

## **Romania and 'The Great War'**

An event like the accomplishment of the Great Union – synonym with the setup of the Greater Romania – should be properly discussed in an events' approach.

### **1914-1916**

#### **Romania's neutrality in the First World War**

### **1914**

Two days after the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war against Serbia, on 17/30 July 1914, the Allied Powers' representatives informed the Bucharest authorities the agreement of their countries (France, Great Britain, Russia) regarding the union of Transylvania with Romania, in exchange of its participation to the war, together with the Allied Powers (the Triple Understanding) and against the Central Powers (Germany, Austro-Hungaria).

On the day of 19<sup>th</sup> July/01<sup>st</sup> August, Germany declared war against Russia, and emperor Wilhelm 2<sup>nd</sup> of Hohenzollern (1888-1918) telegraphed King Carol

the 1<sup>st</sup> of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen (1866-1914, King starting with 1881), and demanded him in an urgent manner to join his side. The Austro-Hungarian emperor, Franz Joseph of Habsburg (1848-1916), would take the same approach the following day.

**21<sup>st</sup> of July/03<sup>rd</sup> August** – The Crown Committee decides that Romania remains neutral.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of July/03<sup>rd</sup> August 1914, the day in which Germany declared war against France, the Crown Committee had a gathering at the Peleş Castle of Sinaia; there they participated: King Carol the 1<sup>st</sup>, the Crown Prince Ferdinand, the Prime-Minister Ion. I.C. Brătianu (governs between 1914-1918) and all the members of the liberal party, as well as all the ex prime-ministers, no matter the political variety. King Carol the 1<sup>st</sup>, supported by the Conservative Petre P. Carp – which had a different opinion and considered that Romania's biggest threat came from Russia – just like his ex prime-minister, he declared himself an adept of Romania's entering the war alongside the Central Powers.

After some fiery debates – in which it was called down the reasoning of betraying by the Central Powers of the defensive nature of the Romanian-Austro-Hungarian Treaty of 1883 – it was decided that Romania remains neutral. In these circumstances, King Carol the 1<sup>st</sup>, in his constitutional monarch position of Romania, submitted to the majority of the Crown Committee, as well as to the people's will, and decided to abdicate. His death, having been occurred on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September/10<sup>th</sup> of October 1914, held Carol the 1<sup>st</sup> back from making a gesture that seemingly came at the turn of two centuries: the one in which the King saw the daylight on German lands/ the one in which the dawn presented itself to the Greater Romanian nation.

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During two years (1914-1916), the Romanian political scene has been 'ripped apart' by the confrontation, at the élite's level, regarding Romania's participation to the 'Great War' (the First World War, 1914-1916): the partisans of the national security (like Petre P. Carp and Constantin Stere), by rubbing into the threat of transforming the country in a Russian province/gubernya, wished Romania to join the Central Powers; adepts of accomplishment, by the incorporation of Transylvania, of the national unity (like Ion C. Brătianu, Take Ionescu, Nicolae Filipescu and Nicolae Iorga), were 'craving' for Romania to join the Allied Powers' cause.

This way, P.P. Carp, C. Stere and their adepts were drawing attention over the threat represented by Russia for Romania, found in its way after Tarigrad (Istanbul) and Strâmtori. Feeling ran high in Stere's ('the Siberian', born in Bessarabia, deported in Siberia during the tsar's government) speech to another liberal, such as himself, Ion G. Duca:

'Russia can only lose. The tsar's armies, which are now retreating, (the talk had taken place on 21<sup>st</sup> of May 1915 – n.n.) will never be able to reorganize [...]. Russia will not give us Transylvania, Russia wants Strâmtori, it is willing to pass over our dead bodies to get this territory. An alliance with them will only lead to slavery. You don't have to work in politics, but be blind, stupid to not see, to not understand a thing so sure, so clear [...]. Think about the responsibility you take before history, you ruin the work of all the generations from 1848 until now. They left you a free State, and the power to play a role here, in the Eastern Europe, you turn it into a Russian province. There won't be enough courses to punis till doomsday the crime you are preparing today against the

Romanian people.’ (*apud* Florin Constantiniu, *An honest history of Romanian people*, Bucharest, Univers Enciclopedic, 1997, p. 273; hereafter: CONSTANTINIU, p. ...).

The followers of the Allied Powers, in fact followers of the national unity – but without Bessarabia, because the Russian Empire, together with France and Great Britain, had established together the Triple Understanding – made out a case that Romania couldn’t but take advantage of the opportunity given by the great conflagration to regain the territories occupied by the romanians in Austro-Hungaria:

‘[...] I don’t know how the war will go – said, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August 1916, Ion I.C. Brătianu to his son, Gheorghe <the great future hystorian> –, we could have Serbia’s fate <completely occupied by the Central Powers at the time> but we would have indefeasibly confirmed our rights over our land. You see, the present moment is decisive. If they make peace without us, we will be crushed between a great Hungaria and an even greater Bulgaria. The world has to see what we want and why we want it for.’ (*apud* CONSTANTINIU, p. 274).

Once the ‘The Great War’ has begun, the two fighting sides – The Allied Powers and The Central Powers Puterile Centrale – strived to draw the neutral States on their side by using a wide range of persuasive means (starting from tempting promises and going to hard pressures). In 1915, after Italy joined the war (on the Allied Powers’ side) and Bulgaria (on the Central Powers’ side), Romania – as a consequence of its strategic placement (Lower Danube and the Istru’s Openings), its soil treasures (wheat) and subsoil (oil) – it became the aim of some persistent requests. The Central Powers hoped for Romania to remain

neutral, in the most fortunate case. The Allied Powers wished for Romania to join the war to weaken the German army on the western front (France); facing the pressures carried by the Allied Powers, the Prime-Minister Ion I.C. Brătianu would have exclaimed on the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1915: ‘When you see the tone which the Allied Powers use to speak to us, I regret the time when Germany used to have supremacy in Europe’ (*apud* CONSTANTINIU, p. 275).

