

**ONE CENTURY SINCE
THE GREAT CONFRONTATIONS
OF THE SUMMER OF 1917 ON THE ROMANIAN FRONT**

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Abstract

After the campaign of 1916 that ended with a great military defeat, the Romanian Army was subjected to a vast reorganization, restructuring, instruction, and endowment program under very difficult conditions during the winter of 1917. The recovery was performed with the support of the French Military Mission that arrived in Romania at the beginning of October 1916 and was led by General Henri Mathias Berthelot. The new Romanian Army was capable to carry out offensive actions, as was the one in Mărăști, and to reject the repeated attempts of the Armed Forces of the Central Powers at Mărășești and Oituz, meant to exclude Romania from the war. These victories were obtained under circumstances in which the Russian Military Forces had diminished their combative capacity as a consequence of the Revolution of February 1917. The victories of the Romanian Army at Mărăști, Mărășești, and Oituz were among the most important ones of the Entente during 1917.

Keywords. World War I, Romania, Romanian Army, French Military Mission, Alexandru Averescu, Constantin Prezan, Henri Mathias Berthelot.

The Romanian State entered the First World War on 15/28 August 1916, after two years of neutrality marked by disputes within the political class and the public around the question regarding which side to join—the Entente or the Central Powers.

Eventually, Romania decided to join the Entente and signed the Political Convention and the Military Convention on 4/17 August 1916. The goal of taking up action was to reunite Transylvania, Banat, and Bucovina with the Kingdom of Romania, as provinces inhabited mostly by Romanians and which were included in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In fact, Romania declared war only to the dual monarchy, but because of its alliances, it entered a state of belligerence with all the other states that represented the Central Powers (i.e. the German Empire, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire).

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The failure of the 1916 campaign

The military campaign for the liberation of Transylvania began under promising auspices, but ended in a massive military defeat that nobody had anticipated at its start, the causes of which are still a subject of intense debate in historiography.¹ Some emphasized the objective factors that led to such a disaster—the ratio of forces in favor of the enemy, after a two years' war experience; the failure of the Allies to fulfill their assumed obligations, such as the passivity of the Thessaloniki Army led by General Maurice Sarrail; the lack of consistency of the Russian ally's support, who considered that Oltenia, Muntenia, and Dobrogea needed to be evacuated and then to maintain the front along the alignment of the Oriental Carpathians, continuing it on the Lower Siret River; the geopolitical and geostrategic position of the Romanian state, which led to setting up a very extended front of about 1,400 km by mid-August 1916, etc.

The supporters of this trend kept silent or minimized their own errors, like the serious dysfunctions that occurred during the period of neutrality in regard to the preparation of the country and the army for war, or mistakes made by higher and lower commandments, by some commanders in conducting the operations and battles during the autumn of 1916, or the moral decline of a part of the Romanian political class during the same period of time, etc.

A second tendency was to blur off the objective factors quoted above and to emphasize almost exclusively our own downfalls, which were, however, not few during the “autumn of our torments,” as this period was called. This is a hyper-critical perspective, having the merit of eliminating the triumphalism and heroic vision of events, phenomena that have long prevailed in our national historiography, especially in the years of national communism.

We do not intend to examine these two opinions in detail, but we consider that the truth is somewhere in the middle, as it is usually the case. The objective factors had a major and decisive contribution in the outcome of the 1916 campaign. We can say that, from the start, Romania was bound to such an outcome. But the way the Romanian political class as well as a part of the commanding body behaved, especially the higher one, the attitude of certain segments of the Romanian society regarding the war we entered were lamentable, amplifying frustrations and discontents. The campaign highlighted the fact that Romania and

¹ For this debate, the most important works are: Constantin Kirițescu, *Istoria războiului pentru întregirea României* (București: 1922–1923) [subsequent editions of *Istoria războiului pentru întregirea României*, 2nd revised and expanded edition: 3 vols. (București: 1925–1927); 3rd edition, 2 vols. (București: 1989)]; Colonel Alexandru Ioanițiu, *Războiul României (1916–1918)*, vol. 1 (București: n.d.); General G. A. Dabija, *Armata română în Războiul Mondial (1916–1918)*, with a preface by Army Corps General Alexandru Averescu, 4 vols. (București: 1934–1936); Victor Atanasiu, Anastasie Iordache, Mircea Iosa, Ion M. Oprea, and Paul Opreșcu, *România în Primul Război Mondial* (București: 1979); *România în anii Primului Război Mondial*, 2 vols. (București: 1987); Glenn E. Torrey, *România în Primul Război Mondial*, translated by Dan Criste (București: 2014).

its army were not prepared for a war of the industrial age, the dimensions of which had exceeded everything that had been known in military history until then. Facing the pitiless exams thereof, we found ourselves in a so-called “non-pass situation,” as it is called in didactic language.

The configuration of the military actions during the autumn of 1916 in the Carpathians and the Romanian Plain differed from the confrontations on the other theaters of military actions. If in France, Italy, and the Balkans, the approach was via a position-war or trench-war, military actions in Romania were characterized by “moving-on,” which made the American General Michael B. Barrett consider that campaign to be “a prelude to Blitzkrieg.”² That was an occasion to highlight the superiority of the German command that managed to fully meet its goals.³

By the end of 1916, the front stabilized on the Oriental Carpathians, the Lower Siret, and the navigable Danube. Oltenia, Muntenia, and Dobrogea were occupied by the Central Powers. The Royal Family, the Government, the Parliament, and the Army retreated in the area between the Oriental Carpathians and the Prut River. The winter 1916–1917 was exceptionally harsh because of overpopulation, shortages of all kinds, epidemic of exanthematic typhus, etc.

