# *Exitium Imperii*

## Transferring Military Loyalties in Uncertain Borderlands

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*"The demons have not gone away—they're only sleeping."*
*(Jan-Claude Juncker)*

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FOLLOWING THE distinction between the use and abuse of history might be one of the most difficult tasks in the writing of history, and generating questions rather than providing answers is one possible tool in dealing with this issue. This article aims to highlight some particularities of the East and Central European framework during WWI, using as a case study the Romanian officers' loyalty and allegiance transfer from the imperial/supranational hierarchy to the national one in the context of a strategic landscape change.

The scholarly debates have accelerated at an unprecedented pace, as the centennial commemorations of WWI are currently ongoing. Books and articles in academic journals, including a recent journal dedicated to the topic, have been published regularly during the last year, in addition to the book reviews and essays published almost weekly in newspapers and magazines.

Moreover, political leaders and state institutions are part of the process of 're-inventing' perspectives on the meanings of the war, on its origins and consequences. This process started before the actual WWI commemorations began.

In a rather alarming tone, the new President of the European Commission, the former prime minister of Luxembourg, Jean-Claude Juncker, underlined the following comparison between the years 1913 and 2013: "Anyone who believes that the eternal question of war and peace in Europe is no longer there risks being deeply mistaken. The demons have not gone away—they're only sleeping."[1] Fast forward to 2014, the actual centennial commemoration year and, indeed, Europe's East is again at war. Among the many lessons one can learn is that centennial war events may be sidelined by current war events. Thus, the wars in Ukraine and in Syria, the increasing number of secessionist declarations and referenda in Europe, and the creation of new entities by way of extreme violence, such as the recent so-called caliphate of the "Islamic State," are just several examples of the continuing challenges to the provisions of the Paris Peace Treaties that attempted to put an end to WWI and make "the world safe for democracy," as US President Woodrow Wilson soundly remarked.

The understanding of the causes and consequences of WWI for European and world security is not hampered, however, only by political statements, but by another mundane phenomenon: the politicizing of history by historians. As in the case of other historical landmark events of the twentieth century, such as WWII, the Cold War and the 1989 revolutions, historians cross arguments, with or without reference to archives and documents. The debates on the causes of WWI started even before the actual surrender by the German Empire in the fall of 1918, one of the best illustrations in this respect being the interesting "alliance" between historians and diplomats at the very beginning of the war, leading to the publication of the so-called "colored books." As the editor of one of the most fascinating collections of documents on WWI underlines, "due to the contentious issue of war-guilt, which became divisive and passionately debated as soon as war had broken out, documents have always been crucial to the way in which governments and historians have attempted to fight their corner in the acrimonious debates on the origins of the war."[2]

The "colored books" saga started on 4 August 1914, when the German Empire's *White Book* was presented to the parliament, the Reichstag. Only two days later, the lower house of the British Parliament, the House of Commons, received the British version of events also called *White Book*, and later a larger *Blue Book* was published. In the empire of the Romanov dynasty orange was the chosen color, the Russian *Orange Book* being published on 7 August 1914. After a delay of four months, France decided to publish its own version, the *Yellow Book*, generating controversies regarding the purpose and reliability of some of the documents involved. Serbia followed suit in November with its *Blue Book*, and in February 1915 the Austro-Hungarian *Red Book* was published.

Consequently, documents were cleverly collected and immediately published, distributed and debated. They have generated serious controversies

until today.[3] Archives and official documents were manipulated and used in one of the most fascinating propaganda wars the world had ever seen.[4] In parallel with the military operations, the "battle for hearts and minds" was aimed not only at defending oneself, but gradually at disrupting and dismantling the adversary. Nations versus empires created a new battle space. After the Bolshevik revolution succeeded in overthrowing the Romanov dynasty at the end of 1917, the propaganda war took a new ideological turn. Nationalism, socialism and capitalism were pitted against each other.

The "national" dimension of WWI research was legitimized at the end of the war. Another plethora of collections of documents have been published, mostly as a reaction to the decisions taken during the Paris peace talks. They presently encompassed hundreds of volumes of "official" documents. They were actually sent to press and to the public up to the end of the 1930s. The controversies continued after WWII, during the Cold War, and even afterwards.

