

## WARFARE ACTIONS OF THE LARGE ROMANIAN MILITARY UNITS FOR DEFENSE AND EVACUATION OF CRIMEA IN WORLD WAR II

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**Abstract:** *Researching the existing Romanian and foreign bibliography, regarding the circumstances in which combat forces from the Romanian Army will end up carrying out combat actions, together with Wehrmacht troops, for the defense of Crimea and then the evacuation of troops from the Peninsula, in the World War II, the authors highlight some aspects of these operations, which are less known, and which have sometimes given rise to different and even biased approaches.*

*The analysis shows the steps taken by Marshal Ion Antonescu and the Chief of the General Staff of the Romanian Army, General Ilie Șteflea, to determine Hitler to order the evacuation of troops from large units of the Romanian Army in Crimea, as well as the execution thereof.*

**Keywords:** *Crimea as strategic objective in the Black Sea; coalition war; politico-military decisions; the Soviet offensive; defense of German-Romanian forces; evacuation of troops.*

### Introduction

In July 1942, after the total conquest of Crimea by German and Romanian troops, the southern flank of the German-Soviet front would become the center of gravity for military operations.

On June 28, 1942, Army Groups B and A began offensive operations with the mission to conquer the Stalingrad and reach the Volga, as well as the subsequent conquest of the Caucasus, to gain access to oil fields, a mandatory condition for the offensive continuation on Soviet territory.

In the summer of 1942, the Wehrmacht Army, although advancing in the depths of Russian territory, was stopped at Stalingrad<sup>1</sup>, because it aimed to conquer both it and the Caucasus at the same time and not in turn, which

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<sup>1</sup> Benoît Lemay, *Erich von Manstein strategul lui Hitler*, Volumul I, Editura MIIDECĂRȚI, București, 2017, p.214.

led to the division of Wehrmacht forces, situation on which the Soviet army took advantage by launching the November 1942<sup>2</sup> counteroffensive.

Although the situation was favorable to the Soviets, they contented themselves with the siege and destruction of the German 6th Army at Stalingrad (January 31, 1943<sup>3</sup>) and did not advance towards Rostov, in order to cut off the retreat of Army Group A, with its large units advanced quite deep in the Caucasus.

### **Retreat in Crimea**

Under these conditions, the Wehrmacht wanted to keep the Cuban and the Taman Peninsula under control for as long as possible in order to resume the offensive towards the oil fields in the Caucasus. The mission was carried out by the German 17th Army, Commander-in-Chief Erwin Jaenecke, and the large Romanian units (divisions) of cavalry, infantry and mountain that had fought, mostly in Crimea.<sup>4</sup>

In February-September 1943, German and Romanian troops of the 17th Army fought in successive positions, retreating to the Taman Peninsula.

At the beginning of September 1943, during a visit to the Zaporozhe headquarters of Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, Marshal Ion Antonescu (*figure 1*) requested the retreat in Crimea of the Romanian troops from the Taman peninsula<sup>5</sup>, a retreat that received the approval of Hitler who ordered Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist, commander of Army Group A, to evacuate the Taman (Operation Krimhild).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Feldmareșal Erich von Manstein, *Victorii pierdute, Memoriile de război ale celui mai strălucit general a lui Hitler*, Editura Elit, 1982, pp. 320 - 321.

<sup>3</sup> Jaques de Launay, *Mari decizii ale celui de-al doilea război mondial*, vol. II, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1988, pp. 33 - 34.

<sup>4</sup> Feldmareșal Erich von Manstein, *op. cit.*, p. 322.

<sup>5</sup> General Platon Chirnoagă, *Istoria politică și militară a războiului României contra Rusiei Sovietice. 22 iunie 1941 - 23 august 1944, ediția a II - a*, Madrid, 1986, p. 212.

<sup>6</sup> Adrian Pandeia, Eftimie Ardeleanu, *Românii în Crimeea*, Editura Militară, București, 1995, p. 285.



*Figure 1. Meeting between Marshal Ion Antonescu and Field Marshal Erich von Manstein.<sup>7</sup>*

On September 15, 1943, the German 17th Army and Romanian troops with more than 200,000 troops retreat to Crimea, operation that ended on October 9th, and managed to cross the Kerch Strait without heavy losses. This transfer will turn the Peninsula into an advanced bastion of the Wehrmacht on the southern flank, and a supposed future base for the resumption of operations in the Caucasus.

#### **Fighting actions for defense of the Crimea**

In the fall of 1943, the military situation north of the Sea of Azov did not present a favorable prospect for the Wehrmacht to keep Crimea under control. As early as the summer, after the failure of the Battle of Kursk (*Operation Citadel*), the retreat of the Army Groups South and A on the Dnieper line was foreseen as the only solution to prevent the collapse of the

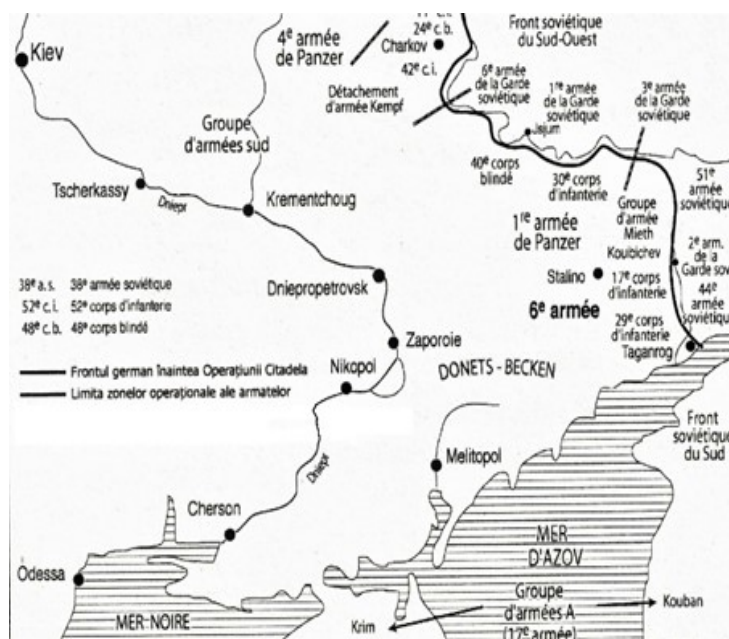
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<sup>7</sup> Photo available at <http://www.istorie-pe-scurt.ro/principiile-de-guvernare-ale-lui-ion-antonescu>, accessed on Jan 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

