

## ROMANIA AT THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE

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Romania emerged from World War I with few, if any, disappointments. A greater Romanian state coming into existence as a geographical entity represented the fulfillment of an idea that only five years earlier had been no more than a dream. From a pre-war area of 53,661 square miles and a population of 7½ million, Romania grew to 113,941 square miles (an area almost equal to the combined territories of the states of Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland) and a population of about 16 million. These figures show that the denial of bits of territory in the interest of compromise was negligible. Not even the Italians or Greeks, who also challenged the authority of the Peace Conference, entered the post-war era so rich in territorial gains. Romania secured more territory than had been promised in the 1916 Alliance. Although Romania was deprived of 3,618 square miles in Crişana and 3,409 square miles in the Banat, this reduction of her Alliance promise was richly compensated for by the incorporation of 16,988 square miles in Bessarabia and about 1,000 square miles of Bucovina (the latter area consigned to Russia by the Alliance). Reflecting on the troubled years between the signing of the Alliance and the in-gathering of the new provinces, most Romanians had good cause for satisfaction. Basic national aspirations had become a reality, and the obstacles to a “Greater Romania” had been overcome.

How did the unique privilege of more than doubling her size and population come to a state whose leader, perhaps more than any other statesman, tenaciously resisted the efforts of the Allies to renege on their 1916 promises? This is the basic question which pervades the account just presented. Dour, intractable, rigid, possessing a logical mind and clear-cut opinions which never changed, the Romanian Premier, with his insatiable lust for power and vanity, had the most extraordinary talent for diplomatic and intrigue; he was a superb actor, a master of timing, and an ingenious dissimulator. One cannot blame his contemporaries for distrusting Brătianu, because they had to judge him by his deeds, not his explanation of them. His strength lay in the dexterity of his maneuvers, in the manipulations of the ideals of others, and in inventing devices for attaining goals.

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<sup>1</sup>Sherman David Spector, *Romania at the Paris Peace Conference: A Study of the Diplomacy of Ioan I. C. Brătianu*, Iaşi, The Center for Romanian Studies, 1995, the chapter *Conclusions*.

Brătianu was a master of that subtle, farsighted, and somewhat disreputable diplomacy which in other times was called “Byzantine”. Like his Byzantine forebears, Brătianu was adept in the art of playing nations against each other for his own benefit. The uncertainty in which he left the Great Powers as the side Romania would eventually join was a masterpiece of political strategy. Vacillation as a diplomatic art was brought to its loftiest height of perfection by Romanian rulers during centuries of precarious existence wedged between Turks, Magyars, and Slavs. Brătianu proved a worthy successor to his predecessors. From 1914 to 1916 he executed one of the most notable acts of political tightrope walking. The Germans assumed he never fight against them, but feared he might not fight for them. The Allies doubted if he ever would fight for them, but hoped he would not fight against them. At the decisive moment, he threw in with the Allies and the results were catastrophic, but out of the catastrophe Romania emerged with her territory and population doubled, the sixth largest country in Europe, and the dominant state in Southeastern Europe.

Brătianu was a product of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, standing for the continued validity of *Realpolitik* in the tradition of Talleyrand and Bismarck. His attitude was compounded of devotion to old yet realistic diplomacy, an incurable aversion to new ideas, and a nationalism resting at home on a government by the narrowest of cliques and in disregard of constitutional government. In the appraisal of an astute observer, Romanian politics had “an ineradicable proclivity for *șmecherie* (a term of half-admiration for fraudulent actions performed with a degree of poise and dexterity)”. Romania’s easy victory over Bulgaria in 1913 and her diplomatic success after the Balkan Wars contributed materially to both society and government exaggerating their own importance. Politically and militarily, Brătianu and the Romanians overrated themselves. But this exultation did not blind Brătianu from understanding, as his father had, that Romania lay between the upper and lower grindstones of belligerent diplomacy. He was equally uninfluenced by the promises of Germany, the blandishments of Russia, the pleas of France, and the loans of Britain. For two years he refused to deviate from a policy of more or less impartial neutrality, and awaited what he himself described as “*le moment opportune*”.

