

STATE OF MIND OF ION I. C. BRĂȚIANU AT THE BEGINNING OF WORLD WAR I (JUNE 1914-DECEMBER 1916)

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Abstract. On 1 June 1914, Romanian Prime-Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu met Tzar Nicholas II who was paying an official visit to Romania. The Russian emperor insistently demanded that Romania remain neutral or conclude an alliance with the Entente. The Romanian Prime-Minister concluded an alliance with the Entente. On 14/27 August 1916, Romania joined the war alongside the Entente. The Austro-Hungarian, German, Bulgarian and Turkish troops took advantage of the lack of help from the Entente to Romania. Romanian troops were defeated. Confronted with the situation, Ion I. C. Brătianu turned demoralized. He fortunately recovered quickly and succeeded to organize the retreat in Moldavia and Romania's resistance to the foreign attacks.

Key-words: Romania, Ion I. C. Brătianu, neutrality, World War I, fighting on two fronts

On 1 June 1914, Tzar Nicholas II arrived in the maritime harbour of Constanța. The Russian autocrat had sailed his splendid yacht *Standard* together with his family, for an apparent courtesy visit. In reality, during the visit the Tzar declared to King Charles I that he would not keep unresponsive in the case of a war against Serbia.

Was that a premonition of the Tzar's? I do not tend to believe that.

The assassination that took place in the Bosnian city of Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 that resulted in the killing of Franz Ferdinand, the heir of the Austria-Hungary Empire throne, and his wife, princess Sofia, actually represented the pretext for the start of the First World War. In truth, the determining cause for the engagement into the fight of not less than 28 states from all the continents¹ was the desire for redistribution of the colonial empires and to form national states in Europe.

Romania was interested to solve the problem of coagulating its ethnic state on the grounds of the minorities' principle. Actually, the diplomats and political leaders in the capital cities of the great powers formally used this principle, which allowed conceptual ascertaining of the future national European states, pre-existing the end of World War I.²

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¹ Cf. Mircea Popa, *Primul război mondial*, București, 1979, p. 477; see also the annexed tables.

² An example of this is drawing, already in December 1916, the future conventional border destined to separate Romania and Hungary, called by the diplomats „the Balfour line” (see R. Șt.

To a certain extent, discussions within the political circles in Paris and London were known in Bucharest. That is exactly why the Romanian Prime-Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu³ proved caution as the regards the decision to join the war. The crown council of 21 July/3 August 1914 from Sinaia decided that Romania was to remain neutral⁴. On that day, the crucial word was that of Ion I. C. Brătianu, in his capacity of Prime-Minister. He had the courage to confront King Charles I and the chief of the conservatives, Petre P. Carp. They both supported observance of the treaty concluded with the Central Powers, i.e. Romania's joining them at war⁵.

Immediately after the Crown Council's decision was announced, an aggregated action was initiated by the great powers to overturn that decision. That was not an easy task. The vigilance of Ion I. C. Brătianu, who was a first rank personality, had to be cheated. He was made various promises as a start. Austria-Hungary, knowing the desires and aim of the Romanians at that time offered Bukovina, which the empire was administering directly. They went even farther, also promising Bessarabia⁶. However they did not speak about Transylvania and the Romanian lands from under the administration of the royal crown in Budapest. Resulting was an offer far from satisfying Bucharest's expectations⁷.

The Russian Empire, on the other hand, through Constantin Diamandi, attempted in 1915 to resume the failed project of the marriage of prince Charles (future King Charles II), the son of King Ferdinand and Queen Mary, and a princess from the Romanov royal house. The grand duchess Olga Nicolaevna, the oldest daughter of Tzar Nicholas II, was to receive Bessarabia as her dower⁸. For complex reasons, the political-matrimonial contract was never finalized. In that same context, Petrograd restated the promises included in the secret agreement called Sazonov-Diamandi, concluded in Bucharest on 18 September/ 1 October 1914. Through it, the Tzarist Empire also offered Transylvania and Bukovina in exchange for Romania's waging war in alliance with the Entente till its end⁹.

Vergatti, *O dispută fără obiect: Transilvania*, în "Geopolitica, Revistă de geografie politică, geopolitică și geostrategie", anul III, nr. 11/2005, p. 125-136).

³ For the biography of Ionel I.C. Brătianu, see I. Scurtu *Activitatea politică*, ("Political activity") București, 1992, passim; Anastase Iordache, *Ion I. C. Brătianu*, București, 1994, passim.

