

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE YEAR 1918 IN ROMANIAN HISTORY

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### Abstract

1918 officially marks the end of the Great War. It was the year most awaited by humanity at the time. An era ended, and hopes such as unity, diversity, multiculturalism, and equal opportunities emerged. The age of empires was waning, nation-states were consolidating within their territories, and unity of language was one of the classifying factors regarding the states' composition. The Romanians of Transylvania, Bessarabia, and Bukovina also wanted the Romanian-speaking region between the Dniester and the Tisza, where they were and still are in the majority, to finally have the right to establish a state. They hoped the medieval period's project and ideas would ultimately take shape.

The year of the centenary celebrations of the Great Union has given historians of good faith the opportunity to evoke the personalities of the Great Union: those who sacrificed themselves for their country, those who believed in the national ideal, and those who had a purpose. The Union generation wanted and succeeded. Together with the previous generations, their efforts prevailed in shaping national identity and unity. Let us remember 1917. Bucharest was under occupation, the government was in exile in Iași, and the hope for the Union seemed remote. The leaders of the time brought about change and national fulfilment only months later. Regrettably, part of the Union Generation ended up in communist prisons. 1918 was the year of Romanian pride. It is the year of the national ideal. 1918 is—or should be—the most famous event in our history. 1918 is the year we can refer to as the year of national unity, the year in which hopes were fulfilled, the year of the Romanians' confidence in their strength, and the year Romania became Greater.

**Keywords:** 1918, Bessarabia, Bukovina, Transylvania, Ion I. C. Brătianu.

The year 1918 is the year of our fulfillment. It is the year of the national ideal. It is the milestone we dreamed to reach, beyond sacrifices, beyond delusions, beyond temporary fulfillment or grand victories. The year 1918 represents—or should represent—the best-known event in our own history. The year 1918 is the year to which we should refer with pride but also with humility. We must learn, to understand how it was possible, for those who built the Union, to achieve what all Romanians dreamed of—a state that represents them, a state where they don't feel marginalized or humiliated, their state. The year we must not forget, the year to have as a model!

The year when the Centenary of the Great Union was celebrated gave to the bona fide historians the opportunity to evoke the personalities of the Great Union. Those

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who sacrificed themselves for the country, those who believed in the national ideal, those who had a purpose. The Union Generation wanted it and got it. Along with previous generations, their efforts prevailed in shaping national identity and unity. Unfortunately, part of the Union Generation ended up in communist prisons.

Immediately after the outbreak of the World War I, the Crown Council assembled and Ion I. C. Brătianu presented the government's point of view:

*“We demand that Romania remain neutral. The treaty, (1883) as it was shown, does not oblige us, Romania cannot allow its allies to dispose of its fate without at least taking the trouble to inform us. They did not even do us the honor of communicating their intentions. After the war is a fait accompli, they asked us to take up arms with them. A state like ours, which entered the alliance as a sovereign state and on an equal footing, cannot be treated like this.”<sup>1</sup>*

At the end of the debates, King Carol I concluded:

*“I note that the country's representatives, almost unanimously, demanded Romania's neutrality. As a constitutional king I submit to your will. However, I am afraid that the country's prestige will be diminished after today's meeting, and I am afraid that you have made a decision that Romania will regret in the future.”<sup>2</sup>*

The perseverance of Ion I. C. Brătianu and his determination have been decisive during the period of neutrality. Moreover, he agreed Romania to entry into the war after the signing of the Military Convention of August 14/27, 1916, when the Great Powers: Great Britain, France, Russia, and Italy guaranteed Romania's territorial integrity, guarantees they never considered in the Paris Peace Treaties of 1919–1920.

Also, a statement by Ion I. C. Brătianu is suggestive about how he related to international relations:

*“In a whirlwind like the one of the current war, in which the map of the world is changing, a country like ours, a country with national aspirations, cannot remain neutral until the end, without definitively compromising his entire future. Therefore, it is necessary to get out of neutrality, but on the other hand, having national unity as an ideal, we are obliged to pursue its realization, because who knows if in the course of the ages we will find an opportunity as favorable as today. (Ion I. C. Brătianu at the Crown Council of August 14, 1916)”<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Ionuț Cojocaru, “Ion I. C. Brătianu”, [glasulistoriei.ro](https://glasulistoriei.ro), accessed on October 10, 2023, <https://glasulistoriei.ro/index.php/2019/08/20/ion-i-c-bratianu/>.

<sup>2</sup> Cojocaru, “Ion I. C. Brătianu.”

<sup>3</sup> Ionuț Cojocaru, “Ion I. C. Brătianu”, [ionutcojocaru.ro](https://ionutcojocaru.ro), accessed on October 10, 2023, <https://ionutcojocaru.ro/2017/05/12/ion-i-c-bratianu/>.