From the beginning of the war Brătianu knew the ultimate consequences of ill-timed intervention. Romanian neutrality wavered on two calculations: a wish to arrive in time for the dismemberment of Austria-Hungary and an effort to earn as possible at the expense of the belligerents. Brătianu did not share with the other wartime leaders that propensity to offer extravagant promises to their people as to what might be expected to flow from victory. He declared candidly in 1914 that the choice between belligerency and neutrality had to be determined solely by the balance of territorial advantages which were offered by both sides. He could not

afford to repeat the mistake made in 1878, when, in return for heavy sacrifices, Romania was deprived of southern Bessarabia and given, as compensation, northern Dobrodgea. The Premier insisted upon advantageous terms clearly specified and adequately guaranteed, and unless they outweighed those which he could secure from one side in return for neutrality, he felt it his duty to reject them.

Brătianu had too sound a judgment to be dazzled by proposals, however spacious, which held out prospects of territorial aggrandizement unless such conquests would satisfy not his greed, but his anxiety. He believed that justice to his people demanded a protection of national security; and this protection could be secured only by strategic frontiers at the expense of another people. To him the war was not a fight for international right and human liberty. His interest in either of these 20<sup>th</sup> century ideals was indifferent and somewhat scornful. The war was to him a supreme chance for extending boundaries and increasing the security, prestige, and importance of Romania. That is why he abandoned the Central Powers and used his influence to induce Romania to join the Allies. He was shrewd enough to see that the Central Powers would give him nothing for either alliance or neutrality. Deliberate and practical in urging his views, which were not affected by idealistic considerations, Brătianu constantly sought material benefits for his country. It was clearly national interest rather than abstract justice that determined his policy. Certainly Brătianu's position was such that he had a responsibility to see what was done was in Romania's best interests, and he must be judged by that standard. After all, this same policy was pursued by the leaders of both sides during the war. In international relations, there are virtually no absolute values except the existence of the state and the satisfaction of its interests. The state is morally its own excuse for being; it needs no moral justification other than those which it furnishes itself. The only concepts of "good" and "bad" which relate to the international conduct of a state are relative to its success or failure in attaining its objectives. Any policy which succeeds in advancing national interest is a "good" policy; any policy fails to reach its objective is a "bad" one.

That Brătianu was able to select his own way and his own moment demanded skill. He could not make obvious his preparations for war against the Central Powers, for that would give them time to prepare while it would weaken his position with the Allies. Because the risks of war could not be taken lightly, he tried to obtain concessions from Austria-Hungary by playing the threat of intervention. That policy, characterized by the self-righteous as blackmail, was a sane and sound national policy from the Romanian point of view because Brătianu was taking advantage of his own making. One needs to reflect on the military situation in 1914-1916. Things were not going too well for the Allies. Both sides came to the realization that the adventure upon which they had embarked was

beset with greater difficulties and perils than they had fully contemplated, that victory was not so assured as they had at first anticipated, that they must seek and, if necessary, purchase the assistance of an ally. But Brătianu did not require defeats on the battlefield to convince him of these facts. He advised the Crown Council of August 1914, before hostilities commenced, that Romania would await the most favorable bid. As his father's son, he suspected all Russians of treachery and guile and, while holding his neutrality agreement with Russia as a trump card affording him rights without duties and protection without obligation, he was quick to take advantage of every Allied disagreement on Balkan policy and turn it to his gain at Russia's expense. He simultaneously flirted with the Central Powers. Unlike the Great Powers, none of whom planned the war and all of whom muddled into it, Romania deliberately entered it with expressed war aims.

