
P A R A D I G M S

Beyond Unconditional Surrender

Romania's Diplomatic Campaign for a Conditional Armistice (1942–1944)

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The fear was that an unconditional surrender would leave Romania vulnerable to severe postwar consequences, including Soviet domination and the loss of territorial integrity.

Romania's withdrawal from the war against the United Nations on 23 August 1944 came after more than two years of diplomatic probing. The changing conditions on the front were the central and constant topic on the agenda of the negotiations. Beyond the context created by the military offensives, the diplomacy of the Allied conferences during the war greatly complicated the dynamics of these negotiations, often leading to deadlocks. This article addresses the issue of the armistice that Romania would have liked to conclude with the Allies from the perspective of the negotiating positions of the parties involved in the discussions held between 1942 and 1944.

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Defining an Armistice and the Checkmate of Casablanca (1943)

THE TERM ‘armistice’ has evolved over time, reflecting the changing nature of conflicts. Initially, it was defined as an agreement to suspend hostilities between warring parties, often serving as a temporary measure to halt fighting. These armistices could be local, confined to specific conflict areas, or general, encompassing all fronts of a war. However, after 1918, the term ‘armistice’ took on a new meaning, signaling an intention to cease hostilities completely, often leading to a formal peace treaty. In modern usage, these temporary suspensions of hostilities are more commonly referred to as armistices or ceasefires, but these terms have become imprecise over time, leading to a certain level of ambiguity. In the literature, they can often be found under the name “preliminary peace agreements or treaties.”¹

Peacebuilding after the Second World War raised the issue of unconditional surrender. This was becoming a problematic precedent for the Axis powers to tolerate. While armistices are usually negotiated agreements that serve as a temporary measure to stop fighting, thus facilitating the initiation of peace talks and the eventual formulation of peace treaties, capitulation means that a belligerent party formally gives up resistance to its adversary. Surrender can be unconditional if the defeated party accepts all the conditions imposed by the victor or conditional if specific conditions are agreed upon before the cessation of hostilities.² Armistices may be subject to renewal until permanent terms are negotiated. If we look at capitulation, we note that this means the definitive cessation of military operations. Unlike an armistice, it often leads to the occupation of the territory of the defeated party, disarmament and the initiation of peace negotiations.³

The progression of the Second World War prompted several European states (Italy, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Finland, and Czechoslovakia) to seek an armistice with the Allies. The terms of these armistice agreements were not solely determined by the international context, but also by the strategic interests of the three Allied powers, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and the United States, who played a significant role in dictating these terms.

The Casablanca Conference, held on 14–24 January 1943, was a significant turning point in Allied strategic planning. During this conference, Allied leaders Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill declared that they would only accept the unconditional surrender of the Axis powers. Apparently, “unconditional surrender” was not a premeditated goal of the British–American meeting in Casablanca, but a phrase with which President Roosevelt surprised his audience during the press conference that concluded that meeting. If Churchill’s

memoirs are to be believed, it was then that the British prime minister heard this expression for the first time and was overcome with enthusiasm.⁴ In any case, the Anglo-Americans remained faithful to this principle in their discussions with those Axis belligerents looking for options to exit the war in 1943 and 1944. This policy had dramatic implications for Romania's diplomatic efforts in 1943. Despite political pressure from the United States and other Allies, President Roosevelt wanted to create the aura of an uncompromising leader by repeating this condition in all his subsequent statements.⁵

The Romanian Diplomatic Offensive (1942–1944)

WHAT I call in this article the “diplomatic offensive of Romania” is a highly complex action through which various Romanian political leaders struggled, for almost two years, to pull the country from the edge of a precipice that had been opening since 1942, when the Allies began to outline the plan for a lasting peace in the postwar international system in which the Axis countries had at most a marginal role. Perhaps one of the most appropriate descriptions of this diplomatic offensive belongs to the Romanian historian Vasile Pușcaș, who labelled it “hope and despair.”⁶ This period falls between August 1941 and September 1944. This interval, which appears here more extensive than it is customary in the literature on this subject, can be divided into three major stages: (a) August 1941–the end of 1942 (negotiations within the Axis); (b) January 1943–23 August 1944 (negotiations with the Allies) and (c) 23 August–12 September 1944 (negotiations under Soviet occupation). In what follows, this article will explore the first two stages.

