

## CROSSROADS IN WAR. ROMANIA AND ITALY JOIN THE ENTENTE POWERS

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### Abstract

Italy and Romania, former allies of Austria-Hungary and Germany, refrained from engaging in the First World War. Both countries adopted a position of neutrality, concluding a convention stipulating that neither of them would enter the war without announcing the other partner. Nevertheless, Italy signed the Treaty of London (1915) with the Entente Powers and took up arms without letting the Romanian government know. Similarities in the international conduct of the two countries were followed by the pursuit of specific national interests and by a different status at the negotiations. At the Peace Conference (1919–1920), both countries did well, the difference of position between Romania and Italy notwithstanding.

**Keywords:** war, neutrality, treaty, negotiations, claims.

At the beginning of the First World War, both Romania and Italy were allies of Germany and Austria-Hungary, the Central Powers, because Romania feared Russia and Italy had misgivings about France. However, both countries contemplated the completion of their national unification. That is why, in the end, they had to change alliances.

Similarities in the position of the two countries during the first months of the war led to similar tactics of neutrality, depending on the changing situation on the fronts, because of the unpreparedness of their armies for a modern war.<sup>1</sup> Both countries were under pressure from both belligerents to join one party or the other.

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<sup>1</sup> Concerning Romania, things were much more complicated. “En fait, le dilemme on le sait, n’était pas à choisir entre la Bessarabie offerte par les Centraux et la Transylvanie, promise par l’Entente, ni à se ranger de part ou d’autre en fonction du hasard des opérations militaires, car Ion I. C. Brătianu ne menait pas une politique d’un tel opportunisme, mais il consistait à bien choisir les conditions d’une telle alliance et les garanties, qui à longue échéance devait créer à la Roumanie, après lui avoir assuré la victoire, un cadre politique, militaire, économique dans lequel son union nationale fût consolidée et son développement protégé.” See George Cipăianu, “Dilemmes, options et risques dans les relations internationales de la Roumanie pendant la Première Guerre mondiale,” in *La fin de la Première Guerre mondiale et la nouvelle architecture géopolitique européenne*, eds. George Cipăianu and Vasile Vesa (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2000), 16–17.

Both were eager to enhance their international status in the event of future substantial negotiations with the Triple Entente or the Central Powers. In both Romania and Italy, there were strong pro-interventionist currents in society, asking for an immediate attack on Austria-Hungary. Both countries were trying to choose the best moment for their intervention. Their interests in the Balkans contributed as well to preparing the ground for mutual good relations at the beginning of the war.

As a historian put it, “the analogous positions of Italy and Romania vis-à-vis the Central Powers certainly provided a significant area of common ground, upon which an entente between Rome and Bucharest could be constructed.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarities prepared the ground, but the desire of both Romania and Italy to secure a better bargaining position constituted the main stimulus (especially for Italy) for signing an agreement on a common approach concerning the future negotiations for joining the war on the side of the Entente Powers.<sup>3</sup> The negotiations were initiated and conducted by the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Marquis Antonino di San Giuliano, through his minister to Bucharest, Baron Carlo Fasciotti, with Romania’s Prime Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu.

The agreement was signed on 23 September 1914, and it contained the following text:

*1. Les deux gouvernements s’engagent mutuellement de ne pas sortir de la neutralité sans un avis préalable de huit jours.*

*2. Les deux gouvernements se tiendront en relations constantes et suivies dans le but d’examiner la situation, au fur et à mesure qu’elle se modifiera et de décider si elle comporte la nécessité d’accords plus précis au sujet de l’attitude que les deux États auront à tenir.*

*3. Les deux gouvernements, en considération de leurs rapports traditionnels et de l’analogie de leur situation vis-à-vis de la présente guerre, s’engagent à se concerter de manière à tenir la même attitude pour la sauvegarde de leurs intérêts respectifs dans leur action pour le maintien de la neutralité, ainsi que dans l’éventualité de la médiation ou dans le cas qu’il ne serait pas possible de conserver la neutralité par suite du fait que leurs intérêts respectifs seraient menacés ou lésés.*

