

## MARSHALL ION ANTONESCU AND THE “LATIN AXIS” (1942 - 1944)

MIHAI D. DRECIN\*, DELIA CORA\*\*

**Abstract:** *Antonescu's Romania entered World War II on the side of the fascist Axis, seeking to recover the territories lost in June–September 1940 to its neighbors: the USSR, Hungary, and Bulgaria, supported by fascist Germany and Italy. Forced to cross the Nistru, the eastern border of Unified Romania sanctioned at the Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920), in 1942, after Germany's defeat at Stalingrad and Al-Alamein, she finds herself forced to think about a bleak political future that would bring the Red Army to Romania. Romanian diplomacy will make special efforts, both the democratic Opposition (the Royal House, the historical parties) and the Government of Ion Antonescu, through official and unofficial diplomatic channels, to get Romania out of Hitler's war. The paths initiated by the Antonescu regime with a view to establishing the "Latin Axis" around Mussolini are detailed, which would force Hitler to accept a divorce from his allies, in order to avoid the occupation of Romania by the Red Army. Even if the attempt fails, it turns out that Stalin would have preferred an armistice with Ion Antonescu, in whom he had more confidence than in the historical bourgeois political parties. The coup d'état of August 23, 1944 and the arrest of Marshall Ion Antonescu cancel the "Latin Axis" option.*

**Keywords:** Ion and Mihai Antonescu, armistice with the USSR, "Latin Axis", 1942-1944, August 23, 1944.

**DOI** [10.56082/annalsarscihist.2025.1.49](https://doi.org/10.56082/annalsarscihist.2025.1.49)

The offensive military operations of the German Army in Western and Northern Europe against Belgium, the Netherlands, and Denmark, in the spring of 1940, combined with the military actions of the U.S.S.R. whose aim was to occupy Eastern Polish territories, as well as the war against Finland resulted in Romania's entering a new stage of diplomatic relations known as “pro-axis non-belligerency” (29 May 1940 - 21 June 1941).<sup>1</sup> It is a certainty that the resurgence of the Soviet threat, which materialised in the occupation of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, resulted in our country's refusing, on 1 July 1940, the security guarantees offered

---

\* University Professor Emeritus Ph.D., History Department, University of Oradea, Full Member of the Academy of Romanian Scientists

\*\* Ph.D. in History, teacher at *Petőfi Sándor* Theoretical High School in Săcueni/Bihor, *Silviu Dragomir* Center for Interdisciplinary Studies – Oradea – Kishinev - Padova.

<sup>1</sup> Gh. Buzatu, Gh. I. Florescu, *Al Doilea Război Mondial și România. O bibliografie*, published in *A.D. Xenopol* Yearbook of the University of History and Archeology (Iași), 1981, p. XII; this stage of diplomatic relations was preceded by other stages: *collective security* (1918 - 1936), *bloc diplomacy* (1936 - 1939), and *active, pro-allied neutrality* (6 September 1936 - 29 May 1940), all firmly geared towards France and England.

---

by England and France on 13 April 1939 concerning the integrity of Romanian borders, Romania's withdrawal from the League of Nations (on 11 July 1940), and the confirmation of its decision to cooperate with the Nazi Reich by joining the Tripartite Pact (on 23 November 1940), while also signing another humiliating trade agreement with Germany (on 4 December 1940).

However, the breaking up of the last political relations with our traditional French and English partners would not change Germany's attitude towards the Government in Bucharest for the better. Consequently, on 30 August and 6 September 1940, Germany will offer Hungary and Bulgaria diplomatic support for the occupation of North-Eastern Transylvania and the Quadrilateral, respectively. During a period of only two months and a half, Romania's territory would be torn apart from all sides, the country losing not only 34.28% of its territory and 32% of its population,<sup>2</sup> but also places and establishments of great economic significance.

Faced with national disaster, King Carol II raises to power General Ion Antonescu, in spite of the latter being a good-faith critic of the Royal House in the previous years. The General was also well-known for his nationalist, pro-legionary views. On the other hand, the King hoped to use the General to win Nazi Germany's favours and keep his throne. On the day following his appointment as Chairman of the Council of Ministers, on 5 September 1940, General Ion Antonescu forces King Carol II to relinquish his throne in favour of his son, Michael. On 14 September, a Government comprising military officials in cooperation with the legionaries is established, led by General Antonescu as Prime Minister and the legionary Horia Sima as Deputy Prime Minister. The "National Legionary State" was meant to administer a Romania whose territory was seriously dismembered and economically controlled by Germany, while the country morale was at its lowest.<sup>3</sup>

Ion Antonescu's "divorce" from the legionaries and his election as a partner by Hitler had no impact on the Romanian Government's pro-German stance.<sup>4</sup> The Government leader's military qualities were trusted more by the German military elite than the attitude of the legionary misfits who were planning to stir political conflicts and get rich. Preparations for the planning of attacks against the U.S.S.R. required the employment of all the anti-Soviet forces and the Romanian Army, firmly controlled by Ion Antonescu, was one such force.

