



GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE ACTION OF THE GERMAN MILITARY MISSION ON ROMANIAN TERRITORY BETWEEN 1940 AND 1941

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The activity of the German Military Mission in Romania in 1940 consisted mainly of training the Romanian armed forces in accordance with the new techniques of war. The efficiency of this military mission was strongly reflected among the Romanian armed forces from the perspective of the Romanian soldier's training and morale. These defining aspects are addressed in the present article, using the method of historiographical investigation and comparative analysis.

The objective historical analysis of Romanian-German relations during the German Military Mission in Romania highlights a legal issue, because between the two countries there were no alliance treaties or military conventions as the legal basis for Romania's participation alongside Germany in the war, most of the subordination of the Romanian armed forces to the German echelons of command being done by verbal agreement.

At the same time, the German Military Mission had a dominant influence on the activities of the General Headquarters and the General Staff, minimising their responsibilities for the design and command of the Romanian armed forces in the theatre of war.

Keywords: Munich Agreement; German Military Mission; World War II; Little Entente; Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact;



INTRODUCTION

Europe in the 1940s was engulfed in the vortex of a continental war triggered, on the one hand, by the rise of fascism and Italian Nazism, and on the other hand, by a series of errors or fears of Western democracies. The dismemberment of Czechoslovakia and the disintegration of the Little Entente, following the Munich Agreement (September 1938), as well as the implacable Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact (23 August 1939) were the most drastic events on the European political scene. The geopolitical situation thus created had significant consequences on Romania's security, the evolution of political events becoming inevitable. In this context, Romania was directly affected by the territorial losses in 1940, following the Vienna Award: Basarabia, the northern part of Bucovina and the northwestern part of Transilvania.

Although, in principle, as a political organisation with a defensive role, the Little Entente was based on democratic criteria, thus managing to preserve for a while the territorial integrity of the signatory states – Czechoslovakia, the Kingdom of Romania and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia – and representing, at the same time, an obstacle to the arbitrary claims of Horthy's Hungary, Germany's road to expansion was one of the dramatic consequences of the Munich Agreement. Also, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Soviet ultimatums of 26-27 June 1940 were determining factors in the breakdown of the political balance in Central and Eastern Europe, which imminently led to the outbreak of the Second World War.

In the same vein, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact brought about the establishment of Soviet power (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics/ USSR) in the three Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – which thus became part of the USSR, sacrificed Poland between the Kremlin and Berlin, and forced Romania and Finland to give up important territories in favour of Moscow.

In this geopolitical picture, Romania emerges as a participating actor, "from the onset, on Germany's side in the <crusade against Bolshevism>" (Trașcă, 2006, p. 3), with the natural and legitimate

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intention of regaining the territories taken from it in the summer of 1940. On the same security coordinates, it can be mentioned that the Soviet ultimatums of June 1940 “inaugurated the black series of the summer of 1940, which culminated in ceding the Quadrilateral to Bulgaria, through the Treaty of Craiova, on 7 September 1940, and of North-Eastern Transylvania to Hungary, following the Second Vienna Award, on 30 August 1940” (Trașcă, 2013, p. 71; Duțu, 2000, p. 17). In such circumstances, Romania turned towards a pact with Germany, through the collaboration with the German Command, which was put into practice when a German Military Mission was sent to our country. Thus, in 1941, Romania found itself in the situation of being an ally of Nazi Germany, with the primary and obviously subjective goal of getting back the regions abusively annexed by the USSR a year before. At the same time, through the German Military Mission, the Romanian decision-makers sought to integrate Romania in the political-military system of the Axis Powers.

DEFINING ASPECTS OF ROMANIA'S POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND STRATEGIC INTEREST DURING THE GERMAN MILITARY MISSION MANDATE

In the strategic plans of Germany, ever since before the Second World War, Romania had an essential role, from at least three perspectives: its border with the USSR, direct access to the Black Sea and oil resources, a fundamental element in the economy of the Third Reich (Haynes, 2003, p. 18). In fact, gaining access to the economic power of the states of South-Eastern Europe was among the objectives of the Nazi foreign policy (Ancel, 1940), Romania being surrounded by rivals with territorial claims, such as the Soviet Union, Bulgaria and Hungary. The Romanian side, in turn, was motivated by the orientation towards the German power economically and in terms of ensuring territorial integrity and national security, as well as in the attempt of blocking the Hungarian revisionism, seeking support from the German Military Mission to protect against a possible Soviet threat (Haynes, p. 28). In such circumstances, King Carol II of Romania (8 June 1930 – 6 September 1940) thought that getting close to Germany would guarantee the defence of the Romanian territory, but would also save his throne, after the political regime changed and a national-legionary government rose to power.

