

# The Romanian Motz Army in 1848–1849

## Order of Battle, Tactics, Glossary\*

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The existence of the Motz [Moți], Romanians from the Western Carpathians [Munții Apuseni], in fact the only among the Romanians living permanently in small villages [cătune] at altitudes higher than 1,400 meters, is barely registered by the foreign historiography. The “Motz Land” [Țara Moților], their habitation core, is formed of 12–14 highland villages around the town of Câmpeni. The name of the Motz, also called “Țopi,” probably derives from the hair tuft (*moț* in Romanian language), which men used to wear on the right side of the head until the 1900’s. The Motz are described as patient, indurated, proud and curageous people, being feared as fighting spirits and redoubtable warriors.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the Motz are a peaceful peasant population. They earn their living by woodcraft and by selling the wood products in the plains. Even if their neighbourhood preserves the Gold Triangle including Roșia Montană, they were never attracted by taking advantage of this European El Dorado and they lived on as woodcraftsmen, as their ancestors had done since the beginning of times. As concerns their religion, they are all Orthodox.

The martial fame of the Motz comes from the fact that for centuries they opposed a fierce resistance to any foreign authority, either Austrian or Hungarian, which ever tried to turn them into serfs. In 1784 they rose in the mass rebellion led by Horea, Cloșca and Crișan.

In 1848–1849, the Motz army alone withstood the Hungarian troops that occupied Transylvania. Although the bravery proved by the Motz was emphasized both by their military enemies<sup>2</sup> and allies,<sup>3</sup> even less is known today about the concrete deployment and organization of the Transylvanian Romanian armed forces.

That is why, our article aims to present the order of battle and tactics of the Motz peasant army during the 1848–1849 revolution and war. Among the 15 legions [legiuni] of the Motz army, we shall refer especially to the Legion Auraria Gemina (recruited entirely among the Motz), the Auraria et Salinae, the Legion of Zarand, the Legion of Zlatna and the Legion Prima Blasiana. Formed in Transylvania, but outside the Motz

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Land, the last four legions mentioned fought side by side with the Motz of the Auraria Gemina, under the command of the Motz leader Avram Iancu. The Legion of Zlatna and Prima Blasiana participated with a small number of fighters, the first never being actually raised and the second being disbanded after the Hungarian invasion in Transylvania in late 1848.

**T**HE FORMAL RECRUITMENT base of the Romanian Landsturm, including the Legion Auraria Gemina, was the 10th Point of the National Petition adopted at the Great National Assembly in Blaj on 3/15 May 1848, which called for “arming the people or national guard to defend the country from inside and outside threats,” and asked for Romanian militia and Romanian officers.<sup>4</sup> On 17 October 1848 the Transylvanian Romanians’ arming was approved by the Austrian military commander from Sibiu. All young men aged 18–25 were registered, resulting a number of 195.000 potential fighters,<sup>5</sup> to be conscripted in a Romanian militia called *Landsturm*. Not all of them were raised eventually. The real number of Romanian fighters in Transylvania in 1848–1849 is difficult to evaluate.

The military organization of the Romanians was put into practice by the Romanian Pacification Committee in Sibiu. Transylvania was organized in civilian and military administrative units called *prefectures* [prefecture]. Each prefecture [prefectură] had to form its own legion. In October 1848 the Romanian Pacification Committee ordered the raising of 15 Romanian legions, which was confirmed by the Austrian commander in Transylvania, general Puchner.<sup>6</sup>

The Romanian folk army in Transylvania had the following structure. Each legion was commanded by a *prefect* (with the rank of a general), assisted by several *vice-prefects* [viceprefecți]. The prefects were subordinated only to the Romanian Pacification Committee in Sibiu, and not to the Austrian authorities.<sup>7</sup> A legion was subdivided in 10 tribunates [tribunate], as large as battalions, each *tribunate* having 1.000 fighters, commanded by a *tribune* [tribun], with the rank of a major, and a *vice-tribune* [vicetribun]. Each tribunate comprised 10 *centurias* [centurii], each centuria [centuria] or company having 100 fighters, led by a *centurion* [centurion], with the rank of a captain, assisted by a *vice-centurion* [vicecenturion]. Usually, a centuria was raised from a single village, but in case the village was too small, 2 or 3 villages formed together a centuria. This was made up of 10 *decurias* [decurii], each decuria [decuria] or platoon being led by a *decurion* [Decurion], equivalent in rank with a corporal or sergeant, helped by a *vice-decurion* [vicedecurion].<sup>8</sup>