Once General Antonescu becomes aware of Operation Barbarossa, he sets as his objective the - even partial - restoration of state unity through the liberation of

---

<sup>2</sup> Vasile I. Ciubăncan, *România 1940. Pierderile economice și de populație. Basarabia – Bucovina de Sus – Cadrilater*, Ed. Ciubăncan, Cluj-Napoca, 2005, p. 5

<sup>3</sup> Ioan Scurtu, Gheorghe Buzatu, *Istoria românilor în secolul XX (1918 - 1948)* Ed. Paideia, București, 1999, p. 360. For more recent publications, see: Mihai Müller, *Statul național-legionar (septembrie 1940 - ianuarie 1941)*, Editura Corint, București, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Ioan Scurtu, Gheorghe Buzatu, *op. cit.*, p. 404

---

Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. The historical parties will support the alliance between the Romanian Army, the German Army, and all the other allies of the Government in Berlin, they will keep in frequent contact with and permanently advise Ion Antonescu, "the Man of the Hour", while the leaders of the democratic parties will agree with the cooperation between the Romanian Government and some of their own technical experts, despite refusing direct Government membership. King Michael I himself, at the General's insistence, will get involved in the war in the East, out of patriotism.<sup>5</sup>

Our country's entering the war against the U.S.S.R. on 22 June 1941 and the liberation of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina were welcomed with great enthusiasm by the Romanian public opinion. However, General Ion Antonescu made a mistake, since he was not concerned with first obtaining a document from his ally, setting out the exact purpose and conditions for Romania's participation in the war. After 26 July 1941, the General, out of over-zealousness for "the word of military honour given to the Führer", will not agree to the country's withdrawal from the alliance with Germany, thus failing to stop the Romanian Army from crossing the Dniester River.<sup>6</sup> An increasing number of historians nowadays are wondering if Antonescu had been able to make such a decision, what Hitler's reaction would have been. What would have been the consequences for our country? Nevertheless, it is true that all military strategists, from ancient to modern times, are of the opinion that once involved in war, one should go all the way to the end. That is, of course, if there is no opportunity for a peace agreement that is convenient for all sides.

After one year and a half of victories against the Red Army and the Anglo-American Armies, the Axis troops suffer the first relevant defeats in Stalingrad<sup>7</sup> and El Alamein,<sup>8</sup> in November 1942. As of this moment, Germany and its allies resort to successive "re-groupings" and "strategic withdrawals" on all the war fronts where they were present. Soviet advancement to the West brought the matter of our country's political future to the forefront. "Dormant" traditional parties, the Royal House, and some of the generals who had expressed reservations about the crossing of the Dniester River as early as July 1941, all became actively involved, the same as the politicians who supported Marshall Ion Antonescu. They initiated diplomatic actions involving the Anglo-American and Soviet allies in the capital cities of many neutral states, with the aim of taking Romania out of Hitler's war. It is important to highlight the fact that the two exploratory diplomatic lines of action were pursued

---

<sup>5</sup> Gh. Buzatu, Gh. I. Florescu, *Al Doilea Război Mondial și România. O bibliografie*, published in *A.D. Xenopol* Yearbook of the University of History and Archeology (Iași). 1981, p. XV; Petre Țurlea, *Ultimii doi regi. Regele Mihai și Mareșalul Antonescu*, vol. III, Ed. Semne, 2021 p. 295 and *passim*

<sup>6</sup> Gh. Buzatu, Gh. I. Florescu, *op. cit.*, p. XV

<sup>7</sup> 4 September – 23 November, on the Volga River

<sup>8</sup> 23 October – 3 November, in Northern Africa

---

at the same time, with the knowledge and agreement of the Government led by Ion Antonescu.

The actions involving the anti-German allies are led by Iuliu Maniu, with the support of Dinu Brătianu and Gheorghe Tătărescu, as representatives of the democratic opposition, while the Ion Antonescu Government was represented by Mihai Antonescu, the Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers and Minister of Foreign Affairs, the second most important person in the country, a longtime, close associate of the Marshall.<sup>9</sup>

The key issue of the “truce” with the Allies was the subsequent setting up of the country’s borders. Both the opposition parties and the Ion Antonescu Government wanted back the territories which had been occupied by our Russian, Hungarian, and Bulgarian neighbours in the summer of 1940.