August 1941–End of 1942 (Negotiations Within the Axis)

IN THE first stage, the negotiations were initiated by the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mihai Antonescu, immediately after the start of Operation Barbarossa. As early as July 1941, with the arrival of Renato Bova Scoppa, the minister plenipotentiary of Italy in Bucharest, M. Antonescu tried to intensify Romanian–Italian relations in order to build a “Latin Axis” which would include Romania, Italy, France, Spain, and Portugal. Such a diplomatic construction would have counterbalanced German supremacy and halted Slavic expansionism on the continent. On 6 August 1941, M. Antonescu suggested to Bova Scoppa a compromise whereby the war would end with a “Pax Germanica” in which the Mediterranean Entente would occupy a relevant place.

Reportedly, a similar perspective had been presented earlier to Bova Scoppa by Portuguese Prime Minister António de Oliveira Salazar, while on a mission to Lisbon. However, the Portuguese argument was that Italy should avoid entering the war precisely to avoid the Latin Axis coming under German rule.⁷ In parallel with this project, M. Antonescu presented to the Italian diplomat the outline of a possible institutionalized cooperation under the auspices of the Holy See. This cooperation was to include several neutral states, such as Spain, Portugal, Sweden, and Switzerland, seeking to initiate a reconciliation of the European belligerents.⁸

On 21 November 1941, the Romanian foreign minister instructed the Romanian Legation in Lisbon to test Salazar's opinion regarding the Latin Axis. The Portuguese Prime Minister informed the Romanian envoy that his country could have only encouraged such an ambitious initiative if Italy had not been in a duet with Germany.⁹

However, in 1941, Mihai Antonescu's (secret) diplomatic actions were still in flagrant contradiction with Romania's military actions. Unofficially, Romania's initial participation in Operation Barbarossa, from June 1941, was part of an action intended to liberate the territories occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940, based on the agreement of August 1939 between Joseph Stalin and Adolf Hitler. However, the telegram that President F. D. Roosevelt sent on 18 July 1941 to Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin, the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, ruled out any possible benevolent attitude of the Allies towards the participation of Romania and Finland in the war against the USSR.

The Bucharest government faced a daunting task in justifying the continued presence of Romanian troops in the campaign against the Soviet Union, across the Dniester. In this context, on 15 August 1941, M. Antonescu instructed the Romanian Legation in Washington, D.C., to explain the geopolitical and geo-strategic reasons for establishing a security buffer zone between the Dniester and the Bug. This was the moment when the Romanian foreign minister put forth the argument that the continuation of this war on Soviet territory was in the interest of the Anglo-Saxon world, as it created a barrier against the Bolshevik threat to European civilization.¹⁰ The discussions between the Romanian envoy to Washington, D.C., Brutus Coste, and the Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, highlight on the one hand the fact that the Americans and the British considered that a continuation of the Romanian participation in the campaign against the USSR only prolonged the war and, implicitly, the Western costs of destroying Nazism. On the other hand, the Westerners suggested that Romania had positioned itself as an aggressor state, especially after continuing the fighting beyond Odessa. Already on 3 October 1941, the American diplomacy declared itself misled by the government in Bucharest.¹¹

The literature seems to prefer a synthesis of Mihai Antonescu's diplomatic efforts from the first part of 1942, creating a path for Iuliu Maniu, the unofficial leader of the democratic opposition in Romania. Until we get to him, it is appropriate to present some data that comes from the German archives, which we can corroborate with the Italian diplomatic documents and the archive of the United States State Department. In his extensive and rigorously documented study, the historian Sebastian Balta suggests that Mihai Antonescu "had already discussed in Bucharest with envoys of the neutral states issues related to the peace. When exactly these diplomatic attempts were initiated cannot be established."¹²

