

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE ROMANIAN ARMY TO DEFENDING THE GREAT UNION, AFTER DECEMBER 1st, 1918

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Abstract:

Just the simple proclamation of the Great Union was not enough, it had to be politically, military and diplomatically guaranteed. Thus, during November and December 1918, the Romanian army who come over the Carpathians supported the taking over, defending and pushing westward the demarcation line with Hungary.

After the liberation through combat of Transylvania, the Romanian army carried offensive operations on the territory of Hungary, stabilized its defense on the Tisza River, and then, by counteroffensive, passed East of Tisza (24 July - 1 August), through the pursuit of fights against Hungarian troops and on August 4, 1919 occupied Budapest.

In other words, obtaining / taking over state power demanded from the Romanian army many more and much more serious efforts, including new blood sacrifices.

Keywords: *proclamation of the Great Union; Romanian army; King Ferdinand; General Prezan; passage of Tisza; occupying Budapest.*

Introuction

The Great Union of Alba Iulia in 1918 represents for our national history the most important event that signifies the fulfillment of the Romanian ideal to live freely in a single national unitary state.

The accomplishment of the Great Romania in December 1918 did not happen suddenly, but it represented a secular dream of the Romanians to be together from Banat to the Dniester.

With all the motivations of the historical, cultural and social-political components, this historic act could not have been accomplished without the involvement and significant contribution of the military component.

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According to the famous Romanian historian Constantin Kirițescu¹, the balance sheet of the military effort made by Romania during the First World War amounted to 800,000-1,000,000 people out of the battle, representing over 10% of the entire population of Romania. In relation to the number of its inhabitants, Romania sacrificed more people than France or Italy.

The mandate of the supreme sacrifice was entrusted and assumed, as in other crucial moments in national history, by the Romanian Army.

The Political-Military Context of the Great Union

A favorable situation was expected to meet the desire of unity of the Romanians expressed throughout the ages, possibly after the First World War, in a geopolitical context of the collapse of the great European empires: Tsarist and Austro-Hungarian empires, and the creation of new, independent states. Ever since the war, the purpose has been declared to the Romanian people through a proclamation that synthesizes the historical facts of the forefathers for national unity: *"Today we have been given to the task to complete their work by forever establishing what Michael the Brave managed to accomplish for just a moment: the Union of the Romanians on the two sides of the Carpathians"*².

Having German military training, King Ferdinand strongly believed in the victory of Central Powers³ in World War I, in contradiction to Queen Maria who supported the alliance with the Entente. However, the sense of duty towards the country was stronger than his convictions, and Romania joined the Entente⁴.

King Ferdinand said: *"I am a constitutional king, so if the country believes its interests dictate to go against the Central Powers, it will not find in me a hindrance in achieving its national ideal"*⁵.

An important figure related to this historical period remains the politician Ion I.C. Brătianu⁶, Prime Minister of King Carol I, who joined

¹ Constantin Kirițescu, *Istoria războiului pentru întregirea României*, 1916-1919, vol. I, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1989, p.15.

² Ioan Scurtu, *Alba Iulia 1 Decembrie 1918*, București, Editura Sport-Turism, 1988, p.69.

³Alliance of the Nations formed from Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria in the First World War.

⁴ Political-military mutual aid bloc formed before the First World War including France, England and Russia, which Romania joined in 1916.

⁵ I. G. Duca, *Memorii*, București, Editura Expres, 1992, vol. I, p. 129.

*Romania in 1883, at the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy), "considering it the strongest on the continent"*⁷.

*Unlike his predecessor, who held the reins of Romania's foreign policy, King Ferdinand "left entire freedom of action to the experienced Ion I. C. Brătianu, who undertook several political and diplomatic actions aimed at obtaining certain guarantees regarding the satisfaction of the national aspirations of the Romanian people"*⁸.

An extremely important element, from the military point of view, is that General Constantin Prezan (the future Marshal) was the commander of the Great General Headquarters of the Romanian Army, and Lieutenant Colonel Ion Antonescu (the future Marshal) was working at the Operations Section.

