

ROMANIA AND WORLD WAR I, 1914–1918: AN INTRODUCTORY SURVEY¹

PAUL E. MICHELSON

I. Introduction

“Romania’s participation in World War I had a far-reaching impact on all the belligerents. Both the Central Powers and the Allied Coalition diverted substantial military resources to the Romanian Front, to the detriment of operations elsewhere. Moreover, the promises of territorial acquisitions that the Entente Powers reluctantly gave to win their new ally tied their hands in negotiating a peace settlement later. The Romanians, for their part, suffered through a crushing defeat in 1916, a hard-won trial by fire on the battlefield in 1917, and the traumatic impact of the Russian Revolution, which forced them into a disastrous separate peace with the Central Powers. The eventual victory of the Entente allowed them to achieve the war aims for which they fought”².

For Romania, World War I did not really begin in 1914. Given Romania’s location in the middle of the South East European “tinderbox” where the war ignited, it was surprising that Romania remained uninvolved for so long. But, despite the fact that in 1883, the Romanian Kingdom signed on as a silent and supposedly secret partner in the Triple Alliance between Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy, it only became a co-belligerent in the war in 1916. This paper opens with a consideration of the preconditions for World War I and the question of why Romania remained neutral for the first two years of the Great War.

II. Preconditions: The Coming of the War

“The start of the first war was marked in all countries by an explosion of national fervor. Patriotism overrode social resentments and revolutionary aspirations. In a few days, sometimes in a few hours, the socialists, who had been pitiless critics of the diplomacy of both the Wilhelmstrasse and the Quai d’Orsay, were carried away by the collective enthusiasm and embraced the popular sentiment”³.

¹ A shorter version of this paper was first presented at the Romanian Cultural Institute of New York Colloquium “News from the Eastern Front: A Centennial Perspective on Romania During World War I,” 14 June 2016, drawing freely on my contribution “Romania and World War I,” in Kurt W. Treptow, ed., *A History of Romania, third edition* (Iași: Center for Romanian Studies, 1997), pp. 364–389; and on the indispensable and authoritative researches of my mentor, Prof. Glenn E. Torrey. For sources, consult the bibliography given below. All dates are Western style.

² Glenn E. Torrey, *The Romanian Battlefield in World War I* (Lawrence KS: University Press of Kansas, 2011), p. xi.

³ Raymond Aron, *The Century of Total War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 25.

The preconditions for the First World War were both long and short run. For more than a century the Eastern Question, raised by the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the affirmation of the Southeast European nationalities under the domination of that empire, had been a central problem in European diplomacy. The flourishing of nationalism in Europe as a whole and the unreconcilable conflicts that this brought between multi-national empires, countries, and peoples created an increasingly hostile and volatile environment.

This was aggravated by the influence of Social Darwinism which argued for combative national policies, justified aggression as natural and healthy, and gave rise to racial nationalism. In addition, this fostered maneuvers to upset the European balance of power and numerous contests for imperial affirmation. In short, those governments and leaders that asserted themselves by force were by definition “the fittest” and deserved to dominate; those that promoted peace and cooperation were not fit and deserved to be dominated. In international terms, this meant that conflicts came increasingly to be couched in terms of national survival.

It is not surprising in such an environment that a primary focus was on diplomatic and military maneuvers. From the 1870’s onward, the European powers, both large and small, came to be entangled in a complex web of alliances. Many of these were secret (or had important secret provisions), and they made confrontations more and more dangerous as the various sides became increasingly reluctant to back down, especially in the face of perceived or real humiliation.

On the military side, the creation of fool-proof war contingency plans—the Schlieffen Plan for the Germans and Plan XVII for the French – had three negative effects. The possession of a strategy that supposedly provided a secret edge over ones opponent did nothing to reign in warmongering. Secondly, the existence of such plans meant that Germany and France were expending most of their efforts preparing for war instead of avoiding war. And, thirdly, the element of surprise in both plans overlooked the fact that having such a plan might inadvertently force a premature declaration of war, as in fact happened to the Germans once the Russians started a general troop mobilization.

Particularly influential in fostering this militaristic, contentious atmosphere was Kaiser Wilhelm II’s Germany, which had pursued for two decades a policy of *Weltpolitik* to give Germany its “rightful” place in sun. To do this, he abandoned Bismarck’s defensive alliance systems and reluctance to get involved in imperial wild goose chases, initiated an evermore costly arms race, and built an alliance system that came to be focussed on his central European ally Austria-Hungary. Wilhelm’s ill-considered sabre-rattling and unappreciated efforts to start or meddle in one crisis after another provoked a series of incidents managed to drive Great Britain, France, and Tsarist Russia (all traditional political and ideological foes) into an opposing alliance known as the Triple Entente. Not only was the Austro-Hungarian Empire in full-fledged decline, and therefore an increasingly weak link in the chain, but Germany and its ally found themselves confronted by the vexing Two-Front Problem Bismarck worked so hard to avoid.

Among the crises that led to the war were several in Southeastern Europe. There was the Bosnian crisis in 1908, sparked by the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which humiliated Russia and enraged its Balkan ally Serbia. This was followed by the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, in which Austria-Hungary intervened (once more with Germany's support) to the disadvantage of Serbia and the dismay of Russia. The Balkan Wars not only raised the level of confrontation between Austria-Hungary and South Slav nationalists and their Russian sponsor; it also sharpened hostilities within Southeastern Europe as the conflicts between the interests of Serbia, Romania, and Greece, on the one hand, and Bulgaria, Turkey, and Austria-Hungary, on the other, became clearer and more inflamed.

III. Preconditions: Romanian Neutrality, 1914–1916

“Ministers and their military advisors thought they were undertaking a war ‘like any other,’ expecting its issue to be determined by a few battles of annihilation. Instead, they committed the people of their countries to a long trial by attrition. Between the aspiration and its fulfillment there intervened...the ‘technical surprise.’... the war of 1914 spread across the Continent and became ‘hyperbolic’”⁴.

