

At the Crossroads of Destiny

Romania's Tumultuous Journey from 23 August 1944 to the Armistice: Consequences

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Romania's entry into the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union and its subsequent communization as a guarantee of its geopolitical subordination must be understood as part of a global transformation process within the international system.

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The Dichotomy of 23 August 1944

IN ROMANIA, 23 August 1944 is considered the day of enslavement by the opponents of communism and the day of liberation by its supporters. For the anti-communists, 23 August symbolizes the end of the old order, which, however imperfect it may have been, functioned according to Romanian principles within a Romanian national framework.

The historical representation according to which the communization of Romania was the direct consequence of the decisions taken in Bucharest on the afternoon of 23 August 1944 began to emerge at the time of the event itself. First, we have the rhetoric of the political leaders who were behind the event or hailed it as a historical fact of exceptional value, as was the case with the communists. Later, this image enjoyed a wide circulation in Romanian historiography before and after 1989,

as historians and analysts sought to unravel the roots and causes of the emergence of the communist regime in Romania.¹

Romania's Strategic Predicament

LOOKING BACK at the events occurred eight decades ago, any researcher can easily realize that in the summer of 1944, Romania's situation was rather difficult, both due to the Soviet victories on the Eastern Front and to the occupation of an important part of its territory. Domestically, in the summer of 1944, the old regime and its supporters faced two inimical forces, which had become increasingly powerful: the Soviet Union and its agent in Romania, the Romanian Communist Party. In that situation, the efforts of the politicians were directed towards the search for compromise formulas to guarantee the continuity of the Romanian nation, the Romanian society, and the Romanian political representation in an independent and democratic Romania. Moreover, for the fulfilment of this goal, the act of 23 August 1944² meant not only the separation from the Nazi coalition and the removal of the government led by Ion Antonescu, but also the beginning of Soviet influence in Romania, with the entry of the Romanian communists in the new government formed in the evening of 23 August and with the increase in the number of Soviet soldiers on the territory of the country.

The Immediate Aftermath and International Reactions

IN THE evening of 23 August 1944, the reality was much more difficult for Romania than one could have imagined. On the one hand, externally, after King Michael I's Proclamation to the country announcing the exit from the alliance with the Axis Powers and the immediate end of the war with the United Nations,³ Romania's status was that of an independent state, waging war against its former allies, on the side of its former enemies. On the other hand, internally, the hopes the Romanians had on 23 August 1944 were quickly dashed. A few days later, upon their entry into Bucharest, the Soviet troops found an interim government prepared to negotiate an armistice and hold free elections.⁴ However, the Soviet Command in Romania did not recognize the national authority of a state with which the government of their country had not yet concluded an armistice, and failed to take any measures against the abuses of the Soviet soldiers against the Romanian soldiers and civilians.⁵ Moreover,

it was only on 27 August that Moscow ordered its troops in Romania to stop treating the Romanians as enemies.

Hoping for help and political support, the king, the prime minister, diplomats and the leaders of the democratic parties requested Western assistance.⁶ Of primary importance was the attitude of the United States of America and the Soviet Union towards Romania. Nevertheless, given how the unofficial meetings between the representatives of King Michael I and of the government and those of the Western powers with a view to an armistice went, the situation must have been discouraging for Bucharest. The United States had little interest in Romania. Historically, the ties between the two countries had been insignificant. Few Romanians knew English, and even fewer had visited America. Likewise, few Americans had been in Romania before the war. There were not many who knew where to locate Romania geographically. The Romanian emigration to the United States was not numerous during the interwar period. American economic interests in Romania were limited to investments in oil companies and to a few subsidiaries of smaller American corporations. However, the leaders of the Romanian parties, except for the communists, but also representatives of the intellectual elite and the majority of the population looked at America as the savior of Romania due to the fall of France and the distrust in Great Britain.⁷ They even hoped to receive support in recovering the territories lost in 1940, even if, until 1944, the United States of America had refused to discuss any issue involving territorial changes pending the peace treaties to be concluded after the end of the war. This should not have been surprising since, at least in political circles, it was known that the United States had consistently spoken out against any intentions to examine and regulate matters that concerned the areas of interest and influence of the various great powers while hostilities continued on the front. The motivation for the American position was complex. Washington wanted the postwar order to be organized according to the principles of the Atlantic Charter, the application of which should lead to “one world,” governed by the values of liberalism and democracy, in which the assurance of peace and security belonged to a world organization.⁸ However, starting in 1943, under the pressure of events and mainly due to the Soviet advance towards Central and Southeastern Europe, Washington had to start accepting arrangements that included solutions regarding the postwar world, including territorial solutions.⁹ Thus, in addition to the State Department of the United States, an Advisory Committee on Problems of Foreign Relations was established, under the nominal leadership of the Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, but having, in reality, the Undersecretary of State, Sumner Welles, as its executive chairman. The most important departments within it were the Political Subcommittee and the Ter-

ritorial Subcommittee, which had, among other things, the mission to draw up the necessary recommendations regarding the solution to territorial problems.¹⁰

