

The Foreign Policy of the Legionary Movement during the National-Legionary Regime in Romania

SORIN ARHIRE **Attitudes towards Britain**

“The British are stronger? —We shall go with the British. The Germans are stronger?—We side with them.”

(Horia Sima)

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ON 30 November 1937, the Captain of the Legionary Movement made a famous statement, defining the coordinates of Romanian foreign policy that were to be followed when the Legion took the power in the county:

I am against the Great Western Democracies, I am against the Little Entente, I am against the Balkan Entente and I care little about the League of Nations, in which I do not believe. I am in favor of a Romanian foreign policy aligned to that of Rome and of Berlin, alongside the States of the National Revolutions and against Bolshevism. 48 hours after the victory of the Legionary Movement, Romania will conclude an alliance with Rome and Berlin, thus beginning to fulfill its historical mission in this world: the defense of the Cross, of Christian culture and civilization.¹

It must be said that this statement, together with another one made by Corneliu Zelea Codreanu in front of Parliament,² in 1931, with the memorandum sent to King Carol II on 5 November 1936, with the telegrams sent to Hitler and to Mussolini in 1937, and with the telegram sent on 12 March 1938 on the occasion of the Anschluss, came to express the theoretical foundations behind the foreign policy agenda of the Legion.³

This agenda was implemented only partially and indirectly because, as we know, the Legionary Movement never managed to form a government entirely by itself and thus pursue its own foreign policy. This despite the fact that, in the government created on 14 September 1940, Mihail Sturdza⁴ was the new minister of foreign affairs. In actual fact, foreign policy remained largely the province of General Ion Antonescu, the Leader of the state, and the legionnaires failed to exert a decisive influence in this respect. This is indicated, for instance, by the fact that all major agreements with Berlin were negotiated directly by Antonescu. The minister of foreign affairs did not take part in the negotiations and was not even informed on their content.⁵

The government of the national-legionary state was little more than a hybrid construct, with latent conflicts present since the very beginning and with every faction involved believing that the alliance was but a temporary one. Furthermore, we could even say that, despite Codreanu's desire to stay away from power until the Legion became strong and extremely united, their participation in government came at a time when the organization was least prepared for it and most of its leaders were—to quote a crude joke—like potatoes, under the ground.⁶

Besides, the country had lost considerable territory precisely following the decision taken by the states favored by the Romanian policy of that time, namely, Germany and Italy. Faced with Soviet and Hungarian revisionism, Antonescu and the legionnaires realized that the only chance to oppose the threat was an alliance with Germany. The two aforementioned countries were not blamed for the territorial losses suffered by Romania, and all responsibility was shifted on the shoulders of the politicians of the previous regime. Thus, Horia Sima, who was a sort of lay vicar of Codreanu during the national-legionary state, stated the following: “Do not hastily accuse the Axis Powers for the Vienna Award, when you did everything in your power to antagonize those powers, to the point of placing Romania in their enemies' camp. How did you expect Rome and Berlin to treat Romania, a country involved in countless plots and attempts against their security and in the service of Moscow?”⁷

The legionnaires, aware of the magnitude of the territorial loss in question, believed that the victory of September 6 was a much more significant event. In keeping with the tenets of their doctrine, they considered that for the first time

in history, Romanians had become masters of their own fate, and the joy of being rid of the regime deemed responsible for the territorial losses far exceeded the pain suffered over the loss of Transylvania.⁸

Once the two factions in the government divided the portfolios,⁹ Minister of Foreign Affairs Mihail Sturdza started a bitter struggle against Antonescu in the attempt to appoint his own people within the ministry.¹⁰ At the same time, he firmly advocated an alliance between Romania and the Axis, accompanied by the severing of all other political connections. During the negotiations between the Leader and Minister Sturdza, the latter also demanded that members of the Legion be sent as ambassadors to the countries that had experienced “national revolutions,” namely, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and then Greece.¹¹