However, gradually, a new research perspective gradually emerged as an alternative to the national and war guilt debates. It might be called the "global" perspective. Having its origins in the pre–WWI debates on the impact of finance, technology, communications and geography on future wars and peace, the "global" perspective was reinforced by a tremendous amount of research in the area of international relations—a discipline actually born of the ashes of WWI. Recent publications consolidated the global perspective in terms of WWI's importance and geographical scale.[5]

Nowadays, during the centennial commemoration, the research dedicated to WWI has practically covered almost all possible angles. Research is carried out within a large number of disciplines, including cultural studies and anthropology. Military history and the focus on the actual chronological narratives were partially neglected and brought back into focus only recently.[6]

**B**ESIDE THE impact of the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, the ultimatum sent to the Serbian government by the Austro-Hungarian cabinet and the actual mobilization of most European armies in the following days, an important point of discussion regarding any war is whether there was a military operational plan ready for implementation. In the case of WWI, the answer is rather straightforward: indeed, there was at least one plan, originally devised by General Moltke in the 1870s as a "two fronts war" (Western and Eastern), then detailed and promoted by the General Staff of the German army, discussed in general terms with the Austro-Hungarian allies, and presented for approval to the imperial authorities. The name of this plan is the Schlieffen Plan. As in November 1912, after a secret meeting in Berlin with Archduke Francis Ferdinand, Kaiser William II and General Moltke, General Blasius Schemua, the then Chief of the Staff of the K.u.K. Armed Forces (who

travelled to the German capital in civilian clothes), reported that "Germany's mobilization would automatically result in that of France . . . In that case it was naturally the first intention to defeat the opponent in the West first—which he hoped for in 4–6 weeks, and then deploy the surplus of power eastwards."[7]

Notwithstanding the fundamental importance of the Schlieffen Plan and the relatively balanced division of strategic thought between a "western" and an "eastern" front, a significant volume of historical research was mainly dedicated to the western front. The eastern front has received less attention, although the political consequences of the war were more radical in the East.[8]

The actual history of military operations on the eastern front is only part of the general history of the region. The strategic, political, economic and societal impact of the war has not been fully examined in a broader framework.[9] Some interesting debates did occur, such as for instance the political consequences of the Austro-Hungarian Empire's dissolution and the emerging kaleidoscope of new and fragile states between Germany and the USSR in the interwar period;[10] however, additional research aimed at the whole new strategic context of what could be called *Exitium Imperii* is still lacking. This type of intellectual exercise usually involves elements of counter-factual history, and the "what-if" type of research is rarely fruitful.[11]

*Exitium Imperii*, or the domino-like break-up of the four dynastic empires (Habsburg, Hohenzollern, Ottoman and Romanov), occupying since the 18th century contiguous spaces and the borderlands which separated them,[12] led to the disintegration of a sub-continental inter-imperial system with a set of distinct features. Thus, "the interaction and mutual dependence of the four neighboring continental empires suggested the importance of treating them not only as distinctive units of comparison but also as a macro-system. The specific characteristics of their entangled histories distinguish them from the competitive relationships of other continental and overseas empires."[13]

The balance of all arguments related to the distinctiveness of the central and eastern inter-imperial "macro-system" is not a research goal of this article. However, it should be underlined that this framework would be appropriate if we accepted that the historiography and research on the topic were altered by the very disappearance of these four empires. Documents related to the war were collected, selected and published by the successor states. The memoirs of the major and minor actors were written after the war from a new perspective, requiring additional caution, especially for those who shifted their allegiances and loyalties from the supranational/imperial level to the national one. Some of the traditional historical approaches to these regions, such as the "Eastern Question" and "Geopolitics," are "from the outside" and obviously followed the interests and

perceptions of outsiders. "From the inside," on the other hand, the ideological framework promoted and then brutally imposed by the leaders of the Bolshevik revolution on the USSR, as the successor of the Romanov Empire, and on some of the successor states of the Habsburg and Hohenzollern Empire, further influenced the historiographical debates. The interest in the late Ottoman archives is rather recent.