The idea of a German military mission in Romania originated during the regency of Carol II, when the German military attaché

in Bucharest, Colonel Karl Richard Wahle, stated in Berlin on 14 July 1940 that *“The Military Air Attaché and the undersigned were called upon in the afternoon of the same day to an audience with the King. The King opened the meeting by declaring that he was seriously determined to go with Germany. That is why he asked us to convey to the German Supreme Command his official request for a Military Mission, in keeping with what he had already proposed to the Führer. So far the King has not received a favourable answer”* (Oșca, p. 56). But because the Berlin leadership was reticent towards Carol II’s foreign policy, the Führer’s response would come later. Undoubtedly, although a dictatorial leadership, Romania progressed under the leadership of Carol II, from a cultural and social point of view, but the king’s authoritarianism grew increasingly, and the territorial losses from 1940 minimised credibility of the regime, culminating in the abdication of the king. As such, a coalition government came to power, made up of far-right officers under the leadership of General Ion Antonescu and representatives of the Iron Guard, which resumed the idea of the need, seen as a solution, at the same time, of a German military mission in Romania. This suggestion was mentioned in the document entitled *“Proposals of the Romanian government for receiving a German Military Mission, based on the talks that took place on 15-17 September 1940 between General Antonescu, the head of the Romanian State, and General von Tippelskirch, from the German Supreme Command”* (Trașcă, 2013, pp. 147-148). Regarding the organisation and powers of the German Military Mission, the document stipulated that: *“1) it will work in connection with the Romanian General Staff and will have the necessary specialist officers; 2) the troops that will also serve as training units in the training centers will be the following: a) combat aviation ...; b) anti-aircraft defense...; c) large monitored and mechanised units. (...) The Romanian government proposed that a number of 3-4 staff officers from the German army were assigned to the Higher War School. Also, young Romanian officers were to be sent to training centres in Germany”* (Ib.).

The German Military Mission started its activity in October 1940 (Ib., p. 139). The attributions of this body emerged from the guideline signed by Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, head of the High Command of the Wehrmacht (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht/OKW), on 20 September 1940, in which it was stipulated that: *“The apparent mission of the German troops is to help Romania, a new friend, regarding the organisation and training of its armed forces. Their real missions, which must not become obvious either to the Romanians*



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Since the beginning of the Romanian-German military cooperation, there were numerous differences between the two entities, among which the most important ones were the poorly equipped Romanian armed forces, as well as the Romanians' incapacity to provide civilised conditions for waging war among their own troops. An example in this respect is the equipment of the German armed forces, which had "special outfits for duty, training and sports, special rest, comfortable and hygienic accommodation".

or to their own troops, are: a) to protect the oil region from destruction and its seizure by a third power, b) to provide the Romanian armed forces with the ability to carry out different tasks, in keeping with a plan designed in favour of German interests, c) in the event of a war imposed on us by Soviet Russia, to carry out preparations for the engagement of German and Romanian forces from Romania" (Ib., p. 150), Romania thus being, as Field Marshal Keitel believed, "linked to us to the death" (Trașcă, 2021, p. 211).

Basically, the presence of German units on the territory of our country meant Romania's entry into Germany's sphere of influence, as well as the implicit adoption of the decisions of the Third Reich, especially regarding the attack on the USSR in the first part of 1941. During this campaign, the Romanian armed forces did not have the necessary potential – neither physical nor moral – to fight against the USSR: the cavalry was the basis of the armed forces, but it lacked modern artillery, not having enough armoured units. In addition to these impediments, the combat and moral training of the Romanian soldiers were inadequate for such circumstances. It should also be remembered that, since the beginning of the Romanian-German military cooperation, there were numerous differences between the two entities, among which the most important ones were the poorly equipped Romanian armed forces, as well as the Romanians' incapacity to provide civilised conditions for waging war among their own troops. An example in this respect is the equipment of the German armed forces, which had "special outfits for duty, training and sports, special rest, comfortable and hygienic accommodation" (AMNR, 2005, p. 9).

In economic terms, Romanian oil was a decisive factor for the German war effort, being the only natural product capable of meeting the industrial and economic needs of the German armed forces. It was a vital strategic resource that had to be fully secured, which is why it was a priority in the analyses of German decision-making factors. It follows, thus, that the possession of Romanian oil was a well-founded argument for the German interest in Romania, as well as one of the factors that motivated Germany to wage a war of aggression against the USSR in June 1941.

