

Romanians and Their Allies in War Memoirs. Contrasting Portrayals of the Russians and of the French (1916–1918)

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WHEN DECIDING that their country should join the Great War, in the summer of 1916, the Romanian decision-makers had very few certainties to build on. The choice to take up arms, to enter a battle for fulfilling the ideal of the nation, was not, in fact, entirely their own. At the time, the Great War was without precedent in the kingdom's brief military history. From the start, it had been viewed by everyone as a coalition war. It would take much confidence, tenacity and skill for the relations between the allies (with such diverse interests and aspirations) to allow the harmonization of the cooperation mechanisms. Romania's joining the Entente was sketched out during the neutrality years. Despite the many affinities (particularly between the Romanian and the French), the negotiations had progressed with difficulty. Prime Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu had been the architect of the entire strategy. However, he had remained prudent and mistrusting throughout. He feared the outcome of an armed conflict could have been against Romania's interests and tried to make sure the allies would provide certainty through their consistent commitment. Besides, from the start Ion I. C. Brătianu had warned his partners about the difference between the decisive and the final stage of the war¹. Abandoning its neutrality, Romania became engaged in its own war, at a time where the outcome of the great conflagration was still shrouded in uncertainty. The government in Bucharest had dared to make important sacrifices, and the allied support could have played a crucial role. Apart from coordinating military actions (there was the promise that the Army of the Orient, under the command of General Sarrail would immediately step into action) and the delivery of the necessary amounts of armaments, the pledge negotiated by Brătianu concerned particularly the transfer of troops. As the French were building up their resistance in Verdun, the majority of foreign troops on Romanian territory could only come from Russia. Initially, Brătianu suggested a number of 200,000 men, with a later addition (under pressure from the French) of another 50,000². But the war took a course that was contrary to Romania's objectives. After the failure of the autumn campaign of 1916, in order to stave off the offensive of the Central Powers, the Romanian army needed not only the support of the Russians, but also the presence of foreign advisors. Around mid-October, the time

had come for decisive action. At the request of Ionel Brătianu, the French allies agreed to send a military mission to the Romanian front. The history of this mission and the figure of General Henri Mathias Berthelot are more than familiar to historians, with very few issues remaining out of the reach of in-depth research. But, similar to the case of the presence of Russian troops, the encounter between the French and the Romanians preserved a specific particularity, a defining note that is abundantly revealed by the memoirs of the era.

Naturally, the various memoirs have their own particularities. We are dealing with a vast literature that not only recounts the war, but also outlines, using an entire palette of colors, the way people experienced it. This trend is visible everywhere, from cryptic political memoirs (even when they are meant to be eulogistic), to notes jotted down on the frontline, where the proximity of death pushes observation to the limits of drama. When investigating autobiographical literature, the historians usually make classifications: memoirs proper, political memoirs, journalistic notes etc., depending on the context of each particular account. The war does not eliminate completely the categorization of “notes,” but it does subject the particularities of memoir writing to a flexible judgment. The distinction between the combatants in the trenches and those on the home front requires increased caution. The Great War has been perceived by historians as a total war. Each individual experiences his own drama. Class distinctions are blurred, as are the differences pertaining to the cultural background. People are inclined to write down their emotions without restraint. Their confession does not leave out their interaction with the foreigners. The Romanians’ allies receive differentiated treatment. Some of them (such as the Russians) are perceived as almost no better than the enemy, while others (such as the French), with rare exceptions, are always praised.

The images the Romanians had about their allies and expressed in relation to them had their source in the not-so-distant past. The neutrality period had been a troubled one: the alliance with France had found fierce supporters; the *Marseillaise* was being sung in cafes, and brochures with fantastic titles and romance-like contents had invaded the streets. France was the Latin sister fighting for a just cause, for the liberation of nations, for civilization. On the other hand, Russia had an almost evil image in the Romanian press. The historical precedents (the rape of the land of Bessarabia in 1812; the military cooperation in the 1877 war etc.) were not exactly a recommendation. Whereas France was truly an option rooted in the public consciousness, Russia was merely a momentary political option, the result of a compromise founded on the national idea. Did the war perpetuate the old clichés? What new stereotypes were added? These are the two questions we are attempting to answer.

