

Intelligence activity of the Romanian Army during the Romanian War of Independence (1877 – 1878)

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Romania during 1877

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Abstract

The development of the military intelligence service of the Romanian army was influenced both by the transformation of the Romanian army in its structure, and by the changes and the regional and continental political-military interests influencing our country's development throughout the years. Lacking the tradition of other states, the Independence War (1877 - 1878) was a serious challenge for both civilian and military Romanian intelligence. Due to the close collaboration between the different structures of the power institutions belonging to the state (especially the Ministry of Interior and the Army) most of the Ottoman Empire's attempts to find out about Romania's strengths and vulnerabilities were discovered and annihilated. Taking as a starting point the experience gained during the war of independence, the political and military authorities implemented major reforms concerning the leadership and management of the army, as well as the physiognomy of the military structures. Starting with the creation of the General Staff in 1882, the intelligence structure of the army acquired more coherence and stability and the intelligence activity entered a second stage of evolution based on the unity of intelligence and counter-intelligence structures.

Keywords: *espionage, intelligence cooperation, Romanian Army, intelligence gathering, General Army Headquarters.*

Introduction

During the year 1875, the Eastern Question was reopened through the uprisings in Bosnia and Herzegovina; the next year the conflict was amplified through the uprising of the Bulgarians and the slaughter made by the Turks in the South of the Danube or the war between the Ottoman Empire, Serbia and Montenegro; Romanian authorities adopted a neutral position but supported in secret these freedom fight movements, under various forms (by facilitating the weapons smuggling towards the South Danubian fighters, by providing refuge on the Romanian territory for the people persecuted by the Ottomans etc.).

The failure of the Constantinople Conference (December 1876 and January 1877) and London Conference (March 1877) shattered any hope for peace, giving the Tsarist Empire the appropriate opportunity to declare war on the Sublime Porte. Ensuring the benevolent neutrality of Austro-Hungarian Empire by signing the secret Budapest Convention on 3/15

January 1877 (in exchange of the „right” to occupy Bosnia and Herzegovina, Vienna agreed that, following the imminent Russo-Turkish war, the three counties in the South of Basarabia will be incorporated in the Russian Empire), Petrograd asked Romania, on March 31/April 12, to sign a convention stipulating that the Russian troops were allowed to cross its territory. This was signed on April 4/16, Russia taking on the obligation to „maintain and respect the political rights of the country, in the way this results from the internal laws and the existing treaties, as well as to maintain and defend the present integrity of Romania.”¹

The economic and socio-political development of the Romanian state proved the anachronism of the Turkish suzerainty through the creation in the spring of 1877 of the favorable internal and external premises for its removal. Subsequently, in the Extraordinary Session of the Deputies Assembly on 9 May 1877, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mihail Kogălniceanu claimed that Romania broke any relations with the Sublime Porte and proclaimed the independence of the country – “The Assembly commits to paper the fact that the war between Romania and Turkey, the interruption of our relations with the Sublime Porte and the absolute state independence of Romania receive their official consecration”².

The proclamation of independence did not necessarily mean the beginning of a close military cooperation between the Romanians and the Russians in the Balkans, due to the divergent positions of the involved actors. Bucharest, naturally, wanted to get involved in the conflict as an individual actor and to have a military contribution, with the view of obtaining a seat at the peace talks that were to end the imminent war. Subsequently, the Romanian leader, Carol I, negotiated both with the Grand Duke Nicolae and the Tsar Alexander II. The collaboration offers and the suggestion of giving its own base for military actions did not receive the expected answers, due to geopolitical reasons – the Tsarist Empire pursued the objective of assuming the whole merit of the presumed easy victory against the Ottoman Empire.

As a proof to this stands the diplomatic note received by the Romanian government on 17/29 of May 1877 from the Russian chancellor Gorceakov, in which it was written that “ (...) the Emperor does not invite

¹ Gheorghe Platon, *Modern History of Romania*, Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing, Bucharest, 1985, p. 240.

² Costin Scorpan, *The History of Romania. Encyclopedia*, Nemira Publishing, Bucharest, 1997, p. 595.

Romania to cooperate across the Danube. But if the Romanian government would wish to undertake such an action at its own expenses, at its own risks and threats, this could not take place unless the condition of absolute unity of the superior command is met and this remains in the hands of the supreme command of the imperial army. ***Russia does not need the contribution of the Romanian Army.*** The forces that have been mobilized with the aim of combating the Turks are ample enough to accomplish this objective”³

Dominated by this atmosphere of enthusiasm, without having a real value for the military capabilities of the Porte (which started a decade ago a complex modernization process of the army, with the help of counselors and Western arms suppliers), Petersburg decides to launch the offensive in the South of the Danube, declaring war on the Ottoman Empire on 12/24 April 1877.

Collecting raw intelligence – a priority for the Romanian military structures

In 1877 Romania did not hold a numerous army, but through the mobilization that was ordered on 6/18 April of the same year, it significantly increased the number of its troops. The permanent and territorial army formed “the first line army”, the militia that were to be organized in **active corps** formed “the second line army”, and the civic guard were responsible for the protection of the cities. The mobilized army was young, the soldiers were mainly under the age of 30, and the total troops were made up of virtually 120.000 people. Among these, 58.700 formed the operative army, 30.000 the troops of the militia battalions, 16.000 the civic or city guards and virtually 5.000 horse and foot soldiers left to guard the border and maintain order⁴.