The assassination of the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, at Sarajevo in Bosnia on 28 June 1914 was the precipitant that launched the first of the great conflagrations of the 20th century that came to be known as the World Wars. The alliance systems and the generally belligerent attitude of Europe's leaders and peoples started a domino-effect that soon brought most countries into either the camp of the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) or the Triple Entente (Great Britain, France, and Russia).

Romania was an exception. Though it had been a part of a defensive alliance with the Central Powers since 1883, the hostile attitude of Austria-Hungary toward Romania during the Balkan Wars and Romanian national interests in the Transylvanian region of the Dual Monarchy determined Romanian leaders – particularly Ion I.C. Brătianu, who had become Prime Minister on 17 January 1914 – to opt for a position of neutrality⁵. Romania's aging Hohenzollern ruler, King Carol I, summoned a Crown Council on 3 August 1914, supporting, along with P.P. Carp and other Romanian Germanophile elements, the Romanian Kingdom's commitment to its Austro-German alliance, especially in the face of the perennial Russian menace.

⁴ Aron, *Century of Total War*, 1955, pp. 18–19.

⁵ Ion I. C. Brătianu (1864–1927) was the son of Ion C. Brătianu (1821–1891), a 1848 revolutionary and one of the founders of modern Romania. The younger Brătianu was educated as an engineer in France. He served as Minister of Public Works (1897–1899; 1901–1902), Foreign Minister (1902–1904; 1908–1909; 1918; 1919; 1927), Minister of Interior (1907–1908; 1908–1909; 1923–1926); Minister of War (1914–1916; 1922); and Prime Minister (1908–1910; 1914–1916; 1916–1918; 1918; 1919; 1922–1925; 1927). Brătianu was a very private man, even to his closest associates. He enjoyed the reputation of being enigmatic and was nicknamed “The Sphinx,” but this was all part of a deliberate public persona.

However, Brătianu and the preponderance of the Romanian elite (including his Conservative rivals Take Ionescu and Nicolae Filipescu) argued that the treaty was purely defensive in nature and therefore not operational because it was the Central Powers that had launched the armed hostilities. (Italy, also a signatory to the alliance, took the same position⁶). Brătianu underlined the fact that the Central Powers had kept its putative Romanian ally totally in the dark about their plans for war. He also pointed out that Romania could hardly participate in a war designed to smother a small nation over national issues. Finally, Brătianu observed, both public sentiment and “Romanianism” were solidly against Austria-Hungary. While public opinion need not always be heeded, this was not feasible in connection with the “big” national issues. The Crown Council concluded by overwhelmingly favoring neutrality (only Carp voted in favor of the alliance).

The decision gave Romania much needed time to prepare politically, diplomatically, and militarily for war. It also meant that they would have a chance to enter the war at the most opportune moment from the point of view of Romanian national considerations. These considerations clearly came to mean preparation for joining the Entente. King Carol was dismayed by the decision for neutrality – he considered abdication – though, at the same time, he was quite possibly relieved at being able to avoid a massive internal crisis. His death on 10 October 1914 and the accession to the throne of King Ferdinand (who had less sentimental loyalty to Germany and whose consort, Marie, was half English, with a Russian mother and a British father) gave a further impulse to the political and diplomatic activity directed toward the Entente camp. Ion I.C. Brătianu now had virtual mastery of the Romanian internal and external policy.

It had happened that the war broke out as Romania was in a crucial reorientation of its foreign policy. The escalation of anti-Magyar (and therefore anti-Habsburg) sentiment, the resentments caused by the Balkan wars, and the perception that Russia might be less of a threat to Romanian national goals than Austria-Hungary were key factors. (In June of 1914, the Tsar and his family even paid a protocol visit to King Carol at Constanța). Much of the elite, from Brătianu and his National Liberals to the Conservative faction leaders Ionescu and Filipescu were clearly Francophile and Anglophile. The interim of 1914–1916, thus, can be viewed as a transition period in Romania’s diplomatic orientation, one which would likely have occurred even without the war. In this light, much speculation and recrimination over Romania’s delay in entering the war and over which side it would join becomes pointless.

Between 1914 and 1916, Ionel Brătianu pursued several major objectives. First of all, he hoped to use the War to further the Romanian national project. This meant trying to preserve Romania’s freedom of action in an extremely dangerous

⁶ See “Note of Baron Sonnino, Italian Foreign Minister, to Italian Representatives abroad and foreign governments”, 23 May 1915, in US Department of State, *Declarations of War/Severances of Diplomatic Relations, 1914–1918* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1919), pp. 40–45.

situation as long as possible so as to bring about the union of the Romanian kingdom with Romanian-inhabited areas outside its borders. In doing this, Brătianu was not looking for the “best deal,” but rather sought to complete the Romanian national state by acquiring those territories that Romanian nationalists believed should be part of a Romanian national state. First and foremost, this meant Habsburg-controlled Transylvania. Since the war favored the Central Powers between 1914 and 1916, the order of the day for the Romanians was diplomatic delay.

Secondly, Brătianu sought to maximize the Romanian kingdom’s security. He recognized that Romania’s very existence could come into play. Even if successful in achieving the Romanian national project, the Romanian kingdom would not remain what it had been before 1914. Brătianu was, of course, desirous of taking Romania to the next level of national unification, but he was also wary of jeopardizing the state that his own father had played such a major role in creating. A war against the Central Powers would be fought on two fronts (the Carpathians in the North and West; the Danube in the South and East) along 1 400 km of frontier facing Austria-Hungary, Bulgarian, Turkish, and German troops. That these troops were led by capable German generals was not the least of Romania’s concerns.

