



## ROMANIA, BULGARIA AND THE DECLINE OF GERMAN MILITARY POWER AT THE BLACK SEA (NOVEMBER 1942-SEPTEMBER 1944)

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*The capture of Sevastopol, on 4 July 1942, and the military developments of the following months marked a genuine peak of German military presence and power at the Black Sea. Until the autumn of 1944, this presence would be history, after a quasi-uninterrupted series of Red Army successes. In this article, the impact of these military and political developments on Romania and Bulgaria and the relations between the two neighbouring states west of the Black Sea is analysed. Thus, from the position of asymmetrical allies of the Third Reich, Romania and Bulgaria would finally almost simultaneously become allies of the Soviet Union, but still find themselves in asymmetrical positions compared to the new regional hegemon. The bibliography of the article includes important Romanian, Bulgarian and Western historiographical contributions, which vary in terms of typology and range, to which many documents from the Romanian military archives, partly original ones, are added.*

*Keywords: Second World War; balance of power; spheres of influence; intelligence; diplomacy;*

### INTRODUCTION

Control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits had been a clear objective of Russian foreign policy since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, adopted by the Soviet regime after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

In the interwar period, the Soviet state showed a tendency to assert its hegemony over the Black Sea and the Straits and to expand its military naval power, with not entirely disinterested support for Kemalist Turkey at the Lausanne (21 November 1922-24 July 1923) and Montreux (June-July 1936) conferences (Dașcovici, pp. 2-3, 110-119). At the same time, the Soviet state, which never recognised the unification of Basarabia with Romania, indirectly conveyed through Cominternist propaganda the idea of a Soviet-Bulgarian territorial union structure at the mouth of the Danube, which was increasingly reaffirmed after the dismissal of Nicolae Titulescu as head of the Romanian diplomacy on 29 August 1936 (Ungureanu, 2019, pp. 8-9).

Soviet claims to the Black Sea became known in some new forms after the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and the outbreak of World War II. In a telegram to Molotov on 13 November 1940, I.V. Stalin describes his position on this geopolitical question as follows: "As far as the Black Sea is concerned, Hitler should know that the problem is not so much the exit as the entrance to the Black Sea, which has always been used by England and other states to attack the coasts of the USSR. All events since the Crimean War in the last century (19<sup>th</sup> century, author's note) until the landing of foreign troops in Crimea and Odesa in 1918-1919 show that the security of the Black Sea regions of the USSR cannot be achieved without the first finding a solution to the problem of the strait" (apud Constantiniu, 2002, pp. 146-147).

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at the mouth of the Danube. Ultimately, however, Bulgarian claims on Romania were limited to Southern Dobrogea (the so-called Quadrilateral), a territory whose cession the Romanian government finally accepted under German pressure in August 1940 (Ungureanu, 2009, pp. 355-368). The specific aspects of this cession of territory (transfer of powers, population exchange, various financial and legal issues, etc.) were regulated in the Treaty of Craiova, signed on 7 September 1940 (Preda-Mătășaru, 2004, passim).

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In the silent, underground diplomatic struggle between Germany and the USSR for influence in Bulgaria, the Third Reich won. Bulgaria's accession to the Tripartite Pact, which was made official on 1 March 1941 (Ilčev, 2019, p. 558), sparked Soviet protests against Germany (Constantiniu, pp. 169-170). The German diplomatic offensive was also directed against Türkiye in early 1941, in preparation for the anti-Soviet war. Because of the diplomatic defeat in Bulgaria and the growing disagreements with Germany, the Soviet Union changed its attitude towards Türkiye, which led to the signing of a Turkish-Soviet declaration of non-aggression on 24 March 1941 (Ekrem, p. 119).



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Romanian diplomacy also joined German efforts to bring Türkiye into the Axis camp, with Ion Antonescu himself voicing such proposals in talks with the Turkish diplomat Suphi Tanrıöver on 27 May 1941; the steps taken by the Antonescu government in this regard continued after the outbreak of the anti-Soviet war on 22 June 1941 (AMAE, vol. 62, pp. 69-77, 106-10; Ekrem, pp. 119-121).

As in the years of the First World War, naval operations in the Black Sea were a secondary and smaller part of the much more important land operations on the Eastern Front (King, 2015, p. 246). The outbreak of the anti-Soviet war highlighted the asymmetrical position of Romania and Bulgaria within the Axis system. Romania, for example, participated directly in *Operation "Barbarossa"* with a troop strength of about 325,000 (Duțu, 2008, p. 226) to recapture the territories occupied by the Soviet Union in the summer of 1940, while Bulgaria, which had already achieved all its territorial objectives after the German campaign in the Balkans (April 1941), did not break off diplomatic relations with the USSR but instead assumed responsibility for representing the interests of Germany and its allies (including Romania) in relations with the Soviet Union (Mateeva, Tepavičarov, 1989, p. 268).

By the end of 1941, both Romania and Bulgaria entered a state of war with other states, primarily with Britain and its dominions, but also with the USA (Calafeteanu, coord., 2003, pp. 333-334; Mateeva, Tepavičarov, pp. 102, 251). The governments and public opinion in both South-Eastern European states regarded the war with the powers of the Anglo-Saxon world as a rather formal situation. Thus, the phrase "*symbolic war*" circulated in Bulgaria (Ilčev, p. 560), and Marshal Ion Antonescu declared to a group of Romanian journalists in January 1942 "*I am allied with Germany against Russia, I am neutral towards England and Germany, I am on the side of the Americans against the Japanese*" (after Giurescu, coord., 2010, p. 454).

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peninsula. From the autumn of 1941 until 4 July 1942, some Romanian military units effectively cooperated with German units in the operations in Crimea (Duțu, 2008, pp. 252-258). After the fall of Odesa on 16 October 1941, most Romanian forces had been withdrawn from the front, except for the Mountain Corps and two brigades fighting in the Crimea (Ibid., p. 252). Romania's direct participation in the anti-Soviet war became significant again in the 1942 campaign (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Armies) after Marshal Ion Antonescu's decision following his talks with Adolf Hitler on 11 and 12 February 1942 (Ibid., pp. 261-262).

Despite the progressive loss of some important ports, the Soviet navy remained strong in the Black Sea and was able to conduct offshore interdiction operations from smaller bases at Poti and Batumi on the Caucasian coast, especially with the support of British patrol ships (King, pp. 246-247).

