

**A few Considerations on Romanian-French -Russian
Relations in 1917: the Discussions concerning
Romanian Army's Evacuation in Russia[□]**

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Abstract

This short study deals with the relations between Romania, France and Russia and especially with the possibility of the royal Romanian army's evacuation in the Russian territory for reorganization. This problem generated tension in the relations between the Allies, especially between France and Russia. During 1917, this represented a key-problem of the discussions between the three diplomacies (French, Russian and Romanian) and the military representatives.

Key words: *army, evacuation, reorganization, Russia, France, Romania, relations.*

In 1917, one of the most important aspects of the political, diplomatic and military relations between France and Romania represented the possibility for Romanian Royal army to go in Russia. It was to be reorganized on Russian territory. An intense correspondence took also place on this topic and the Romanian-French-Russian negotiations were very assiduous.¹

Despite the opposition of France and Romania, on 4th of January 1917, the Russian government took seriously into account the possibility of transferring the diplomatic body and Romanian authorities in Russia. As a reply to Russian intents, the count Charles de Saint-Aulaire, the France's minister plenipotentiary to Iași proceeded to sustained efforts together with his English and Italian colleagues, Sir George Barclay, respectively the baron Carlo

[□] See Hadrian Gorun, *Russian-French Contradictions Concerning the Possibility of Romanian Army's Evacuation in Russia in the Year 1917*, in *Studia Universitatis Petru Maior Historia*, nr. 11/ 2011, pp. 257-266. We published an exhaustive study on this topic.

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¹ H. Gorun, *op. cit.* , p. 257; See Idem, *România și Aliații (1915-1918)*, Editura "Academica Brâncuși", Târgu-Jiu, 2010 and also *Relații politico-diplomatice și militare ale României cu Franța în Primul Război mondial*, Editura Argonaut, Cluj-Napoca, 2009.

Fasciotii. He also informed Russia's minister to Iași, Mossolov that the refuse of the Russian troops to defend at least Moldavia placed the Empire of the Czars in a humiliating hypostasis.²

In their competition with the French for influence in Romania, it seemed that the Russians have made some advance in the winter of 1917 when General Vladimir Sakharov became King Ferdinand's nominal deputy. Then General Berthelot was appointed to a position apparently without importance, namely the inspector of the Romanian troops. Thus, Sakharov began to insist that all Romanian units undergoing rehabilitation under the supervision of General Berthelot should cross the Prut river in order to be quartered on Russian territory.³

The Russian General had similar discussions with the Romanian Chief of Staff, Constantin Prezan. Romanian government and King Ferdinand energetically rejected Russian demands. Ferdinand declared that he would never separate himself of his army. In fact the Romanian authorities realized that Petrograd had planned the subordination of the Romanian army, the limitation of the King's prerogatives, although he was the supreme commander. The Russian political and military officials wanted to gain for their army all the war materials sent by France to Romania, via Arhanghelsk harbour.⁴

A little time after the transfer of the Romanian General Headquarter to Bârlad, the commander of the Russian military mission from Romania, the general Mikhail Beleaev, required, on the behalf of the state he represented that Romanian and Russian armies should be commanded by General Sakharov. In his opinion, the Romanian General Headquarters should be eliminated and absorbed by the Russian one. This inadmissible request could not be fulfilled, because there were also difficulties of legal nature. According to the Constitution, the supreme commander of the army was the King, while according to the law of the siege state, the Romanian General Headquarters assumed a few of the prerogatives of the Council of ministers.⁵ Trying to subordinate the Romanian army, the Russian military authorities projected its division in two components: one of them was to go to Poltava and the other one to

² Service Historique de l' Armée de Terre (hereafter cited as S. H. A. T.), Série Cabinet du ministre, Carton 5N 200, telegrama nr. 9, din 4 ianuarie 1917, signed Saint - Aulaire; A. M. A. E. F., Guerre, Roumanie, D. 345, f. 16.

³ H. Gorun, *Romanian-French Contradictions...*, p. 259.

⁴ Glenn E. Torrey, "Russia, Romania and France: The Reorganisation of the Romanian Front 1916 - 1917", in *Revue Roumaine d' Histoire*, 1992, nr. 1-2p. 102; Constantin I. Stan, *Regele Ferdinand I „Întregitorul” (1914-1927)*; Editura Paideia, București, 2003, p. 82.

⁵ I. G. Duca, *Memorii*, Editura Machiavelli, București, 1994, vol. IV, p. 133, *apud* C. I. Stan, *op. cit.* , p. 82.