Brătianu shared the belief of other realists that however exalted ideals may be, they can never be achieved without force. He did not succumb to the doctrine preached that much could be gained without intervention. Like Sonnion, he was filled with a nationalistic desire to use to the full this opportunity of creating a greater Romania. The Allies were only too well pleased to secure the adherence of another ally to scrutinize the proposed territorial readjustments which were the conditions of the 1916 bargain. When Lloyd George wrote, "War plays havoc with the refinements of conscience", he was obviously closing his eyes to the secret treaties and paying lip-service to the intrusion of Wilsonian ideals, destined to produce a new era in diplomacy. For it was the American intervention that led to a lack of confidence in the traditional channels and techniques of diplomacy. Brătianu was aware of the naive American assumption that moral force and reason would lead to an orderly and righteous international society. Although Wilson's eloquently expressed ideals swayed many judgments, Brătianu overturned such concepts by first implementing his decisions and then laying down principles to justify them. He spoke of dismembering Austria-Hungary in 1916, long before the Allies adopted this as a war aim. While the Allies had the short range goal of winning the war and the long range goal of fulfilling war aims, Brătianu telescoped the two aims into one. He never shared with the Allies any enthusiasm for their professed idealistic aims and, for that reason, the Allies never secured from him any modicum of support for any enterprise, military or naval, which was not purely and strictly Romanian, however important it might have been for the success of the common Allied cause.

For a casual observer to conclude that Brătianu cheated the Allies is to absolve the Allies of all complicity in meeting his demands. One must note that there existed a certain insincerity in inter-Allied relations, a combination of idealism and opportunism, and a lack of moral strength accompanied by a wavering attitude. That Brătianu asked for a written alliance in the face of these

conditions is certainly understandable. He regarded the 1916 Alliance as sacrosanct and rested his case solely upon it. The real basis of the Alliance must be seen as an application of the doctrine of the balance of power. In 1916 the total dismemberment of Austria-Hungary was a very possibility, but hardly an immediate prospect. By assigning parts of that empire to Romania, the Allies made dismemberment inevitable. When the Allies later realized the dangers of dismemberment, it was too late to stop Brătianu. His unswerving fight to seize promised lands blinded him to Wilsonian principles, and eventually led him afoul of the will of the Peace Conference.

In his naïve belief that he had elevated Romania to a position of equality with the Allies, Brătianu expected a reserved seat on the Supreme Council. His anticipation was somewhat justified in that Romania had been the partner of Great Powers in the Triple Alliance. The 1883 treaty had accorded Romania equal status in negotiating peace treaties. Brătianu's expectation that the 1916 Alliance signed with enemies of the Triplice granted him the same right suffered a severe jolt when the Allies assumed authority for the final disposition of claims of the "small powers with special interests", a label which infuriated Brătianu. The Allies anticipated that Brătianu would accept their decisions cheerfully. Deeply resenting exclusion from the Council, which angered him more than equivocations over the validity of the 1916 Alliance, Brătianu resumed in Paris his vexatious wartime tactics to resist adverse decisions reached without his participation. He did not like to be dealt with by others as he had dealt with them. In Paris he was astonished to learn how seldom and how reluctantly he had acknowledged the virtue of compromise during his long life in politics. He had never considered a question settled until it was settled his way. For him to have violated the Alliance by making a separate peace was, in Brătianu's estimation, an entirely justifiable act; but for the Allies to betray that sacred compact was contrary to international justice. His exasperating resistance to the dictates of the Allied leaders, all of whom he considered parvenus and unqualified to interfere in Romania's private affairs, and his rejection of compromise involved the Allies in a tangle of contradictions as to accentuate the rift in their ranks. Perhaps nothing serves as well to illustrate the success of his divide-and-conquer tactics than the failure of the Allied statesmen to repudiate or honor the Alliance publicly. Their disinclination to disavow it was a by-product of the bickering and rivalries among the peacemakers.

