



## COMPETITION FOR THE LEADERSHIP OF THE GREAT GENERAL STAFF DURING THE BALKAN CRISIS AND THE NEUTRALITY PERIOD (1912-1916)

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*The study analyses the competition for the position of Chief of the General Staff during the Balkan crisis (1912-1913) and during Romania's neutrality (1914-1916). The position was very important and enjoyed an increased prestige, because it created the conditions for standing out on the battlefield and, implicitly, for winning military glory. Therefore, the number of competitors was quite high. However, the major decision-maker regarding the appointment of the Chief of the General Staff, which, during the war, was transformed into the General Headquarters, was the political factor, namely the ruling party and the king, who was "the head of the armed power".*

*The solution chosen at the beginning of the world conflict, which worked even after Romania entered the war, with General Vasile Zottu as Chief and General Dumitru Iliescu as Deputy Chief, actually leading the Romanian armed forces operations, was inefficient. The right person to lead the General Headquarters, namely General Constantin Prezan, was found only at the beginning of December 1916.*

*Keywords: General Staff; Ion I.C. Brătianu; European armed forces; Vasile Zottu; territorial resources;*

## INTRODUCTION

One of the components of the *revolution in military affairs* in the second half of the 19th century was the establishment of the *Staff* throughout the hierarchy, from unit to state level, at the top of the pyramid being the Great General Staff. At first, it had relatively limited responsibilities, but gradually, it was assigned new tasks, so it became an essential structure in the European armed forces organisation.

A very important role in the improvement of this structure was played by German Marshals Helmuth von Moltke (1800-1891) and Alfred von Schlieffen (1833-1913) in the second half of the same century (Black, 2004, pp. 115, 131-132). The former, also known as “*Moltke the Elder*”, to distinguish from his nephew, played an active role just before and at the beginning of the “*Great War*”, being Chief of the German Great General Staff between 1857 and 1888, making an essential contribution to the victories won by Prussia against Denmark (1864), Austria (1866), and France (1870-1871), which led to the Second German Reich (Droz, 2006, pp. 56-75). His work was continued by Alfred von Schlieffen, who held the mentioned position between 1891 and 1906, best known for the Plan of Attack on France (Schneider, 1964).

In essence, the General Staff was responsible for preparing the armed forces for war, planning combat and operations, while the main tasks of the relevant ministry were to build the armed forces structures as a whole and to provide them with all they needed to be successful on the battlefield.

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## THE GREAT GENERAL STAFF ESTABLISHMENT AND ITS DEVELOPMENTS UP TO 1914

In the full process of modernisation after the first strong assertion on a modern battlefield, between 1877 and 1878, the Romanian army still felt the need of a staff-like central body, to ensure the successful coordination of the efforts to increase its effectiveness. A staff structure,



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established on 12/24 November 1859 (*Monitorul Oastei*, 1860, pp. 322-325; Cioflină, 1994, pp. 77-78)<sup>1</sup>, had been also functional up to that time. However, with all the legislative and institutional changes, it did not fully meet the requirements of the revolution in military affairs, which was in full swing in Europe, and of the new stage of evolution of the Romanian military body.

The mentioned shortcoming was addressed between 1882 and 1883, when it was adopted the legislation that led to the establishment of the Armed Forces Great General Staff, through the High Decree no. 2945, on 29 November/11 December 1882 (Cioflină, *ib.*, pp. 16-17, 87-97). The normative act stipulated that the new body was directly subordinated to the Ministry of War, and it was under the direction of the Chief of the Armed Forces General Staff. The responsibilities of the latter were established as follows:

- to study the issues related to the military organisation;
- to study and prepare the operations for war (troops mobilisation and concentration, logistics and auxiliary services – railway, post, telegraphy, information);
- to develop and update the map of the country;
- to study the geography and topography of foreign countries;
- to study the armed forces of different countries and to permanently analyse their military affairs.

A step forward was the promulgation, on 6/18 March 1883, of the *Law on Staff Service*, adopted by Parliament in the previous year. According to Colonel Ștefan Fălcoianu, the normative act concerned one of the most important services of the army, filled a gap in military legislation and had as its object the dissemination of military knowledge in the army, as well as the organisation, on a solid basis, of the most important service in any army, namely the *staff service* (*Apărarea națională și Parlamentul României*, 1992, p. 150).

