The Heroism of Romanian Soldiers from Comarnic, Prahova, during the First World War

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to initiate a discussion on Romania’s situation during the First World War. Beyond the military operations, which often ended in failure, as they were wrongly conceived and designed by the Great Military Headquarters, one can see the heroism of the Romanians. We intend to integrate the local history along the Prahova valley with the reality of the Great war at national and international level. The local heroism is illustrated by the examples offered by the sacrifice of the soldiers of Comarnic (a town situated along the Prahova valley), who fought in the most important battles of the war. At the same time, we intend to show the impact of the German military occupation upon the civilian population by giving examples of the destruction recorded in the towns along the Prahova valley. The evocation of the local history leads to cultivating national feeling, almost one century since the fulfilment of the unitary Romanian state.

Key words: Romania, Romanian Army, Prahova Valley, Comarnic.

The beginning of the First World War found Romania in a delicate situation. Since 1883, King Carol I had already secretly signed an alliance with Germany and Austro-Hungary. This alliance was the cause of many disputes between politicians because of Austro-Hungary holding the Romanian territories of Transylvania and Bucovina. After two years of

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neutrality, Romania joined the war alongside the Entente Cordiale under the slogan: “Now or never!”.

The military situation of Romania in 1916 was unfavourable. The Romanian army that had been mobilized had over 800,000 soldiers and officers, who had to defend a front about 1,500 km long. This front was positioned in the North and North-West against Austro-Hungary and in the South against Bulgaria. Romania also depended on the offensive of the allies on the Salonic front, which was not going to take place, but also on a difficult cooperation with the Russian troops. The laurels of victory and the heroism of Romanians masked the poor outfitting of the Romanian army and the logistic mistakes of the Grand General Quarters who dealt with the battle plan.

Romania joined the war on August 15th 1916 with an attack against Austro-Hungary, who was in charge of a part of the Romanian territory. A dramatic episode from the history of the Romanians took place at that moment when those in the Old Kingdom fought against their brethren in Ardeal. With particular tenacity, the Romanians obtained several victories, managing to penetrate the NW front. The joy was short-lived as the Romanians had to fight simultaneously on two fronts (N/NW and S). The offensive of the Romanian troops in Transylvania was interrupted by moving some units on the Danube front, fact which created a very dangerous breech in that area.

At the beginning of September 1916, the Romanian army was defeated at Turtucaia in the South of the country by the Bulgarian army. For
the historian Constantin Kirițescu, Turtucaia “made a mockery of us in front of the enemies and discredited us in front of friends (…) and it deeply influenced the evolution of the war. It is the initial cause of the disasters that followed”.  

Although the defeat at Turtucaia was a painful one in the tactical plan, it did not have strategic importance. Unfortunately, the impact at the level of the public opinion was so great and the morale of the population and that of the army dropped so low, that at the level of the superior command of the army a great crisis took place with consequences far greater than the Turtucaia defeat.

Another important military operation was the “battle of the passes” over the Carpathian Mountains. The Romanian army had fought heroically along the Jiu valley, the Olt valley, the Prahova valley, the Teleajen valley, the Bratocea pass, with the purpose to reject the German counter-offensive.

One of the most important strategic areas was the Prahova valley. The road along the Prahova valley connected Transylvania and the capital of the country. Also, here was the “petrol belt” of the country which spread from Târgoviște to Ploiești, very sought after by the Germans. The Prahova area was a region very much affected by the war, but which also gave many hero soldiers.

From the beginning of October 1916, important battles were fought in this area. Such a battle took place in Brasov, in the area of the Bartolomeu church and of the railway station. The counter-offensive of the 9th German army continued towards the town of Predeal. An important

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Romanian resistance force was defeated at the Predeal railway station. Many soldiers of the 61st Regiment from the area Ilfov – Dâmboviţa fought in this area with numerous losses of human lives. Being an important strategic point, a Romanian resistance operation was organized here. This is what a German eye-witness declared: “It was extraordinary to see those ranks, tightly united, rushing forward carelessly, despising death in spite of our artillery and infantry’s terrible counter-effects… The direct hits of our mortars would tear the ranks, but they formed back. And, still, our artillery was so heavy and its effect was so terrible in this attack”\(^2\)