In the face of the advance of German troops north of the Black Sea (and in other areas to the west USSR), Türkiye's neutrality was viewed favourably by Stalin and Molotov, despite the conclusion of the German-Turkish Friendship Treaty of 18 June 1941 and the expansion of economic relations between Hitler's Germany and the Turkish Republic (Biagini, pp. 127-128).

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As for Romanian-Bulgarian relations between the summer of 1941 and the autumn of 1942, there was a normal atmosphere, with some

signs of cordiality, but also with several negative aspects, of which we mention, first of all, the "consequences" of the territorial problems on both sides of the border in Dobrogea, then the status of the ethnic Romanians from the Bulgarian Timok Valley, respectively of ethnic Bulgarians from Romania (including those from Basarabia), as well as Romanian mistrust of Hungarian-Bulgarian relations (Ungureanu, 2009, pp. 395-396).

## EXPOSURE

Due to the progressive and faltering weakening of the German and pro-German forces encircled Stalingrad in late 1942, the Soviets were able to successively deploy new troops from the siege forces, which they diverted to the North Caucasian areas (Liddel Hart, s.a., vol. II, p. 116). However, continued German resistance at Stalingrad facilitated Axis efforts in the North Caucasian areas to withdraw westwards via Rostov-on-Don, an operation carried out just as the last German forts in the city were being destroyed by the Soviets (Ibid., p. 118). In the spring the Germans counter-attacked, and on 15 and 19 March were able to recapture the cities of Kharkov and Belgorod, which had been lost in the first half of February (Ibid., p. 121).

After the disaster of the Romanian 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Armies in the battles of Thunder Ridge and Stalingrad, Romania's direct military participation in the anti-Soviet war was drastically reduced. The total losses of Romanian forces on the Eastern Front between 15 November 1942 and 15 March 1943 amounted to 15,566 killed, 67,183 wounded and 98,692 missing (Scurtu, Buzatu, 1999, p. 408).

After the disaster at the Donner Ridge and Stalingrad, Romania's direct military contribution to the anti-Soviet war was reduced to eight divisions (four mountain fighter divisions, three infantry divisions and one cavalry division), which were to defend a bridgehead in the North Caucasus east of the Crimean peninsula (Kuban – Taman peninsula). The advance of Soviet troops to other sections of the front made this mission impossible and forced a retreat to the Crimean Peninsula in the autumn of 1943 (Duțu, 2008, p. 278).



ROMANIAN  
MILITARY  
THINKING

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As a result of the resounding defeats of the Axis powers in Berlin and Rome, both on the Eastern Front and in North Africa, in late 1942 and early 1943, the attitude of the leaders of the UN coalition towards Turkish neutrality changed. For example, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill began to question the opening of a front in the Balkans through an Anglo-American landing at the same time that Türkiye abandoned its neutrality and embraced the United Nations cause (Ekrem, pp. 129-130). The idea of an Allied landing in the Balkans with Turkish support was to prove a stubborn illusion in Romanian and Bulgarian political circles in 1943-1944. Actual historical developments were to confirm these expectations only belatedly and to a small extent, namely with the landing of British troops in Greece in October 1944, after the Red Army had taken control of Romania and Bulgaria.

Due to its neutral status, Türkiye became a breeding ground for diplomatic contacts and soundings, especially between the envoys of the allied German states and the Anglo-American representatives. Among the contacts initiated midway between 1942 and 1943 by Mihai Antonescu, the head of the Romanian diplomacy, were confidential talks with the Turkish minister in Bucharest, Suphi Tanriover (Giurescu, 1999, p. 188). Apart from a whole series of differences between them, Romania, Bulgaria and Türkiye felt threatened in one way or another by the Soviet offensive, and the question arose of how to win the goodwill of the USA and Great Britain.

As early as the winter of 1942-1943, Mihai Antonescu had drafted a project to work with Italy and Germany's other allies to distance themselves from the Reich, sign a separate peace treaty with the US and Britain, and show solidarity against Bolshevism (Calafeteanu, coord., p. 335). Coincidentally or not, in early 1943 the King of Italy, Victor Emmanuel, made some entries in his diary about the need for contact with Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria (Dimitrov, 1976, p. 432).

According to the Romanian diplomat Alexandru G. Cretzianu (1895-1974), the plans of the Bulgarian ruler Boris III were coordinated with those of Mihai Antonescu. After Stalingrad, the Bulgarian king

advocated the formation of a coalition government led by Krăstyo Pastuhov (1874-1949), a social democratic leader, to end the war. To this end, Boris III had sent some signals to his father-in-law, the King of Italy, through his daughter, the Princess of Hesse, and the results were positive (Cretzianu, 1998, p. 118). Bulgarian sources also indicate that the Bulgarian king and his key associates were convinced in early 1943 that Hitler's Germany was heading for defeat (Mănčev, vol. III, 2008, p. 343).

At the beginning of 1943, Romanian-Bulgarian relations were at a normal stage, with elements of friendship and cordiality. In this context, it is worth mentioning the attention paid by some officials and the main Bulgarian central newspapers to the celebration of the Union of Principalities on 24 January 1943, with the head of the Press Directorate himself, the lawyer and journalist Nikolay P. Nikolaev, speaking on the subject on Sofia Radio (AMNR-Dca-P, file 487/1943, pp. 1-17).

On 1 April 1943, a bilateral agreement was concluded to solve the problems arising from the application of certain provisions of the Treaty of Craiova<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, the Bulgarian government, having postponed payment of the sum of one billion lei provided for in the financial agreement to the Treaty of Craiova, now agreed to pay 850 million lei, of which 380 million immediately and the rest within three months; at the same time, the Romanian government waived its claims amounting to 26 million lei, which was the equivalent of the transfer operation of the Bulgarian emigrants from Northern Dobrogea. Regarding the remaining crops, it was agreed that the Bulgarian government would deliver 12,000 tonnes of maize and 2,244,000 Swiss francs in exchange for 6,000 tonnes of maize, 4,550,000 francs and 5,000 tonnes of sunflowers, while the Romanian government waived its right to reclaim the remaining cotton crops.

