

**ROMANIA'S AND BULGARIA'S MILITARY EFFORT  
AGAINST THEIR FORMER GERMAN ALLY (1944-1945)  
– A BRIEF COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW**

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**Abstract:** *During the years of World War II, Romania and Bulgaria were, for more than three years each, in the hies of Nazi Germany, against which they turned their guns in 1944, on August 23 and September 9, respectively. The purpose of this article is to draw a comparative picture of the military contribution of the two neighbouring countries to the defeat of the Third Reich, taking into account their human and material potential, domestic political developments, international position and interests. The main sources are some Romanian, Bulgarian and Western published and on-line contributions, supplemented by certain Romanian military archival documents.*

**Keywords:** Romania, Bulgaria, Second World War, military effectives, confrontations, accounts.

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**PRELIMINARIES: ROMANIA AND BULGARIA WITHIN AXIS POWERS' SYSTEM**

A well-known witty saying, often invoked by diplomats and politicians, is that alliances are made and broken. Human history faces one with numerous examples of alliances being reversed. During World War II, Romania and Bulgaria found themselves in the same camp as Nazi Germany, more or less circumstantially, for a relatively long period of time, and then turned their weapons against their former ally. After the end of the war, communist regimes were established in both countries, which tried to legitimize themselves precisely based on the act of turning their weapons in 1944, claimed as a founding moment. Thus, August 23 and 9 September, respectively, became national holidays in post-war Romania and Bulgaria. Both during the “communist” period and especially after 1989, these two partially similar historical moments and their consequences have been subject to significant re-evaluations; moreover, the real freedom of expression of the last three and a half decades favoured the emergence of controversial approaches.

In the present article, we aim to provide a brief comparative overview of the contribution of the two South-East European states to the defeat of their former German ally during the last eight to nine months of the war in Europe. Our approach takes into account the position of the two neighbouring states within the Berlin-

Rome Axis system, their situation on the eve of their break with the Third Reich, the concrete manner in which that break took place, as well as the stages of the war against Germany (against the backdrop of the onset of communization and Sovietization processes, including purges of the officer corps), and, finally, a comparative assessment. The analytical (comparative) approach specifically required a number of deviations from the strictly chronological presentation of the events and developments under consideration.

The sources used consist of Romanian, Bulgarian, and Western publications, namely a set of Romanian military archive documents.

Since we are addressing primarily a Romanian audience knowledgeable about Romania's participation in World War II, more space will be given to the presentation of the events and developments in Bulgaria.

As an ally of Germany, Romania was directly and heavily involved in the anti-Soviet war that broke out on 22 June 1941; in fact, fears concerning the USSR, which grew exponentially after the events of late June 1940, had brought the Romanian state to the point of desperately seeking the protection of the Axis Powers, given that France had capitulated and Great Britain was struggling hard to resist Germany.

The losses of the Romanian army in the anti-Soviet war were immense, totalling 624,740 soldiers, of whom 71,585 were killed, 243,622 wounded and sick, and 309,532 missing (including those captured by the Red Army on the front in Moldavia, after 23 August 1944)<sup>1</sup>.

Being part of the Tripartite Pact resulted in Romania's entering the war against the British Empire, in December 1941 (on the initiative of the British side), and then the US (the North American response to the Romanian declaration of war, presented on 12 December 1941, came on 6 June 1942)<sup>2</sup>. For the Romanian head of state, Marshal Ion Antonescu, the war with the US and Great Britain was a temporary situation, as the main enemy was the Bolshevik colossus. In February 1942, upon returning from a visit to Germany, Ion Antonescu made a rather surprising statement to a group of journalists that accompanied him: "I am the *Reich's* ally against Soviet Russia, I am neutral between England and Germany, and I am on the

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<sup>1</sup>Alesandru D. Duțu, *Armata română în campania din Vest*, în *Istoria românilor* (tratat academic), vol. IX, *România în anii 1940-1947* [*The Romanian Army in the Western Campaign*, in *History of Romanians* (academic treatise), vol. IX, *Romania during the Years 1940-1947*], editor-in-chief: Acad. Dinu C. Giurescu, secretary: Florin Șperlea, Bucharest, Encyclopaedic Publishing House, 2008, pp. 296-297.

<sup>2</sup>*Istoria politicii externe românești în date* [*History of Romanian Foreign Policy in Data*], editor-in-chief: Ion Calafățeanu, Bucharest, Encyclopaedic Publishing House, 2003, pp. 333-334.

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side of the Americans against the Japanese.”<sup>3</sup> These more or less personal feelings and opinions were impossible to put into practice under the concrete political and military circumstances of the Second World War. As a matter of fact, starting on 4 April 1944, Romania was subjected to a series of systematic massive Anglo-American air raids, targeting primarily the oil-rich Prahova region, the main railway junctions and urban areas; the last such bombing took place on 19 August 1944<sup>4</sup>.

In terms of its attitude towards the US and Great Britain, Bulgaria’s position was very similar to that of Romania. On 13 December 1941, the Parliament in Sofia voted on a “symbolic” declaration of war against the two great powers of the Anglo-Saxon world<sup>5</sup>, but in the winter of 1943-1944, Sofia and other major cities in Bulgaria suffered heavy Anglo-American bombing<sup>6</sup>, as described in reports prepared by the Romanian military attaché in the Bulgarian capital, Major Iacob Pleșoianu<sup>7</sup>.

In terms of its attitude towards the USSR, Bulgaria’s position was markedly different from that of its northern neighbour; the rulers in Sofia, led by King Boris III (1918-1943), skilfully managed to maintain their country’s neutrality in the German-Soviet war, despite numerous difficulties, which were to intensify from January 1944 onwards. As Soviet troops advanced towards Romania and then into its territory, Moscow’s tone towards Sofia hardened and its demands increased<sup>8</sup>.