Army reorganization

In spite of this very difficult situation, the army underwent an extensive reorganization, restructuring, training, and endowment program. The army restoration was carried out with the support of the French Military Mission that arrived in Romania in early October 1916 and was led by General Henri Mathias Berthelot.⁴

The concept underlying this process emerged during December 1916 and January 1917. According to the instructions of February 1917, the document synthesized the searches up to then, and the reorganization had to take into account the negative experience of the 1916 campaign.⁵ Therefore, it was decided to adapt the dimension of the army staff according to the economic, demographic, and financial possibilities of Romania at that time; there resulted 15 infantry divisions

² Michael B. Barrett, *Preludiu la Blitzkrieg. Campania armatei austro-germane în România—1916*, translated by Mona Iosif (București: 2016). On the issues of the “Blitzkrieg,” successfully applied by Nazi Germany over the years 1939–1941, see Karl-Hans Friesser, *Mitul Blitzkrieg-ului* (București: 2010).

³ Erich von Falkenhayn, *Campania Armatei a 9-a împotriva românilor și rușilor 1916–1917* (București: 1937).

⁴ George Cîpăianu and Vasile Vesa, eds., *La présence française en Roumanie pendant la Grande Guerre 1914–1918* (Cluj-Napoca, 1997); Jean-Noël Grandhomme, *Le Général Berthelot et l'action de la France en Roumanie et en Russie Méridionale (1916–1918)* (Paris: 1999), 219–550; Gheorghe Nicolescu, “Contribuții franceze la reforma structurilor organizatorice ale armatei române în primul război mondial,” in *Reforma militară și societatea în România de la Carol I la a doua conflagrație mondială*, edited by Petre Otu, *Occasional Papers* 6, no. 8 (2007): 129–44.

⁵ Army Corps General Dumitru Cioflină, ed., *Marele Cartier General al Armatei Române. Documente 1916–1920* (București: 1996), 163–69.

and two cavalry divisions. The division was considered to be “the true combat unit,” and to this purpose there were provided the necessary means for autonomous living and fighting.

A special situation concerned the 2nd Army, commanded by General Alexandru Averescu, the only big unit left on the front, in direct contact with the enemy. At the end of December 1916, the Great General Headquarters decided that the 2nd Army would undergo reorganization on the front. To this purpose, its structure of forces and the reorganization manner of its major organic units were established. The 2nd Army consisted of two army bodies—Corps 2 and Corps 4, with three divisions each.⁶

General Alexandru Averescu ordered that the reorganization be made division-wise, behind the front. Each large unit of the two bodies of troops was removed from combat disposition for a month and placed into a location intended for that purpose. During that period of time, the big units carried out complex activities such as: restoring the numbers of troops and materials, working on the homogeneity of subunits and units, firing exercises with the weapons supplied, organizing and performing applications and exercises, etc.

Army Corps 2 performed reorganization in two major stages: One from the beginning of January to mid-April and the other from the second decade of April to the end of June 1917, during which the army benefited from an increased number of people.

A long-debated issue was the place where to carry out this reorganization, with the Russian Commands requesting the transfer of the Romanian army out of the national territory, respectively to Russia. General Vladimir Sakharov even proposed the Harkov-Don region. In support of their proposal, tenaciously sustained, the Russians brought as arguments the disorganization of the Romanian economy, the remaining territory being unable to provide the logistics for such a large number of soldiers, as they alone were having three armies over there (the 9th, 4th, and the 6th), the need for an effective defense of the Carpathian front, the necessity to end the overloading transportation in that region, ensuring good conditions of recovery for the Romanian army, etc. Their unmistakable goal, however, was to incorporate the Romanian army and Romania, which was to become simply a Russian business. This implied the elimination or significant reduction of the influence of the French Military Mission, viewed with hostility by Stavka from the start.⁷

In fact, Russian officials were considering a general evacuation from Moldavia, including state authorities (Royal Court, Government, Parliament, etc.).⁸

⁶ Petre Otu, *Mareșalul Alexandru Averescu. Militarul, omul politic, legenda* (București: 2005), 161–66.

⁷ Glenn E. Torrey, “Russia, Romania and France: The Reorganization of the Romanian Front, 1916–1917,” in *Romania and World War I. A Collection of Studies* (Iași; Oxford; Portland: 1999), 257.

⁸ A. A. Mossolov, *Misiunea mea în România (Memorii)*, edited and prefaced by Marin C. Stănescu (București: 1999), 56–90.

Plans had been developed, recognition actions had been made, transportation programs had been drawn up, even with lists of persons to be included, etc.

Meanwhile, the special situation in Moldavia and the insistent pressure by the Russian side generated reactions from the French Military Mission and the Romanian government. General Berthelot, who was subjected to huge pressures to accept the transfer of the Romanian troops and of his own mission beyond the Prut River, sent a long telegram to Paris at the end of December 1916, drawing the attention of French authorities to the Russian plans. Therefore, France became more careful, unwilling to accept the dissolution of its own mission.⁹

The resistance of King Ferdinand, the actions of the government headed by Brătianu, the help of the French Military Mission, by its chief personally, have contributed to determining the Russian ally to abandon its plans for transferring the Romanian army beyond the Dniester River.

