

March 1945 – A 23rd August in Reverse – Some British Documents

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Abstract

On March 2nd, 1945, general Avramescu was convoked to the commander of the 40th Soviet Army. One hour later, the Romanian delegation was announced that Avramescu and the Russian general, Filip Fedorovici Jmacenko, left to the command point of the Ukrainian Front 2, as they were expected there by Marshall Malinovski. In fact, General Avramescu had been arrested. Later, the Soviet authorities announced that Avramescu had been killed on 3rd March 1945, allegedly in an aerial attack on the car which was transporting him, and his body was buried in Budapest Soshalom cemetery. For many years Romanian historians have accused the Soviet secret services for having conspired to arrest the general. Our research in British archives has revealed the role played by the British intelligence GCHQ in this business..

Keywords: March 1945, general Avramescu, Soviet Union, British intelligence CGHQ

According to an informative synthesis from 19th May 1945, the first information about anti-Soviet armed groups emerged in October 1944. The document spoke of the existence of armed groups in the Brasov-Fagaras-Sibiu area. According to this document the first were the soldiers and legionaries sent by the government in Vienna. In November 1944 they got in touch with General Rădescu from receiving missions.

Andreas Schmidt was a key figure of the German plans for the Romanian territory. After August 23rd 1944, he withdrew with the German army and went to Vienna, where, in early September, he met Horia Sima and General SS Arthur PHLEPS, (Cristian Troncoță, 1999, pp. 110-111.) the latter being appointed by Hitler on August 25th "General SS and Commander of the Police for Transylvania and Banat". Andreas Schmidt was involved in subversive actions organized by Himmler in Romania. Himmler ordered the famous sturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny, the liberator of Mussolini, to organize the war of partisans in Romania, and to come in close contact with Schmidt. Teams that were to be parachuted behind the lines had been prepared in special training centres. These actions are known as conventional "Parachutist action", name given by some historians. Airdrop of about 100 Legionnaires and 17 Germans in Romania occurred from November 1944 to January 1945. On the night of 4th to 5th November 1944, Schmidt, accompanied by Nicholas Petraşcu and six other legionaries returned to Romania, being parachuted in the Sighisoara area. (Academia Română, 2008. p. 740.)

On February 9th 1945, a Henschel – 129 plane, which departed from Oradea to Miskolc, was attacked and shot down by two Romanian fighters, on the express orders of the Soviet command. The pilot and the passengers, who survived, were initially hospitalized and subsequently handed over to the Soviets. Andreas Schmidt, the leader of the ethnic Germans from Romania and Constantin Stoicanescu, one of the legionary movement leaders, were passengers on this plane. They were travelling under fake names: Sergeant Rugan Octavian and Corporal Stefan Barsan, both from the security company Baneasa (Manuel Stănescu, 2012). According to the interrogation in March 22nd, 1945, he stated that in Romania there had been organized "a plot aimed against the Soviet Union" prepared by leaders of the Iron Guard movement, a group of Romanian soldiers (he mentioned the name of General Avramescu) and the leaders of the German ethnic group in Romania (Academia Română, 2008,p. 741.)

Military records and service orders for travelling to Miskolc had been purchased by the paratrooper captain Michael Ţanţu, Commander of the 32nd Guard Company Baneasa. After his arrest; he made a full confession that would prove to be a revelation to the investigators (Florica Dobre, 2002, pp. 18-21.).Tantu met Stoicanescu who asked him to provide support for him and another companion to travel to the German lines.

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Țanțu had to do it for those who fled military records, service orders to Miskolc and to accompany them to Brasov. The testimony of Captain Țanțu is one of the few direct evidences that incriminate General Avramescu (Manuel Stănescu, 2012).

There had been other situations that involved General Avramescu directly or indirectly in this plot. Thus, on November 2nd, 1944 Ilie Vlad Sturdza, the son-in-law of General Avramescu and the son of Prince Mihail Sturdza, former foreign minister during the Legion Movement Government, surrendered eight units of the German Army, and he was sent to Vienna, to meet his father. Another case was that of Ion San Giorgiu who deserted the enemy with the support of Avramescu. After his defection, San Giorgiu becomes Minister of Education in the National Government of Vienna, led by Horia Sima, head of the Legionary Movement (Alexandru Duțu, 2015). All these defections and repeated enemy crossings of the people with close connection with legionnaire or pro German known exile, could not go unnoticed by the special services of Moscow. All these defections culminated with the disaster of the 4th Romanian Infantry Division in bridgehead from Szolnok, the Tisza. This was almost entirely captured by the Germans on 20th October 1944, the unit commander, General Platon Chirnoagă, becoming the only Romanian general prisoner on the Western Front (Manuel Stănescu, 2012).