Caucas. The Romanian minister to Paris, Lahovari informed French government about the dangerous situation that would have been created if Russian projects had been materialized.⁶

If King Ferdinand energetically disagreed the sending of the Romanian army and officials in Russia, the government and the General Staff tended somehow to assume the point of view of the Russian authorities arguing that it was the sole solution for the salvation in the event of Moldavia's invasion. Maybe a few political and military officials wanted to prevent new sacrifices. The minister plenipotentiary Saint-Aulaire and the General Berthelot were aware that the reorganization of the Romanian army on the national territory had represented the only one viable solution for the perpetuation of the French influence in Romanian Kingdom and in Balkans.⁷ That is why they did their best to rally to their point of view all the decision makers from Romania. Due to these efforts, the president of the Council of ministers Consiliului, Ion I. C. Brătianu decided to plead for the reorganization of the Royal army on the Romanian soil at the Petrograd conference.⁸

We must underline that the French diplomacy has always insisted for the reorganization of the the Romanian troops in Moldavia. This represented a guarantee of its efficiency.

The revolution which broke out on 28 February/ 13 March 1917 put an end to the Russian plans and, subsequently, the independence and the identity of the Royal army were preserved.⁹ So, at least at that moment, the matter of the evacuation of the Romanian army and authorities was solved according to the French opinion strongly expressed by the chief of the military mission, Berthelot.

At the end of July 1917, the question of a possible withdrawal in Russia became again the most important topic of the discussions between Iași, Paris and Petrograd. The government from Iași and King Ferdinand were reluctant to admit this eventuality. The Romanian diplomacy made its best to avoid the abandonment the national territory by the army. France had to support Romanian cause at Petrograd. The Central Empires' troops would invade Moldavia and could march to Odesa. On 28 July, the King reiterated his strong loyalty for the Entente and told that the withdrawal in Russia represented a desperate action, an ultimate solution. In this case, Ferdinand requested all the rights due to a commander-in-chief, a special

⁶ A. M. A. E. F. , *Guerre, Roumanie*, D. 345, f. 25 ; H. Gorun, *op. cit.* , p. 260.

⁷ S. H. A. T. , *Cabinet du ministre*, Carton 5N 200, telegram no. 65, 31 January 1917, signed Saint - Aulaire; See also Carton 5N 140.

⁸ *Ibidem*, telegram no. 66, 31 January 1917, signed Saint-Aulaire.

⁹ G. E. Torrey, *op. cit.* , p. 63.

military zone and even a temporary territorial sovereignty. The Foreign Affairs' minister of the provisional government, Terescenko declared that the respecting of all the royal prerogatives would be guaranteed in this eventuality.¹⁰

Russia tried to persuade France that it had never given up Moldavia's defense and if necessary, the Russian General Staff would study the possibility of a withdrawal in the north of Bucovina.¹¹ The General Brusilov was replaced by the Genral Kornilov. In fact, the Russian troops began to refuse fighting and the growing anarchy made worst the military co-operation. They became very sensitive to the pacifist ideas and German propaganda. The Russian troops were unable to defend neither Prut line, nor that of Nistru. Moreover, the Russian were unpredictable seizing all the means of conveyance to facilitate their own run.¹²

On the other hand, the departure of the diplomatic body was delayed again, although the members of Parliament and those of the Court of Cassation had been already evacuated.¹³ In Constantin Diamandi's opinion, if the provisional government adoped a fair attitude to Romania, the Russian soldiers on the front did not show a similar one. Ion I. C. Bratianu considered that the Entente should "take in its hands Romania's fate and adopt Romanian army".¹⁴ So, the allied powers should respect and reaffirm the commitments assumed towards Romania.

The dussions concerning a possible departure in Russia continued in the fall of 1917. The Russian disorder and anarchy became deeper and deeper and therefore, the Romanian Kingdom was not able to fructify the brilliant victories of the summer and it had to combat without the necessary support and military means.¹⁵

The Russian authorities tended to control and subordinate the Romanian army. That is why they insisted so much on the principle of the evacuation for the Romanian army, government and population¹⁶.

¹⁰ A. M. A. E. F. , Guerre, Roumanie, D. 347, f. 77-80, f. 98.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, f. 77-80 f. 99; H. Gorun, *op. cit.* , p. 265.

¹² Arhivele Naționale ale României, Fond Microfilme, Anglia, r. 257, c. 30; Conte de Saint - Aulaire, *Confesiunile unui bătrân diplomat*, Translated into Romanian by Ileana Sturza, Editura Humanitas, București, 2003, p. 154.

¹³ S. H. A. T. , Cabinet du ministre, Carton 5N 201, telegram no. 473 of the commander of the French military mission to the War minister, at Paris, 23 August 1917 .

¹⁴ A. M. A. E. F. , Guerre, Roumanie, D. 347, f. 198.

¹⁵ H. Gorun, *op. cit.* , p. 266.

The General Henri Mathias Berthelot and the count Auguste Charles de Saint-Aulaire has always militated for the Romania's cause, warning Brătianu government about the disadvantages and risks involved by the evacuation of the army and of the authorities in Russia. Of course, this would have represented a military adventure and the costs for such an action would have been huge.¹⁷

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 266.