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southern flank, an important natural obstacle on which the Soviets could be stopped.<sup>8</sup>

After the defeat at Stalingrad, Hitler had become reluctant to the proposals of his generals, imposing as a principle of conducting the operations of the Wehrmacht *"no step back"*<sup>9</sup>. That is why he accepts that German troops would wait for winter on the Dnieper, provided they defend the Donets Basin and the Crimea (*figure 2*).



*Figure 2. Operation Citadel. Battle of Kursk.<sup>10</sup>*

In this way, Hitler compromised the fate of the operation for the Dnieper, which had become, at that time, a decisive obstacle in conducting

<sup>8</sup> Paul Johnson, *O istorie a lumii moderne 1920 - 2000*, Editura HUMANITAS, București, p. 400.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 372.

<sup>10</sup> Benoît Lemay, *op.cit.*, Volumul II, p. 229.

operations, because its loss would have meant a danger in the supply of oil from Romania, the Wehrmacht's most important source of oil. it would have been a fatal blow to Germany, whose troops had failed to take control of Caucasian oil <sup>11</sup>.

In the first half of October, when Field Marshal Erich von Manstein called for the abandonment of the Zaporozhe bridgehead on the eastern bank of the Dnieper, besieged by the South-West Front, he was suspected by Hitler and von Kleist of wanting to get rid of a mission he did not want<sup>12</sup>. As a result, Hitler will instruct von Kleist, commander of Army Group A, to take over this bridgehead, which he considered a choice only if troops from the German 17th Army in Crimea were brought to the bridgehead. The solution was not accepted by Hitler, because he did not accept the surrender of the peninsula.

On October 14, the Soviets continued the offensive, first liberating Zaporozhe and then, on November 6, Kiev, thus compromising the German defense on the Dnieper.

On October 9, the Russians resumed the offensive against the German 6th Army, which was defending itself in the Nogaisk Steppe, north of the Sea of Azov. The loss of the bridgehead at Zaporozhe and the numerical and technical superiority of the Soviet troops determined the 6th Army, under which there were two Romanian divisions, 24 Infantry and 4 Mountain, to withdraw in haste to Nikopol to avoid the encirclement <sup>13</sup>.

On October 23, 1943, Melitopol was conquered by Soviet forces, which thus opened the way to the Perekop and Genicesk isthmuses, and at the end of October they would isolate German-Romanian troops in Crimea from the rest of the German front.

### **Fighting actions for defense of the Crimea**

On October 18, 19 and 24, when the battle of the Nogaisk Steppe was more and more unfavorable, Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist, commander of Army Group A, which subordinated Armies 6 and 17, reported to the High Command of the Army (OKH), that the land

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<sup>11</sup> Apud, Adrian Pandeia, Eftimie Ardeleanu, *op.cit*, p. 58.

<sup>12</sup> Feldmareșal Erich von Manstein, *op, cit.*, pp. 426; 435.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 434 - 435.

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evacuation of Crimea was required, but General Kurt Zeitzler, the head of the OKH General Staff, will answer that Hitler did not allow the evacuation<sup>14</sup>.

On October 26, von Kleist will report that the situation of the 6th Army is increasingly difficult, having to allocate another German division in Crimea, and that, in these conditions, the German 17th Army, left with a German division and seven Romanian divisions, will not be able to defend the peninsula, demanding its retreat. Also, this time the answer will be no.

On October 27, Marshal Ion Antonescu, through General Ilie Șteflea, Chief of the Romanian General Staff, will telegraph to the High Command of the Armed Forces (OKW), rendering the contents of a communication made the day before to General Erik Hansen, Head of the German Military Mission in Romania, expressing concern about the fate of the Romanian divisions in Crimea, with minimal chances of resisting the Soviet encirclement, as they did not have enough anti-tank weapons and therefore the impossibility of building mobile reserves, as well as concern about the increasing difficulties to ensure their supply by sea<sup>15</sup>.

On October 28, Hitler will ban the evacuation of Crimea, and on October 29, he will respond to the Marshal's telegram in which he will present his own vision of the defense of Crimea<sup>16</sup>, which he considers "*the most important air base against the Romanian oil region*"<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand, after the massive American bombings of April 1, 5, 15 and 24, 1944, on the capital and on Ploiești, raids started from the aerodromes in Italy, Crimea was no longer *the most important air base* against Romania<sup>18</sup>.

Also, in the reply telegram Hitler will state that the problem of evacuating the 17th Army by land was obsolete because, in the time necessary for the preparation and execution of this operation, the Russians could either close the northern isthmuses, as will happen, or the German troops in the head of the bridge at Nikopol, would have managed to re-

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 438 - 439.

<sup>15</sup> Adrian Pandea, Eftimie Ardeleanu, *op.cit.*, p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 288 - 290.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Forczyk, *Al Doilea Război Mondial, Sevastopol 1942, Triumful lui von Manstein*, Osprey Publishing, 2008, p. 9; Feldmareșal Erich von Manstein, *op. cit.* p. 439.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques de Launay, *op.cit.*, p. 235.

establish contact with the peninsula, which will not happen due to the lack of necessary forces and means.