Starting with the winter of 1942 - 1943, increasingly consistent throughout the year 1943, and then, without interruption until July 1944, the democratic opposition, through its own envoys, had been establishing contacts with the American, English, and Belgian embassies in neutral states (such as Türkiye, Switzerland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and Egypt). Eduard Beneš, the President of Czechoslovakia and the government-in-exile<sup>10</sup> of this friendly country were also involved, particularly with regard to the relations with the Soviets.<sup>11</sup>

Iuliu Maniu would send his own envoys with reports explaining the conditions the opposition was willing to accept in order to agree to an armistice. Unfortunately, by June - July 1944, Iuliu Maniu had excluded the U.S.S.R. from among the country’s “Allies”, based on the logical assumption that the large neighbouring state would be unwilling to give up Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, the territories it had occupied as early as 1940. Moreover, the Romanian leader refused to accept that the U.S.A., Great Britain, and the U.S.S.R. had already established their areas of influence during the Teheran and Yalta Conferences, with Romania falling under Soviet control. Iuliu Maniu would act through representatives such as Ion Cristu in Ankara, Grigore Gafencu, Richard Franasovici and Raoul Bossy in Geneva and Bern, Șeinescu in Stockholm, Jan Pangal in Lisbon, Barbu Știrbey and Constantin

---

<sup>9</sup> Attorney-at-law, talented speaker, and Professor of International Law with the University of Bucharest, he was an ambitious person who would soon have a brilliant political career; he was 33 years old in 1940 and was selected as the personal lawyer of General Ion Antonescu who treated him as his own son.

<sup>10</sup> In London.

<sup>11</sup> Older and more recent bibliographical references: H. Prost, *La Roumanie et le seconde guerre mondiale*, published in *Revue d'histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale*, issue no. 6, IV, 1952; Gh. Buzatu, *România și războiul mondial din 1939-1945*, Iași, CJCE, 1995; Ioan Scurtu, Gh. Buzatu, *Istoria românilor în secolul XX*, Ed. Paideia, București, 1999; Corvin Lupu, *Eforturile politico-diplomatice românești de ieșire din al II-lea Război Mondial în lumina arhivei diplomatice a S.U.A.*, Ed. Elion, București, 2016

---

Vișoianu in Cairo.<sup>12</sup> All their actions were known and accepted by both Ion Antonescu and Mihai Antonescu.

At the same time, Mihai Antonescu would act for the same purpose through the official diplomatic structures of the same countries, namely the ambassadors: Alexandru Cretzianu (Ankara), Alexandru Lahovary (Bern), Frederic Nanu (Stockholm),<sup>13</sup> Victor Cădere (Lisbon), and Nicolae Dumitrescu (Madrid). Besides ambassadors, other officials and high ranking diplomats working for the embassies were also involved.<sup>14</sup>

The actions of the opposition abroad were controlled by the Secret Intelligence Service (S.I.S.) led by Eugen Cristescu,<sup>15</sup> who had been appointed by the Ion Antonescu Government, through SIS officers infiltrated under diplomatic cover.<sup>16</sup> On the other side, the German secret intelligence services operating in Romania<sup>17</sup> and neutral countries were largely controlling the Romanian - Allied talks.<sup>18</sup>

A less known "direction", which is also revealed by Romanian historiography, refers to Mihai Antonescu's efforts for the establishment of a Latin Axis having Benito Mussolini at its center, with the purpose of forcing Hitler to accept Latin countries governed by fascist or fascist-like regimes exiting the war. Portugal, Spain,<sup>19</sup> Vichy France, Croatia, Slovakia, and Romania were expected to get involved. Mussolini's involvement was due to Hitler's actions meant to belittle the Italian regime in 1933, despite the German dictator being initially very flattered when invited in Italy, the motherland of fascism since 1922.

In January 1943, Mihai Antonescu would engage in discussions with the ambassador of Italy in Bucharest, Bova Scoppa,<sup>20</sup> on the opportunity and necessity for Romania to sign a separate peace agreement with Great Britain and the U.S.A. On this occasion, Mihai Antonescu informs the Italian Ambassador that, in April 1943, he would suggest to Ribbentrop that the Reich should attempt at engaging in

---

<sup>12</sup> Corvin Lupu, *op. cit.*, pp. 28 - 71, 78 - 170

<sup>13</sup> The very interesting talks with Alexandra Kallontai, the Ambassador of the U.S.S.R. in Sweden, extended ad infinitum and turned irrelevant for the Soviets in August 1944