It should be noted that, thanks to its previously established good relations with Germany, Bulgaria had recovered Southern Dobruja from Romania (August-September 1940)<sup>9</sup>, and, shortly after joining the Tripartite Pact (1 March 1941), had taken advantage of the occupation of Yugoslavia and Greece, extending its

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<sup>3</sup> Apud Ioan Scurtu, *Relațiile partidelor istorice cu mareșalul Antonescu* [Relations between historical parties and Marshal Antonescu], text available on the website <https://ioan.scurtu.ro>, accessed on 2 May 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Florin Constantiniu, *O istorie sinceră a poporului român* [An honest history of the Romanian people], third revised and expanded edition, Bucharest, Encyclopaedic Universe Publishing House, 2002, pp. 402-403.

<sup>5</sup> Ivan Ilchev, *Rozata na Balkanite. Kratka balgarska istoriia za liubopitni citateli. Balgariiaprez XX vek*, [The Rose of the Balkans. A brief history of Bulgaria for curious readers. Bulgaria in the 20<sup>th</sup> century], Sofia, Colibri Publishers House, 2019, p. 560.

<sup>6</sup> Lee Marshall Miller, *Bulgaria during the Second World War*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1975, p. 167.

<sup>7</sup> Central Archive Repository “General Grigore Constandache” from Pitești (hereinafter, referred to as C.A.R.-P.), fund 5417 *General Military Staff-Section 2 Information*, dossier no. 1291/1943, passim.

<sup>8</sup> Mariya Mateeva, Hristo Tepavicharov, *Diplomaticeski otnosheniya na Balgariya: 1878-1988* [Diplomatic Relations of Bulgaria: 1878-1988], Sofia, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, 1989, pp. 268-269.

<sup>9</sup> George Ungureanu, *Cedarea Dobrogei de Sud (Cadrilaterului)*, in „Revista de Istorie Militară” [The Cession of Southern Dobruja, in *Military History Review*], Bucharest., IPSDMH, no. 1-2/2020, pp. 62-65.

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authority, without a fight, over territories long claimed by Bulgarian nationalists, primarily over large areas of Vardar Macedonia, Aegean Macedonia, and Western Thrace.

When the Soviet offensive began on the front in Moldavia (the “Operation Iași-Chișinău”) on 20 August 1944, Romania had about 1,100,000 men under arms, of whom about 430,000 were on the Moldavia front and the rest (i.e., about 5/8) in the rest of the country<sup>10</sup>. The number of German soldiers on Romanian territory was almost 400,000, the vast majority of them being deployed on the Moldavia front, but also 11,000 in the capital and 25,000 in the oil-producing region<sup>11</sup>.

In neighbouring Bulgaria, the German military presence was much smaller, even if we take into account the quantitative differences between the Romanian and Bulgarian military potential. On the eve of 23 August 1944, there were about 22,000 well-equipped and trained German soldiers in Bulgaria, deployed in 220 strategically positioned establishments; according to Bulgarian sources cited by historian Ivan Ilchev, they were to be joined by about 30,000 comrades-in-arms, hastily withdrawn from Dobruja and other areas of neighbouring Romania after the breakup of the Romanian-German alliance<sup>12</sup>. In fact, throughout the entire period 1941-1944 (after Bulgaria's official joining the Tripartite Pact), the number of German soldiers present on the territory of this Slavic Balkan state ranged between 20,000 and 30,000<sup>13</sup>. Their behaviour towards the Bulgarian population was generally fair, but in trade with Germany, Bulgaria did not enjoy the same sensible treatment as Romania<sup>14</sup>.

On the eve of 9 September 1944, the Bulgarian regular armed forces had a total strength of 454,653 soldiers<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Alesandru D. Duțu, *op.cit.*, p. 296.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques de Launay, *Mari decizii ale celui de-al Doilea Război Mondial*, vol. II (1942-1945) [*Major Decisions of World War II*, vol. II (1942-1945)], translated by Mihnea and Dan Ghibernea, Bucharest, Scientific and Encyclopaedic Publishing House, 1988, p. 240.

<sup>12</sup> Ivan Ilchev, *op.cit.*, p. 594.

<sup>13</sup> Varban Todorov, *Balgariya i Vtorata Svetovna Voina. Istoricheska deistvitelnost i urochi* [[*Bulgaria and the Second World War. Historical Reality and Lessons*], in *Drugi Svjetski rat-50 godina kasnije II* [*Second World War after 50 years*] II, Papers read at the International Scientific Meeting in Podgoritsa, 20-22 September 1995, editor Vlado Strugar, Podgoritsa, The Academy of Montenegro for Sciences and Arts, 1997, p. 250.

<sup>14</sup> Richard J. Crampton, *Europa răsăriteană în secolul al XX-lea... și după* [*Eastern Europe in the XX Century... and after*], translated by Cornelia Bucur, Bucharest, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2002, p. 209.

<sup>15</sup> Boyan Zhekov, *Voennatopolitika na Balgariya po vreme na Vtorata Svetovna Voina 1939-1945*, in *Voennopoliticheska Istoriya na Balgariya* [*The Military Policy of Bulgaria during World War II, 1939-*

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## THE BREAK WITH NAZI GERMANY

The act carried out in Romania on 23 August 1944 precipitated the efforts of Bulgarian political circles to break out of the alliance with Germany.

Thus, during the last eight days of August 1944, the Ivan Bagrianov government (invested on 1 June), through the voice of Foreign Minister Parvan Draganov (former Bulgarian minister in Berlin), asked the Germans three times to withdraw their troops from Bulgarian territory, to no avail<sup>16</sup>, whereas Moscow accused Sofia of duplicity<sup>17</sup>. A sudden and total break in Bulgaria's relations with Germany before the Red Army entered Bulgaria was not desired by the Soviets, for whom the German military presence on Bulgarian territory served as a veritable propaganda and diplomatic weapon, given that military action had become imminent.

In the short-lived government (2-8 September 1944) led by Konstantin Muraviev, the position of Minister of War, which was of paramount importance in that context, went to General Ivan Marinov, who had secret but close ties to the "Fatherland Front", an illegal coalition formed on 17 July 1942 by the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP), the Social Democratic Party, the left-wing agrarian group *Pladne*, and the military group *Zveno*<sup>18</sup>. As Minister of the Army in the Muraviev government, General Ivan Marinov acted in the interests of the USSR and the internal pro-Soviet forces (Communists, etc.), delaying the break with Germany as long as possible under clever pretexts, such as concern for the fate of the Bulgarian soldiers deployed in Vardar Macedonia, who risked being left at the mercy of the Germans; in this way, he provided a more substantial pretext for the Soviet government to order the Red Army to enter Bulgaria, a state that had not participated in the anti-Soviet war initiated in 1941<sup>19</sup>.