*Figure 3. Crimea Peninsula, Perekop, October 28, 1943)<sup>19</sup>.*

On October 26, when Soviet troops broke through German positions in the Nogaisk Steppe, Commander of Army 17 ordered preparations to begin for the evacuation of Crimea. After von Kleist's unsuccessful attempt on October 27 to obtain Hitler's approval, on October 28 Jaenecke announced to Army Group A that he ordered the execution of the evacuation plan, informing the field marshal that he would not execute the defense order at any cost, for fear of having a new Stalingrad. The maneuver proposed by Jaenecke to leave the Crimean Army 17 towards the Dnieper bend was risky,

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<sup>19</sup> Harta Crimeii, available at <https://www.google.com/search?q=Crimeea+harta>, accessed on Jan 29, 2021.

as on October 30 the Soviet tanks had reached Perekop and could forbid its withdrawal (*figure 3*).

In the telegram of October 29, addressed to Ion Antonescu, Hitler showed very strongly that, given the impossibility of evacuating on land, in case of blockade by the Russians of the isthmuses in the north of the peninsula, Crimea will be defended "*at all costs*"<sup>20</sup>.

Hitler's messages to Ion Antonescu, as well as to the commanders of the army groups in the area, showed that Hitler had, in fact, political and economic arguments<sup>21</sup>.

The capitulation of Italy on September 8, 1943<sup>22</sup> had made Hitler fear that the loss of Crimea could have determined Romania's exit from the alliance, which would have meant an unimaginable blow to the Third Reich<sup>23</sup>. In the spring of 1944, these fears, which he had for Romania and Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, proved to be catastrophic for Germany.

Hitler's acceptance of the siege of Army 17 in Crimea was based on assurances from Admiral Karl Dönitz, commander of the German Navy, that the supply of troops and their evacuation at sea could be carried out by German and Romanian naval forces in the Black Sea. In fact, on October 27, Dönitz returns and assures him that the naval vessels will be able to transport 50,000 tons of material per month and that they will be able to evacuate the peninsula at a rate of 20,000 people in four days<sup>24</sup>. The General Staff of the Romanian Army also agreed with this insurance, provided that the transfer of troops from the Crimean ports to Odessa or Constanta took place before the Russians entered the peninsula, given the difficulties related to sea transportation, on a long route, of the over 200,000 German and Romanian soldiers<sup>25</sup>.

On October 13, 1943, the commander of the North-Caucasian Front, although he did not have the forces necessary for success, would prepare the

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<sup>20</sup> Adrian Pandea, Eftimie Ardeleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

<sup>21</sup> Feldmareșal Erich von Manstein, *op. cit.* p. 436.

<sup>22</sup> Francesca Tacchi, *Istoria ilustrată a fascismului*, Editura Enciclopedica RAO, București, 2006, pp. 156 - 159.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques de Launay, *op. cit.*, pp. 88 - 91.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Forczyk, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> Adrian Pandea, Eftimie Ardeleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

occupation of two bridgeheads north of the town of Kerch and in the Eltigen area, respectively, by the 56th Army and 318 (figure 4).



Figure 4. Operation Kerch - Eltigen, 1943<sup>26</sup>.

On October 31, the operation will have an undesirable development in the two landing points. Thus, at Eltigen, the Soviet bridgehead was limited, then blocked, and finally, between December 4 and 7, annihilated by the troops of the 6th Romanian Cavalry Division, commanded by General Corneliu Teodorini<sup>27</sup> and subordinated to 5th German Army Corps. To the north of Kerch, however, the bridgehead was developed by the Russians and, in early December 1943,

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<sup>26</sup> Operations map, available at <https://www.google.com/search?q=eltigen-+crimeea>, accessed at March 20, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Ion V. Emilian, *Cavalerii apocalipsei*, Editura Marist, Baia Mare, 2020, p.350.

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could no longer be limited by the 5th Army Corps, Commander-in-Chief Karl Allmendinger<sup>28</sup>..

Also on October 31, Ukrainian Front 4 troops will land in northern Crimea occupying bridgeheads in the Perekop<sup>29</sup> isthmus and the Ziongar peninsula, where they will build a dam bringing armored vehicles and tanks to the bridgehead, which would pose a serious threat to the northern Crimean front.

In early November 1943, neither Field Marshal von Manstein nor General Jaenecke, who went to Hitler in audience, were able to convince him of the situation of the Army 17, informing him that the structure and endowment of the Peninsula forces did not allow the organization of a lasting defense of Crimea<sup>30</sup>. At that time, the Army 17 had two German infantry divisions, i.e., 50 and 336, the 9th Artillery Division A.A. and the 4th Air Corps, and the Romanian troops, consisting of the Cavalry Corps consisting of the 6th and 9th Cavalry Divisions, the 10th and 19th Infantry and the Mountain Corps with three divisions, had about 110,000 combatants<sup>31</sup>. It should be noted that, in the conference of November 1, 1943, from the Royal Navy Command in Constanța, the evacuation of Romanian troops from Crimea, were appreciated by 75,000 combatants (out of a general total of 180,000), and on November 22, on the occasion During the visit of General Șteflea to OKW, the German side estimated the Romanian troops at 85,000 out of a total of 212,000<sup>32</sup>.

Also, the model manpower situations, "9,700" show that in December 1943, there were approximately 64,000 Romanian soldiers in Crimea; General Ilie Șteflea, the head of the Romanian General Staff, claimed that, in the face of Hitler's decision to keep Crimea at any cost, he reduced the Romanian troops on the peninsula from 110,000 to 64,000, despite all German protests<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Adrian Pandea, Eftimie Ardeleanu, *op. cit.*, (o strălucită victorie românească), pp. 312 - 314.

<sup>29</sup> Arhivele militare române, Relațiile militare Româno - Germane, *A.M.R., fond Corpul de Cavalerie, dosar, 997, fila 15*, Editura EUROPA NOVA, București, 2000, p. 360.

<sup>30</sup> Feldmareșal Erich von Manstein, *op. cit.* p. 439.

<sup>31</sup> Arhiva Ministerului Apărării Naționale, fond 948, dosar nr. 811, fila 228.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, fond microfilme, rola II 1.1611, cd. 524.

<sup>33</sup> Adrian Pandea, Eftimie Ardeleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 304; 436.