The names of the great tactical units (the legions), and of the smaller units (like tribunates, centurias, decurias), were inspired from the Roman Antiquity, in order to underline the Roman heritage of the Romanian 1848 fighters. The glossary of ranks and commanders of the Romanian Landsturm pointed out the same idea of Roman lineage. Prefect Avram Iancu himself led the Legion Auraria Gemina, core and pattern of the Motz army, as most of the largest Romanian legions were organized in the same manner.<sup>9</sup> Besides their Latinised name, the legions had a number, but in this stage of our research we couldn’t identify the numbers held by each of the Romanian 1848–1849 legions.

Few of the commanders and aides of the Motz army were Romanians who had previously served in the Austrian army. Even smaller was the number of the former Romanian professional soldiers, who sought refuge in Transylvania after the failure of the 1848 revolution in Wallachia. Most of the commanders came from civilian ranks, but despite their lack of military experience, they became outstanding fighters, such as Axente Sever, Nicolae Corcheș, Clemente Aiudeanu and others. Later on, the Romanian Landsturm received in its ranks some Austrian military aides, in fact Habsburg officers of Romanian parentage.<sup>10</sup>

The social composition of the Motz army was manifold, comprising students, noblemen, priests, miners, city inhabitants and other social categories. Yet the bulk of the troops were made up of peasants, as recorded in the nominal evidence of the Romanian combatants. Registered by the priests and Landsturm commanders after the revolution, these names lists included name and surname, residence, marital status and age of the 1848–1849 Romanian volunteers or drafted men.<sup>11</sup>

The real manpower of the Motz army is impossible to be accurately known today. Besides the Motz, there were Romanian refugees from other parts of Transylvania,<sup>12</sup> occupied by the Hungarian troops. These refugees are uncountable, maybe some thousands. A small number of Romanian revolutionaries, who fled from Wallachia, fought in the ranks of the Motz, too. Quite often Motz women fought abreast with men,<sup>13</sup> as illustrated by the case of *Pelaghia Roșu* and the women from Mărișelu village, but military participation of women is even more difficult to appreciate in precise parameters. The lowest figures of the Motz army indicate 10,000–15,000 fighters, normally corresponding to a full strength legion. The highest headcounts of the Legion Auraria Gemina, of 30,000–40,000 fighters<sup>14</sup> or even 70,000 fighters<sup>15</sup>, are unbelievable, double. As these figures were offered by the enemies of the Motz, they must be exaggerated, in order to justify the big human losses suffered by the Hungarian army. In reality the latter totally exceeded the outnumbered and under-equipped Motz.

Regardless the size of the Motz army, only a part of it could be kept permanently under arms,<sup>16</sup> because battles occurred only from time to time, so there was no need of the entire force. During the big battle from Abrud in May–June 1849, the Motz must have deployed thousands of fighters, but there is no sufficient documentary evidence to advance a certain figure. Moreover, the food supplies were also a problem, while longer time purveyance and quartering of thousands of soldiers were difficult issues, under the war conditions existing in the Western Carpathians, which is a poor region even in peacetime.<sup>17</sup>

The age of the Motz fighters registered large variations during the National War from Transylvania. The Motz exceeded both limits of the usual recruitment age of 18–25, rising from under 14 years until old age!<sup>18</sup>

In times of need, Motz women fought besides their men, as already mentioned. They grabbed the weapons in the ranks of men,<sup>19</sup> replaced them in the guard service around the Apuseni Mountains and completed the depleted forces of the Motz. Other times, the women accompanied the men in the battle, raising their spirits by marching in the vanguard of the war formations and instigating them to fight against the enemy. Children, aged from 12 to 14, served as *drummers* [toboșari], to give the necessary military signals during the battles.<sup>20</sup>

The Motz handled both cold weapons and fire weapons and, when required, anything else that could be used as a weapon (boulders, tree trunks and further objects which could be thrown upon the enemies in the valleys).<sup>21</sup>