Another key issue for the army reorganization process was that of the Command. Given the very large number of Russian troops in Moldavia, the authorities from Petrograd and Mogilev insisted that the High Command on the Moldavian front should be held exclusively by them, or at best, the Romanian ally was to play a secondary role. On the other hand, the Russians constantly blamed the Romanian commanders for the poor condition of railway transportation, hiding their lack of desire to fight behind this factual situation.

The issue was of vital importance for Romania, going beyond the military sphere. According to the constitution, the king was the supreme commander of the army, and he could not give up this prerogative to a Russian general to whom he would have become subordinated. In 1877, when Romania was not independent yet, the reigning Prince Carol refused such a formula, which would have put him in the position of a Russian general's subordinate. Based on the negotiations held, a compromise solution was reached, Prince Carol being invested Commander of the Western Army, helped by two General Staffs, one Russian and one Romanian. It was, therefore, difficult to accept a situation that was inferior to that of the War of Independence.

On the other hand, in wartime, according to the law concerning the state of siege, the Great HQ had the right to dispose in matters of administration over the ministers, who had the obligation to carry out the taken decisions. Therefore, the abolition of this body and its replacement with a foreign structure, Russian in this case, placed the Romanian authorities in the subordination thereof. The consequence was the end of national sovereignty on its own territory. On the contrary, maintaining the individuality of the Great General Headquarters had the merit to determine the Russian ally to comply with Romanian legislation.

⁹ Torrey, "Russia, Romania and France," 262–63.

Finally, Tsar Nicholas II agreed that King Ferdinand would command the Romanian and Russian troops from Moldavia. The Romanian Front was established, having a mixed command structure headed by King Ferdinand, who was assisted by the Head of the Great General Headquarters, General Constantin Prezan for the Romanian troops, and by a Russian General Staff, headed at first by General Vladimir Vladimirovich Sakharov and later by General Dmitry Grigorievich Shcherbachev for the Russian troops. It was a compromise solution that respected both the royal family's blazon and the sovereignty of the Romanian state. Such a structure also proved to be viable due to the good cooperation established between the Generals Prezan and Shcherbachev.

The reorganization of the military structures was accompanied by a considerable improvement in endowment. This was possible as a result of the efforts made by the Romanian government, the French Military Mission, and the missions sent abroad, among which the one headed by Vasile Rudeanu is worth mentioning.¹⁰ However, hardships were not few, the route through Russia being very long and other access ways being blocked. Russian railways, with their wider track gauge, were not in a very good condition, and beside that, priority was given to their own needs while those of Romanians were treated with lack of solicitude by the Russian authorities. In addition, in February 1917, the Russian revolution started, which increased the difficulties in providing supplies. Nevertheless, the quantities of military material coming from the West were incomparably superior, which allowed the great Romanian units to be much better equipped and trained.

Most of the material was received from France, of which there were: 150,000 Lebel guns, 1,700 St. Etienne machine guns, 2,628 sub-machine guns, 84 75 mm model 1894 cannons, 72 120 mm long cannons, 14 155 mm howitzers, 130 trench mortars, 1,300,000 grenades, etc. Much less quantities of military supplies came from England: 197 machine guns, 108 sub-machine guns, 127 howitzers, etc.¹¹

Instruction received a particular attention, acquiring a pronounced practical character, soldiers and officers learning how to handle the new weapons and becoming acquainted with the demands of modern combat. The instruction of the troops was usually done within the division, in organized schools and training centers. These were structured according to armament categories, i.e. machine guns, grenadiers, telephonists and fortification signalers, etc. Since spring, field applications were taking place with or without combat firing, including artillery weaponry.

With spring setting in and after weeks of intensive training, to everybody's surprise the army began to show a different look. Participants in the 10th of May Parade on the Șorogariilor Hill near Iași witnessed the marching-on of well-equipped and well-trained units. "It was the first time," I. G. Duca wrote, "after the

¹⁰ General Vasile Rudeanu, *Memorii din timpuri de pace și de război 1884–1929*, edited and introductory study by Dumitru Preda and Vasile Alexandrescu (București: 2004).

¹¹ Colonel Alexandru Ioanițiu, *Războiul României (1916–1918)*, vol. 2 (București: n.d.), 283.

retreat and after that terrible winter of misery and epidemics, when we realized that the army had resurrected and had become better good-looking and stately than ever before. I confess that it was a heartening, invigorating surprise for all of us. . . . Accustomed for months to hear about what sufferings this army had endured, and although we knew what solid work of reorganization it had gone through, our minds could not conceive what we were about to see now. This is why our enthusiasm on the Șorogari Plateau was indescribable.”¹²

Another participant, Gheorghe Gh. Mârzescu, recalled similar impressions: “The parade was impressive,” he remarked, “and that moment of satisfaction moved us to tears, when we saw the Șorogari Plain filled with the Romanian infantry, well-equipped and looking good. Over 3,000 soldiers, commanders, and officers, both Romanian and French, horses carrying machine guns, in good condition and well-kept, under the command of general Petala.”¹³ The army, reorganized and equipped according to the standards of war, had become an instrument of combat, but the confirmation of its qualities in the confrontations with the enemy had still to wait, for meanwhile decisive events were taking place in Russia, and they were bearing on the Romanian Front, as well.