We found that, according to Marshal Ion Antonescu's correspondence with Hitler and the German headquarters, the seven divisions in Crimea were considered to be of the highest quality, given both their experience on the battlefield and their equipment<sup>34</sup>.

At the beginning of November, the command of Army 17 estimated that, in case of a Soviet offensive, due to its weak defensive positions in the north, from Perekop and Sivas, as well as from the east, from Kerch, it could not last more than 3-4 days. This did not happen, however, due to the fact that the Russians focused on obtaining a decision in the northern sector of the Southern Army Group.

On November 15, 1943, Marshal Antonescu asked Hitler to keep his promises regarding the evacuation of Crimea, an issue that would be discussed by General Ilie Ștefleă, during his visit to OKW between November 21 and 22.

On December 28, in the light of a new offensive by Russian troops a few days earlier on the alignments on the Dnieper bend and the insistence of Kurt Zeitzler, Chief of the General Staff of the High Command of the Army and Field Marshal Manstein, Hitler will tell them that will not cede Crimea, thus giving the Russians and Western allies the opportunity to push Turkey into the United Nations camp<sup>35</sup>. Von Manstein will later send a letter to Hitler, in which he will argue that the attitude of Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania should not depend, both on the preservation of Crimea, and on the presence of a continuous and stable German front east of the Romanian border. <sup>36</sup>

The Russian offensive to liberate western Ukraine, which began in December 1943, continued to pursue the recapture of Crimea, so that on January 10, 1944, Ukrainian Fronts 3 and 4 launched the offensive to clear the bridgehead at Nikopol.

The next day, on January 11, 1944, General Ilie Ștefleă addressed General Erik Hansen, proposing that, in the event of the evacuation of the bridgehead from Nikopol, the situation of the Crimean troops be reconsidered and that they be withdrawn to a bridgehead in the Sevastopol

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<sup>34</sup> *Antonescu - Hitler, corespondență și întâlniri inedite (1940 - 1944), vol. II*, Editura Cozia, București, 1991, pp. 124; 154.

<sup>35</sup> Feldmareșal Erich von Manstein, *op. cit.* p. 336.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem, op. cit.* p. 456.

area and subsequently to the evacuation at sea, requesting that the retreat and evacuation be prepared in advance before the enemy exerts any pressure on Crimea.

However, Hitler relied on the preservation of Crimea by German-Romanian troops on the premise that the connection with the peninsula could be re-established by a counter-offensive from the bridgehead at Nikopol<sup>37</sup>, but the idea that Wehrmacht can resume the initiative on the southern flank, as well as along the entire eastern front, proved unachievable. The three German corps, which had been placed at the end of October under the command of a commander esteemed by Hitler, the mountain infantry general Ferdinand Schörner, would play an important role in the final battle for Crimea.

At the insistence of Marshal Ion Antonescu, the reinforcements promised to Army 17 would arrive late in the Crimea: the 73rd Infantry Division only at the end of January 1944, and the 111th Infantry Division in March 1944. Thus, in April 1944, Jaenecke had under command five German infantry divisions (50, 73, 98, 111 and 336), in addition to the seven Romanian divisions.

Despite all Schörner's energy, the bridgehead could not resist, and on February 4, Karl Hollidt, commander of the German 6th Army, issued a retreat order, and on February 8, Soviet troops entered Nikopol.

#### **Combat actions of German – Romanian troops in order to retreat towards Sevastopol bridgehead**

On February 9, General Ilie Șteflea sent a letter to General Hansen, requesting Marshal Antonescu to ask OKH to re-examine the situation in Crimea, because "*the evacuation of Crimea must begin immediately*" because: the head of the Nikopol bridge was lost; the Soviet preparations for the attack on Sivas and Kerch, and especially the lack of a large armored unit, without which a retreat maneuver would not have been possible in the event of a Soviet offensive in Crimea. The marshal adds that the loss of the Romanian divisions, *the most glorious and most war experienced* in Crimea,

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<sup>37</sup> Gheorghe Buzatu, *România sub imperiul haosului, 1939 - 1945*, Centrul de Istorie a Românilor „Constantin C. Giurescu”, București, 2007., p. 242.

would have represented an unjustified *weakening of the Romanian army*, and would have reached an *extremely critical internal situation*<sup>38</sup>.

On February 15, General Steflea would express the marshal's point of view in front of Hitler, but the latter had already decided to turn Crimea into a fortress.

On February 26-27, during the meeting in Klessheim<sup>39</sup>, Marshal Antonescu will not succeed in convincing Hitler to accept the evacuation of Crimea. He will try again on March 27, in a letter to him, to persuade him, this time to accept the evacuation of Crimean troops, showing that as soon as the Upper Prut and Upper Dniester were overrun by the Russians, the last favorable time for the evacuation of Crimea had come<sup>40</sup>. In the same letter of March 27, Ion Antonescu also showed that regarding the reorganization of the command, proposed by Hitler, he sees thereof by *regrouping the Romanian forces in a single block*, out of the desire to have all the Romanian forces under his own command<sup>41</sup>.

Such a solution had also been put forward by Field Marshal Erich von Manstein on March 25, 1944, when he proposed to Hitler to create a single command of the southern flank, headed by Marshal Antonescu. Hitler will answer that, for political reasons, the marshal will reject the proposal<sup>42</sup>.

Only after the start of the Soviet offensive on April 8 and the retreat to Sevastopol, (*figure 5*) the command of the German Army 17 and the Crimean Maritime Command will form a common plan for evacuation of the peninsula because it was very clear that the German army could not land on the Dnieper elbow, the only escape route being the sea, provided it was executed before Soviet troops went on the offensive.

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<sup>38</sup> Adrian Pandea, Eftimie Ardeleanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 318 - 319.