After this moment, politicians were even more anxious about the achievement of the goal of unification of Romanians dispersed under foreign rule in the territories of Transylvania, Banat, Crișana, Maramureș (approximately 2,800,000 Romanians), Bucovina (230,000) and Bessarabia (2,750,000 of whom 1,810,000 (67%) were Romanians, 33,000 Russians and Ukrainians, and the rest were Jews, Bulgarians, Gagauzs and Germans)⁹.

The Romanian delegation at the 1919 Peace Conference in Paris was also led by Ion I.C. Brătianu, *"who has carried out a huge diplomatic activity in order to address, in turn, all the vital problems for the Romanian people"*¹⁰, then when all the peoples of Europe were expecting to have the territorial status they were entitled to.

⁶ Ion C. Bratianu (1864-1927) was an important Romanian politician, also known as Ionel Bratianu, president of the National Liberal Party, with an active role in the achievement of the Union of 1st December 1918.

⁷ Keith Hitchins, *România: 1866-1947*, trad. Delia Răzdolescu, George G. Potra, ediția a III-a, Buc., Humanitas, 2004, p. 7.

⁸ Ioan Scurtu, *Istoria românilor în timpul celor patru regi (1866-1947), Vol. II: Ferdinand*, București, Editura Enciclopedică, 2004, p. 13.

⁹ Constantin Kirițescu, *Istoria războiului pentru întregirea Românie: 1916-1919*, vol. II, București, Tip. România Nouă, 1932, p. 61.

¹⁰ Sever Neagoe, *Teritoriul și frontierele în istoria românilor*, București, Editura Ministerului de Interne, 1995, p. 109.

As active participants in World War I, King Ferdinand on the front, and Queen Maria behind the battle lines, helping and caring for the wounded, the two monarchs demonstrated responsibility and vocation of leaders who can lead the country's destiny in history.

The vast majority of the Romanian army was made up of peasants (who were wearing traditional laced-moccasins instead of boots) who were motivated in proving their courage, by the patriotic spirit inculcated by the Romanian school and the Romanian Orthodox Church, by the respect and trust in the commanders of the army and in King Ferdinand and, last but not least, by the promise of King Ferdinand to the soldiers that he will give to them pieces of land as well as other rights¹¹.

My grandfather, Vasile C. BOARU, fought in the Battle of Mărășești (he had the rank of sergeant) in 1917 under the slogan "*YOU SHALL NOT PASS!*". He subsequently received land near his native village Itești, Bacău County.

King Ferdinand thus honored his promise in front of those who fought in this war for unifying the nation.

The Romanian Army also played an important role in conducting these events. After the withdrawal of Russia from the war, in November 1917 and the gaining of autonomy by Bessarabia on December 2/15, 1917, the Russian soldiers' attacks on the population followed, which the new Bessarabian government could not cope with. The help of the Romanian officials was requested and the support came from the Romanian Armed Forces.

¹¹ On March 23, 1917, Ferdinand addressed the military of the 2nd Army, who were cantoned at Răcăciuni, and he told them: "*Soldiers, you, sons of the peasants, who defended with your arms and your chest the land where you were born, where you grew up, I, your king, am telling you that besides the great reward of your success for which the whole nation is grateful to you, you have also gained the right to master in a greater extent the land which you have fought for. You will be given land! I, your king, I will be the first to give an example, you will be granted a wide participation in the affairs of the state*". King Ferdinand kept his promise, and on June 19, 1917, the Constitutional Review Bill was promulgated, which included, among other things, the adoption of the agrarian reform by the expropriation of the great property and the introduction of universal suffrage. [<https://www.balcanii.ro/2016/03/un-bun-roman-regele-ferdinand/>], accessed on April 14, 2018.

Bessarabia with Romania on 27 March 1918, followed by Bucovina on 28 November 1918, and Transylvania, Banat, Crișana and Maramureș on 1st December 1918¹².

The actions of the Romanian army for the defense of the Great Union

The actions between Prut and Nistru

The manner in which the Romanian Command solved the problems it faced on a strategic and tactical level was fully demonstrated in the military actions carried out between December 1918 and August 1919 for the expulsion of the invaders and the defense of the national unity of all the Romanians by uniting the provinces' historical background with the motherland.

A first military action of the Romanian army was the restoration of the rule of law on the territories between the Prut and Nistru.