The year 1918 officially marks the end of the Great War. It was the most awaited year for mankind at that time. After a bloody and universal war, Peace has finally come. The hopes of millions of people who mourned their dead were reborn with the end of the cruelest conflagration. Moreover, an Era was coming to an end and hopes such as unity, diversity, multiculturalism, equality of opportunity was emerging before humanity. Today, many of these seem trivial.

The Age of Empires was setting, nation states were consolidating on their territory, and language unity was one of the classifying factors in terms of the composition of states. Just as we also wanted, the territory between the Dniester and Tisa, speaking the Romanian language, where the Romanians were and are the majority, to finally have the right to create a state. The ideas, the project from the medieval period, to finally take shape.

For us, 1918 is the year that we can categorize as the year of national unity, the year of the realization of hopes, the year of Romanians confidence in their own strength, the year Romania became Great.

C. Stere gave a memorable speech about the Union of Bessarabia with Romania:

*“Gentlemen deputies, in people’s life as well as in the life of a whole nation, there are not many such uplifting moments. I am deeply moved by the trust you have placed in me and by the heavy task you have placed on my shoulders, but I also feel the endless joy that you give me the opportunity to fight again for the justice and freedom of the people, whose son I am.*

*Banished from my native land, by the blind power of the despotic tsar, today I am brought here again by the will of the liberated people. Today we have to decide what will have an extraordinary bearing on the future fate of our people. The iron march of history places a responsibility on our shoulders, which we cannot ignore with any sophistry. No one but us has the right to speak and decide anything in the name of the Bessarabian people. We are brought here by that elementary historical process that destroys the foundations of fortresses and bastions.*

*The revolution led to this not only the Russians, but also the entire Romanian people. You lit that torch, the flame of which burned all the papers that divided people into privileged and non-privileged, you created from the Moldovan people a people that have no other privilege than that of work.*

*Now, you are called by History to carry this holy flame beyond the Prut, in order to enlighten your brothers and to break their chains of age-old injustice, thereby paying your debt to the brothers who came to your aid in the most difficult historical moment. Today we proclaim the rights of the sovereign people, not only here in Bessarabia, but also the rights of all brothers, wherever they are. Thanking you for the honor you have shown me by making this choice, today, after so many years of struggle, I, together with you, will go to battle with the same determination as 30 years ago, when, still young, I was*

*thrown in the prison that still stands there today, as a reminder of the accursed past, from which today we parted forever.*<sup>4</sup>

Bessarabia was the first province to unite with Romania, in March 1918, after more than a hundred years of Russian occupation. In the period following the unification, numerous studies of certain value were published about Bessarabia by renowned historians: Nicolae Iorga, Gheorghe Brătianu, Ion Nistor, Alexandru Boldur, and also the memoirs of some of the participants in the events: Constantin Stere, Ion Pelivan, Ion Inculeț, Onisifor Ghibu. These studies and memoirs approached Bessarabia from a national and scientific perspective, basing their conclusions and value judgments on indisputable historical data.

To the question “who the Romanians are”, Dimitrie Cantemir answers that they are the descendants of the Romans, and to the question about the countries inhabited by Romanians, he says that they come from a long time ago, having been formed on the site of ancient Dacia. In the Chronicle (called Prolegomena) “the book” presents a historical-geographical description “of the whole Wallachia” which then split into “Moldova, Muntenescă and Ardeal” from its founding by Trajan.

#### **National unity is based on origin, language, religion, culture.**

Miron Costin believes that Romanians, no matter where they live, call all the regions they live in, Wallachia.

Grigore Ureche wrote in his chronicle “since the country was founded” that the Romanians, those that live from Hungary to Transylvania and Maramoroșu, originate in the same place as the Moldavians and all of them originate in “Râm”.

Greater Romania, the first Parliament:

*“Dear deputies, I take the floor with a natural and deep emotion, in the first Parliament of Greater Romania, because above all the being and the faces, and those from the government and those in this hall, I see in front of me all those who worked for the same great achievement, all those who sacrificed themselves, all those who believed in the achievement that we have to strengthen and that the generations to come shall enjoy.”* (Ion I. C. Brătianu in the meeting of the Assembly of Deputies on December 16, 1919)<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, there was a desire for unity for this space inhabited by Romanians, divided into Wallachia, Muntenia, Transylvania, Moldova. They speak the same language; they have the same culture and ideals.

<sup>4</sup> Ioan Scurtu, “Discursul lui Constantin Stere rostit în ședința Sfatului Țării din 27 martie 1918”, ioanscurtu.ro, accessed on October 10, 2023, <http://www.ioanscurtu.ro/discursul-lui-constantin-stere-rostit-in-sedinta-sfatului-tarii-din-27-martie-1918/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ionuț Cojocaru, “Ion I. C. Brătianu, făuritorul Marii Uniri”, ionutcojocaru.ro, accessed on October 10, 2023, <https://ionutcojocaru.ro/2019/02/07/ion-i-c-bratianu-fauritorul-marii-uniri/>.