In the first phase of the conflict development, the units of the Romanian army were distributed, starting with April, in order to be able to respond to a possible attack against Calafat from the numerous Turkish troops that were concentrated in the area of Vidin and also to be able to reject any future advance of the Turkish troops from Giurgiu to Bucharest.

³ Gheorghe Platon, op. cit., p. 242.

⁴ Romanian Academy, *History of the Romanians*, vol. VII, tome I, coord. Dan Berindei, Encyclopedia Publishing, Bucharest, 2003, p. 664.

The Turks, following the intensive bombardment launched by our artillery from Calafat, Oltenita, Izlaz, Bechet and Corabia, eventually relinquished the intention to initiate a military campaign on our national territory.

Given the fact that the national territory of Romania was threatened to become a theatre of war, the authorities within the Ministry of Interior responsible with the raw intelligence collection and counter espionage activities, in collaboration with the similar authorities belonging to the Ministry of War, intensified, during the winter and spring of 1877, their monitoring activities and their abilities to use human sources within the Turkish garrison on the right bank of the Danube. The safety measures adopted by the Romanian authorities regarding the expulsion of several Turkish secret agents, as well as the positioning of the Romanian military units along the river, had the effect of annihilating most of the Turkish espionage activities. The Turks relied on an espionage practice which involved getting raw intelligence by recruiting people that had the Austro-Hungarian, Greek or other citizenship and that were in Romania under legal cover. The counterespionage authorities became aware early of these new practices and therefore arrested numerous agents that were operating mostly in the ports from the Danube being under the cover of various traders, entrepreneurs or sailors⁵.

Due to their vigilance, the administrative authorities timely discovered and unveiled several acts of diversion created by the agents of the Turkish espionage, such as the attempts to destroy the telegraph network. The chiefs of the telegraph stations were forbidden to communicate to other people, except for the authorized ones, copies of the Romanian commanders' reports. During the crossing of the Danube by the Russian armies, all the post offices and telegraph stations from the Southern part of the country stopped any form of communication activity.

The necessity of adopting counteracting measures, in order to combat the espionage and sabotage actions initiated by the Turkish army, was emphasized in a telegram sent in May 1877 by the Ministry of War and addressed to all the military units that were situated in the proximity of the city Craiova. The military preparations and the massive influx of arms and ammunition reflected the necessity of building in the area a series of

⁵ Vasile Bobocescu, *Moments from the history of the Ministry of Interns*, vol. I, Ministry of Interns Publishing, Bucharest, 2000, p.69.

military storage facilities which had to be highly protected “in order not to risk falling in the hands of spies or audacious adventurers, who could set them on fire or destroy them - and this protection has to be made as thoroughly as possible given the fact that the enemy is using whatever means to accomplish his aim and the military and civil police are very weak, as they totally lack any means”⁶.

The need of an intense military intelligence collection strongly prevailed even from the moment when Alexandru Ioan Cuza created the United Principalities. He himself supported the creation of a military structure that would be connected to the events on the continent. Therefore, due to the fact that his priority was to have the military structures from Moldavia and Wallachia united in a single and unique entity, through the decree number 83 issued on 12/24 November 1859, he created the *General Staff of the United Principalities*, having among its most important duties “the execution of military technical workings and other missions that request special military knowledge”⁷.

This first General Staff of the Romanian army consisted of three sections; among these, the director of *Section II – topographic and geodesic projects*⁸ was Sub-lieutenant Gheorghe Slăniceanu (he later became a general), and its deputy directors were the Sub-lieutenants Nicolae Dona, Constantin Barozzi and Ștefan Fălcoianu (officers who also, during the next decades, became generals and were named into important leading posts). Their main responsibilities, established by the normative act, referred to the elaboration of topographic, geodesic and statistical papers, collection and centralization of data and information necessary for the planning of tactical and strategic operations of the army and ensuring the most appropriate and safe movements of the military units⁹.

Section II was active until 1865, when the General Staff was dissolved and its administrative attributions were passed to Direction I within the Ministry of War¹⁰. Even though the first steps in this complex and

⁶ The National Archives of Romania, *Fund: Ministry of War, Structural part of the General Staff. The General Army Headquarters*, Folder no.6/1877, File 82.

⁷ „The Army Monitor” no 21 from 3 June 1860, p.322, apud Maria Georgescu, *The Creation of the General Staff (1859)*, in magazine „Folder”, no. 3(45)/2009, p. 2, <http://www.mapn.ro/smg/SIA/document1.html>

⁸ Maria Georgescu, op. cit., p.3.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Cristian Troncotă, *Romania and the Secret Front*, ELION Publishing, Bucharest, 2008, p. 23.

vital field of the modern war were taken, the activity of this structure was limited; nevertheless, the basis of the external military intelligence was created with the help of the officers that were sent to study abroad, especially in France and Belgium, and to observe the major conflicts on the continents or the American Civil War.

Based on the interest of having an efficient military structure, on 17 March 1877 the General Deposit of War was created, within which Section II was revived – its missions were to collect and process data about the enemy. Once the General Army Headquarters (*Marele Cartier General – MCG*)¹¹ was created, two sections from the General Deposit of War – *Map of Romania* and *Historical works* – became subordinated to this new structure. The officers from MCG responsible with the intelligence analysis and the elaboration of some specific synthesis papers regarding the Turkish army were Major Constantin Brătianu and Captain Constantin Căpităneanu from the Topographic Section.