⁴ Cf. Al. Marghiloman, *Note politice* ("Political notes") 1897-1924, vol. I, 1897-1915, ed. I, Institutul de Arte Grafice "Eminescu" S.A., București, 1927, p. 231-236.

⁵ This point of view was also expressed by the liberal C. Stere in *Marele război* ("The Great War") București, 1918, p. 219 and foll.; *România în anii primului război mondial* ("Romania in the years of WWI"), vol. I, București, 1987, p. 78.

⁶ Cf. *România în anii primului război mondial* ("Romania in the years of WWI"), vol. I, ed.cit., p. 108.

⁷ Cf. David Prodan, *Transilvania și iar Transilvania. Considerații istorice* ("Transylvania and again Transylvania. Historical considerations"), București, 1992, passim.

⁸ Cf. C. Diamandi archive Fondul Casei regale (Royal House Fund), Archives of the Foreign Affairs Ministry ds. 115, f. 21, 22.

⁹ Cf. *România în anii primului război mondial* ("Romania in the years of WWI"), vol. I, ed.cit., p. 103-104.

England in turn promised something it did not possess: Bukovina and Transylvania, which belonged to Austro-Hungary, as well as Bessarabia, which was under Tzarist rule, i.e. the rule of an allied state¹⁰.

Ion I. C. Brătianu did not believe the promises made by the great powers. He knew what his father had gone through, struck by the contempt of the powerful ones. He wanted to avoid the suffering his father and the country had been caused¹¹. Therefore he was neither influenced nor seduced by promises made by political men under pressure, Entente supporters like Emil Costinescu (who was a plain Russophile¹²), Take Ionescu and Nicu Filipescu¹³, or by anti-Russians like C. Stere, who explicitly demanded entering the war alongside the Central Powers.

Late in the autumn of 1914, Ion I. C. Brătianu confessed to George Mârzescu his intention to conclude an alliance with the Entente¹⁴. His clear judgement was not comprehended by those who lacked the depth of his thinking, his information and his connections at the level of the masonic elites. Unfortunately, he was criticized by those who did not understand the situation, like Emil Costinescu, Const. Stere etc.¹⁵

During that turmoil that marked the years of neutrality, there was a joke among the Bucharesters that pictured the state of mind of the time. It was said that Mr. Nicolae Filipescu had declared it was not yet time to enter the fight, Mr. Marghiloman – that the time had long arrived and Mr. Brătianu – that it was best not to mind the watch.

Ion I. C. Brătianu indeed waited for the most favourable moment to send Romania to wage war. He did how he had told Georgel Mârzescu in 1914 that he would do. On 4/17 August 1916 he concluded a secret agreement with the Entente, in view of Romania's entering the war alongside it¹⁶. Since he knew that a secret was meant to be disclosed, especially in times of war, Ionel I. C. Brătianu decided that the country should take action immediately. On 14/27 August 1916 the Austria-Hungary Empire was declared war and on 15/28 August 1916 Romanian military operations began for freeing Transylvania. During the first days of victories in Transylvania and of neutrality of the Bulgarian Kingdom towards Romania, Ion I. C. Brătianu showed a very satisfied expression¹⁷. He

¹⁰ Idem, p. 108.

¹¹ Cf. I. G. Duca, *Amintiri politice* ("Political memories", vol. I, Jon Dumitru-Verlag, München, 1981, p. 137.

¹² Cf. Al. Marghiloman, op.cit., vol. I, ed.cit, p. 230.

¹³ Cf. C. Stere, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

¹⁴ Idem, p. 229.

¹⁵ Idem, p. 229 și urm.

¹⁶ For the content of the treaty, see *România în anii primului război*, ("Romania in the years of WW I") vol. I, ed. cit., p. 121 and foll.

¹⁷ Cf. C. Stere, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

probably got rallied in the wave of general enthusiasm. However this situation was rapidly overturned. On 17/30 August 1916, the German Empire declared war to Romania and on 19 August/1 September, the Bulgarian Kingdom and the Sublime Porte did the same.

Ion I. C. Brătianu found himself in the situation of asking the Romanian army to fight on two fronts. It was a situation that had been foreseen. The help of the Entente had been promised in the event that moment occurred. However the help did not come. Ion I. C. Brătianu kept calm and confident in himself and the army. Anyway, the disaster on the southern front (Turtucaia – 24 August/6 September 1916) was soon a fact. Generals Aslan, Teodorescu and Basarabescu proved incapable in front of the German divisions that were waging a modern type of war under the command of General Mackensen¹⁸. In addition, the Russian divisions arrived in Dobruđa under the command of General Andrei Medardovitovici Zaionciovski did not even initiate fight¹⁹.