The proclamation of the autonomy of the Bessarabian republic constituted an uplifting historical moment for the Romanian people living in this province. However, the event coincided with the agreement on the ceasefire on the Romanian front, a signal of the general route of the Russian army, which extended to the territory between the Prut and the Dniester. On this Romanian historical territory there were many warehouses, materials and armaments of the Romanian army, administered and guarded by the Romanian army, with the prior consent of the Russian Command.

The proclamation of the Bessarabian republic and the creation of the Council of the Country through free elections constituted an expression of the people's desire in this province to shake off the foreign reins. The sense of unity of nation, just as in Transylvania, was strong. The desire of the majority of the population here, which was 66.5% Romanian, was to be united with the motherland, Romania.

As the young republic did not have its own army force, undergoing reorganization, and the majority of the Bessarabian people were spread in the immensity of Russia, due to the war, the Country Council strongly urged

¹² Nicolae Ceachir, *Marile puteri și România (1856–1947)*, București, Editura Albatros, 1996, p. 200.

the Romanian Government on 24 December / 6 January 1918 to provide military aid for keeping order on the territory of the republic.

The Romanian government responded favorably to the demand of the Bessarabian people and allocated some of the forces available for the actions between the Prut and the Dniester.

The Romanian Command assigned two infantry divisions (D11, 13 I) and two cavalry divisions (D1, 2 Cv) that acted to restore order in southern Bessarabia (D.13 I) in the center Bessarabia and the capital (D.11 I), in northern Bessarabia (D.1 Cv) and D.2 Cv acted in support of D.11, 13 I.

The actions of the Romanian troops began on 7/20 January and ended on February 27th / March 12th, 1918, with the entry of 13th Infantry Division troops into Cetatea Albă. The Romanian troops executed a very special action: the restoration of the rule of law in a Romanian province devastated by the withdrawing Russian army and by armed formations of various colors. There were no offensive actions against groups of forces that would have defended their positions.

Liberation of occupied Transylvania

The penetration of the Romanian troops into our historical provinces to expel the invaders made the withdrawal of Mackensen's troops extremely difficult, which turned into a disorderly fleeing, especially after October 29 / November 11, 1918, when the Compiègne¹³ truce was signed, which ended the hostilities on the Western Front.

¹³ The Treaty of Armistice took place on November 11, 1918 between the German Empire and the Powers of the Entente, and ended the First World War on the Western Front. The treaty was signed in a train carriage in the Compiègne forest. The main signatories were Marshal Ferdinand Foch, commander of the Entente forces, and Matthias Erzberger from Germany.

Because of the terror exerted by the Hungarian guards in Transylvania, the Romanian National Council here requested support from the Romanian Government from Iasi.

Consequently, on November 5/18, the Great General Headquarters ordered Romanian troops to enter quickly in Transylvania, in order to ensure the order, peace, life and wealth of the inhabitants. Thus, the division commanded by General Traian Moşoiu was concentrated in the Toplița - Ditrău - Gheorghieni area and the 1st Hunters Division (Infantry - Field Hunters) in the Miercurea Ciuc - Sân Dămăcuș area. the 6th Infantry Division of Focsani was concentrated in Olt Valley and the 2nd Hunters (Infantry) Division in the Jiu Valley.

The Romanian military units defended the Great Union on 18 November / 1st December 1918 in Alba Iulia. As the members of the delegations from the counties in the west of the country, who participated in the Great Meeting from Alba Iulia, were arrested and persecuted by the Hungarian administration, the Romanian army began fighting to the west in December 1918, reaching the line: Satu Mare, Salaj, Bihor, Arad.

With the approval of the Inter-Allied Supreme Military Council from Paris, the Romanian army expelled the Hungarian administration and Hungarian troops, on April 1919, up to Tisza. Among the localities liberated in the western part of the country there was also Oradea on 20th April 1919.

Bela Kun (Soviet ruler established in Budapest in March 1919)¹⁴, by an agreement with Lenin, the Bolshevik leader of Russia, attacked with the Hungarian army, in June 1919, the Czech army and it was just the decisive intervention of the Romanian army that calmed down the Hungarians.