The Russian troops made their presence felt on the front in Dobruja, shortly after Romania entered the war. The Russian army corps consisted of two infantry divisions (however with poorly trained men) and one cavalry division: 28 battalions, 12 field batteries, two heavy artillery batteries, 24 cavalry squadrons and two cavalry batteries. A total of approximately 42,000 men, whose value in combat proved to be quite low. General Zayonchkovski, sent to command the troops on the Romanian front, has sent a wire to the Tsar, reminding him that the army he had been assigned was nothing but bait (“some bones”) thrown to Romania in order to persuade it to enter the war³.

Over time, the Russian military presence grew considerably. Glenn Torrey noted that the defeats suffered by the Romanians in the 1916 campaign had caused among the political and military leaders of the Entente genuine “buyer’s remorse,” precisely because they had hoped that Romania’s intervention in the war would tip the scales of victory. The direct mission to save Romania had eventually been assigned to the Russians, who sent in over 1,000,000 soldiers in order to avoid a breach in the front⁴.

The presence of Russian units in Romania could not help but be high-profile. The image of the Russian soldiers is a common feature in all the memoirs of the era and several stereotypes were born precisely in this period. As a rule, people remember things about their conduct, morality and vices (primarily the excessive drinking), then about cohabitation, solidarity and ignorance, then about contempt and betrayal. As early as during the first part of Romania’s intervention in the war, before the retreat of the authorities to Moldavia, the degrading image of betrayal on the side of the Russian allies became increasingly conspicuous. This image became the foundation of a long-lasting representation, to which other ingredients of a malevolent perception were soon added. The modest involvement of the Russian army units in the decisive battles (e.g. Tutrakan-Silistra or the battle for the defense of Bucharest) constantly fed suspicion and resentment. It was, in fact, the reflex of a deeply rooted mistrust of Russians, a state of mind that had been long in development in the decades preceding the war. The Russians’ hesitations when facing the enemy (particularly the Bulgarian soldiers) and the deliberate relinquishment of territory were for the Romanians as many confirmations of old attitudes. I. G. Duca, a member in the government led by Ionel Brătianu, wrote in his memoirs that the prime minister had done everything humanly possible to secure the Russians’ support. He had pleaded with Poklewski and Beleyev, had telegraphed the STAVKA, had entreated Tsar Nicholas II, setting the king into motion, and later even the French allies (Joffre, Saint Aulaire, Berthelot), he had even made an appeal to the British (Colonel Thomson). The result of all his exertions was nevertheless unsatisfactory. Zakharov’s troops, redeployed from Dobruja only at the Tsar’s order (over the head of General Gurko, who had replaced Alexeyev at the command of the Chiefs of Staff) arrived too late to change the result of the clash. Duca’s conclusion is clear-cut: “I was waiting to see what their next treachery would be. Given the circumstances, for me the question was not whether we would win or not, but rather when the battle would end, when Bucharest would fall, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow or the day after that”⁵. We find the same judgment in Argetoianu’s notes. Together with the city of Bucharest, Brătianu had lost his head. Instead of a fancy aristocrat, he was now suddenly a beggar, holding out his hat, at the mercy of the Russians, whose policy had been revealed when they sabotaged the defense of Dobruja and showed moderate enthusiasm for the consolidation of the frontline on the Siret River⁶. Until today we ask the question: was it really betrayal? General Victor Pétin, active within the French Military Mission, acknowledged the Russians’ inertia and their flagrant ill-will, but avoided uttering the word “betrayal.” Such assertions, as he noted in “Romania’s drama,” had not been confirmed by any documents. It would be wiser to provide more “earthly” explanations for the Russians’ shortcomings⁷. More “earthly,” but not in the context of the time. The topic became a sort of “knife in the back” legend (Dolchstosslegende) with