As fire weapons, the Motz used military and civil weapons. Civil weapons were represented by the *hunting rifles* [puștile de vânătoare], mainly flintstocks. It is impossible to retrace today all types of civilian weapons of the Motz, due to the great number of civilian manufacturers who produced them back in 1848. On the other side, some of the civilian weapons were in use before the Romanian National War, others were captured or bought during it.<sup>22</sup> The Motz also used *pistols*, yet the reconstitution of their number and models is too difficult. Most of the pistols were in the possession of wealthier Romanians, some of them were captured from the enemy and only a few were offered on behalf of the Austrian army.<sup>23</sup>

The military weapons, with bayonet, handled by the Motz, belonged to the models in use in the Austrian and Hungarian army. As military weapons, they used military rifles of the old model with *flintlock* [puști cu cremene] or the new *capslock*-models [puști cu capsă].

The rifles, either civilian or military, were insufficient for the Motz needs. Prefect Avram Iancu himself asserted that he had never had more than 1,300–1,400 functional rifles at the same time,<sup>24</sup> not even during the bloodiest battles. These rifles' ammunition was scarce, as well. Initially, in November 1848, the Legion Auraria Gemina barely disposed of 243 rifles, including the military types received from the Austrian army.<sup>25</sup> Most often the captured Hungarian rifles were outworn as soon as their ammunition was burned. The ignition was made by caps with mercury fulminate, but such caps couldn't be manufactured by the Motz, who lacked the necessary technology.<sup>26</sup> So, the Motz had to rely on the old model of the flintlock rifles. The ones received as a help from the Austrians were in a small number and in a very poor condition.<sup>27</sup>

The Motz artillery was made up of the so-called "*treascuri*" (a sort of civilian mortars employed only for signalling), wooden cannons and military cannons. We don't have any information about Hungarian rockets being captured or about Austrian rockets being ever received by the Motz.<sup>28</sup>

The *wooden cannons* [tunuri de lemn] in the endowment of the Motz were manufactured only by themselves.<sup>29</sup> Their exact number is unknown, but they had to be in sufficient number, due to at least 2 factors: first, even the smaller Motz units were fielded with one or two wooden cannons; second, the Motz, exceptional woodcrafters, could easily manufacture their cannons and in the Western Carpathians there was plenty of the raw material, namely wood.

According to the time sources, wooden cannons were made of cherry, ash or fir tree, and they were put into action mostly for their psychological effect: when discharged, their sound was deafening, encouraging their own and demoralising the enemy's troops. Up in the mountains, the cannons' effect was even stronger due to the echo, which multiplied the sound several times. Different types of ammunition could be used, including homemade ammunition, like incendiary charges, iron, stone or wooden balls, and even artisanal grapeshot charges.

The *powder* [praf de pușcă] of the cannons derived from the explosible used in the mines from Abrud and Roșia Montană, received or bought from the Austrian army.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes, the expenses for the powder were borne by the Motz from their own money.<sup>31</sup>

Firing such a cannon was a dangerous enterprise not only for the enemy, but also for the team, as the wooden barrel was rather weak and could explode after just 8–10 discharges, thus rendering the gun useless.<sup>32</sup>

We do not know the exact sizes of the wooden cannons, but from the way they were manufactured we can approximate some of them to be of high caliber, t.i. 12–15 centimeters, and a total length of 3 meters or more.<sup>33</sup> It is almost certain that smaller wooden cannons existed, as they were easily transported to the battle field, being pulled by horses or in man carried small carts.

The Motz molded iron cannons, too, but in a very small number, as they had no suiting technology and no manufacture experts.<sup>34</sup> Anyway, they managed to mold 2 cannons, probably in bronze, which were eventually fielded and used in confrontations.<sup>35</sup>

The only military cannons used by the Motz were captured in the battles from the Hungarian army.<sup>36</sup>

The cold weapons used by the Motz are represented by *lances* [lănci], *spears* [sulițe], *warscythes* [coase îndreptate], *bows and arrows* [arcuri cu săgeți], *axes* [topoare], *forks* [furci], *flails* [îmblăcie] and any other peasant tools deadly enough to be employed in battle.<sup>37</sup> Some of the Romanian military commanders disposed of *swords* [săbii],<sup>38</sup> that probably were not available to the large mass of the military.