After several months of intense efforts, in July 1917, the reorganized Romanian army counted 700,000 people, of whom 460,000 made up the operations army. As compared to the situation in August 1916, the numbers of the mobilized persons and of those in the operations army were obviously smaller, but we should also note that the resources had also diminished after Muntenia, Oltenia, and Dobrogea entered under enemy occupation.

In organizational terms, the Army had the following structure: Two military commandments; five army corps commandments; 15 infantry divisions; two cavalry divisions; two mounted troops or cavalymen brigades (called “călărași” according to the 19th century tradition, i.e. territorial cavalry—our note); two brigades of Red Uniform pedestrians/Red Tunics afoot (in the 19th century tradition, “roșiori” were the regular cavalry, the elite of the Romanian Army—our note); one frontier guard brigade; one royal escort regiment; 12 flying squadrons; five aerostation companies.

The combat force consisted of 207 battalions, 60 marching (infantry) battalions, 110 squadrons, 243 batteries of which: 114 field cannon batteries, 30 field howitzer batteries, 2 heavy howitzers, 47 mountain cannon batteries, 15 trench mortar batteries (with 8 pieces each), 15 53 mm-caliber cannon batteries (with 8 pieces each), 6 mounted troops batteries, to which the elements of aviation were added.

¹² I. G. Duca, *Memorii*, vol. 3, *Războiul, Partea I (1916–1917)*, edited by Stelian Neagoe (București: 1994), 229–30.

¹³ Gheorghe Gh. Mârzescu, *Fapte și impresii zilnice (1917–1918)*, edited by Ioan Lăcustă (București: 2004), 41.

Strategic planning for the year of 1917

At the Allied meeting in Chantilly (2–3/15–16 November 1916), there was established the General Operations Project of the Entente for 1917, including also an offensive on the Romanian Front.

The initial form of the plan for the future offensive was established in March 1917 by the two Allied Commands, Romanian and Russian, but the provisions could not be applied because of the Russian Revolution (February/March 1917). The provisional government, headed by Prince Lvov, who took over the power in Russia after the Tsar's abdication, proved unable to set forth the call for action, in spite of repeated promises. During the period 22 April/5 May–29 April/12 May, Prime Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu accompanied by General Constantin Prezan, Head of the Great General Headquarters, paid a visit to Petrograd, one of the topics for debate being the fate of the envisaged offensive.

Also at the beginning of May 1917, General Prezan met, at Mogilev, with General Mikhail V. Alekseyev, Chief of the Russian General Headquarters, and General D. G. Shcerbachev, Commander of the Russian troops in Moldavia, and they substantially changed the plan adopted in March. It was decided to carry out a double enveloping maneuver and strike in the Brăila sector, at the same time with an offensive action of the Russian troops in Bucovina.

The last stage of the strategic planning activity was carried out in early June, in Iași, in the context of a meeting attended by King Ferdinand, Prime Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu, Generals Constantin Prezan, Alexandru Averescu, Constantin Christescu, D. G. Shcerbachev, Nikolai Golovin, and H. M. Berthelot. During the meeting, the Generals Averescu and Prezan's conceptions were outstandingly different, the first proposing to give the most important role to the 2nd Army that was under his command. This Army was supposed to perform the main strike at the junction of the two enemy army groups deployed from Bucovina to Oituz and in the Vrancea Mountains and on the Siret Plain, respectively, so that they could be defeated later on, in parts.

Those present did not agree with this solution and favored a more pragmatic version. The main strike was to be given by the Romanian Army, commissioned by General Constantin Christescu, in the Nămolosa sector, the aim being the destruction, together with the 4th Russian Army, of the main enemy group, the 9th German Army. In order to attract the enemy's forces and to support the right flank of the group on the direction of the main strike, the 2nd Army was to develop the offensive in the Mărăști sector. Its action had to precede that of the main group.

In its turn, the Central Powers Command did not elaborate the plans of operations on the Romanian Front that spring, because of insufficient forces available, especially due to the Russian Revolution. The outbreak thereof created the premises for a negotiated peace. That was why Field Marshal August von Mackensen was

ordered not to undertake any large-scale operations against the Romanian and Russian armies.¹⁴

The intensification of the military activity by the Romanians and the Russians called for planning operations to counteract their offensive. The German and Austro-Hungarian commanders designed a doubly enveloping offensive action. The main strike was still to take place in the Nămolosa sector, which demonstrated a poor informative capacity, doubled by another one in the Oituz Valley. The goal was to catch the Romanian-Russian forces in Southern Moldavia like between the two arms of pliers.

This maneuver was correlated with a wider one, meant to destroy the entire Romanian Front and implicitly the Eastern one. An army of the Central Powers was to attack through Galicia and Bucovina, descending along the Dniester, Prut, or Siret Rivers, depending on the strength of the resistance encountered. These strategic projections did not materialize, so it is difficult to predict the possible outcome of such confrontations.