Romanian ingredients. The memoirs of the era had unequivocally validated the theme of Russian treason, the main cause of Romania's leaving the war. "The Russians—noted Constantin Argetoianu—could no longer fill up the entire front with troops, and our army did not have the necessary forces for such ample operations. Besides, even for the troops we had, the ammunition and supplies were enough for a maximum of 20 days of warfare. A serious German attack would have easily thrown us off balance."⁸ And this is how things went in the memoir accounts. The Russians went into battle, but it looked like this was not their war. Alexandru Vasiliu Tătăruși remembered that, on the way from Buzău to Moldavia, he had come across large groups of Russians who were saying, in Romanian (!) that they were on their way to beat the Germans and destroy them⁹. The "Moskals" could be seen everywhere, on their way to the frontline, singing as if they were going to a party. However, their songs were not heroic, filled with warrior-like vigor or disdain for death. Instead, they were melancholic, filled with the nostalgia of their homeland, for the steppes of the vast Tsarist Empire¹⁰. Once in the trenches, facing the enemy, the Russians acted hesitantly. After putting up little resistance, some of them retreated in a disorderly fashion towards the Siret, noted Vasile Scârneci in July 1917. The same author adds that the Romanians kept stumbling across Russians running scared¹¹. What is intriguing is not just their attitude towards the enemy: Cowardice is combined with disdain and carelessness. The presence of the Russians in Romania also made the locals' lives hell. Apparently they lived in sloth (wrote teacher Ion Bulbeș, based on the refugees' accounts), took advantage of the local population and stole the little they had¹². In the area of Mărășești, the Russians allegedly set fire to timber stores and celebrated Christmas by looting and drinking heavily¹³. Heavy drinking (a sensitive topic in the run of any modern war) easily becomes the writer's focus of attention. Looking back, it cannot be said for certain that it was only the Russians, out of all the combatants of the Romanian front, that obstinately sought out strong alcohol. However, this is what the notes of the time tell us. The references are numerous—the difficult issue is not finding them, but rather sorting them out. Alexandru Marghiloman had heard that the Russians, whenever they chanced upon a tavern, would drink heavily and then loot the place¹⁴. More eloquent is an excerpt from the notes of Lieutenant Sterea-Georgescu, witness to their behavior, some of it downright abominable: "I'll leave aside the wine barrels tapped with a bullet, the Russians found dead in cellars, having drowned in wine, the looting, debauchery and chasing after the village women. So much could be written about the acts of these allies in Romania..."¹⁵ It was degrading and humiliating (as remarked by a high-society lady, Nadeja Bibescu, later Stirbey) that the Romanians' fate was in the hands of uncultured Russians, depending on narrow minds, inflamed by misconceptions¹⁶. Hard to fight a woman's opinion! Arabella Yarka had seen "sneering and brazen" Russians walking around Moldavian towns, attacking the locals in broad daylight and stealing their purses¹⁷. Nevertheless, on the frontline things sometimes look different. However "uncultured," the Russians are the ally. And when facing death we are all equal. Cohabitation on the frontline, sometimes made difficult by linguistic barriers, did occasionally take on agreeable forms. This happened in particular when the Romanians discovered their Bessarabian brethren among the Russian allies. At Giurgeni (close to Hârșova), Mihail Văgăonescu (a lawyer from Bacău) even wrote about a Russian

round dance, in which the Romanians joined as well, both parties singing and gleefully shouting, each in its own language¹⁸.

Sometimes parallels are made between the Russian allies and the French. However, the comparison reveals the opposition between “traitors” and “saviors.” Ion Bulbeș (a teacher from the town of Berislăvești, Vâlcea) thought that the Russians did not show good faith, as they didn’t want to fight from the very start, instead handing the Romanians over to the enemy, hogtied. There were not to be trusted in good times or bad. Without the support of the other allies (French, English, Italian and American), the Romanians’ situation would have obviously been much worse¹⁹. The Russians were not the French, Argetoianu noted in Iași, and Kherson was certainly no Le Havre. The Russians inspired fear and mistrust. Few hopes could be set in the support they could provide. This is the reason why the requests of the Russian High Command (above all the merger of the remaining Romanian army with the Russian one; the evacuation of the government, of the king and of the Parliament to Russia etc.) were left unanswered for a while, the same Argetoianu reminisced, only to be turned down completely later on²⁰.