Four days after the first American air raid against the Romanian oilfields at Ploiești, Mihai Antonescu created, on 16 June 1942, within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a "Commission for the collection of documentary material for the peace conference," also known as the "Peace Office." It was made up of approximately 80 personalities from political, military, scientific and cultural circles, including War Minister Constantin Pantazi, Army Chief of Staff Ilie Șteflea, Ion Petrovici, Constantin D. Bușilă, Pamfil Șeicaru, and Gheorghe I. Brătianu.¹³

Mihai Antonescu's parallel diplomatic efforts continued throughout 1942. An information note dated 17 October 1942 informed the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs that in the Romanian diplomatic missions to all countries, there were important people "whose main task was to carefully probe the state of mind and prepare Romania's transition to the side of the Allies."¹⁴

Diplomatic probes were active within the Romanian legations abroad. For example, Brutus Coste was visited on 18 May 1942 by an official from the State Department who presented him with the United States government's perspective on the evolution of the war and Romania's position. The American official told Coste that his government was not assuming any obligations regarding the postwar territorial configuration of Europe. Therefore, Romania did not receive any guarantee for its borders, either. At most, he was promised a solution to the Transylvanian issue.¹⁵ Such a discouraging perspective from the American diplomats confined the Romanian leaders to merely tentative options.

In his diplomatic pursuits, Mihai Antonescu turned his attention towards neutral states. Every week, the Romanian foreign minister met in Bucharest with diplomatic envoys of Switzerland, Portugal, and Turkey. Notably, the head of the Turkish mission held a key position as the main channel of communication with the Allied diplomats in Ankara, Istanbul, and Cairo.¹⁶ Likewise, the Romanian diplomatic envoy in Lisbon was one of the channels often used to transmit Bucharest's messages to British diplomats.¹⁷

Between the end of 1942 and September 1943, when Italy capitulated, the Romanian government intensified diplomatic efforts to find a way out of the

war. After the defeat at Stalingrad, the prospect of the collapse of the Wehrmacht and the imminent invasion of the Red Army led the leaders in Bucharest to intensify their diplomatic actions.¹⁸ In 1942, Mihai Antonescu tried to present his peace initiatives as being in Germany's interest, emphasizing the Soviet danger and the need for a joint strategy with the Western Allies. However, Ribbentrop categorically rejected any peace talks, considering the Romanian initiatives counterproductive. Dissatisfied with the German refusal, Mihai Antonescu criticized Germany for its attitude towards the allies and the lack of an effective strategy amid a military crisis on the Eastern Front.¹⁹

A discussion held in November 1942 between Mihai Antonescu and the German Minister of Science, Education and National Culture, Bernhard Rust, features a relatively singular position that the Romanian leader displayed in regard to a Reich already on the military defensive. The Romanian leader stated that despite an amply demonstrated loyalty to the Axis alliance, nothing prevented him from stating that "in Europe today, there is nothing but disorder, disorientation, hostility, and a prelude to chaos."²⁰

Beyond the strictly military aspect, Mihai Antonescu highlighted the absence of a political approach among the Axis countries. He criticized the fact that, unlike the Allied states, no vision of what the postwar world should look like had been formulated in the Axis space. In a discussion with the Italian minister in Bucharest, Antonescu repeated to him the thoughts he had conveyed to Baron Manfred von Killinger, stating that

*Roosevelt speaks, he lists principles for the world of tomorrow, proclaims in his own way what the new order will be, gives the Allied nations a creed and a faith. On this side, we ignore everything; we do not know what our future will be, and we live in agitation and uncertainty. If Germany does not decide to leave the incandescent nebula in which it is in this time of war and give a body to the ideas and precision to the formulas, the peoples adhering to the Axis will end up losing faith.*²¹

1942 was also a time of diplomatic endeavors for the leaders of the Romanian democratic opposition. The central figure remained Iuliu Maniu, the chairman of the National Peasant Party, who considered himself "a spokesman for the Romanian population before the Allies."²² Even if the British became exasperated by Maniu's "indecisiveness, inability to act and stubbornness,"²³ he created a real network of agents with diplomatic missions. He had discussions with the Americans through René de Weck (plenipotentiary minister for Switzerland in Romania) and Carol (Citta) Davila (ex-plenipotentiary minister for Romania in United States), with the British through the Turkish Embassy in Bucharest, and through Cornel Bianu (Maniu's envoy to London during World War II), Jean

Pangal (ex-plenipotentiary minister for Romania in Spain and Portugal), Prince Barbu Știrbey, to which others were added in the following years.

