

SOVIET ESPIONAGE ACTIONS AGAINST ROMANIA IN THE FIRST INTERWAR DECADE. THE CASE STUDY OF GENERAL LUDOVIC MIRCESCU

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Abstract

"World War I destroyed a world" were the words used by a known politician, Constantin Argetoianu, in order to summarise the post-war reality. Even if only four years went by, mankind was completely different in 1918 compared to 1914. Romania is a good example for this situation, as it managed to fulfil the goal of taking back some territories that were under Russian and Austro-Hungarian dominance.

In the post-war international context, Romania had to face a double challenge: on one hand, integrating its new provinces from an institutional – administrative and economic point of view. On the other hand, ensuring a normal state of security considering that the eastern, western and southern borders were subject to Soviet, Hungarian and Bulgarian revisionism. However, the greatest threat to the state's integrity is going to be Soviet Russia who did not accept the fall of the Russian Empire. That is why, in the 3rd and 4th decades of the 20th century, it tried to destabilize Romania through every means, including aggressive espionage against the defence and security system. Although Romanian intelligence structures obliterated most of the Russian espionage networks, there were failures as well.

This study presents the case of General Ludovic Mircescu, war minister in the '20's; a case which delivered a shock to the Romanian public of that time. The Russian secret services, through a thoroughly organized action, managed to steal the Romanian plans for a war against Russia (important military documents, troops' position and movement, military structure etc.) This "wake up call" led to an unprecedented consolidation of the Romanian secret services in the following decade, with spectacular results in the fight with the Russian agents.

Keywords: Romanian Army, secret services, Soviet Russia, interwar period.

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Introduction

In the European context at the end of WWI, Romania, as one of the dynamic actors of the international system created through the peace treaties of Versailles and Trianon (1918-1923) had to face a double challenge, firstly, integrity (from an institutional, administrative and economic point of view), secondly, ensuring a state of security considering the fact that the eastern, western and southern borders were subjected to Soviet, Hungarian and Bulgarian revisionism.

Beyond the revolutionary propaganda which excited millions of people from the former Soviet Empire, the communist leadership adopted an obviously repressive policy once it took over Russia. Denying the people's right to decide their own faith resulted in territorial loss, between 1917-1918, which was perceived by the new political-military elite as an act of "weakness" that had to be fixed as soon as possible.

The Romanian-Soviet relations were extremely tense in the following years, especially considering that the newly formed Soviet Union was considered to be, *de facto*, at war with the Romanian state (after breaking diplomatic relations in January of 1918), only waiting for an appropriate reason to engage in the real military offensive. In this matter, the words of Russian diplomat Maxim M. Litvinov, spoken to communist leader Cristian Racovski, are eloquent: "We are now, formally, in a state of war with Romania. We consider that the Romanian troops occupy our territory and, formally, we can cross the Dniester without a declaration of war at any moment" (Constantiniu, 2010, p. 44).

However, in order to achieve this strategic objective, the significant weakening of Romania's capacity to react by internal destabilization, terror, assassinations, communist propaganda had to be achieved

A difficult and extremely tense period followed for the national intelligence structures (firstly the military ones), said services having to, in the middle of the 3rd interwar decade, face an capable and aggressive adversary, Russian secret services – VECHEKA, subsequently GPU and OGPU, (Mitrokhin, 2008), in the difficult conditions which communist Russia was against while "applying" hits in the public opinion and not only (for example, the Senate attempt, December of 1920 (Troncotă, 2008, pp. 152-154) or the Tatarbunary uprising, September of 1924).

A spectacular achievement of Soviet espionage in the mid-1920s. The case study of General Ludovic Mircescu



General Ludovic Mircescu (1872 – 1930)¹

In the first interwar decade, soviet espionage operations against the state's institutions are amplified, with the purpose of knowing, in detail, Romania's military capacities, representing a crucial aspect considering that the end goal was triggering military operations.

One of the greatest achievements of interwar Soviet espionage against Romania consists of the so-called "Ludovic Mircescu Case" – since going public it created a shock in the national public, forcing King Carol II to initiate a thorough investigation concerning the leadership of the Romanian Army. This case study revolves a mainly around the information provided in Case

¹ General Ludovic Mircescu was an appreciated senior officer – cavalry brigade commander during the First World War, then commander of Romanian Gendarmerie in 1918-1919. In the following years, his achievements in Romanian Army will culminate with appointment as War Minister (March 1926 – June 1927).

File no. 1/1927, titled *Ludovic Mircescu General Case*, which can be found at the Romanian National Archives (Police General Directorate Collection, file no. 1/1927).

The “Ludovic Mircescu Case” is about the theft of important documents regarding Romania’s security, as said documents contained, in over 100 pages, details military plans, inventory, a possible move against Russia that would’ve taken place in Bessarabia etc. It was a professional espionage action, Russia gaining information, in detail about, the Romanian military potential; the situation was even more difficult considering that Russia thought of Romania as an enemy that had to be defeated through any means (the territorial union, that happened in 1918, between Romania and Bessarabia was viewed as an act of war by the communist authorities).