The new Hungarian authorities refused to comply with Allied requests to withdraw and demanded a return to the demarcation line previously established by the Belgrade Convention. As the Hungarian troops refused to implement such a decision, in the second half of April 1919 the Romanian army triggered the counteroffensive and occupied the territory between the Apuseni Mountains and Tisza river.

¹⁴ On March 8/21, 1919, the Hungarian Republic of Councils was created, Bela Kun being actually its leader.

In 14 days of fighting, the Romanian troops crossed the distance between the ridges of the Apuseni Mountains and Tisza river- over 200 Km - achieving an average of offensive rhythm of 15 Km / 24 hours. Once she got to Tisza, the Romanian army fulfilled its mission - the liberation of Transylvania from the occupants and the defense of this Romanian province on an advanced line (awaiting the political-military deliberations from Paris).

Defensive formations were built on this line, pending the decision of the Allies convened in Paris.

In the following months, the Romanian troops consolidated their defensive positions on the Tisza River¹⁵. A covering formation, commissioned by General Gheorghe Mărdărescu, was realized, made of two sectors. The Northern coverage sector, defended by the North Group commanded by General Nicolae Mihăescu with an opening of 150 Km, and the Southern Sector with a 150 Km aperture, defended by the South Group commanded by General Ștefan Holban. The general reserve was concentrated in the Carei-Oradea-Debrecen region.

However, the Hungarian troops surprisingly started by initiating a new offensive against the Romanian army on July 20, 1919, managing to set bridgeheads to East of Tisza River.

For the destruction of the enemy that penetrated to the east of Tisza, through a double surrounding maneuver on the Szolnok bridgehead and the restoration of defense on the watercourse, the Command of the Transylvanian Troops constituted a counteroffensive task force made up of 6 major units (as compared to only 3 of the enemy) triggered the counterstrike on July 11/24 (initially only with the Group of Maneuvers), commanded by General Moșoiu, managing on the first day to penetrate 8-10 Km into the left flank of the enemy and to reject across the Tisza River a part of his forces.

Subsequently, on July 12/25 and 13/26 July, the Romanian Command hired all countercoup groups who have successfully advanced on the evening of 13/26 July and the defense was restored on Tisza River in the Szolnok area. The enemy that was not captured managed to retreat in

¹⁵ Petre Otu, *România în primul război mondial-Marea Unire 1918*, pp.121-122.

disarray to the west by Tisza, while the northern group liquidated the bridgehead from Tokaj, reestablishing here also its defense on the watercourse (the conquered line on July 20th).

At this moment, Romania's political-military leadership (Prime Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu) made the decision to cross the Tisza River to destroy the Hungarian army and complete the victory.

Thus, in the Operations Order of the Transylvanian Troops Command of 29 July 1919 it was stated: *"In order not to give the enemy time to bring their troops back in good shape and regroup them, it is absolutely necessary to resume the tracking ..."*¹⁶.

As a result, the Romanian troops started the offensive in the night of 16 (29) / 17 (30) July, on the entire front of Tisza, launching the main strike on the direction Szolnoc, Budapesta.

King Ferdinand and Queen Maria were also present at this event.

The historian Constantin Kirițescu, in his wonderful literary work *"The Story of Our Holy War"*¹⁷, describes the moment of Tisza's crossing, under the eyes of King Ferdinand, Queen Maria and other personalities, as follows: *"On the night of July 29th to July 30th (1919), the Romanians crossed Tisza in boats, above the Szolnoc, without being sensed, and then they built a bridge of boats over water. On the bridge of boats, the Romanian army afterwards passed the whole day.*

On the shore, King Ferdinand, Queen Mary, and their great adviser, Ioan Brătianu, remembered how, forty-two years before (1877) on the shore of the Danube in front of Nicopolis, their predecessors, King Carol and Ioan Brătianu, the old one, watched the Romanian army that crossed the great river water to win on the plains of Bulgaria the independence of the smaller Romania at that time.

The sons and grandsons of the Plevna fighters were now passing over Tisza under the eyes of the nephew of King Carol and of the son of

¹⁶ Arhiva M.Ap.N., Fond 370, dosar 22, f. 143

¹⁷ Constantin Kirițescu, *Povestea sfântului nostru război*, Ed. SAECULUM I.O., București, 2018. This work, written in the series called "Literature" (not in "Historic Writings"), was published by the author eight years after the publication of the first book called *Istoria războiului pentru întregirea României*, 1916-1919. This edition was cared for and prefaced by I. Oprișan.