Radio Donau announced that Platon became Minister of War of the National Army of the government in Vienna, and that his close collaborators were former employees of the 4th Infantry Division: Lt. Col. Constantin Ciobanu, Chief of Staff of the Division and captains Rigani and George Topor (Dana Beldiman, 2002, p. 150). Most prisoners in Division 4 formed a so-called National Army under the authority of the government in Vienna (Ion Gheorgheos, 2012). On 22nd January 1945 Sanatescu informed General Vinogradov, deputy of the Allied (Soviet) Control Commission in Romania that "General Avramescu requested a leave of 25 days and it was given to him by the Minister of War. The officer was sick and would pass on the expiry of leave in reserve (Alexandru Duțu, 2015). But in the late January 1945, Marshal Malinovsky asked to be recalled.

The reason: in the absence of general Avramescu, the combat strength of the 4th Army fell by half. Avramescu went to the front, taking command of the 4th Army on 19th February, which he led until March 2nd, 1945. The demand of Marshal Malinovsky had only one explanation: the Soviets wanted Avramescu's arrest on front, for easy reasons. Stelian Tanase believes that "in Romania, the Soviets could be much more difficult to arrest. Political responses, diplomatic protests, and the negative image provided by an occupation regime prevented the Soviets from arresting him at home. In addition, before the Yalta Conference, the Soviets did not want to start other discussions with the Anglo-Americans. Returning to the 4th Army command as part of his assassination plan" (Stelian Tănase, 2012), on March 2nd, 1945, at 13, the Soviet command summoned General Avramescu by phone. That evening he was arrested (Alexandru Duțu, 2015).

Our research at the Public Record Office in London reveals that the British Intelligence Service was involved in the surveillance of the connection between SD center in Vienna and the pro-German circle in Romania and was providing evidence to Soviet Secret Services which led to the arrest of general Avramescu. The British Intelligence Service used the *Gunpowder* sources which we identified to be GCHQ. In fact, GCHQ monitored radio transmissions between SD intelligence center of Vienna and their agent in Romania.

According to dispatches from the Army Group South, a revolt against the Bolsheviks was being planned in Romania. The report, confirmed by information via Gunpowder channels, says that the situation in Romania had become more and tenser during the months of December 1944 and January 1945, due to the continuous Bolshevik oppression. In fact, the idea of a revolt against the oppressors was considered by the circles which were close to the Romanian Government.

Discussions had progressed to the point where national circles closest to Germany were approached by intermediaries who inquired whether they were prepared to join the movement. These circles were of the opinion that the moment could be ill chosen, because there was a lack of adequate preparation to guarantee success. Nevertheless, they answered that they would not stand aside if a general revolt was staged. However, German secret services welcomed a revolt in Romania, possibly spreading in Bulgaria, which "might be as a relief to the Eastern front", but they remembered that "the failure of such an undertaking, due to the inadequate preparations, would probably destroy all opportunity for similar projects in the future. Outlook for such projects should be viewed as favorable only if it can be timed to coincide with a counter-trust of German Army against the Bolsheviks on the eastern front" (PRO Kew Gardens, dossier HWI 3605, *Telegram from Altenburg Vienna to Ministry of Foreign Affairs Berlin, Romania, The Germans and anti-russians intrigue in Romania*).

Another German report in January 1945 revealed that the situation increased in tenseness as the Bolsheviks obviously intended to fully eliminate bourgeois elements in a comparatively short time, those placing power exclusively in communist hands. For this purpose, troops and GPU units were covertly shifted to Bucharest during December 1944 and January 1945. The middle class in the Government realized the danger that was threatening them and believed that they could expect destruction only by means of the planned putsch, in cooperation with Romanian military circles. Despite the reinforcement of the Bolshevik troops, the Romanian commandment in Bucharest reportedly hoped that he could hold the city with Romanian troops against the Bolsheviks. Contact with the National circles regarding participation in the movement was remade with Iuliu Maniu, who, significantly enough was branded as a war criminal by the Bucharest radio on 1st February. The National Group gave the answer that if they participated in the movement, they would not do so under their own name but as National peasants. The German agent requested instructions so that they would be able to guide developments in accordance with the SD wishes. He also requested an early grant of the financial assistance which was urgent under those circumstances. (Ibid., dossier HWI 3605, *Telegram from Altenburg Vienna to Ministry of Foreign Affairs Berlin*)

Another telegram informed that the Soviet repression in Romania had resulted in plans for an uprising with the support of the circles which were close to the Romanian government. The Nationalist circle close to Germany which were sounded out for support believed that the Movement was insufficiently prepared but they were nevertheless willing to participate in the general rising.

Receiving the telegram, the German Secret Service believed that, as a matter of fact, recommending an uprising was dubious. "Failure would mean the loss of German "point's d'appui" in Romania. It would be preferable to make the attempt simultaneously with the counteroffensive on the eastern front".