<sup>1</sup> Full text at *Arhivele Ministerului Afacerilor Externe al României, Bulgaria (1920-1944)* Collection, vol. 86 – *relații cu România (1941-1943)*, pp. 572-580.





About the liquidation of rural property, it was agreed that Article V of the Treaty of Craiova would not apply to civil servants who still owned real estate in Southern Dobrogea on 14 September 1940, nor to legal persons; instead, Romania was to pay 20 million lei on the spot. The basic criterion for determining the scope of Article V remained residence and not ethnicity, and a new 18-month period for free liquidation was established.

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An important moment for Romanian-Bulgarian contacts was the visit of the diplomat Svetoslav Pomenov, then minister of the Bulgarian royal house, to Bucharest in May 1943. In the Romanian capital, the Bulgarian dignitary met with King Michael I, Marshal Ion Antonescu and with Foreign Minister Mihai Antonescu (Dimitrov, p. 431). In his speech on the occasion of the award of a medal to King Michael I, S. Pomenov stressed that Romania and Bulgaria had to unite their efforts to defend their political independence. The text of the speech was not published so as not to alarm the Germans (Cretzianu, p. 118). Mihai Antonescu used the meeting with Pomenov to convey to Sofia the call for political-diplomatic cooperation within the framework of the system conceived by the Romanian Foreign Minister. The message was received, but the Bulgarian head of government Bogdan Filov noted in his diary: *"I will not mount this chariot. The Romanians demand that we break away from the Germans"* (apud Dimitrov, p. 431). In the talks with King Boris, the head of the government of Sofia would speak somewhat differently: *"I will not get on this chariot! The Romanians want to discredit us before the Germans to have arguments to take up the Dobrogea problem again"* (Nedev, 1997, p. 525). Thus the initiatives of May 1943 were unsuccessful.

According to an intelligence report from the General Police Directorate of 20 June 1943, based on several sources considered reliable, the Bulgarian Minister Serafimov, accompanied by six Bulgarian journalists, had arrived in Bucharest by train the previous day (AMNR-Dca-P, *M.St.M. - Secția 2 Informații* Collection, file no. 1275/1943, p. 34)<sup>2</sup>.

The summer of 1943 brought new changes in the conduct of the war and marked the final and irreversible transfer of the strategic initiative to the United Nations coalition. The major military confrontations at Kursk-Oryol and the collapse of the Italian fascist regime were the main events leading to this development. In the case of Romania and Bulgaria, it should be noted that the state of war with the USA and Britain is gradually losing its symbolic character, as both South-Eastern European countries have been the target of some devastating air attacks. In this context, the concern for a diplomatic solution to avoid a total catastrophe has increased. Marshal Ion Antonescu categorically rejected the demands of the leaders of the historical parties for an immediate and unilateral withdrawal of troops from the Eastern Front: *"What would be the result? The commanders of our troops in the Kuban would be shot by the Germans, just as the Italian generals were shot on the retreat from Sicily. The country would be occupied by the Germans and a legionary government with Horia Sima or another leader would take over. Moreover, they would hand over all of Transylvania to the Hungarians"*; the historian Dinu C. Giurescu considered the scenario conjured up by Ion Antonescu to be very plausible (Giurescu, p. 191). In Bulgaria, the unexpected death of King Boris on 28 August 1943 dealt a heavy blow to the tendencies towards foreign policy autonomy vis-à-vis Germany.

Immediately after Mussolini's fall (25 July 1943), a Romanian proposal for cooperation against the Bolshevik threat was transmitted

<sup>2</sup> We were unable to identify a Bulgarian Minister by the name of Serafimov; see Tașev, T.V., *Ministrile na Bălgaria (1879-1999). Ențiklopidičen spravočnik*, Akademichno Izdatelstvo "Profesor Marin Drinov" i Izdatelstvo na Ministerăta na Otbranata "Sv. Gheorghe Pobedonoset", Sofia, 1999, passim.



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to Sofia, but King Boris hesitated to make a decision, while Bogdan Filov informed the German Legation (after Dimitrov, p. 431; Nedev, pp. 525-526). However, the Romanian minister in Bulgaria, Ion Șerban Christu (1895-1953), informed Al. Cretzianu, who travelled to Ankara in September, that he had received clear messages from the Foreign Ministry in Sofia that there were coordinated efforts to distance themselves from Germany (Cretzianu, p. 119).

In July 1943, the Bulgarians held a series of talks with the Americans through the Swiss, hoping for recognition of all territorial acquisitions, especially in Macedonia and Thrace. The Americans replied that no guarantees could be given before the Peace Conference, except for possible recognition of Bulgarian rights in southern Dobrogea, possibly on condition that Bulgarian troops leave the region pending the Conference's verdict (Miller, pp. 113-114, 180-181; Jackowicz, 1982, pp. 31-43).

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in the context of the presentation of debates on the possibilities of industrialisation in Bulgaria, noted that any reference to the "New European Order" had disappeared from Bulgarian newspapers (Ibid., file no. 485/1943, pp. 358-359).

In 1943, the question of the ethnicity of Bulgarians in Romania and Romanians in Bulgaria continued to be present in bilateral relations. Thus wrote the lawyer At. Golii, a member of the joint Romanian-Bulgarian commission for population exchange in the municipalities of Vinga, Denta, Brestea and Beșenova Veche, inhabited by Bulgarians of Roman Catholic denomination, in a memorandum prepared after a visit to this commission. Golii, a member of this commission, drew attention to the Hungarian sympathies within this ethno-cultural group (AMNR-Dca-P, file no. 487/1943, pp. 183-186).

In the middle of 1943, there was also the case of the 14 Bulgarian citizens of Romanian origin from the municipalities of Găureni and Gulianți (Plevna – Nicopole area) who were arrested and ill-treated by Bulgarian police officers on the orders of the local authorities after they had applied to leave for Romania on the basis of Annex C of the Craiova Treaty. Following the intervention of the Romanian delegates in the Joint Commission for Population Exchange, the 14 citizens were finally released (Ibid., pp. 158-181).

In the twelve months following the death of the Bulgarian King Boris, there is growing discontent and concern among the population and political circles of Romania and Bulgaria about the ultimate fate of these states in the face of the continuing decline of German power.