*4. Les deux gouvernements s’engagent à tenir le secret le plus absolu sur le présent accord<sup>4</sup>*

Neither this agreement nor the Romanian-Italian Mutual Assistance Agreement of 6 February 1915 played any role in the Romanian–Italian relations

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<sup>2</sup> Glenn E. Torrey, “The Romanian-Italian Agreement of 23 September 1914,” in Glenn E. Torrey, *Romania and World War I. A Collection of Studies* (Iași: Center for Romanian Studies, 1998), 77

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 77, 93–94.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 90–91.

during the war. The government of Antonio Salandra (San Giuliano) wanted to benefit from Romania's bargaining with the Entente Powers. San Giuliano (like Sonnino) never trusted Brătianu and proved himself to be even more untrustworthy, because whereas the Romanian Prime Minister strictly respected the secrecy pledge, the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs let the British and the French governments know about it, disclosing even its content. Oddly enough, the similarities of circumstances were followed by dissimilarities of conduct.<sup>5</sup>

The real intention of the Italian government in this affair came to light on 26 April 1915, when it signed the Treaty of London and entered the war without even informing Romania, but not before trying to get Austro-Hungarian territory (Trentino, Bolzano, and Gorizia) through negotiations with Vienna.<sup>6</sup> The attitude towards the agreement of 23 September 1914 represents a strong dissimilarity.

Romania entered the war in the summer of 1916. On 17 August 1916, Ion I. C. Brătianu signed a treaty with the Entente representatives to Bucharest, i.e. those of France, Great Britain, Russia, and Italy, and within days the Romanian Army launched an ill-fated offensive in Transylvania, attacking Austria-Hungary, her former ally.<sup>7</sup> One would say this was an analogous situation with that of Italy, as both governments abandoned their former allies, pursuing the goal of complete national unification and both countries attacked in the direction of the provinces they wanted to incorporate. Also, both attacks ended in disaster, with the difference that they were one year apart from each other.

Italy, for one, tried an offensive in 1916, but in May of that year, the Austrians were victorious in Trentino and the Asiago Plateau. Even worse, in October 1917, disaster struck at Caporetto.<sup>8</sup> British and French troops had to be

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 79, 91–92, and footnote 76.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Paul Bled, *François-Joseph* (Paris: Fayard, 1987), 687.

<sup>7</sup> Glenn E. Torrey, *The Romanian Battlefield in World War I* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011), 45–153.

<sup>8</sup> The Italian point of view was the following: “Ici, malgré les très graves pertes subies, l’armée italienne s’accrocha tenacement aux nouvelles positions et résista efficacement contre les nouvelles attaques ennemies avant même de recevoir en renfort quelques divisions françaises et anglaises (ensuite ce sera l’Italie qui enverra un certain nombre en France) divisions qui resteront d’ailleurs en arrière en vue d’une éventuelle intervention, dont en définitive il n’y aura pas besoin”; see Luigi Salvatorelli, *Histoire de l’Italie des origines à nos jours*, trans. Angelo Santoro (Roanne: Horvath, n.d.), 553. This is an over-optimistic interpretation. It is difficult to accept that the French and the British would have displaced divisions from the Western front in 1917, a bad year for the Allies, just to have them waiting behind the Italian defensive lines, especially if we take into account the French point of view: “On October 23, 1917, the Austro-German offensive on the Isonzo has practically pulverized the Italian front, because of a tactical blunder of General Cadorna and the insubordination of Cappello. Disaster followed at Caporetto. The Italian troops began disbanding and fled in their tens of thousands: 200,000 soldiers and officers surrendered without fighting. Entire divisions fell into the hands of the enemy (293,000 men). Certain fugitives got as far as the Abruzzi Mountains.” See Marc T. Ferro, *La Grande Guerre 1914–1918*, foreword by Pierre Renouvin (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 342–45; Torrey, *Romania and World War I*, 293.

rushed in, and the front eventually was stabilized. The efforts of Italy to become a great power in its own right proved to be futile.