In these geopolitical and economic conditions, we consider that the German Military Mission played a significant role in preparing the attack against the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, as well as in establishing and sustaining a strategic partnership between the German Reich and the Kingdom of Romania until the end of August 1944, when our country entered the war alongside the USSR, leaving the Axis coalition.

ROMANIA'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE GERMAN-SOVIET WAR – OPERATION “BARBAROSSA”



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Somewhat isolated in the international context, especially after the division of Eastern European territories between Germany and the USSR, but especially after the signing of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, Romania found itself in the position to accept Germany's support: *“In this difficult situation, in which its very existence was threatened, Romania could not direct its policy somewhere else – as it did in other times – but only towards Germany, with which it entered the war against Russia in the summer of 1941 (...), continuing the holy war, together with its great ally, against the communist danger”* (Cioroiu, 1942, p. 70). However, as the former Romanian ambassador in Berlin, Ion Gheorghe, reckoned, this solution was *“an official act without convincing power”* (Gheorghe, 1996, p. 220), because the relations between the two countries came down to an *“ordinary political opportunism”* (Dușu, 2016, p. 218). Romania's objective within this alliance was unequivocal: getting back the lost regions of Basarabia and North Bucovina, annexed by the USSR.

In terms of strategic position in the attack against the USSR, Romania was considered by the Third Reich as the ideal instrument, the Romanian armed forces being a consistent support in carrying out operations against the Soviets. At the same time, the oil resources were a vulnerability in terms of a possible retaliation from the USSR.

Romania's involvement in the German-Soviet war that began on 22 June 1941 consisted in the contribution and effort of the Romanian armed forces, considered a main partner of the Axis, alongside Japan and Italy, through the participation in the siege of Odessa, the conquest of Crimea or the battle of Stalingrad. In all these actions, the contribution of the German Military Mission to train and assist the Romanian armed forces was significant and effective.

Germany and its allies – Italy, Finland, Slovakia, Hungary, Spain, Romania – attacked the USSR on 22 June 1941 in the operation code-named *“Barbarossa”*, which aimed to annihilate the Soviet Union and its communist regime. In order to prepare this operation, one of the urgent measures taken by the German Military Mission was to evaluate the fighting capacity of the Romanian armed forces, which was not exactly a positive one, as it appears from a report from 1941 of the German Military Mission: the officers were appreciated as well trained theoretically, but *“without the strength and will to resist to the*

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last man” (Trașcă, 2021, p. 7). The report also emphasised the fact that no information could be given about non-commissioned officers, “since there are no active non-commissioned officers at all” (Ib.). Instead, the evaluation of the Romanian soldiers was a positive one: “The Romanian soldier is a capable (human – author’s note) material, willing to learn; he is usually docile and willing to assimilate, apparently strong and persevering; however, he generally has a low level of training. He lacks independent activity and thinking. His relationship with his superiors is, according to the Romanian mentality, based on fear of punishment rather than trust. The treatment of the soldier is, in part, bad, and the living conditions in the barracks – according to our standards – are primitive. The salary does not even correspond to modest living needs” (Ib.).

Although the German Military Mission improved the situation of the Romanian troops to some extent, it was still decided that the Romanian armed forces were not “suited for difficult attack missions” at least in the first stage of Operation Barbarossa.

Also, the report showed the state of the Romanian divisions, which, following the evaluation, were considered non-functional in independent attack actions, and could only be used in guard and security missions. The assessments in the report were extremely critical and ended with the following decisive conclusion: *“an independent attack operation by the Romanian troops is out of the question”* (Ib.). Therefore, it was decided that the Romanian divisions were not indicated for independent combat missions, but only for some attack missions. Thus, both based on the conclusions of the report of the German Military Mission and as a result of the opposition expressed by Adolf Hitler, the plans regarding the use of Romanian troops in the *“Barbarossa”* operation were changed (Ib., p. 9). Although the German Military Mission improved the situation of the Romanian troops to some extent, it was still decided that the Romanian armed forces were not *“suited for difficult attack missions”* at least in the first stage of Operation *Barbarossa* (Ib.). Moreover, one of the conclusions of the report stated, in a suggestive and categorical manner: *“The German suggestions were assimilated and followed with sincere interest and conviction. It can be seen that the greater part of the Romanian General Staff and the Romanian command corps are sincerely trying to learn German battle principles. Command posts should generally be filled by appropriate personalities”* (Ib., p. 13).