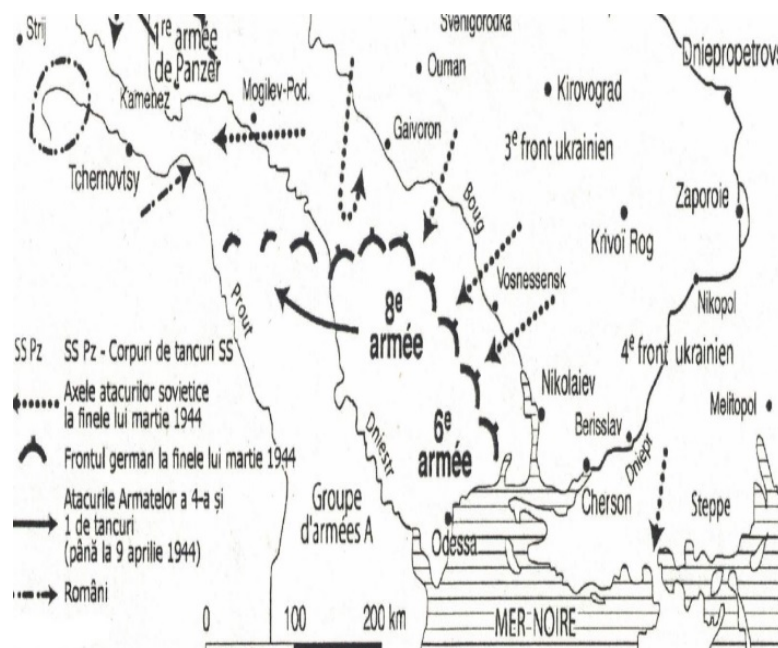
<sup>39</sup> Gheorghe Buzatu, *România sub imperiul haosului, 1939 - 1945*, Centrul de Istorie a Românilor „Constantin C. Giurescu, București, 2007, pp. 230 - 231.

<sup>40</sup> *Antonescu - Hitler, corespondență și întâlniri inedite (1940 - 1944)*, vol. II, Editura Cozia, București, 1991, p. 158.

<sup>41</sup> Idem p. 158 - 159.

<sup>42</sup> Feldmareșal Erich von Manstein, *op. cit.* p. 485.

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*Figure 5. Evolution of the situation on the southern flank of Eastern Front, at the end of March 1944<sup>43</sup>.*

On March 30, another event with consequences for the evolution of the situation in Crimea would be added; Hitler's dismissal of Field Marshals Erich von Manstein and Ewald von Kleist from command of the Army Groups South and A, respectively, replacing them with General Colonel Walther Model and General Ferdinand Schörner<sup>44</sup>, respectively. The consequences of these dismissals will be visible during the final battle for Crimea, when the marshal's interventions alongside Schörner, OKH and OKW will no longer be considered.

In early April, the Army 17 Command drew up the "Adler" evacuation plan, which was a follow-up to the "Ruderboot" project, which was drawn up in

<sup>43</sup> Benoît Lemay, *op.cit.*, Volumul II, p. 229.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 128 - 129.

December 1943. The plan covered the initial retreat to an enlarged bridgehead at Sevastopol and then, in detail, the phases of a forced or orderly abandonment of Crimea at sea. The start date of the evacuation operations depended on the enemy's attack and the results obtained by him<sup>45</sup>.

On April 6, 1944, Hitler further restrained the Romanian army by organizing the Army Group "Southern Ukraine", to prevent any attempt to leave the Alliance, and thus, depriving it of a distinct sector of the front and a national command. Thus, Hitler took an extra security measure for Romania's allegiance to the Third Reich.

On April 8, Russian troops on the 4th Ukrainian Front and the Coast Army launched the final offensive for Crimea, with 30 divisions, two fortification sectors and two brigades of marines at their disposal, totaling 470,000 men, 6,000 gunshots, 560 tanks and cannons and about 1250 fighter jets. Russian forces wanted to enter Sevastopol, divide the German Army and destroy it, starting from the bridgeheads of Kerch, Perekop and Sivas<sup>46</sup>.

In the defense operation, the German 17<sup>th</sup> Army had about 230,000 men, about 1,000 gunshots and 200 asphalt tanks and cannons, but no armored or motorized divisions<sup>47</sup>.

On the day of the attack, in Sivaş, the situation will become critical, the Russians strongly attacking the Konrad Group consisting of the Army Corps 49 (Commander-in-Chief Rudolf Konrad, *figure 6*) and the Romanian Infantry Divisions 10 and 19, will cause great losses, especially to Infantry Division 10. The Cavalry Division 9 will remain in the German Army 17 reserve, subsequently ensuring its withdrawal on the Gneisenau alignment.

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<sup>45</sup> Adrian Pandea, Eftimie Ardeleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

<sup>46</sup> Robert Forczyk, *Where the Iron Crosses Grow: The Crimea 1941 - 44*, Paperback - September 20, 2016, pp. 81.

<sup>47</sup> Victor Nitu, „Armata română în al Doilea Război Mondial, Ultima bătălie în Crimeea - 1943”, available at *WorldWar2.ro*, accessed at 04.03. 2021.



Figure 6. Army corps General Hugo Schwab (second from left), together with his German peer General der Gebirgstruppe Rudolf Konrad (center). In front, Romanian soldiers operate a “Brandt, cal. 81.4mm, md.1927/31” mine launcher, Crimea – February 27, 1944<sup>48</sup>

### **Evacuation of German – Romanian troops from Crimea**

On April 9, 1944, General Erwin Jaenecke, realizing that he could not stop the Russian offensive, reported to the army group asking for approval of the preparation of the "Adler action"<sup>49</sup>, the evacuation plan in

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<sup>48</sup> Photo available at <https://www.google.com/search?q=hugo+schwab+fotografii&sxsrf>, accessed at March 20, 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Robert Forczyk, *op. cit.*, p. 315; Codenames, Operations World War II, *Operation Adler* (12 - 16 April 1944).

case of Soviet offensive, and the freedom to launch the operation at the appropriate time<sup>50</sup>.