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1945, in *Military Political History of Bulgaria*], editor-in-chief: Katerina Antonova, Sofia, Military Academy "Georgy Stoykov Rakovski", 2023, p. 112.

<sup>16</sup> Lee Marshall Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

<sup>17</sup> Stoyan Rachev, *Čărčil, Balgariya i Balkanite (1939-1945)* [*Charchil, Bulgaria and the Balkans (1939-1945)*], Sofia, 1998, pp. 276-282.

<sup>18</sup> Tasho V. Tashev, *Ministrите na Balgariya (1879-1999). Entsiklopedichen spravochnik* [*Ministries of Bulgaria (1879-1999). Encyclopedic Reference Book*], Sofia, Academic Publishing House "Professor Marin Drinov" and Publishing House of the Ministry of Defense "St. George the Bearer of Triumph", 1999, pp. 278-279.

<sup>19</sup> Lee Marshall Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 210; Guy Gauthier, *Acvile și lei. O istorie a monarhiilor balcanice (1817-1974)* [*Eagles and Lions. A History of the Balkan Monarchies (1817-1974)*], translated from French into Romanian by Ludovic Skultéty, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2004, p. 263.

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In Romania, the act of 23 August 1944 was the work of the young sovereign Mihai I, who used his prerogative as head of the armed forces, aided by a group of loyal officers, given that the “historic parties” (National Liberal Party, National Peasant Party, Social-Democrat Party) and the minuscule Communist Party from Romania had formed a coalition of convenience on 20 June 1944, called the National-Democratic Bloc, with the stated objectives of removing the country from the war against the United Nations Coalition, removing the Antonescu dictatorship, and returning to a pluralistic parliamentary regime<sup>20</sup>.

In Bulgaria, the events of 9 September 1944 were characterized by much stronger involvement of the communists, either directly or indirectly, through allied groups or loyal officers, such as the aforementioned General Ivan Marinov, who contributed decisively to the arrest of his colleagues in the Muraviev government, or the leader of the *Zveno* group, Colonel Kimon Georgiev, the new prime minister. The monarchy, decapitated for a year following the premature, sudden, and mysterious death of King Boris (28 August 1943), not only failed to play any part in those events, but the tripartite regency established in the autumn of the previous year (the son of the late monarch Boris, Simeon II, was born in 1937) was one of the targets of the coup perpetrated at dawn on 9 September 1944, with all three regents (former Germanophile Prime Minister Bogdan Filov, General Nikola Mihov, and Prince Kiril of Preslav) being arrested<sup>21</sup>.

Among the first measures taken by the new government in Sofia was the formation of a new Regency Council, composed of Professor Venelin Ganev (1880-1966), Todor Pavlov (1890-1977), and Tsvetko Boboshevski (1884-1952). Other swift measures included granting a broad political amnesty, establishing the “National Militia” (which replaced the old police and gendarmerie forces), severing diplomatic relations with Hungary, Croatia, and Slovakia, and, on 16 October 1944, the first “people’s tribunals” were formed<sup>22</sup>.

In actual fact, the moment of 9 September 1944 in Bulgaria is the equivalent of the moment of 23 August 1944 in Romania, while also it accumulates a set of meanings rather similar to both the act of 23 August 1944, and the episode of 6 March 1945

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example: Dinu C. Giurescu, *Actul de la 23 august 1944. Aspecte politice* [*The Act of 23 August 1944. Political Aspects*], in *Istoria românilor* [*History of Romanians*], vol. IX..., pp. 133-177.

<sup>21</sup> Lee Marshall Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 216; *Istoriia na Balgarska Komunisticheska Partiya*, [*History of the Bulgarian Communist Party*], third edition, Sofia, Institute for the History of the BCP, 1981, pp. 421-426.

<sup>22</sup> C.A.R.-P., *Collection of Studies and Research on the Romanian Army...* (hereinafter referred to as *Collection XIV*), dossier no. 539/1944, ll. 73-74.

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(the establishment of the government led by Petru Groza) in the neighbouring country.

In the context of the changing alliances of Romania and Bulgaria, in August-September 1944, both South-East European states experienced a period in which, *de facto* or *de jure*, there was an overlap of states of war with their former German allies and with the states of the United Nations Coalition, respectively. In Romania's case, this *de facto* overlap occurred on the Moldavia front in the days immediately following 23 August 1944, when the Red Army continued to treat numerous Romanian military units with hostility, capturing a large number of Romanian soldiers, estimated by various sources to be between 100,000 and 162,000<sup>23</sup>. The capture of the ships of the Royal Romanian Navy on 5 September 1944<sup>24</sup>, exactly on the day when the USSR officially declared war on Bulgaria and on the eve of Bulgaria's declaration of war on Germany (an act which, however, provided for a 48-hour deadline), was also in line with the Soviet policy<sup>25</sup>. Consequently, from a legal point of view, Bulgaria was, on the afternoon of 8 September 1944, simultaneously at war with Germany, the USSR, Great Britain, and the United States. However, the brief state of war with the Soviet Union had much less tragic consequences than the *de facto* continuation of Soviet-Romanian hostilities after 23 August 1944, since no casualties were reported in the Bulgarian case. The behaviour of the Soviet soldiers who entered the Bulgarian territory was, in general, much more peaceful than in Romania, and even than in the case of the British troops who were to land in Greece starting in October: "In Bulgaria, looting, rape, and expropriation were less common than in other countries. In general, the Bulgarians welcomed the liberating troops with polite enthusiasm," writes historian Misha Glenny<sup>26</sup>. The establishment of the new power in Sofia was viewed with reluctance in London, as Greece was a country of major interest to Great Britain, and Winston Churchill had long feared that Stalin could reach the Aegean Sea through a pro-Soviet Bulgaria, given that the Bulgarian 7<sup>th</sup> Army was still in Western Thrace<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Dinu C. Giurescu, *România în Al Doilea Război Mondial (1939-1945)* [*Romania in World War II (1939-1945)*], Bucharest, BIC ALL Publishing House, 1999, pp. 224, 236, 255-256, 260.