However, a collection of studies recently published on the inter-imperial "macro-system" of the four empires of Central and Eastern Europe highlight interesting features. One of these is revealed by the multiple meanings of "border-lands." It should be underlined that all these four multicultural and multinational conglomerates developed and promoted as one of their sources of legitimacy a founding mythology of "frontier" empires, while struggling to achieve balance between a core and a periphery. Thus, "whether a place or a region is or ever was in the borderlands may itself be a contested assertion. For the notion of borderlands can have various uses, ranging from a license to conquest and annex-ation to a preoccupation with nostalgia and marginality. The scope, definition and meaning of borderlands are, therefore, fluid and unstable."[14] In addition, as the argument put forward in the latest book published on the topic, "the unprecedented strains of the First World War, the civil wars and interventions ripped open the fragile fabric covering these complex frontiers. The dissolu-tion of empires left unresolved problems arising from persistent factors that had long faced the rulers and ruling elites of the multicultural empires."[15]

**T**HE HISTORY of Romanians can be an interesting case study when set in a larger context. Having gone through a multitude of experiences with-in the macro-system of empires and overlapping imperial borderlands is a distinctive, although not a unique feature. Hence, in a short timespan, between the mid–19th century and until the end of WWI, a part of the Romanians were under Ottoman suzerainty, and later successfully conducted an independent state-hood and national dynastic experiment with a German Hohenzollern king as head of state, whereas others were part of the system of dynastic allegiances as citizens of the Habsburg and Austro-Hungarian Empire in the provinces of Transylvania, Banat and Bukovina, and also loyal subjects of the Romanov Empire within the gubernia of Bessarabia.

Moreover, an important feature of the struggle for the imperial borderlands is the fact that the current Romanian territory was part of two important mili-tary imperial frontier projects in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Habsburg central institutions expanded the military frontier system along the inner range of the Carpathians in 1764. The military border was dismantled in 1851 in Transylvania, but continued until 1872 in Banat. Its complex political, economic

and societal consequences have been researched with interesting results.[16] In addition, at the end of the 1828–1829 war, the Russian imperial army decided to support, manage and finance the creation of a complex quarantine system, including a Land Militia in Moldavia and Wallachia. It is important to underline the almost exclusive military and security focus on the Danube, but not on the Carpathian border of the two provinces. The General Inspectorate of the Quarantines was actually the first "common" institution of Moldavia and Wallachia, preceding by almost three decades the creation of the first joint Romanian army after 1859. There are few publications on the Russian imperial intentions on the Danube quarantine system, and a comparative assessment of the political and economic impact of three imperial borderlands (Ottoman, Habsburg and Romanov) has been carried out with interesting preliminary conclusions.[17] Similar research performed on other countries of the region generated fascinating results as well.[18]

Back to WWI, in the summer of 1914 Romanians recruited in Transylvania and Banat (both parts of the Hungarian half of the empire) and Bukovina (in the Austrian half) fought against the Romanians recruited by the army of the Romanov tsar from Bessarabia, on the eastern front. From August 1916, regiments of the Kingdom of Romania crossed the Carpathians into Transylvania, where they fought against joint Austro-Hungarian (K.u.K.) and Hungarian units that included Romanians in their ranks. With the armies clashing, a significant number of Romanians fought and died for the emperors and dynasties of Vienna and Sankt Petersburg, whereas others fought for the Romanian king and kingdom. Most of them were proud to be Romanian and went to war for "their rights," for "the Emperor," for "the King" and for "the nation," as numerous folklore poems of the simple peasant soldiers reveal.

The dismantling of the imperial armies and bureaucracies deserves further research, being one of the most fascinating aspects of the "eastern" front. The dissolution of dynastic empires as the traditional form of governance generated in only few years a completely new reality. The inter-imperial macro-system, based for more than two centuries on the subtle balances between military action and strategic self-restraint, collapsed. The complex and "protean" imperial borderlands were erased and replaced with new national frontiers. In hindsight, it should be emphasized that "empire was a remarkably durable form of state. . . By comparison, the nation-state appears as a blip on the historical horizon, a state form that emerged recently from under imperial skies and whose hold on the world's political imagination may well prove partial or transitory."[19]

The setting up of new political regimes and systems was rather easy to accomplish at the end of WWI. Generating new forms of political legitimacy and acceptance on the ashes of former allegiances required a different set of approaches than imposing a new constitutional and legal authority. Among the items on a list

of the most neglected aspects of the end of WWI, at the top could be the transfer of loyalties and allegiances from the imperial/dynastic to the national "habits of the heart" or other supra-national forms of legitimization, such as revolutionary socialism.