Thirdly, Brătianu needed to prepare Romania for successful participation in the war, which meant being able to enter the war when it best suited Romanian interests and when it would have a better than even chance of success⁷. This involved both Romania’s diplomatic situation and its military preparation. For all the diplomatic success of 1913, the Second Balkan War had shown how unprepared Romania was militarily. Brătianu had taken over the Ministry of War as well as the Prime Ministership in January 1914. He knew he needed time to deal with not only with problems of budget, supply, and training, but also of strategic re-orientation from the Central Powers to the Entente. Romanian planning had been directed toward meeting a Russian threat in coordination with the Austro-Hungarian army; this now had to be reversed. The military budget was increased by 20% (81.6 million lei in 1913; 97.9 million lei in 1914), while supplemental appropriations for arms and munitions in 1914–1915 totaled 203 million lei. Assiduous military and arms acquisition missions were sent abroad. Officer training was expanded, producing 20 000 officers by 1916 as compared to 8 500 in 1913. Troop levees bolstered the armed forces from 400 000 men in 1913 to 833 000 in 1916, with 416 000 reserves. These were impressive accomplishments, but insufficient as will be seen below. It should also be noted that the virtual governmental takeover of the Romanian economy had a considerably negative impact.

Finally, Brătianu had to move toward these goals while stubbornly resisting hot heads, opportunists, and pressure from all sides that wanted to force his hand and plunge into war. It is a tribute to his perceptiveness, determination, and skill

⁷ Brătianu told the French Minister in București that “he had no intention of going to war until there were 75 chances out of a 100 of winning.” Quoted in Torrey, *The Romanian Battlefield in World War I*, 2011, p. 8.

that he was able to buy more than two years of time before Romanian options were foreclosed. During 1914–1916, București was a swirl of diplomatic negotiations, intrigues, and disinformation campaigns, with everybody talking to everybody else. Brătianu utilized all of this to achieve his goals, including fostering the misleading impression that he was wracked by indecision. The “who” had been determined at the outset, what remained was deciding “when,” “where,” and “how”. It is remarkable that Brătianu was able to stave off commitment on these fateful issues as long as he could and did.

Given that Brătianu had already decided that Romanian objectives could be accomplished only by participation on the side of the Entente, the main problem was the Russians. The Russian Empire was obviously expansionistic and had already shown a penchant for seizing Romanian territory (Basarabia in 1812 and 1878, the last under particularly discreditable circumstances). It was also the Entente partner that Britain and France insisted Romania deal with. Brătianu was troubled by the strategic situation in the east, which was seldom favorable to the Entente, and by Russian inconsistency, incompetence, and uncooperativeness. However, for Romania to successfully participate in the war on the Entente side, Russia had to serve as a pipeline for British and French logistic assistance as well as provide substantial military support. And the Russians had to be securely bound by political and military alliances so as to obviate a repeat of the 1878 fiasco and guarantee the desired outcomes for the Romanian national project. Brătianu’s father had been victimized by the Russians in 1878; he wasn’t about to repeat history.

Mistrust of Russia, a Germanophile argument, paradoxically came to be used by Brătianu as an argument for the Entantophile position. As Brătianu saw it, alliance with the Central Powers was simply not a logical option. If Romania allied against Austria-Hungary and won, its national project would be mostly fulfilled (except for Russian-held Basarabia and perhaps a portion of Bucovina). If the Entente lost, the Dual Monarchy, because of its minority problems, would not be strong enough to rule all of Southeast Europe. The Romanian Kingdom with its German dynasty would probably survive, though as a virtual chattel of the victors. On the other hand, if Romania allied against Russia and won, it would gain very little (Basarabia and perhaps some of Bucovina) and would have to contend in the future with a vengeful Russia. And if Romania allied against Russia and lost, it would either be swallowed up as part of the triumphant Slavic march to Constantinople or reduced to simple vassal status.

Dealing with Russia was frustrating. The question of who would get northern Bucovina was in dispute. So, too, was possession of the western Banat, claimed by both Romania and Serbia. In addition, the Russians were most amenable to negotiations when the war was going badly for them (which, of course, would be when entry into the war would be most unfavorable for the Romanians), and were most obstructionistic on all counts when the war was going better (which is when entry would have been more desirable from the Romanian point of view). Negotiations with the Russians seldom went well.

Matters were complicated since both sides of the warring alliances had assumed that the war would be of brief duration, due to their contingency plans which featured attack and movement and neglected the long run. This “short war illusion” was undermined by the Battle of the Marne in September 1914 and destroyed by the stalemate of trench warfare that ensued. Diplomatic efforts to expand the two coalitions intensified as a result. Southeastern Europe was a primary target of such politicking because of its strategic importance. Gradually the neutrals would be drawn into the war: Turkey in November 1914, Italy in May 1915, Bulgaria in 1915, and Romania in 1916. The latter, with its considerable supplies of grain and Europe’s largest oil fields became an increasingly significant potential ally as the war of attrition dragged on.

Following Tsarist military catastrophes at Tannenberg in August 1914 and the Masurian Lakes in September 1914, and Brătianu's skillful diplomacy, on 1 October 1914 the Romanian government signed a secret convention with Russia in which Romania promised benevolent neutrality toward the states of the Entente. In return, the Tsarist government recognized the legitimacy of Romania’s claims to the territories inhabited by Romanians in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and promised to support unification of these territories with Romania provided that Romania occupied them during the war. At the same time, Brătianu was also able to conclude secret agreements with Italy in which the two states agreed to give each other prior notice of abandoning neutrality (23 September 1914) and promised mutual assistance in case of an Austro-Hungarian attack (6 February 1915). Though subsequent Romanian-Italian cooperation actually amounted to very little, the agreements strengthened Brătianu’s hand and bolstered Romanian neutrality position in the short run.

These successes, especially the agreement with Russia whereby Romania obtained support for its territorial aspirations without actually having to enter the war, eased the pressure on Brătianu to plunge prematurely into the war before it was militarily or domestically ready. While the Central Powers were encouraged that Romania did not enter the war against them, they did not clearly enough realize that Romania’s neutrality in 1914 was already a decision against them and for the Entente.

