



## 1<sup>ST</sup> GERMAN INFANTRY REGIMENT WITHIN THE ARMY OF THE MOLDAVIAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC (1917-1918)

Associate Professor Anatolie LEȘCU, PhD

*“Alexandru cel Bun” Military Academy, Chișinău*

*The increasing effort for affirming national identity was one of the consequences for the disintegration of the Russian Empire, in 1917. Basarabia, abruptly taken away from Moldova about a century before, was suddenly finding its own place, due to the total separation from Russia. Consequently, on 27 October 1917, Basarabia proclaimed its autonomy. At the same time, the Country Counsel (Sfatul Țării) was established, as a legislative body.*

*In 1917, Southern Basarabia was engulfed in a disastrous situation, caused by the numerous acts of vandalism and disorganisation triggered by the Sovietisation of the region. In order to stabilise and calm the situation in the area, German colonists, allying themselves with the Moldavians in their fight against Tsarism, formed detachments, patrolling the towns.*

*Even though its history was brief, the 1<sup>st</sup> German Infantry Regiment within the Army of the Moldavian Democratic Republic played its part in enforcing order, guarding goods and, last but not least, fighting anarchy.*

*Keywords: Country Counsel, Moldavian-German units, national emancipation, German colonists, regular army.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Union Act of 27 March (9 April) 1918 voted by the Country Counsel (Sfatul Țării) was the expression of the will of the native population to end Russian occupation. The struggle for national emancipation of Moldavians was regarded with sympathy and supported by representatives of other nations, among which one of the most important where the ethnic Germans of Basarabia. After the annexation of Basarabia, in 1812, their number increased steadily from 6,412 people in 1826 to 9,000 in 1846 and from 35,501 people in 1861 to 93,422 people in 1940<sup>1</sup>. The census data regarding the population of the Russian Empire in 1897 attested to the existence of 58,106 ethnic Germans in Basarabia, which represented 3.5% of the total population of the region<sup>2</sup>.

Beginning with the 8<sup>th</sup> decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Germans, as well as other nationalities, were subjected to a massive process of Russification, their mother tongue being excluded from the curricula of German settlers' schools<sup>3</sup>. Because of this fact, German colonists became the natural allies of Moldavians in their struggle against Tsarism, which gained momentum with the Russian revolution of February 1917. The national interests of the Germans were represented in the Country Council by two deputies – Philipp Almendinger and Robert von Loesch.

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## MOLDAVIAN-GERMAN UNITS ORGANISATION AND COMMAND

The political situation in the region, which was already very tense, became much worse with the formation of the Country Counsel on 21 November 1917, which undertook the leadership of the region.

<sup>1</sup> E. Ploșnița, *Coloniștii germani în Basarabia*, in *Akados. Revista de știință, inovare, cultură și artă*, no. 1 (20), 2011, Chișinău, p. 128.

<sup>2</sup> L. Prisac, *Învățământul minorităților naționale prin prisma comunității armene de la Basarabia țaristă la Basarabia românească*, in *Țara Bârsei. Revista de cultură*, Brașov, 2014, p. 437.

<sup>3</sup> E. Ploșnița, *op. cit.*, p. 128.



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The Bolshevik Government in Petrograd decided to Sovietise the region by an armed coup with the help of the red guards and the Bolshevik units of the Russian Army. For this, they needed to destabilise the social-political situation through specially trained emissaries sent from Petrograd to Basarabia. Due to their activity, the entire territory between the Dniester and Prut rivers was engulfed in a huge wave of anarchy, murders and robberies. The wave of terror did not avoid Southern Basarabia. To end this state of affairs, the German colonists spontaneously organised themselves in small detachments to patrol its towns and fight the villains. This initiative was supported by the leadership of the Country Council, which assigned Robert von Loesch, member of the Country Council and its Military Council, with the drafting of the regulation on the organisation, augmentation and command of the Moldavian-German units of the Moldavian Republic, being appointed as Commissar of these units. The regulation stipulated the creation of special military units of the Germans from Basarabia, subordinated to the General Directorate for Military and Maritime Affairs, with the purpose of maintaining order, guarding material goods and fight with anarchy.