Before starting the war, MCG edited a range of instructions referring to the way soldiers had to be aware of the positions and intentions of the enemy, in general of the capabilities of the Turkish troops established in the Southern Danube.

Two days after Russia declared war on the Ottoman Empire, on 14/26 April 1877, the Chief of the General Army Headquarters, Colonel Gheorghe Slăniceanu issued Decree Number 1, in which the emphasis was once more on the importance and the role of the military orders – which had to be precise, clear and concise - and on the necessity of knowing the condition and the power of the enemy¹².

The Army Decree number 3, from 18 April 1877, requested that “the Commanders of the Army Corps and Active Divisions will submit to the General Army Headquarters the discoveries that resulted from the ordered reconnaissance missions and the information regarding the enemy’s position and movements and the topography of the area he occupies, according to the following instructions.”

¹¹ The General Army Headquarters was created on 6/18 April 1877, having as its first chief Colonel Gheorghe Slăniceanu. During the War of Independence, the General Army Headquarters worked successively in Romania and Bulgaria, in Bucharest, Poiana, Craiova, Corabia, Verbița, Poradim and Lom Palanka.

¹² Alin Spănu, *Romania’s Secret Service during the First World War*, Military Publishing, Bucharest, 2012, p. 20.

“The map shared among the Corps is at a scale of 1/57600. The General Staff of the major units have the duty to rectify the differences noticed between the map and the reality. The special papers ordered by various commanders, concerning the recognition of the enemy as well as its positions and all sorts of resources, its artificial methods of defense or the obstacles it encounters, are to be conveyed to the General Army Headquarters every week”¹³.

As far as the necessity of intelligence collection regarding the Ottoman troops was concerned, *Article 3 – Information*, stated: “During rest, the security service of the troops will gather all the statements about the position of the enemy, its effective forces, its moral state and its projects, that were directly or indirectly conveyed.

These statements will be also sent to the General Army Headquarters when they are of immediate importance. In any other case, they will be safely kept in the archive of the army corps and divisions. The discoveries that are aimed at revealing the forces of the enemy and its battle orders and which are centered on transmitting the precise location of the enemy’s cavalry and artillery are to be immediately conveyed to the General Army Headquarters”¹⁴.

Further on, the General Army Headquarters emitted, on 4 July 1877, Decree Number 23¹⁵, which referred to the safety measures that were to be adopted by the units: establishing and resetting the military passwords, passing across the lines, reconnaissance missions accomplished on the enemy’s territory, the behavior towards the enemy’s negotiators, prisoners and defectors. “It is highly recommended to use the *intoxication of the enemy method*, which implies misleading the foes by releasing false information regarding the capabilities and intentions of the Romanian army. It is even possible to execute at times wrong movements so that the enemy would be deceived about our objectives, positions or capabilities”¹⁶

¹³ The National Archives of Romania, *Fund: Ministry of War, Structural part of the General Staff. The General Army Headquarters. Army Corp II*, Folder no. 6/1877, File 25.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ The National Archives of Romania, *Fund: Ministry of War, Structural part of the General Staff. The General Army Headquarters. Brigade 1 Division 1 Cavalry*, Folder no. 7/1877, Files 27-29.

¹⁶ Ibidem

Decree Number 26¹⁷ from 6 July 1877 described the actual methods that had to be used in order to collect raw intelligence about the enemy, except for the ones obtained through using human sources (soldiers participating in reconnaissance missions or patrolling). The document represented the most detailed version of such a record, having a paramount importance in a modern war. The value of obtaining real and correct information about the enemy was stated as following: “The bigger the importance of acquiring precise data, the more dangerous is to adjust future actions according to false or imprecise data. When we have even the most insignificant reason to doubt the data source, it is prudent to consider it useless. The main means, except for the missions of reconnaissance and patrols, resorted to with the view of acquiring news about the enemy during the military campaigns are:

1. Prisoners
2. Defectors
3. Local inhabitants
4. Spies
5. Various other indicators

Apart from these means, news can still be obtained through intercepting the letters and the telegraph messages or through controlling the latter ones by installing a telegraph system on the lines of the enemy’s telegraph.”

The interesting details were further described in the document, proving that the Romanian soldiers acknowledged based on the training they underwent in the country or abroad, the “art” of intelligence collection and the check on their veracity. In the case of war prisoners, strict procedures had to be respected within the questioning process, and this excluded the use of gratuitous violence to obtain the information requested by the commanders, because the objective was to have qualitative, not only quantitative data. As for the defectors, the situation was in general quite the contrary. They delivered a big amount of information with the aim of becoming useful; subsequently, each piece of information delivered had to be checked from several sources.

A special attention was paid to the spies that proved to be working on this double front. “Through spies we may obtain much news on the enemy, but using it may pose some difficulties, as anyone doing this job for

¹⁷ The National Archives of Romania, *Fund: Ministry of War, Structural part of the General Staff. The General Army Headquarters. Brigade 1 Division 1 Cavalry*, Folder no. 7/1877, Files 33-34.

money cannot be a man of trust. They are chosen from the ones who can be least doubted [by the enemy¹⁸]: priests, traders and smugglers. Spies must have knowledge of the other spies, with the view of mutually checking their claims and words and even for facilitating their mutual supervising.”