<sup>24</sup> Alesandru D. Duțu, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

<sup>25</sup> Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Istoria Balcanilor (1804-1945)* [*History of Balkans (1804-1945)*], translated from English by Andreea Doica, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 2002, p. 305.

<sup>26</sup> Misha Glenny, *Balcanii (1804-2012). Naționalism, război și Marile Puteri* [*The Balkans (1804-2012). Nationalism, War, and the Great Powers*], translated by Livia Szász, Bucharest, Trei Publishing House, 2020, p. 550.

<sup>27</sup> Stoyan Rachev, *op. cit.*, pp. 375-376.

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Both in Romania, immediately after 23 August 1944, and in Bulgaria, starting even before 9 September 1944, there followed a chronological period of eight to nine days of intense confrontations with German troops, ending with their expulsion from (almost) the entire Romanian and Bulgarian national territories.

Between 23/24 August and 31 August 1944, Romanian troops killed or captured approximately 61,500 German soldiers (including 14 generals and another 1,400-plus officers), causing the new enemy significant losses in combat equipment (222 aircraft, 438 ships, thousands of cannons and mortars)<sup>28</sup>. German attempts to regroup on the Focșani-Nămoloasa-Brăila line and in the Carpathians were also successfully countered, in parallel with the strategic operation meant to “cover the borders.”

In Bulgaria, in addition to the regular military force of over 450,000 men, approximately 40,000 volunteers and partisans were also deployed against the German troops<sup>29</sup>. On 13 September, the German offensive in the Kula-Vidin area was halted, and on 17 September, when the Bulgarian territory was delimited as it had been at the beginning of 1941 (including Southern Dobruja, but excluding Western Thrace and several areas of Aegean and Vardar Macedonia), the “Georgi Dimitrov” partisan brigade pushed back several German offensive attempts in the Küstendil (Velbuzhd) area<sup>30</sup>. The forces of the Bulgarian 5<sup>th</sup> Army, located in Vardar Macedonia, failed to resist the Germans, with many combatants choosing to flee or surrender to the Titoist partisans in the area, which led to the actual dissolution of that structure, officially confirmed by the Fatherland Front in October<sup>31</sup>.

A week after 9 September 1944, Soviet troops entered Sofia<sup>32</sup>; as far as Romania is concerned, the Red Army units had entered Bucharest a week after 23/24 August 1944.

#### THE WAR BY THE SIDE OF UNITED NATIONS COALITION

The framework for Soviet-Romanian military cooperation (in fact, the subordination of the Romanian military units to the structures and major units of the Red Army) was established by the Armistice Agreement signed in Moscow, on the night of 12/13 September 1944. The document noted in its preamble “the fact

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<sup>28</sup> Alesandru D. Duțu, *op.cit.*, pp. 320-321.

<sup>29</sup> V. Todorov, *op.cit.*, p. 251.

<sup>30</sup> *Istoriya na BKP... / History of BCP...*, p. 432.

<sup>31</sup> Vanche Stoychev, *The military history of Macedonia*, Skopje, 2004, pp. 618-620.

<sup>32</sup> J. de Launay, *op.cit.*, p. 247.

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of Romania's defeat in the war", and its content explicitly stipulated the Romanian state's obligation to make available to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ukrainian Front, under the command of Marshal Rodion Yakovlevich Malinovsky, forces permanently numbering at least 12 divisions, until the complete defeat of Germany (and Hungary)<sup>33</sup>. In fact, the effective entry of Romanian combat forces under the command of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ukrainian Front had already taken place on 7 September<sup>34</sup>.

The text of the Armistice Convention retained a certain ambiguity regarding the Transylvanian territory lost by Romania four years earlier through the Vienna Dictate; although the nullity of this act was expressly stated, the territory in question was to be returned to Romania "in its entirety or in the greater part", a formulation that caused unease among Romanians and represented an additional element of pressure from the USSR on Romania, especially until the imposition of the Petru Groza government<sup>35</sup>.

In the case of Bulgaria, the armistice with the United Nations was signed even later than the similar document in Romania, namely on 28 October 1944, 50 days after 9 September 1944, and 20 days after the famous Soviet-British agreements on the delimitation of spheres of influence in South-Eastern Europe. It should be noted that shortly after Stalin recognized the preponderance of British interests in Greece, on 12 October 1944, an agreement was concluded whereby the Bulgarian 7<sup>th</sup> Army handed over the administration of Western Thrace to the local Greek resistance forces<sup>36</sup>. In the absence of an armistice agreement with the United Nations Coalition states, the framework for military cooperation between Bulgaria and the anti-Hitler coalition was established, in actual practice, through a series of bilateral Soviet-Bulgarian, Yugoslav-Bulgarian, and Soviet-Yugoslav agreements, both before and after 28 October 1944, which was not particularly significant from this point of view.

Thus, on 16 September 1944, when the Red Army entered Sofia, the commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ukrainian Front, Marshal Fyodor Ivanovich Tolbukhin, met with the Bulgarian Minister of Defence, General Damyan Velchev (a member of the *Zveno* group), and the two agreed on bilateral military cooperation<sup>37</sup>. During the communist regime in Bulgaria, the city of Dobrich in Southern Dobruja (whose

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<sup>33</sup> *Istoria politicii externe românești...* [History of Romanian foreign policy...], pp. 341-342.

<sup>34</sup> Dinu C. Giurescu, *op.cit.*, p. 257.

<sup>35</sup> Valeriu Florin Dobrinescu, *România și organizarea postbelică a lumii (1945-1947)* [Romania and the Post War World Organization (1945-1947)], Bucharest, Academy of the Socialist Republic of Romania, 1988, p. 48.

<sup>36</sup> C.A.R.-P., *Collection XIV*, dossier no. 539/1944, l. 74.

<sup>37</sup> Stoyan Rachev, *op.cit.*, p. 378.