The generous principles of this legislation, initiated under the leadership of Prime Minister Ion C. Brătianu, who was also the Ministry of War (1 August 1882-22 June 1884), were amended and, in many

<sup>1</sup> Through the High Order of the Day no. 83 on 12/24 November 1859, the ruler Alexandru Ioan Cuza established "*Corpul de Stat Major General al Principatelor Unite/the United Principalities General Staff Corps*", having responsibilities in the field of "*executing military technical works and other missions that required special military qualification*". Thus, 12 November is celebrated as the Day of the Defence Staff, the current name of the structure.

cases, even violated by the regulations of 1895 and 1909, as well as by the operating regulations of 1884, 1891, 1899 and 1912.

In this regard, by the *Regulation of 1891*, the Great General Staff formed a special superior directorate within the Ministry of War. In case of armed conflict, it had to be divided into a “*sedentary part*” and a “*mobile part*”, which would later become the General Headquarters (Otu, 2009, p. 56).

In 1895, new amendments were made to the *Law on the Staff Service* of 1883. It was divided into three sections:

- a) the Army General Staff Service, executed by officers with special studies included in the Great General Staff;
- b) the Army Geographical and Topographical Service, executed by officers with special knowledge of geodesy and topography included into the Army Geographical Institute;
- c) the High Commands Staff Service.

Several other important changes concerning the improvement of the organisation and functioning of the Staff Service, the improvement of the staffing and of the level of training of the personnel were made by the *Law of 1909* and the *Rules of Procedure of 1912*. Thus, starting in 1909, the Staff Service had two components: the Great General Staff and the large units staffs. The selected officers were sent to the Great General Staff to follow a “*complementary staff course*”. In 1912, a more detailed organisation of the Great General Staff for mobilisation was established, on the two echelons, as follows:

- a) the General Staff (in fact, the Great General Headquarters), the “*active part*”, with the task of operatively leading the troops engaged in the conflict; it was placed as close as possible to the front and under the authority of the commander-in-chief of the army;
- b) the Great General Staff, the “*sedentary part*”, which remained at the Ministry of War, exercising its authority over the interior area, with the mission to mobilise all territorial resources and to continuously supply, with people and materials, the troops in the area of operations.

The central administration became even more complicated following the establishment, at the Ministry of War, of Weapons Inspectorates (Directorates), which overlapped with the duties



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The position of Chief of the Great General Staff was a coveted one, being filled by a series of important personalities of the time, such as: Alexandru Cernat, Constantin Barozzi, Alexandru Carcalețeanu, Constantin Poenaru, Iacob Lahovary, Nicolae Tătărescu, Grigore Crăiniceanu.

of the Great General Staff (*Anuarul Armatei*, 1909, pp. 3-17)<sup>2</sup>. Numerous committees and councils were added, such as: the Superior Council of the Army; the Committees of General Inspectors; advisory committees: of the General Staff, of the Infantry, Cavalry, Artillery, Engineer Troops, Navy, Health Service, Quartermaster, Armament, Military Education etc. (*Anuarul Armatei*, 1915, pp. 25-27). In addition, the General Secretariat of the relevant Ministry acquired increased importance, with a person close to the ruling party usually taking the lead.

The structure of the Central Military Administration was completed with the Army General Inspectorate, headed by Crown Prince Ferdinand. Under those conditions, many sources show the modest role that the Great General Staff played among governing bodies, as well as the fact that it was parasitised by other bodies created in the meantime. The conclusion was that “*the Great General Staff is unable to give due impetus to the preparation of the army for war*”. (*Armata Română în timpul ultimilor 40 de ani*, 1906, p. 34).

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## THE BALKAN CRISIS

An event that increased the importance of the Staff Service was the Balkan crisis of 1912-1913. The First Balkan War took place between 25 September/8 October 1912 and 30 May/13 June 1913, the belligerents being the Ottoman Empire, on the one hand, and the Balkan League (Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, Montenegro), on the other hand (*A Concise History of the Balkan Wars 1912-1913*, 1998).

In the conflict, which ended with the victory of the Balkan allies, Romania maintained its neutrality, declaring that it would intervene if the balance of forces south of the Danube changed<sup>3</sup>. The critical

<sup>2</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Directorate – Infantry, 2<sup>nd</sup> – Cavalry, 3<sup>rd</sup> – Artillery, 4<sup>th</sup> – Engineer Troops, 5<sup>th</sup> – Navy, 6<sup>th</sup> – Health Service, 7<sup>th</sup> – Quartermaster. Subsequently, there were added the 8<sup>th</sup> Directorate – Armament, and the 9<sup>th</sup> one – Military Schools.

<sup>3</sup> Related to the position of Romania in the crisis see *Documente Diplomatice. Evenimentele din Peninsula Balcanică. Acțiunea României 20 septembrie 1912-1 august 1913* (1913). (The Green Book); Maiorescu, 1995; Zbucnea, 1999.

situation in the neighbourhood required extensive measures to strengthen the army, including an increased role of the Great General Staff, especially since, in the prospect of the intervention, it had the obligation to complete the strategic projects.