Internally, Brătianu dominated the situation. He dropped the idea of a coalition government of national unity, used the war to put most substantive political debate – including Parliamentary interpellations and proposed electoral and agrarian reforms – on the back burner, and generally marginalized the opposition. “Postpone anything that might divide us” was the stick with which he subdued his antagonists. He also simply refused to make public statements about the war. The Prime Minister benefitted from the cooperation of the Conservative leader Alexandru Marghiloman, who agreed that a wait and see neutrality was essential for Romanian interests and helped counterbalance the war faction in his own party. Indeed, Brătianu’s position was strengthened by the manifest disunity of the Conservatives.

On the other hand, the government's hand was weakened by the fact that Romanian socialist leaders were the beneficiaries of German financial support, which they used to promote strikes and other protests. Brătianu was not greatly concerned by most of these "actions," but he did feel their pressure in 1916. In addition, while many elements of the National Liberal party were outspoken about the need to join the Entente immediately (such as Emil Costinescu), others urged that priority be given to extracting Basarabia from the Tsarist dungeon of nationalities. These liberals, such as the Basarabian-born Constantin Stere, were not favorably inclined toward the Austro-German alliance as much as they were anti-Russian.

Internal support for entering the war on the side of the Entente continued to escalate during this period. The *Liga Pentru Unitatea Culturală a Tuturor Românilor* now changed its name to "League for the Political Unity of All Romanians", a variety of new associations appeared militating for the national ideal, and frequent public assemblies were held promoting the union of Romanian territories in Austria-Hungary with the Romanian Kingdom. Typical was a Liga meeting at Ploiești in 1915, where Nicolae Titulescu spoke on the role of Transylvania in Romanian civilization:

"Romania cannot be whole without Transylvania... Transylvania is its cradle... the school of its people, the magic that preserved its being... We must have Transylvania! We cannot be without it!... Transylvania is not only the heart of Romania politically; look at the map: Transylvania is the heart of Romania geographically!"⁸

By 1916, support for union had achieved critical mass both among the elite and at the grassroots level, with priority being given to Transylvania.

This was manifested in the parliamentary session of 1915–1916, which was far less docile about neutrality than that of 1914–1915 had been. Brătianu was more and more embarrassed by the questions being raised concerning the war, Romania's diplomacy, and the preparation of the army. The pressure was almost entirely from the side of those calling for Romania's entry into the war on the Allied side.

By 1916, Brătianu began to have fewer and fewer options and pretexts for continued Romanian neutrality. The agreement in principle by the Entente to Romania's requirements meant that he would soon be forced to act. In the face of the murderous battles at Verdun and the Somme, the Allies (especially France) became more and more insistent that Romania needed to act. In addition, Italy's entry into the war had opened a new front for Austria-Hungary, while the Russian offensive in Galicia under General Brusilov (June – September 1916) had the Dual Monarchy's forces reeling in the East. This raised the specter of a separate peace between Austria-Hungary and the Entente, something which would have short-circuited Romania's national project if it occurred before Romania could enter the war.

⁸ Nicolae Titulescu, "Inima României," Liga Culturală meeting in Ploiești, 3 v 1915, reprinted in Nicolae Titulescu, *Discursuri*, edited with an introductory study by Robert Deutsch (București: Editura Științifică, 1967), pp. 142–143.

The on-going negotiations with St. Petersburg, London, and Paris proceeded slowly at first because the Romanians insisted on written guarantees from the Entente that Transylvania, the Banat, and Bucovina would be unified with Romania. However, the fact that the Central Powers were making their own offers (cession of Basarabia to Romania and a more favorable status for the Romanians of Transylvania) coupled with the signing of an economically advantageous commercial treaty with Germany in 1915, the uncertainties of the Russian offensive in Galicia (it eventually stalled in August 1916), and the bloody realities of the “war by attrition” on the western front, strengthened the Romanian hand. It was under these circumstances that the Romanian decision to enter the war was finally made.

IV. Precipitants: Romania Enters the War, 1916

“In the event of a conflict between great powers, said Machiavelli, the small ones generally have no chance to remain neutral, and nothing to gain by doing so, for their attitude arouses the enmity of the conqueror, whoever he may be...”⁹

The political and military conventions between Romania and the Entente were signed in București on 17 August 1916¹⁰. The Allies recognized the rights of Romania over Transylvania, the Banat, and Bucovina, and promised official recognition for the union of these territories with the Romanian Kingdom at the post-war peace conference (in which Romania would participate as an equal partner). The Entente was also to provide Romania with weapons and ammunition, to arrange cooperation with the Russian army in the Dobrogea, and to initiate action against Bulgaria in the region of Saloniki and against Austria-Hungary in Galicia when Romanian troops moved into action in Transylvania. In return, Romania was to declare war on Austria-Hungary and launch an offensive against the Central Powers. The Crown Council convened by King Ferdinand declared war on 27 August 1916¹¹. That same day, Romanian troops crossed the Carpathians into Transylvania.

The impact of the Romanian entry into the war had far-reaching consequences. The Chief of the German General Staff, General Erich von Falkenhayn had completely miscalculated the “when” of Romanian intervention into the war, though he had anticipated that the Romanians would join the Entente eventually. He admitted in his memoirs that while Romania’s declaration of war found the Germans “not unprepared... it took them by surprise. The Chief of the General Staff [Falkenhayn] had not expected war with Rumania until after the Rumanian harvest in the middle of September”¹². Because of German failures on the Western Front in 1916,

⁹ Aron, *Century of Total War*, 1955, p. 22.

¹⁰ Text in Ioan Lupaș, *Lecturi din izvoarele istoriei române* (Cluj: Cartea Românească, 1928), pp. 279–280. See also US Department of State, *Declarations of War/Severances of Diplomatic Relations, 1914–1918* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1919), pp. 55–57.

¹¹ Text in Lupaș, *Lecturi din izvoarele*, 1928, pp. 281–282.