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former name had been Bazargic, during the Ottoman period and the interwar Romanian period) was to bear the name of Soviet Marshal Tolbukhin.

On 5 October 1944, a Bulgarian-Yugoslav meeting was held in Craiova, in Romania. The Bulgarian delegation, led by General D. Terpeshev, met with Marshal Josip Broz Tito, in the presence of Soviet General Sergey Semionovitch Biryuzov. On that occasion, a number of aspects of Bulgarian-Yugoslav military cooperation were agreed upon, and the two sides agreed that any bilateral issues would be resolved “in a spirit of friendship and brotherhood”<sup>38</sup>.

F. I. Tolbukhin's visits to Sofia and Belgrade, on 17 and 20 November 1944, provided an opportunity to regulate Bulgarian military participation, in the new stage of the anti-Hitler war, after the liberation of the eastern half of Yugoslavia and the imminent complete liberation of little Albania<sup>39</sup>.

Regarding the participation of Romanian and Bulgarian troops in the hostilities against Germany beyond their own borders, historian Barbara Jelavich noted: “The Soviets' desire for the Romanian and Bulgarian armies to participate in the war against Germany led to the departure of a massive number of troops from their countries at a crucial time for the political future of these states. This effectively removed a traditional element of support for conservative regimes”<sup>40</sup>.

Another way of eroding the military structures in Romania and Bulgaria was by means of the so-called restructuring, which in fact meant the dissolution of numerous units and large units. In Romania's case, the reference point in this regard remains the protocol of 26 October 1944, signed, after tremendous pressure, by General Nicolae Rădescu, Chief of the General Staff, with Soviet General Vladislav Petrovich Vinogradov, Vice-President of the Allied (Soviet) Control Commission. As a result of that act, in the following 35 days, one army command, four army corps commands, 14 divisions, and other large units were disbanded, with only two army corps commands and three infantry or mountain divisions being allowed to remain in the country with peacetime strength<sup>41</sup>.

After 23 August 1944, the military portfolio in the Bucharest government was successively held by Generals Mihail Racoviță (until 5 November 1944), Constantin Sănătescu (6 November-6 December 1944), Ion Negulescu, and, after

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 381-382.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 387-388.

<sup>40</sup> Barbara Jelavich, *Istoria Balcanilor. Secolul XX (1887-1982)* [ *History of the Balkans. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1887-1982)* ], translated into Romanian by Mihai Eugen Avădanei, Iași, European Institute Publishers, 2000, pp. 237-238.

<sup>41</sup> Alesandru D. Duțu, *op. cit.*, p. 376.

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the establishment of the Petru Groza government, Constantin Vasiliu Rășcanu<sup>42</sup>. General Gheorghe Mihail was initially appointed head of the General Staff until mid-October 1944, followed by General Nicolae Rădescu (the future prime minister), and after 11 December, for almost 200 days, by General Constantin Sănătescu<sup>43</sup>, former prime minister immediately after 23 August 1944.

In Bulgaria, from 9 September 1944 until the end of March 1946, the army portfolio went to Damyan Velchev (a member of *Zveno*, like Prime Minister Kimon Georgiev<sup>44</sup>), while General Ivan Marinov was appointed to the specially created position of commander of the Bulgarian forces fighting on the anti-Hitler front<sup>45</sup>.

Political purges began rapidly after the Fatherland Front took power. In the first days after the coup, 956 officers, including 220 generals and colonels, were removed from their posts, which had disastrous consequences for the quality of command and even drew the dissatisfaction of Soviet commanders<sup>46</sup>. As a result, combat units were sent into battle beyond Bulgaria's borders, in Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Austria, while units that were reorganized or in the process of reorganization in accordance with the new political imperatives remained in the country.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, shortly after 9 September 1944, the position of “deputy commander” appeared in Bulgarian military units, which was similar in many respects to the political deputy in Red Army units. According to the Bulgarian government press, this organizational innovation had a threefold purpose: 1. To enforce discipline in the army by strengthening cohesion between commanders and troops; 2. To eliminate “fascist elements” from the army; 3. Conducting extensive educational and political activities (organizing conferences, meetings and gatherings, writing reports, newspapers, brochures, etc.) for the political training of commanders and soldiers, with special focus on topics related to cooperation between the Balkan and Slavic peoples, respectively, and “knowledge of the real situation in Soviet Russia”.<sup>48</sup> According to a Romanian intelligence report compiled in mid-1945, in April large-scale events were organized for all units of the Bulgarian army to take the oath of allegiance, in the new wording, which mentioned loyalty to the “new

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<sup>42</sup> *Lista miniștrilor apărării naționale ai României*, [List of Romanian ministers of national defence], text available on the website <https://romania.fandom.com>, accessed on 3 May 2025.

<sup>43</sup> Data available on the website <https://armed.mapn.ro>, accessed on 3 May 2025.

<sup>44</sup> Tasho V. Toshev, *op. cit.*, p. 586.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 278-279.

<sup>46</sup> Boyan Zhekov, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>47</sup> Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *op. cit.*, p. 306.

<sup>48</sup> C.A.R.-P., *Collection XIV*, dossier no. 606/1945, l. 22.

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order of the Bulgarian state”, loyalty to commanders, and “fighting to the death for the unity of the great Slavic family”<sup>49</sup>.

In the autumn of 1944 and the following winter, approximately 11,000 political trials took place in Bulgaria, resulting in approximately 3,000 death sentences, of which at least 2,000 were promptly carried out<sup>50</sup>. At dawn on 2 February 1945, numerous former dignitaries were executed (dozens of former ministers, the three regents until 9 September 1944, the former prime ministers from February 1940 to August 1944, former members of parliament, etc.)<sup>51</sup>.

Returning to the actual course of the military confrontations, we note that in the battles in Transylvania, fought between 1 and 25 October 1944, the Romanian troops liberated 872 localities, forced five waterways, and suffered losses estimated at around 50,000 combatants, inflicting losses on the German-Hungarian enemy that were estimated at around 21,000 soldiers<sup>52</sup>. The large proportion of the losses suffered by the Romanians was due, to a significant extent, to the way in which Soviet military commanders chose to use the Romanian troops (who had become their allies) in battle. A symbolic episode was the bloody confrontations that took place in September 1944 in the Oarba de Mureş-Iernut area.