On the other hand, recognizing the need for a rapid and methodical transition from a state of war to a state of peace, after the Moscow Conference of October 1943, the foreign ministers of the Soviet Union, the United States of America, and Great Britain decided, in a joint declaration of 30 October 1943, that the unity of action created during the war against their enemies should also be maintained in the process of organizing and ensuring peace and security.¹¹ However, the unity invoked by the three allies was no longer respected, even if, at the Moscow Conference in 1943, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin had declared that they would seek an agreement on the liberated countries. A secret arrangement was made in June 1944 between London and Moscow, more precisely, an agreement whereby, for three months, the Soviet Union would exercise predominant influence in Romania and Great Britain in Greece. Although the President of the United States of America initially disagreed, he eventually relented and accepted Churchill's plan, but on the condition that the agreement between London and Moscow be implemented only during wartime,¹² which did not happen.

It is true that the Americans, to a greater extent than the British, considered the Soviet presence to be temporary. However, we have no reason to believe that the American government was prepared at that time to oppose the Russian policy and plans for Romania, as later demonstrated by the evolution of events. As for the British, they were fully prepared to hand Romania over to Soviet rule in the fall of 1944. Churchill admitted that during his talks with Stalin he had agreed to a 90% Russian influence in Romania. Correctly understanding the intentions of the Soviet Union towards Romania, Churchill sought to obtain the greatest benefits for Great Britain in Greece.¹³

There are opinions in the historiography according to which King Michael I's decision of 23 August 1944 to withdraw Romania from the anti-Soviet war was partly influenced by the very attempt to thwart the implementation of the British and Russian plans in Romania, as well as to prevent their acceptance by the States United States of America. It is believed that doubts about Washington's determination to really oppose the establishment of a Soviet sphere of influence in Romania led King Michael I and his political associates to allow, on 23 August 1944, the inclusion of a communist leader, Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, in the Sănătescu government constituted on that occasion.¹⁴

For his part, after 23 August, Prime Minister Constantin Sănătescu had some major priorities, but also few options for achieving them. First of all, he did everything in his power for Romania to conclude an armistice as soon as possible,

in order to regulate the status of the country at the international level and then focus on the territorial issues concerning Romania's borders, especially the one with Hungary. However, since the beginning of 1944, during the negotiations carried out by Romania with the representatives of the United States of America, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union, the Western representatives had advised Bucharest to reach an agreement with Moscow with a view to an armistice that would establish the preliminaries of a peace. On 29 August the Romanian delegation left for Moscow, where it arrived the following day.

The Armistice and Its Aftermath

ONLY ON 8 September, after a week of waiting and after the Soviet troops had occupied the entire territory of the country, the Romanian representatives were received at the Kremlin in a glacial atmosphere. Vyacheslav Molotov read out the armistice clauses, refusing to discuss them with the Romanians.¹⁵ The Armistice Agreement was signed on 12 September 1944 by the Soviet General Rodion Malinovsky on behalf of the Allies, i.e., the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom of Great Britain, and the United States of America, although the representatives of the last two states, Archibald Clark Kerr and W. Averell Harriman, were present. Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, Gen. Dumitru Dămăceanu, Prince Barbu Știrbey, and Gheorghe (Ghiță) Popp signed for Romania.¹⁶ The armistice clauses drawn up by Molotov were very harsh for Romania and allowed numerous abuses by the Soviets.

The manner in which the issue of the Armistice Agreement with Romania was treated, but especially Moscow's claims of total control over the interpretation of its application, made the adviser of the Embassy of the United States of America in Moscow, George F. Kennan, write (in September 1944) that the events of the fall of that year demonstrated the Soviet Union's categorical claim to become the "dominant power" in Central and Eastern Europe, with the Americans unable to understand the truth about Russia.¹⁷ Also convincing were the conclusions of General Cortlandt Van Rensselaer Schuyler, the American representative in the Allied Control Commission in Romania, who said that most of the articles of the Armistice Agreement with Romania had a "distinctly Soviet flavor."¹⁸

