

GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE ACTIVITY OF THE GERMAN MILITARY MISSION ON ROMANIAN TERRITORY BETWEEN 1940 AND 1945

Daniel-Cornel ȘTEFĂNESCU

“Henri Coandă” Air Force Academy, Brașov, Romania (stefanescu_d@yahoo.com)

DOI: 10.19062/2247-3173.2022.23.3

***Abstract:** The German Military Mission arrived in Romania in 1940 with the stated purpose of training of the Romanian military in accordance with the new warfare technique. The activity and the role of this military mission impacted the Romanian army, both in terms of their training and in terms of the moral preparation of the Romanian soldier. These aspects are the main topics of this article, in which the method of historiographical investigation, as well as the comparative analysis were employed.*

***Keywords:** political, economic and strategic interest; Little Entente; German Military Mission; Second World War, Soviet Russia.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The European geopolitical situation between 1938 and 1940 had significant consequences on Romania's security, the evolution of political events becoming inevitable. In this context, the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia and the dissolution of the Little Entente, following the Munich Agreement (29 September 1938), as well as the grim Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact (23 August 1939) were the most drastic events on Europe's political scene, Romania being directly affected by the territorial losses of 1940, following the Vienna Award: Basarabia, northern Bucovina and the northwestern part of Transilvania.

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

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact led to the incorporation of the Baltic States into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), made Poland a pawn on the chessboard between the Kremlin and Berlin, while Romania and Finland were forced to give up important territories in favour of Moscow. Against this geopolitical backdrop, Romania appears as an actor-participant, ever “*since the first moment, on the German side in the <crusade against Bolshevism>*” [1], with the intention of regaining the territories uprooted in the summer of 1940.

On the same geopolitical coordinates, one can note that the June 1940 Soviet ultimatums “*inaugurated the black series of the summer of 1940, culminating in the forced handover of the Quadrilateral to Bulgaria, by the signing of the Treaty of Craiova on September 7, 1940, and Northeastern Transylvania in favour of Hungary, following the second arbitration in Vienna on 30 August 1940*” [2].

Therefore, Romania’s orientation towards an agreement with Germany, through the collaboration with the German Command, was put in practice through the sending of a German Military Mission to our country. Consequently, in 1941, Romania was in the position of being an ally of Nazi Germany, with the primary obviously subjective purpose of getting back the regions annexed by the USSR arbitrarily a year ago. Through the German Military Mission, the Romanian domestic policy also hoped for an integration of Romania in the politico-military system of the Axis Powers. We will further analyse the activity and importance of the German Military Mission in our country from the perspective of both the Romanian political, economic and strategic interest, and the power relations between the Third Reich and the Kingdom of Romania.

2. ROMANIA’S POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND STRATEGIC INTEREST IN RELATION TO THE ACTIVITY OF THE GERMAN MILITARY MISSION ON THE ROMANIAN TERRITORY

According to Germany’s strategic plans, ever since the years before the Second World War, Romania had a fundamental role [3, p. 18], from at least three perspectives: its border with the USSR, easy access to the Black Sea and oil resources essential for the economy of the Third Reich. In fact, among the Nazi foreign policy objectives, first of all there was the access to the economic power of the states of Southeast Europe [4]. At the same time, Romania was surrounded by rivals with territorial claims, such as the USSR, Bulgaria and Hungary. In such circumstances, the Romanian side, in its turn, was motivated by its orientation towards the German power from an economic point of view and from the point of view of ensuring territorial integrity and national security. On the one hand, this happened in order to obstruct Hungarian revisionism, and on the other hand, to protect Romania against a possible Soviet threat [3, p. 28]. In such circumstances, King Carol II of Romania (8 June 1930 – 6 September 1940) hoped that becoming closer to Germany would result in the Romanian territory being protected, but also in his remaining on his throne, given that the political regime changed when the national-legionary government was formed.