Romania's predicament was different. Situated between the armies of the Central Powers in Transylvania and the German and the Bulgarian ones located south of the Danube, her prospects of winning were almost nil. Caught in the pincer movement of the German and the Austro-Hungarian troops coming from Transylvania (after having repelled the Romanian thrust into Transylvania) and the German and Bulgarian armies advancing from the south, lacking serious Russian military cooperation, the Romanian Army almost collapsed and was defeated in Oltenia, Wallachia, and Dobrudja. It was at this juncture that France sent a Military Mission to Romania, of about two thousand men, officers, and military technicians, commanded by General Henri Mathias Berthelot. They retreated north with the Romanian Army, the Royal Family, and the government. The French Military Mission reorganized and armed the Romanian troops, preparing them for a modern type of warfare. In the summer of 1917 (July–August–September), the Romanian Army stopped and defeated the Austrian–German onslaught (Mărăști, Mărășești, and Oituz), without much Russian assistance. The only help was that of the officers of the French Mission, who fought and died alongside the Romanian soldiers, whom they had prepared for battle. The Entente could not and did not send troops to Romania. Both countries, Romania and Italy, met with military disaster, and then prevailed, but not in similar ways.<sup>9</sup>

Despite all the similarities between Romania and Italy during the First World War, we should not forget the following notable dissimilarity: after the disintegration of the Russian Army, the Allies could not send troops to Romania.

During the war, Italy benefited from French and British intervention. She attended the Paris Peace Conference with the chance of seeing the promises made to her in the Treaty she had signed in London become reality, because she had not signed a separate peace treaty with the Central Powers. Romania's fate was different and disadvantageous. Completely isolated, far from her Western allies, facing the risk of being crushed by the Central Powers armies after Russia signed an armistice with Germany and Austria-Hungary (fall of 1917), and then a peace treaty at Brest-Litovsk (spring of 1918), Romania had to conclude and reluctantly signed a separate peace treaty with the Central Powers (armistice at Focșani on 9 December 1917; peace at Buftea, 5 March, and Bucharest, 7 May 1918). The alternative would have been national annihilation, but by signing this treaty, the

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<sup>9</sup> George Cipăianu and Vasile Vesa, eds., *La présence française en Roumanie pendant la Grande Guerre, 1914–1918* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 1997), 16–69. For Romania, the defeat of 1916 meant hundreds of thousands of casualties and the loss of two thirds of the national territory [...]. Even if its allies won the war, the possibility that they would fulfill the promises contained in the Treaty of 1916 appeared questionable. British Secretary of Foreign Affairs Arthur Balfour declared that Romania's conduct of the war was "incompetent to the verge of a crime" (apud Torrey, *The Romanian Battlefield*, 169).

clauses of the 1916 Treaty with the Entente Powers were rendered null and void. Whereas Italy presented herself at the Peace Conference as a major victor, Romania lost the status of equality with the Allies (Entente), established by the Treaty of 1916, and participated in the Conference as a junior partner, although she had re-entered the war on 9/10 November 1918. This was another difference between Italy and Romania in World War I, an important one. And there was still another: more than half of the Romanian territory and the economy had been ravaged during the war. The Italian territory was not devastated to such extent.

It is worth noting that during the agonizing months of Romania's negotiations with the Allied and Associated Powers concerning her intention to make a separate peace, the Italians opposed a "legal" separate peace, although their minister to Romania knew the real dimension of Romania's predicament. He even recommended prudence, stating that the rigid attitude on the part of the Allies "potrebbe a mio avviso condurre a un risultato contrario a quello che desidera la Francia, se l'azione degli alleati in Russia non riuscisse a procurare alla Romania quegli aiuti senza dei quali la resistenza è qui considerata impossibile."<sup>10</sup> "The Italians even suggested that the Allied representatives in Jassy not be informed on the common declaration of sympathy for Romania to be presented with the Romanian government after the peace had been signed, in order to avoid any possible detrimental leak, which would play in the hands of the peace supporters in Romania."<sup>11</sup>