After the great armoured battles of the summer of 1943, which ended in a draw in favour of the Soviets, the strategic initiative finally passed into their hands: In September 1943 the major port cities of Novorossiysk were recaptured, and in the spring of 1944 Nikolaev and Odesa (King, p. 247). In spring 1944, during Operation "Uman-Botoșani", the port of Kherson was recaptured by the Soviets on 13 March 1944, while the Germans held out in Nikolaev until 28 March. Other Soviet troops under Ivan Koniev had crossed the South Bug on 12 March and within a few days reached the Dniester,



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which was crossed on 18 March (Liddel Hart, pp. 244-245). On 4 April 1944, areas of Bucharest near the North Railway Station became the target of a devastating Anglo-American air raid. In the following months, the Romanian railway network and oil installations were the targets of numerous Anglo-American bombing raids (Giurescu, coord., 2010, pp. 460-462).

By mid-April, the Soviet incursion continued its threatening advance up and towards Romanian territory. At the end of March, Soviet troops crossed the upper Prut, on 5 April, the town of Razdelnaia near Tiraspol was occupied, and on 10 April the port city of Odesa, from which most German and Romanian troops had withdrawn, was recaptured (Liddel Hart, p. 248). Under these conditions, on 16 March 1944, the troops of the Romanian Third Army were withdrawn west of the Dniester, except for the units that continued to hold out in the Crimea, and the Fourth Army became operational again; a month later, the German-Soviet front in the Romanian sector was stabilised on the Kutu-Paşcani-Northern Iaşi-Northern Chişinău-Dubăsari-Nistru line (Scurtu, Buzatu, p. 408).

After the death of King Boris, as Crown Prince Simeon II was only six years old, the regency was established in Bulgaria. Bogdan Filov stepped down as head of government and took over as regent, the economist Dobri Bojilov, became prime minister and Dimităr Şişmanov became head of Bulgarian diplomacy (Miller, 143). The circumstances surrounding the death of King Boris fuelled and reinforced mutual distrust between Hitler and members of the Bulgarian royal family, resulting in Queen Giovanna di Savoia and her children leaving the country in the autumn of 1943 (Gauthier, 2004, p. 262). Hitler, for his part, ordered the imprisonment of Princess Mafalda, the Queen's sister, who died in a Nazi camp during an Anglo-American air raid (Miller, pp. 144-145).

The government of Dobri Bojilov, which remained in power in Bulgaria until the end of May 1944, still hoped for reconciliation between the Axis powers and the Washington-London tandem and therefore sought to reassure the Western Allies that it was a bulwark

against the Bolshevik threat; the development of the pro-British movement throughout the country was encouraged in parallel with the harsh repression of communist resistance (de Launay, vol. II, 1988, p. 244). A note from SSI dated 31 August 1943 on the situation in Bulgaria concluded with this assessment: *"After the death of King Boris, concern about the future increased in all circles"* (AMNR-Dca-P, file no. 485/1943, p. 224).

During their visit to Germany on 15 to 21 October 1943, the three regents (former Prime Minister Bogdan Filov, General N. Mihov and Prince Kiril of Preslav) were surprised to find that Hitler believed only in a successful defence, was counting on aggravation of the differences between the Soviets and the Anglo-Americans, and had no intention of seeking a compromise with the USA and UK. Based on these findings, the Dobri Bojilov government authorised a series of cautious interviews of Anglo-Americans in Ankara by private individuals close to the late King Boris (de Launay, p. 245). The Anglo-American air raid of 14 November 1943 had not caused any significant damage, but it had shattered the myth of the *"symbolic war"*, and two months later Sofia was the target of a massive Anglo-American air raid that claimed many victims (Miller, p. 167).

On 25 October 1943, Hitler asked Ion Antonescu for greater Romanian participation on the Eastern Front to defend the Nipru line: *"Any division that Romania can now put at my disposal will give me the possibility of releasing German divisions for a counterattack, which may ultimately be of decisive importance for the restoration of the situation on the lower Dnieper"* (apud Giurescu, p. 83). Three weeks later, the Romanian leader replied to his German counterpart. After reviewing the military contribution and losses Romania had suffered in more than two years of war, Marshal Ion Antonescu called for *"a minimum of weapons and a minimum of equipment"*, pointing out that *"apart from some material sent directly to the units in the Crimea and Cuban, what our army has received is insufficient and worthless [...]. To bring in new Romanian units now is rather to increase*



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*the value of losses unnecessarily than to contribute effectively to the improvement of the situation at the front”, and finally to demand the withdrawal of the Romanian divisions from the Crimea “in order not to lose them in advance” and to use them for the defence of the Nistru line (Ibid., p. 84).*

In November 1943, the government in Sofia officially, but confidentially, initiated some inquiry among the Turkish government about possible cooperation with the Soviet offensive. The government in Ankara had already become the target of Soviet propaganda accusations because it had relations with Germany and did not want to jeopardise its position, so it rejected diplomatic advances from Sofia (Miller, p. 159).

Between November 1943 and February 1944, Türkiye's relations with the USA and Great Britain, but also with the Soviet Union, went through a difficult phase, as Turkey, under Anglo-American pressure, asserted its need for weapons and ammunition and formulated a series of conditions and demands that were almost impossible for the allies to meet at that time. However, in the spring of 1944, after the possibilities of Anglo-American aid had increased, Turkey distanced itself more and more from Germany (Biagini, pp. 131-132).

At the beginning of November 1943, at the same time as the recapture of Kyiv, and taking advantage of a gap created in the area of Melitopol, Soviet troops crossed the Nogai steppe, entering the Lower Dnieper area and thus succeeding in isolating the German and Romanian forces in the Crimean Peninsula (Liddel Hart, pp. 138-139). The Romanian military forces stuck here amounted to 66,102 soldiers, including 2,427 officers and 2,416 non-commissioned officers, constituting seven divisions (Giurescu, p. 104).

On 27 March 1944, Ion Antonescu reiterated to Hitler his request for the withdrawal of these troops: *“This is the last favourable moment to evacuate Crimea, regardless of the enemy's offensive intentions”*. Antonescu's request was met with a stereotypical refusal from Hitler, who was in no way willing to accept the loss of Crimea (Ibid.). Soviet forces would launch the final decisive attack on the Crimean Peninsula

on 8 April 1944, and on 13 May 1944, the fighting on the Peninsula ended with the surrender of 30,000 German troops (Liddel Hart, pp. 248-249). According to estimates quoted by historian Dinu C. Giurescu, the Soviet offensive in Crimea (8 April-13 May 1944) caused casualties between 23,854 and 30,897 to the Romanian troops (Giurescu, p. 104).