As Nicolae Iorga concluded: “Romania once had a meaning that many have forgotten, and some have never understood; it meant all the land inhabited ethnographically by Romanians”.<sup>6</sup>

We find this ideal, this desire for unity from Matei Basarab and Vasile Lupu to Dimitrie Cantemir, Miron Costin, Școala Ardeleană, Mihail Kogălniceanu, Nicolae Bălcescu, even in the writings of the post–Great Union historians such as Nicolae Iorga, Constantin Giurescu or Gheorghe Brătianu.

In the same idea of perfecting national unity, with Greater Romania in their mind, Alexandru Averescu, Nicolae Iorga, Ion I. C. Brătianu and Constantin Argetoianu participated in the Balkan war. Like their predecessors, they also contributed to the consolidation of Romania.

Today, of course, the nationalism is regarded with reluctance. There was introduced the idea that being a nationalist is wrong, that Romanians must look towards the idea of Europeanism, that the idea of national unity is outdated and therefore we should look towards decentralization together with the promises that the result will be a higher standard of living, all this based on the idea that where there are fewer, there will be more solutions.

After many centuries, this nation that was formed in the Carpatho–Danubian–Pontic area managed to achieve its national ideal, to find its purpose and role, to define itself as a state. In history, it officially became a state on the day of December 1, 1918. It is a day with special significance, a day full of emotion, a day when we, the future generations, should think with gratitude about the work of our forefathers and very important, not to disappoint.

Let’s remember 1917. Bucharest was occupied; the government was in exile in Iasi and the hope of the Union seemed far away. Only the leaders of that time have made it possible for the change and the national fulfillment to happen only after a few months.

### **A few words about history. As a science!**

I welcome the idea of the National Congress of Romanian Historians. It is a first step so that the science to which we have devoted ourselves professionally can benefit from these debates and lectures that happen at every Congress. I participated in the Congresses in Cluj, Iași and in Alba Iulia. Personally, I feel that much more could be done for history as a whole, because, and it’s no secret, history is the *magistra vitae*.

Even if at one point we had three historians at the head of the Romanian Academy, even if we had and still have historians Rectors, even if we have historians in research institutes, and some of them are directors, overall, all these dignities do not fulfill our expectations.

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<sup>6</sup> Nicolae Iorga, *Români și Slavi. Români și Unguri* (București: Editura Institutului Sud-Est-European, 1922), 9.

Therefore, what is the role of the historian nowadays? What about the role of the historian who leads institutions that are fundamental in the gear of the Romanian state?

We have politically unaffiliated historians, we have historians that are politicians, we have historians in the gear of political parties. What we don't really have is a unification of their efforts to make history a respectable educational discipline. Please remember that a few years ago history was a Baccalaureate subject, in the universities a special importance was given to studying it and it was not studied only in the specialized ones.

What do we have today? Fewer history faculties, too few places in the archival faculty, in auxiliary sciences, etc. The archives are in a situation that we did not think possible a few years ago.

What is the result of the lack of history in the educational institutions in Romania?

We already see that a generation with serious deficiencies in historical culture has emerged. We have dignitaries who do not know their own history. Which makes us wonder how a dignitary can represent his country if he doesn't know his own history?

Therefore, maybe it would be appropriate to think how to put into practice, together, some ideas such as more history lessons in school, more history of Romanians (not of Romania) compared with the universal one, the reintroduction of history as a Baccalaureate subject. I would go with the proposal that every faculty, be it economics, mathematics, or engineering, should have a course on the history of the Romanians. Basically, in Romania, it would not hurt Romanians to learn interesting things about Stephen the Great, Mihai the Brave or Avram Iancu. To find out that Romanians have contributed to science and universal culture, that we have models, that we have achieved, perhaps in worse conditions compared to the consolidated states, a state, Greater Romania. To learn that when the right people are in the right place, in Romania things can also have a positive evolution.

Qualification courses, professional retraining and all kinds of other ideas have been held for years. Wouldn't it be useful for the positions of public dignity to have a course on the history of the Romanians? Today we have a president or prime minister, ministers, parliamentarians who do not know how to relate to the moments that are debated in our own historiography. To learn, for example, about August 23, Ion Antonescu or the legionary movement? About the monarchy but also about A.I. Cuza or Snake Island. About the History of Communism and the History of the Holocaust.

Wouldn't it be normal for the student to know where he comes from, how Romania was formed and what his own identity means? Why focus only on the misfortunes that have happened and knowingly avoid the positive things in our own history? Or why not a course on the history of Greater Romania?