In order to open the way along the Prahova valley, the Germans attacked the village of Azuga, which immediately surrendered. The Romanian troops retreated towards Busteni, Sinaia, Comarnic, Câmpina. In these areas, the civil population had to face the regime of the German occupation. “The regime of the German occupiers was based on the requisitions of: food products, cloth, tissues, clothes, leather, alcohol; a card-based system was introduced for the population for bread, meat, flour, soap. Nothing could be sold without the approval of the Germans while the famine generated an exaggerated rise in prices.”\(^3\)

The regime of the military occupation along the towns on the Prahova valley demanded that the administrator of the Peleş district in the person of Mr. Ion Sarateanu, who supervised the territory from Azuga to Breaza, had to be replaced. Official documents began to be issued in

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\(^3\) A.N.D.J.PH. *Fond prefectura Prahova*, dosar nr. 9, f.119.
German and Romanian. Administrative changes also took place in the town of Comarnic. Thus, the Mayor Nae Stoicescu, who was ill, was replaced by the Germans with the headmaster of School no. 1, Mr. Vasile Dumitrescu. The town hall archives were handed in to the German authorities. The notary of the town of Comarnic was replaced by a seller, Radu Nicolescu, who had no specialized training. The authorities drew up lists with all the merchants in town for the aim of requisitioning.4

While the local administration was taken over by the Germans, the army retreated towards Ploiești. This is how this retreat was described by a British officer: “I went with general Văitoianu to Câmpina when his troops retreated from the pass of Predeal and I saw these troops after a march of 45 km with no food or rest; although the March discipline was non-existent, the troops continued the march all night long towards Ploiești. The March discipline is very feeble amongst the Romanians.”5

It appears that by the end of November and the beginning of December 1916, the Prahova valley and the capital of the country, Bucharest, were occupied by the German troops. Ploiești was the centre of the Romanian oil industry.

The British government sent over a team of engineers with the purpose of setting fire to the petrol tanks and destroying the oil wells, in spite of the protests of the Romanian government. The chief of this mission was lieutenant-colonel John Norton – Griffiths who used the tactics of

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4 A.N.D.J.PH. Fond Primăria Comarnic, dosar nr 15, f.49.
5 Ana Sterian, „Necazurile primarului Mărăscu”, in Historia Special - România în refugiu 1916-1918, Year VI, No.18, March 2017, p. 28.
“burnt ground”. This action provoked a strong reaction even from the French mission, who intervened through General Henri M. Berthelot to stop the destructions.

After the fire, the city of Ploiești was enveloped by a cloud of thick smoke. A German soldier wrote: “All the rivers, especially Prahova, were covered with thick multi-coloured layers of petrol and at sunrise the entire sky was black because of the smoke and the darkness”.6

In another report about the city, it was described “like a scene from the Old Testament, when at day it was dark because of the clouds of smoke and at night there was light because of the giant flames of the grease which kept burning for a whole week.”7 Even the representatives of the French mission in Romania were strongly impressed by this image of the city “which in three days turned from the capital of the black gold into the capital of black smoke”.8

After Bucharest surrendered, on December 7th 1916, the exodus of the civilian population began, as well as that of the army and politicians, towards Moldova. Ploiești became overcrowded because it was the railway exchange towards Moldova. The railway station was more than overcrowded by trains coming from Bucharest but also by civilians who retreated together with the army coming from Sinaia - Comarnic - Câmpina.

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6 St. Popescu-Filuță, “Insemnări de război”, in Magazin Istoric, Year L, New Series, No.4 (601), April 2017, p. 82.
7 Ibidem, p. 82
The Prahova Valley also stood out via the heroism of the soldiers recruited along the fighting front. The soldiers from Comarnic had an important contribution in those battles. An analysis initiated by the Association “The Cult of the Heroes” led to the identification of local heroes participating in the war. Thus, most of the soldiers from Comarnic joined and participated in the battles within the 7th Infantry Regiment and the 47th Prahova Infantry Regiment.