Italy participated in the Peace Conference as a "great/weak power," wanting to be like France without ever succeeding in doing so; her army had collapsed at Caporetto (1917), she was heavily indebted to the Allies (700 million British pounds),<sup>12</sup> had imperial ambitions (she had been defeated by the Ethiopians in 1896), and she wanted to annex territories inhabited by other peoples. The Treaty of London promised Italy Austro-Hungarian territory, Trieste, Valona (Albania), the Dodecanese Islands, a stretch of territory on the Dalmatian Coast, and rights over the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>13</sup>

In December 1918, Robert Cecil wrote to Britain's ambassador to Italy: "The Yugoslavs have claimed far more than is their just due, but Sonnino's stubbornness and the extravagant nature of Italy's claims have had as a result that it is now literally true that Italy has not a friend in Europe except ourselves, and she is doing her best to make her isolation complete." Wilson's opinion was no better. France

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<sup>10</sup> George Cipăianu, *At the Cross-Roads (Fall of 1917–Spring 1918): Great Britain and Romania's Making of a Separate Peace* (Oradea: Cogito, 1993), 9, 53.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Margaret MacMillan, *Peacemakers. The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War* (John Murray: London, 2001), 289.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

was not inclined to cajole the Italians either. Being jealous and resentful, the Italians feared France.<sup>14</sup>

At the Paris Peace Conference, the Italians antagonized all the Allies, everybody, with their greedy, unflinching stubbornness. The Big Three loathed them. Their London Treaty of 1915 was not applied in its entirety. In the end, Orlando (prime minister) and Sonnino (minister for Foreign Affairs) left the Conference (April 1919).

They came back, but nothing important happened with regard to the London Treaty during their stay. At the Paris Peace Conference and afterwards, Italy did not ratify the union of Bessarabia with Romania before 1927.<sup>15</sup>

Romania participated in the Paris Peace Conference in no better position. Although she had re-entered the war on 10 November 1918, one day before the General Armistice (11 November), the Treaty signed with the Entente Powers (August 1916) was considered null and void<sup>16</sup> by the Allied and Associated Powers, who blamed the Italians for the Caporetto disaster, and the Romanians for signing the Buftea-Bucharest Peace Treaty with the Central Powers. France and Great Britain were only eager and happy to declare they were not bound by the two embarrassing treaties anymore, especially after the United States joined the war. The Americans did not accept treaties signed in the shadow of the European cabinets, whereby territorial issues were decided.

Both governments claimed territories larger than what was justified by demographic realities, but whereas demands were exaggerated on both sides, Romania only asked for limited additional territories beyond the ethnic lines, while Italy requested significant territories beyond its borders: Dalmatia, Smyrna, Libya, Abyssinia, the Dodecanese Islands, and a part of Somalia.

Both countries had tried to maintain good relations with both belligerent alliances to get advantages from the Central Powers before entering the war, but “he [Brătianu] showed no interest in their repeated offers of Bessarabia, and at no time did he enter into serious negotiations to share in their possible victory.”<sup>17</sup> Romania wanted Transylvania, which was non-negotiable from the Austro-Hungarian point of view, whereas Bessarabia was out of the question, because nobody could foresee the dismemberment of the Russian Empire.

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<sup>14</sup> “Throughout the whole of my negotiations with the Italians,” Lloyd George revealed, “I found that their foreign policy was largely influenced by a compound mixture of jealousy, rivalry, resentment, but more particularly fear of France” (apud MacMillan, *Peacemakers*, 295, 298).

<sup>15</sup> Vasile Ungureanu, “România–Italia: relații politico-diplomatice (1922–1934),” PhD diss., (Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași, 2010), 106–7. The Italians ratified the Treaty of Paris (26 October 1920) concerning the union of Bessarabia with Romania, on 9 December 1927.

<sup>16</sup> Gheorghe Iancu and George Cipăianu, *La consolidation de l’Union de la Transylvanie et de la Roumanie (1918–1919). Témoignages français* (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 1990), 16–19; Cipăianu, *At the Cross-Roads*, 52, 54.