Another point of this regulation stipulated that Moldavian-German troops were to be filled exclusively only by the Germans – local settlers, except for the officers, who could be replaced by ethnic Germans from other regions of Russia. Simultaneously, it was stipulated that all Moldavian-German units would form a great military unit with the size of a brigade, the brigade commander enjoying similar rights to a division commander<sup>4</sup>.

Beginning with 11 December 1917, the organisation of German units within the regular army of the Republic of Moldova took a practical turn. On this day, an ad was published in the newspaper “Vocea Basarabiei” (*Voice of Basarabia*), in which the public was informed that “*in Chișinău, based on the Country Council’s decision, the process of building the Basarabian Germans’ units (battalions) began, consisting of mobile detachments equipped with machine gun buses*

<sup>4</sup> Arhiva Națională a Republicii Moldova/National Archives of the Republic of Moldova (NARM), 1725 Collection, inv. 3, f. 165, pp. 19-19 verso.

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*to fight anarchy and pogroms. The Chancellery of units was in Volkenberg's home on Aleksandrovskaia Street, cornering Hospitals Street"<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, Major General Baron Alexander von Heyking was made commander of the Moldavian-German units<sup>6</sup>. The plans of the German leaders stipulated the establishment of a cavalry detachment of 300 troops, 2 artillery regiments and an artillery battery for which they demanded, from the Russian 6<sup>th</sup> Army depots, 300 horses completely equipped, weapons for 300 horsemen, 30,000 cartridges, 6 field guns of 76.2 mm with 300 bombshells, 32 machine guns with 256 battle guns, 3,000 rifles with 100,000 cartridges for them, engineering for 2 regiments and equipment for 50,000 troops<sup>7</sup>.*



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*Volkenberg's House, the chancellery of the German units on the Aleksandrovskaia street on the corner of Spitalelor Street (Ștefan cel Mare Boulevard on the corner with T. Ciorbă Street)*

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The first from the number of units planned for training was the *1<sup>st</sup> Moldavian-German Infantry Regiment*. The process of setting up the regiment was rather tedious. Not even the date of the regiment's creation is clear. We know that at the joint meeting of the ethnic Germans of Akkerman and the German National Committee on 24 January 1918 under the chairmanship of Commissioner von Loesch,

<sup>5</sup> NARM, 1725 Collection, inv. 3, d. 26, pp. 8-8 verso.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 44 verso.



the decision was made to form the 1<sup>st</sup> German Infantry Regiment located in the city of Chișinău<sup>8</sup>. But on 27 December 1917 Robert von Loesch addressed the Military Directorate with the request to assign Lieutenant Colonel Sergei Grunberg as a Regiment Commander<sup>9</sup>. The organising chart of the unit was drawn up shortly, which included the unit command, an infantry battalion composed of 4 companies and an assurance company<sup>10</sup>. Towards the beginning of 1918, the regiment had 10 officers, 1 civilian employee, 44 soldiers and 30 horses<sup>11</sup>. All attempts to increase the number of the staff with German population from southern Basarabia did not succeed, the number of soldiers remaining constant over the entire existence of the unit, which was abolished in March 1918. The small number of troops allowed the unit to be fully stationed at the Balș Orphanage in Chișinău together with other structures of the Moldavian army<sup>12</sup>.

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*The Balș Orphanage Building on 2 Lăpușneanu Street, headquarters of the Moldavian-German Infantry Regiment*

Among the officers of the regiment we can list the following: Lieutenant Colonel Serghei Grünberg – Commander of the Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Lange – Deputy Domestic (Logistics)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, f. 15, p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, f. 26, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, f. 14, p. 42 verso.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 3 verso.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, f. 15, p. 51.