During the national-legionary state, under the influence of Horia Sima and through the agency of Mihail Sturdza, the Movement pursued a foreign policy aligned to that of totalitarian states such as Germany and Italy. Apart from the shared ideological basis, behind this policy we find another important cause. It was believed that the main directions in Romanian foreign policy had to be set in keeping with the constant threat represented by the eastern neighbor. If, in the case of France, the hereditary enemy was Germany, when it came to Romania this nefarious role was played by the Soviet Union.¹² Firmly believing that, of all foreign invasions and occupations, the Slavic onslaught had been the only to threaten the very survival of the Romanian nation, in his book entitled *Tineretul și politica externă* (The youth and foreign policy) Mihail Polihroniade stated an axiom that was not to be forgotten: Romania cannot fight alongside the Soviet Union.¹³ His conclusion was indeed hyperbolic. Seeing the Russia of that time as hell on earth, bound to annihilate millennia of civilization, the nations of man, and mock God, the author rhetorically asked: “Why should we make a pact with the devil? To gain hell?”¹⁴

At least at the level of statements, the support of the “new European order” of Hitler and Mussolini was total. The position of the Iron Guard with regard to Italy and Germany was summed up as follows by Mihail Manoilescu: “We are not alongside the Axis, but in the Axis.”¹⁵ Still, it seems that the legionnaires were a lot more attracted by Italy than by Germany, and it was only the economic and political inferiority of the former that prevented the legionnaires from establishing even stronger relations with Mussolini’s regime.

Contacts between Romania and Italy were many in number. Thus, in early October 1940, the Fascist Party hosted in Padua a meeting of young European nationalists, with delegates from Germany, Spain, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania.¹⁶ The Romanian delegation consisted of 120 “green shirts,” most of them students.¹⁷ Between 13 and 17 November, General Antonescu and the minister for foreign affairs visited Italy and were received by Mussolini and by Ciano. Ostensibly, the visit demonstrated the excellent relations between the two states,

but in actual fact it revealed the presence of major disagreements. Each side was disappointed with the other. Mussolini still felt offended by Antonescu's lukewarm response to his offer of sending an Italian military mission to Romania, while the leader of the Romanian state was himself quite sour over the extremely pro-Hungarian verdict given by the Altenburg–Roggeri Commission¹⁸ in November of 1940.¹⁹

Without overlooking the relations with Italy, it is obvious that the most important Romanian foreign policy decisions had to do with Germany. The arrival of the first command units of the German military mission²⁰ led by General Erik Hansen, and especially Romania's joining the Tripartite Pact, on 23 November 1940,²¹ are two major developments of that time, decisively shaping Romanian foreign policy over the four years that followed. It must be said that the negotiations regarding Romania's membership in the Tripartite Pact were conducted exclusively by the Leader, without the participation or even the consultation of the minister of foreign affairs.²²

Interestingly enough, relations between the Iron Guard and Germany were not as good as one might have expected. Both the Reich's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Wehrmacht had little sympathy for the Legionary Movement. The same could be said about the German personnel sent to Romania. With the exception of Kurt Geissler, the Gestapo chief for Romania, of Albrecht Otto von Bolschwing, the head of the SD, and of Arthur Konradi, AO²³ director in Bucharest, all of the other leading German officials had a rather negative opinion when it came to the members of the Legionary Movement.²⁴ On the other hand, the Iron Guard had the support of Himmler and of the SS. It would seem, however, that the sympathy demonstrated by the most extreme of the Nazis was not enough to generate a favorable opinion of the legionnaires in Germany. The purchase—for next to nothing—of Jewish companies by German businessmen also created some discontent among the members of the Iron Guard who, themselves nationalists, refused to blindly obey Germany.²⁵ Another reason why relations between Germany and the Legionary Movement were somewhat strained had to do with the latter's lack of internal cohesion, two factions operating alongside that of Horia Sima. One such faction was led by Ion Zelea Codreanu and his sons, Decebal and Horia, while the other, more influential in Transylvania, was strongly anti-German and was led by a certain Cojocaru.²⁶

Romania's signing of the Tripartite Pact and especially the arrival of the German military mission led to the adoption of a firm position in regard to Hungary. Publicly stating that "the Vienna Award is a thing of the past," Horia Sima and the other leaders of the Legion initiated a seemingly endless series of anti-Hungarian attacks, denouncing the atrocities perpetrated by the Hungarian authorities.²⁷ In his turn, Antonescu used every opportunity to remind Hitler of the fact that Romania's territory had been mutilated to the advantage of Hungary.