Brătianu, to ratify on the plains of Hungary the Great Union of all Romanians"¹⁸.



As the enemy gave up the organization of defense on Tisza River, General Mărdărescu ordered switching to enemy pursuit so that in the first three days of August 1919 the Romanian army kept going forward continually destroying from the movement the enemy's resistance and fractioning their forces.

King Ferdinand and Queen Maria on shore of the Tisza River¹⁹

In the confrontation on the Tisza River (late July and up to August 18) the Romanian army²⁰ lost 123 officers and 6434 soldiers, of which 1760 were dead (30 officers and 1,730 soldiers), 3206 were wounded (81 officers and 3125 soldiers) and 1573 missing (3 officers and 1570 soldiers).

Advancing with determination into the Hungarian steppe, the Romanian army entered into Budapest on August 3, 1919. The first ones to penetrate into the city were the soldiers from the four cavalry squadrons of the 4th Brigade Roșiori Tecuci commanded by General Rusescu who exploited the success of the offensive.

¹⁸ Constantin Kirițescu, *Povestea sfântului nostru război*, Ed. SAECULUM I.O., București, 2018, pp. 306-307.

¹⁹ <https://cersipamantromanesc.wordpress.com>.

²⁰ Petre Otu, *România în primul război mondial-Marea Unire 1918*, p. 177.

About the Romanians' coming into Budapest, Constantin Kirişescu wrote: *General Rusescu, commander of the avant-garde of cavalrymen,, in front of four hundred horsemen, entered the city of Budapest in the evening of August 3rd (1919). The next day, on August 4th, the Romanian army occupied Budapest and hoisted the Romanian flag on the Buda stronghold, the royal palace on shore of the Danube and all the city's most important buildings* ²¹.



Romanian cavalrymen on the Streets of Budapest (1919) ²²

The first large unit that entered Budapest was therefore the 4th Rosiori Brigade led by General Gheorghe Rusescu. The action was not agreed on by General Gheorghe Mărdărescu (Commander of the Command of the Transylvanian Troops) who entered Budapest, being followed by the great majority of troops, on August 4th.

²¹ Constantin Kirişescu, *Povestea sfântului nostru război*, *op.cit.* p. 307.

²² - foto: cersipamanromanesc.wordpress.com, taken from ro.wikipedia.org.



Romanian troops occupying Budapest, 1919²³

Thus, the event became legendary after the news that the Romanian army had put the traditional Romanian peasant footwear, „*opinca*”, on the roof of parliament from Budapest, but that was indeed what happened: “... *And our troops entered Budapest in early August 1919. The Hungarian Parliament Palace was guarded by a platoon of hunters. The chief of the guardsman from the main entrance was Sergeant Iordan, an Oltenian from Craiova, of average height, thin and very lively. Above the palace, Iordan saw the Hungarian flag fluttering in the wind, red-green-white.*

This did not upset him too much, but he did not like it, either ...

Calling on corporal Bivolaru, they went up towards the clouds over Budapest and lowered the flag along the rope, straight at the half-mast, and then, taking the „opinca” of the corporal, he climbed like a bear cub and put it on, as a fur cap, on the head of the mast, leaving the laces to hang in

²³ - foto: ro.wikipedia.org.

the wind. And so there it fluttered a long time in the sky of Budapest, the Hungarian flag with a Romanian „opinca” on it ... ”²⁴.



Romanian troops in front of Parliament from Budapest²⁵

With much talent and patriotism, Kirițescu very much praised the event, as follows: *"Great and unforgettable in the history of the nation will be this day of August 4th, when the Romanian broke the chains of a thousand-year-old slavery, made the enemy kneel and he put his foot on his neck, right in his capital. It was the day that avenged all the sufferings and all the troubles of the war. Among all the allies, we were the only ones who managed to take over the capital city of the enemy. The French and the English failed to enter with their army as conquerors in Berlin, for the Germans, when they felt the ground under their feet shaking, rushed to*

²⁴This episode, which has already entered into folklore, is a real one and here we reproduced its description made by General Marcel Olteanu, a former governor of Budapest during the Romanian occupation of Hungary, between August and November 1919. It originally appeared in his book *„Huzarul negru”*, 1926, and was taken over when the book was re-edited, the book written by General Gheorghe Mărdărescu: *„Campania pentru desrobirea Ardealului și ocuparea Budapestei”*, 1922, by Marist Publishing House under the title *„Campania pentru desrobirea Ardealului și ocuparea Budapestei – și alte mărturii”*, 2010.