In parallel with the fighting on the Peninsula, the Romanian navy, in collaboration with the German navy, managed, under very difficult conditions, to evacuate more than 120,000 people (of which 36,557 Romanians, 58,486 Germans and, in smaller numbers, Slovaks, Russian and Ukrainian volunteers, civilians, etc.), 21,457 soldiers were evacuated by air, while several thousand soldiers and civilians lost their lives during the evacuation operations, cause of the Soviet air and naval attacks (Giurescu, coord., p. 461).

The approach of the Soviet-German front to the Crimean Peninsula and the re-entry of the Red Army into this important strategic area in the north of the country did not go unnoticed in Bulgaria. A Romanian intelligence memo from Varna, dated 11 October 1943, recorded the deep impression made on the local population by the news of the sinking of the Bulgarian ship Varna in the area of the Crimean Peninsula, with all 32 members of the crew, originally from the area itself, losing their lives (AMNR-Dca-P, file no. 485/1943, p. 269). A few months later, after the German and Romanian troops had left the territory of the Crimean Peninsula for good, the ethnic Bulgarians here (about 14,000) were to be deported to Central Asia (Ilčev, p. 590).

Türkiye's improving relations with the Allies and its distancing from Germany in the spring of 1944 fuelled speculations and rumours of an imminent entry into the war against Germany, which heightened the concerns in Sofia. Even tougher measures were ordered against partisan groups, but army loyalty was in a tailspin. Thus, on 17 May 1944, a company of the Serbian Occupation Corps crossed *in corpore* into the ranks of the resistance movement (de Launay, p. 246).

As the Red Army troops approached the Balkan area, Romanian diplomatic and military circles were surprised by the increasing importance given to Bulgaria by the Soviet Union. Rumours were







*On 29 October 1943, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confidentially transmitted to General Ilie Șteflea, Chief of the General Military Staff, some information on the recent visit to Germany of Prince Kiril (brother of the late King Boris) and Bogdan Filov. According to the authors of the address, the German dignitaries had expressed concern about Soviet speculation of pan-Slavistic slogans, especially after Stalin reviewed his position towards the Orthodox Church and the election of the Patriarch of Russia.*

brought up in the Swiss press about the appointment as Soviet minister in Sofia of the famous *apparatchik* Vladimir Dekanozov (AMNR-Dca-P, file no. 485/1943, pp. 378-3793). On 29 October 1943, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confidentially transmitted to General Ilie Șteflea, Chief of the General Military Staff, some information on the recent visit to Germany of Prince Kiril (brother of the late King Boris) and Bogdan Filov. According to the authors of the address, the German dignitaries had expressed concern about Soviet speculation of pan-Slavistic slogans, especially after Stalin reviewed his position towards the Orthodox Church and the election of the Patriarch of Russia (Ibid., p. 375). In an intelligence memo from 2 December 1943, submitted from the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, some fragments of the speech given in *Săbranie* on 2 December 1943 by the Bulgarian Foreign Minister were reproduced and briefly commented on, namely: the statement that Bulgarian-Soviet relations would not change (seen as an allusion to a secret bilateral pact), and the emphasis on links and affinities with Hungary, in contrast to the more reserved terms used against Romania and Italy (Ibid., p. 416).

At the same time, the Kremlin's tone towards Bulgaria was getting harsher, and the reproaches and demands were increasing. On 22 January and 17 April 1944, the Soviet government protested against the provision of Bulgarian territory and communication routes to German troops. On 26 April, the Soviet Union demanded not only the reopening of the consulate in Varna but also the opening of two new consulates in the cities of Ruse and Burgas. To this request repeated insistently by the Soviets, the Bojilov government responded with some evasive remarks about bilateral relations of neutrality and fairness, as well as postponing the restoration of consular relations until the normalisation of bilateral trade relations (Mateeva, Tepavičarov, p. 269).

Regarding Romanian-Bulgarian relations during this period (August 1943-August 1944), Romania's tendency to draw Bulgaria

<sup>3</sup> SSI memo from 12 October 1943.

into an anti-communist combination is obvious. Thus, in August 1943, Ion Antonescu sent Bogdan Filov a proposal that Romania and Bulgaria should collaborate to defend the Balkans, without changing their relations with Germany. Filov disclosed these plans to German diplomat Adolf-Heinz Beckerle, who thought that the talks might be useful, but that *von Ribbentrop* would not be very happy with the plan (Miller, pp. 116-117; de Launay, p. 245). "*What can we do? Nothing!*", Prime Minister D. Bojilov told the Romanian diplomat I. Christu in January 1944; the Bulgarian government followed its way, not seriously considering either withdrawing from the war against the USA and Great Britain or breaking off relations with the USSR (Calafeteanu, 2011, p. 216).

The attitude of the leaders in Sofia towards the Romanian proposals fully confirms Lee Marshal Miller's assertion about the difference between King Boris III and his successors: "*Boris had been opportunistic and flexible, especially in relations with Germany, but his successors were dogmatic Germanophiles and unimaginative*" (Miller, p. 174).

Another noteworthy fact, in the same context, is the persistence of Romanian suspicions and fears towards Bulgaria, regarding Old Dobrogea. In an intelligence memo of the SSI dated 29 November 1943, it was recorded: "*For some time now, articles on Dobrogea have been published widely and almost daily in the Bulgarian press. Most of them were inspired by statements from Bucharest, which were probably misinterpreted by Bulgarian journalists who visited Romania*" (AMNR-Dca-P, file no. 485/1943, p. 467).