The Chief of the Great General Staff was General Alexandru Averescu, who took office on 18 November 1911, the relevant Minister being Nicolae Filipescu. His predecessor was General Vasile Zottu, but Filipescu preferred Averescu, although he had to overcome the opposition of his party colleague, Alexandru Marghiloman. He had a major role in removing Averescu from the office of Minister of War, accusing him, in an interpellation, of administrative irregularities (Otu, 2019, pp. 73-85)<sup>4</sup>. Practically, Marghiloman played the game of Ion I.C. Brătianu, who wanted to get rid of Averescu, whom he suspected of sympathising with Take Ionescu.

The Romanian-Bulgarian war in the summer of 1913 represented the first presence of the Romanian armed forces on a battlefield, after three and a half decades. General Alexandru Averescu was Chief of the Great General Staff<sup>5</sup>, and the Commander-in-Chief was Crown Prince Ferdinand (Parfeni, 1914; Petrescu, 1914; Lascarov-Moldoveanu, 1915; Otu, 2017). The campaign south of the Danube reflected the state of the armed forces, after a long period of peace, in which the reforms had neither the coherence nor the scale that were necessary to modernise them. Therefore, although no fighting took place, as Bulgaria capitulated, the Romanian large units emphasised a series of structural shortcomings in terms of organisation, equipment, staff training, troop training, health etc.

Alexandru Averescu performance was appreciated in different ways. Thus, some personalities that participated in the Campaign south of the Danube remarked the work power and energy of Alexandru Averescu: *“The only one who fulfilled his duty – as Constantin Argetoianu put it – was General Alexandru Averescu, the Chief of the Great General Staff, who did his best with the available resources”* (2008, p. 231).

<sup>4</sup> Alexandru Marghiloman, in his memoirs (1927, pp. 85-87), provides details about the appointment of Averescu, who was persuaded to accept by Titu Maiorescu and Petre P. Carp. Filipescu appreciated that *“he could not work for the Ministry without Averescu”*, Marghiloman consenting with *“effusion”* and ensuring *“reciprocity”*.

<sup>5</sup> The official name was Chief of the Staff Service.



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Nicolae Iorga, who was also in Bulgaria, assessed Alexandru Averescu in a positive way. Describing his unexpected visit to the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Corps Headquarters to get informed about the too rapid advance of the Romanian troops, the illustrious historian saw him as *“slim, slender, reduced to a known mathematical formula (...), as he is, he does not need rest and he does not have any other human needs”*. (1913, p. 174).

It was also Nicolae Iorga who, in *Memorii/Memoirs* (1934, p. 190), characterised him using laudatory terms: *“That whole action, the scientist wrote, was more like a trip (...) and the supreme leadership was entrusted to a man of great merit, whom I met for the first time, namely General Averescu, who was tall, extremely slim, bony, with a phosphoric look in his small, cold eyes, enchanting those who met and ensuring them that everything he did had to be done, and had to be done that way, with confidence in the final success. That unusual commander was for sure a skilled strategist and especially someone who could inspire the troops, although he lacked the appropriate voice, gesture, oratorical talent and warmth. A silhouette and warmth resembling that of Moltke, with the same exact calculation of all the possibilities, with the same indifference to everything around him”*. (ib.).

His opponents, not a few, especially those in the political area, but not only, criticised his strategic conception and the way he led the troops south of the Danube. It is worth mentioning the furious campaign carried out by the National Liberal Party and by some publications, such as *“Viitorul”* and *“Adevărul”*, against the armed forces and, implicitly, against Averescu.

As General Radu R. Rosetti wrote, the Liberal press campaign did much harm to the military. That is why he insisted on Ion I.C. Brătianu (the two were brothers-in-law), to put an end to the campaign. *“He invited me to his brother, Vintilă – wrote Radu R. Rosetti -, who also invited I.G. Duca. After a long discussion, I persuaded them to put an end to the campaign led by the Liberal press against the military, a campaign aimed at, according to Ion I.C. Brătianu, preventing N. Filipescu and General Averescu from returning as triumphant to Bucharest”*. (2020, p. 481).

## NEUTRALITY. COMPETITORS FOR THE HIGH POSITION

After the end of the Balkan crisis, whose last act was the Peace of Bucharest (28 July/10 August 1913), the government led by Titu Maiorescu practically exhausted its resources. In addition to the Liberal campaign on the need for reform, a factor contributing to the loss of credibility was represented by the disputes within the Conservative camp. At the end of 1913, the Conservatives were forced to leave power (Iordache, 1972, pp. 259-271), the government being taken over by the Liberals, led by Ion I.C. Brătianu, who became, for the second time, Prime Minister (Mamina, Bulei, 1994, pp. 127-132).