The Soviet accomplishment in the “secret frontline” happened in the summer of 1926, when cavalry General Ludovic Mircescu, War Minister, spent his time off with his mistress (a Slavic girl known as Gerda) at the Vatra Dornei resort. Ignoring the rules required to handle secret documents, the general orders the Deployment Plan to be fetched, with its detailed appendages, sketches, and graphics. All these documents were stolen by his partner, later revealed (by Romanian counterintelligence) to be an agent of the soviet secret services (Ștefănescu, 2007, p. 79). The investigation launched when the event went public reveals that the soviet secret services began the infiltration of Gerda years before, in 1920, when General Mircescu was at Cernăuți (Bukovina) as a commander of the 8th infantry division. It was, after all, a classic espionage movement, in the “honey trap” category, perfectly thought and executed, because Gerda and the accomplices left the country in the shortest time possible, without leaving a trace behind.

Although the disappearance of the documents was discovered less than a day after happening, the Romanian superior military authorities tried to cover it up and succeeding for a period of three years. But, as information about the spectacular Soviet action started showing up in both international and Romanian press, details started to unveil. Bucharest based newspapers provide large columns, describing it as the gravest espionage act against Romania.

The first information to confirm that the documents were stolen by the Soviets comes from the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), which demonstrates the existing collaboration between the Romanian and English secret services.

In this sense, we present the information memorandum from 27 March 1927, by the Intelligence Service, addressed to the Romanian Secret Service, which confirms the theft of military documents by Soviet agents.

“Our Secret Information Service from Moscow informed us that in March, of the current year, the Soviet Special Information Service from Vienna filed an important document regarding the Deployment Plan of the Romanian Army, supplemented by a translation, from Romanian to Russian, for which the Soviets paid 25.000 schillings.

We add the following:

1. Russian military experts established that the document is real, based on their expertise.
2. The communication of our Information Service from Moscow must be considered to be real and beyond any suspicion.

28. III. 1927” (NARCollection the Precedency of the Council of Ministries – Special Information Service, File no. 1/1927, f. 2)

The document forwarded by the Intelligence Service to the Romanian Secret Service proves the valuable information network owned by the British inside Russia, despite the OGPU’s extreme measures in order to make the foreign secret services activity on Soviet ground useless.

Echoes of the case in the public

The press thinks about the “Mircescu Case” as being the worst espionage act against Romania until that moment. Thus, “Ordinea” newspaper, no. 534 from 17th September 1930 says, in capital letters: “We are around a never-before-seen military scandal. After some disclosures in the Russian and German press, it wouldn’t be surprising for resignation letters to be required from a former War Minister and his former General Secretary, both active generals in the army.

It is said that due to some grave dereliction of duty, both the army’s and the country’s interests had a lot to suffer. What happened unveiled a terrific intelligence network that the country’s memoirs use to surround it ...”

The news, as it gained information from local and foreign sources, highlighted a novelty fact – the collaboration between Russian and German secret services in order to spy on Romania, because agent Gerda was working for both of them, as it was established by Romanian and British secret services (also informing the press).

The Russian-German informative collaboration emerges from another document belonging to the Secret Services, addressed to the military. Both

Russia and Germany were after the annulment of the peace treaties signed at the end of World War I.

"SECRET DOCUMENT"

I. The history of the problem

The General Staff were notified by the British, through the Foreign Office, that the 1926 Romanian Deployment Plan was stolen. This document was given by the state to the adjutant general Florescu M. Ioan to be presented to the Minister of National Defence (General Mircescu Ludvig).

Spy 48 R., from Cernăuți (Chernivtsi)-presently in the service of Germany and of the OGPU, stole it.

II. People involved

- General Mircescu Ludvig (deceased)
- Adjutant general Florescu B. Ioan (deceased)
- Spy 48 R.

III. Conclusions

Immediate change of the Romanian Deployment Plan and its appendages.

IV. Proposals

Documents of such importance are not to be studied outside the state or the Ministry of National Defence" (NAR, Collection the Precedency of the Council of Ministries – Special Information Service, File no. 1/1927, f. 48).

The denouement was tragic, the army's honour badly affected, which drove King Carol II to order General Ludovic Mircescu – urgently summoned, in the autumn of 1930, from Paris – to take the decision of defending his military honour (taking his own life).

In this way, in November of 1930, the newspapers announce the death of general Mircescu "after a long-suffering", circumstance in which he is presented with eulogies concerning his activity as a soldier with important army leading duties.

Conclusion

Acknowledging the danger of soviet espionage following this massive scandal lead to an obvious improvement, in the following years, in the activity

of the national intelligence services through the allocation of superior financial resources, a broad staff upgrading process etc.

The intelligence activity of the Romanian secret services in the interwar period resulted in:

- Neutralizing the complex actions launched by neighbouring revisionist states aimed to Destabilize Romania.
- The absence of a strong communist party on the Romanian territory up to the end of World War II.
- A correct informational flow to the superior national decision-making levels, concerning threats to national security.

At the same time, the need to make the intelligence structures more effective and to organize a modern intelligence service (The Secret Intelligence Service) to counteract the whole range of threats to national security, either from the West or from the East, was felt.

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