The first step by which he legitimized his position in these diplomatic efforts was taken in January 1942, when the opposition leader reached an agreement with Queen Mother Helen to maintain and develop contacts with the Western Allies in Romania. Constantin I. C. Brătianu (chairman of the National Liberal Party) and Barbu Știrbey also rallied in support of such an approach.²⁴

Maniu's task was difficult and hampered by the inflexible and often unimaginative approach of the Western Allies. The latter would have wanted Maniu to assume leadership of a coup to overthrow the Antonescu government and put the Romanian Army at the service of the Allies. Even assuming that such an action could have been carried out, Maniu still asked the Allies for a minimal set of guarantees for Romania: the independence of the state and the restoration of the borders of 1920, except for the Quadrilateral. These wishes were transmitted by Maniu through numerous channels, including a memorandum sent on 20 November 1942 to the government in London through the Swiss Legation in Bucharest.²⁵ On this occasion, the leader of the Romanian opposition explained that Romania's internal context was too fragile to risk the removal of Ion Antonescu from the government. The presence of German troops and secret services in Romania made it impossible to stop fighting the Soviet Union and turn against Germany, especially in the absence of consistent Allied military support.²⁶

Somehow reinforcing the message sent in May 1942 to B. Coste, the Foreign Office sent Maniu, in December 1942, an information note stating that the postwar borders of Romania were to be set by the Allies, based on the principles of the Atlantic Charter and of the British–Soviet Treaty of 26 May 1942.²⁷

It was almost impossible for Maniu to find a negotiation margin favorable to Romania's interests. Hoping to soften the Allies' position, the old politician sent an extensive memorandum to London in December 1942, trying to clarify the historical, geopolitical, and moral reasons that had pushed Romania to fight alongside Germany against the USSR.²⁸

January 1943–23 August 1944 (Negotiations with the Allies)

THE CASABLANCA Conference, held in January 1943, was a significant turning point in Allied strategic planning. The imposition of unconditional surrender complicated Romania's attempts to negotiate an armistice. The Romanian leaders, especially Ion Antonescu, were deeply reluctant and fearful of the harsh terms that this policy entailed. The fear was that an unconditional surrender would leave Romania vulnerable to severe postwar

consequences, including Soviet domination and the loss of territorial integrity. This policy made the Romanian leadership rather reluctant to break relations with Germany without concrete guarantees from the Allies.²⁹

The month of January 1943 was relatively rich in diplomatic discussions. On 4 January 1943, Iuliu Maniu wrote to Edvard Beneš, the president of the Czechoslovak government in exile in London, asking him “to defend Romanian interests with the Allies.”³⁰ The response received seemed quite discouraging. The Czechoslovak leader stated that creating a Romanian leadership in exile would have been much more effective: “I draw attention to the fact that if responsible politicians from the country do not come abroad in time, Romania’s interests will suffer all the more.”³¹ Beneš’ message later led Maniu to request clarifications on whether creating a government in exile in London could have given Romania’s cause more chances.³² In January 1943, the Foreign Office rejected Maniu’s request to create a Romanian government-in-exile in London, considering that this could damage relations with the Soviet Union. Although the United States offered the possibility of establishing a government-in-exile on American soil, Maniu refused, considering that the United States had no major strategic interests in Southeast Europe.³³