On April 10, the Adler plan is launched, and the commander of the 5th Army Corps receives an order to retreat his troops from the Kerch Peninsula on a new alignment in the Parpaci isthmus. The aim was to retreat successively in a bridgehead around Sevastopol, without allowing the Russians to intercept the retreat routes.

On the same day, Soviet troops enter Odessa, occupying the port provided for in the Crimean evacuation plan.

On April 11, under pressure from the troops of the 4th Ukrainian Front, arriving on the Djankoi alignment and isolating the Peninsula from the north, General Jaenecke ordered the retreat of the German Army 17 on the "Gneisenau" alignment (figure 7). Noting this withdrawal, General Schörner informed Hitler that, in the absence of an immediate decision, the Army 17 would certainly be lost, forcing him to approve the retreat to the Sevastopol bridgehead and allow the evacuation of non-combatants.

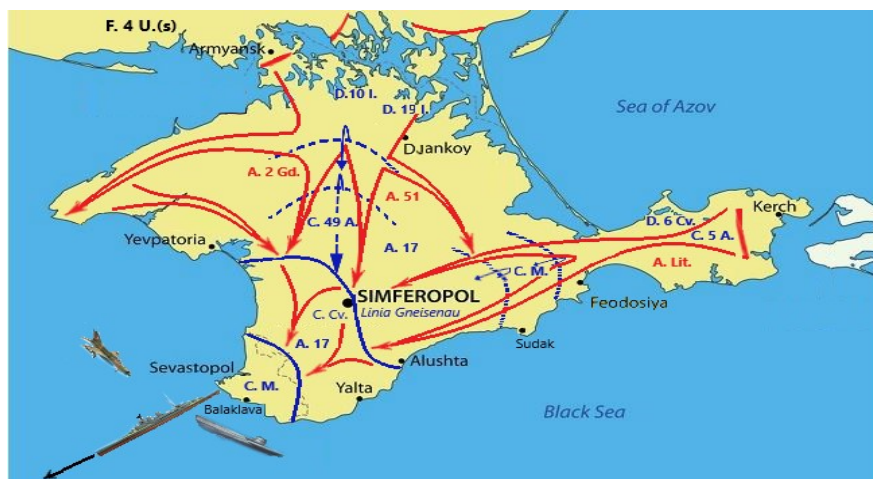


Figure 7. Soviet offensive in Crimea, April - May 1944.

<sup>50</sup> Marius-Adrian Nicoară, „Activitatea desfășurată de Forțele Aeriene Regale române pe timpul evacuării trupelor germano - române din Crimeea (15 aprilie -12 mai 1944)”, *Buletinul Arhivelor Militare Române*, nr.1/2014, p. 62.

Under these conditions, the Romanian Royal Navy launched the evacuation operation, the convoys immediately setting off from Constanța to Sevastopol.

On April 12, General Adolf Heusinger, Head of Operations at the OKH, will send a new order from Hitler to General Walther Model, informing him that Sevastopol will be kept for a long time and that no fighting unit will be allowed to evacuate.

All this time in the Peninsula the German and Romanian troops, under the pressure of the Soviet troops, were fighting fiercely. The 10th and 19th Infantry Divisions were in the most difficult situation, the first facing the offensive of the Soviet 51st Army, launched from the bridgehead of the Ziongar Peninsula, and the second, deployed in the Salkovo and Genicesk isthmuses, ensured the retreat west of the 5th Army of the Kerch Peninsula<sup>51</sup>.

On April 13, after the Soviet conquest of Simferopol, the 5th Army Corps, which also included the 6th Cavalry Division, which was retreating to Sevastopol, was ordered to follow the road on the south coast, through Sudak<sup>52</sup>, Alushta, Yalta, Balaklava, protected by the divisions of the Romanian Mountain Corps.

Under these conditions, between April 13 and 15<sup>53</sup>, the "Alușta" Detachment, consisting of the 7th and 23rd Mountain Hunters Battalions and a mountain artillery division, was sacrificed by the German command in the area of Alușta, Uskut, Perival, which would tension the Romanian-German command relations even more.

The troops that occupied the first positions at the head of the Sevastopol bridge were those of the Romanian Mountain Corps, which were closest to the new alignment and which allowed German and Romanian troops to withdraw safely from the north and east of the Peninsula.

Army 17 will reach the bridgehead in Sevastopol on April 16, 1944, with a force of 124,000 men, of which 78,000 Germans and 46,762

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<sup>51</sup> Robert Forczyk, *op. cit.*, pp. 315 - 316.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>53</sup> Adrian Pandea, Eftimie Ardeleanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 353 - 354.

Romanians, and will demand the evacuation, with priority of Romanian troops, but the reality will be completely different.

On April 21, *General Hugo Schwab's report*<sup>54</sup> will explain the losses suffered in the battles between April 8 and 20: 12,221 Germans and 17,652 Romanians, dead, wounded and missing.

After breaking through the Sivaş front, where the 10th Romanian Infantry Division was located, Marshal Ion Antonescu summoned General Erik Hansen<sup>55</sup> in audience, reproaching him for the fact that, despite his repeated requests, Romanian troops were captured in Crimea in an unfavorable situation. As a result, it was decided that the Romanian troops should be evacuated, except for the 1st Mountain Division and several battalions from the 2nd and 3rd Mountain Divisions, but all the large units were forced to leave troops to form the battle groups, formed in the last days of the actions. Thus, the Romanian soldiers remained in position until the final evacuations and their conduct proved to be at the level of the German soldiers<sup>56</sup>.

The evacuation of Romanian troops was particularly difficult, at least between April 12 and 30. Statistics show that the number of evacuated Germans was almost four times higher, and that of *legionaries* (troops recruited from the populations of the occupied territories in Russia), prisoners and civilians almost double that of Romanians evacuated during this period (at April 19, 1944, 2077 Romanian soldiers were evacuated compared to 15,000 German soldiers and 7,107 legionaries and German auxiliary personnel).

That is why, on April 20, 1944, the Romanian General Staff had to intervene vigorously for a *fair proportionality* between Romanians and Germans in the evacuation transports.