<sup>17</sup> Torrey, *Romania and World War I*, 14.

The Italians were not kind to the Slavic populations under their occupation; the Romanians did not mistreat the Hungarians in the territory under their control. Another similarity: like the Italians, Ion I. C. Brătianu clung to the letter of the 1916 Treaty, invoking, at the same time, the right to self-determination, which was unusual and did not count much with regard to Romania's territorial claims. He wanted the entire Banat, which inconvenienced the Allies in their relation with the Serbs. He also wished to settle the Romanian-Hungarian border on the Tisza River. This would have created enormous ethnic problems for Romania after the war, and was in fact an unjust claim. Brătianu's bargaining antagonized the Allies; his territorial claims were considered excessive.<sup>18</sup>

Like Sonnino and Orlando, he was disliked by many participants in the Conference. One of them said about him: "Brătianu is a bearded woman, a forceful humbug, a Bucharest intellectual, a most unpleasing man. Handsome and exuberant, he flings his fine head sideways, catching his own profile in the glass. He makes elaborate verbal jokes imagining them to be Parisian."<sup>19</sup> Like Orlando and Sonnino, he got angry at the refusal of the Big Four to accept his claims and went home to Bucharest. Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, another politician and prime minister, was sent to Paris to head the Romanian delegation.

Nevertheless, Romania did well at the Paris Peace Conference: she almost doubled her territory and population (Transylvania, North Bukovina, two thirds of Banat, and Bessarabia), although she was represented as a smaller power. Italy did not get all she wanted,<sup>20</sup> but also did well, even if politicians and the public opinion resented that certain claims had not been satisfied.

<sup>18</sup> Sherman David Spector, *România și Conferința de Pace de la Paris. Diplomația lui Ion I. C. Brătianu*, trans. Sorin Părvu (Iași: Institutul European, 1995), 112.

<sup>19</sup> Apud MacMillan, *Peacemakers*, 135. This is all that a British diplomat had to say about a statesman like Brătianu. Besides, in the cited work, Margaret MacMillan is not very kind either when speaking about the Romanians and the Italians at the Peace Conference. She does not seem to know the Romanian works on Romania's participation in the war.

<sup>20</sup> In the north, Italy got South Tyrol, Trentino, and in 1920—by way of the Italian-Yugoslav Treaty of Rapallo, under Giolitti—the Istrian Peninsula, Zadar, and a few small islands in the Adriatic Sea.

The Treaty of London (1915) stipulated the following in favor of Italy:

- Islands and a stretch of territory in Dalmatia, Valona (Vlorë);
- Protectorate in central Albania;
- The Dodecanese Islands and parts of the Ottoman Empire (around Smyrna) in the case of its dissolution;
- Equal rights with Great Britain and France.

The Italian greedy colonial claims, according to the Memorandum sent by Gaspare Colosimo, colonial minister, to Arthur Balfour, the British foreign secretary, and Edward House, president Wilson's closest advisor, before the end of the war, were as follows:

- Exclusive control over Ethiopia (despite the shameful defeat at Adowa in 1896);

Although some of the great victors were appalled by the exaggerated territorial appetite of the two nations, forgetting their own greed (colonies, mandates), Romanians and Italians played their parts in the First World War and in its end, contributing to the reconfiguration of the political geography of Europe.

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- The British Territory in Somalia to be added to the part already in Italian hands;
  - A piece of Somalia under French authority;
  - The north-eastern part of British Kenya;
  - The railway from Djibouti to Addis Ababa, from France;
  - A portion of the British Territory in Egypt to be added to an enlarged Libya, together with parts of the French possessions;
    - Angola from the Portuguese, in case the Portuguese Empire would crumble (MacMillan, *Peacemakers*, 299).

At the Peace Conference, the huge Italian territorial ambitions made Bismarck's old saying very popular: "Italy's appetite was invariably bigger than its teeth" (apud MacMillan, *Peacemakers*, 302).