“There are often spies paid by both parties. These are by far the best, but to be able to efficiently use them, a lot of skill is required. On one hand, the more satisfying the reward should be, the better the news is; on the other hand, they have to be severely punished, in some cases even shot, the minute there is any evidence they are traitors¹⁹.”

Further on, a description of other aspects that may be considered extremely useful for the Romanian commanders to be able to notice the changes in the Ottomans’ combat dispositions was given: “Apart from these means there are other indicators that can at least enable us to make some assumptions about the enemy’s movements and intentions. New clothes found on the battlefield show us the arrival of new troops. Dust risen by a column marching can indicate the direction of the march and even an approximate number of the troops that form that column; hence, if there is an infantry column, dust rises at a low height, but if there is a cavalry column dust touches much higher heights; if the column is compound of coaches, the height of the dust consequently changes, depending on the ground and soil. The direction of the troops can be judged based upon the shining of the arms, which is brighter if the enemy troops are approaching us and darker if they are withdrawing...”²⁰

These general rules were at the disposal of the army before they started the military campaign in Bulgaria. They represented the ground foundation of the raw intelligence collection process regarding the Ottoman troops, based on which the Romanians generally managed to know both the enemy’s capabilities and plans.

An important issue is the necessity of having specially trained officers responsible for the interrogations of all the categories of people previously described, with the view of detecting “misleading information intentionally released” before it entered the informational fluxes established at the level of the army preparing for the siege of Plevna. These soldiers

¹⁸ Editor’s note

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Ibidem.

were asked to “try to guess, grasp and discover using all the means their intelligence and skill put at their disposal, the whole truth”²¹.

Beyond the obvious modern character of the instructions presented in the previously mentioned documents, the war experience also revealed the drawbacks that existed. Even though the need to adapt the intelligence collection activity to the battlefield conditions was precisely stated, the indications were later considered as being too general and applying to all types of war. Thus, there were not any requests about the fortifications, natural or artificial obstacles that existed on the enemy’s ground²², about the disguise of the hostile artillery and its real possibilities, the type of arms the enemy held and their characteristics (unfortunately these proved to be superior to initial estimates). People interrogated had to be asked precise, relevant questions in order to render valuable information, exploited at its maximum potential; as for this, unfortunately, the instructions of the General Army Headquarters notably lacked essential aspects, leading to the initial failures of the military hostilities.

Intelligence Contribution of the Romanian Army during the War of Independence

After the several easy successes recorded on the Bulgarian front (May – July 1877), the situation became more complicated for the Russian expeditionary force once the intervention army led by Osman Pasha left the citadel of Vidin. At first, the Ottoman general intended to support Nicopole, but since this was conquered, he soon changed the direction of his march, heading towards Plevna. Realizing the strategic importance of the fortified system from Plevna, the wise Turkish commander transformed the simple citadel “from an accidental war position, as it was considered at the beginning by the Russians, in a strong moment citadel: the final and decisive objective of the campaign”²³.

The military campaign suffered a dramatic turn for the Tsarist Russia, as it even had to take into consideration its prolongation (according

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Paul Ștefănescu, *The history of Romanian secret services*, ANTET Publishing, Bucharest, 2007, p.25.

²³ Nicolae Densușianu, *The military history of the Romanian people*, Vestala Publishing, Bucharest, 2002, p. 403-404.

to the initial estimates, the Porte would have had to be defeated in maximum one month), the increase in human and resources cost, diplomatic complication etc. It is to be mentioned that the warnings issued by the Romanian reconnaissance units, which operated on the Bulgarian territory, were not taken into consideration by the imperial Russian command, even though they contained valuable information regarding Osman Pasha's movements. Hence, on 20 of June/2 July 1877, Prince Carol I wrote a letter to the Grand Duke Nicolae, the supreme commander of the Russian expeditionary troops in the Balkans, containing the following: "...I am duty-bound to let you have knowledge about news that we acquired from the Serbian elite, news that I here convey to you the way we received it, because nothing authorized us so far to reason upon its character of truth or lie: Osman Pasha would have left Vidin accompanied by 15 battalions and two batteries and he would have taken the path to Rahova",²⁴.

The movement made by the Ottoman general radically changed the strategic situation of the Bulgarian front, due to the existence of a real threat for the Russian troops to be attacked on the flank and for Şiştov to be conquered. The place was essential because it harbored the most important bridge that ensured the link across the Danube between the Tsarist army and the Romanian territory; combined with the offensive led by general Gurko in the Balkans, the potential danger for the Tsarist troops to be forced retreat across the river existed, an action subsequently implying dramatic consequences for our country. Confronted with this critical situation, the imperial Russian command decided upon conquering the defensive system at Plevna.

The Ottoman garrison from Plevna occupied a special strategic position, as here there was a crossroad of important communication paths that were linking towns like Nicopol, Rusciuk, Sofia, Tirnovo or Filipopol. The natural frame was favorable for the defenders, because the terrain surrounding Plevna was mostly uneven, with successive hills of various heights that were hardening the attempts to attack the Turkish positions, with valleys and dales covered in rivers with or without water at that moment. Benefiting from the strategic errors of the Russian command, Osman Pasha, who was a very competent leader, immediately realized the fact that the location where Plevna was situated could rapidly change the course of the war – consequently, he ordered the preparation and

²⁴ Ibidem.

fortification of this defensive system, respecting all the principles of modern engineering art, relying on 14 citadels, many of which were interconnected and had the possibility of mutually protecting themselves with artillery fire.