After this date, the Soviet air force and navy began to be more active on the convoy route, and on April 18 the ship "Alba Iulia" was hit hard by the Soviet air force and, although most of the 5,000 soldiers on board were rescued, there were also casualties among Ukrainian volunteers and Soviet prisoners, the ship being towed with great difficulty to Constanta.

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 359 - 364.

<sup>55</sup> Ion V. Emilian, *op. cit.* p. 341.

<sup>56</sup> Maréchal Erich von Manstein, *Victoires perdues*, Published by Plon, Paris, 1958, p. 97 - 98.

On April 17, 18 and 19, Generals Jaenecke, Model, Schörner and Zeitzler tried to change Hitler's order to defend Sevastopol indefinitely, he rejected all their arguments, even though Schörner reminded him that any fighting unit lost in Crimea would be missing in the decisive battle on the Dniester and that, in fact, there were only five regiments left in Sevastopol and not five divisions<sup>57</sup>.

In the face of this inflexibility, General Ferdinand Schörner went to Berghof again to personally explain to the Führer the dramatic situation of the Army 17. His arguments were not heard this time neither, with all the support of Aviation General Deichmann. Schörner's plea for the impossibility of defending Sevastopol was thwarted even by one of his subordinates, General Karl Allmehdinger, commander of the 5th Army Corps, specially called by Hitler, who said that if new forces were brought in, Sevastopol could be defended<sup>58</sup>. Hitler promised reinforcements to defend Sevastopol but found that he had no divisions available.

For Hitler, the preservation of Crimea was mandatory in order to maintain Turkey's neutrality, and the holding of Sevastopol had to be ensured within 6-8 weeks, during which time the Allied landings in the West could take place and the Wehrmacht troops could repel it. The events will occur completely like this; Turkey announced that it would no longer supply chromium to Germany and that it would change its status to an allied state, and that the Allied landing in Normandy would take place close to the deadline scheduled for June 6, 1944, but the Wehrmacht would not be able to reject it<sup>59</sup>.

At the same time, Hitler agreed to the evacuation of the Romanians, mentioning that a division would have to remain to defend the coasts.

On April 22, 1944, Hitler would meet again with General Karl Allmehdinger, whom he saw as the possible savior of Sevastopol, but the meeting would not bring new elements.

On April 25, Hitler summoned Vice Admiral Helmuth Brinkmann "Admiral Black Sea", and Rear Admiral Otto Schulz, commander of the

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 43.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 50 - 51.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*.

Crimean Maritime Command, to Berghof to discuss the Navy's possibilities of supporting Crimean operations.

To Hitler's question: *"How many people can be evacuated in one night if the Russians break through the front?"*<sup>60</sup> Brinkmann puts the figure at 40,000, and Schulz tells him that not even 16,000 people.

On April 26, Hitler will relay the order to defend Sevastopol until the Allied invasion, ordering the cessation of evacuations at sea, with the German Army 17 also tasked with blocking the enemy. The order would cause concern, especially since the transport of the Romanian Cavalry Corps by sea was in full swing, which would end on April 28 without incident, but required the Mountain Corps to remain in place in Sevastopol.

On April 26, *Army Corps General Hugo Schwab* reportedly argued that Sevastopol could not be defended. As a result, Marshal Ion Antonescu sent again, through General Ștefleă, a message to General Schörner requesting the immediate retreat of the Romanian troops from Sevastopol, showing unequivocally that he did not understand why these large units *"are kept without any meaning in a distant bridgehead that cannot be kept anyway, and to be sacrificed instead of being brought into the country, to defend their homes, on which the enemy spills"*<sup>61</sup>.

On May 1, Hitler dismissed General Jaenecke from command of Army 17, deeming him incapable of completing his mission, replacing him with General Karl Allmendinger.

Between May 1 and 2, the promised reinforcements will arrive in Crimea, but their size was too small (2 marching battalions, 15 heavy cannons, 14 howitzers), for the resistance required by Hitler, until June 6-8, to be met.

On May 5, 1944, when in Sevastopol the Russians attacked the northern sector of the front, owned by the German Army 17, a sector in which most Romanian troops were located, the number thereof was reduced, so that of the more than 46,000 of Romanians withdrawn at the head of the bridge, almost 30,000 had already been evacuated by sea or by air.

The main attack of the Soviet army took place in the south-eastern sector, where the 5th Army Corps was located, by the Coast Army. In this

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<sup>60</sup> Apud, Adrian Pandeă, Eftimie Ardeleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>61</sup> *Antonescu - Hitler, corespondență și întâlniri inedite (1940 - 1944), vol. II*, Editura Cozia, București, 1991, p. 163.

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sector, the Soviets used up to 250 gunshots per kilometer of front in artillery training, which surpassed von Manstein's *record* of June 1942, when he scored over 100 gunshots / km.<sup>62</sup>

Although on May 7, the Soviets occupied the heights of Sapun, which meant that Sevastopol would soon be conquered, Hitler would refuse, once again, to evacuate.

During the night of May 8/9, General Kurt Zeitzler informed General Schörner that Hitler had given the order to evacuate Sevastopol. The German Army 17 was to be shipped to Constanta. Also, during the night of 8/9 May, the first two convoys, with an estimated transport capacity of 20,000 people, were set in motion from Constanta to Sevastopol, so that, based on plans drawn up jointly with the Crimean Maritime Command, on the night of 9/10 about 14,000 people were to be embarked, and the other 20,000 - 35,000 people the next night.

On May 9, 1944, the Soviets occupied Sevastopol, and German and Romanian troops retreated to the bridgehead on the Hersones Peninsula, occupied by Romanian Mountain Corps troops, who thus secured the withdrawal of Army 17 fighters from Sevastopol.

On May 10-12, for the execution of the crossing, there were almost 190 warships or merchant ships, German and Romanian, with a transport capacity of about 87,000 people, enough to take over all the survivors of the peninsula.