In another intelligence memo, dated 1 December 1943, the construction of a new power station in Varna was considered one of the stages in the Bulgarian authorities' plan for the electrification of villages, adopted after the recovery of Southern Dobrogea (Ibid., p. 24). On 30 December 1943, the head of the Foreign Liaison Office of the General Staff, Major V. Plesnilă, communicated to Office 2 of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Section of the GMS the information that the Bulgarian military attaché in Bucharest, Major Čavdarov, had been informed, on two



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*An SSI synthesis, dated 21 December 1943, noted the abundance of material praising Hungary, Admiral Horthy and Hungarian revisionism in the Bulgarian press (Ibid., file no. 485/1943, p. 430). In another Romanian military synthesis, dated June 1944, several details of friendly Hungarian-Bulgarian relations were mentioned: the common hostility towards Serbia, the manifestations of friendship occasioned by the conclusion of commercial and cultural agreements in 1943, but also the similarity of interests about Romania, concerning Southern Transylvania and Northern Dobrogea.*

occasions, of the dissatisfaction of the Romanian authorities with the Bulgarian propaganda images of Romanian Dobrogea, placed on the packaging of matches; Major Čavdarov had promised to intervene in Sofia to withdraw these products from the market (AMNR-Dca-P, file no. 1275/1943, p. 217).

Other reasons for concern in Bucharest were generated by Bulgaria's good relations with Hungary, considered a symptom of the persistence of Bulgarian aspirations over Northern Dobrogea (Ibid.; file no. 535/1944, pp. 18-19). An SSI synthesis, dated 21 December 1943, noted the abundance of material praising Hungary, Admiral Horthy and Hungarian revisionism in the Bulgarian press (Ibid., file no. 485/1943, p. 430). In another Romanian military synthesis, dated June 1944, several details of friendly Hungarian-Bulgarian relations were mentioned: the common hostility towards Serbia, the manifestations of friendship occasioned by the conclusion of commercial and cultural agreements in 1943, but also the similarity of interests about Romania, concerning Southern Transylvania and Northern Dobrogea (AMNR-Dca-P, file no. 535/1944, p. 17).

As for Romania, at the beginning of September 1943, an SSI memo recorded, from a "serious source", that the main Bulgarian central newspapers had published, under the title "Strengthening of friendly relations between Bulgaria and Romania", a text about 10 lines, focusing on the cultural-scientific and artistic side (Ibid., file no. 485/1943, p. 479). However, other Romanian military documents show a less favourable attitude towards Romanians in Bulgaria. According to a memo of the SSI from 27 November 1943, the Romanians ethnics from the Bulgarian Timok Valley were not allowed to do their military training near their home localities and were sent to border units and Macedonia. This was the case of the 51<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment, camped in Skopje, a military unit composed mostly of ethnic Romanians (Ibid., p. 473).

On 26 January 1944, a new Bulgarian minister was officially appointed in Bucharest: Ivan V. Popov, none other than the former head of Bulgarian diplomacy from 15 February 1940 to 11 April 1942

(Mateeva, Tepavičarov, p. 237). Romania's interests in the Bulgarian capital continued to be represented until the autumn of 1945 by Ion Șerban Christu (Ibid., p. 238). A Bulgarian consulate was operating in Galați, under the leadership of the diplomat Ivan Stančov. An SSI memo from 30 March 1944 mentioned Stančov's visit from ten days earlier to the German consulate in Galați, where he had had a one-and-a-half-hour talk with his counterpart, Alfred Lörner. According to the SSI memo, the Bulgarian consul was seeking some information on the specific developments on the Eastern Front, under the pretext of concern for the situation of the ethnic Bulgarians in Southern Basarabia (AMNR-Dca-P, file no. 1275/1943, p. 286).

Confronted by the Soviet incursion, the Romanians stopped thinking about regaining the Quadrilateral, which was absent from the agenda of the talk points held with the representatives of the United Nations Coalition in Ankara, Cairo, Stockholm, etc. However, both Barbu Știrbey, in Cairo, in the spring, during the talks with the Allies, and I. Antonescu, at his last meeting with Hitler (5-6 August 1944), raised the issue of protecting Romania against the potential Hungarian-Bulgarian threat (Ungureanu, 2009, p. 397).

The beginning of June 1944 saw, in addition to the entry of Anglo-American troops in Rome and the opening of the second front in Normandy, a series of political and diplomatic events concerning Bulgaria and Romania. Thus, a new government was formed in Sofia, under the diplomat Ivan Bagrianov, with Bulgaria's former minister in Berlin, Pârvan Draganov, as foreign minister (Miller, p. 174). At the same time, discussions between Romania and the United Nations Coalition broke down, both in Stockholm and in Cairo, due to Marshal Ion Antonescu's objections to the armistice conditions announced by the Soviets, and to the collective American-British-Soviet refusal to continue talks with the opposition emissaries (Calafeteanu, coord., p. 339).

The Bagrianov government launched 867 operations against the armed resistance movement during June and July, killing, by some estimates, more than 9,000 partisans and about 20,000 civilians;



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however, the popularity of the resistance movement was growing, including among the army and police (de Launay, p. 246).

On a diplomatic level, the US and the UK conditioned the signing of the armistice with Bulgaria on the withdrawal of the Bulgarian administration and troops from the Greek and Yugoslav territories occupied after 6 April 1941, and on the restoration of the borders existing at that date between Bulgaria, Greece and Yugoslavia (Račev, 1998, pp. 257-258, 266). The refusal of the USSR to participate in the work of the European Consultative Commission, based in London, in matters concerning Bulgaria, because the latter was not in a state of war with the Soviet Union, was regarded with suspicion by the Anglo-Americans, as a ploy to prevent Greece from regaining Western Thrace and thus bringing the Red Army to the Aegean Sea via Bulgaria (Ibid., pp. 258-259).

In an appendix to an information synthesis from June 1944, after reviewing the Soviet demands towards Bulgaria, it was stated that: *“a break in diplomatic relations from the Soviet initiative does not seem to be excluded”, since “despite all Soviet pressure, the Bulgarian government does not seem to be giving up anything from its position as a sincere ally of Germany...”* (AMNR-Dca-P, file no. 535/1944, p. 79). However, in the contents of the above-mentioned synthesis, the sending of military attachés to Moscow and Sofia was regarded as a sign of the strengthening of bilateral diplomatic relations and a gloomy but interesting prediction was made about the future of Romanian-Bulgarian relations, in the context of the Soviet forces unstoppable advance: *“It is not excluded that, should Soviet troops, in their offensive, reach the Bulgarian border or attempt a landing on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, a total regime change in favour of the Soviets will take place in Bulgaria. In this hypothesis, one could also count on the Bulgarian army, together with the Russian (Soviet, our note) army, participating in an attack from the south against Romania (in Dobrogea)”* (Ibid., pp. 17-18). In July 1944, during discussions with Ion Christu, I. Bagrianov and P. Draganov expressed their conviction that Bulgaria would be able to maintain good relations with the USSR,

but also hoped that the advance of the Red Army would be stopped (by others, our note) (Calafeteanu, p. 216).