In the battles fought on Hungarian territory between 24 September 1944, and 15 January 1945 (in the areas of Debrecen, Nyíregyháza, Szolnok, Miskolc, Budapest, etc.), the Romanian combat troops, belonging to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Armies (commanders: Generals Nicolae Macici and Gheorghe Avramescu), liberated 1,237 localities and inflicted losses on the enemy estimated at over 30,000 men, at the cost of losing over 43,000 of their own troops, representing over 20% of the troops engaged in combat<sup>53</sup>.

In Czechoslovakia, during the last months of the war, about 248,000 Romanian soldiers took part in the armed conflicts, forcing four major waterways (Hron, Nitra, Váh, and Morava) and 10 major mountain ranges, and liberated 1,722 localities during the Zvolen-Banská Bystrica, Javorina, Prague, etc. operations, recording total losses of about 66,000 combatants and taking about 29,000 enemy soldiers out of action<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup>*Ibidem*, dossier no. 604/1945, l. 3

<sup>50</sup> Ivan Ilchev, *op.cit.*, p. 604.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibidem*.

<sup>52</sup> Alesandru D. Duţu, *op.cit.*, pp. 338-339.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibidem*, pp. 349-350.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibidem*, pp. 367-368.

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During April 1945, Romanian soldiers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Combat Regiment participated in battles in several towns in North-Eastern Austria (Hohenrupersdorf, Schrick, Zisterdorf, etc.), in the context of the Red Army's operations in the Vienna area, a city conquered on 13 April, and then they returned to Czechoslovak territory<sup>55</sup>.

For the Romanian combat forces, hostilities did not end on 9 May 1945, but three days later, with the completion of Operation Prague.

As for Bulgaria, its participation in the war against Germany, after the liberation of its own national territory (within the confines recognized by the United Nations Coalition), includes two main stages.

The first of these stages took place between 8 October and 25 November 1944, when troops from the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> Bulgarian Armies participated in the liberation of Yugoslavia, with a total combat strength of about 190,000 soldiers, backed by a reserve force consisting of 10 infantry divisions, two cavalry divisions, and two brigades, totalling over 150,000 soldiers<sup>56</sup>.

The Bulgarian Second Army, under the command of Lieutenant General Kiril Stanchev, operated in southern Serbia, in the area of Nish and then in the province of Kosovo, entering the Yugoslav territory through Byala Palanka and Vlasotnitsi, towards Nish, Leskovac, and Pirot. The 1<sup>st</sup> Bulgarian Army, commanded by General Vladimir Stoichev, had as its main objective the city of Skopje, the metropolis of Vardar Macedonia and the current capital of the Republic of North Macedonia, passing through Kriva Palanka and Kumanovo. Finally, the Bulgarian 4<sup>th</sup> Army (commander: Major General Asen Sirakov) entered the southern part of Vardar Macedonia through the Bregalnitsa-Strumitsa areas, towards Tsarevo Selo, Kočani, and Štip, and was to subsequently force the Vardar River through the Veles area<sup>57</sup>. Those objectives were to be achieved within about one and a half months, in parallel with the withdrawal of the German "Aegean" group from Greece, where British troops landed in October.

Thus, on 14 October 1944, in collaboration with the 13<sup>th</sup> Yugoslav Corps, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bulgarian Army liberated the cities of Nish and Leskovac, and on 18 November 1944, the large units on its left wing liberated the city of Prishtina (the most important urban centre in Kosovo), while the forces on the right wing entered Vučín

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<sup>55</sup> *Armata română în Al Doilea Război Mondial 1941-1945. Dicționar enciclopedic* [*The Romanian Army in World War II, 1941–1945. Encyclopaedic dictionary*], editors: Alesandru Duțu, Florica Dobre, Leonida Loghin, Bucharest, Encyclopaedic Publishing House, 1999, passim.

<sup>56</sup> Data available on the websites <https://meer.com> and, respectively [https://www.ww2\\_weapons.com](https://www.ww2_weapons.com), accessed on 27 April 2025.

<sup>57</sup> Stoyan Rachev, *op. cit.*, pp. 379-384.

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on 21 November and then (Kosovska) Mitrovica, in northern Kosovo. The forces of the Bulgarian 4<sup>th</sup> Army reached Veles on 10 November, when the Bulgarian 1<sup>st</sup> Army took control of Kumanovo, forcing German troops to abandon the city of Skopje three days later<sup>58</sup>.

According to a recent historiographical contribution, Bulgarian losses in the fighting in southern Yugoslavia amounted to 16,412 dead, wounded, and missing<sup>59</sup>. On 1 March 1945, Bulgarian Foreign Minister Petko Staynov stated in a letter that Bulgarian troops participating in the fighting in October-November 1944 in Macedonia and southern Serbia had suffered 3,422 dead, 10,895 wounded, and 2,146 missing, which leads us to a result that is very close to the above-mentioned one<sup>60</sup>.

A Romanian intelligence report dated 28 January 1945 includes generally unfavourable and often exaggerated assessments of the Bulgarian troops fighting in neighbouring Yugoslavia. Thus, the forces engaged in combat are estimated at about 400,000, the opposing German forces at only 35,000, and the Bulgarian losses at about 30,000. The situation was attributed to a complex set of causes, among which the negative impact of political purges on the combat capability of the troops stood out. Furthermore, it was mentioned that the Bulgarian troops were supported by the Red Army with aircraft, tanks, and heavy artillery in difficult moments<sup>61</sup>. The idea that the losses suffered by Bulgarian combat forces in battles with the Germans were “disproportionately high” is also found in a CIA report from the end of 1945, which nevertheless noted that the new Bulgarian army had gained a new core of experienced commanders and soldiers<sup>62</sup>.