All of the above clearly indicate that the foreign policy strategy pursued by the Legionary Movement stemmed from a certain perception of international affairs, a perception that differed radically from that of state officials and of the democratic parties.²⁸ It is largely true that, during the interwar period, Romanian foreign policy was somewhat undecided, driven in one direction and then in another, in keeping with the shifts in the European balance of power.²⁹ Horia Sima was quite explicit when it came to the duplicitous policies pursued by the governments of Greater Romania: “The British are stronger?—We shall go with the British. The Germans are stronger?—We side with them. The Russians are stronger? The alchemists of Romanian policy did not hesitate to cultivate the Russians as well.”³⁰

The legionnaires wanted to demolish the prestige traditionally enjoyed in Romania by Britain and France. In their opinion, the Western nations were waging an absurd war, precisely against the countries whose stated objective was the defense and preservation of Western civilization.³¹ This observation was chiefly aimed at Britain, as on 22 June 1940 France had signed an armistice that was little more than a capitulation, and the British were the only ones left to oppose the victorious Wehrmacht. According to the legionnaires, the British attitude was another indication of the mutual lack of understanding between German national-socialism and the Western democracies.³² Besides, they believed that, in the past, Romanian politicians had lacked a sound mentality, devising their foreign policies in keeping with the advice and seeking the approval of Western diplomats. This situation, this dependence upon Britain and France, was presently seen as utterly shameful and humiliating.³³

As indicated in the previous pages, thinking of the endless Romanian-Russian antagonism, the Legionary Movement always believed that British policy was incompatible with that of Romania, as the latter had different enemies and different problems to solve.³⁴ While the island state could always follow a third path, neutrality or even an alliance with the United States, Romania could only choose between the two powers that enclosed between them Central and Eastern Europe: Germany and the Soviet Union. The belief in the nefarious role played by the Romanian Jewry and the strong influence enjoyed by Jewish circles in Britain also increased the anti-British feelings of the legionnaires. They believed that Romania was being made to play the part of a buttress for the Western states, Romanian foreign policy being judged strictly in terms of its similarity to Western policies.

Britain was directly or indirectly accused of all possible evils, the anti-British psychosis being extremely strong among the legionnaires. Thus, the British territorial guarantees had been nothing but empty words, valid until they actually had to be implemented. Besides, London was seen as the world center of the Judeo-Masons. The loss of Bessarabia and the Vienna Award would have not

taken place had the Romanian foreign policy been independent from that of the Foreign Office. Allegedly, Poland had refused to negotiate with Germany because of British interference, and thus Britain was accused of having started the most devastating conflagration in history, the Second World War.³⁵ Attention was also paid to the activity of the foreign governments operating in exile in London. According to the legionnaires, these governments were working against the interests of their respective peoples. Besides, British diplomacy was doing its best to isolate Germany. The conclusion was that an alliance with Britain was completely out of the question and, furthermore, Britain had to be driven away from the continent, its “perfidiousness” being the cause of all unfortunate events occurred in the past in the field of international relations.

Quite interesting is the attitude towards Britain of Commander von Müller, aide-de-camp to Admiral Canaris, an attitude described by the future Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mihail Sturdza, in his book, *România și sfârșitul Europei: Amintiri din țara pierdută* (Romania and the end of Europe: Memories of a lost country). Amazingly enough, the future minister of foreign affairs was told that his country should do everything in order to avoid a war with Britain, for Great Britain always wins.³⁶

The excesses of the Iron Guard, the assassinations at Jilava and especially the murder of Nicolae Iorga and of Virgil Madgearu came to strain even further the relations between the two government factions: on the one hand, General Antonescu, supported by the army, and, on the other, the Legionary Movement.

In December of 1940 the Leader took direct action against the legionnaires. Among other things, Mihail Sturdza was sacked from his position as minister of foreign affairs. After December 23, his attributions were “provisionally” taken up by Antonescu, who was presently receiving all the reports sent by Romania’s diplomatic missions.³⁷ With the sacking of Mihail Sturdza the influence of the Legionary Movement over Romanian foreign policy basically came to an end, and the same happened to the attempt to put into practice its anti-British psychosis.