On 2 August 1944, the National Assembly of the Republic of Türkiye voted to break off diplomatic relations with Germany (a formal declaration of war would be issued only on 23 February 1945) (Biagini, pp. 133-134). At that time, Marshal Ion Antonescu still believed in an imminent entry of the Turkish state into the war, on the side of Great Britain, respectively, in an imminent Anglo-American landing in the Balkans. Mihai Antonescu also interpreted Türkiye's gesture on 2 August 1944 in the same manner (Giurescu, pp. 196-197).

At the same time, Mihai Antonescu sent the Western Allies, through Professor Constantin C. Giurescu and Colonel Traian Teodorescu, the Romanian military attaché in Türkiye, who had contacted the American consul in Istanbul, Burton Y. Berry, a confidential message concerning Romania's readiness to make broad concessions to the Anglo-Americans in areas such as oil, minerals and timber, in exchange for the USA and the UK taking over the war reparations demanded of Romania by the Soviets, and its readiness to resist the German troops in the country, on condition of receiving Anglo-American aid in the form of planes, airborne troops and naval forces *via* Black Sea (Ibid., p. 197).

The long-awaited Anglo-American landing in the Balkans did not take place, and at dawn on 20 August 1944, the Soviet army launched the *“Iași-Chișinău”* operation on the Moldovan front, with not only a clear numerical superiority but also a crushing superiority in tanks, air force, heavy artillery etc. (Duțu, 292). Under these conditions, the Romanian efforts to resume contact with the Allies and to break away from Germany were precipitated. M. Antonescu was considering the possibility of flying to Ankara, to conclude the armistice, which is why, on the morning of 23 August 1944, he discussed with Suphi Tanriover (Giurescu, p. 198).

Since Ion Antonescu, although convinced of the need to give up the alliance with Germany, continued to procrastinate and condition this act, after a long series of preparations, on 23 August 1944,



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King Michael I, exercising his prerogative as head of the national armed forces, ordered the dismissal and arrest of the marshal and his main collaborators, announcing, by a radio proclamation, the cessation of hostilities with the states of the United Nations Coalition. The unilateral character of the act from 23 August 1944 (the non-existence of an official previous bilateral written agreement on the armistice) created a very confusing situation on the Moldova front, where a large number of Romanian soldiers (between 130,000 and 180,000) were taken prisoners by the Soviets, between 24 August and 5 September 1944 (Giurescu, coord., pp. 462-463).

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As Soviet troops continued to attack Romanian military units in the Danube Delta and acts of aggression by the Germans increased, aware of their technical superiority in the coastal sector, General Costin Ionașcu, commander of the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, and Admiral Horia Măcelariu requested and allowed the German land and naval forces in the Constanța area to withdraw peacefully; they headed by road and by sea towards Bulgaria (Duțu, pp. 307-308). Between 24-29 August 1944, Romanian military forces in Dobrogea disarmed more than 10,500 German soldiers (including a general and 400 other officers), took over and maintained firm control over the coastline and the route of the sea Danube, kept intact the sea and river port facilities and communication routes, including the famous Fetești-Cernavodă Bridge (Ibid., pp. 313-314). However, by 5 September 1944, Romania's navy was virtually captured by Soviet forces (Ibid., p. 314).

Among the most important consequences of the act from 23 August 1944 was the disintegration of the German machine in South-Eastern Europe. The *Wehrmacht* was forced to evacuate, within about nine weeks, the territories of Bulgaria, Greece (including Crete and the Aegean islands), some parts of Albania and the eastern half of Yugoslavia (Giurescu, p. 258).

August 1944 also marked the hastening of Bulgaria's efforts to leave the alliance with Germany. On 14 August, Stoičo Moșanov was sent on a mission to Istanbul, together with the industrialist Gheorghi Kiselov, to make contact with representatives of the USA and Great

Britain, to sign an armistice that would prevent Soviet occupation (Račev, pp. 260 et seq.) On the very day of 23 August 1944, the two Bulgarian emissaries met the USA and British Ministers plenipotentiary in Türkiye, seeking guarantees for an Anglo-American military presence on the territory of their country (Ibid., p. 269).

The events in Romania quickly convinced the Bulgarian government to intensify its approaches to the USA and Great Britain, given the fears, which were to be proved justified, about the attitude of the Soviet Union (Liddel Hart, p. 261). Between 24 and 31 August 1944, the Bagrianov-Draganov government repeatedly asked Germany to withdraw its troops from Bulgarian territory, even warning of the possibility of opening fire against them (Miller, p. 204). At the same time, on 26 August, the withdrawal of the Occupation Corps from Serbia (but not from Macedonia) was announced, and on 30 August, Moșanov was again sent on the mission, this time to Cairo, where he arrived on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September (de Launay, pp. 246-247). According to Bulgarian historical sources, the number of German troops on Bulgarian territory at the end of August 1944 was 22,000, stationed in 220 establishments, to which were added almost 30,000 more, hastily withdrawn from Dobrogea and other parts of Romania (Ilčev, p. 594).

The Bagrianov government's hasted actions had no practical effect, as they ended up being ignored both by Germany, which neither withdrew its troops from Bulgaria, nor initiated acts of hostility, and by USSR, which accused the Bulgarian authorities of duplicity and refused to send negotiators to Cairo, where Moshanov quickly realised that the Anglo-Americans were not at all willing to disagree with the Soviets cause of Bulgaria (Račev, pp. 276-282).