The Battles of Mărăști, Mărășești, and Oituz

The military events on the Eastern Front presented a distinctive dynamics. After the reign of Tsar Nicholas II, there was a duality of power between left siders and right siders in Russia. The first considered that the Revolution was a way of ending the war, while the second saw the war as a way to end the Revolution.¹⁵

At mid-year, the latter group managed to impose the solution of a big offensive against the Central Powers, with the Western Allies exerting great pressure to this purpose. It was hoped to mobilize the energies of the crowds and to diminish the major tensions within society in case of a victory. To this end, war minister Alexandr Kerenski visited the front for several days, trying to spirit up the masses of soldiers with enthusiastic speeches. Apparently, discipline and cohesion seemed to reanimate the Russian army, but it was just a shallow impression. On the same occasion, Kerenski replaced many commanders of large units, which was a big mistake that contributed to the decrease in combat capacity.

At the beginning of July 1917, Russia's last offensive against the Central Powers, also called the "Kerenski Offensive," took place. During the first two or three days, a great success was achieved, but gradually many soldiers refused to continue fighting, standing up against their own officers. In their turn, the Central Powers triggered a powerful counter-offensive, which created the danger of re-establishing the Romanian Front.

It was under these circumstances that the confrontations in Southern Moldavia unfolded. As planned, the Romanian 2nd Army under the command of General

¹⁴ Torrey, *România în Primul Război Mondial*, 214.

¹⁵ Orlando Figes, *Rusia revoluționară (1891–1991)*, translated by Alina Popescu, preface by Ioan Scurtu (București: 2016), 121.

Alexandru Averescu launched the Battle of Mărăști.¹⁶ It began on 9/22 July 1917 with a forceful artillery approach and continued the next day, an action that caused significant destruction to the enemy deployment and facilitated the offensive of the Romanian troops. At dawn on 11/23 July 1917, the large units of the 2nd Army started their attack against the German 218th Infantry Division within the Group led by General Eugen Ruiz. After fierce confrontations, at 10 a.m. the village of Mărăști, set up by the enemy as a strong defensive center, was taken over by the Romanian soldiers. By the end of the day, the 2nd Army had broken the front of the enemy over a 10 km-stretch, conquering its first defense position.

The following day, 12/24 July 1917, the offensive of the great Romanian and Russian units continued vigorously, the enemy being overcome all the time and forced to retreat hastily. Among other things, the localities Câmpuri, Vizantea Mănăstirească, Roșculești, Răcoasa, etc. were liberated. Yet, while in full victorious offensive, the Romanian Great General Headquarters sent the Operational Order no. 34 to the 2nd Army, commanding the termination of the action.

Such a decision was motivated by the particularly critical situation in Galicia as a result of the offensive launched by the Austro-Hungarian troops on 6/19 July 1917. Under powerful pressures, the great units of the Russian 8th Army withdrew and the Austro-Hungarian forces occupied the town of Tarnopol on 12/25 July 1917.

Although General L. G. Kornilov managed to temporarily stop the offensive of the Austro-Hungarian Army, for the permanent stabilization of the situation on the Romanian Front new forces were needed. Therefore, the entire operation plan of the Romanian and Russian troops on the Romanian Front was radically changed. The offensive at Mărăști was stopped and the action planned for the Nămolosa area was canceled. With the large Russian units made available, a maneuvering group was formed and sent to Galicia for mending up the situation.

General Averescu was very much displeased with the order to stop the offensive. In his opinion, the danger from the north would have required, on the contrary, to continue his army's action so as to make the most of the success. Considering that he could not stop the attack, because the alignment of the troops was not favorable for the defense, Averescu, in spite of the orders of the Great General Headquarters, continued the attack on 13–14/26–27 July 1917. His deployment was greatly successful, so the enemy had to withdraw along the entire frontline of the army. A proof of the enemy's confusion was the dissolution of the Ruiz Group on 13/26 July 1917, while its two major units, the German 218th Division and the 1st Austro-Hungarian Cavalry Division were to be led directly by the Gerock Group.

¹⁶ For the offensive of Mărăști see Major Radu Bâldescu, *Ofensiva de la Nămolosa. Bătălia de la Mărăști* (Sibiu: 1928); Nicolae Sc. Stoenescu, *Bătălia de la Mărăști* (București: 1930); Marshal Alexandru Averescu, *Notițe zilnice din război*, vol. 2., edited and introductory study by Eftimie Ardeleanu and Adrian Pandea (București: 1992), 142–98; Vasile Alexandrescu and Costică Prodan, *Ofensiva de vară* (București: 1999), etc.

The obtained victory was brilliant, the enemy front line was destroyed over 30 km width and 20 km depth. A territory of 500 square kilometers containing 30 localities was liberated. Own losses amounted to 110 officers and 4,782 soldiers (dead, wounded, and missing) and the ones caused to the enemy consisted of 2,793 prisoners and an impressive war material.

The offensive of Mărăști and the defeat of the Russian troops in Eastern Galicia and Bucovina forced the two combatants to change their campaign plans. First, the enemy was compelled to give up the offensive in the Nămolosa sector and to reorient its efforts towards the Focșani-Adjud sector. It also had to go into action without being able to concentrate all its forces and means as established in its campaign plan.

On the other hand, the Romanian-Russian Command cancelled the offensive at Nămolosa and proceeded to organize a group of forces consisting of five army bodies, removed from the bodies of the Russian 9th and 4th Armies. This group was to be moved to Bucovina and Eastern Galicia to solve the serious situation created by the non-combat of the Russian troops. Their place was to be taken by the great units of the Romanian 1st Army, which was undergoing a process of focusing on going into action when deployed between Clipicești and Liești (both included). In its turn, the Russian 6th Army extended its defensive strip to the right flank up to Liești, on the bank of the Siret River, where it connected with the Romanian 1st Army. These replacements were supposed to take place between 23–28 July/5–10 August 1917.

