

## DECLARATION OF WAR BY BULGARIA AGAINST ROMANIA ON 1 SEPTEMBER 1916. TURTUCAIA AND ITS IMPACT ON ROMANIAN MILITARY LEADERSHIP

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**Abstract:** *The article presents some aspects related to the circumstances in which Romania entered the First World War in 1916.*

*It is shown that in the geopolitical context existing at the time Romania had to cope with the difficult situation of being at war on two fronts and against four actors – Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey. Moreover, the impact of the defeat at Turtucaia, especially on Romanian military leadership, is briefly analyzed.*

**Keywords:** *First World War; Turtucaia; Central Powers; Entente; Southern Dobruja; Transylvania; offensive; defensive*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Following the Entente complex diplomatic efforts, in the unstable geopolitical context existing between 1914 and 1916, Romania decided to enter the war alongside the Entente powers. Romania's readiness to enter the war was the result of recognition by the Treaty of 17 August 1916 of the legitimate right of Romania over Transylvania and all the territories inhabited by the Romanians ruled by Austria-Hungary.

Moreover, the Alliance Treaty between Romania and Russia, France, Great Britain and Italy, concluded on 17 August 1916, guaranteed Romania's territorial integrity, including stipulations with regard to the territories in Austria-Hungary – Transylvania, Crişana, Maramureş, Banat and Bucovina – that were to become part of Romania following the victory of the Entente [4, p. 216]

The political objective pursued by the officials in Romania in the First World War, namely to liberate Transylvania and to defend Dobruja, was reflected in the Romanian Armed Forces Campaign Plan, a framework document, named *The Plan of Operations in a War against Central Powers and Bulgaria. Romania Allied with Quadruple Entente*, known as the "Z Hypothesis" [3, p. 363]

The overall goal of the war was "to fulfill our national ideal that was to unify the nation", which was achievable through the military action of Romania having as strategic goal "to destroy the enemy forces in Transylvania, debouch into the Hungarian Plain and get to the valleys of the Tisza and the Danube in order to seize the area from which the Austro-Hungarian armed forces were provided with food". The plan was consistent with the set strategic goal, including the strategic disposition of forces, the mission of each army, and the stages of operations development [5, pp. 17-18].

The plan also stipulated, depending on the geopolitical context, the conduct of military operations on two fronts: in the north and northwest against Austria-Hungary, and in the south against Bulgaria, which was the Central Powers ally, in case of its action. Therefore, strategic offensive was considered for the front in Transylvania. For the southern front, strategic defensive was considered in the first phase.

Then, in the second phase – following the mission to cover the Russian troops landing and advance in Dobruja, and to gather them after landing in the area south of Cernavodă-Medgidia line – limited defensive was considered up to the safety alignment in the depth of the enemy disposition Rusciuk-Şumla-Varna [5, p. 364].

## **2. CENTRAL POWERS RESPONDED TO THE INVASION OF TRANSYLVANIA**

On 27 August 1916, Romania declared war on Austria-Hungary with the intention of liberating the Romanian provinces that were under the Dual Monarchy rule, without declaring war on the Austro-Hungarian Empire allies. Shortly after the Romanian armed forces crossed the Carpathians to liberate Transylvania, on 28 August 1916, Germany broke off diplomatic relations with Romania. Immediately, on 30 August 1916, the Ottoman Empire declared war on Romania, followed by Germany and Bulgaria, on 1 September 1916 [5, p. 218].

It was evident that, in the summer of 1916, when clear signs emerged that Romania was to join the Entente, the Central Powers developed a campaign plan against it. The essential elements of the plan were established on 29 July 1916 at the German Great Headquarters located in Pless. At the suggestion of the Austrian-Hungarian Great General Staff, an offensive operation in Southern Dobruja was introduced in the plan in order to mass the Romanian troops in the mentioned area and to reduce the Romanian pressure on the front in Transylvania.

The plan was developed by the Chief of the German Great Headquarters, General Erich von Falkenhayn, his Austrian-Hungarian counterpart, General Conrad von Hötzendorf, and the Bulgarian Great Headquarters representative, Lieutenant Colonel Petăr Gancev [5, p. 384].

Concerned about the attitude of Bulgaria when offensive was launched in Transylvania, I.I.C. Brătianu wanted a guarantee from the Entente representatives, knowing the politics of duplicity conducted by Bulgaria led by King Ferdinand.

The day before Romania entered the war against Austria-Hungary, the Entente ministries in Bucharest – Blondel, Barklay and Poklevski – remitted a note to Brătianu saying that “the Bulgarian Council President, declaring, as officially as possible, in the presence of the minister in Sofia of Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain, that Bulgaria will preserve strict neutrality and will not attack Romania in case it participates in an action against Austria, the Triple Entente representatives notify Mr. Radoslavov that they take note of this statement”. It is interesting that two months and a half after the mentioned statement, the same Radoslavov cynically declared, during the meeting of the Bulgarian Sobranie on 12 November 1916, that: “While negotiating with the Romanian representative deluding him with my promises, I took all the necessary measures and, when the time was ripe, I flung at the Romanians”. [5, p. 311].