THE MILITARY issue is just a part of this shift in political culture. The social and political trajectory of the thousands of generals and millions of officers and non-commissioned officers of the former imperial armies of East Central Europe would be both illustrative and eloquent. For a career officer or general, the issues of loyalty and betrayal represented not just a matter of honor, but one of life and death. In times of war, the same applied to reserve officers and conscripted peasant-soldiers. Consequently, the crisis and transfer of loyalties and allegiances among the generals and the officer corps had tragic dimensions when compared to the "civilian" side (administration, bureaucracy, church, civil associations). If one takes only the case of the Austro-Hungarian army, it becomes obvious that as the war progressed into 1917 and the shrinking numbers of professional officers were compensated for with more civilian "reserve" officers, a significant technology of surveying loyalties (*Kaisertreue*) was set up within the army.

Probably not coincidently, the period overlaps with the intensification of the silent propaganda war, both national and Bolshevik socialist, on the eastern front. Among the WWI belligerents, the K.u.K. Armee "achieved" authentic negative records: "By 1917, the Habsburg Army was hardly an army at all. As many men had been killed, wounded or captured—3.5 million—as remained under arms . . . A shocking 1.7 million troops were in Russian captivity at the beginning of 1917 (compared with a tenth as many Germans)."[20] Despite this staggering operational "performance," the army fought to the end of the war and eventually survived the empire.

However, as recent research shows, the implementation of a bureaucratic apparatus of censorship and loyalty-boosting among officers, soldiers and prisoners alike actually backfired. Among the prisoners of war only wounds counted as a decisive test of loyalty and patriotism. The censorship system added other "conclusive" criteria for counting and measuring loyalties: veneration of the emperor and "hatred of the enemy." The increasingly chaotic operational environment and the success of the socialist revolution in Russia added new counterintelligence and protection measures against the spreading of what was called the "Bolshevik bacillus," mainly among the prisoners. Starting with the winter of 1917–1918, a new repatriation system was added to censorship. It involved "reception stations" that included medical quarantine, "disciplinary re-education" and evidence of behavior during captivity.[21]

There were about 500,000 Romanians conscripted in the Austro-Hungarian Army in WWI, with the largest numbers varying between 489,544 in accounts that admitted possible errors, and 651,000, according to unpublished sources.[22] About 120,000 Romanians were recorded among the prisoners on the eastern front, with obviously smaller numbers on the Serbian and Italian fronts.

The Kingdom of Romania's entry into the war in August 1916 on the side of the Entente was not a decisive factor in shifting loyalties. The intervention occurred against Austria-Hungary in Transylvania. Ambivalence prevailed. The reaction of opinion leaders to the arrival of Romanian troops was negative. Even major figures of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Transylvania, among them Miron Cristea, the future patriarch of the Orthodox Church of the Kingdom of Romania in the interwar period, published letters of condemnation against the Romanian Army's intervention in Transylvania.[23]

The official contacts between the Romanian army officers and the Romanian prisoners held in Russia was established with caution. Gradually, both sides aimed at integration into distinctive, "separate" units of the Romanian Army. The Darnitsa manifesto of the Romanian prisoners was received with serious controversies and debates regarding its timing and opportunity. How they could volunteer for the Romanian Army as long as they were still under an oath of allegiance to emperor and dynasty represented a fundamental matter. The oath of allegiance upon conscription in the K.u.K. army had been taken both in the barracks and by the military chaplains on the front. The Romanian Ministry of War established a special unit, the Romanian Volunteer Corps,[24] only in November 1917. Transylvanian volunteers from the eastern front did not participate in significant numbers in the fierce summer battles of Mărăşeşti, Mărăşti and Oituz against the German imperial army.