On the other side, dissatisfied with Mussolini’s refusal to support the Latin Axis project, Mihai Antonescu decided to intensify the attempts to have direct contact with diplomatic representatives of the Allies in neutral countries, in order to conclude a separate peace.³⁴ On 16 January 1943, Mihai Antonescu began discussions with the Turkish envoy in Bucharest, Hamdullah Suphi Tanrıöver, and informed Berlin through the German ambassador Manfred von Killinger about these contacts. What created additional nervousness in Berlin was that in these actions, Antonescu, through his diplomatic channels, let it be understood that these peace overtures were made at least with Hitler’s knowledge. Ribbentrop, Germany’s foreign minister, demanded clarifications, stressing that Germany was not interested in a peace but in the complete defeat of its enemies. In early February 1943, rumors of Mihai Antonescu’s peace talks were confirmed by German intelligence intercepts, prompting Antonescu to openly acknowledge these efforts to Killinger.³⁵

The news about the peace overtures that the Romanian leaders were making led Ribbentrop to send to Bucharest a denial of the fact that this was being done in the name of Hitler.³⁶ At a meeting between Joachim Ribbentrop and Giuseppe Bastianini, on 7 April 1943, the former told the Italian undersecretary of foreign affairs that he had learned that:

Minister Dimitrescu, a few weeks ago, allegedly told the ambassadors of Argentina and Portugal in Madrid that, at the request of the Führer, he had been instructed

by Antonescu to start peace negotiations. Telegraphic intercepts also corroborate this. On the other hand, the Romanian diplomats would have widely spread the news of the tentative contacts with a view to negotiations, not only in Madrid but also in Lisbon, Ankara, and Helsinki.³⁷

In April 1943, Hitler invited the Romanian leader to a discussion at Kleßheim Castle, where he presented information about Foreign Minister Mihai Antonescu's peace attempts and opposition leader Iuliu Maniu's contacts with the Western powers. Hitler demanded the dismissal of Mihai Antonescu and the arrest of Maniu, but Marshal Antonescu cautiously refused, claiming that the charges were based on misinterpretations by foreign diplomats. Instead of a resignation, the marshal asked Mihai Antonescu to take a few weeks off.³⁸ Once recovered from this "diplomatic illness," Antonescu resumed his activity, as indicated by the correspondence between Bova Scoppa and Ciano. The Romanian foreign minister regularly expressed his belief in the German defeat and, in May 1943, proposed creating a "Mediterranean Entente," hoping for Mussolini's involvement in this project.³⁹ Aware of the military and political crisis of the Axis states, Mihai Antonescu proposed to Mussolini to enter into contact with the Western Allies, but the Duke considered that it was still too early for such steps.⁴⁰

On 25 July 1943, two weeks after the Allied landing in Sicily, Mussolini was dismissed and arrested. Mihai Antonescu addressed Raffaele Guariglia, the new Italian foreign minister, renewing the proposal that the two countries initiate a joint action to withdraw from the war.⁴¹ The evasive answer the Italian diplomat gave on 30 July left the Romanian government struggling with indecision. Furthermore, Killiger was instructed to inform Antonescu of the Italian government's decision to continue the war alongside Germany. A few weeks later, on behalf of Prime Minister Pietro Badoglio, General Giuseppe Castellano arrived in Lisbon on 19 August to negotiate with the Allies, and on 3 September, he signed Italy's capitulation.⁴²

Iuliu Maniu urged Alexandru Cretzianu, the former secretary general of the Foreign Ministry, to accept his appointment as Romania's envoy to Ankara and to intensify contacts with the Western Allies. Maniu instructed Cretzianu to inform the British and American diplomats that Romania would turn against Germany once the Anglo-American troops arrived in Bulgaria. Antonescu authorized informing the United States about the resources available for a possible Allied landing in the Balkans.⁴³ However, in the autumn of 1943, plans for an Allied landing in the Balkans were abandoned in favor of operations in Normandy and southern France. At the Moscow Conference of October 1943, the Soviets strongly opposed the entry of British-American troops in Europe from the southeast. Arriving in Ankara in such a context, all he got from the Western

Allies was a categorical refusal for Romania to sign the peace only with the British and the Americans.⁴⁴

Returning to Bucharest in November 1943, Cretzianu presented the Romanian leaders with the new context of the negotiations, which increasingly limited Romania's negotiating options. Antonescu agreed with the position of Maniu and Brătianu, who considered the capitulation a military action, adding that he would leave power if the opposition obtained guarantees for Romania's independence.⁴⁵ Thus, they chose to appoint Barbu Știrbey as the Romanian emissary for the negotiations with the Allies in Cairo.