¹² Erich von Falkenhayn, *General Headquarters, 1914–1916, and its Critical Decisions* (London: Hutchinson, ND), p. 284.

Falkenhayn (who had replaced Moltke in September 1914) was in the toils of a struggle to maintain command of the German forces; his blunder in judging the Romanian situation was a final factor that led to his dismissal on 29 August¹³. His replacement by a Hindenburg/Ludendorff team that would pursue a new and disastrous policy of total war resulted in total defeat for Germany and its allies. As a result, the war would no longer admit of any reasonable compromises and would end only with a Carthaginian peace.

It was a tribute to Brătianu's determination and political skills that he was able to buy more than two years of time, both internally and externally, before Romania as a small power was compelled to declare its hand and enter the War on the Allied side. In many respects, he had the same sense of destiny as his father had had half a century earlier. He never doubted that Romania would go to war against the Central Powers, he never wavered in pursuit of the Romanian national project, and he never lost his nerve.

V. The Course of Events: Romania at War, 1916–1918

“The unexpected duration of World War I compelled each of the protagonists to organize and reorganize the home front to improve the efficiency and enlarge the scale of the country's war effort... Time-tested customs and institutions became soft and malleable... Family life, property rights, access to consumables, locality and class relationships – all altered drastically¹⁴.

Romanian forces quickly occupied Braşov (29 August) while advancing on Sibiu and Sighişoara. Their reception by the Romanians of Transylvania was enthusiastic, but Romanian advances and elation were short-lived. The Transylvanian offensive stalled as men and resources were drained off to meet a counter-offensive in the south. The tide soon turned.

Lack of coordination between Russian and Romanian forces coupled with the failure of the Allies to begin the promised Saloniki offensive contributed to disastrous defeats as well as significant casualties and loss of materiel in the Dobrogea, where the German-Bulgarian offensive seems to have taken the Romanians by surprise. The Romanian reversals at Turtucaia (1–6 September, where thousands were killed and 25 000 prisoners were lost) and Silistria were as demoralizing and devastating as the initial advance into Transylvania had been uplifting and inspiring.

¹³ Italy which had declared war on Austria-Hungary on 23 May 1915, on Turkey on 21 August 1915, and on Bulgaria on 19 October 1915, declared war on Germany on 28 August 1916. US Department of State, *Declarations of War/Severances of Diplomatic Relations, 1914–1918* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1919), pp. 46–47.

¹⁴ William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power. Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A. D. 1000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 317.

German and Austro-Hungarian armies now embarked on a massive counter-attack in Transylvania and soon made their way southward across the Carpathians on numerous fronts. On 28 September, Romanian troops were driven back at Sibiu and on 8 October, Braşov was lost. The German/Austro-Hungarian drive through the mountain passes of Moldova was halted in the north at Oituz by the forces under Generals Eremia Grigorescu and Constantin Prezan (14–27 October). This saved the Romanians from being caught in a pincher movement which would have led to the destruction of Romania then and there.

The German offensive shifted to the south. Though the Romanians held temporarily at Predeal and Bran in the center, their position was rapidly being undermined by increasing problems of logistics, materiel, attrition, and the huge front they had to defend. Following a successful German offensive in Jiu region in November – ironically under the command of the demoted former head of the General Staff, General Falkenhayn – the situation became critical. The enemy armies, now clearly superior in numbers, resources, and technique, overwhelmed Romanian resistance at Podul Jiului and Tîrgu Jiu in November and occupied Craiova. When troops under General August von Mackensen crossed the Danube in the south through Zimnicea on 23 November, Bucureşti itself was directly threatened. (The capital had already taken a considerable pounding in October and November from enemy bombing).

The Romanian General staff made one last concentrated stand at the Neajlov-Argeş line to defend the capital (29 November – 3 December). In spite of desperate fighting by Romanian forces commanded by Prezan, the Central Powers were victorious. On 6 December, Mackensen entered Bucureşti. He found the capital undefended and untenanted. The King, Brătianu, and the Romanian government had already evacuated northward to Iaşi.

The calamity was nearly complete. Three quarters of the territory of the Romanian Kingdom had fallen under enemy occupation. Almost 250 000 soldiers, 290 000 guns, 250 machine guns, and 450 cannon were lost during the failed campaigns of 1916. In addition, as Romanian forces retreated, British agents set fire to Romania's oil fields and refineries to prevent their being used by the enemy.

The defeats suffered by Romania in the 1916 campaign had several causes: poor equipment (on every count: rifles, artillery, machine guns) and lack of promised munitions from the Allies (Romanian regiments had a tenth of the machine guns of their opponents); a very long front that could not be defended in the circumstances (due to half-hearted Russian cooperation and the failure of promised allied offensives to materialize at Saloniki and Bucovina); a lack of adequate training, technique, and experience on the part of the Romanian army; and tactical errors by both Romanian military and political leaders (the Romanian battle plan, Hypothesis Z was based more on political than strategic considerations. And by planning offensives on both the Transylvanian and Dobrogean fronts, the Romanians dramatically lessened their odds of success on either). From a psychological point of view, the disaster at

Turtucaia appeared to unnerve the Romanian General Staff. They subsequently lost their initial focus and elan, plunged into poorly considered improvisations, and as their grasp of the strategic situation became hazy, they made increasingly poor decisions.

In addition, the Central Powers were able to concentrate more forces against Romania than expected. Ironically, the Romanian offensive, instead of benefiting from the Brusilov offensive in Galicia, began just as the Germans were hastening re-enforcements to the east. Finally, though Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian units were little better, if any, than the Romanian forces, the German troops involved had superior military technique, weapons, tactics, and leadership.

