managed to preserve its statute of belligerent country at the peace conference.

During the summer of 1918 the great military successes of the Entente took place and, during Autumn, the Central Powers and their allies capitulated one by one: Bulgaria on 29 September, the Ottoman Empire on 30 October, Austria on 3 November, Germany on 11 November, and Hungary on 13 November.

On 9 November, the Romanian government presented an ultimatum to the Central Powers' occupation troops to leave the national territory and on 10 November Romania re-entered the war on the side of the Entente. One day later, the war was practically ended, following the signature, in Compiegne, of the truce between the Entente and Germany. On this occasion, Germany recognised, among others, the caducity of the Bucharest Peace Treaty of 24 April/7 May 1918.

During its participation in the war, Romania suffered huge losses in lives, both at the level of the army and of the civilian population: approximately half a million people. Also, the Central Powers led a policy of systematic economic exploitation of the occupied territory, taking over a million tons of oil, two million tons of cereals, 6,000 tons of food products, over 500,000 horses, 3.5 million pigs, etc.

However, victory in war, coupled with the fall of the Austro-Hungarian and Tsarist empires, brought Romania closer to the possibility of achieving national unity.

Translation from Romanian into English: George Tiugea, Proofread by Dr. Ian Copestake

PhD Ana-Maria Cătănuş

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