

DANUBIAN REVIEW

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KING FERDINAND OF RUMANIA* (II)

BY

ZSOMBOR de SZASZ

II. THE CROWN COUNCIL OF AUGUST 27, 1916.

In the middle of the Rumanian negotiations with the Allied Powers new difficulties arose.

The Russo-Rumanian convention of October 1914, which concerned the Austrian and Hungarian territories to be attached to Rumania, was based on the "ethnic majority" of the population, and made no attempt at a definite settlement of the future frontiers. The Rumanian Government occasionally alluded to this principle, when it suited their purposes or when they were confronted with a suggestion as absurd as the annexation of Hungarian territory as far as Debrecen, a suggestion which Brătianu magnanimously refused. But they ignored it when its application would have clashed with their own interests, as for example in the case of the Banat, whose population consisted of four races jumbled together and whose southwestern corner, inhabited by a distinct Serb majority, formed the Hinterland of the Serb capital of Belgrade. Here the Rumanian Government calmly set aside the nationality principle and with a complete disregard of the wishes of the inhabitants, demanded the entire, undivided territory.

The Rumanian pretensions came to the knowledge of the Serb Government in the beginning of 1915, and elicited from the latter an immediate protest against a solution which meant placing a preponderantly Serb-inhabited territory under Rumanian domination. M. Marinkovich, the Serb Minister in Bucharest, expostulated bitterly with M. Marghiloman: "Rumania's attitude," he complained, "is most unfriendly towards Serbia. Why does she demand Serb

* See the previous article under the same title in the August 1942 issue of this review.

territories? It is impossible for us completely to sacrifice our own interests. Putnik (the Commander-in-Chief of the Serb army) was born in the Banat, Versec is a Serb town, Temesvár was recognised as a Serb Principality by Imperial Rescript in 1848."

The Serbs carried the question to London, and there proffered their demand for the Serb territories of the Banat, partly on the basis of the ethnical principle on which Rumania based her claim to Hungarian and Austrian territory, partly on the basis of strategic considerations, since Belgrade was indefensible without the Serb *Hinterland*.

But this was one of the cases in which Brătianu had no use for the nationality principle. He did not deny the fact that the southwestern corner of the Banat was inhabited by a Serb population; but he blandly observed that "it is impossible to cling rigidly to the ethnic principle in every assessment of territory." For the rest he pointed out that the 200,000 Serbs who would come under Rumanian rule would be more than balanced by the 300,000 Rumanians who would remain in the Timoc Valley in Serbia. As regarded the strategic situation, since Rumania demanded no *Hinterland* on her side of the Danube, he saw no reason why Serbia should be better provided in this respect on the opposite side and on the banks of the Tisza.

Brătianu's statistics were, to say the least, deceptive. According to the last pre-war Hungarian census of 1910 there were 270,000 Serbs in the Banat, while according to the Russian Diplomatic Documents there were no more than 150,000 Rumanians in the Timoc Valley.

But Brătianu was categorical: if the Allied Powers failed to comply with his wishes and Rumania was not accorded Banat area, she would not attack the Central Powers.

The Serbs felt ill at ease. "The Powers are making concessions at our cost," complained M. Vesnitch, in Paris, to the French Minister for Foreign Affairs. But the Powers were powerless and sorely in need of the Rumanian support. Baron Schilling, of the Russian Foreign Office, wrote to M. Kudatcheff, the Russian Minister in Brussels: "It is lamentable to think that we should have sunk so low as to be obliged to

negotiate with these disgusting Rumanians, with whom we talked in a very different manner not so long ago. But I am convinced that the time will come when Russia will be able to change her tone in dealing with her."

Meanwhile no material change occurred in Rumania's policy, and negotiations dragged on and on.

General Brusilov's victorious offensive impressed the Rumanians favourably. The Russian forces invaded Austrian Bukovina and occupied Kimpolung, a town on the Rumanian border. Sazonoff, the Russian Foreign Minister, who had the French Ambassador, M. Paléologue, with him, took a look at the map.

"This," he observed, „would be the right moment for a Rumanian attack, — the way is clear to Nagyvárad and Temesvár . . . even to Budapest. But Brătianu is not the man for quick and simple decisions . . . he will once again miss the favourable opportunity." An opinion which partly, but only partly, bore out King Ferdinand's declaration to Marghiloman: "Brătianu is an astonishing mixture of determination and irresolution."

Although the Russian victories made the Rumanian assistance less urgent, Allied diplomacy returned to the task of trying to induce Rumania to attack the Central Powers. As a result, Brătianu, in June 1916, assured the French Minister in Bucharest that "Rumania's neutrality would not last long," and he begged for a respite of forty-eight hours in which to make up his mind.

This was the face he showed to the Allied Powers. That which he turned towards Austria-Hungary was very different.