But on 24 July/6 August 1917, in order to take advantage of the severe defeat of the Russian troops in Galicia and Bucovina, the enemy started the offensive. This is how the battle north of Focșani started, known in historiography as “the Battle of Mărășești,” the greatest confrontation on the Romanian Front in the summer of 1917 and one of the Entente’s most widespread ones that same year.¹⁷ On the eve of the battle, the Romanian 1st Army consisted of six divisions, of which one was a cavalry division, three brigades, the heavy artillery group, the 2nd Aeronautical Group, etc. The combat forces included 78 battalions, 58 squadrons, 114 batteries, eight pioneer battalions, and 52 planes, with a total of 170,000 people. The Russian 4th Army consisted of a total of 84 battalions, 32 squadrons, and 79 batteries.

The German 9th Army comprised 174 battalions, 16 squadrons, 150 batteries, 3 squadrons, 39 firefighter companies, a cycling company, etc. As compared to the Russian 4th Army, the enemy had a ratio of 1.2/1 in infantry, 1.3/1 in cavalry, and 2.7/1 in artillery batteries. Although it occupied a 75-kilometer front between South Nămolosa and Valea Sării, the German 9th Army started the offensive on a

¹⁷ General Winogradsky, *La Guerre sur le front oriental. En Russie. En Roumanie*, exposition and commentary by General Malleterre (Paris: 1926), 365–78; Col. I. Cupșa, *Mărășești 1917* (București: 1957); General N. Ionescu, *Generalul Eremia Grigorescu* (București: 1967); Dumitru Preda and Nicolae Ciobanu, *Bătălia de la Mărășești* (București: 2017).

35-kilometer land strip between Biliești and South Șerbești, the breaking sector having a 12-kilometer frontal development. There it concentrated 45 battalions and 516 artillery guns, as compared to 12 battalions and 72 cannons the Russian 34th Infantry Division had when sustaining the shock of the blow.

The battle had three important stages in its development. In the first stage, between 24–30 July/6–12 August 1917, the Romanian 1st Army and the Russian 4th Army organized daring defenses; the great Romanian units gradually deployed over the front strips, from which the great Russian units had retreated, in order to compensate for the missing resistance in some of them. This forced the enemy to move its effort towards the northwest. At that moment, a crisis broke at Romanian-Russian command level, manifested via the misunderstandings between Generals Constantin Christescu and Aleksandr I. Ragoza, commanders of the Romanian 1st Army and the Russian 4th Army, respectively. In order to restore the good cooperation on the battlefield, indispensable for obtaining the victory, General Constantin Christescu was replaced with General Eremia Grigorescu.

The second stage took place between 31 July/13 August–6/19 August 1917 and was characterized by the increased intensity of the enemy's offensive, the thorough organization of the Romanian troops' resistance, completely deployed into defense positions, and the failure of the enemy's offensive.

Finally, the third stage, 7/20 August–21 August/3 September 1917, was characterized by a considerable diminution in the intensity of the confrontation, the enemy making a final offensive effort to improve its positions in the Varnița-Muncelu area.

The climax of the Battle of Mărășești was reached on 6/19 August 1917, when the enemy started the general attack against the Romanian-Russian positions. Field Marshal Mackensen set up an attack group composed of five infantry divisions under the command of General von Morgen. The main strike was set for the frontline segment between Panciu and Mărășești, defended by the Romanian divisions.

The most important action took place within the strip of the 13th Infantry Division, commanded by General Ion Popescu. Attacked by three large enemy units, the division surrendered the right flank where the junction with the 10th Infantry Division was to be made. His position was overwhelmed over a section of 150 meters in the south corner of the Răzoare Forest, which threatened the entire defense line of the 13th, 9th, and 14th Infantry Divisions and the town of Mărășești.

General Ion Popescu ordered several subunits to deploy behind the Mărășești-Panciu railway, in order to gain the necessary time to bring in reserves from behind. The machine-gun company led by captain Grigore Ignat was moved on to level-mark 100, the dominant height of the area ensuring the domination over the last terrace towards the Siret River, where it resisted to the last man, delaying the advance of the enemy. At the same time, the other large Romanian units resisted all attacks, as well.

At this moment of the battle, in order to eliminate the penetrating enemy, General Ion Popescu organized a convergent counterattack conducted with the reserve battalions, commanded by captains Nicolae Miclescu and Mircea Tomescu, joined by the 10th Infantry Division. Hit from the front and sideways, the attacker was forced to withdraw with great losses. Unfortunately, the commander of the 1st Army did not have fresh forces to increase his success.

The victory achieved that day by the Romanian 1st Army was extremely important, as the enemy was forced to give up its offensive intentions. Equipped with modern weaponry, thoroughly trained, animated by a strong desire for retaliation, the Romanian troops showed a remarkable fighting ability, which surprised the opponent. As for the great Russian units, they fought unevenly, revealing in certain moments of the confrontation the obvious tendency to leave their positions or to give up the continuation of actions.