By the end of November 1944, the territories of Greece and Albania were completely liberated from German occupation, as were three of the future six Yugoslav republics (Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia). This marked the end of the second stage of Bulgaria's participation in the war against Nazi Germany. On 12 December 1944, General Ivan Marinov issued a daily order, in which he mentioned the battles of Byala Palanka, Nish, Podujevo, Prishtina, Mitrovica, Raška, Novi Pazar, Kriva Palanka, Kumanovo, Skopje, Kočani, Strumitsa, Štip and Veles, as well as several officers, starting with Generals Kiril Stanchev, Vladimir Stoychev, Asen Sirakov, Boyan Urumov, and Boris Kopchev. The order concluded:

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 387.

<sup>59</sup> Boyan Zhekov, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>60</sup> *Apud* Stoyan Rachev, *op. cit.*, pp. 413-414.

<sup>61</sup> C.A.R.-P., *Collection XIV*, dossier no. 606/1945, ll. 1-5.

<sup>62</sup> Document available on the website <https://www.cia.gov>, accessed on 27 April 2025.

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“The war is not yet over [...] We will march side by side with the brotherly armies of the USSR and New Serbia”<sup>63</sup>.

However, Bulgaria’s participation in the war against Hitler was considerably reduced in terms of numbers, to a single army under the command of General Vladimir Stoychev, with a strength of about 100,000<sup>64</sup> (according to other sources: 130,000)<sup>65</sup> combatants.

Among the causes of this reduction, according to officers from the Romanian army’s intelligence structures, were the tense relations with Turkey and Greece at the turn of 1944 and 1945, as mentioned in the articles of the elderly and incisive Turkish journalist Hüseyin Cahit Yalçın, and the speech in Thessaloniki by the Greek bishop-regent Damaskinos, in which Bulgaria was accused of its previous pro-German conduct, and veiled territorial claims were made against the small Slavic Balkan state<sup>66</sup>.

After the restructuring at the end of November 1944, the forces of the Bulgarian 1<sup>st</sup> Army successfully operated in the Srem area (in northern Serbia), then entered southern Hungary on 22 December<sup>67</sup>, and during January 1945 marched over 250 kilometres; during this stage of the war, the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Army Corps – commanded by Generals Todor Toshev and Stoyan Trandafilov, respectively – distinguished themselves<sup>68</sup>. In the context of the German offensive attempt at Balaton in March 1945, the Bulgarian troops distinguished themselves in the battles at the confluence of the Drava and Danube rivers, where, for 11 days (19-29 March), they carried out counteroffensive operations in collaboration with Soviet troops, managing to annihilate German units north of Lower Miholats<sup>69</sup>.

Coincidentally or not, the date of the launching of Operation Balaton by the Germans (6 March 1945) coincides with the date of the establishment of Petru Groza’s government in Bucharest, an act interpreted today by historians as a Soviet reaction either to British anti-communist actions in Greece, or to the preparations of pro-German Romanian groups to organize a “reverse 23 August”. In the immediate context leading up to the events of 6 March 1945, on the front in Czechoslovakia, General Gheorghe Avramescu (b. 1884), commander of the 4<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> C.A.R.-P., *Collection XIV*, dossier no. 606/1945, l. 21.

<sup>64</sup> *First Army (Bulgarian)*, text available at <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>, accessed on 25 April 2025.

<sup>65</sup> *The Bulgarian Army in the Years of World War 2*, text available at <https://meer.com>, accessed on 27 April 2025.

<sup>66</sup> C.A.R.-P., *Collection XIV*, dossier no. 606/1945, ll. 7-11.

<sup>67</sup> Boyan Zhekov, *op.cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>68</sup> *The Bulgarian Army in the Years of World War 2...*, accessed on April 25, 2025.

<sup>69</sup> *Istoriya na BKP... / History of BCP...*, p. 437; Boyan Zhekov, *op.cit.*, p.113.

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Romanian Army, one of the most competent and respected Romanian generals, whose conduct had become suspicious in the eyes of the Soviets, was taken by them from the operational area (2 March 1945) and died the next day in the Hungarian town of Jászberény (where he had been transported) as a result of a German air raid<sup>70</sup>. He was succeeded as commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Army by General Nicolae Dăscălescu, an officer who had also held this position between 12 January and 18 February 1945<sup>71</sup>. On 12/13 February, General Nicolae Macici had been replaced as commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Army by General Vasile Atanasiu, at the request of the Soviet High Command, then he was arrested, tried, and convicted by the People's Tribunal on 22 May 1945 for "the crime of destroying the country by committing war crimes"<sup>72</sup>.

The imposition of the Groza government was followed by the adoption of laws for the purging of the Romanian military, while Romania's military involvement on the Czechoslovakian front continued. Thus, through Law 186 of 19 March 1945, over 7,000 military personnel (70 generals, 1,878 officers, 4,081 non-commissioned officers, and 1,139 technical NCOs) were placed in reserve<sup>73</sup>. On 21 April 1945 the "Law for the Prosecution of Those Guilty of the Country's Disaster" was issued"<sup>74</sup>.

After countering the German offensive in March 1945, the Bulgarian troops resumed their advance, and then proceeded to force the Mur River, which originates in Austria and flows through Slovenia and Croatia, forming the latter's border with Hungary. From mid-April to 6 May, the Bulgarian 1<sup>st</sup> Army had to defend a 220-kilometer-long front, successfully repelling enemy attempts to cross the Drava and then resuming the offensive on 7 May 1945<sup>75</sup>.

On 9 May 1945, conventionally considered Victory Day against fascism in Europe, the Bulgarian troops were in full offensive mode, and entering the Slovenian city of Maribor<sup>76</sup>. The fighting in that part of Europe would end a few days later with the surrender (and massacre) of Croatian Ustasha forces at Bleiburg. On the same day, 15 May 1945, in the Klagenfurt area of southern Austria (Carinthia province), the junction occurred between General Vl. Stoychev's 1<sup>st</sup> Bulgarian Army and the

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<sup>70</sup> *Armata română în Al Doilea Război Mondial...* [The Romanian Army in World War II...], p. 43; Florin Constantiniu, *op.cit.*, pp. 427-428.

<sup>71</sup> *Armata română în Al Doilea Război Mondial...* [The Romanian Army in World War II...], p. 35.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 28, 272.

<sup>73</sup> Dinu C. Giurescu, *op.cit.*, p. 264.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 265.