Being poor, many Motz could not afford a weapon, not even a lance or a warscythe, meanwhile a rifle was out of discussion. These poor men went to the war armed with a mere *club* [bătă] or even *empty handed* [cu mâinile goale]<sup>39</sup> and, when possible, with lances manufactured on the legion's costs or purchased as a war capture.

The military training [instrucție] of the Romanian Landsturm, and of course of the Motz, was made according to regulations printed in Romanian language,<sup>40</sup> issued by the Austrian General Command in Sibiu and available to the legions as early as 5/17 October 1848.<sup>41</sup> The Habsburgs had probably elaborated these regulations for the militia ("Landwehr"), created after the experience gained during the Polish insurrection from 1830 to 1831, when they learned how to deal with masses of poorly armed and undisciplined civilians, that were to be transformed into a volunteer folk army.

In 1848–1849, all Romanian fighters of the Landsturm were called *lăncieri* (pike-men), no matter if they fought with a cold weapon or with a fire weapon. Sometimes there were made distinctions between the fighters using rifles, t.i. *riflemen* [pușcași] or *hunters* [vânători], and those armed with cold weapons, actually bearing the name *pikemen* [lăncieri]. Other times we meet the term *mob* [gloată], designating masses of Romanian fighters armed with cold weapons of various types.

Tactically speaking, in fact the battle formations consisted of units armed with rifles and units armed with cold weapons. Usually, when enough riflemen were available, they were deployed in the first line, while the units armed with cold weapons were designated only to clear the field at the end of the battle or to pursue the fleeing enemy, in lack of the cavalry.<sup>42</sup> In case of an enemy cavalry attack, a square was formed, em-

ploying in the first ranks the men armed with pikes and warscythes, in order to repel the opponent.

In various cases, the Romanians commanders, like prefect Axente Sever,<sup>43</sup> led their warriors in night fights, which were considered even by professional soldiers as an extremely dangerous endeavour.

In order to defend their position, especially in the mountain passes and defiles, the Motz knew how to use the natural advantages of the highland and, when necessary, they digged ditches and raised barricades.<sup>44</sup> They also made temporary dams [baraje] on waterstreams, releasing them at the right moment and thus sweeping away the enemy formations by power of the unlocked waters.<sup>45</sup>

The regulations instructed to destroy the bridges in retreat, in order to slow down the enemy's advance, then to cut down large sections of forest or even to burn down the villages.<sup>46</sup>

Cavalry units among the Motz haven't been mentioned. The few existing horses must have been used by the couriers, to pull the artillery pieces or to carry the supplies.<sup>47</sup>

As regards food and ammo supplying, as well as clothing, the Motz fighters ready for combat were supposed to receive free food and 8 silver kreutzers per day, the pay of a regular Austrian soldier.<sup>48</sup> Not only the payment was sporadic, due to the lack of money, but also the food rations were in limited quantities, because of the war conditions.

The Habsburg General Commando decree, number 6499 R, stipulated that Romanian Landsturm military serving more than 5 days in a *camp* [loagăr] was entitled to receive free food ("Etappenverpflegung"), similar to the regular Austrian troops.<sup>49</sup> The General Commando granted this right, but not the necessary resources. Under these circumstances, in the poor area of the Western Carpathians, the Romanian fighters usually were obliged to go hungry,<sup>50</sup> or to attack enemy supply bases to earn some food.<sup>51</sup>

Supplying consisted in part of the requisitions assented by the Austrian authorities. When available, supplies were taken from the abandoned household of Hungarian refugees<sup>52</sup>, as it was motivated that these properties couldn't be properly guarded against robbers. As regards the enemy property, especially Legion Auraria Gemina evinced an extremely correct behaviour, any abuse being severely punished by prefect Avram Iancu.<sup>53</sup>

The legions tried to procure supplies for themselves with the support of the local population. We found documents which show how local commanders tried to ensure the food and cloth supplying from the villages.<sup>54</sup> The war conditions increased the prices of all essential articles, making life even harder for both fighters and civilian population.<sup>55</sup>

The Motz army didn't have military uniforms. Fighters used to fight in their own clothes, each having better or worse clothing, depending on his social status.<sup>56</sup> The refugees had a more difficult situation, with no spare clothes and no money, their properties being left in the territory occupied by the enemy.<sup>57</sup>

There was no organized medical service. The Motz used the service of the few doctors living in the mountains. The death rate among wounded was high.