Ion I. C. Brătianu imperatively demanded the Entente to hold to its promises. It was useless. Russian General Mihail Vasilievici Alexeev did not order commencement of the offensive in Bukovina area²⁰ and French General Maurice Sarrail engaged in a sham fight in Thessaloniki – Moscopoli area²¹.

With the sharp wit he possessed, Prime-Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu understood that he had reached a worse situation than his father had during the Independence War, having to fight unaided on two fronts. Suddenly his state of mind collapsed after 1 September 1916, becoming unrecognisable. He would walk the house repeating incessantly „I have been deceived”. Certainly he meant the great powers and their masonic elites²². He would not answer when being spoken to and he had a ravaged face. His close ones tried to calm him down: Eliza Știrbei-Brătianu – his wife, Barbu Știrbei – his brother-in-law and I. G. Duca²³, his best friend. They did not succeed. For 15 days, Ion I. C. Brătianu was in a state of unusual depression, dangerous for the country. He recovered by himself. It was extremely difficult for him to see how everything that he had painstakingly built for two years was collapsing, two years during which he had been bitterly criticized for being in abeyance, a state he had considered fruitful²⁴.

He understood perfectly what was going to happen. He saw that on the front line, only two generals showed command capabilities: Prezan and Averescu. Under those circumstances, he again appealed to observance of the treaty by the French. He demanded for a military mission to be sent. He was answered on

¹⁸ Cf. I. G. Duca, *op. cit.*, vol. II, Jon Dumitru Verlag, München, 1981, p. 12 și urm.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Idem*, p. 26 și urm.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Idem*, p. 29.

²³ *Idem*, p. 20.

²⁴ *Idem*, p. 30.

behalf of Marshall Joffre that General Henri Mathias Berthelot would come. Unfortunately the later reached Bucharest late, only on 15 October 1916²⁵. However, the announcement of the arrival of the French mission meant much for Ion I. C. Brătianu's state of mind. He thus saw that he had not been completely forgotten by the Entente. He proved again calmness and the qualities of a great leader. He refused to summon the Parliament, so as not to be exposed to violent, demolishing criticism, coming from people incapable to understand the course of events²⁶. He was grieved to see the situation on the front in Transylvania, where the Romanian army could not withstand the offensive of the German units led by General von Falkenheim. He had received confidential information from the Entente on the operations calendar of the Central Powers armies along the Romanian front²⁷. It was only left for him to try to save as much as he could of Romania's territory, thus contributing, through the length of the front line to the victory of the Entente.

Those were the circumstances under which Ion I. C. Brătianu participated in the meeting of the War Council on 15 September 1916. He listened to the army men, however without giving them much credit. Their plans were far too optimistic, in comparison with the information newly received from the capital cities of the Entente countries. He expressed his reserve to his close friend I. Gh. Duca²⁸. He plainly told the latter that he would not participate in the decision-making by the military side. He knew what the result of their actions would be.

Consequently, he, as a Prime-Minister, was going to focus all his energy, capacity and work force to ensure the retreat in Moldavia. And he achieved this mission successfully, in a normal state of mind, in complete serenity, as I. Gh. Duca wrote²⁹.

On 20 November/ 3 December 1916, when the battle on Argeș-Neajlov (the battle for Bucharest) ended, Ion I. C. Brătianu and the Romanian government headed to Moldavia. Despite the general opinion across the country, that assessed the result of this battle to be a disaster, Ion I. C. Brătianu weighted it both visionary and realistically as representing the loss of one fight but not of the war. He sincerely believed that the Entente would prevail and that Greater Romania would emerge³⁰. The extraordinary faith and intuition of this man, creator of a country, endowed with courage all those who were fighting, especially those on the front line, whose blood wetted the land more than the water falling as rain.

²⁵ Idem, p. 51.

²⁶ Idem, p. 30.

²⁷ Idem, p. 31.

²⁸ Idem, p. 31-32.

²⁹ Idem, p. 53.

³⁰ Idem, p. 53 și urm.



Ionel I. C. Brătianu residence, Bucharest, Dacia Blvd.
It is here that politician Ionel I. C. Brătianu spent his last years.



Statue of Ion I.C. Brătianu, Bucharest.

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