After the first failure of the Russian troops in front of Plevna (8/20 July 1877), even though no treaty of military collaboration had been formally sealed, the Romanian government, at the explicit request of the imperial command, agreed to take over the citadel Nicopole – which was already occupied – with the view of releasing the military units which were to participate in the second attack on Plevna.

Following the second defeat suffered at Plevna (18/30 July 1877), much heavier due to its losses and possible direct consequences, the Russian troops fled in panic, starting the chaotic retreat towards the bridge from Şiştov. The critical situation of the imperial army on the front in the Balkans determined the Sankt-Petersburg government to mobilize and send to war even the last troops it had at its disposal – the imperial guard – and to solicit the urgent participation of the Romanian army, the only one that, due to its vicinity to the front, could stop a possible Turkish attempt to surround the Russian units.

A dramatic aspect of the event is represented by the telegram sent by Grand Duke Nicolae, on 19/31 July 1877, to Prince Carol I: *“The Turks are crushing us by gathering a great mass of troops at Plevna. I entreat you to join forces, help and if possible, to cross the Danube with your army, as you wish. Between river Jiu and Corabia your intervention is urgently needed to facilitate our movements”*²⁵.

The rest of the troops from the fourth Romanian Division were immediately sent there, because a possible defeat that Russia risked to suffer would have had dramatic consequences for Romania; the next month, following other pressing telegrams from Grand Duke Nicolae – from 9/21 and 19/31 August – and the negotiations held between the two governments and between Emperor Alexander I and Prince Carol I (16/28 and 17/29 August 1877), an important mass of Romanian soldiers crossed the river on 20 August/1 September using an improvised bridge established at Siliştoara, near Corabia, and adopted war positions in front of the fortifications at Plevna²⁶.

²⁵ *Memories of King Carol I*, volum III (1876 - 1877), Edited by Stelian Neagoe, Machiavelli Publishing, Bucharest, 1994, p. 191.

²⁶ Romanian Academy, *History of the Romanians*, vol. VII, tome I, p. 673.

At the negotiation table it was agreed that the Romanian and Russian troops dislocated at Plevna and forming the Western Army, were to be put under the command of Prince Carol I, seconded by the Russian general Zotov as the chief of the General Staff; the effective command of the Romanian army was given to general Alexandru Cernat, the Minister of War. The failures suffered obliged the Tsar to adopt a more responsible position within the relations with our country and to accept “the partnership of the Romanian army in the conditions of an allied army”, and the Romanian decision-makers were content only with the verbal statements and promises of the interlocutors, without pretending a “written” formal alliance, as it would have been normal, given the negative experience of our relations with Tsarist Russia²⁷.

The rush with which the Russian command organized the third battle at Plevna, that took place on 30 August 1877 - also the name day of Tsar Alexander II - did not permit the Russian and Romanian military units to convey a full intelligence report upon the Ottoman defensive disposition. The insufficient information on the enemy had as a consequence the elaboration, by the operations and topography sections, of some battle strategic documents for 30 August/11 September 1877 using some imprecise data.

The third battle at Plevna clearly represented a failure, emphasizing the lack of experience of the imperial Russian command and the faulty way in which the action of the Romanian-Russian troops developed, in spite of the obvious heroism showed by the engaged units. Conquering and keeping citadel Grivița 1 was the only success of the action, definitely too insignificant compared to almost 20.000 Romanian and Russian soldiers that were hurt or died during one day of fighting²⁸.

The important losses recorded in only a few hours convinced the supreme command that the defense system of Plevna was extremely powerful, cleverly organized, successfully using the advantages of the terrain and benefiting from artillery arms that were ensuring the execution of a dense artillery fire. Consequently, it was impossible to conquer the citadel through a general siege, but only by blocking and forcing Osman Pasha to surrender through hunger and disease; a prolonged siege started, continuing until December 1877 and representing an extremely valuable war experience that the young Romanian army gained.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ John Henry Verrinder Crowe, *PLEVNA*, Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th Edition, vol. 21, pp. 838-840, <http://www.xenophon-mil.org/rushistory/battles/plevna2.htm>

Besides the insufficient human and material force of the Russo-Rumanian armies, in this third battle of Plevna another paramount factor of the defeat was represented by the lack of elementary information about the enemy: number, arms, fighting willingness, experience, the placement of the Ottoman citadels and fronts etc.

The incapacity to collect correct field information led the Romanian troops to a situation which endangered most of our units. Hence, following the evaluation made after the fight, General Gheorghe Anghelescu, the commander of the Infantry Division number 3, was accused of “absolute lack of initiative regarding the organization of the special reconnaissance missions”, and Major Jacob Lahovary, responsible for the field reconnaissance in front of Plevna, was severely criticized for his error, including by the national press. Major Lahovary defended himself insisting on the objective difficulties which did not permit him to identify the two citadels (Grivița 1 and Grivița 2) or the steep abyss that was lying in front of them²⁹.