Signalling and communications were realized by means of visual signs and sounds. The visual communication, excepting the written one, implied fires lighted on the peaks of the mountains,<sup>58</sup> the news being thus transmitted very fast at long distances. The



hearing signals of the Motz were communicated with *alphorns* [tulnice]<sup>59</sup>, t.i. musical instruments made of fir tree made, specific to the Motz Land, church bells [clopote],<sup>60</sup> and *civilian handmade mortars* [treascuri]. The latter, as small cannons, were usually fit to give the alarm signals. The Motz communicated with alphorns in a codified manner, as only those who used the alphorns knew the meaning of the sounds. The enemy learned out soon what the Motz alphorns meant, so the instruments had quite a psychological impact upon the Hungarian troops, who knew an attack was imminent. In the battles, the signals were given by drums, in a military fashion.<sup>61</sup>

We have casual evidence the Motz had and used war flags. Most of the authors and historians don't mention this issue. Nevertheless, there are data about a battle flag used by Legion Auraria Gemina. This Motz battle flag had the same Romanian tricolour flag as today, in red–yellow–blue, with the difference that the national colors were disposed horizontally, red in the inferior part. Scraps of the Hungarian national colours, red–white–green, could be seen on the flag pole, which meant it was a war capture, taken from the Hungarian troops in one of the three battles from Abrud in the spring and summer of 1849.<sup>62</sup>

The legions' administration was organized and brought up to date. The documents and the financial status were administrated by a clerk,<sup>63</sup> appointed by the legion prefect. In order to confer more power and an official character to the documents, some legions had a seal. The seal of the Motz Legion Auraria Gemina depicted a stylized fir tree and prefect Avram Iancu bore its expenses.

**I**N CONCLUSION to our study, here we presented a case study of the organization, tactics and glossary of the Romanian Landsturm during the military events of the years 1848–1849. The Motz, usually known as a peaceful peasant population living in the Western Carpathians, created, under command of their leader Avram Iancu, the most redoubtable armed force, that conducted the National War of the Romanians in Transylvania. The legions of the Motz were the only army in Transylvania able to withstand the Hungarian military led by Polish general Bem, until the latter's defeat through the Russians in August 1849.

That is why we aimed to explain the way the military organization of the Motz was put into practice, by showing the recruitment and tactical units, the order of battle, manpower, arming and weapons of the Romanian Landsturm.

Yet the analysis of these important issues cannot justify the military victories of the Motz neither by their numerical, nor by their armed power, whereas the enemy forces exceeded those of the Transylvanian Romanians in any aspect.

The most valuable explanation of the miraculous resistance and success of the Motz army relies in the fact that the deployment of the military operations comprised the manoeuvring area of their homeland, revealing the tragic national self-defense war of the Romanians made against the Hungarian occupants.



## Notes

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### **Abstract**

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The Motz, usually known as a peaceful peasant population living in the Western Carpathians, created, under command of their leader Avram Iancu, the most redoubtable armed force, that conducted the National War of the Romanians in Transylvania (1848–1849). The legions of the Motz were the only army in Transylvania able to withstand the Hungarian military led by Polish general Bem, until the latter's defeat through the Russians in August 1849.

That is why we aimed to explain the way the military organization of the Motz was put into practice, by showing the recruitment and tactical units, the order of battle, manpower, arming and weapons of the Romanian Landsturm. We also focused on the specific Romanian glossary of the military concepts. Yet the analysis of these important issues cannot justify the military victories of the Motz neither by their numerical, nor by their armed power, whereas the enemy forces exceeded those of the Transylvanian Romanians in any aspect. The most valuable explanation of the miraculous resistance and success of the Motz army relies in the fact that the deployment of the military operations comprised the manoeuvring area of their homeland, revealing the tragic national selfdefense war of the Romanians made against the Hungarian occupants.

### **Keywords**

Motz army, 1848–1849, order of battle, Romanian military glossary