For all of this, the Romanian campaign of 1916 had some favorable consequences for the Entente and for Romania. The very fact of Romanian participation on the allied side changed the geo-political situation of the war. As General Erich von Ludendorff, Chief of Staff of the German Army, later recognized, “despite the victories obtained over the Romanian Army, we were weakened in the general context of the war”¹⁵. Forces were drawn to the Eastern Front that would have made a difference in the West. And, despite the debacle, the Romanians continued to fight. In the end, it is even possible that Brătianu had taken the decision to enter the war fully realizing that Romania might be hammered, but went ahead in order to establish the basis for the larger gains achieved in 1918–1919.

At the beginning of 1917, Moldova became the center of national resistance. The Russian army belatedly managed to stabilize the front in southern Moldova on the Galați-Nămoloasă line, giving the Romanians an opportunity to regroup. A new government of national concentration was formed (24 December) under Ion I.C. Brătianu, seconded by Take Ionescu. Conditions were grim as thousands of refugees from the occupied territories flooded into the area in the dead of winter. An outbreak of typhoid fever also spread rapidly during the winter, increasing the seriousness of the situation in Moldova. It became more and more difficult to supply the army (and the population) with food and medicine. To bolster morale and loyalty, King Ferdinand and the Brătianu government now (April and May 1917) shrewdly issued proclamations promising agrarian reform and universal voting rights, proposals that were adopted by the exile Parliament in Iași in the summer. These constitutional modifications were promulgated by the King on 19 July 1917, though they were not to take effect until the war’s end.

At the same time, strenuous efforts were undertaken to rebuild the virtually decimated Romanian army. The linchpin of this activity was the work of a French military mission (some 1 500 strong) headed by General Henri Berthelot, which had arrived in Romania in October 1916. Berthelot, working closely with the new Romanian chief of staff, General Prezan, and with the full confidence of the King, succeeded in creating a new, fully operational army of some 20 divisions comprised of 500 000 soldiers, a substantial portion of which was active by June of 1917.

¹⁵ Quoted in Torrey, *The Romanian Battlefield in World War I*, 2011, p. 168.

The strategic situation in the east changed once more with the outbreak of the Russian revolution in March 1917. The German high command now made plans to launch a general offensive in the summer of 1917 which would defeat Romania once and for all, solidify the Danube-Carpathian front, and prepare the way for either the defeat of Russia or its withdrawal from the war. Astonishingly, this German effort in Romania was a resounding failure.

Mackensen's plan was to smash the Moldovan front in an attack heavily supported by cannon and machine guns which would capture the remnants of Romanian territory, disband, capture or force into exile the Romanian king and his government, and open the road to Odessa and the Ukraine. However, in July and August of 1917, the new Romanian armies under the command of Averescu, Prezan, and Grigorescu managed to thwart the Germans with a mini-offensive of their own at Mărăști (24 July – 1 August), and with heroic resistance at Mărășești (6 August – 19 August), and Oituz (8 August – 22 August), sites which became legend in Romanian tradition. Though once again inadequately supported by their Russian allies, with their backs to the wall, Romanian soldiers fought valiantly and battled the Germans to a standstill.

In addition, though they gained a few kilometers of front, Austro-German losses at Mărășești were roughly the same for the Romanians and their Russian allies. From a strategic point of view, it was a victory. For the Romanians, primary credit was due to the ordinary Romanian soldier, whose courage and exertion impressed even the arrogant Germans. The Austro-German command had made the mistake of viewing the campaign of 1917 from their perspective on the Romanians' disastrous campaign of 1916; they paid a heavy price for this in 1917¹⁶. On the leadership level, General Berthelot had considerably exceeded reasonable expectations for his mission, King Ferdinand and Queen Marie rose famously to the occasion, and the Romanian General Staff headed by Prezan proved that with adequate training and better materiel they were a match for the Central Powers.

These battles saved the Romanian Kingdom, redeemed the Romanians in the eyes of their allies, and marked the final German offensive in this sector. The prospect of the permanent partition of Romania began to recede. Brătianu reopened his propaganda offensive in allied capitals in connection with Romanian territorial aims. (In late 1917 a Romanian university mission and a Romanian National Committee began work in Paris).

However, political and military circumstances on the eastern front in November 1917 began to look less than promising. The Bolshevik revolution in Russia in November and the decision of Lenin to pursue peace with the Central Powers created new dangers for the Romanian state. On 3 December 1917, Russia

¹⁶ The Austro-German command "had doubts about its [the Romanian army's] transformation and ability to withstand a major attack.... Austro-German commanders and their men at the front were surprised at the willingness of Romanian soldiers, and some Russians, to resist and counterattack, even in the face of heavy losses". Torrey, *The Romanian Battlefield in World War I*, 2011, p. 332.

signed an armistice with the Central Powers. The disintegration of the Russian army and the collapse of numerous sectors along the Carpathian front now meant that the Central Powers could quite easily have occupied all that was left of Romania. In addition, the Romanians were faced with the destabilizing actions of revolutionary-minded Russian troops and Bolshevik agitators. Romanian line troop strength was also significantly diminished by the necessity of having to occupy Basarabia. The Entente demand that their Romanian allies continue armed resistance was clearly untenable. Therefore, the Romanian government initiated discussions with the Central Powers that resulted in an armistice signed at Focșani on 9 December 1917.

The pressure now mounted from the Central Powers for a separate peace with the Romanians. Romania's Western Allies could not offer any substantial assistance, and Bolshevik Russia was nearing completion of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (signed on 3 March 1918) which effectively eliminated the Eastern Front. At the end of January 1918, the Bolshevik regime officially broke relations with Romania, confiscating part of the national treasure that had been sent to Moscow for safe-keeping in the fall of 1916. In response to Romania's evident attempts to avoid negotiations, the Central Powers finally issued an ultimatum which brought results. The Brătianu-Ionescu government resigned on 8 February 1918 and was replaced by a cabinet headed by General Averescu on 10 February.