Angered and disappointed, Brătianu accused the Allies of bad faith, but his indignation did not blind him to the fact the Peace Conference was not omnipotent. The Allies had no means of enforcing their decisions in East Central Europe simply because they had failed to occupy the region in strength after the armistices. War weariness and mutually antagonistic aims hindered inter-Allied

occupation, the most effective means of enforcing territorial settlements. What the Allies failed to realize was that the boundaries that involved annexations of territories in East Central Europe were an accomplished fact before the Allies ever adjudicated upon their fairness. The map of the Habsburg Monarchy had been rearranged before the Peace Conference convened. The Conference could only ratify or regulate retracing already carried out by Romania and other states located on the periphery of Austria-Hungary. The political and military situation existing in the winter of 1918-1919 limited the freedom of action of the Allies. By that time the liberation and unification of all Romanians had been proclaimed. Detailed boundaries of the newly-enlarged nation had to be fixed by negotiation, but it could not be denied that "Greater Romania" was already established. The final territorial settlements merely entailed a formal legalization of Romania's new frontiers which war and conquest already had created. To take away what Romania had been promised and had acquired and to return it to Hungary and other states in the interests of permanent peace was anathema to Brătianu.

By taking advantage of dissensions within Allied ranks, Brătianu was able to control the course of events in 1919. His encouragement of disputes among the Allies and his ability to turn resulting imbroglios to his favor show that he was more skilled than any of the Big Four, none of whom had had first-hand acquaintance with his diplomatic dexterity. Whenever the Allies finally made up their minds that they needed his assistance, they were clearly not in a position to haggle over details. When any solution to become complete and decisive, Brătianu's demands became excessive and his counter-thrusts jeopardized the final peace settlement. This pattern, at times verging on the absurd, had become so ingrained that Brătianu could never discard it. Wilsonian principles condemning a continuation of this type of diplomacy won popular lip-service, but Brătianu openly repudiated the "new diplomacy". To him the peace treaties were "Wilsonian garlands around Napoleonic clauses". He referred in December 1919 to the Peace Conference as "a provisional institution above which existed the supreme and permanent interests" of Romania who "was strong by the conscience that it has a high mission".

The infusion of Wilsonian ideals into peacemaking made Romania's position one of particular difficulty and ambiguity, but since Allied statesmen were neither united as to policy nor faithful to their decisions, Brătianu found conditions most favorable for his policy of resistance, delay, and skillful bargaining. He never believed in, nor would he allow himself to be seduced by, the dream of a brave new world emerging under the aegis of the League of Nations. This attitude reflected general European mistrust of a peace based on the Fourteen Points. It was as natural for Brătianu to resent American interference as it was for French, Italian, and Japanese statesmen to thwart Wilson's dreams. One

has only to point to the American rejection of French claims to the Rhineland, Italian designs on the eastern Adriatic shore, or Japanese claims to Shantung to demonstrate that Brătianu's claims might not have been satisfied if the Americans had won out completely in Paris. As Sonnino so aptly put it, "The War undoubtedly had had the effect of over-exciting the feeling of nationality ... Perhaps America fostered it by putting the principles so clearly". When the Americans attempted to restrain rampant nationalism by means of abstract formulas, based largely upon the essentials of liberal democracy, their efforts met with least success in East Central Europe where frontiers were so historically and traditionally that no one could with certainty unravel the title to lands on either side.

Added to the complexities produced by American intervention was the complicated relationship between foreign and domestic policy. "Democratic" foreign policy was in its infancy in 1919. Brătianu evinced little or no understanding of its merits. The relationship in Romania between foreign and domestic policy played a far less significant role in the formulation of policies than in the development of British, French, and Italian statesmanship. Unlike other elected statesmen, Brătianu was not really accountable to public opinion for his acts. Moreover, in contrast to the diplomatic tactics of the British, French, and Italians, which shifted with changes in administrations, Romanian policy remained steadfast despite shuffling of cabinets in Bucharest. Brătianu, by virtue of his control of Romanian politics, steered a consistent course to victory without deferring to his opponents at home. By contriving to show that Romania could no longer be expected to remain under constant subjection to the machinations of the Great Powers, who were still trying to use her as a pawn, Brătianu overturned the established concept that smaller European states had only marginal control over their destinies.