On May 13, 1916, Count Czernin, the Austro-Hungarian Minister in Bucharest, sent home the following report concerning a conversation which he had had with the Rumanian Prime Minister:

Brătianu had begun saying that he wished to speak with perfect openness and to explain one or two things concerning which they seemed to hold different views. He, Brătianu, had no concern for details. Whether Verdun capitulated or not, whether the Central Powers occupied more or less territory, were matters that held no interest for him. The

decisive question was, whether one or other of the belligerents would be able to annihilate the other, or whether, unable to do this, they would make peace on the basis of the *status quo*. In either case his policy was the right one. In the latter case, post-war Europe would not materially differ from the Europe of 1914, and his country would be grateful to have been spared the horrors of war. In the former case the war would be won, it would last many years, and Rumania would not be able to hold out to the end. The only policy open to her was a waiting policy. Europe was in a feverish condition, but he, Brătianu, would keep a cool head. He had not attacked Austria when the Russians had been in the Carpathians, nor had he declared war on Russia when that country had suffered reverses. "While the Great Powers consume themselves in the course of a prolonged war, Rumania is doing splendid business and, except for a few hotheads, nobody complains." And he repeated that the only suitable policy for Rumania was the policy of neutrality.

By the beginning of July there was general talk of an imminent war with the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. It was said that troops had been mobilized and sent to the Hungarian frontier; that the officers and men of the border regiments had received no furlough and that preparations had been made for a black-out in all the towns in case of air attack.

On the 6th of July Brătianu declared to Count Czernin that Austria-Hungary had no reason to fear an attack from the side of Rumania; and he started negotiations with the purpose of selling Rumanian wheat to the Monarchy.

"On the 18th July," — Baron Burián, the then Austro-Hungarian Minister for Foreign Affairs, writes in his mémoires — "I caused our Ambassador at Bucharest to make a final attempt to convince King Ferdinand of the moral turpitude of the gross breach of faith which he was contemplating in joining those who were fighting his former allies. The King's reply was an embarrassed stutter, while he protested that he had no designs against us, and achieved the remark that even Brătianu, while wishing "to be in" any final partition of Austria-Hungary, did not wish to bring it about!"

A few days previously M. Paléologue, the French Ambassador in St. Petersburg, had told M. Sazonoff that he had received instructions from M. Briand, then Minister for Foreign Affairs; "We accept," — ran these instructions, — "all the conditions of M. Brătianu, but the intervention of Rumania will only be valuable for us if it is immediate. An attack on the decimated and retiring Austrian troops would be an easy matter for the Rumanian army and useful for the Allies. Rumania would take her place among the Allied Powers at the psychologically opportune moment, and would thereby have the right to fulfil her aspirations... If Rumania misses this occasion, she will lose her chance of becoming a great nation."

"Voilà qui est parfait," — was the Russian Foreign Minister's comment.

But things were not as perfect as Sazonoff thought. The negotiations dragged on, and Brătianu left for the country in order to avoid the final decision; he dreaded having to fix the precise date of the Rumanian intervention. The Chief of the Russian General Staff, General Alexeiev, urged in no measured terms that he should end his shilly-shallying and settle the day on which the Rumanian forces were to attack the Monarchy. Yet a few days later M. Paléologue wrote in his *Mémoires*: "Brătianu's vacillation and haggling continues, and as usual he lays the blame for them on the attitude of Russia."

To Count Czernin Brătianu said that he only told the Allied Powers that Rumania would fight on their side in order to avoid a revolution and to allow the Monarchy to improve her position on the battle-fields and thereby allay the martial ardour of the Rumanian people.

But Russia's patience was exhausted at last.

On August 8 the project of a military convention was presented to Brătianu with Sazonoff's appended commentary to the effect that if Rumania refused to accept it she would forfeit her claim to every political and material advantage which was being offered to her at the time.

Brătianu was still reluctant; he pronounced the project unsatisfactory and talked of resigning. However, he surrendered at last, and on August 17 there was signed a treaty and a

military convention between the Allied Powers — Russia, England, France and Italy — on the one hand, and Rumania on the other.

The first clause of the Treaty guaranteed the territorial integrity of the Rumanian State as it was at the time of signing. In return, Rumania undertook to attack the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy on the date fixed by the Convention — August 28, 1916 — and to sever diplomatic relations with all the States which were at war with the Allied Powers.

The fourth clause fixed the boundaries of those Austrian and Hungarian territories which Rumania would be entitled to annex, i. e. Southern Bukovina, Transylvania and purely Hungarian areas almost as far as the river Tisza, and the entire, undivided Banat, with the condition that a demilitarised zone should be created opposite the Serb capital and those Serb inhabitants who wished to move from this district should be compensated.

The contracting parties on both sides pledged themselves to make no separate peace with the enemy.