Dealing with the political ambiguity (maneuvers and protractions) adopted by the liberal cabinet of Ion I.C. Brătianu, the Allied Powers faced Romania with a restraining choice in the summer of 1916: ‘now or never’.

# The war to unite the romanian people

**1916-1918**

## Romania in the First World War

**1916**

**04<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> of August** – signing the alliance Treaty between Romania and the Allied Powers.

The Liberal Ministers' Committee lead by Ion. C. Brătianu (rules between 1914-1918) prepared for two years – by mistakenly believing, though, that Transylvania would be freed in 15 days (!) – and negotiated with the Allied Powers the entering of Romania of the war, greatly preoccupied that the satisfaction of its personal territorial claimings would make the object of the firm commitment of the Allied Powers.

After two years of neutrality (1914-1916), facing the pressures of the Allied Powers, on the 04<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> of August 1916, Romania signed, in Bucharest, the alliance Treaty with the Allied Powers, diplomatic

document accompanied by a military convention. The Treaty was signed by Romania through the Prime-Minister Ion I.C. Brătianu, by the Allied Powers through the plenipotentiary ministers in Bucharest of France, Great Britain, Russia and Italy (that joined the war in 1915).

Romania took a commitment to enter the war against Austro-Hungaria, while the Allied Powers admitted its right over the territories inhabited by the romanians from Austro-Hungaria: the Banat (including the Serbian one), Bucovina, Crișana, the Maramureș, Transylvania.

The Allied Powers were preparing to unleash, eight days before Romania entered the war, a military offensive at Salonic (the north of Greece) with the mission to keep the German and Bulgarian troops busy on the Balkan front, as well as an armed offensive in the direction of the Austro-Hungarian front from the Hungarian plain, strategic initiative meant to ease the Romanian army's actions in Transylvania.

In return, Romania committed itself to enter the war on 15<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> of August the latest, and only against Austro-Hungaria. The Romanian State was to receive, daily, a ration of 300 tons of amunition and war materials transported through Russia; the Russian State would send two infantry divisions and a cavalry one. However, it has to be emphasized the fact that the lack of good faith of the Allied Powers would be synonymous with their lack of fulfillment of their welsh on the deal.

### **14<sup>th</sup>/27<sup>th</sup> of August** – The Crown Committee decides Romania's entering the war alongside the Allied Powers

According to the narration of this event by a privileged witness, Ion G. Duca – at the time Minister of the Public Cults and Instruction in the liberal government of Ion I.C. Brătianu –, in the hall of the Crown Committee in Cotroceni (Bucharest) there

were present: the entire Ministers' Committee in front with the Prime-Minister ministru Ion I.C. Brătianu, the deputies of the Parliament (the attorney of the Deputy Room and the Senate Room), ex-presidents of the Ministers' Committee (like P.P. Carp and Titu Maiorescu), party leaders (like Take Ionescu, Nicolae Filipescu and Alexandru Marghiloman), ex-presidents of the Lawmaker Unit. Ferdinand the I<sup>st</sup> (1914-1927) made his entrance accompanied by the heir to the throne (prince Carol). The King spoke first, like it was established beforehand Ion I.C. Brătianu, aiming to show from the beginning what was the role of this Crown Committee. In Sinaia, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of July/03<sup>rd</sup> of August 1914, King Carol the I<sup>st</sup> has called the squad leaders of the country to make a decision: war or neutrality.

‘Now, the King would mention the fact it was no longer the question of maKing a decision, because it has already been made. He had summoned the attorneys of all the partied, however, to communicate this decision to them and to ask of them to accept joining it, as well as to ask all the competition the country was so desperately needing. The King was very nervous. On his face you could read the marks of the inside battle he has been through, of the tormenting unslept nights in which he was teared apart between the natural drives of German Prince and his masterful duties as a Romanian King, nights in which he was beat by the doubt between the german victory and the Allies' victory, moments in which his conscience as a King and as a man forced him to judge all the historic responsibility lying on his shoulders. But, with all the impressive emotion controlling him, he spoke with perfect clarity and with a voice of undeniable determination. This time, the talk didn't take place, like in

Sinaia, in French, but in Romanian. The old Romania had died the moment the first rays of the sunrise of new Romania lifted up.'

'In brief, King Ferdinand said he had summoned the heads of the country not to ask an advice from them, because the decision has already been made, but to ask for their support. In the present situation, the neutrality is no longer possible, Romania has to make a decision and choose. The fate of the war bends in the favor of the Allied Powers but, however it may be, Romania cannot fight alongside the Central Powers, because it would mean to go against the whole historic evolution of our people. The King has shown afterwards that, in order to get to such a conclusion, he passed through excruciating challenges that, of course, we understand, but, viewing only the interests of the country of which Crown he wears, he defeated himself. As the right cause triumphed in himself, he has the certainty he will be a winner in this war and, this way, from the sacrifices that wait for us, it will come the accomplishment of our national ideal.' (I.G. Duca, *Political Memories*, vol. I, München, Jon Dumitru Verlag, 1981, p. 272-273; from now on: DUCA (I), p. ...).

Prime-Minister Ion I.C. Brătianu demanded the word.

'His speech has been a display of the situation and the reasons he imposed us to join the action alongside the Allied Powers, talking clearly, briefly, convincingly, without long phrases, without pathos. In a vortex like the one of the present war, in which the world's map changes, a country like ours, a country with national aims, cannot remain neutral until the end, without

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