The attack launched against Romania was confirmed by George Georgescu, former Prefect of Kaliakra County, who, on 27 August 1916, while “coming back from Bazargic, after visiting the county, was informed by the administrator of rural district Balchik that several bombs were dropped from an aircraft coming from Cape Kaliakra in the yard of the police station in Balchik, several people being injured.

As he feared that the same aircraft might come to Bazargic, after talking to the General, I ordered to turn off all the lights in the town (Bazargic), and I, together with the gendarmes commander, left for Balchik by car.

As at 12 o'clock at night the Romanian armed forces were to launch offensive on the entire front of the Carpathians and Bulgaria had already entered the war alongside the Central Powers, the troops of the 19th Division that were in Kaliakra County took up position in the field and deployed in defensive, the 40th Regiment Călugăreni from Bazargic, Carapelit, Curt-Bunar to the Bulgarian border, and the 9th Hunter Regiment on the front Balcic-Duvan-Iuvasi-Bazargic to the border". [7, p. 24]

As planned, the Central Powers responded to the invasion of Transylvania with an attack on the southern border of Romania. On 31 August, Field Marshal August von Mackensen, commander of the enemy group in northern Bulgaria, directly subordinated to the German Great Headquarters, moved his headquarters to Tarnovo, in northern Bulgaria, and met with General Stefan Toshev, Commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bulgarian Army. They agreed on the action plan developed by Colonel Hentsch: to harass the Romanians along the entire border, the attack on the fortress of Turtucaia being mainly considered. [9, p. 77]

While the Bulgarian forces planned the attack on Turtucaia, local clashes took place in eastern Dobrogea along the border with Bulgaria. On 30 August a gang of komitadji infiltrated in Bazargic, devastating the properties and determining the municipal authorities and the Romanian citizens to flee in terror. [9, p. 84]

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

In spite of the fact that, on the day war was declared on Austria-Hungary, the Romanian minister in Sofia notified the Bulgarian government that the Romanian government did not nourish any aggressive intent against Bulgaria, warning it at the same time, in a determined tone, about the threat it had to face in case it undertook hostilities against Romania [8, p. 311], the signal of the Bulgarian attack was given on the border of Romania.

On the evening of 27 August 1916, the commissioner and the customs officer at the border crossing point in Ceatal-Ceşme informed that: "along the entire border those wisps of straw were ignited", obviously signaling the attack. [8, p. 25]

In fact, on 12 May 1915, the Special Security Brigade in Silistra informed that: "starting on 1 May, the Bulgarian border guards placed a pillar having a height of 8-10 m for each and every picket. The pillars will be sprinkled with oil and ignited if needed to serve as signals for the inhabitants in the area who should come to help the soldiers at the pickets when they are in danger. The Bulgarians employ this method, as they fear that they cannot timely communicate using the phone whose wires could be cut by the Romanian border guards. [2, f. 197]

On 1 September 1916, in the manifesto of war it was announced that "the time for revenge has come" and that "the national war against the hereditary enemy began", and the Bulgarian detachments crossed the border on the Romanian territory during the previous night, killing the border guards. Romania was at war on two fronts and against four countries: Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey. [2, p. 314.]

According to the campaign plan developed by the Romanian General Staff and the set goal of the envisaged military operations, along the southern border, Romania did not pursue to wage a war of aggression against Bulgaria, but only to thwart the Central Powers ally, in the event of military actions on the border with Romania, in other words, it was in defensive.

The outcome of the campaign in Southern Dobruja has been the topic of many papers in Romanian historiography. The defeat at Turtucaia had a significant impact on the military history of the Romanian people. It had an “even more significant impact on Romanian military leadership, whose morale, as one informed observer puts it, <suffered a great depression> [6, p. 179]. This mood reinforced their already overly timid and indecisive approach to the execution of Hypothesis Z [1, p. 179]. The Romanians had entered Transylvania looking back over their shoulder, and when Turtucaia fell, they quickly took measures to shore up a situation whose danger they overestimated. On 6 September, they took preliminary steps to transfer to the south one division from the northern armies and one from their reserves. A fateful process was set in motion” [9, pp. 178-179].

However, the heroism of the soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice to defend the frontiers of Romania is remarkable in light of the recently available documents at the Central Historical National Archives. These documents show that, besides the mistakes made by Romanian military commanders and the logistical superiority of the enemy, the attack on the fortress of Turtucaia was developed based on the plan for the defense of the fortress, plan made available to the High German-Bulgarian Command by Bulgarian secret agents in Romania.

This article is written in memory of the 160 officers and 6,000 soldiers who died in Turtucaia.

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