The Prime Minister reserved for himself the leadership of the Ministry of War, one of the most important departments in any government. This situation was not new, as there were other cases in which the Prime Minister took over the Ministry of War. For example, former Liberal leader D.A. Sturdza, cumulated both positions, Prime Minister and Minister of War, between 11 February 1901 and 20 December 1904 (*Miniștrii apărării naționale*, 2012; Damean, 2013).

The solution had both advantages and disadvantages. Knowing well the state of the armed forces, Prime Minister Brătianu, participant in the Romanian-Bulgarian war, could drive, with the authority of the office, the reform process, which became a priority in the governance programme (Otu, 2015; *Armata României și politica națională*, 2015, pp. 44- 45). At the same time, given the multitude of responsibilities that a prime minister had, he had relatively little time to dwell in detail on such complex military issues. Under such conditions, he appointed Colonel Dumitru Iliescu, immediately promoted to the rank of General (14 March 1914), as the head of the General Secretariat of the relevant department. He thus became the most important person in the administration of the activities of the Ministry of War.

That high position was based on the friendship between the Prime Minister and General Iliescu. The circumstances of that very close connection were explained, after the war, by Dumitru Iliescu. During the meeting of the Senate on 13 June 1924, he emphasised: “Statesmen, becoming a second lieutenant on 1 July 1886, ranking the first among my colleagues, as I also ranked while attending the School of military sons in Craiova, I introduced myself to illustrious stateman, Ion C. Brătianu, who became the interim Minister of War that year, on the occasion of leaving for France, on a five-year vacation,



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THINKING

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On 1 April 1914, Vasile Zottu was appointed Chief of the Great General Staff. He was a capable general, from the Engineer Troops, who had distinguished himself in various functions, including in the construction of the Palace of the Military Circle in the Bucharest garrison. He had been placed on the reserve a few days ago, but he was reactivated and appointed Chief of the Great General Staff at the age of 61, being the oldest holder of this high position to date.

*where I was going to attend the courses of the Polytechnic School of Paris and those of the School of Applied Artillery and Engineering from Fontainebleau. During the audience with the great Romanian man, among other recommendations, he told me to make friends in Paris with his son, Ionel, who was also a student of the Polytechnic School. That recommendation lies at the basis of the relationship with today's Prime Minister of the country and with the Brătianu brothers, because we were all students of the schools in Paris. The origin, therefore, of my friendship with the Brătianu brothers was a school camaraderie, and not a political affinity". (Iliescu, 1924, pp. 3-4).*

Despite those clarifications, the high position in which Dumitru Iliescu was invested was due, in large part, to the old friendship between the two. But not entirely. Ionel Brătianu participated in the armed forces Campaign south of the Danube as a reserve officer and came to the conclusion that the general corps had a low value. Therefore, he wanted the position to be filled by a younger and loyal man who would be able to carry out the great reforms in the military field. The option was Dumitru Iliescu. He was a capable, energetic military, but he was not an outstanding figure. In addition, being young and reaching a high position, coveted by many others, older in rank, he did not enjoy much sympathy among the officer corps.

The solution at the level of the Great General Staff was equally debatable. As it was known that the Liberals would come to power, in order not to risk a dismissal from them, Alexandru Averescu resigned from the position of Chief of the Great General Staff, taking over the command of the 1st Army Corps whose headquarters were in Craiova. Colonel, later General, Constantin Christescu, deputy chief of the structure until that date, was appointed ad-interim to lead the Great General Staff (Cătănici, 2014, p. 113).

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and his age, General Zottu was not the most suitable solution, and his role gradually became increasingly weak, ending up in being the nominal head of the structure.

The outbreak of the world conflagration on 15/28 July 1914, by the attack of Austria-Hungary on Serbia, accentuated the competition for the leadership of the Great General Staff, many considering that the option for Vasile Zottu was provisional in view of Romania's entry into the conflict. However, at the outbreak of hostilities, the structure of the central administration of the Ministry of War remained the same: Minister – Ion I.C. Brătianu, Secretary General – Dumitru Iliescu, Chief of the Great General Staff – General Vasile Zottu.

In regard to the competitors for the high position, one of them was General Alexandru Averescu, although, as I have mentioned, he did not enjoy the appreciation of Prime Minister Brătianu. But he had illusions. On 18 July 1914, he noted: *"It was written to me, in particular, that I would be destined to command an army. A few days ago, the idea was revisited. By not appointing or assigning another, I assume that I will be replaced with General Zottu and appointed Chief of the Great General Staff"*. (1937, p. 12).