The Battle of Mărășești was the most extensive confrontation in the summer of 1917 on the Romanian Front, comparable to the big battles on the other combat fronts in points of number of committed belligerents, set goals, obtained outcomes, generated strategic implications, losses suffered by the two parties, etc. Initially engaged by the German 9th Army and the Russian 4th Army, it had turned gradually into a battle to which the contribution of the Romanians was essential. In fact, on 31 July/13 August 1917, the leadership in battle was reverted to the Romanians, namely to General Eremia Grigorescu and Colonel Nicolae Samsonovici as chief of staff.

The Battle of Mărășești, the continuation in time and space of that of Mărăști, lasted 29 days, of which 16 were battle days (10 in offensive and 6 in counterattacks) and 13 days were of relative respite, necessary for restructuring combat disposition or supplying the troops.

The technical data confirm the extraordinarily vast proportions of the confrontation. The 1st Army has lost 27,410 people, i.e. 16% of its numbers at the beginning of the battle (170,000 soldiers). Out of these, 5,125 were killed (125 officers, 5,000 troops), 9,818 missing (118 officers, 9,700 troops) and 12,467 injured (367 officers, 12,100 troops). The Russian 4th Army has also registered serious losses: 25,650 soldiers, of which 7,083 were killed (83 officers and 7,000 troops), 10,400 were wounded (400 officers and 10,000 troops) and 8,167 missing (167 officers and 8,000 troops). The German 9th Army, the main enemy force group, registered 60–65,000 people out of the battle (dead, injured, and missing).

Simultaneously with the action south of the Carpathians, the enemy started the offensive on the Oituz River Valley as well, so as to break through the Romanian-Russian troops defense over there and for joining the troops under Mackensen's command, advancing on the Siret River Valley.

This mission was entrusted to the Group led by General Friedrich von Gerock, who was located on the right flank of the Austro-Hungarian Army,

relocated to the Eastern Carpathians. These troops were positioned between the Dofteana Valley and Irești, and were divided into two groups. Between the Dofteana Valley and Măgura Cașin there was the 8th Army Corps, consisting of the 70th Honved Division, the German 117th Infantry Division, and the Austro-Hungarian 71st Infantry Division. The Haber Group was deployed from Măgura Cașin up to Irești, consisting of several units and subunits, namely the Austro-Hungarian 8th Mountain Brigade, the Austro-Hungarian 1st Cavalry Division, the 37th Honved Division, etc.

The Gerock Group decided to have the 8th Army Corps give the main strike in the direction of Fereastră-Grozești-Onești and head a second one, together with the 70th Honved Division towards Târgu Ocna. Thus, the right flank of the Romanian 2nd Army and the left flank of the Russian 9th Army would have been reverted. On the main direction of the attack, the enemy concentrated 34 battalions with 136 artillery guns, of which 36 heavy ones.

The deployment of the 2nd Army over 60 km width was the following: The 4th Army Corps, commanded by General Gheorghe Văleanu and having three divisions (the 7th, 6th, and 8th) within its first echelon, was placed between the Dofteana Valley and the height Sboina Neagră; continuing it, up to Irești, there was the 2nd Army Corps, led by General Arthur Văitoianu, also with three large units (the 12th, 1st, and 3rd Infantry Divisions), with a combat disposition as per one echelon, as well. The 2nd Army had established a small reserve of only four battalions, located behind the 2nd Army Corps.

On the morning of 26 July/8 August 1917, after several hours of firing preparations, the 8th Army Corps started the offensive, and the shock of the attack was assumed by the Romanian 7th and 6th Divisions. The shock of the blow was so powerful that the Romanian troops on the inner flanks of the two big units had to withdraw.

The confrontations were frightful, the hardest days of the Battle of Oituz were between 29–31 July/11–13 August 1917, when the enemy made desperate efforts to overcome the defense of the Romanian and Russian troops. The tenacious resistance of the defenders correlated with the effective measures taken by the Great General Headquarters and the 2nd Army to strengthen up the deployment contributed to overcoming this crisis. Until 5/18 August 1917, the military activity was reduced on the front of Oituz, being limited to patrolling and artillery duels.

On 6/19 August 1917, the Gerock Group resumed the offensive, with the German 117th Infantry Division attacking the center of the Romanian troop disposition, defended by the 1st Cavalry Division. At the same time, the 7th Infantry Division was attacked by the Austro-Hungarian 70th Infantry Division and the 7th Cavalry Division, and the 6th Infantry Division by the Austro-Hungarian 71st Infantry Division. The enemy managed to reconquer the Coșna Hill, but was not successful on other front segments. The next two days, the most terrible confrontations took place around the Coșna Hill, which the Romanian troops did not manage to reconquer.

After 9/22 August 1917, the intensity of the fights dropped considerably, the enemy was exhausted due to its efforts and had to resort to a defensive conduct. One last offensive outburst took place on 16/29 August 1917, along with the Muncelu episode on the Mărășești front. The German 117th Infantry Division attacked the 6th Infantry Division in order to conquer the 383 meter-level mark. Yet this last attempt could no longer change the outcome of the Battle of Oituz, which ended with a new victory for the Romanian Army. The surrounding maneuver imagined by the Central Powers Command, intended to catch the Romanian and Russian main forces like in pliers in the Curvature Carpathians and the “gate” of Focșani, just failed.

The losses of the 2nd Army in the Battle of Oituz were significant, amounting to 12,350 soldiers, of which 1,800 killed, 4,850 wounded, and 1,570 missing. Oituz was the last episode of the confrontations on the Romanian Front during the summer of 1917. They saved the existence of the Romanian state and contributed to the revival of the moral of all citizens.