Notes

1. Mihail Sturdza, *România și sfârșitul Europei: Amintiri din țara pierdută* (Alba Iulia–Paris: Fronde, 1994), 130.
2. On 3 December 1931, during a meeting of the House of Representatives, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu declared that, if he had to choose between the two extremes towards which European public opinion was converging at that time, he believed that the sun rose in Rome, rather than in Moscow. Stelian Neagoe, “Garda de Fier în parlamentul României,” in *Împotriva fascismului* (Bucharest: Ed. Politică, 1971), 54.

3. Florin Müller, "Politica externă a Mișcării Legionare: ideologie și strategii," *Arhivele totalitarismului* (Bucharest) 1, 1 (1993): 33.
4. Mihail Sturdza (1886–1980). Doctor in international law, diplomat, minister plenipotentiary of Romania to Riga and Copenhagen, Romanian minister of foreign affairs in September–December 1940, as well as in the legionary government in exile in Vienna (December 1944–May 1945). *Evenimentele din ianuarie 1941 în arhivele germane și române*, vol. 1 (Bucharest: Majadahonda, 1998), 30.
5. Horia Sima, *Mișcarea Legionară și Monarhia* (Iași: Agora, 1997), 61.
6. Nicolas M. Nagy-Talavera, *Fascismul în Ungaria și România*, trans. (Bucharest: Hasefer, 1996), 420.
7. Horia Sima, *Era libertății: Statul național-legionar*, vol. 1 (Timișoara: Gordian, 1995), 9.
8. Ibid.
9. In the government formed in the night of 14/15 September 1940, the Iron Guard had the deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers (Horia Sima), the minister of foreign affairs (Mihail Sturdza), the minister of internal affairs (Constantin Petrovicescu), the minister of public works and communications (Pompiliu Nicolau), the minister of education, religious denominations, and the arts (Traian Brăileanu), and the minister for labor, health, and social protection (Vasile Iasinschi). High-ranking army officers, politicians, and technocrats controlled the strategic ministries (Economy, Finance, Economic Coordination and HQ, Agriculture, Justice, Defense, the Army, the Air Forces, and the Navy). Aurică Simion, *Regimul politic din România în perioada septembrie 1940–ianuarie 1941* (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1976), 41–42; Francisco Veiga, *Istoria Gărzii de Fier 1919–1941: Mistica ultranaționalismului*, trans. (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1993), 281.
10. Among the close advisors of Minister Sturdza we find: lawyer Mircea Vlasto, his chief of staff, and Alexandru Cretzianu, his general secretary. Harold Laeuen, *Marschall Antonescu* (Essen: Essener Verlagsanstalt, 1943), 84. Apud Nagy-Talavera, 145–147.
11. Sima, *Era libertății*, 1: 145–147.
12. Faust Brădescu, *Scurtă analiză spectrală a Mișcării Legionare* (Bucharest: Majadahonda, 1996), 84–85.
13. Mihail Polihroniade, *Tineretul și politica externă* (Bucharest, 1937), 9.
14. Ibid.
15. Dragoș Zamfirescu, *Legiunea Arhanghelul Mihail de la mit la realitate* (Bucharest: Ed. Enciclopedică, 1997), 125.
16. Sima, *Era libertății*, 1: 132.
17. Ibid.
18. After the Vienna Award, given the mistreatment of Romanians by the Hungarian army in Northern Transylvania, the government in Bucharest decided to demand an intervention of the Axis. Germany and Italy set up a joint investigation commission which included the ministers plenipotentiary Altenburg and Count Roggeri di Villanova. Between 17 and 27 October 1940, the commission traveled nearly

3,000 km by car and interviewed more than 500 people. The investigators concluded that both Romania and Hungary were to blame, but indicated that Hungary's responsibility was greater. The verdict did not please the Romanians, and Bucharest felt that the investigation of the Altenburg–Roggeri had failed to bring the expected results. *Al Doilea Război Mondial: Transilvania și aranjamentele europene (1940–1944)*, edited with an introductory study and notes by Vasile Pușcaș (Cluj-Napoca: Centrul de Studii Transilvane, Fundația Culturală Română, 1995), XXXVI–LI passim.