He thought it was rational, but the prospect of working with Prince Ferdinand again did not please him at all. However, as it results from his notes, the permanent ties with the Conservative leaders Nicu Filipescu, Take Ionescu, Ionaș Grădișteanu (Ib., pp. 34, 38, 66-67, 71, 82, 138) and others nurtured his hopes for that dignity, especially in the prospect of a national union government.

On 17 February 1915, General Iliescu noted that, according to Lieutenant-Colonel Ion Rășcanu, Chief of the Operations Section within the Great General Staff, *"Averescu went to Nicu Filipescu and asked him to appoint him Chief of the Great General Staff, in case a national government was formed. Averescu told it to Arghirescu, too, who repeated it to Rășcanu; the latter seemed sincere when he was against that appointment, given his character and the fact that those we had prepared for a year in B hypothesis were unknown to him"*. (Biblioteca Națională a României, p. 96).

Alexandru Averescu did not fulfil his dream of being, again, Chief of the Great General Staff. When the war was declared, he was appointed Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, which he commanded except for a short period, when he led the group of forces that organised the manoeuvre



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MILITARY  
THINKING

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Another contender for the position of Chief of the Great General Staff/the Great General Headquarters was General Constantin Christescu, Deputy Chief at that time. He did not enjoy favourable appreciations from some politicians, such as Nicolae Filipescu, who considered him superficial and theoretical as a military man. There were many others who considered that he also suffered the consequences of his character flaws, and his options were directed towards Germany, at least in the first phase of the world conflict.

in Flămânda, according to his own conception, until the end of January 1918, when he was appointed Prime Minister of the country. The cold relations with King Ferdinand, dating back to the Campaign south of the Danube, the adversity of Ionel Brătianu, the animosities of some generals prevented him from reaching the position he most wanted and considered most suitable for him.

General Radu R. Rosetti, in his *Mărturisiri/Confessions*, made a characterisation of the potential chiefs of the Great General Staff in case of hostilities. Regarding Alexandru Averescu, he noted that *“he was supported by Take Ionescu and Nicu Filipescu, but he did not enjoy the confidence of the King, nor of Brătianu, nor of many generals and senior officers. In fact, he did not want to be the King’s Chief of Staff, but he did not consider that the position of commander-in-chief did not suit him. Of course, Averescu had military knowledge, he knew the staff service well. I am, after much thought, of the opinion that far removed from certain political influences and with a leader who knew how to impose his will, he could have been an acceptable chief of staff. As he was in the circumstances of the time, he pointed out that his best definition was that given by one of [Joseph Rudyard] Kipling’s soldiers<sup>6</sup> to Marshal Lord Wolseley<sup>7</sup>, a definition that, freely translated, would be: he was looking with one eye at the influential political circles and with the other eye at his own blessed person”*. (Rosetti, lb., p. 587).

Another contender for the position of Chief of the Great General Staff/the Great General Headquarters (in wartime, the sedentary part maintaining the name in peacetime) was General Constantin Christescu, Deputy Chief at that time (Stroea, Ghinoiu, 2016). He did not enjoy favourable appreciations from some politicians, such as Nicolae Filipescu, who considered him superficial and theoretical as a military man (Biblioteca Națională a României, pp. 18-19). There were many others who considered that he also suffered the consequences of his character flaws (lb. p. 91, 205), and his options were directed towards Germany, at least in the first phase of the world conflict.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936). British poet and novelist, recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907. He is famous for the *“Jungle Book”* (1894).

<sup>7</sup> Garnet Joseph Wolseley (1833-1913) was an Anglo-Irish officer in the British Army who became a Field Marshal. He was one of the most influential and admired British generals after his military successes in the Crimean War, Sudan, Egypt, Burma etc. Between 1895 and 1900 he was the Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces.

Radu R. Rosetti characterised him as follows: *“He was better prepared than Iliescu, from a strategic, tactical point of view, and as a staff officer, not from other points of view. He was attributed some flexibility of character and did not enjoy the confidence of the decision-makers. Being a young general, he would have had against him, like Iliescu, the jealousy and bad will of many generals. I repeat that, from a purely operative point of view, I consider that he was superior to Iliescu and, like Averescu, with a commander-in-chief knowing how to impose his will, he could have brought services”*. (Rosetti, lb.).

A surprising contender for the leadership of the Great General Staff was General Grigore Crăiniceanu, who had previously been both Minister of War and Chief of the Great General Staff, but who was retiring, leaving the armed forces after the 1913 Campaign. In October 1915, after the great defeats of the Russian armed forces in the summer, Ionel Brătianu approved General Crăiniceanu’s departure to Russia, in order to analyse the state of the Russian armed forces and persuade the officials in Petrograd to attack Bulgaria with sufficient forces (Biblioteca Națională a României, f. 231).