<sup>75</sup> Boyan Zhekov, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>76</sup> C.A.R.-P., *Collection XIV*, dossier no. 593/1945, l. 166.

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British 8<sup>th</sup> Army (then under the command of General Richard McCreery), which had liberated North Africa and Italy. According to the communiqué broadcast by Radio Sofia at 20:30, the discussions between the two commanders took place in an atmosphere of “perfect understanding” and “warm friendship,” reaching full agreement on the detailed route of the demarcation line; the communiqué also mentioned isolated attacks by scattered groups of Chetniks and partisans of the pro-Nazi Russian general Vlasov<sup>77</sup>.

#### SUMMATIVE COMPARATIVE DATA

The Romanian army’s participation in World War II, on the side of the United Nations Coalition, included covering a distance of over 1,700 kilometres, from the Black Sea coast to the vicinity of Prague, crossing 12 major rivers, conquering 20 mountain ranges, and liberating 3,831 localities, including 53 cities.

A total of 538,536 soldiers were engaged in the battle, with recorded and estimated losses of 169,822 combatants and enemy losses of 126,000 soldiers<sup>78</sup>. Own losses include 21,035 dead, 90,334 wounded and sick, and 58,443 missing, representing, overall, almost one third (more precisely, 31.5%) of the total troops engaged in combat<sup>79</sup>. These losses were added to the huge losses suffered by Romania during more than three years of war against the Soviet Union.

In the case of Bulgaria, the distance covered by its combatants from September 1944 to mid-May 1945, from Varna and Burgas to Klagenfurt, is approximately 1,450 kilometres.

Its own losses amounted to over 30,000 dead, wounded, and missing. Thus, Bulgarian national-communist historiography in the last decade of the Todor Zhivkov period put forward a total number of 31,922<sup>80</sup>, rounded up to “approximately 32,000” by Ivan Ilchev<sup>81</sup>, while Boyan Zhekov speaks of 10,753 dead and 23,005 wounded, most of whom were between 20 and 40 years old<sup>82</sup>. Regarding Bulgaria’s total losses during World War II, historian Varban Todorov indicates a toll of approximately 41,000 dead, wounded, and missing<sup>83</sup>, while other

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<sup>77</sup>*Ibidem*, l. 167.

<sup>78</sup> Alesandru D. Duțu, *op. cit.*, p. 371.

<sup>79</sup> Dinu C. Giurescu, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

<sup>80</sup> *Istoriya na BKP... [History of BCP...]*, p. 438.

<sup>81</sup> Ivan Ilchev, *op. cit.*, p. 608.

<sup>82</sup> Boyan Zhekov, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>83</sup> Varban Todorov, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

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experts speak of a total of 40,450 soldiers, of whom 8,337 were killed, 22,958 wounded, and 9,155 missing<sup>84</sup>.

Beyond the discrepancies between the two Bulgarian statistics (which can be explained, in part, by the subsequent death of some combatants initially recorded as wounded), it is clear that Bulgaria's losses during World War II were much lower than those of neighbouring Romania, not only in absolute terms, but also when comparing the figures to the demographic and military potential of each of the two states. Furthermore, while more than three-quarters of the human losses recorded by the Romanian army all through the Second World War occurred during the period of alliance with Germany, in the case of Bulgaria, the situation was exactly the opposite, in terms of this proportional ratio, with almost 80% of the losses in the Bulgarian army occurring after the breakup of the alliance with Germany. Another noteworthy fact is that slightly more than half of the human losses suffered by Bulgarian combat troops between 9 September 1944 and 15 May 1945 (over a period of 249 days) were recorded in the 49 days corresponding to the fighting in Vardar Macedonia and other adjacent areas in southern of Yugoslavia (8 October – 25 November 1944).

Regarding the losses inflicted on the German enemy, starting from 9 September 1944, both before 1989 and currently Bulgarian historiography cites the surprising (approximate) figure of 69,000<sup>85</sup>, which is more than double the losses recorded by Bulgaria, demonstrating remarkable efficiency from this point of view.

Due to a complex set of objective factors (superior demographic, economic, and military potential, geostrategic position, etc.) and subjective factors (Moscow's demands, its own fervent desire to obtain the complete annulment of the Second Vienna Dictate regarding Transylvania, etc.), Romania's military contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany after 23 August 1944, was more substantial and visible than that of Bulgaria, which had not participated in the anti-Soviet war that began on 22 June 1941. King Michael I of Romania, the main author of the act of 23 August 1944, and "head of the armed forces" in the Romanian state organization of the time, received the high Soviet order "Pobeda" (Victory), being the fifth foreign military commander to be honoured with this distinction, after Marshals Josip Broz Tito, Michał Rola-Żymierski, Bernard Law Montgomery, and General Dwight D. Eisenhower, respectively<sup>86</sup>.

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<sup>84</sup> *Bulgarian Army during WW2*, text available on the website <https://militarymuseum.bg>, accessed on 29 March 2025.

<sup>85</sup> *Istoriya na BKP... [History of BCP...]*, p. 438; Boyan Zhekov, *op.cit.*, p. 114.

<sup>86</sup> Dinu C. Giurescu, *op.cit.*, p. 259.

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## FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND DISTINCTIONS

The dissimilar positions occupied by Romania and Bulgaria in the Axis alliance system, and more particularly their different attitudes towards the Soviet Union on the one hand, and the difference in the weight of communists in the internal political life of the two neighbouring South-Eastern European states on the other, were two factors of great importance.

These two factors had a substantial influence both on how these states withdrew from their ill-fated alliance with Nazi Germany and on their participation in the war on the side of the United Nations Coalition in the final months of the Second World War.

The more favourable attitude of the Red Army led to Bulgaria having significantly lower losses than Romania, not only in absolute terms, but also as a percentage of the total troops actually engaged in combat.

Although the Bulgarian Communist Party was much stronger than the homologue party from Romania, the communist option was not a majority one in Bulgaria either. Consequently, in the case of both states, participation in the war against Germany represented for the USSR, the new regional hegemon, an (additional) way/opportunity to smooth the way for the communists to seize all political power in the state, by removing from the country and partially but inevitably eroding in battle some conservative military structures that were reluctant or resistant to communization.

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