The Armistice Agreement stated Romania's obligations towards the Allies, especially the Soviet Union, in terms of its political, economic, and administrative life. For this reason, the Agreement constituted, for a period, the fundamental act on which Romania's relations with the Soviet state were based. In this sense, we consider it necessary to enumerate its most important provi-

sions: Romania's continuation of the war alongside the Allies, with 12 divisions; the retention of German and Hungarian subjects in the country; ensuring the movement of troops on the territory of the country; the release of prisoners and the repeal of Nazi laws; the dissolution of pro-Hitler organizations; collaboration with the Soviet High Command for the arrest and trial of war criminals; Soviet censorship of publications, films, performances, communications; the restoration of the Romanian administration behind the front at a distance of at least 50–100 km, etc.¹⁹ Also, the Armistice Agreement established, in a provisional manner, the fundamental conditions for ending the state of war between Romania and the United Nations, which were to remain mandatory until the Agreement was replaced by a peace treaty. In a single document, the Armistice provided all the military, political, territorial, economic, occupation, etc. provisions that Romania had to respect. Later, the Peace Treaty signed by Romania on 10 February 1947 resumed the provisions of the Armistice Agreement of 12 September 1944.²⁰

Territorial Issues and the Soviet Strategy

IN THE following period, it was easy to see that Stalin used the Armistice to undermine the effects of 23 August in Romania. This act threatened to deprive him of the initiative in Romanian politics. In order to regain this initiative, the Soviet leader transformed the Armistice Agreement into a legal framework, ensuring his dominant political and economic interests in Romania²¹ and beyond. Also, the Armistice between the Allied Powers and Romania (as well as those with Bulgaria and Hungary, for example) represented a confirmation of the political reconfiguration of the continent, both from the perspective of international relations (of the game between the great powers) and from the perspective of political regimes. On the other hand, Romania began to experience a series of internal political mutations that modified its evolution, as the terms of the imposed Armistice Agreement were also made possible by the non-inclusion of the country in the area of strategic interest of the Western Allies.²²

The Armistice Agreement also provided for the borders of the Romanian state. From the beginning, it must be stated that the Soviets kept Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. Article 4 of the Armistice Agreement provided for the restoration of the state border between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Romania established by the Soviet–Romanian agreement of 28 June 1940.²³ Of course, the context in which the Soviet–Romanian agreement had been concluded in June 1940 was not mentioned. As regards the Romanian–

Hungarian border and the status of the Transylvanian territory ceded by Romania to Hungary on 30 August 1940, the situation was much more complex due to the provisions of Article 19 of the Armistice Agreement. Therefore, for the Romanians, the problem of Transylvania remained an open one. Article 19 states the following:

*The Allied Governments regard the decision of the Vienna Award regarding Transylvania as null and void and are agreed that Transylvania (or the greater part thereof) should be returned to Romania, subject to confirmation at the peace settlement, and the Soviet Government agrees that Soviet forces shall take part for this purpose in joint military operations with Romania against Germany and Hungary.*²⁴

The act of 23 August 1944 in Romania took not only Berlin by surprise, but also Budapest. It is already well known that neither of the countries that claimed Transylvania believed in the definitive validity of the situation created following the Vienna Award of 30 August 1940. Despite the German border guarantees given to Romania, the Hungarian side always believed in the re-annexation of Southern Transylvania, just as the Romanians believed in the restoration of the territorial unity of Greater Romania once the war ended. In part, this was the reason for the participation of both countries in the war, as they tried to fulfil the German demands: troops, war materiel, and raw materials.²⁵

As far as the Soviets were concerned, among the political issues they used in order to subjugate Central-Eastern Europe were also the ethnic and territorial disputes that, over time, had repeatedly manifested themselves in the region. Furthermore, to show how the Soviet Union insisted on making unilateral decisions in this part of Europe, the American professor, historian and diplomat Philip E. Mosely, rapporteur in the Territorial Subcommittee of the Advisory Committee attached to the State Department of the United States of America, analyzed the manner in which Moscow had approached the Romanian–Hungarian relations from the perspective of its attitude towards Transylvania. This analysis was published in a volume dedicated to the renowned American specialist.²⁶ Referring to the period between 23 August 1944 and 12 September 1944, Mosely considered that Molotov came to accept the return of all Transylvania to Romania as a result of Romania's decision to leave the Axis, and especially because of the determination with which it joined the battle against the German troops and for the liberation of its territory. What is interesting in the said volume, however, is the observation that Philip E. Mosely did not note that the Soviet option was also determined by the attitude of the government in Budapest. Declaring war on Romania at the beginning of September 1944, Hungary

announced that it intended to fight not only for the preservation of Northern Transylvania but also in order to annex Southern Transylvania and, most importantly for the Soviets, that it was determined to remain in the war alongside Hitler's Germany. This explains why, in the early autumn of 1944, Moscow showed its willingness to recognize Romania's right over the whole of Transylvania, or, as the Soviet–American–British compromise formula was expressed in the Armistice Agreement, “the greater part thereof.”²⁷