Under these circumstances, another Bulgarian government was sworn in at the beginning of September, under the leadership of Konstantin Muraviev. The new Council of Ministers was generally made up of personalities linked to British, French and Belgian business circles (de Launay, p. 247), but the crucial position of Minister of War went to Ivan Marinov, who kept secret but strong connections with the Fatherland Front, a left-wing coalition established due to the initiative



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*Like Romania's act of 23 August 1944, the moment of 9 September 1944 in Bulgaria preceded the formal conclusion of the armistice with the United Nations. In both countries, the precipitous break with Germany coincided chronologically with the beginning of the Communist seizure of political power, the difference being that Bulgaria had completed in seven days (2-9 September 1944) a journey that Romania was to complete in six and a half months (24 August 1944-6 March 1945).*

of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP) two years earlier (Taşev, pp. 278-279).

Marinov undermined Muraviev's diplomatic manoeuvres, also by delaying the declaration of war on Germany, so that Bulgaria would not become, *in extremis*, an ally of the USA and UK, which would have suited neither the Soviet Union nor the BKP (Gauthier, 263). The pretext invoked was a rather convincing one: to avoid capture or destruction by the much better equipped German forces of the Bulgarian troops retreating from Macedonia (Miller, p. 210). Bulgaria's declaration of war on Germany was issued on 6 September 1944, but it allowed for a 48-hour delay before it came into effect (Ilčev, p. 595). The day before, however, the Soviet Union had declared war on Bulgaria (Mateeva, Tepavičarov, p. 270). Officially, on 8 September 1944, Bulgaria was therefore at war with Germany as well as with the USA, Great Britain and the Soviet Union, a situation relatively similar to that of the Romanian troops on the Moldovan front immediately after the Act of 23 August 1944.

As Soviet troops entered and advanced into Bulgaria, several regiments in Varna and Burgas revolted against the Muraviev government, which led to the arrest of pro-government officers (Miller, 215). At dawn on 9 September, with the assistance of Ivan Marinov, Prime Minister K. Muraviev and his close collaborators were arrested, and a government of the Fatherland Front was announced on Radio Sofia under the leadership of Colonel Kimon Georgiev, with substantial participation of the BKP (Ibid., p. 216).

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Among the acts initiated by K. Muraviev, under his short-lived government, it's worth mentioning the dismissal of Ivan V. Popov from the position of Bulgarian Minister in Romania. The former head of Bulgarian diplomacy took his own life on 29 October 1944 at the Colentina Hospital (Taşev, p. 376). Since Romania had left the alliance with Germany at a time when Bulgaria was preparing for a similar gesture, the events of 23 August 1944 did not result in the severance of Romanian-Bulgarian diplomatic relations, as was the situation between Romania and Hungary.

Three weeks after the effective exit from the alliance with Germany, on the night of 12/13 September 1944, in Moscow, the Armistice Convention was signed between Romania and the United Nations Coalition. Among other things, this document provided for the nullity of the Vienna Dictate (29/30 August 1940) and the restitution of all or most of Northern Transylvania to Romania, without any reference to Southern Dobrogea (Calafeteanu, coordinator, pp. 341-342).

At the end of the first decade of October 1944, Winston Churchill and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden visited Moscow, where they held talks with their Soviet counterparts, I.V. Stalin and V.M. Molotov. It was in this context that the famous Soviet-British percentage agreement on the spheres of influence of the two Great Powers in the South-Eastern European states was concluded. The Soviets obtained recognition of their preponderance in Romania (90%) and Bulgaria (75%), countries in which the Red Army was already established, and the British retained their preponderance (90%) over Greece (de Launay, p. 295).

In the case of Bulgaria, too, the formal conclusion of the armistice with the United Nations Coalition states was delayed even longer than in the case of Romania, namely until 28 October 1944, because of "*compromises and concessions resulting from the Anglo-Soviet proxy agreement of October 1944, which reflected the new balance of political and military power in the Balkans*" (Chiper, 2007, p. 331). Due to the initiative of the USSR, accepted by the USA and Great Britain, the text of the Act of 28 October 1944 included the stipulation that Bulgaria



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should evacuate the occupied territories of Greece and Yugoslavia, and not “the territories of the allied states currently occupied by Bulgaria”, as originally proposed; thus, the issue of Southern Dobrogea was categorically removed from the discussion (Ibid., p. 332).

The traditional Russian-Bulgarian affinities and the speed of the communisation process of Bulgaria made this country a confident ally of the USSR, towards which Romania was not opportune to come with territorial claims, especially since the USA and Great Britain had, since 1918-1919, viewed with great understanding the Bulgarian claims over Southern Dobrogea (Ungureanu, 2009, pp. 63-66) In addition, the ethnic data in the Quadrilateral had been greatly changed in favour of the Bulgarians, following the population exchange provided for in the Treaty of 7 September 1940 (Ibid., pp. 383-384).

## CONCLUSIONS

The outbreak of the German-Soviet war on 22 June 1941 found both Romania and Bulgaria in the Tripartite Pact. However, the specific differences between the two South-Eastern European states determined that Romania became substantially involved in the anti-Soviet war, while Bulgaria maintained its neutrality between the two totalitarian giants. In December 1941, both states, allied with Germany, went to war with the British Empire and the USA, underestimating the importance of this act.

The general change in the evolution of the war, particularly on the Soviet front in the winter of 1942-1943, led, especially in Romania, but also in Bulgaria, to the initiation of some diplomatic steps to avoid falling under the influence of the USSR, through an armistice with the USA and Great Britain and the establishment of an Anglo-American military presence. This was an illusory goal, given the geopolitical realities, but also the military and the political-diplomatic developments worldwide. Despite some initiatives, especially Romanian ones, coordination between the two states was not achieved, mainly due to the over-cautious attitude of the Sofia government, especially after King Boris III death (28 August 1943).



As a result, Romania's and Bulgaria's withdrawal from the German sphere of influence took place almost simultaneously, on 23 August and September 9 1944, respectively, as the Red Army was advancing impetuously. In both cases, the act was haste, after a long period of hesitation, partly fuelled by many illusory hopes. Later, Romania would endure the hardships of Soviet occupation, while Bulgaria became the most confident ally of the new regional hegemonic power.

Regarding the “Dobrogea issue”, which had dominated bilateral relations for several decades, we notice, during 1943-1944, within many Romanian media, on the one hand, the evanescence of concerns related to Southern Dobrogea (the Quadrilateral), and on the other hand, the persistence of fears related to Bulgaria's aspirations for Old Dobrogea, in an international context unfavourable to the Romanian state.

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