Politico-strategic consequences

This exceptional result was possible due to the fact that the Romanian Army acquired a new image in the first part of 1917 and became a more efficient fighting body. The rebirth of the Romanian Army was almost a miracle given the exceptionally difficult circumstances under which the reorganization process was initiated and carried out. Above all the hardships mentioned (demoralization due to repeated failures, human and material losses, occupation of territories, exanthematic typhus epidemic, deplorable conditions of transportation, moral attitudes compromising certain politicians or commanders, etc.), there was yet another serious event that decisively influenced the fate of the entire Eastern Front from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea—the Russian Revolution.

The removal of the Romanov dynasty was like a high scale earthquake, felt all over the globe and especially on the Eastern Front. The new authorities in Petrograd maintained the country in the Entente’s coalition, but the domestic situation was gradually degrading, which had a direct influence on the Russian army, causing it to lose its fighting capacity.

With great efforts, the provisional government, stimulated by War Minister A. F. Kerenski, launched the offensive in Galicia in early July 1917, which after a promising start got stuck when whole units refused to fight.

Simultaneously with these events, from the northern to the southern front wing, things were totally different. The Mărăști offensive and the fierce resistance of the Romanian troops at Mărășești and Oituz, unevenly helped by the Russian ones, stopped the offensive of the Central Powers’ army led by the famous Field Marshal Mackensen. They obtained a modest tactical success, but suffered a bitter

strategic failure, and they could not reach their set goals (defeating the Russian and Romanian armies, eliminating Romania from the war, moving forward and reaching the south of Russia).

Although they tried to diminish the extent of their failure, the German and Austro-Hungarian commanders, the press and the historiography explicitly or implicitly acknowledged the bravery of the Romanians, their outstanding fighting capacity, and the defeat suffered at the gates of Moldavia.

In his work *Meiner Truppen Heldenkämpfe* [The heroic fights of my troops], General Curt von Morgen, commander of the German 1st Reserve Corps, wrote:

*The resistance of the enemy, especially of the Romanians, was unusually daring and manifested along the 61 counterattacks on the front of the 1st Reserve Corps during those 14 days. They led to bayonet attacks and caused us considerable losses. The fights of August 1917 brought us a local success but not a decisive one; they proved that the Romanians had become an opponent worthy of respect. After a six-month preparation behind the front, under French leadership, they fought better, they were led more skillfully, especially the artillery and the infantry cooperated more closely than at the beginning of the campaign.*¹⁸

The acknowledgements and appreciations of allies and opponents reflect the reality on the battlefield. The heroic behavior—let us not avoid this word—regained the Romanian Army's reputation, revenged its defeats of the 1916 campaign and won everybody's respect.

An overview of the developments in the military theaters of 1917 highlights the fact that the battles of Mărăști, Mărășești, and Oituz were among the most important victories of the Entente, having therefore an obvious strategic significance. Of course, they could no longer be capitalized because of the profound crisis in Russia, which led to the collapse of the entire Eastern Front. But that could not be attributed to Romania, which, through an exceptional mobilization, managed to keep up the front for several months.

The euphoria of the victories—while entirely deserved, but also heavily covered in blood—should not make us feel too enthusiastic. During the First World War, the Romanian Front was, nevertheless, of secondary importance.

Yet for us, the battles at the gates of Moldavia were greatly significant as they allowed the salvation of Romania's statehood. A defeat in those confrontations would have led either to a surrender or to a retreat to Russia, then enflamed by the Revolution. In fact, at the end of 1916 and the beginning of 1917, Petrograd strongly insisted on a general withdrawal of the Romanian authorities (Royal Family, Government, Parliament, etc.) and the army to Southern Russia. It gave up this thought, but not entirely, after the outbreak of the Revolution.

¹⁸ Curt von Morgen, *Meiner Truppen Heldenkämpfe* (Berlin: 1920), 121–26.

On the other hand, the conduct of the Romanian Army in those battles set strong grounds for the national restoration to be claimed in the following year. Firstly, the ideal of unification, which seemed compromised at the end of 1916, underwent a significant revival, the victories feeding the hopes for its achievement. Secondly, another failure like in 1916 in the confrontations in Southern Moldavia would have given the Allies the occasion to question the observance of the signature on the Treaty of 4/17 August 1916. The victories of July and August 1917 were, in other words, a strong argument for Romania during the harsh diplomatic battle of the 1919–1920 Paris Conference for the recognition of the 1918 Union Acts.

We would like to point out also an extremely important fact that has a complex motivation. While in full Russian anarchy on the Moldavian front, the Romanian Army has fully maintained its cohesion, discipline, and fighting ability, which allowed it to cope with the very difficult situation of 1917/1918 when, after the Bolsheviks took over power in Petrograd, the entire Eastern Front collapsed. On this background, groups of maximalists tried to change the political regime in Romania and make it a center of the “Bolshevik World Revolution.” The determined intervention of the Army removed that danger. Moreover, in the years 1918–1919, the Army was able to reject the aggressions from the East and the West, which were threatening with arms the integrity of the barely united Romanian state.

The Battles of Mărăști, Mărășești, and Oituz a century ago now represent a brilliant deed of arms, a constituent part of the great confrontations in the WWI gallery, a reference milestone for our national history.