After Romania joined the war against Hitler, together with the advance of Romanian and Soviet troops in Transylvania and with the re-establishment of the Romanian administration in the Transylvanian territory ceded to Hungary in 1940, starting with the end of October 1944, the Romanian authorities experienced numerous problems caused by Moscow's persistent refusal to accept the exercise of Romanian state authority over the province. From liberated Transylvania, increasingly alarming rumors about the province's future began to reach Bucharest. In the big cities of Transylvania, especially in Cluj (Klausenburg, Kolozsvár), there was more and more talk about an imminent takeover of the administration by the Soviet army.²⁸ Unfortunately, the rumors came true. Taking advantage of the increasingly difficult internal situation in which Romania found itself due to the pressure of the Communist Party and the Kremlin, who wanted to subordinate the Romanian government, invoking the desire to prevent interethnic incidents and the need to ensure security in the area behind the front, barely two months after the signing of the Armistice, Stalin decided to remove Northern Transylvania from under the authority of the Romanian state and introduce a Soviet military administration.²⁹ Thus began a new chapter in the history of Transylvania and of Romania, the Romanian authorities having to understand that, at least until the signing of the Peace Treaty, in terms of territorial issues, Moscow had secured, through its military presence, the right to have the last word. The Soviet military administration functioned until 9 March 1945, when, two days after the establishment of the Petru Groza government in Bucharest, a government accepted by the Soviets, Stalin allowed the reinstatement of the Romanian administration in Northern Transylvania.

Final Remarks

THE DAY of 23 August 1944 remains one of the most important in the contemporary history of Romania. Then, without any condition, Romania made available to the Allies (especially the Soviets) an important military potential, ranking fourth in terms of the troops engaged in the fight against Germany and contributing to the shortening of the war by about six

months, a fact recognized internationally both at that time and in the decades that followed. However, the primary beneficiary of the Bucharest act of 23 August was the Soviet Union because, from that day until 1990, Romania's internal and external policy was carried out under the strict authority of the Soviet government.³⁰ Naturally, Romania's entry into the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union and its subsequent communization as a guarantee of its geopolitical subordination must be understood as part of a global transformation process within the international system.³¹ The Soviets were determined to control Romania ever since the Red Army troops had crossed the country's borders, and in no case did they want a government in Bucharest that they could not control. Established on 23 August 1944, the Sănătescu government did not meet the conditions claimed by Moscow, and without the help of the Western powers it was doomed to failure. The same happened with the second Sănătescu government and with the one led by Nicolae Rădescu. Only the government of Petru Groza was accepted by Moscow. However, despite everything that happened, one of the objectives for which Romania had first entered the anti-Soviet war, then the war against Hitler, was fulfilled. The Romanian-Hungarian border drawn at the end of the First World War was restored. The Transylvanian territory ceded to Hungary in 1940 returned to the Romanian state, as a result of the act of 23 August 1944 and of the participation of the Romanian army in the campaign in the West, as well as due to the "diplomatic battle" that Romania won at the Paris Peace Conference of 1946–1947.



Notes

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6. Nicolae Baciú, *Agonia României, 1944–1948: Dosarele secrete acuză* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia, 1990), 167.
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8. Constantin Vlad, *Diplomația secolului XX* (Bucharest: Fundația Europeană Titulescu, 2006), 198–199.
9. Marcela Sălăgean, *Transilvania în jocul de interese al Marilor Puteri (1940–1947)* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Mega, 2013), especially chapter II, 40–62.
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12. Franck, 99.
13. Fischer-Galați, 99–101. See also Marcela Sălăgean, “Reacția aliaților occidentali și sovietici la evenimentele de la 23 august 1944 din România,” in *Evenimentele de la 23 august 1944 din România și insurecția națională slovacă din 29 august 1944*, 53.
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22. Alexandrescu, 62.
23. “Convenție de armistițiu,” 311 (p. 323, the text in English).
24. “Convenție de armistițiu,” 313.

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Abstract

At the Crossroads of Destiny: Romania's Tumultuous Journey from 23 August 1944 to the Armistice: Consequences

The second half of 1944 was one of the most complex periods in Romania's contemporary history. It all started with the act of 23 August, after which Romania not only left the alliance with Nazi Germany, but had to endure Soviet pressure, to accept the entry of communist representatives into the government and the provisions of the Armistice Agreement, as well as the removal of Northern Transylvania from the administration of the Romanian state and the establishment of the Soviet administration in the region. However, despite everything that happened, one of the objectives for which Romania had first entered the anti-Soviet war, then the war against Hitler, was fulfilled. The Romanian–Hungarian border drawn at the end of the First World War was restored.

Keywords

23 August 1944, Romania's status, return of Northern Transylvania, Armistice Agreement