The arrival of the French Mission in Romania caused a rush of impressions—favorable perceptions, rejuvenating ones, full of hope, living proof that France cares about the Romanians. Hope was reborn in everyone’s heart. Văgăonescu remembers that the French officers had managed to lift the soldiers’ morale. In the trenches in Vrancea, the mere appearance of a “tall and spiffy” lieutenant with “imposing whiskers” was an occasion for an effusion of confidence: “There, my brothers, see how well-built are the French! Let the Germans try to pass by us if they think they can afford it!”²¹ Father Cicerone Iordăchescu informs us that the officers of the French Mission operated as a sort of discreet supervisors among the Romanian troops. They were good advisers and comrades, and their experience on the Western front was very useful to the Romanians²². General Berthelot was very well received from the beginning (although not everywhere, to be truthful). Queen Marie would describe him as a “massive man,” “heavy-set,” “blond,” “pleasant and natural,” “clever and serious.” She seems to be sure, from the start, that he had brought with him excellent officers, prepared to help the Romanians with the art of war²³. I. G. Duca pointed out that Berthelot inspired optimism and confidence among the troops. His presence was a symbol of France’s support, a France that was at the time going through hard times and painful doubts. Unlike him, General Belyaev, sent by the STAVKA, emanated the same hostility towards Romania as his superiors²⁴. Naturally, not everyone liked the famous French general. Averescu’s antipathy remains notorious. Here is an eloquent excerpt from his “Daily notes....” of 6 May 1917: “I received the visit of General Berthelot, whom I accommodated at my place, together with his aide de camp. We went to the training center, so that he could inspect the activity of the French officers. It looks like he will need to leave for France, where he is to be assigned the command of an army. Irrespective of his sentiments towards me, I believe we shall be at an advantage if he is replaced”²⁵.

It is from the French officers that the Romanians learned what it meant to owe respect to the enlisted man. Captain Petithory (who was a dear friend of Father Iordăchescu) would attend the funerals of those fallen on the field of honor. He would stand respectfully, and at the end of the service would toss a handful of earth on the coffin²⁶. Sometimes

the religious service for funerals would be held by the French military priests. In Iași, in the Catholic church of the city, Berthelot himself would attend such events, together with all the members of the French Mission. In the streets, the ceremonies were organized with long corteges. The officers (both Romanian and French) would then hold speeches, eulogizing the departed²⁷. It is quite clear that, when it comes to the allies (particularly to the French), wartime notes create a character. Without fancying themselves writers or artists, Romanian memoir authors seem to be often fascinated with painting portraits. Here is another example. We find the French Colonel Fain in the Târgu Jiu region; he is a prominent character in the notes left by Captain Pârnu Boerescu (an officer with the Chiefs of Staff of the 11th Division, in charge of the Operations and the Intelligence Bureaus). Wishing to gain a better understanding of the situation of the Romanian troops, Fain would accompany Boerescu to various frontline sectors. He was also part of dangerous missions. During one such mission, Boerescu had suggested to Fain to accompany him to the rendezvous with the Coandă Detachment²⁸, in a high-risk area located near the village of Tetila (currently Tetila in the county of Gorj). The two would have to cross enemy territory, and the Germans could have discovered them relatively easily. It was also likely that they would fail to reach the rendezvous point on time, and thus be accused of deserting the ranks. Fain accepted the challenge, and the result was a success. The next morning the pair reached Tetila, where the first echelons of the Coandă Detachment had begun to arrive²⁹.