But, on 5 October 1915, he set some conditions, the most important of which was that, upon mobilisation, he would be given the command of the General Staff (lb., p. 232). After the defeat at Turtucaia, General Crăiniceanu was appointed Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, replacing Alexandru Averescu, appointed first Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, then Commander of the Army Group that bore his name, which organised the famous manoeuvre from Flămânda. General Crăiniceanu did not confirm, so he was replaced, Averescu returning to the command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army, after the failure of crossing the Danube.

There were different opinions about General Crăiniceanu personality and activity. He was one of the most important military theorists of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the works on fortifications being very solid from a scientific point of view (Otu, Oroian, Emil, 1997, pp. 129- 135). General Gheorghe Dabija, who was his Chief Cabinet Secretary during his term as Chief of the Great General Staff and Minister of War, greatly appreciated him in his *Amintiri/Memoirs* (2020, pp. 187-193). Other appreciations are more nuanced, some even critical. Thus, I.G. Duca wrote that the appointment of Crăiniceanu as Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army was a mistake: *“I was, alongside Brătianu, part of Crăiniceanu’s headquarters in 1913, the illustrious memorialist*



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MILITARY  
THINKING

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*At the beginning of March 1916, it was established the armed forces order of battle, which was to become operational once Romania entered the war. Gheorghe Dabija, at that time Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hunters Battalion, which guarded the Royal Palace, found out that General Dumitru Iliescu would lead the Great General Staff, either from the position of General Vasile Zottu Deputy or as direct chief of the institution.*

*noted, and we could easily see that he was more than peculiar; he had a pathological nervousness, he was inconsistent in decisions, he lacked solicitude for his troop, he was brutal towards the officers, which frightened us. We both returned from Bulgaria with the feeling that General Crăiniceanu should not be entrusted with any command, because he is absolutely incapable of fulfilling such a significant and delicate mission". (Duca, 1981, p. 27).*

General Dumitru Iliescu, the Secretary General of the Ministry of War, was knocking at the gates of the position of Chief of the Great General Staff. He was in the most favourable position for this honourable post. He was the right hand of Prime Minister Brătianu and enjoyed his friendship, he had managed the preparation of the army for war, knowing in detail all the issues, including those of strategic planning, he had enough connections among politicians, primarily liberals. His *Însemnări/Notes* from 1914-1916 show that one of his main concerns in those years was to block the aspirations of generals in the top echelon of the armed forces to be appointed as Chiefs of the Great General Staff.

There were also numerous objections to his appointment. One of them, unusual, belongs to Gheorghe Dabija. At the beginning of March 1916, it was established the armed forces order of battle, which was to become operational once Romania entered the war. Gheorghe Dabija, at that time Commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hunters Battalion, which guarded the Royal Palace, found out that General Dumitru Iliescu would lead the Great General Staff, either from the position of General Vasile Zottu Deputy or as direct chief of the institution. Such a prospect worried him, as neither of them had the qualities necessary for this high and decisive position. *"I did not see General Zottu at all, Dabija noted, as the Chief of Staff for Operations. He was, of course, an educated man, perhaps a good officer in the Engineer Troops, but nothing more".*

As for General Iliescu, he *"was a very educated man, he had vast general knowledge, he was a good technician and mathematician, he was brilliantly intelligent, with a good memory, he could talk about varied subjects, lively and spiritually, having a vivid sense of humour. He was appreciated for the qualities of his soul, ready to owe, but not always to the value of the solicitor. So, he had multiple qualities as a soldier and a man, but I did not see him as a strategist at all".*

Based on those assessments, which were based on a permanent contact with the would-be chiefs and a very good knowledge

of the situation of the Romanian armed forces and the command corps, Lieutenant Colonel Dabija tried to prevent the appointment. He requested an audience with General Iliescu to persuade him to give up his intention. During the audience, Dabija suggested that he should apply for the position of Minister of War, filled at that time by Ion Brătianu, Prime Minister. The suggestion was based on the consideration that, in his capacity as Secretary General, Iliescu was a factotum of the Ministry. The answer received was disappointing, General Iliescu being sharp: *“But for what? I want to be the Chief of the Great General Staff, and the war against Austria-Hungary will go like butter. Can you imagine a hot knife dipped into butter? Know that this is how we will go to Buda-Pest”*.

Lieutenant Colonel Dabija tried to convince him that such a prospect was unlikely, as the German armed forces would intervene, which, even though they were exhausted (at that time, the bloody Battle of Verdun was in full swing), would not allow for the flank of the Austro-Hungarian armed forces to be reversed.