In order to make the siege of Plevna triumphant, the links of the people inside the citadel with the outside world had to be cut. This plan was accomplished through the actions developed under the command of the Russian General Gurko, who conquered on 12/24 October the Gorni Dubnic, situated in the South-West of Plevna, took 5000 prisoners and completed the surrounding plan of Plevna. During the same period, a Romanian Cavalry brigade occupied Gorni and Dolni Etropol; the conquest of Teliș, Dolni Dubnic, Crișin, Osicova, Vrața etc meant the accomplishment of the surrounding and isolation process of Plevna; any attempt to communicate with the outside was stopped. Due to a lack of external help, the fate of the surrounded army was sealed; Grand Duke Nicolae addressed an ultimatum on 31 October/12 November to Osman Pasha and asked him to surrender, but the request was rejected by the commander of the citadel under siege.

Consequently, measures were taken towards preparing the allied Russo-Romanian army (approximately 100.000 soldiers having 500 cannons) for the final battle and the conquest of Plevna. The entire perimeter of the surrounding, measuring 50 km, was divided in six sectors and the longest one was given to the Romanian units that were led by General Alexander Cernat³⁰.

²⁹ Alin Spânu, op. cit., p.22.

³⁰ Romanian Academy, *History of the Romanians*, vol. VII, p.684.

To provide and protect the secret of its own battle action, rigorous measures were initiated in order to prevent data leaking to the enemy. The military gendarmerie and the clerks within the Minister of Interior, who were detached in the operations area, removed all the individuals suspected of espionage and living in the vicinity of Plevna, where military Romanian units were stationed, and ensured that there was no risk of information leaking in the press correspondents' telegraphic messages. Special attention was paid to the interception of Osman Pasha's agents sent on reconnaissance missions, hence many of his attempts to communicate with the Turkish commanders failed.

The interrogation of various types of people reaching the lines of the Romanian units was of extreme usefulness in the evaluation process of the capabilities held by the Ottoman army that was under siege at Plevna. Therefore, the documents elaborated on the Bulgarian front contained the interrogations of some Turkish Islamic defectors, Bulgarian peasants and small Christian traders who ran away from the Ottoman fortifications or who were taken prisoners during the battles. Next, we will follow the thread of this intelligence collection process, extremely useful due to the fact that it could also describe, of course with a dose of subjectivity, the "updated" picture of the situation of the Ottoman army led by General Osman Pasha.

In the interrogations of the Bulgarians Iordache Ghețov, Petrache Țacov and Christu Nicolof at the beginning of November 1877, they confessed they ran away from Plevna due to the harsh living conditions existing in the citadel at that moment. The General Army Headquarters established, as it was already presented, a set of standard questions that were applied to those subjected to the process of military intelligence collection. The interrogation started with the question – *What is your religion, where are you from and why did you defect from Plevna?* The Bulgarians who were interrogated answered "We are Christian inhabitants of Plevna and we ran away because if the Turks put their hands on us they make us work and they don't care we have been starving for three weeks."

What is your knowledge about the Turkish army? –We know the Turks were sheltering from the cannons and running from the citadels in the cities where they hid in the Bulgarians' houses; and the officers came in and beat them and threatened they would shoot them or take them on the front; at first they were boasting about having 100.000 soldiers, but now we have heard them saying they only have 20.000 able to fight, the rest being

wounded or ill; all the houses are full of injured and wounded people and the rest of us is sitting in cellars and outdoor.

Do they have plenty of war munitions? –For the guns there is enough, but for the cannons there is not much left; they took all the munitions out of the churches and put it outside the city, in holes dug in the ground.

Do they have much food supply left? –I have heard someone talk that there is enough for two weeks, but there are food stores only in some booth corners.

Do they have much food for the cattle and how numerous are the cattle? –They have big cattle, but they are dying of starvation as they have nothing to feed them.

What have you heard about the Turks' intentions? –We have heard that the officers were encouraging the troops by telling them new forces are coming from Sofia. Five Pashas from the Turkish command agree with the surrender, but Osman Pasha and two other Pashas do not want to surrender; and these Pashas never sleep together for fear not to be killed”³¹.

On the same line also subscribe the information delivered by other Bulgarians who fled from the authority of Osman Pasha. Subsequently, at the question “*What do you know about the Turkish army, what number is it compound of and in what condition is it?*” the Bulgarians who were subjected to the interrogations on 7 November 1877 declared: “...according to what we have seen and heard, they might be around 40-50 thousands, they are in a very bad condition, they are starving and are very ragged; before Plevna was closed, they were brought a few clothes which were taken by the most important ones”³². This number is also present in the interrogation taken to the Bulgarian Petru Nincu on 20 October 1877, who claimed having defected from Plevna due to very hard living conditions they had to suffer at that given moment. At the question concerning the size of the Turkish army in Plevna, he answered – “I have heard a rumor saying that they are around 50000 soldiers.”

The Romanian soldiers obtained very useful information by interrogating the fled Turkish defectors. In the report addressed to General Alexandru Cernat, the commander of the Operations Army, the interrogation

³¹The National Archives of Romania, *Fund: Ministry of War, Structural part of the General Staff. The General Army Headquarters*, Folder no.38/1877, Files 92-93.

³² Ibidem, File 94.

taken on 5 November 1877 to Turkish soldier Osman Edifnizani, defector, was attached. It is mentioned that the soldier defected because of the starvation existing among the members of Osman Pasha's army; valuable data about the power of the enemy troops was also collected: "...the troops from Plevna that had around 4-500 people in a battalion at the beginning of August, now it has only 120-180 people per battalion, due to the losses suffered and the endemic diseases... The reserve troops that were to sustain the front are currently located in the bivouac, near Plevna. Only the mountain artillery has 3 horses or mules for each piece, used for transportation; the rest of the artillery does not have any horses"³³.