The beginning of the year 1918 found the Austro-Hungarian Empire with an "inner front" more dangerous than the actual enemies, the Romanov dynasty overthrown and the Romanian Kingdom severely amputated, with its capital Bucharest occupied by German, Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian forces. In the next several months, amid completely chaotic political and military conditions, several initiatives and decisions taken by the Romanian professional and reserve officers of the Austro-Hungarian army provided the minimum conditions required for the orderly transfer of both soldiers and their loyalties from the imperial "fatherland" to the future national "motherland."

The most important decisions were taken in the imperial capital of Vienna in October and November 1918, especially after the Declaration of self-determination read by Alexandru Vaida-Voevod in the Hungarian Parliament. The establishment and recognition of the Romanian Political Committee and its Military Senate by the Austro-Hungarian War Minister proved to be crucial. There were about 15–20,000 Romanian officers and soldiers in Vienna, nearly 30–40,000

if we include those stationed on the outskirts, at Wiener Neustadt. Gradually reorganized by the Military Senate, they were not only involved in maintaining order in the soon-to-be former imperial capital, but also took a new oath of allegiance: "The oath, which we swore long before the Emperor had absolved all those who had sworn allegiance to him, went as follows: 'I swear loyalty to the Romanian Nation and total obedience to the Romanian National Council. I shall only serve the Romanian people, whom I will not desert in any case or in any circumstance. So help me God.'"[25]

It is important to emphasize that the transfer of loyalties from emperor and dynasty to king and the nation passed via the National Council of Transylvania. The process was organized rather smoothly, thus avoiding the formation of Romanian Transylvanian paramilitary groupings pursuing radical and centrifugal political actions. As recent research indicates, the end of the war brought with it renewed violence and "defeat was infinitely more real for those who lived in the ethnically diverse border regions of the Central Powers . . . and it is no coincidence that young men from these disputed regions were highly overrepresented in the paramilitary organizations of the postwar years."[26]

Transylvania's Ruling Council (1918–1920) dealt with a tremendous number of contentious issues related to the re-integration in society and in the future army of the Kingdom of Romania.[27] Former K.u.K. General Ioan Boeriu and Iuliu Maniu, based on their experience in Vienna at the end of 1918, created institutional channels for a smoother access of thousands of Romanian officers from Transylvania into the new Romanian army and administration. It should be stressed, however, that not all returned home.[28]

The official military documents indicate interesting career paths for the former Romanian K.u.K. generals and officers. Thus, by 1924 around 10% of the active generals and officers of the Romanian Army had come from the K.u.K. Army, with higher ratios among the Gendarmerie and the medical services. They were not only Romanians, but Germans, Jews and Hungarians as well. Dănilă Papp was the only such example among the 30 mayor generals, and Alexandru Hanzu, Hugo Schotsch and Ioan Schmidt ranked among the other 108 brigadier generals. A lower but nonetheless significant number were serving during WWI in the Romanov tsar's army. The records indicate they were promoted and decorated by both their former imperial and future national royal army. A significant proportion among them fought for the former imperial supranational armies until the very end of the war.[29] A lieutenant-colonel in the imperial Habsburg army in 1918, Iosif Iacobici became Minister of War and the Chief of the General Staff of the Romanian Army during WWII, and he was dismissed by Ion Antonescu when he insisted that the extension of operations further east from Transnistria might be fatal.[30]

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## Notes

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22. Huluban, 292.
23. *Telegraful roman* (Sibiu) 44, 85 (11/24 October 1916): 343–344.
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## Abstract

*Exitium Imperii:* Transferring Military Loyalties in Uncertain Borderlands

The ongoing centennial commemorations have steered the literature and debates on WWI. Nevertheless, most of the research on its causes and consequences reflects traditional methodologies and approaches. The "national" perspective is primarily a consequence of the postwar political-legal arrangements, whereas the "global" approach is more recent and reinforced by other disciplines. Several studies take a "middle" perspective, some of them seeing the pre–WWI Central and Eastern European strategic landscape as a regional systemic context of its own, a distinctive balanced interaction among the contiguous empires of the Hohenzollern, Habsburg, Ottoman and Romanov dynasties. This article aims to highlight some particularities of the East and Central European inter-imperial framework by introducing a new research area. The shift in the Romanian officers' loyalties from an imperial/supranational hierarchy to a national one will be used as a case study.

## Keywords