The history of the German Military Mission in Romania, as it is shown, for instance, by studies drawn up by Prof. Alexandru Oșca, dates back to the reign of King Carol II, when the German military attaché in Bucharest, Colonel Karl Richard Wahle, communicated in Berlin, on 14 July 1940, the following *pieces of information*: “*The military attaché of the air force and myself were asked to attend a meeting with the King in the afternoon of that day. The king opened the meeting by declaring that he was determined to go to Germany. That is why he asked us to send to the German Supreme Command his official request that the Military Mission is sent, in keeping with what he had already proposed to the Führer. So far, the king has not received a positive answer.* However, the Führer’s answer would come later, due to the reserved attitude of the leadership in Berlin towards the foreign policy of Carol II. Under the dictatorial rule of Carol II, Romania undoubtedly progressed culturally, but authoritarianism became more and more widespread, with territorial losses in 1940 minimising the regime’s credibility, culminating in the abdication of the king. A coalition government came to power, made up of far-right officers, led by General Ion Antonescu, and representatives of the Iron

Guard. The government went on with the idea of the need, seen in time as a solution, for a German military mission in Romania. This proposal was pointed out in the document entitled *“Proposals of the Romanian Government for sending a German Military Mission, based on the talks that took place on 15-17 September 1940 between General Antonescu, the leader of the Romanian State, and General von Tippelskirch, from the German Supreme Command”*: *Regarding the structure and functioning of the German Military Mission, the document provided that: < 1) it will function in connection with the Romanian General Staff and will have the necessary specialist officers; 2) the troops that will also be training units in the training centres will be the following: a) combat aviation ...; b) air defence...; c) large monitored and mechanised units. (...) The Romanian government proposed that a number of 3-4 staff officers from the German army should be sent to the Higher War School. Also, young Romanian officers were to be sent to the training centres in Germany>”* [2, pp. 147-148].

The activity of the German Military Mission actually began in October 1940 [2, p. 139]. Its tasks derive from the directive signed by Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, on 20 September 1940, that reads: *“The apparent mission of the German troops is to help Romania, a new friend, in organising and training its armed forces. Their real missions, which must not become obvious either to the Romanians or to their own troops, are: a) to protect the oil region from destruction and its seizure by a third power, b) to offer Romanian armies the ability to carry out different tasks, in accordance with a plan drawn up in favour of German interests, c) should a war imposed on us by Soviet Russia occur, they must make preparations for the engagement of German and Romanian forces from Romania”* [2, p. 150]. As one can easily see, the military mission worked “undercover”, its real purpose being that of the “transmission belt” [6, p. 5] between the Wehrmacht and the Romanian Army. The presence of German units in our country meant, in fact, that Romania entered under the German influence, as well as that it would from then on implicitly adopt the decisions of the Third Reich, especially regarding the attack on the USSR in the first part of 1941. During this campaign, the Romanian army had neither moral nor physical capacity against the USSR: the fundament of the armed forces was the cavalry, but it lacked modern artillery and did not have enough armoured units. In addition, the combat and moral training of the Romanian soldiers was not at its best.

From an economic point of view, Romanian oil was a determining factor for the German war effort. Oil was the only natural product capable of “feeding” the industrial and economic needs of the Third Reich. Therefore, it was a strategic resource that had to be secured, thus gaining priority in the analysis of German decision-makers. That is way, gaining control over Romanian oil was a good reason for the Germans’ direct involvement in Romania, and we can assume that it also was one of the factors that motivated Germany to wage a war of aggression against the USSR in June 1941.

As such, the German Military Mission played an important role in preparing for the armed aggression against the USSR on 22 June 1941, as well as in establishing and maintaining a strategic partnership between the German Reich and the Kingdom of Romania until the end of August 1945, when our country left the Axis coalition, and fought alongside the USSR for the remainder of the war.

3. POWER RELATIONS IN THE LIGHT OF THE GERMAN MILITARY MISSION IN ROMANIA – OPERATION “BARBAROSSA”

Rather marginalised in the international arena, especially after Eastern Europe was divided between Germany and the USSR, but especially after the signing of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, Romania was forced to choose the lesser evil: enter under

Germany's sphere of influence. However, as the former Romanian ambassador to Berlin, Ion Gheorghe, described it, it was "*an official act without any power of persuasion*" [7, p. 220], the relations between the two countries being all about "*ordinary political opportunism*" [8, pp. 218]. All Romania wanted from this alliance was to regain the lost regions of Basarabia and Northern Bucovina, annexed by the USSR.

The Third Reich saw Romania as the ideal basis, in terms of strategic position, for attacking the USSR, understanding that the Romanian army was a consistent support in carrying out operations against the Soviets. At the same time, however, oil resources were a vulnerability in terms of a possible Soviet response.

Through Romania's involvement in the German-Soviet war that began on 22 June 1941, the Romanian army was seen as a major partner of the Axis, alongside Japan and Italy, participating in the siege of Odessa, the conquest of Crimea or the Battle of Stalingrad. In all these actions, one must remember the contribution of the German Military Mission in the preparation of the Romanian army through the training and assistance provided.