19. Michelle Rallo, *România în perioada revoluțiilor naționale din Europa 1919–1945*, trans. (Bucharest: Sempre, 1999), 105.
20. The request for a German military mission in Bucharest was hardly a novelty. The request had been first made by King Carol II, on 2 July 1940. On 7 September 1940, only two days after taking full control of the country, General Ion Antonescu explained to Colonel Gerstenberg, the German attaché with the air forces in Bucharest, that Romania was seeking a cooperation between the German and the Romanian armies, in the form of German mechanized units and air squadrons deployed in Romania and including the delivery of weapons, chiefly tanks and anti-aircraft guns. Following the report drawn up by Lieutenant General Kurt von Tippelskirch, chief of the Fourth Command of the Army Chiefs of Staff, on 9 September 1940 Adolf Hitler took the final decision to send an army and air force military mission to Romania, as well as military advisors. On September 30, the decision was also communicated to the Romanian government, through diplomatic channels. On October 7, the Bucharest Ministry of National Propaganda issued an official communiqué announcing the future arrival of a German military mission in Romania. The German authorities confirmed the report only on October 12. G. Buzatu, *O istorie a petrolului românesc* (Bucharest: Ed. Enciclopedică, 1998), 331–332; Andreas Hillgruber, *Hitler, regele Carol și mareșalul Antonescu: Relațiile germano-române 1938–1944*, trans. (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1994), 133–135.
21. Romania's joining the Tripartite Pact was the culminating point and the natural outcome of the policy pursued after Nicolae Titulescu was dismissed from his position as minister of foreign affairs, on 29 August 1936. Until his dismissal, the dominant belief had been that the borders of Romania were best defended if the country remained in a system of collective anti-German security. This was followed by a policy of official neutrality with regard to all Great Powers, later replaced by increasing overtures to Germany. See Rebecca Haynes, *Romanian Policy towards Germany, 1936–40* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000).
22. Buzatu, 331–332.
23. Auslanderorganisation.
24. Sima, *Era libertății*, 1: 44.
25. Nagy-Talavera, 427.
26. *Ibid.*, 421.
27. *Ibid.*, 425.
28. Müller, 33.
29. Sima, *Mișcarea Legionară*, 61.

30. Ibid.
31. Brădescu, 82–88 passim.
32. Ibid., 86.
33. Ibid., 81.
34. Ibid., 80.
35. Alexandru Constant, *Un an decisiv 1939/1940* (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1941), 49. Apud Müller, 35–36.
36. Sturdza, 174.
37. Ottmar Trașcă and Ana-Maria Stan, *Rebeliunea legionară în arhive străine (germane, maghiare, franceze)* (Bucharest: Albatros, 2002), 53–54.

Abstract

The Foreign Policy of the Legionary Movement during the National-Legionary Regime in Romania: Attitudes towards Britain

Taking into account the incessant Romanian-Russian antagonism, the Legionary Movement's permanent position was that British foreign policy was incompatible with that of Romania, the latter having problems and enemies different from those of Britain. The belief in the negative role that the Jews had in Romania and the powerful influence of the Jewish circles in Britain increased the anti-British feelings of the legionnaires. Britain was accused, directly or indirectly, of all possible evils, the anti-British psychosis being extremely strong within the ranks of the Legion. Consequently, the British guarantee extended to Romania in April 1939 was seen as nothing more than empty words and London was considered the center of the international Jewish Masonry. The loss of Bessarabia and the Vienna Award would never have taken place had it not been for the alignment of Romania's foreign policy to that of the Foreign Office. Poland allegedly refused the German invitation to discussions due to British interference, Britain being thus accused of starting the Second World War. The activity of the governments in exile to London—which, according to the members of the Legionary Movement, led a policy opposed to the interests of their own countries—did not escape notice, and neither did the tendency of British diplomacy to encircle Germany. The conclusion was that, according to the legionnaires, an alliance with Britain was out of the question. Furthermore, Britain had to be driven away from the continent, since its "perfidiousness" was the cause of all unfortunate events occurred in the past in the field of international relations.

Keywords

Britain, Germany, Legionary Movement, Romanian foreign policy, National Legionary State