

## A CENTURY SINCE THE SAVING OF THE NATIONAL BEING (1917-2017)

Corneliu-Mihail LUNGU\*

**Abstract.** The armed struggles remain on the Eastern Front in the summer of 1917 constitute a moment of great importance in the evolution of the First World War. To emphasize the special international echo generated by the confrontations in Marasti, Marasesti and Oituz, this time we appeal to diplomatic and military documents, due to senior foreign officials, who commented on the effort of the Romanian army.

**Keywords:** First World War, Marasti, Marasesti and Oituz, diplomatic and military documents

The year 1917 was crucial for Romania, as it was facing the situation of no longer existing on Europe's map. The evolution of the events was very closely followed by the European diplomacy, who noticed that the dangers that threatened Romania were coming not only from the enemy, but also due to the overthrow and the complication of the political regime in Russia.

Over the years, numerous documentary testimonies remained and have been preserved, proving that in the summer of 1917, the national being was saved from extinction by the sacrifice of the "great war generation <that> accomplished his duty toward his nation."<sup>1</sup>

The first document that was closely examined is the report drew up by the Swiss charge d'affaires in Romania, Gustav Boissiere and released in July 17, 1917, who was notifying the federal councillor of the Public Department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs about the situation on the battlefield. The main conclusion of the Swiss diplomat made reference to the tragic situation in Romania, which "definitely cannot rely on its neighbours, and the only support that others allies can offer is supplying with ammunition and other war materials."<sup>2</sup>

---

\* Full Member of the Academy of Romanian Scientists, „Hyperion” University, Bucharest, gabriel.givlea@stefadina.ro

<sup>1</sup> Mareșal Alexandru Averescu, *Notițe zilnice din război (Daily notes from the war) (1916-1918)*, Publishing house „Cultura Națională”, Bucharest, p. 232.

<sup>2</sup> *1918 la Români. Desăvârșirea unității statale a poporului român.(Romanians in 1918. The achievement state unity by the Romanian people)* Documente externe (External documents) (1916-1918), vol. II, Publishing house Edit. Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1983, p. 925.

Similar information and equally alarming could be found in other diplomatic reports, as for example the one of the Legation of Belgium, that was submitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on August 1, 1917, showing that the Germans played an important card, "since it is known that they don't superficially undertake such offensives and that once started, their tenacity will lead their way."<sup>3</sup> To the author of the report this meant that the enemy was "decided to deliver a fatal stroke, aiming to defeat Romania."<sup>4</sup>

As shown in the same report of the Legation of Switzerland in Romania, cited above, the critical moment of our military situation was reached on July 25 1917, when the Russian army, which fought in cooperation with the Romanian army in the area between Cașin and Putna, received order from Kerenski to stop any offensive. The Swiss diplomat rightly considered that, "the real hopes for a brilliant success have been followed by a deep pessimism, not least the feeling of revolt against the new Russians' boycott."<sup>5</sup>

Russia's reluctant attitude was recurrent, and we can also speak about a hostile position, expressed in the important moment when Romania decided to join the war. This can be demonstrated by the detailed **Memorandum – Report** of the mayor Stanley Washburn, who was describing, among the other aspects, Russia's opposition to Romania's decision to enter the war. Worth noting that the opinion he had formed was based on some eloquent information and after a long conversation with Serghei Sazonov, former Minister of Foreign Affairs. Given the tremendous pressure exerted by France and Britain to force Romania to enter the war, in his turn, the former Minister was invited by the general Alexeev to discuss "the Romanian businesses". General Alexeev answered was that he was "against such an action in 1916", and he argued that Romania entering the war would mean the extension of the flank, and the Russian front line would reach the Black Sea."<sup>6</sup> In the same time, he disagreed because he was unsure that Romania was prepared to join the war. Arriving in Brussilov's general district, major Washburn was about to find the same adverse attitude "for the same reasons that had influenced Alexeev."<sup>7</sup>

In the same context, another finding of the military correspondent sent on the eastern front deserves to be highlighted, regarding the lack of trust in the Russian diplomacy that "has always behaved in the past so as to justify Romania's fears"<sup>8</sup>. His belief was that among the reasons why Romania has postponed to

---

<sup>3</sup> Central Historical National Archives (A.N.I.C.), Collection „Microfilme” ("Microfilms") Belgium, roll of film no. 12, frame 139 (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Correspondance Politique, Légations Roumaine).