<sup>14</sup> Corvin Lupu, *op. cit.* p. 175

<sup>15</sup> Cristian Troncotă, *Eugen Cristescu asul serviciilor secrete românești*, Ed. Roza Vânturilor, București, 1994

<sup>16</sup> Corvin Lupu, *op. cit.*, p. 32. See also Marian Ureche, Aurel Rogojan, *Servicii secrete străine. Retrospectivă și actualitate. Interferențe în spațiul românesc*, Ed. Paco, București, 2000

<sup>17</sup> Mention should be made of the 11 German secret intelligence services, of which only 3 were authorised by the Romanian Government. Cf. Cristian Troncotă, *Istoria serviciilor secrete românești. De la Cuza la Ceaușescu*, Ed. Ion Cristoiu, București, 1999, p. 239

<sup>18</sup> Corvin Lupu, *op. cit.*, pp. 171 - 174

<sup>19</sup> Although their respective countries were neutral, the Portuguese Salazar and the Spanish Franco were important for Hitler.

<sup>20</sup> Bova Scoppa, *Colloque con due Dittatori*, Ed. Ruffolo, Roma, 1949, p. 200, review published in *Revue d'histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale*, issue no. 6, IV, 1952

---

talks with Great Britain with the purpose of concluding a truce/peace agreement which would allow Germany to deploy its military forces on the anti-Soviet front.<sup>21</sup> On 21 June 1943, Mihai Antonescu meets *Il Duce* (“the Duke”) and his newly-appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, G. Bastianini, in Rocca delle Caminate, Italy. There, the Romanian official would ask *Il Duce* to rush the establishment of the Latin Axis and force Hitler to face the fact that the Latin Axis is a reality and his Latin allies are leaving the war. Reluctantly, Mussolini promises that, in the following two months, he would organise a plenary conference, with or without Hitler’s involvement, where his decision will be announced. But, there was no more time, since only eight days later, the Anglo-American troops would land in Sicily and on 25 July, *Il Duce* is arrested. Mihai Antonescu continues to militate in favour of his plan before the new Italian political regime led by Marshall Pietro Badoglio, who took over power in Italy on 8 September 1943.<sup>22</sup>

Pope Pius XII (1939 - 1958), a well-known friend of the Germans, was also contacted by Mihai Antonescu through Monsignor Cassulo, the papal nuncio in Bucharest.

By the spring of 1944, Marshall Ion Antonescu, a fervent anti-Communist and military man who wanted to keep the promises made to Hitler, had already started to realise that Germany’s defeat was imminent, that the Red Army was getting closer to the territory of Romania and the threat of the country being occupied by the Russians was real. The option of an armistice with the Allies was the solution to save the country from Russian invasion. Consequently, Marshall Ion Antonescu would show mercy for the English and American pilots shot down during the raids over Bucharest, Valea Prahovei, and the towns of Drobeta Turnu-Severin, Hunedoara, and Arad; he would also reject Berlin’s requests concerning the handing over of the French prisoners who, as of July 1942, managed to escape the German camps in Poland and took refuge in Romania,<sup>23</sup> and would refuse to hand over to the German secret intelligence services in Bucharest the notorious “Autonomous” team which had been dropped down by parachute on 22 December 1943, with the purpose to support the opposition and sabotage German actions in the region. All the prisoners were very well taken care of in the camp located in Timișul de Jos (Brașov). Moreover, the “Autonomous” team would be supported in establishing a meeting with Iuliu Maniu, while being accommodated in a building owned by the Gendarmerie, which provided hotel-type services.<sup>24</sup> Ion Antonescu ordered that no other Romanian troops should be sent on the Eastern front and that

---

<sup>21</sup> Hitler, informed by Ribbentrop, demands that Marshall Antonescu should discard his associate. However, Ion Antonescu does not comply. See the meeting between Hitler and Antonescu in April 1943.

<sup>22</sup> Bova Scoppa, *op. cit.*,

<sup>23</sup> H. Prost. *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> From the large volume of published literature concerning the event, see: Ivor Porter, *Operațiunea Autonomous*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 1991