On 24 February, a set of draconian Austro-German peace conditions were received. They included cession of the Dobrogea, major alterations of the Carpathian frontiers (loss of strategic passes, some 6 500 km², and more than 700 000 people) and extremely onerous economic concessions. This was backed up with the threat that if the war was renewed, Romania would be obliterated from the map of Europe (Germany and Austria-Hungary had signed an accord to this effect in March of 1917). The Averescu cabinet agreed to a preliminary treaty at Buftea on 5 March, which accepted these oppressive conditions (though Constantin Argetoianu was sent to sign it on behalf of the government).

On 18 March, as the more or less unilateral negotiations wound down, a new Romanian government was formed under the leadership of Alexandru Marghiloman. His policy was based on the assumption that neither the Central Powers nor the Entente would win a complete victory. This meant that Romania had to walk a fine line in order to be protected in an eventual compromise peace. The Romanians also hoped that the Germanophile Marghiloman might get better terms from the Central Powers, but the Peace of București which he had to sign on 7 May was little better than the preliminary proposals. The treaty dealt a severe blow to the territorial integrity and the sovereignty of the Romanian state. The Romanian army was to be almost completely disbanded, Romanian resources were to be pillaged by the Central Powers, and most of Romania's territory would now come under German occupation.

Romania was effectively out of the war, though the Germans appear to have decided to maintain Romania's existence as a possible negotiating point for the

future. Marghiloman was able to formalize, with the approval of the Central Powers, the Union of Basarabia with the Romanian Kingdom on 9 April. He was also able to moderate some of the Central Powers' actions through dilatory tactics that enraged Ludendorff and the German High Command (for example several divisions of the Romanian Army remained on an armed footing and stealthy accounting techniques disguised the quantity and quality of weaponry they retained). King Ferdinand, encouraged by Marghiloman, delayed promulgation of the Treaty of București (which never actually came into effect) and continued to deal from Iași with the Entente.

As the collapse of the Central Powers ensued in 1918 with collapse of the Bulgarian front in September, Romania made preparations to re-enter the war, including the sending of troops into Bucovina on 4 November at the request of the Romanian National Council there. The Marghiloman government was compelled to resign on 6 November and General Constantin Coanda was named Prime Minister. The Romanian army was remobilized, an ultimatum was issued to the occupying German forces, and on 10 November, the Romanians once more declared war on the Central Powers. A French expeditionary corps under the command of General Berthelot crossed the Danube on 10–11 November and Mackensen's army of occupation began to withdraw toward Transylvania. On 11 November the Germans signed an armistice ending the war and on 1 December, the King and Queen, accompanied by General Berthelot entered București at the head of Romania's battered but now victorious army.

VI. The Outcome: The Completion of the Romanian National Project

“In the end, the Paris Peace Conference approved territorial gains for Romania that, with the exception of the division of the Banat with Yugoslavia, included by and large what had been promised in 1916. In addition, the annexation of Bessarabia was recognized.”¹⁷

The Romanians had been very active throughout the war in promoting the Romanian national project: the unification of all the Romanian lands. A constant of their diplomacy had been to promote the legitimacy of Romania's territorial claims. These efforts were supported by the activities of numerous Romanian associations, societies, and individuals inside and outside of Romania, such as the Liga Culturală, the Romanian National Committee in the United States, the English-Romanian Society, and the National Council for Romanian Unity in Paris.

There were also attempts at organizing Romanian volunteer corps, for example in the United States and among captured Austro-Hungarian soldiers of Romanian descent who were now in the territories of states allied with Romania. A Romanian legion was formed in Italy, and in July 1917, some 1 200 Transylvanian volunteers from the prisoner camps of Russia arrived in Iași to fight on the Moldovan front.

¹⁷ Torrey, *The Romanian Battlefield in World War I*, 2011, p. 334.

The Union of Basarabia with Romania

Although in 1916 Romania entered the war on the side of the Entente to liberate Transylvania and Bucovina, ironically the first Romanian land to be reunited with Romania was Basarabia. For all the difficulties caused for the Romanian war effort by the February Revolution in Russia, one of its consequences was the activation of a Romanian national movement between the Prut and Nistru.

A key event was the founding in April of the Moldovan National Party under the leadership of Vasile Stroescu. Initially, the demand was for political, administrative, educational, and religious autonomy, a program vigorously promoted by the Romanian newspaper *Cuvântul românesc* in Chişinău. In May, Basarabian Romanian soldiers met in Odessa to demand autonomy for the province. That same month, demands for a Orthodox church to be headed by a Romanian were voiced by a meeting of Basarabian priests, while a congress of school teachers meeting in Chişinău called for the Romanianizing of education, replacement of Russian textbooks and the introduction of the Latin alphabet.

As Russian authority and institutions began to crumble, the Ukrainian Rada's reach was extended over Basarabia. As a result, in the summer of 1917, Romanian endeavors to achieve autonomy or separation of Basarabia intensified. A Basarabian assembly, the Sfatul Țării, was established, which proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Moldova on 15 December 1917 with Ion Incuț as president.

As Bolshevik bands and deserters from the disintegrating Russian army caused the situation to rapidly deteriorate (Bolshevik forces actually occupied Chişinău on 18 January 1918) the Moldovan government requested military assistance from the Romanian government in Iaşi. The Romanian Prime Minister, Ion I.C. Brătianu, obtained Entente approval and sent a division across the Prut on 26 January.

The Sfatul Țării now proclaimed the independence of the Moldovan Republic from Russia (6 February) and began negotiations with the Romanians. On 9 April 1918, the Sfatul Țării voted 86 – 3 (with 35 abstentions) to unify with the Romanian Kingdom¹⁸. (It should be noted that the Basarabians' resolution included conditions designed to put their relationship with Romania on a federalist basis.) More than a century of Russian occupation had been ended, and the first step toward completion of the Romanian national project had been achieved. In addition, this accomplishment provided a ray of hope in the dark days of defeat in early 1918.