The arguments did not convince General Iliescu. He asked Dabija who would be the most entitled generals to access that position. He made the imprudence to name Alexandru Averescu and Constantin Christescu.

General Iliescu concluded that Lieutenant Colonel Dabija was part of a conspiracy designed to prevent him from achieving his goal. King Ferdinand had repeatedly asked Iliescu to go to Craiova, the Headquarters of the 1<sup>st</sup> Army Corps, to extinguish the older conflict with Averescu. According to Iliescu, Lieutenant Colonel Dabija was behind such a requirement. *“Now I understand the matter, said the general, you have spoken to the Prince [Dabija was commanding the 2<sup>nd</sup> Hunters Battalion at that time, and Crown Prince Carol, having the rank of Captain, was the Commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Company – A.N.], he spoke to the king and he was influenced by an intrigue”*.

The strong denials of Dabija, who told him that the initiative was purely personal, without any hidden thought, had no result, General Iliescu being convinced that he went behind his back. The result of his outrage was the removal of Lieutenant Colonel Dabija from the list of officers to possibly be promoted in rank on 1 April 1916 (Dabija, *ib.*, pp. 354-357).



*General Iliescu won the competition, being the best placed for the position of Chief of the Great General Staff. However, it was a partial victory, as Brătianu, taking into account the opposition among the military as well as among some politicians, appointed him Deputy Chief, in the first phase. In reality, General Iliescu led the actions of the Romanian armed forces in the first months of the campaign, General Zottu remaining nominally head of the structure.*

### **SOLUTION. DUMITRU ILIESCU – “NAPOLEON OF ROMANIA”**

On 7 August 1916, Averescu met Nicolae Filipescu, who informed him *“that Iliescu will not be the Chief of Staff. He himself replied that he was giving up. And this seems like a farce to me, but in any case, if not Iliescu, who will be? Zottu? Iliescu also told me at the ministry, some time ago, that he was not thinking of going to the G.G.H. I told him that he would do very well, but I knew for sure that it would be different and it was different”*. (Biblioteca Națională a României, p. 239).

Indeed, General Iliescu won the competition, being the best placed for the position of Chief of the Great General Staff. However, it was a partial victory, as Brătianu, taking into account the opposition among the military as well as among some politicians, appointed him Deputy Chief, in the first phase. In reality, General Iliescu led the actions of the Romanian armed forces in the first months of the campaign, General Zottu remaining nominally head of the structure.

In historiography, there have been a lot of discussions about the Prime Minister’s decision to keep General Zottu in office and appoint General Iliescu as Deputy Chief of the Great General Staff (General Headquarters). Naturally, several hypotheses were issued. One of them was that such a situation allowed the Brătianu-Iliescu couple to totally control the situation. A second one derived from the difficult relations of the Romanian government with the belligerent camps and, in particular, with the Triple Alliance. General Zottu was allegedly suspected of having links with the Central Powers, and he was also on Gunther’s famous list including political and military leaders, journalists etc. who were massively financed (corrupted). Brătianu kept Zottu as he did not want to generate a new conflict with the Central Powers.

His personality was differently appreciated. Radu Rosetti considered him *“well-intentioned, having a very developed sense of honour, as he proved by his suicide, after the Turtucaia disaster”*. (Rosetti, lb., p. 587).

King Ferdinand found General Zottu inefficient in his position as Chief of the Great General Staff (Biblioteca Națională a României, p. 98). Nicolae Filipescu was of the same opinion, the Conservative leader calling him *“Zottu’s dummy”* (lb., p. 151).

General Iliescu’s performance as, first *de facto* and then *de jure*, Chief of the Great General Headquarters was far from meeting the requirements of the high position, although his entourage

congratulated him with the nickname “*Napoleon*” of Romania. Not having a thorough training as a staff officer, surrounded by a clientele that he cultivated during the campaign, maintaining the same lifestyle, which scandalised many in those hard times<sup>8</sup>, without a constant behaviour during hardships, “*torn*”, as I.G. Duca put it, by a part of the corps of generals and senior officers, faced with the adversity of some politicians<sup>9</sup>, General Iliescu failed.

Radu Rosetti, who supported his appointment as Chief of the Great General Headquarters, also came to regret the decision: “*I have to say, wrote Rosetti, that very soon Iliescu showed that he was smart, educated, kind-hearted, he was a wonderful teacher, a valuable technician, and a good administrator of needs; however, he was neither a strategist nor a technician, as he was not at all fully acquainted with the execution of the staff service in war. For me, it was a great disappointment, the greater it became, the more illusions I had*”. (Rosetti, *ib.*, p. 588).