---



all the officers and soldiers who had higher education or were industrial craftsmen should be taken out of the war zone, while the quantity of oil and food products supplied to Germany without payment in gold should be reduced.<sup>25</sup> The Italian Ambassador Bova Scoppa, a dedicated anti-German, would stay in Bucharest even after the proclamation of the Republic of Salò, the last attempt by Italian fascists to remain involved in politics (25 September 1943). Ion Antonescu's Government rejects the new ambassador sent by the Government of Salò, despite German pressures. The diplomatic reason behind Mihai Antonescu's decision to keep Bova Scoppa as the representative of the Italian Government led by Pietro Badoglio was that the Government of the Kingdom of Italy never declared war against Romania.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the Marshall finally realised that Hitler had lost the war. As the Red Army is approaching the Dniester River, Ion Antonescu is forced to accept to conclude a truce with the Allies, namely with the U.S.S.R.. During his last meeting with Hitler (on 5 August 1944),<sup>27</sup> the Marshall becomes aware that all the promises of the Germans to defend Romania's borders were nothing but empty words. Therefore, on 23 August 1944, with the consent of Iuliu Maniu and Dinu Brătianu, the Marshall, represented by Gheorghe Brătianu, would ask for an audience at the Royal Palace with the purpose of informing the King of his decision.<sup>28</sup> Following the discussion at the Royal Palace, the plan was for the Marshall to go to the Iași - Kishinev front to implement the necessary measures. However, once at the Royal Palace, he would be arrested by the democratic coalition established as early as the month of June (by the National Peasants' Party (P.N.Ț.), the National Liberal Party (P.N.L.), the Social Democratic Party (P.S.D.), and the Conservative Party (P.C.)), with the consent of King Michael and of a group of officers loyal to the Royal House.

As early as the spring of 1944, the U.S.S.R. had already accepted, in principle, that the armistice with Romania should be signed by Ion Antonescu. He seemed to be more trustworthy, since he was a military man and he was still held in high regard by the Romanian Army, while the actions of the civilian, pro-Western political leaders seemed to be far too hesitant.

The coup of 23 August 1944 marked our country's leaving the fascist Axis and its turning of arms against Hitler. However, by the time the Moscow Armistice was signed (on 12 September 1944), Romania would suffer significant material and human loss. It is well known that tens of thousands of Romanian officers and soldiers were disarmed, arrested, and sent, as prisoners of war, to the U.S.S.R. In

---

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, Ion Antonescu was thinking of removing as many military units as possible from the war front, in order to be able to face the German troops deployed in Romania, in the event of signing a "truce" with the U.S.S.R..

<sup>26</sup> H. Post, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> Bova Scoppa, *op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> Corvin Lupu, *op. cit.* p. 168

---

addition, a large variety of goods in the territories occupied by the Red Army were declared spoils of war and were never considered in the amount of compensation our country was forced to pay to the U.S.S.R. for damage caused in the three years of war on Soviet territory, as per the provisions laid down in the armistice agreement.

Could an armistice agreement signed by Ion Antonescu with Stalin have provided Romania with better post-war peace conditions? Would “the gain have been smaller than the loss”?<sup>29</sup>

However, historical events cannot be judged *post festum* in such a manner. What is certain is that the events which took place between 1940 and 1944, when Romania joined the traditional French, English, American, and U.S.S.R. allies, to be later on abandoned by the West under Soviet influence, may be a serious and necessary moment of reflection for our present day diplomacy.

Ion Antonescu’s diplomatic actions were an attempt at correcting the diplomatic actions taken by King Carol II, while at the same time recovering part of the territory that was lost in the summer of 1940, by engaging in the war against the Soviets, the successors of Tsarist Russia, who had been a threat to the Romanian Principalities ever since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, Mihai Antonescu maintained our country’s connection with the West, either indirectly, through the actions of the democratic opposition, or directly, via covert actions. From the autumn of 1944, when Romania is occupied by the Red Army, particularly after 6 March 1945, when the communist, “broad democratic concentration” party led by Petru Groza comes to power, Romanian diplomacy would become engulfed by the predatory Soviet diplomacy, the same as the other Central and South-Eastern European states which had fallen under the control of the U.S.S.R..

For a decade and a half (1945-1958), the Romanian state’s foreign affairs would be guided by Moscow. After the retreat of Soviet troops (1958) and Soviet advisors (1963), the Romanian diplomacy would begin to show, at first timid, then (particularly after 1965) increasingly confident independence in its actions, combining inter-war traditions with the demands of the new times which became manifest worldwide.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 157

<sup>30</sup> A more extensive research paper, with a focus on Romanian diplomacy during the same period of time, including other similar actions taken by the democratic opposition parties (the National Liberal Party (P.N.L.), the National Peasants’ Party (P.N.Ț.)), titled *Diplomația României între Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini și Axa Latină (1942 - 1944)*, written by Delia Cora, Ph.D., will be published in the Romanian language in the Journal *Identitatea Națională* (Oradea) – a publication by the *Avram Iancu* Cultural and Patriotic Society – Bihor Branch, year X, issue no. 2(11) 2025, (in prepress process)

---