During October-November 1877, the Romanian officers interrogated hundreds of Turkish soldiers, defectors or people caught during the battle confrontations. The corroboration of the data obtained from these people, belonging to various units, dislocated in different parts of the Ottoman defense system, created a picture very close to the reality that would come to light after the enemy's surrender, at the end of November.

The Romanian General Army Headquarters knew the defensive system from Plevna was about to collapse, due to the continuous bombardment of the hundreds of Russian and Romanian cannons – that eventually caused great damage – and due to the fact that it was defended by approximately 40-50.000 soldiers, most of whom were part of the infantry, whereas the rest of almost 1.500 troops were cavalry troops. As far as the arms are concerned, the rumors speculated a number of 80-100 cannons, having very little ammunition left – virtually 10-50 fires for each piece of artillery; on the other hand, the ammunition needed by the infantry was considered to be enough.

The same disheartening picture of the November 1877 situation is described by two Turkish officers, belonging to the encircled army and whose memories would be later published: "A circle of iron and fire was suffocating Plevna; the provisions were almost exhausted; even with reduced ratios, soldiers did not have enough food for more than 15 days. The mortality was substantially increasing. Plevna was becoming a large tomb, where, in dirt and anxiety, an army was dying, an army which has been completely separated from the rest of the world"³⁴.

³³ Ibidem, files 98-99.

³⁴ Romanian Academy, *History of the Romanians*, op. cit., p. 683.

It was obvious that the situation could not continue that way and that the Ottoman General, lacking any external help, would try to break through the encirclement and find a path to Sofia; the number of defectors generated by starvation, diseases and cold was becoming a mass phenomena and was leading to the same result³⁵. According to the documents from the archive, we emphasize the data delivered by the Turkish soldier Ahmet Mustafa from Battalion 1 Guard, on 20 November 1877, following his interrogation by the Romanian officers; after presenting the big picture of the situation of the army under siege, he says: **“The intention of the army is to leave towards Sofia as soon as the food provisions will be exhausted”**,³⁶.

Therefore, the Russo-Romanian command was able to timely prepare for the moment in which, due to cause despair, Osman Pasha would order the break of the encirclement regardless of the price. On 19 November/1 December 1877, the Turkish general, reaching the end of his resources, asked the allied command to allow him a free passage towards Sofia or Vidin, leaving in Plevna all the arms and munitions; the answer was that there was no possibility other than the unconditional surrender. The Turkish army tried to create for itself a path towards Sofia through fighting, but was forced to surrender on 28 November/10 December 1877, headed by its supreme commander, Osman Pasha.

The conquest of Plevna represented the end of the hardest stage of the war, the final victory being imminent after that. Further on, the mission of the Romanian army was to destroy the Ottoman troops concentrated in the North-West of Bulgaria, to ensure the back and the right flank of the Russian troops which were heading for Sofia.

The truce that was concluded on 19/31 January 1878 stipulated the occupation of several citadels and cities, our units taking over Vidin and Belogradcik; the surrender of these citadels to the Romanian army marked the end of the campaign started at the South of the Danube with the view of gaining recognition of the national independence; the campaign requested the effort of an entire society and the sacrifice of approximately 10.000 soldiers (dead, wounded or disappeared).

We cannot but remark the difficulties Romanian soldiers from the Bulgarian front had to confront, in particular the various situations that

³⁵ The statement of another Turkish soldier, who deserted in October 1877, are also eloquent: „...if the encirclement is to last longer, almost all the soldiers will desert because they will totally lack food, and we have not received our pays for almost two years”.

³⁶ Ibidem, leaf 151.

appeared and that were requesting urgent energetic measures in order to stop their spread among the troops. From a report addressed to the Ministry of War Ion C. Brătianu (besides the position of Prime-Minister, he held this position too) by the General Direction of the Military Hospitals in Turnu-Măgurele, on 20 October 1877, the following can be extracted³⁷: “From the last transportation of people from across the Danube, it could be observed that most of those injured, in particular those from the County of Teleorman, presented wounds with the following characteristic: injuries at the right hand showing the characteristic of a plague produced by a gun fire shot from a small distance. In the second series of injured, partial amputations of fingers made with a cutting weapon seemed to be prevalent. Our opinion is that these wounds were produced in a voluntarily manner, by people determined to end their military service.

The Medical Division from Turnu warns you, Mister Prime-Minister, about these facts, which can serve as a bad example and can be the starting point of the demoralization of the army; please convey to us what measures will you be taking regarding this matter”.

These desperate actions were caused, besides the personal motives invoked also by most of the deserters who were judged and condemned by the Courts Martial of the military units they belonged to³⁸, by the very hard living conditions existing on the front, especially because a long and cold winter was beginning. The lack of material resources sent from the country to supply the soldiers from the active army, fighting in Bulgaria, becomes a serious problem; the higher body was sent numerous warnings regarding the reported deficiencies. In October 1877, the commander of the Active Battalion from Regiment 15 Dorobanți, through a telegram addressed to the superior structures, illustrated: “I have the honor to report we received 250 new recruits. These people are completely weak in instruction, lacking the campaign training. They did not even accomplish the shooting sessions.