<sup>4</sup> *1918 la Români... (The year 1918 for Romanians ...)*, vol. II, p. 925.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 924.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 984.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 985.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 986.

enter the war was also the fear that Russia might obtain Constantinople and the Dardanelles, and under this circumstances Russia would have controlled the exit to the Black Sea, and the commercial and economic life of Romania would have been practically compromised.

Following the visits to the Romanian battlefield, the Major S. Washburn concluded that the worsening situation was due to the non-delivery of the necessary ammunition by the Allies, their support usually consisting of providing tips. From this point of view, correspondent officer's reporting, after his last visit during which he discussed with General Averescu whom "he had get to know pretty well," is suggestive. When asked what help he receives from the Allies, he confessed that <there are 50 French officers in Romania advising and encouraging us; actually, we receive advice from France, England and Russia; **what we need are fewer tips and more cannons**><sup>9</sup> (our emphasis).

Respecting the historical truth, it must be admitted that France's support was substantial, it materialised in the professional technical support that helped restore Romania's military potential. Instead, from the east, in addition to the advice received, General Brussilov's Major state sent encouragements that urged Romania to understand that: "the defeats suffered by it are only incidents in a wider campaign, because behind it lies the great Russia, that will take care so that the little, but brave ally that joined the war for a just cause won't suffer in the end"<sup>10</sup>.

In this general context, under completely unfavourable conditions and events, there have been carried out the historical battles at Mărăști, Mărășești and Oituz, that saved the country from disaster. A century later, to demonstrate their role in defending the national being, we appealed again to the memory of the archived documents, especially the diplomatic ones. It is worth to be mentioned that the victories acquired and the heroism of the Romanian soldiers impressed both the allies and the enemies. During the events, in august 1917, Georges Clemenceau was asking General H. Berthelot to send a congratulatory telegram to the Commander-in-chief of the Romanian Army, for the "success scored by the Romanian army during the push", considering that the courage and tenacity demonstrated by the Romanian army revealed that the hard trials they went through increased the trust in the final success.<sup>11</sup>

The Government and the Romanian High Command received congratulatory letters and telegrams from some prominent political and military figures in Europe. Such a message sent the British Prime Minister Lloyd George, on 13/26 August 1917, expressing the admiration "for the heroic courage and

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 993.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 995.

<sup>11</sup> A.N.I.C., Collection „Microfilme”(“Microfilms”) France, roll of film no. 175, frame 1064. Archives Historique Militaires Vincennes, Ministère de la Guerre, État-major de l'Armée.

resilience showed by the Romanian people during an almost unparalleled year of challenges." Also remarkable was his finding that: "The reconstruction of the army and its stubborn and invaluable resistance that he is currently putting up to the enemy under extremely difficult conditions are representing a magnificent example of the strength that freedom instils to free people." <sup>12</sup>

In his turn, the military attaché of Serbia in Bucharest, colonel Hadzic, informing the commander of the of the Volunteer Corps of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes on the situation on the Russian-Romanian front, appreciated, on August 2, 1917, that: "As regarding the Romanian troops, they seem to be valuable troops from all the points of view. The discipline and obedience are very good and inspire all the confidence that was created on them." <sup>13</sup>

According to the reports of the chargé d'affaires of Switzerland, G. Boissier, "the new Romanian army, that was rebuilt beyond hope", raised the European public opinion awareness, receiving "some of the most laudatory appreciations". Particularly affected was by the fact that even the French officers, who were generally very reserved, "poured out their appreciations." <sup>14</sup>

Among the diplomatic reports released in that period, a definite place was occupied by the ones about the battles of Mărăști, Mărășești and Oituz. For instance, on September 1, 1917, the same chargé d'affaires of Switzerland, G. Boissier, was reporting to the federal counselor A. Dunant information regarding the military situation on the Romanian front, focusing on the battles of Mărășești that have been "violent and caused the government serious concerns due to a possible complete rupture of the front that would lead to the invasion of Moldova" <sup>15</sup>. Fortunately the event did not take place "due to the heroism of the Romanian troops, more or less backed by some Russian divisions", which prevented the enemy to move forward, and even if "they slightly advanced here and there, in other sectors they had to withdraw". Despite the sacrifices made by the Romanian army, the situation remained difficult "if Russians continued to refuse the fight" and as the Swiss diplomat noted "it could come a time when the Romanians will no longer be able to resist, despite their courage." <sup>16</sup>

No such moment came because, as it results from another diplomatic report released on September 2, 1917, "the Romanian army was successfully resisting everywhere, despite some minor advantages the Germans were able to secure. Moreover, the Romanian troops started an attack in the region Panciu, at the point of junction of both armies Averescu and Grigorescu, from where the 124<sup>th</sup> Russian division entirely fled. The same thing happened in the north, near the