Therefore, his change from the position became inevitable, being replaced with General Constantin Prezan, which was a wise decision, even if it generated the dissatisfaction of some, among whom General Averescu stood out (Otu, 2009, pp. 103-106).

General Iliescu asked to remain in the country and command a large unit, but Brătianu sent him to Paris, as a representative of the Great General Headquarters, which accentuated the criticism of some confreres, who had proof that he was the Prime Minister’s protégé.

Some memoirists and historians blamed the failure of the 1916 Campaign on the mistakes of General Iliescu both during the neutrality period, being considered the main person responsible for training the armed forces, and during the unfortunate campaign of August-November 1916. In other words, they turned him into “*Scapegoat*”, which was a big exaggeration. Of course, he did not rise to the expectations, but the geopolitical and geostrategic situation in which



ROMANIAN  
MILITARY  
THINKING

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<sup>8</sup> Among others, he continued to organise and take part in parties with his friends; moreover, he brought his mistress to Periș, where the Great General Headquarters was established.

<sup>9</sup> One of the greatest critics of Dumitru Iliescu activity was Nicolae Filipescu. Constantin Argetoianu appreciated that Ionel Brătianu had employed his Secretary General to manipulate Filipescu, to moderate his public declarations in favour of immediately entering the war (According to Constantin Argetoianu, *op. cit.*, p. 373). Following Romania's entering the war and the first failures, Nicolae Filipescu exploded with rage in relation to Dumitru Iliescu activity (According to Polizu-Micșunești, 1936, pp. 189, 239, 248, 262, 264-265, 268).



Romania found itself, caught between the two belligerent coalitions, the state of the Romanian economy, preponderantly agrarian, the great shortcomings in the armed forces, accumulated for decades, the Allies failure in meeting the obligations assumed by the Convention of 4/17 August 1916, the difficult relations with the Russian ally, the unfavourable moment of entering the conflict etc., all those made Romania a safe victim in front of the German armed forces and German allies. With or without Iliescu, the result was the same. Obviously, some episodes could have been avoided, such as the humiliating defeat at Turtucaia, but, overall, victory was very problematic.

*The Great General Staff gradually increased its role and importance in all superior military leadership structures. In the years 1912-1916, it became an indispensable instrument in the preparation of the armed forces, in the prospect of Romania's entry into the "Great War". The position of Chief of the Great General Staff acquired an increasing prestige, being coveted by many generals, more or less entitled.*

## CONCLUSIONS

The Great General Staff gradually increased its role and importance in all superior military leadership structures. In the years 1912-1916, it became an indispensable instrument in the preparation of the armed forces, in the prospect of Romania's entry into the "Great War". The position of Chief of the Great General Staff acquired an increasing prestige, being coveted by many generals, more or less entitled. Thus, a fierce competition was launched to occupy it, which consumed a lot of energy, which could be better directed towards raising the level of staff and troop training.

The decisive role in the designation of the occupant of the honorary chair belonged to the political factor, respectively to the ruling party and to the King, who was, according to the Constitution of 1866, "the head of the armed power". The choice did not necessarily take into account the meritocratic criteria, the education, training and qualities of the nominee, but other subjective aspects. It proves that, in Romania, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but not only, the "military" model and not the "militarist" one worked, to quote a phrase of Alfred Vagt.

According to Samuel Huntington, one of the important theorists of civil-military relations, the fundamental problem is the relationship between the professional military elite and the political power, between the military power group and the civilian authority group. Thus, the competitors for the position of Chief of the Great General Staff, well understanding this reality, made efforts to be in the grace of the political leaders in office, this being the essential condition for them to meet their goal.

During the Balkan crisis, Alexandru Averescu, well trained professionally, was close to Conservative circles, which facilitated his path to the high office, in which he tried to serve as well as possible. During the two years of neutrality (1914-1916), the solution chosen by the National Liberal Party, especially by Ion I.C. Brătianu, did not prove viable, General Vasile Zottu being only nominally the Chief of the Great General Staff.

The appointment of General Dumitru Iliescu, a friend of the Prime Minister, as Deputy Chief of the Great General Headquarters, was one with unfortunate implications on the conduct of the 1916 Campaign, without decisively influencing the outcome of the confrontations.

The election of capable military leaders thus fell under the political elite, and any mistake in this regard had dramatic consequences on the battlefield. The “*Iliescu experiment*” in the autumn of 1916 proved it abundantly. The same happened in France, with the “*Robert Nivelle*” solution (Dictionnaire de la Grande Guerre, 2008, pp. 741-743, 759-760).



ROMANIAN  
MILITARY  
THINKING

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