In 1916, the 7th Prahova Infantry Regiment was part of the 9th Brigade, respectively 5th Division, part of the 2nd Romanian Army, led by General Aristide Razu. The 5th Division fought in the battles in Covasna, Buzău, Râmnicu Sărat and Focşani. Between the 16th – 23rd of November 1916, the Comarnic soldiers fought in the battle for Ploieşti. After the German occupation, the soldiers of the 5th Division retreated through Ploieşti – Buzău to Moldova, setting up a rehabilitation centre at Dorneşti.

The Comarnic soldiers within the 47th regiment were part of the 25th Brigade, respectively the 13th Division. All these were subordinated to the 1st Romanian Army. This division fought in the battles on the Olt Valley. Following the German offensive, the 13th Division retreated through Piteşti – Târgovişte – Ploieşti – Buzău, so that the army could recover at Hârlău.

Romania’s defeat in 1916 meant hundreds of thousands of casualties, as well as the loss of two thirds of the national territory. At that moment, “Romania” only meant Moldova. It was a delicate period in the existence of the Romanian state, when the country was in danger of being completely conquered.
The refuge to Moldova in the winter of 1916 - 1917 meant the restoration of the Romanian army. Nothing was easy. The city of Iași became overstuffed, the 70 000 inhabitants mixed with the large mass of new-comers, amounting to over 400 000 people. The image of Iași was a bleak one because of the crowd, misery, cold and hunger. Another winter difficulty was that of exanthemata typhus. The precarious hygiene, the lack of wood and food intensely contributed to the spreading of this epidemic. The landscape in Iași was sinister: “The carts weren’t enough to take the dead to the cemeteries… Typhus was our real enemy”. 9

The morale of the Romanian army was low and General Alexandru Averescu described it as it follows: “Many officers wandered across the city, looking for the units to which they belonged. It was hard to imagine a greater disorder. Many soldiers, still wearing the summer uniforms, walked as far as 300 km, in the cold winter, facing the blizzard. It was particularly difficult for the recruits who were not organized, very weak, poorly dressed and shoed.” 10

The winter and the spring of 1917 brought the re-organizing of the Romanian army, which received weapons and began instruction with the help of the French mission led by General Henri Mathias Berthelot. The Russian Bolshevik revolution had confused Romanian plans because of the numerous desertions of Russian soldiers. Nothing was going to stop the

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Romanians from their desire of freeing the territory and forming the unitary state.

On the 23rd of July 1917, the Romanians began a new episode of their heroism. It was the moment the Mărăști battle began, which lasted until the end of the month. This victory proved that the Romanian soldiers, if properly instructed and equipped could fight as well as their enemies. On August 6th, the attack in the Mărășești battle began. Fighting heroically under the slogan “You can’t go this way either”, launched by the commandant of the First Army, General Eremia Grigorescu, the soldiers of the 13th division rejected the German attack, paying the price with important human losses. The commandant of this division from Prahova county, general Ioan Popescu, was victorious in the Muncel area, at Peak 100, at Doaga, in the “La Răzoare” forest.

The wounded commandant of the 47th regiment, lieutenant-colonel Radu Rosetti, was replaced by Captain Drăgănescu. He managed to re-establish defences in the Panciu area. The last day of the battle at Mărășești, (22 August / 4 September 1917) in the Muncel area marked the death, in the line of duty, of the first lady-officer, infantry ensign Ecaterina Teodoroiu. Regiment 7 Prahova of the 5th division stood out in the Mărășești battles in the legendary “battle in shirts” when Comarnic soldiers, led by major Malamuceanu, also secured an important victory. The flags of the Prahova military units were decorated with the “Mihai Viteazul” order.11

If the battle at Mărăști was “the first real victory of the Romanian army”, the battle at Mărășești was the most important, being named by the soldiers “our little Verdun”. Together with the battle at Oituz, all these confrontations have written in Romanian blood the heroic deeds of the Romanian soldiers.