In all these diplomatic efforts meant to avoid an unconditional armistice or even a capitulation for Romania, one of the dilemmas that troubled the diplomats of the Allied states was who represented Romania in negotiating the terms of the armistice. Thus, in the note dated 2 February 1944, sent by James C. Dunn (director of the Office of European Affairs in the State Department) to John Gilbert Winant (the United States ambassador to the United Kingdom), certain "aspects of Romanian Surrender" were questioned. Among these issues was from which Romanian official the Allies should have received the capitulation. Accepting Ion Antonescu as part of this diplomatic action would have entailed that the government he led would implement the terms of the capitulation. For this reason, the Allies seemed to prefer replacing the Antonescu regime with a government led by Iuliu Maniu.⁴⁶

However, a memorandum of the Division of Southern European Affairs from March 1944, signed by Edward R. Stettinius Jr., indicated that

*so far both the Antonescu regime and the democratic opposition under Maniu have manifested no disposition (a) to turn actively against the Germans or (b) to submit without resistance to the Russians.*⁴⁷

Meanwhile, the Counselor of the Romanian Embassy in Madrid, Scarlat Grigoriu, established contact with the American Ambassador Carlton J. H. Hayes, in October 1943. The latter allegedly told the Romanian diplomat that the USA would be willing to secretly guarantee that Anglo-American troops would occupy part of the Romanian territory to prevent a complete occupation by the Red Army. However, the condition was for the Romanian foreign minister to send a statement expressing the Romanian government's willingness to negotiate based on the formula of unconditional surrender. Afterwards, it was necessary to authorize a Romanian general to go to the headquarters of the Allied forces in North Africa to discuss the military measures to be taken. Such an approach could possibly have protected the Romanian army from possible German reprisals in the context of the long-awaited Allied landing in the Balkans.⁴⁸

Meanwhile, Marshal Antonescu was trying to convince the German leaders, including Hitler personally, of the need for peace between Germany and the Western Allies in order to avoid the victory of the USSR. A scenario that the leaders in Bucharest presented on 21 December 1943, through Grigoriu, assumed that the Romanian government would negotiate based on unconditional surrender but that the submission of the declaration of capitulation would take place only after an Allied landing in the Balkans or after the entry of Turkey in the war on the side of the Allies. However, the two conditions lost their relevance after the Tehran Conference (28 November–1 December 1943); the three Allied powers agreed to abandon the landing in the Balkans and that Turkey should not be included in the war.

On 17 March 1944, in Cairo, Barbu Știrbey, acting as an emissary of the Romanian government, initiated negotiations with representatives of the three Allied powers: Lord Moyne (United Kingdom), Lincoln MacVeagh (United States), and Nikolai Vasilyevich Novikov (Soviet Union). Știrbey, representing the democratic opposition led by Iuliu Maniu, boldly declared the government's willingness to exit the war as soon as possible. The democratic opposition conveyed to the Allies their respect for the commitments and their demand for minimal guarantees such as freedom, independence, and the recognition of the country's territorial rights.⁴⁹

On 12 April 1944, Barbu Știrbey received from the Soviet ambassador Novikov a note addressed to both Antonescu and Maniu, which contained four minimal conditions of the Soviets: (1) the breaking of relations between Romania and Germany, with the Romanian Army turning against the Wehrmacht, in order to "restore its independence and sovereignty"; (2) the recognition of the Romanian–Soviet border from June 1940 and the cession of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina; (3) the payment of reparations to the Soviet Union for the damage caused by war and occupation; and (4) the release of all Allied prisoners of war. It was indicated that these conditions could be changed to Romania's disadvantage if they were not accepted forthwith.⁵⁰