Clause Six provided that Rumania should be accorded the status and rights equal to those enjoyed by the other Powers, during both the preliminary and the definitive peace negotiations. These two provisions exercised a decisive influence on the settlement of the Rumanian question at the Paris Peace Conference. Of this later.

The Military Convention regulated the questions relating to the Russian military assistance, the supply of arms and ammunition, the support of Sarrail's Salonika army, etc.

Treaty and Convention had been signed, the Rumanian intervention was due to occur within ten days, preparations had to be made for the campaign. And still Brătianu delayed. But the Powers had come to the end of their patience, and on August 24 they sent an ultimatum to Rumania announcing that a Russian army 100.000 strong was prepared to enter Rumanian territory if the terms of the Treaty were not complied with. "It depended on Rumania whether the Russians were to come as friends or as foes."

The King summoned a Crown Council for August 27.

The day before, the German Minister, von der Busche, had been received in audience and had made mention of the

impending Crown Council. The King had answered that it was possible one might be held, but that he had no knowledge of it. In any case he was not bound to follow its decisions, and he was not going to issue any orders for mobilization. Rumania had no Treaty obligations apart from those which bound her to the Central Powers.

The same evening M. Maiorescu was with the King, and afterwards gave a despairing account of his interview to Marghiloman. "All is lost," — he said, — „the King has fooled us all. He has forgotten that he is a German. 'I have struggled for months,' he said, 'but at last I have taken my decision'." Maiorescu had begged the King not to lead the country to the brink of ruin. "I have decided", was the King's answer, only a few hours after he had told the German Minister that he was not going to mobilize the army.

Brătianu played the same trick on Czernin That same day, August 26, he told the Austro-Hungarian Minister that Rumania could and would remain neutral. The impending Crown Council would convince him (Count Czernin), of the truth of this. Rumania would only enter war if she were attacked.

After such preliminaries the Council assembled. Its members were, approximately, the same as in August 1914. Poklewsky, the Russian Minister in Bucharest, reported to St. Petersburg that the holding of this Council was a mere formality; and he was right in so far as Rumania was already definitely pledged to the Allied Powers by the Treaty of August 17, a fact which could not be altered by any decision of the Council.

The King, having opened the Council, went on to declare that Rumania could no longer remain neutral. This was the view of the Government, and he, the King, concurred.

Peter Carp asked for particulars and a fuller explanation. Brătianu spoke.

"In an upheaval like the present one," — he said — "which will alter the map of the entire world, our country with its national aspirations cannot, without compromising itself, remain neutral to the end. We must abandon our attitude of neutrality. Our national ideals must be realised, and it

is a question whether so favourable an opportunity for their realisation will ever again present itself."

He gave a brief account of the diplomatic moves which had led up to the actual situation, and concluded with the words: "We are pledged; it is too late to draw back."

He was followed by Take Ionescu and Marghiloman.

"We are faced, —" said the latter, — "with an accomplished fact; any further talk would be useless." Nevertheless he wished to draw attention to the fact that ever since the seventeenth century Russia had aimed at obtaining an ice-free port and that that was still her object. Was it not clear to His Majesty that Russia's way to Constantinople led through Rumania? And even if she did not occupy Rumania she would cripple her economically. "However, since the decision has fallen, I shall hold my peace, lest I disturb our national unity."

After Marghiloman N. Filipescu said a few words, then old, Germanophile P. Carp raised his voice.

"We are not here," he said passionately, "to bandy words as our unbridled temperaments dictate. To join Russia means to act against the interests of our country and to imperil the existence of the dynasty... Under the German flag we fight for principles, civilization and a safer future — also for our own future. I can only wish that we may be beaten. If we win the war, our country will perish. I have a right to speak as I do, for I shall have three sons in the fighting-line."

The King, very red in the face, turned on the old statesman.

"M. Carp, I respect every opinion, but I cannot pass over your last words in silence. They cannot be the expression of your real sentiments; I can only think that they sprang from a momentary madness brought about by the heat of the controversy."

"No, not at all, Your Majesty," replied Carp. "but from now on I shall be mute."

The Prime Minister submitted the text of the Treaty and the Convention to the Council, and after Costinescu, Rosetti and Pherekyde had had their say, he spoke again.

"I beg Your Majesty to consider, not the immediate issue

but the ultimate fate of the nation. If Your Majesty will do this, you will add imperishable pages to the history of Rumania."

The King closed the Council with the words: "This meeting has been one of historic importance and has laid an immense responsibility on us all. Forward, with God's help!"

With the decision of the Crown Council Rumania's era of neutrality was brought to a close. During this era the leading role had been played by Ionel Brătianu, whose actions the English historian Professor Temperley characterised with the sentence: "he brought into international politics the methods of the bazaar." This was the true character not only of the man, but also of those two years of Rumanian politics.
(To be continued.)

OSZK

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