---

<sup>12</sup> *Year 1918...*, vol. II, p. 942.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 928.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 924-925.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 953.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

Bucovina border, where the Russian troops also abandoned the battlefield, fleeing from the bombing."<sup>17</sup>

The ultimate recognition of the significance and importance of the victories obtained in the summer of 1917 by the Romanian troops came not only from allies or the neutrals, but also from the enemy's camp. As arguments and evidence stay the statements of General von Morgen, the commander of the German reserve, who confessed in his memoirs that: "enemy's resistance, especially Romanians was unusually bold, and manifested through a number of 61 counter-attacks during the 14 days of combat."<sup>18</sup>

The effects of the gained victories on the battlefield were so strong that led the German general to conclude that "the battles in August showed that the Romanians had become a respectable opponent."<sup>19</sup>

Commendations for the Romanian army have been made in various German publications of the time, that have extensively dealt with the first global conflagration. Among the comments that were made, noteworthy are those related to the meaning of the Mărășești victory, that was considered possible: "due to a fierce resistance against a well-prepared offensive and numerous dynamic counterattacks, even close fights, without any consideration for the heavy losses, the newly formed Romanian divisions that have been trained by French officers **were able to defend their homeland against a complete conquest**"<sup>20</sup> (our emphasis).

Even though we consider to have insisted sufficiently, with respect to the strong evidence - supported by authentic sources - on the significance and role of the battles of Mărăști, Mărășești and Oituz in saving the national being, we consider appropriate all the testimony to be completed by England's King **Message** for the Romania's sovereign, through which he assured him that "all the sympathy goes to you in these moments of ordeal and I have a great admiration for the heroic and firm resistance of Your army that faced unequalled difficulties and discouragements."<sup>21</sup>

A century since the notable battles, beside the heroism of the Romanian soldiers, Generals Alexandru Averescu, Constantin Cristescu, Eremia Grigorescu and the other army commanders who have demonstrated their qualities of great military strategist, are ought to be glorified. General C. Dabija reports are important clues; he concluded that due to General Al. Averescu "the offensive was not stopped on 12 of July, and it continued until day 17 VII, which had a

<sup>17</sup> ANIC, „Micromovies” Belgium, roll of film 12, frame 157 (Ministere des Affaires...).

<sup>18</sup> C. Kirișescu, *Istoria războiului pentru întregirea României (History of the war for reunification of Romania) (1916-1919)*, vol II, Publishing House Edit. Științifică și Enciclopedică, Bucharest, 1989, p. 133.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 134.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> *Year 1918...*, vol. II, p. 1016.

significant and decisive effect"<sup>22</sup>. Continuing the analysis, the author of the paperwork *The Romanian army in the World war* considered that if General Averescu would have stopped the offensive at that moment, everything would have been lost, Moldavia's defense would have been stopped by the offensive of the German 9<sup>th</sup> Army between Siret and Prut, and the Romanian army and people would have had the most tragical faith.

This is why we subscribe the idea that the battles of Mărăști, Mărășești, Oituz should be generically named "Moldavia's Battle", that saved our national being.

However, nowadays, after a century, it should not be forgotten that "the generation of the great war has done his duty to his people."<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, as the same US military correspondent sent on the Romanian front, S. Washburn, noted in a letter to Senator E. Root, "Romania's sacrifices and good faith in this battle are not understood by everyone."<sup>24</sup>

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Mareșal Alexandru Averescu, *Notițe zilnice din război (Daily notes from the war) (1916-1918)*, Publishing house „Cultura Națională”, Bucharest
- 1918 la Români. *Desăvârșirea unității statale a poporului român.(Romanians in 1918. The achievement state unity by the Romanian people)* Documente externe (External documents) (1916-1918), vol. II, Publishing house Edit. Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1983
- Central Historical National Archives (A.N.I.C.), Collection „Microfilme” ("Microfilms") Belgium, roll of film no. 12, frame 139 (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Correspondance Politique, Légations Roumaine)
- C. Kirîțescu, *Istoria războiului pentru întregirea României (History of the war for reunification of Romania) (1916-1919)*, vol II, Publishing house Edit. Științifică și Enciclopedică, Bucharest, 1989

<sup>22</sup> Al. Averescu, *Daily notes...*, p. 228.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 232.

<sup>24</sup> *Year 1918...*, vol II, p. 944.