Although the assessment of 1941 presented an army not properly prepared in the opinion of the German Military Mission, the Romanian armed forces had a dynamic role, with Romanian and Finnish troops securing *the southern and northern flanks and taking part in military operations alongside the Wehrmacht. From this point of view, Romania*

was also a base of operations for the German armed forces. We know that, ever since the fall of 1940, Reich troops were deployed in Romania as part of a German military mission. Romania was also a supplier of raw materials, especially oil, which was very important to the German war machine. From June 1941, two Romanian armies, the 3rd and 4th, participated in operations alongside the German 11th army within a group of armies called ‹General Antonescu›, whose commander was Ion Antonescu himself, the Romanian head of state. At the beginning, his goal was to liberate Basarabia and northern Bucovina...” (Trașcă, 2013, p. 67).

Following the invasion of the Soviet Union, Romania took control of Basarabia and Northern Bucovina, and, following the conquest of Ukraine by German and Romanian troops, in July and August 1941, Romania received the territory between the Dniester and Bug Rivers. The purpose of the participation of the Romanian armed forces in this far-reaching action – the reunification of its borders – was different from that of Germany, although both countries aimed to achieve their objectives by defeating the Soviet Union.

The failure of German troops to defeat Soviet forces in Operation *Barbarossa* signalled a crucial turning point. Although the Red Army suffered greater losses than the Germans during this campaign, the inability of German forces to defeat the Soviet Union marked a significant setback for the German military effort. Also, the “*Barbarossa*” operation had a series of consequences on the Jewish issue within Romanian-German relations, among them, the pogrom in Iași, from 28-30 June 1941, stirring the interest of numerous historiographers. The policy of the Antonescu government towards the Jews during the Second World War was broadly aligned with the goals of foreign policy, being “*under the sign of tactical and pragmatic considerations*” (Trașcă, 2013, p. 618) of those times. As it is shown in Ion Antonescu’s testimony during the Nuremberg Trials, “*during the time I was in power in Romania, I followed the policy of strengthening ties with Germany in order to recommence the training and arming of the Romanian Armed forces, with its help. To this end, I met Hitler several times*” (Procès-verbal, p. 23). This paragraph shows us the relationship between Germany and its satellites. In the same context, regarding the German Military Mission in Romania, Ion Antonescu acknowledged that: “*I agreed with Hitler that the German military mission in Romania should continue its activity of reorganising the Romanian Armed Forces according to the German model; we also concluded an economic*



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agreement under which the Germans would deliver to Romania 109 Messerschmitt planes, battle tanks, tractors, anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns, automatic weapons and other weapons and would receive, in turn, part of Romania's wheat and gas to meet the needs of the German armed forces. To the question: - Could this first meeting with Hitler be considered as the beginning of my agreement with the Germans for the preparation of the war against the Soviet Union? – I answer in the affirmative” (Ib., p. 65).

CONCLUSIONS

The historical studies undertaken over time on Romanian-German relations during the German Military Mission mandate in Romania point to the deficiency of legal aspects, since no alliance treaties or military conventions were signed between the two countries, to constitute the legal grounds for Romania's participation alongside Germany in the war, most of the subordination of the Romanian armed force to the German command echelons being done by verbal agreement (Oșca, p. 221).

The German Military Mission had a dominant influence on the activities of the General Headquarters and the General Staff, minimising their responsibilities for the concepts and command of the Romanian armed forces in the theatre of war.

We must also mention the nature of the political-military relations with the Third Reich, which imposed its point of view on strategic and operational issues. The German Military Mission had a dominant influence on the activities of the General Headquarters and the General Staff, minimising their responsibilities for the concepts and command of the Romanian armed forces in the theatre of war. For example, during the Eastern Campaign, these two design and command bodies of the Romanian armed forces were prevented from independently drafting campaign plans or actually leading the Romanian armed forces at the front, with only some exceptions - *“in spatially limited areas and directions, in the south of Basarabia and in the battle of Odessa, between 22 June and 16 October 1941, in the 4th Army zone, and even then with notable German suggestions and influences”* (Duțu, p. 12). The role of the German Military Mission in achieving some of our national objectives during the war should not be omitted; here we can mention the contribution of the German 11th Army to the liberation of Basarabia and the northern part of Bucovina, in 1941. We can conclude that *the “stronger partner”* (Oșca, p. 68), in our case Germany, imposed its concept of leading the fight by demonstrating a strict but effective control over the Romanian armed forces.

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