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Actions of Romania for the Purpose of Exiting the United Nations War

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Abstract: Romania's entry into war with Germany on June 22nd, 1941, would come after two years of neutrality and non-belligerence, time when the Romanian external policy direction would be pro-German. The years 1943 - 1944 marked the turning point of the war development, the United Nations succeeding in taking the strategic initiative to the detriment of Nazi Germany and its satellites. The political and military disaster that Romania was facing would require the reorientation of its external policy, aiming at bringing the country out of the war as quickly as possible and signing the armistice (Baciu, 1996, pp. 103-104; Onișoru, 1996, pp. 49-50). The considerable deterioration of the military situation on the Eastern Front, would contribute to the achievement of the "united opposition", seeking, to obtain conditions as favorable as possible for Romania, for signing the armistice. The diplomatic action of the opposition benefited from the support of King Mihai, but the peace signing initiatives were carried out simultaneously also by the Bucharest regime, which, through direct negotiations with the Allies, pursued the same political goals.

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The years 1943 - 1944 marked the turning point of the Second World War, the United Nations armies succeeding in taking the strategic initiative on the front, to the detriment of Nazi Germany and its satellites. The political and military disaster that Romania was facing would require the reorientation of its external policy, aiming at bringing the country out of the war as quickly as possible and signing the armistice (Baciu, 1996, pp. 103-104; Onișoru, 1996, pp. 49-50). The considerable deterioration of the military situation on the Eastern Front, embodied by the tireless offensive of the Red Army, would contribute to the tightening of the relations between the leaders of the main political parties and to the achievement of the "united opposition", seeking, through various diplomatic channels, to obtain conditions as favorable as possible for Romania, for signing the armistice. The diplomatic action of the opposition benefited from the support of King Mihai, but the peace signing initiatives were carried out simultaneously also by the Bucharest regime, which, through direct negotiations with the Allies, pursued the same political goals. In March, the Soviet troops had already reached the Dniester line in certain sectors, the Romanian authorities being more and more worried about the increasingly obvious possibility of transforming Romania into a war zone, the attitude expressing accurately the fears of both the civilian population and the political class. The National Democratic Bloc (B.N.D.) was established on May 20th, 1944, including the National Peasant Party, the National Liberal Party, the Social Democratic Party and, obviously, for strategic reasons, the Communist Party of Romania.

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As early as May 24th, S.S.I (Secret Intelligence Service) was in possession of an information memorandum that predicted the status of the Communist Party in the future, given the political influence of the Soviet Union in the states “liberated” by the Red Army (Baciu, 1996, pp. 103-104; Onișoru, 1996, p. 48). Considering that during the negotiations with the Anglo-American allies on one hand and with the Soviet allies on the other hand, Marshal Ion Antonescu continued to “unduly postpone” the withdrawal of Romania from the war, the B.N.D. members would urgently prepare for the dismissal of the head of state and, taking advantage of the arisen opportunity, they would initiate the arrest of the Marshal and his government team on August 23rd, 1944. The establishment of the new Sănătescu government would meet the adherence of all Romanian political forces who wanted to sign the armistice, so that the first concern of the new cabinet would be to establish direct diplomatic contacts with the Allies (Soviets) for the same purpose. The public opinion would be informed on Romania’s exit from the war following to the broadcast of the King’s proclamation at 22.25 hours.

The new political orientation of Romania, announced by Royal Proclamation, would benefit from the nation’s total adhesion, because the natural consequence of that new situation gave the opportunity “to liberate the land of our Transylvania from the foreign occupation” (Mocanu, 1994, pp. 251-252). Note that the army responded quickly and, more importantly, in the same key, to the contents of the Royal Proclamation. Asked by the commander of the “South Ukraine” Army Group, General Hans Friessner, if they would submit to the King and to the new Romanian government, the commanders of the II-nd and IV-th Romanian Armies, General Petre Dumitrescu and respectively Ilie Șteflea, answered “absolutely and clearly that they will totally assist the King of the Country and his Government”¹.

The Germans would try to limit the magnitude of the military and political disaster that was going to come, trying to gain time for the withdrawal of forces and for the repression of an “eventual rebellion”². The cleaning and cover up operations were executed on the Great General Staff orders by all army’s commandments and structures, the action of detaching from the German forces being considered a true success in the end, the German troops being taken by surprise and neutralized by the action of the Romanian army (Kirișescu, 1995, pp. 234-235).