We started the instruction with the processes of loading the weapons and taking aim and I will try to instruct them according to the minimum standards as soon as possible.

³⁷ The National Archives of Romania, *Fund: Ministry of War, Structural part of the General Staff. The General Army Headquarters*. Folder no. 11/1877, File 345.

³⁸ Regarding the proceedings instituted against the soldiers or defectors from the Romanian army during 1877-1878, more details can be obtained from the folders at the National Archives of Romania, *Fund: Ministry of War, Structural part of the General Staff. The General Army Headquarters, Structural part Observation Corp etc.*

Their clothing is compound of old coats and shirts – most of which are ragged; they are wearing inappropriate shoes. The weapons are of small distance piece, which aims at most the distance of 400 meters. The battalion, as you may know, has only 2 front officers present...³⁹

Beyond the great difficulties encountered, during this period, through considerable organizational and material efforts, a military system with an appropriate structure suitable for the situation in Romania was created. It was instructed and endowed according to the limited possibilities of the country, but, very important, it benefited from a high morale generated by the perspective of the fulfillment of the independence dream. “Only thanks to the original system – declared General Grigore Crăiniceanu in an official meeting of the Romanian Academy – the Romanian army was able in 1877 to ask the cooperation and alliance with the Russian army, instead of obedience, and then to enter the war and win those everlasting victories that offered us the independence of our country”⁴⁰.

Conclusions

Taking as a starting point the experience gained during the war of independence, the political and military authorities implemented major reforms concerning the leadership and management of the army, as well as the physiognomy of the military structures. Starting with the creation of the General Staff in 1882, the intelligence structure of the army acquired more coherence and stability and the intelligence activity entered a second stage of evolution based on the unity of intelligence and counter-intelligence structures. The High Royal Decree from 29 November 1882 transformed the General Staff in a permanent authority within the army, consisting of 3 principal sections: The First Section (*Staff, Mobilization and Tactical operations*), The Second Section (*Intelligence*) and the Third Section (*Communication and Transports*)⁴¹.

In 1884, on the grounds of the Decree No.158, the General Staff Regulation was approved; it also stated the internal regulatory framework of

³⁹The National Archives of Romania, *Fund: Ministry of War, Structural part of the General Staff. The Army General Headquarters*, Folder no.11/1877, leaf 349.

⁴⁰ Maria Georgescu, *Romania's Army during the reign of Carol I*, in *Military History Magazine*, no. 1-2/2008, p. 59.

⁴¹ Cristian Troncotă, *Romania and the Secret Front*, ELION Publishing, Bucharest 2008, p.29.

the Second Section which, starting from 1897, changed its name into “Second Section - military statistics, study of foreign armies, intelligence, transports, telegraphy, operations and international matters” and was divided in two offices⁴².

Once the Superior War School was founded in 1889, there has been introduced a specialization course was introduced; in chapter VI the “Intelligence Service” was described. Analyzing the argumentations of this course, one would conclude the fact that the intelligence service had a main role in the management of war. Of significant importance was also the presentation of the means used to collect military intelligence, for instance: 1) maps and documents gathered on peace time; 2) documents found or taken from the enemy; 3) the interrogation of the local people, the prisoners or the defectors; 4) espionage on the enemy's territory in war and peace time; 5) cavalry intelligence; 6) reconnaissance missions made with the help of the military attaché; 7) topographic reconnaissance missions⁴³.

The following decades proved to be of significant contribution for everything that future encompassed, starting from intelligence and counter intelligence activities to the conversion of the Romanian Army in a relatively modern structure that sets up accurate missions based on an effective internal infrastructure. 1883 came up with a fresh element in the military intelligence structures – the sending of the first Romanian military attaché on a mission to Berlin, Iacob Lahovari.

From a theoretical point of view, we may consider that there is a real connection to the evolution of the European intelligence structures; in reality though, the organization of a military intelligence service, suitable to the needs of the army, still encounters great difficulties due to a variety of not only objective and legal factors (the limited resources for instance), but also mental ones related to the military leaders.

The reform of the national security registered convolutions on a large scale as a result of the late nineteenth century's financial crisis. The Government's decisions were not as efficient as expected for many reasons, among which we can talk on one hand about the inefficiently assigned resources and on the other hand, about the inappropriate management of the funds together with the bad establishment of the real priorities in this area.

⁴² Lenuța Nicolescu, *Section II Information within the General Staff*, in “Folder” magazine, no. 2(6)/1999, p. 57, <http://www.mapn.ro/smg/SIA/document1.html>

⁴³ Cristian Troncotă, op. cit., p.29-30.

The next interwar Prime Minister, Gheorghe Tătărescu, stated that during that period “the improvement of the country's economical activity, its financial stability, seemed more important than the investments in the military field; the railway infrastructure was more necessary than the building of military barracks and the agriculture exports, more important than the arms imports.”⁴⁴

In spite of all these efforts, the process of modernization proved to be too slow; as a proof stands the disastrous campaign from 1916, which was beyond the factors related to the relations between France, England and Russia. A trustful witness of those times, the future General, Radu R. Rosetti, sorrowfully stated that “most of the projects debated then remained, despite all the talks, only projects.” Moreover, even the army's chief Dumitru Iliescu admitted that “on 1 January 1914 the Romanian army lacked the most important things an army needed to start a war”⁴⁵.

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