The Unification of Bucovina with Romania

At the beginning of 1918, the Entente had not yet come to favor the dismemberment of the Habsburg Monarchy, as was clear from the American President Woodrow Wilson's famous Fourteen Points. In April of 1918, a Congress of Oppressed Nationalities in Central Europe was convened in Rome, at which representatives of Italy, Poland, Romania, the Czech lands, Serbia, and Croatia called

¹⁸ Text in Lupaş, *Lecturi din izvoarele*, 1928, pp. 283–284.

for the end of German and Austro-Hungarian domination and proclaimed the right of their nations to constitute national states. By the fall of 1918, the Entente had come to favor the breaking up the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Woodrow Wilson's speech on 27 September proposing self-determination as the means of resolving territorial problems in Central and Southeastern Europe became the basis for concerted action. An attempt by the Habsburg Emperor Charles on 16 October 1918 to save the Empire through its federalization on an ethnic basis failed.

Romanian leaders in the Bucovina began to push for self-determination. Sextil Puscariu's newspaper *Glusul Bucovinei* became a leading vehicle for the affirmation of Romanians in Bucovina and Transylvania. A Romanian Parliamentarians' Club composed of Romanian deputies from Bucovina in the Vienna Parliament prepared the way for the separation of Bucovina from the Dual Monarchy. On 27 October 1918, a meeting of Romanian representatives was held in Cernăuți. The session, presided over by Iancu Flondor, transformed itself into a Constituent Assembly, adopted a declaration in favor of "the unification of Bucovina with the other Romanian lands".

A national council was elected and charged with the preparation of a general congress of Bucovina. (The Romanians were not isolated in their actions: the Slovaks, the Czechs, the Serbs, and other peoples of the Monarchy also organized similar national councils.) The National Council demanded that Habsburg authorities now transfer all power in the province to it. As the Austro-Hungarian army retreated from the area, the Romanians came into conflict with the Ukrainian Rada and Ukrainian troops entered Cernăuți. The National Council solicited military support from the Romanian Government in Iași, which sent a division on 4 November to Bucovina to pacify the situation. This was followed on 28 November by a declaration of the Romanian National Council which voted unanimously for the unification of Bucovina with the Romanian Kingdom¹⁹. The second step of the Romanian national project was complete.

The Unification of Transylvania with Romania

A similarly rapid transition took place in Transylvania, the final remaining major step in the Romanian national project. After a four year hiatus in its activities, the Romanian National Party of Transylvania decided at the end of September 1918 to publicly resume its efforts. The executive committee of the Romanian National Party adopted on 12 October in Oradea a declaration written by Vasile Goldiș announcing the Romanians' separation from the Hungarian state and calling for a national assembly to decide the future of the Romanian nation in Transylvania. The declaration was read in the Hungarian Parliament in Budapest on 18 October by Alexandru Vaida-Voevod.

A Romanian National Council convened in Arad at the beginning of November and proceeded to organize local and regional national councils, as well as national

¹⁹ Text in Lupaș, *Lecturi din izvoarele*, 1928, pp. 285–286.

guards all over Transylvania. These were the precursors to the establishing of a Romanian administration in Transylvania. Between 12 and 14 November, negotiations took place in Arad between the Romanian National Council and delegates of the Hungarian Government. An ultimate effort by the latter to preserve the Hungarian Kingdom by granting national autonomy (virtually on the Swiss model) to the Romanians failed. The Romanian National Council followed this with a series of declarations, including a manifesto on 18 November proclaiming the desire of the Transylvanian Romanians for union with the Romanian Kingdom, a call on 20 November for a national assembly at Alba Iulia on 1 December, and an ultimatum to the Hungarian Government on 22 November calling for the Council's authority to be recognized in the territories inhabited by Romanians.

Public meetings were held across Transylvania to elect delegates to the assembly in Alba Iulia. *Românul* (Arad) wrote: "These are historic days. We have arrived at the point of making history, to be the masters of our own fate"²⁰. On 1 December 1918, some 1,200 delegates and tens of thousands of others from throughout Transylvania converged on Alba Iulia. Gheorghe Pop de Băsești and Vasile Goldiș led the meeting which declared for the unification of Transylvania with Romania in the name of "all Romanians of Transylvania, Banat, and Hungary," and elected a 250 member Great National Council²¹. Pop de Băsești was chosen as chairman and a provisional government, the Dirigent Council, was established at Sibiu under the leadership of Iuliu Maniu. Like the Basarabian assembly, the Transylvanian declaration was based on a number of federalist conditions. (On 8 January 1919, a Saxon German assembly at Mediaș voted to support the union as well²²).

On 12 December, Ion I.C. Brătianu triumphantly returned as Prime Minister, and on 24 December, King Ferdinand promulgated the Union of Transylvania and the Romanian Kingdom completing the Romanian national project.

Romania's success in the War was neither inevitable nor even, most of the time, very probable. From 1916 through early 1918, all could have easily been lost. Yet in almost one fell swoop in 1918, the Romanian Kingdom came forth as a more or less completed national state. Pre-war Romania had had a territory of 120 000 sq. km. and 7 500 000 people. It now entered the Interwar epoch with a territory of 295 000 sq. km. and 16 000 000 people. From the ashes of near fatal defeats in 1916–1917, the modern Romanian national state had emerged and a new page in the history of the Romanians had been turned. This surprising result owed to a striking conjuncture of unforeseen good fortune and unanticipated events, as well as clever and determined human action in the face of opportunity and potential disaster.

²⁰ "Aradul sărbătorește..." *Românul* (Arad), Volume 7 (1918), Nr. 12, 10/23 November 1918, reprinted in Augustin Deac, ed., *1918 la Români. Documente unirii. Unirea Transilvaniei cu România, 1 decembrie 1918* (București: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1989), Vol. VII, p. 473.

²¹ Text in Lupaș, *Lecturi din izvoarele*, 1928, pp. 287–289.

²² Text in Lupaș, *Lecturi din izvoarele*, 1928, pp. 290–292).

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