On 22 June 1941, Germany and its allies – Finland, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, Spain, Romania – attacked the USSR, in an operation codenamed "Barbarossa" (named after the Roman-German Emperor Barbarossa), which aimed to annihilate the Soviet Union and its communist regime.

In order to prepare for the "Barbarossa" operation, one of the most vital measures that the German Military Mission had to take was assessing the combat capabilities of the Romanian army. As quoted by historian Ottmar Trască, a report by the German Military Mission dated 14 February 1941 regarding the evaluation of the Romanian army, a not very positive state of affairs was highlighted: the officers were considered well trained theoretically, but "*without having the strength and will to resist to the last man*" [6, p. 7]. However, the report also pointed out that no information could be provided on non-commissioned officers, "*as there are no active non-commissioned officers at all*" [6, ib.]. The same could not be said about the Romanian soldiers, whose evaluation was positive: "*The Romanian soldier is a worthy (human – A/N) material, willing to learn; he is usually docile and willing to assimilate, seemingly even resilient and consistent; however, he generally has a low level of training. He lacks independent activity and thinking. His relationship with his superiors, in keeping with Romanian mentality, lies on the fear of punishments rather than on trust. The soldier's treatment is partly bad, and the living conditions in the barracks – according to our standards – are primitive. The pay does not even correspond to modest living needs*" [6, ib.].

The report also showed the situation of the Romanian divisions, which, according to the assessment, could not be used in independent offensive actions, but only in peace and security missions. As follows from this short analysis of the Romanian army, the assessments were extremely critical and ended with the following sharp conclusion: "*an independent offensive operation of the Romanian troops is out of the question*" [6, ib.]. Following the preparation of this report, it was decided that the Romanian divisions are not suitable for independent combat missions, but only for lighter attack missions. As a result, the plans for the use of Romanian troops in "Barbarossa" operations were changed, starting from these conclusions and as a result of opposition from Adolf Hitler. Although the German Military Mission improved the Romanian situation to some extent, it was nevertheless decided that the Romanian army was not "*suitable for difficult offensive missions*" [6, p. 9], at least during the first stage of Operation *Barbarossa*.

One of the final conclusions of the report made the following statement, extremely suggestive and leaving no room for comment: "*The German suggestions were adopted and followed with interest and sincere conviction. It can be seen that most of the General*

Staff and the Romanian command corps are sincerely striving to learn the principles of German combat. The command posts should generally be filled by the adequate persons” [6, p. 13].

Although the 1941 assessment showed an unprepared army from the point of view of the German Military Mission, nevertheless, in the 1942 campaign, the Romanian army exceeded expectations. During this large-scale operation, Romania played an active role, with Romanian and Finnish troops ensuring *“the southern and northern flanks and taking part in military operations alongside the Wehrmacht. From this point of view, Romania was also a base of operations for the German army. We know that, since the autumn of 1940, Reich troops had been deployed in Romania as part of a German military mission. Romania was also a supplier of raw materials, especially oil, which was very important for the German war machine. From June 1941, two Romanian armies, the 3rd and the 4th, participated in the operations together with the 11th German army in a group of armies called <General Antonescu>, the commander was Ion Antonescu himself, the head of the Romanian state. In the beginning, its goal was to liberate Basarabia and northern Bucovina ...”* [2, p. 67].

After the invasion of the Soviet Union, Romania took back Basarabia and Northern Bukovina, and after the German and Romanian troops conquered Ukraine, in July and August 1941, Romania was given the territory between the Nistru and Bug Rivers. Romanian authorities set up a military administration there and named the region *“Transnistria”*. The purpose of the Romanian army’s participation in this large-scale action – the reunification of its borders – was different from that of Germany, although both countries sought to achieve their goals by defeating the USSR. This made Romania feel, in its position as an ally of Germany, *“like an enclave”* [7, p. 190].

4. CONCLUSIONS

The *“Barbarossa”* operation had a series of consequences on the Jewish issue within the Romanian-German relations, the pogrom in Iași, from 28-30 June 1941, raising the interest of numerous historiographers. The policy promoted by the Antonescu government towards the Jews during the Second World War was broadly aligned with his foreign policy, being *“under the sign of tactical and pragmatic considerations”* [2, p. 618] of those times. As stated by Ion Antonescu in the Nuremberg Trials, *“during my time in power in Romania, I sought to consolidate the connections with Germany in order to resume its assistance for training and arming the Romanian Army. To this end, I met Hitler several times”* [9, p. 23]. This paragraph can be an example of the relationship between Germany and its satellites.