²⁵<http://www.teorii-secrete.ro/cucerirea-budapestei-de-catre-armata-romana-memoriile-generalului-rusescu/>.

demand peace. Nor did the Italians manage to enter Vienna. But God has made us worthy, we, the humble and the oppressed people, to avenge vexation for so many centuries and end the cruel war, going in to force the enemy to see with his eyes that the times have changed ”²⁶.

In the following period, the Romanian troops cleaned the Hungarian territory, except for the Southwestern region. Following the requests from the new Hungarian administration to the Interim Military Supreme Council in Paris, Romania began the withdrawal of its army from Hungary on 3rd September 1919.

The Romanian-Hungarian War of 1919 went on over a period of nine months. The Romanians lost 188 officers and 11,478 soldiers, of which 69 officers and 3,601 soldiers were dead.

The Romanian troops remained on the territory of Hungary until 22nd November 1919, and between February 14th and March 28th, 1920, the entire territory of Hungary was evacuated by our troops who withdrew behind the border, established by the Peace Conference between Romania and Hungary.

In the same note of patriotism, Kirițescu praised the victory of the Romanian army with nostalgia to our forerunners’ glorious martyrs:

*“The body of voivode Mihai was thrown on the Turda Plain, dastardly killed because he wanted to bring together all the Romanians. The martyrs, thrown in their forgotten graves, they who were impaled, crushed on the wheel, or torn in prisons, when the Romanian soldiers were passing through the streets of the Hungarian capital, with the music in their forefront and the flags unfolded. Glory to the God Almighty who gave Romanians the mind, bravery and patience to fulfill His will!”*²⁷.

On 4th June 1920, the Treaty of Peace between Hungary and Allied Powers was signed at Trianon, in Versailles. Article 45 of the Treaty of Trianon stated: *“Hungary renounces in favor of Romania to all rights and titles on the territories of the former Austro-Hungarian monarchy situated beyond the boundaries of Hungary as set out in Article 27, Part II, and recognizes them by the present treaty, or by any other treaties concluded, in order to regulate the current territories as being part of Romania”*.

²⁶ Constantin Kirițescu, *Povestea sfântului nostru război*, op.cit., pp. 307-308.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 308.



June 4, 1920: The Treaty of Trianon - Hungary recognized Transylvania as part of Romania ²⁸

Conclusions

We can conclude that the generation of those years of great turmoil and transformation throughout Europe had been prepared to claim its rights and freedoms, with the clear conscience that there was a better fate and that it formed the true support of states and the instrument of their power. United Romania became reality and a success for which the Romanians fought both in the first line of the front and behind it, through propaganda and public diplomacy that went beyond the borders of the country.

*In the history of Romania, December 1st, 1918 remains "a day for all ages" as defined in those times, and Alba Iulia is still the city of the first political union of the Romanians under Mihai Viteazul, the place of Horea, Cloșca and Crișan's martyrdom, and the altar of "the revival of the nation's conscience of Romanians everywhere"*²⁹.

The operations conducted by the Romanian army at the end of 1918, from 1919 and early 1920, are part of the war of liberation and unifying the nation led by our people between 1916 and 1920. Although

²⁸ - photo – radioconstanta.ro.

²⁹ Emil Bădulescu, „1918–Anul împlinirii idealului național românesc. Consacrarea internațională a unui drept istoric”, in Buletinul Academiei de Înalte Studii Militare, București, Editura Academiei de Înalte Studii Militare, 1992, nr. 1, pp. 5–9.

on the European fronts the war ceased on 11 November 1918 when the Compiègne truce was signed, the Romanian people and its army had to struggle hard for more than a year to defend their national and territorial unity.



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