Commander, Captain Peter August Schlichenmaer – Battalion Commander, Flagship Michael Wilhelm Steinert – 1<sup>st</sup> Company Commander, Flagship Wilhelm Ivan Zweigardt – 2<sup>nd</sup> Company Commander, Flagship Vsevolod Richard von Prüssing – 3<sup>rd</sup> Company Commander, Flagship Nicolai Ivan Beloborodov – Regiment Treasurer, Flagship Adolf Grossberg – 4<sup>th</sup> Company Commander, Lieutenant Major Ciastek – Assurance Company Commander<sup>13</sup>. Given that, as of 7 (20) February 2018, Lieutenant Colonel Sergei Grünberg, Regiment Commander, did not present to duty, he was dismissed from his position and replaced with Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Lange<sup>14</sup>. Starting March 1918, it began the process of abolishing the regiment due to lack of staff and high maintenance costs that rose to 37,000 roubles per month<sup>15</sup>.

The second unit was the *Cavalry Division* in the capital of the German colonies –Tarutino. The commander of the division was Major von Miller, who, starting with 24 January 1918, initiated the process of registering the staff in his unit, which, according to the organisational chart, would be of 65 people<sup>16</sup>. To complete this division, it received from the 1<sup>st</sup> Moldovan-German Infantry Regiment a truck, a machine gun, 50 rifles, 3 boxes of ammunition, 1 kitchenette, 5 carriages, 10 horses and 50 pieces of complete equipment<sup>17</sup>. In order to help the unit commander to complete the division, Flagship Vsevolod Richard von Prüssing was sent, who carried out a propaganda and agitation activity among the German colonists<sup>18</sup>. However, it seems that the results of the agitation were not very successful, because starting March, the leaders of the German movement in the Moldavian Republic switched to another form of military organisation.

As a result of the failure of creating regular units, it was decided the formation of paramilitary units of militia character, designed to maintain order in the German localities. For this, the southern Basarabia lands were divided into 8 districts, the population of which necessarily represented 8 militia detachments. The 1<sup>st</sup> Pedestrian Detachment



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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, d. 26, p. 133.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 38.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 96 verso.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 98.



included in its area the localities of Chișinău and Bender (Tighina) regions. In the area of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pedestrian Detachment entered all the colonies from the Cahul county. The strength of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Pedestrian Detachment was made up of the Germans of Malojaroslawetz, Tarutino and Krasna, the 4<sup>th</sup> Pedestrian Detachment of the population of Klöstitz, the 5<sup>th</sup> Pedestrian Detachment of the population of Arzis, Paris and Teplitz districts; the 6<sup>th</sup> Pedestrian Detachment – Sarata, Kulevitz, Plahteev districts; the 7<sup>th</sup> Pedestrian Detachment – Postal, Division, Bairamcea, Turlaca and the 8<sup>th</sup> Pedestrian Detachment of the localities in the Nadejda, Talmază districts and other neighbourhoods<sup>19</sup>.

By 19 March 1918, in each detachment, there were assigned as military trainers officers of the former 1<sup>st</sup> German Infantry Regiment under the general command of Lieutenant Colonel Lange. In the 1<sup>st</sup> Detachment, headquartered in Emmental, Lieutenant Steinart was assigned as trainer, Flagship Zweigardt in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Detachment, Flagship Miller in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Detachment, based in Malojaroslawetz, Flagship Grossberg in the 4<sup>th</sup> Detachment, Flagship Bachman in the 6<sup>th</sup> Detachment, based in Sarata, Flagship von Prüssing in the 7<sup>th</sup> Detachment. The 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Detachments had no trainers due to the lack of officers. At Tarutino, the existing division was transformed into a detachment of mounted militia under the command of Captain von Miller, to which Lieutenant Kist and Flagship Beloborodov were added. The existence of these detachments, as well as of the German regular units was short-lived, being abolished after the Union's act.

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The existence of the German units in the regular army of the Moldavian Democratic Republic is a short but important episode in the joint struggle of Basarabian and ethnic Germans for national emancipation against Russian chauvinism and communist ideology. *The 1<sup>st</sup> Moldavian-German Infantry Regiment* was an example of abnegation and solidarity shown by the two allies in their effort against the Russian rule.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 136 verso.

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