Regarding the German Military Mission in Romania, Ion Antonescu acknowledged that: *“I agreed with Hitler that the German military mission in Romania should continue its activity of reorganising the Romanian Army according to the German model; we also concluded an economic agreement under which the Germans would deliver in Romania 109 Messerschmitt aircraft, battle tanks, tractors, anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns, automatic weapons and other armaments and would receive, in return, part of Romania’s wheat and gas for the needs of the German army.”*

When asked: Can this first meeting with Hitler be considered the beginning of my agreement with the Germans to prepare for war against the Soviet Union? - I answer in the affirmative” [9, p. 65]. An objective historical analysis of the Romanian-German relations during the German Military Mission in Romania outlines the legal issues, because there were no alliance treaties or military conventions between the two countries that would stand as the legal basis for Romania’s participation alongside Germany in the

war, most of the subordinations of the Romanian army to the German command echelons being made by verbal agreement [5, p. 221].

At the same time, the nature of the political-military relations with the Third Reich, which imposed its point of view on strategic and operational issues, influenced the activity of the General Headquarters and the General Staff, minimising the responsibilities regarding the conception and leadership of the Romanian army in the theatre of war. For example, as historian Alesandru Duțu writes, during the Eastern Campaign, these two bodies of conception and command of the Romanian army were prevented from independently devising campaign plans or actually leading the Romanian army on the front, with only a few exceptions – “*in limited areas and directions, in southern Basarabia and in the battle of Odessa, between 22 June and 16 October 1941, in the area of the 4th Army, and even so with notable German suggestions and influences*” [8, p. 12].

On the other hand, one must not overlook the role of the German Military Mission in reaching some of our national objectives during the war. Here we can mention the contribution of the German 11th Army to the liberation of Basarabia and the northern part of Bucovina in 1941. Overall, we must emphasise the “*supremacy of the stronger partner*” [5, p. 68], in our case Germany, which imposed its concept of fighting by exerting strict control over the Romanian army. It is what the military theorist Mircea Tomescu predicted in 1932: “*In a coalition war in which there is unknowingness and mutual suspicion, each country shall retain opportunities to face the future*” [10, p. 222].

REFERENCES

- [1] Ottmar Trașcă, *23 august 1944. Sfârșitul „camaraderiei de arme” româno-germane*, Institutul de Istorie „George Barițiu”, Cluj-Napoca. Available at https://nanopdf.com/download/23-august-1944-sfaritul-camaraderiei-de-arme_pdf, retrieved on 12 February 2022;
- [2] Ottmar Trașcă, *Relațiile politice și militare româno-germane. Septembrie 1940-august 1944*, Editura Argonaut, Cluj-Napoca, 2013;
- [3] Rebecca Haynes, *Politica României față de Germania între 1936-1940*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2003;
- [4] Jean Ancel, *Documents concerning the fate of Romanian Jewry during the Holocaust. The Regat and Southern Transylvania*, 1940, Beate Klarsfeld Foundation, New York, 1986. Available at <https://www.worldcat.org/title/documents-concerning-the-fate-of-romanian-jewry-during-the-holocaust-1-a-selected-studies-on-the-jewish-question-in-romania-b-statistical-data-c-the-regat-and-southern-transylvania-1940/oclc/247299716?referer=di&ht=edition>, retrieved on 23 January 2022;
- [5] Alexandru Oșca, *Misiunea militară germană în România. Tratatative și reacții*, s.a. and p. Available at <https://www.scribgroup.com/istorie-politica/istorie/Misiunea-militara-germana-in-R74153.php>, retrieved on 21 January 2022;
- [6] Ottmar Trașcă, *Situația Armatei Române în viziunea Misiunii Militare germane*, în *Revista de istorie militară*, no. 3-4/2021;
- [7] Ion Gheorghe, *Un dictator nefericit. Mareșalul Ion Antonescu*, București, Editura Machiavelli, 1996;
- [8] Alesandru Duțu, *România în cadrul războiului de alianțe (1941-1945)*, in *Studia Universitatis Moldaviae*, Universitatea de Stat din Moldova, 2016, no. 4;
- [9] *Procès-verbal des minutes du processus Nuremberg*. Available at <https://www.unicaen.fr/recherche/mrsh/crdfed/nuremberg/consult/Nuremberg/07/57e.xml/am12021946>, retrieved on 22 January 2022;
- [10] Mircea Tomescu, *Conducerea războiului de alianțiuni*, București, 1932.