The images the Romanians constructed in relation to their war allies, the French and the Russians, are permanently marked by a visible contrast. Even though there is a general tendency to blame all the allies for the defeats suffered (especially for the failed campaign of 1916), Romanian memoirs take refuge in nuance, subtly avoiding the pitfalls of confusion. After the valor shown in war, the French remained “the saviors” and the Russians “the traitors.” Some acted with arrogance and contempt, others, on the contrary, showed their appreciation, devoted themselves to rebuilding the army, sacrificed themselves for the Romanian cause. Some differences are due to cultural prejudice. The French are seen from the perspective of their refinement, the Russians, from that of their crude appetites. Vices also separate them. The Russians are associated, as a rule, with violent behavior and heavy drinking. The French appear to be vice-free, they seem to have only good qualities: they are dignified, strong, courageous.

The root of these perceptions goes back to the political rhetoric from Romania’s neutrality years. France’s popularity in the Romanian society ultimately mitigated the historically depreciative image of the Russians. In the eyes of the Romanian people, even after the Crimean War, Russia had kept (as Radu Rosetti wrote in the brochure titled *Atitudinea României în războiul actual* [Romania’s attitude in the current war], 1915) its great prestige as a military power, but this prestige had been tarnished after the young Romanians who had fought in the War of Independence had returned to their villages. The stories they were telling about the Russians, alongside whom they had fought, were not exactly flattering for the latter. It was said that the Russians’ power consisted in their numbers, that they may be numerous, “but they are stupid and like to drink.” The coup de grace to the Russians’ prestige came from their defeat by the Japanese (“yellow midgets with slanted eyes”), and thus, during the Great War, one could hear in the

villages talk about how strong the Germans were and how easily they beat the Russians³⁰. It is this (widely spread) image that the Russian allies had to deal with when Romania entered the war. What came next seems to be a mere continuation of the story, on another level. The Russians could not reverse the already-formed image; instead, they seemed to be intent on enhancing it. On the other hand we have France's presence in the war. Its victories, as Elena Văcărescu was saying to Count Saint Aulaire (the future minister plenipotentiary in Bucharest), bring together people who do not know each other, make them cry tears of joy and kiss each other in the streets³¹. This image was very much strengthened in the years of the war. Many vectors had contributed to its success, one of them in a crucial manner: the arrival of the French Military Mission in Romania had occurred at a decisive moment. The French support appeared to be at the time an almost divine gift, given that the Russians had shown vulnerability and little commitment for defending Romania. Not without obstacles and challenges (particularly during the dramatic moments when the Peace of Bucharest was signed), the affective connection between the Romanians and the French survived the iniquities of war and was converted into a wealth of shared memories, preserved with care in the years that followed. Throughout the interwar period, the commemorations of Romania's war presented the French as heroes. Quite often such events were attended by guests from France. The sublimity of the French image had reached its zenith.



Notes

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Abstract

Romanians and Their Allies in War Memoirs. Contrasting Portrayals of the Russians and of the French (1916-1918)

At the start of the Great War (1914), Romania had proclaimed its neutrality. The internal political scene was becoming increasingly volatile, and the actions of the diplomacy revealed the pre-occupation for finding new allies. This search was not, however, an open-and-shut case. The preference of the decision-makers of the era for the Entente powers prevailed, but the path to the alliance was tortuous and beset by tensions. After entering the war (August 1916), Romania constructed its own picture of the military contribution of its allies. This image (intensely present in memoirs) preserves several pre-war features and adds new strengths. For the Romanian elites, France had been one of the beacons of modern civilization. Much had been said about the influence of the French spirit in the emancipation process experienced by Romanian society. On the other hand, however, Russia, as an imperial power, enjoyed a negative perception. It had snatched Bessarabia from the Romanians, after the Berlin Congress, and had created a ring of fire around the Kingdom of Romania by calling for brothers of the same race (the Slavs) in the North and West of the Balkan Peninsula to show solidarity. The existing stereotypes did not die out—on the contrary, they became amplified during the war. The proposed presentation aims to clarify the manner in which Romanians viewed the contribution of the Entente allies to their war effort, an image they preserved afterwards for many years in collective memory. The in-depth intent of the text is to show why the French and the Russians, each represented in unbalanced proportions on the Romanian front, were the object of such extremely different perceptions, and what were the defining traits that contributed to this type of portrayal.

Keywords

alliances, allies, war, comrades, society, perceptions, collective memory