The note of 12 April 1944, in which the Soviet Union presented the capitulation conditions to the Romanian government, was seen by Washington diplomats as a violation of the principle of unconditional surrender. The Soviet message stated that the Romanian troops in Crimea, Odessa, and the Chișinău area had to surrender to the Red Army or immediately start fighting against the German Army. In addition, a Soviet commitment was made that the Red Army would not occupy Romania militarily but would demand freedom of movement on Romanian territory. In the end, the Soviet government communicated that it was committed to fighting alongside Romanian soldiers to integrate Transylvania into Romania, wholly or a significant part thereof. All these clauses in

the Note of 12 April were one-sided in regard to the Western Allies, who had often stated that territorial questions would be discussed at the peace conference. However, the Soviet Union did not want the Western Allies to have any influence in the postwar organization of Central and Eastern Europe. In the military context of the moment, the British and American representatives finally accepted the content of the Soviet Note.⁵¹

The Romanian authorities' acceptance of the Soviet conditions was equivalent to ceding Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, which is why Marshal Antonescu hesitated to answer.

Unbeknownst to many, a clandestine series of negotiations commenced in Stockholm, running parallel to the more publicized talks in Cairo. Led by Frederic Nanu, the Romanian Legation found themselves in unexpected discussions with the Soviet ambassador Alexandra Kollontai. After weeks of deliberation, on 12 April, Nanu was handed the Soviet conditions of capitulation, mirroring those sent to Cairo via Novikov.⁵²

On 29 May, without consulting Bucharest, Nanu presented the Soviet Embassy with four additional provisions to the armistice terms. These included: (1) a deadline of 15 days for the withdrawal of German troops from Romania, with the participation of Romanian troops alongside the Red Army if the deadline was not respected; (2) freedom of movement for the Allied forces on the Romanian territory, with the maintenance of the Romanian civil administration and a safe haven for the Romanian government; (3) the fate of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina was to be decided at the peace conference, based on self-determination; (4) the need for a detailed analysis of Romania's economic situation before establishing final reparations. On 31 May 1944, the Soviets responded to Nanu's note, stating that three demands were non-negotiable: that Romania change fronts, cede Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, and release Allied prisoners of war. However, they were willing to (1) grant a deadline of 15 days for the withdrawal of German troops, (2) allow the Romanian government to have a protected territory, (3) make a compromise regarding the civil administration, and (4) take into account Romania's difficult economic situation in establishing reparations.⁵³

Nanu highlighted the contradiction between the requirement to attack Germany immediately and the 15-day deadline for the withdrawal of German troops. He also asked whether Moscow would be willing to receive a Romanian delegation if Germany were to cut off communications with Bucharest or Stockholm. On 2 June, the Soviet government added that if the German troops withdrew within the designated time limit, they would have no objection to Romania remaining neutral. The Soviets also agreed to receive a Romanian delegation to Moscow.⁵⁴

Ion Antonescu's decision to reject the Soviet armistice terms, despite the concessions made on 2 June, was a momentous one. His deep distrust of the Soviet Union, based on a history of repeated invasions of Romanian territory and personal experiences, made him doubt the Kremlin's promises. However, it was his fear of the serious consequences of a change of allegiances that ultimately swayed him. These consequences included a possible German occupation of Romania, a scenario made even more likely by the Wehrmacht's invasion of Hungary in the previous months.⁵⁵

In July 1944, the German ambassador Carl August Clodius reported from Bucharest that Marshal Antonescu was affected by the military failures and the air raids on Romania, fearing the total disorganization of the country. Antonescu was criticized for allowing opposition emissaries to negotiate with the enemy and for not strengthening the internal psychological front, for believing that the war could not be won militarily but through a political understanding. At the same time, Clodius noted that, despite the criticism, Antonescu remained faithful to the German line but was reluctant to make financial and economic sacrifices. The Germans had to choose between imposing the necessary economic demands or risking a change of government with possible negative consequences.⁵⁶

The last meeting between Ion Antonescu and Adolf Hitler (5 August 1944) lasted five and a half hours. Hitler spoke of the new V-1 weapons, emphasizing the loyalty of the Allies and demanding a clear commitment from Antonescu. The marshal expressed his concerns about the Eastern Front, Romania's air defense, and the actions of Turkey, Bulgaria, and Hungary. In this context, Hitler promised him that he would provide additional planes and heavy artillery, assuring him that Germany would not abandon Romania. Although Hitler thought he could count on Antonescu, he was dissatisfied with the answers he received, considering them unsatisfactory.⁵⁷