The motivation of the plan for an anti-Russians rising was the belief that the Soviets intended to eliminate all the bourgeois elements and to give exclusive power to the Communists. For this aim, disguise OGPU formations arrived in Bucharest (Ibid., dossier HWI 3605 *Telegram from Altenburg Vienna to Ministry of Foreign Affairs Berlin*).

Reports received by the German Secret Services indicate the increase of activity in anti-Russian circles in Romania. Anti-Russians and anti-Jewish posters and caricatures appeared. The German controlled Donau radio which was very popular especially among officers. From the rank of major downwards, this feeling was very favorable to Germany.

The Reich Foreign Minister requested that the timing of the movement and the manner in which it was to be brought about should be left up to the Romanians or, respectively, to Horia Sima. He advised against acting as a deterring factor in any way but warned against German Secret Services appearing as the driving force behind the movement. He requested them simply to be active in all phases. Ribbentrop advised that the Romanian rising should be left to the Romanians or to Horia Sima and not to force the peace. (PRO, Kew Gardens, dossier HWI 3605 *Telegram from Altenburg Vienna to Ministry of Foreign Affairs Berlin*).

A Romanian officer who came over into the German lines on 17th January informed that there was a great activity on the part of the legionaries, who were organized throughout the country, even though their leader and deputy leader had been arrested. Members of the Legionary Youth Movement, who were not yet known to the police as legionaries when the arrest was made had been advanced to positions of leadership. In Bucharest, inscriptions against the Jews and the Bolsheviks could be seen on walls quite often. A widely circulating leaflet showed the Russian bear reaching for the Romanian honey pot and being stung by many bees which bore the swastika. Stickers reading "Death to the Jews" also widely circulated. The people looked at the legionaries with a certain hope that the country will be saved, while elements of the old parties, the Liberals and National Peasants, speculated about a German collaboration with the British and the Americans against Soviet Russia.

The Donausaunders, particularly Leu's daily reports, was having great success and was listened to mainly by officers who had members of their families employed by the state as the latter were allowed to have radio sets. Since everyone had relatives in this category, the circle of listeners was very great. There were listeners even amongst the Jews, as the richer ones had taken the anti-Bolshevik attitude, due to Russians plundering. In the 4th Hussar Regiment, commanded by Lt. col.

Tomescu, former adjutant to King Mihai, the Donasender was turned on so loudly at the general officers table at the casino that the soldiers outside the casino queued up with great interest to listen, too. Every Romanian soldier knew that Donasender broadcast and its comments were a constant topic of conversation.

There were 20 weak Romanian divisions on the front. The German soldiers who were taken prisoners were frequently concealed by officers of lower grades and troops and aided to escape. The Romanian generals at the front did everything that the Russians asked as they feared for their lives. General Dragomir, chief of 4th Army General Staff, was Russia's greatest pawn. The feeling amongst the troops upped to the rank of major, was something like this: *Either we will go over the Germans, or we will turn Partisan*. The moral amongst the Romanian troops was bad. They suffered heavy losses. The third Romanian infantry division has had 9336 men wounded between the beginning of hostilities in Transylvania and the 11th of January.

More than 100.000 Russian deserters were wandered in the countryside. The Red Army men complained that they had not lived for four years and were fed up with the war. A Red Army soldier told an agent: "We don't believe that Germany will ever be conquered". Rumors that British and American police agents were in Romania proved to be fairytales. The Russians had constructed fortified positions along the Focsani-Namoloasa –Galatz line and on the Dniester since October.

Agriculture was carried on only feebly, for the Russians were requisitioning horses and wagons everywhere. The food situation was difficult. Villagers controlled by Romanian authorities had to make large deliveries, officially to the Russian Army every week. Peasants were systematically plundered by Russians flying squads. (Ibid., dossier HWI 3605, *Telegram from Schmidt at MFA Berlin to MFA Vienna*, f 2).

In another German report from January 1945, SD reported that the Germans could place completed confidence in General Avramescu. A German report from the Bucharest area dated the end of January speaks of an approach by National Peasants elements to Iron Guard sympathizers with a view to join armed action to counter any coup by the communists. It was claimed that Radescu was aware of this feeler. The Iron Guard party appears to have agreed to come in if and when the Romanian Army took action.

A message dated the end of February implies that preparations were being made for an armed resistance. Another message at the end of February shows keen German interest in economic developments, particularly in evidence with the Russians' attempts to secure their economic predominance. The Germans are also keenly interested in security and secret police arrangements. A message dated the beginning of March shows that the local German Intelligence representative was finding some difficulty in assessing the exact position following the disarming of the Romanian forces by the Russians. A subsequent message denies the current rumors of King Michael's arrest or flight and warns German controlled transmitters to refrain from propaganda on such lines.