On May 10, the Black Sea becomes agitated, forcing the ships to remain off the Hersones and thus postponing the planned evacuations for the night of May 10/11; the boarding of the last German and Romanian units will take place on the night of May 11/12.

Starting with May 9, the Soviets achieved the supremacy of the Black Sea Fleet aviation, which made the ships of the crossing convoys a priority target of the enemy's aviation and submarines.

On May 10, 1944, the ships under the German flag "Totila" and "Teja" will be attacked and sunk. They transported approximately 8,000 – 8,500 Romanian and German soldiers, of which only 230 Romanians and 690 Germans could be saved. The ships "Romania", "Danubius", "Durostor", "Dacia", "Bessarabia" were also sunk under the Romanian flag;

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<sup>62</sup> Benoît Lemay, *op.cit.*, Volume I, p. 206 - 207.

"Prodromos", "Helga", "Geiserich", "Var" under the German flag, were also sunk, but the losses in human lives were less.

On the night of 10/11, the commands of the German Army 17 were evacuated, led by General Allmendinger and the Romanian Mountain Corps, including General Hugo Schwab.

According to Romanian sources, 11,000 deaths were recorded during the crossing, of which 4,000 were Romanians<sup>63</sup>.

The one who successfully led the "*crossing*", known as "*Operation 60,000*", one of the largest operations to withdraw armies by sea during the Second World War, during the period, 12 April - May 12, 1944, was Rear Admiral Horia Macellariu<sup>64</sup>, commander of the Romanian Maritime Naval Force, subordinated to the German Command Admiral Black Sea, and who in parallel became deputy of German Admiral Helmuth Brinkman, commander of the German Command Admiral Black Sea. In August, the Rear Admiral would save the port city of Constanța from destruction\*.

About 10,000 soldiers or 26,700, according to other sources, remained on the Crimean coast, including 2,756 Romanians from the 1st Mountain Division, about whom the documents do not record any information.

According to Romanian sources, 120,853 troops arrived in the ports of Sulina and Constanta, where most of the Crimean troops landed, between April 14 and May 13, 1944, of which about 60,000 German soldiers and 40,000 Romanian soldiers, as well as volunteers, prisoners and civilians<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> Victor Nitu, Armata română în al Doilea Război Mondial, „Operațiunea 60.000 - 1944”, available at *WorldWar2.ro*, accessed on March 18, 2021; Adrian Pandeia, Eftimie Ardeleanu, *op. cit.*, p. 419.

<sup>64</sup> Ion V. Emilian, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

\* In his memoir, „*În plin uragan*”, Romanian Admiral Horia Macellariu described the way his discussion with the German Admiral took place, noting that he went to the powerful German battery "Tirpitz", contacted German Vice Admiral Brinkmann, the German supreme commander, who had orders not to cede Constanța, to fight for its maintenance at any cost and to capture the Romanian fleet. "*Between just the two of us, we examined the situation together and determined him to withdraw without a fight and destruction, which would have made victims in the innocent population ...*".

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 402 - 410; 438 - 438.

### **Conclusions**

The Romanian army had entered the coalition war with Germany, in June 1941, for the reunification of Greater Romania and invoking, at the beginning of the war, *the need for military security space*, which later proved to be an illusion, and with a paid price that is hard to imagine and justify.

The loss of the Battle of Crimea in 1944, for German and Romanian troops, was only the result of the loss of the Battle of Stalingrad, a defeat after which the Wehrmacht troops could not recover, ceding all the conquered territories.

Fighting with the German Army 17, the Romanian soldiers from the Mountain Corps and the Cavalry Corps showed courage and selflessness in fulfilling the entrusted battle missions, sacrificing their lives on the battlefield with the belief that Romania will be reunited.

The limits of the Romanian-German political and military relations made Marshal Antonescu and the Romanian High Command realize, as we have shown, the futility of the Romanian presence in Crimea, and their attempts to evacuate troops from the peninsula proved to be unsuccessful.

The efforts of Marshal Antonescu and the General Staff to determine the German commands to approve the withdrawal of Romanian troops generally remained without echo.

Our belief is that from November 1943 to May 1944, if Hitler had not aspired to keep Crimea, for the reasons we have shown, the evacuation of German and Romanian troops, although it was the most important aerial - naval retreat operation in contact with the enemy from the history of the World War II, in the Black Sea, would have been achieved without so many unnecessary losses of human lives.

As for the Romanian army, of the 62,000 - 65,000 Romanian soldiers who were in the Crimea before April 8, 1944, about 40,000 arrived in Constanta; the losses that Romanian sources claim are at 23,397 dead, injured and missing, representing a percentage of 35%, which we consider to be very high.

If the promises of Hitler and the German command echelons had been kept regarding the evacuation, with priority of Romanian troops in the period of April 14-27, i.e., the first phase of the evacuation, there was the

possibility that the Romanian troops, 46,670 officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers, retreated to the bridgehead of the Sevastopol, and be completely saved.

The order to stop the evacuations given by Hitler, as well as the way in which the command of the Army 17 imposed the priority evacuation of German troops and auxiliary personnel, caused painful losses for the Romanian army.

However, the losses suffered in Crimea can also be explained by what actually happened on the battlefield and, especially, due to the blocking the Romanian army into the organization of the Army Group "Southern Ukraine", thus lacking a distinct front sector and a national command.

Let us not forget that the defense of Sevastopol was made with the Romanian Mountain Corps, as well as the fact that it also secured the positions in Sevastopol, as well as those in Hersones, thus ensuring the withdrawal of the troops of the German Army 17.

All this leads us to the conclusion that the Romanian troops in the Crimean defense operation made an indisputable contribution in its defense, as well as in the evacuation of the fighting forces from the Peninsula.

The acts of heroism and sacrifice of our soldiers, who shed their blood for the country in Crimea, are worth mentioning so as not to forget them and always remember that we also owe them, today, the fact that we live in a democratic country, enjoying freedom. Let us light the candle of gratitude for our heroes and pray that God may rest their souls in His Kingdom.



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