In the last days of his regime, Marshal Ion Antonescu was pressured by the opposition leaders, Iuliu Maniu, Constantin Brătianu, and Gheorghe I. Brătianu, to conclude a truce. On 22 August 1944, Iuliu Maniu sent Ion Mihalache to Antonescu, who had recently returned from the front, to discuss the armistice. Antonescu recognized the gravity of the situation but refused to betray Germany, despite arguments that Germany had betrayed Romania. The next day, G.I. Brătianu informed Antonescu that the opposition was willing to assume all the consequences of the truce. Under these circumstances, the marshal said that he agreed to accept the truce under the required conditions if the opposition leaders offered him a written statement showing that they agreed to all conditions, including the definitive relinquishment of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. The opposition leaders pledged to deliver the signed statement.⁵⁸

Meanwhile, at the Royal Palace, an action group was created around King Michael I for the dismissal of the Antonescu government on 26 August. However, when Ion Antonescu and Mihai Antonescu requested an audience with the monarch following the morning discussions with the opposition, the group decided to move forward the dismissal procedure, especially since the marshal intended to leave for the front the next day. Faced with Antonescu's refusal to sign the armistice at the time of his visit to the Palace, when he stated that he needed 24 hours to receive answers from the diplomatic emissaries, the king agreed and proceeded with the arrest of Antonescu. On the evening of 23 August, the king sent a communiqué to the country announcing Romania's exit from the war against the Allies. The new government, led by General Constantin Sănătescu, had undertaken to negotiate and conclude an armistice with the United Nations.⁵⁹ On the night of 25 August 1944, Soviet Commissar Vyacheslav Mikhaylovich Molotov announced that the Soviet Union would respect Romania's independence and territorial integrity if it joined the fight against Germany and Hungary. Although Romania ceased hostilities and joined the Allies, between 60,000 and 160,000 Romanian soldiers were taken prisoner by the Red Army until the armistice was signed on 12 September 1944. The Romanian delegation, including Barbu Știrbey, Ghiță Popp, General Dumitru Dămăceanu, and Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, arrived in Moscow for negotiations. Although they failed to obtain significant changes to the Soviet conditions, the armistice was signed, acknowledging Romania's defeat and placing its military forces under Soviet command.⁶⁰

Final Remarks

IN THE context of the permanent attempts at negotiation, Mihai Antonescu and Iuliu Maniu stood out as two politicians with opposite personalities and distinct negotiation styles. Each initially tried to ensure the legitimacy of their position in the discussions they initiated. Each of them tried to create networks of emissaries sent to the capitals of Allied and neutral states. Even though each showed creativity in finding solutions, they could not see the overall picture of the postwar system that the Allies seemed to envisage. These negotiations were almost impossible, as the Romanian negotiators were not allowed to choose their partners. They ran into the inflexibility of the United States and the British–Soviet geopolitical competition over East-Central Europe, where the Soviet Union had the upper hand.



Notes

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Abstract

Beyond Unconditional Surrender: Romania’s Diplomatic Campaign for a Conditional Armistice (1942–1944)

Romania’s exit from World War II on 23 August 1944 came after more than two years of complex diplomatic negotiations for an unconditional armistice. This article examines Romania’s diplomatic efforts undertaken between 1942 and 1944, highlighting the challenging conditions imposed by the Allies and the internal political dynamics. Romanian leaders like Mihai Antonescu and Iuliu Maniu endeavored to secure favorable terms to safeguard national interests despite significant hurdles. Their efforts, influenced by the strategic interests of the Allied powers and the changing military landscape, ultimately led to Romania’s shift from the Axis to the Allied side, with profound postwar consequences.

Keywords

Romania, World War II, unconditional armistice, diplomatic negotiations, Mihai Antonescu, Iuliu Maniu