The German Intelligence representative was convinced that most recent developments amount to a trial of strength between the Russians on the one hand and Great Britain and America on the other. (Ibid., dossier HWI 3605, *The Southern Department, The Germans and intrigues in Romania*).

From items of German SD communications dated early March ascertained by most secret means resulted that the Germans were most anxious to ascertain what was the official British attitude to the recent development in Romania. It was suggested that the official attitude of London may not coincide with the attitude of local British Representatives. These local British and American Representatives were reported to Berlin as being officially, or ostensibly, strictly neutral; but at the same time, subsequently, to be egging on the bourgeois political leaders and to the Palace to take a firm stand against the Russians. German controlled broadcast stations were advised against launching attacks on these bourgeois leaders or against King Michael or Radescu. The Iron Guard agreed such attacks were bad policy. The Germans were interested in an attempt to establish discreet contact with Tatarescu, the new Vice Premier. (Ibid., dossier HWI 3596, *Southern Department, The Germans and Romania*, dated 10.3.1945, f. 19.).

On March 6th, 1945 the British Intelligence chiefs decided that the relevant W/T cipher details should be communicated to the Russians, together with the sufficient back material to show the duplicity of Avramescu. In this document they claim that *adverse information about him derived from Gunpowder had earlier been sent to Moscow through O.S.S.* British intelligence chiefs claimed that there was the possibility of Avramescu's appointment as Premier if the coup d'etat succeeded. (Ibidem, dossier HWI 3596, *Note of the British intelligence chiefs*, dated 06.03.1945).

Conclusions

In the fall of 1944 with the tightening of the Soviet occupation regime, there was a resistance movement made up of pro-German elements and former Legionnaires. They operated mainly in the area of Brasov, Sibiu, Fagaraş and had Legionnaire ties with the exiled government in Vienna. Himmler ordered the sturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny to train and organize Legionnaire groups and to create an anti-Soviet partisan movement in Romania. This action known as the Parachutist Action consisted in parachuting over 100 Legionnaires and 17 German secret service SD agents, during November 1944 - January 1945. Among those there were the head of the German ethnic group in Romania, Andreas Schmidt and the Legionnaires commanders, Nicolae Petraşcu and Constantin Stoicanescu. Subsequently, on 9th February, Schmidt and Stoicanescu were captured while trying to return to Germany and revealed the threads of a plot which aimed to organize a coup leading for the expulsion of the Soviet forces in Romania. In their statements they accused the General Gheorghe Avramescu, the Fourth Army commander and the government in Vienna of plotting to overthrow the Romanian government resulted from the coup in August 23rd, 1944.

Until then it is known that Avramescu help edvariouspro-German oriented people to pass the front to the German Army. Among them there was his son- in- law, Vlad Sturzaand Professor Ion San Giurgiu. The Romanian historiography, in connection with the arrest of Avramescu, hypothesises the accusation that the Soviets organized a plot in order to assassinate Avramescu, which was meant to easily subordinate the Romanian army. The contemporary Romanian historiography only gives a shy launched assumption that the General Avramescu would be involved in a German plot.

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The British documents that we studied confirm that the German Intelligence services collected information that resulted in a deterioration of the political and economic situation in Romania between November 1944and February1945.Theforced requisitions and increased food shortages merged. USSR brought new OGPU troops and the ruling circles in Romania expected a Bolshevik coup that aimed to bring the Communist Party of Romania to power.

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The German Intelligence role would be to advise from the shadow for the coup conspirators to meet the German interests in Romania. Regarding Avramescu, he was to be appointed Prime Minister if there would have been a successful coup d'état. The British Intelligence Services intercepted communications between the SD Centre in Vienna and General Avramescu and gathered some informative material that certified what the British Intelligence chiefs believed to be the duplicitous game of Avramescu. According to the documents that we have, some of those informative materials were delivered to the Soviets. We do not agree that General Dragomir Nicolae was a Soviet pawn as it appears in these documents. His arrest together with General Avramescu refutes this claim.

About the justification for the arrest of Avramescu, we think that from the Soviets' point of view and the political orientation adopted by Romania after August 23rd 1944, the operation was justified. An anti-Soviet coup even with the help of a German counter offensive, as the Balaton offensive was, at that time - in March 1945, would have had tiny chances of success. We believe that a failure of the Romanian Fourth Army after the capitulation moment of the 4th Division and the passage of the personnel of that division headed by General Platon Chirnoagă on the side of Germany, would have had more serious consequences on the peace talks in Paris and raised doubts on the question of awarding Transylvania to Romania. Given that Hungary had strong support from some Western politicians, the loss of Soviet support by Romania would have had disastrous consequences for the country. Based on information provided by their Intelligence Services and by the British, the Soviets acted promptly and proceeded to the arrest of Avramescu and to the replacing of Nicolae Rădescu Government with a pro-Soviet government – Petru Groza government.

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