The attitude of the former allies in relation to the Romanian troops would not materialize from the beginning in obvious hostility, both the Romanian and German troops suspecting each other. There were situations in which the separation between them was done “in a very warm atmosphere” (Duțu, 1997, p. 229), but in some cases the situation appeared quite tense, which would attract the energetic response of the Romanian troops. The royal order would be executed by the Romanian troops on the front, namely by the III-rd and IV-th Armies, the Great General Staff taking care of its proper execution (Chirnoagă, 1997, p. 23), but the unfolding of the events would make the order achievable only in part, as the Romanian units found it was almost impossible to break contact with Soviet troops. Radio London (Buzatu, 1995, pp. 416-417) had broadcast “Romania’s change of front” starting with 22.45 hours, statement which would be announced by all news agencies (Mocanu, 1994, pp. 255-256) in the next few days. The Soviet troops would continue their fast advance to the South, surrounding and disarming many Romanian military units that had ceased fire according to the received Royal Order, the attitude of the Soviets producing stupefaction among the Romanian troops, which expected a proper treatment from an allied army. The existing situation would be convenient to the Soviet Military Commandment, which

¹ Archive of the Ministry of National Defense, case 948, file no. 81, f 31. As a matter of fact, the orders of the German High Commandment addressed to the German troops stationed in Romania or to those on the Moldovan front would aim at the immediate arrest of all those who participated in the plot, of the King and, in case Marshal Antonescu is not to be found, the establishment of a new Romanian government led by a Germanophil General.

² *Ibidem*, file no. 1559, f 17. The German attitude was deceitful from the beginning, the case of General Alfred Gerstenberg being already known.

now saw the possibility of easily seizing the entire territory of Romania without a fight, making an important translation of fronts in military terms, threatening directly the entire German military formation in the Balkans and in the Hungarian Plain. The reorganization of the front by the Germans was now only “a theoretical probability”, the Romanian army succeeding in neutralizing the main German forces left in the country (Duțu, 1997, pp. 226-227) with the intention of regaining control over the Romanian territory. The conditions being favorable as “the chaos reached its peak” (Duțu, 1997, pp. 226-227), the Red Army would continue the military offensive against the German and Romanian troops, the consequences being the most disastrous for the latter. Besides the military units captured by the Soviets on the Moldovan front, the Romanian troops represented by the crews of the Black Sea and Danube Delta Fleet would share the same fate, “being landed, disarmed and interned in the U.S.S.R.”¹.

Taking office under very exceptional conditions, the new government led by General Constantin Sănătescu would proceed to quickly initiate the process of signing the armistice with the United Nations (the Soviets holding the priority role), by sending a delegation empowered for this purpose to Moscow on August 28th. The delaying of the negotiations by Soviet Foreign Affairs Commissioner, Viaceslav Molotov, and the postponement of signing the text of the Armistice Convention would further complicate the political and military situation of Romania which, on the date of signing the convention, would be de facto and de jure in the situation of a state actually occupied by an enemy army (Baciu, 1996).

Moreover, although they had managed to liberate the territory from the German forces without the allies' help, along with the military operations to neutralize the German army, the Soviet troops disarmed the Romanian ones, weakening Romania's operative fighting capacity. The bad impression given to Romanians by the Soviet troops entering the country was motivated by “the numerous incidents between civilians and Russian soldiers ... the bourgeoisie and the middle class being - in the opinion of a British observer - quite in a state of panic”². (Quinlan, 1977, 107)

The coup d'état on August 23rd and the crossing of Romania to the United Nations side would in all respects be a very unpleasant surprise for the Germans and especially for the Soviets who were now ready to go into detail on that “segmentation of responsibilities” in the Balkans, insistently demanded by the British through the voice of their Prime Minister, W. Churchill (Quinlan, 1977, 107). The royal decision of the *volte-face* was a true general surprise for the international diplomatic environments, being mainly motivated by the need to avoid turning the country into a war zone, which would have had the worst consequences to the civilian population and the economy in general. The logic of the act itself had represented a very good initiative on short term, but the consequences resulting from it would be unfavorable in terms of Romania's internal and international politics.