The bravery of the soldiers from Prahova is enlightening. Some 110 soldiers, out of all the Prahova troops, were identified as being from Comarnic, having actually taken part in this war. Most of them fought in the 7th Infantry Regiment and in the 47th Prahova Infantry Regiment. According to our research, we noticed that there were a large number of those who died in hospitals from exanthemata typhus or other epidemics or were hurt on the battlefield. To this, we must also add a not-so-precise list of those taken prisoner or those who disappeared in action.

The Romanian soldiers captured by the German army in the battles at Turtucaia on the Argeș River and on other battlefields have been detained in at least 172 camps in Germany. This was the conclusion of the investigation of the Romanian Red Cross in 1919 when the letters sent to the country by Romanian prisoners were studied. Thus, out of the 43,000 Romanian military taken prisoners by forces of the Triple Alliance, about 20 – 25,000 soldiers were transported as war prisoners in the area Pomerania – Gdansk. Here, from the very beginning of the war, the Germans set up 4 concentration camps in Gdansk – Troyl (Przerobce),

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12 Al. Averescu, op. cit., p. 139.
13 Glenn E. Torrey, op. cit. p. 179.
Brodnica, Tuchel (Tuchola) and Czerk to provide labour force for the industrial enterprises in this area of Germany.\textsuperscript{14}

The Comarnic soldiers taken prisoner were inmates in the camps at Sandorf (Slovakia), Hausberg (Austro-Hungary) and in Germany. For most of them, there is no information about the cause or the date of their death. A special situation is that of the soldier Oancea Nicolae of Comarnic who had fought in the 47\textsuperscript{th} Prahova Infantry Regiment at the battle of Mărăști. He was taken prisoner in this battle and declared missing on the 6\textsuperscript{th} of August 1917. On the 18\textsuperscript{th} of February 1918, he was set free from the camp. Being alive, he requested from the Romanian civil and military authorities the cancelation of his death certificate from 1919.\textsuperscript{15}

A particular case is that of Mr. Ion Peticila of Comarnic in whose “Memoirs” he tells of having been mobilized in 1916 in the 47\textsuperscript{th} Prahova Infantry Regiment. As he was in charge of the regiment’s logistics, he did not take part in the instruction organized by the French mission in the spring of 1917. For this reason, he was not accepted in the military operations from Mărășești. With great emotion he tells about the death of his comrades and his chance to survive.\textsuperscript{16}

Even if the war had ended in 1918, the Romanian army continued to fight on the fronts in Bessarabia, Ukraine and, respectively, Transylvania. The two regiments were de-mobilized in 1920. In memory of the human sacrifice, a number of memorials were built, in the period between the two

\textsuperscript{14} Alice D. Boboc, “Prizonierii români din lagărele germane în primul război mondial”, in \textit{Pentru Patrie}, No.4/2014, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{15} A.N.D.J.PH., fund \textit{Primăria Comarnic}, dosar nr 18, f. 59.
\textsuperscript{16} Ion Peticilă, \textit{Memorii nepublicate}, 2 volumes in manuscript, personal fund Ioana Vișan, granddaughter of Ion Peticilă, Comarnic, 2017, unpublished.
World Wars. Such a memorial is the one from Mărășești, which looks like a citadel. The central hall has the sarcophagus of General Eremia Grigorescu and around him there are crypts with the earthly remains of over 6,000 soldiers dead in battle.

In the town of Comarnic, there are monuments dedicated to the heroes. In 1923, a Committee was organized in order to build a commemorative cross. Also in the period between the two Wars, the War Orphans Organization was created. Queen Mary, who had become an active member of the “Red Cross” Association, was preoccupied with gathering the funds, helping the wounded on the front and in the mobile hospital in Moldova. For Comarnic, the gathering of funds for the orphans was coordinated by Princess Martha Bibescu.

In the period between the two World Wars, the tradition of commemorating the heroism of the soldiers who died during the First World War was established in Romania. It was decided that the heroes’ day would be held on the day of Christ’s Ascension from the Christian orthodox calendar. In the year of this article’s publication, on May 25th, the church bells toll to commemorate the bravery of the Romanian soldiers, marking a century since their heroism. Without their bravery and sacrifice, the unitary national state of Romania would not have been possible.

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17 A.N.D.J.PH., fund Primăria Comarnic, dossier no. 18, f. 59.
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