Insisting the 1916 Alliance to be valid and binding, Brătianu first tried to secure by negotiations a general recognition of his new frontiers and of Romania as a great power defending European civilization in the East. After learning that the Allies, each of whom had come to Paris with a program of contradictions, no longer considered the Alliance absolutely binding, Brătianu believed the time had come for Romania to stand alone or select such allies as suited her best. When he proceeded alone to implement the Alliance promises, all the misunderstandings and difficulties which arose in the case of Hungary revealed the shocking lack of unity and singularity of approach among the Allied governments. The Allied statesmen failed to reconcile their various views, and the more clumsily they berated or the more loftily they sermonized, the more violently did Brătianu spout defiance. The Allies overlooked the fact that Romania lived in fear of her national life. Not until it was too late did the Big Four, none of whom had negotiated the

1916 Alliance, realize that there was no unity either of military command or political direction in the treatment of the forces of the defunct Habsburg Monarchy as a whole, that the Belgrade armistice had taken little account of the interests of Romania, and that nine months after that armistice Romania had, rightly or wrongly, received no compensation in kind for her material losses sustained during the war. When dealing with Béla Kun, who made no secret of his belligerent aims, the Big Four preferred relying upon Kun's promises instead of restraining him. When plans were finally considered for military operations to force Hungary into line, the campaign was so retarded that in the meantime Romania, the state most directly interested, had already taken independent action.

At that point, in August 1919, the irreconcilability of Allied war aims became evident when the mask of hypocrisy and equivocation was removed. While the Allies at first were involved in a high degree of improvisation and of confusion in the effort to solve the Romanian crisis, *raison d'état* soon seized the Allies and led them to concentrate their energies upon winning Romania's favor by meeting Brătianu halfway. The brief flirtation with ideals was now over. Although not admitted at the time, the wearisome negotiations with Brătianu were conducted in a spirit reflecting the effects of the secret treaties and the pressure of frankly selfish national objectives. Decisions of the Big Four that for a time echoed abstract principles were flouted whenever they interfered with the ambitions of the state against whom judgment was rendered.

France, perhaps more accountable than any other Allied Power for the munificent promises that lured Romania into the war, appears no less responsible than Romania for the course of events. But it should be noted that Europe was the most important of all continents to France. The French, therefore, decided every issue with a keen eye on prospects for stronger friends and weaker enemies. France was not in a position to uphold the peace settlements by her own strength. The alternative to the abortive Treaty of Guarantees was alliances with the East Central European states. France valued Romania's military resources, strategic location, raw materials, and position in the new balance of power. Such an appreciation of Romania was hardly different from the attitude previously shown by states of the Triple Alliance. The Quai d'Orsay appropriated the pre-war German view that Romania signified a market for business and finance, a causeway to the Ottoman Empire which the French expected to carve up, and the base of French power in East Central Europe. Since these aims conflicted with those of Italy, the French moved swiftly to accommodate Brătianu's maximum demands before the Italians could upset the balance of power. Romania ultimately reciprocated by becoming as vigorous an anti-revisionist state as France.

Romania's success was due indirectly to American inexperience in the give-and-take of *Realpolitik* and the subsequent defection of the United States

from the Peace Conference. American impatience to have done with participation in European affairs gave fresh impetus to French designs, sparked Italian moves toward the same aims, and improved Brătianu's game of chance. Certainly a decisive factor was the American rejection of the peace treaties, an act which rendered the settlement incomplete.

Perhaps as significant as the American default was Russia's absence from the Peace Conference. The collapse of Imperial Russia was an event which had immediately favorable consequences for Romania. If Imperial Russia had been represented, Romania would certainly not have acquired so much non-Romanian territory, and most assuredly not Bessarabia or northern Bucovina. Closely related to Russia's disappearance from the European concert was the very real panic Bolshevism inspired in the West. Brătianu's manipulation of this fear assisted his campaign most effectively. As a result, Romania's increase in size was due as much to Lenin as to the French and Americans.

Grumbling chauvinism and intransigence blinded Brătianu to the fact, which did not become evident until later, that Russia was still his neighbor. He would have been wise to recognize that Romania had been the most favored of allied states in that she had acquired territory from enemy and ally alike. Brătianu should have realized that only by a far-sighted moderation of his territorial claims and respect for the nationalistic tendencies of those non-Romanian peoples whom he incorporated would Romania preserve what she had needed help to win.