Admittedly, Marshal Ion Antonescu's intention to resist had as declared purpose obtaining better armistice conditions, although it would have slowed down the Soviet offensive, but it is hard to believe that the Red Army could be stopped at the Carpathian Passes at that time, on Focșani, Nămolosa and Maritime Danube fortified line. The pros and cons of the opportunity of the act of August 23rd, 1944, are countless and relatively truthful, but it must not be forgotten that Romania had already become a piece of a true puzzle game on the scene of international political relations at that time³.

¹ Archive of the Ministry of National Defense, case 381, file no. 38, f 31.

² It seems that the events developed in a way “unwanted” by the British, being now aware of the danger of communism establishing easier in Europe at the cover of the Red Army, as they were, however, determined to protect their interests in Greece.

³ With all the patriotism of the Marshal, and obviously, of the opposition grouped around King Mihai, we can say that both solutions adopted by the Power and opposition have proved to be totally uninspired, coming either too late or too early. Romania

The benefits brought to Allies' cause were enormous, somewhat in inverse proportion - the critics say - with those acquired by Romania. Without neglecting the importance of regaining Northern Transylvania, we can say that the price paid by the army and by the nation was unjustly high, the sacrifices made being special, both on the front and in the country in the years to come. From strategic point of view, for the German "ally", the capitulation of Romania in "rase campagne" (Baciu, 1996, pp. 92-93) equated to a true military and political disaster - in the opinion of Field Marshal Keitel - materialized by "losing the territory not only of Romania, but also of Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Greece, endangering the entire German army in the Balkans" (Ciachir, 1996, p. 316). Germany would therefore be forced to withdraw its entire military formation from the Balkans in danger of being surrounded by the Red Army offensive, the Soviets finally managing to occupy Bulgaria without any special battles (Ciachir, 1996, p. 316).

Besides from the loss of important defensive positions represented by the Carpathians, Germany would be deprived of the food resources and especially of the Romanian oil, without which the combat force of the German army, a very technical one, would be worse-than-expected.

Other remarks show the courageous attitude of Romania which contributed to tip the scale in favor of the United Nations, "at a time when it was not known who will be victorious in the war", the military troops being counted at about 70 divisions which, by nature of the events, would be made available¹. The services provided to the cause of the allies had cost the Romanian state important material reserves, not to mention the number of Romanian soldiers lost during the battles, the actual cost of Romania's participation in the antifascist war placing the Romanian state on an honorable fourth place in the hierarchy of the states participating in the war against Germany, before France, Yugoslavia and Australia. These assessments are all the more important because they are also made considering the limited period from August 1944 up to May 1945, in relation to the total duration of the conflict, during which Romania participated in the conflict on the part of the United Nations. According to some of the analysts of the Second World War, the reduction of the war period for about six months would be the natural consequence of turning the arms by the Romanian army on August 23rd, 1944, period when the lives of many Allied soldiers had been spared on all fronts. Even with all these considerations, Romania was denied the status of co-belligerence by the Allies, the only thing being achieved was the recognition that the hostilities with Germany stated on August 24th, 1944².

Romania's changing sides on August 23rd to the United Nations would bring the Romanian state back into the "large team of democratic states" only for a short period of time. The international position of the newly established government in Bucharest would improve considerably, within the limits allowed by the inheritance of a military alliance with a Germany which although powerful at the beginning of the conflict, it was now on the verge of losing the war.

The subsequent evolution of the military events on the front would equally condition the domestic situation of a Romania that even though it assumed the status of ally on the front, it was internally treated as a state under occupation.

was no longer in a position to control its own destiny at that time, these prerogatives being long passed to the Three Great Powers (for the Central and Eastern Europe, please read the Soviet Union).

¹ As far as the number of these military units is concerned, it should be specified that this is not just about the Romanian units engaged on the front against the Germans. We also considered in this category the Soviet divisions de-commissioned from the Romanian front, the Romanian divisions, as well as the many German military units neutralized during the military operations related to the August 23rd Act.

² As a result of the hostile behavior of the German troops, the Great General Staff would order, based on the war declaration of the Romanian government of August 25th addressed to the Reich, that "the German army has become our only enemy", urging all Romanian military commandments to urgently "disarm and banish them across the border".

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