
P A R A D I G M S

A High Level Political Meeting Decisive for Romania's Neutrality

RADU ȘTEFAN
VERGATTI

The Russian-Romanian discussions that took place in Constanța were decisive as regards the neutrality status of Romania between 1914 and 1916.

MANY A time, maybe too often, it has been written without justification that the interval between the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1871) and the outbreak of World War I (July–August 1914) was a period of peace. This is not true. Quietness was only apparent during those years but the atmosphere was actually tense, foreshadowing a new storm. The great powers were racing behind the German Empire in an arms race. That race could only lead to one result: testing the efficiency of the weapons on the battlefield. The tense, troubled atmosphere was enhanced by the existence of the two military blocks: the Triple Alliance and the Entente.

Radu Ștefan Vergatti

Historian, member of the Academy of Romanian Scientists. Author, among others, of the vol. **Populație. Timp. Spațiu: Privire asupra demografiei istorice universale** (Population. Time. Space: An outlook on world historical demography) (2003).

The article was issued in an abridged form: “Problema izbucnirii primului război mondial: Contacte politice la cel mai înalt nivel,” in *Dobrogea în contextul primului război mondial*, eds Prof. Valentin Ciorbea, Dr. Corina Mihaela Apostoleanu, and Dr. Delia Roxana Cornea (Bucharest: Top Form Publishing House, 2017), 30–33.

The Triple Alliance, made up of the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Italy, and also the Kingdom of Romania, was not sufficiently coagulated, even threatening to fall apart. In Romania, the common people were increasingly discontented with the Triple Alliance: during the Balkan Wars, Vienna had strongly supported the Bulgarians against our country, whereas Berlin had done nothing to support Bucharest.¹

In Saint Petersburg, Tsar Nicholas II was receiving information about the anti-German and anti-Austro-Hungarian state of mind in Romania. He knew that this attitude was enhanced by the anti-Romanian policy of persecutions against the Romanians in Transylvania, pursued by the Kálmán Tisza government in Budapest.² The pro-Russian feelings of certain politicians like Emil Costinescu were also known.³

Under such circumstances, a matrimonial alliance was planned, between the Grand Duchess Olga Nikolaevna, the elder daughter of the Russian Tsar, and Prince Carol, the heir to the Romanian throne. In his memoirs, Alexandru Marghiloman confesses that on 22 February 1914, during a discussion with King Carol I, the latter declared to his interlocutor that the aforementioned marriage could be good for the family but would not have led to a shift in state

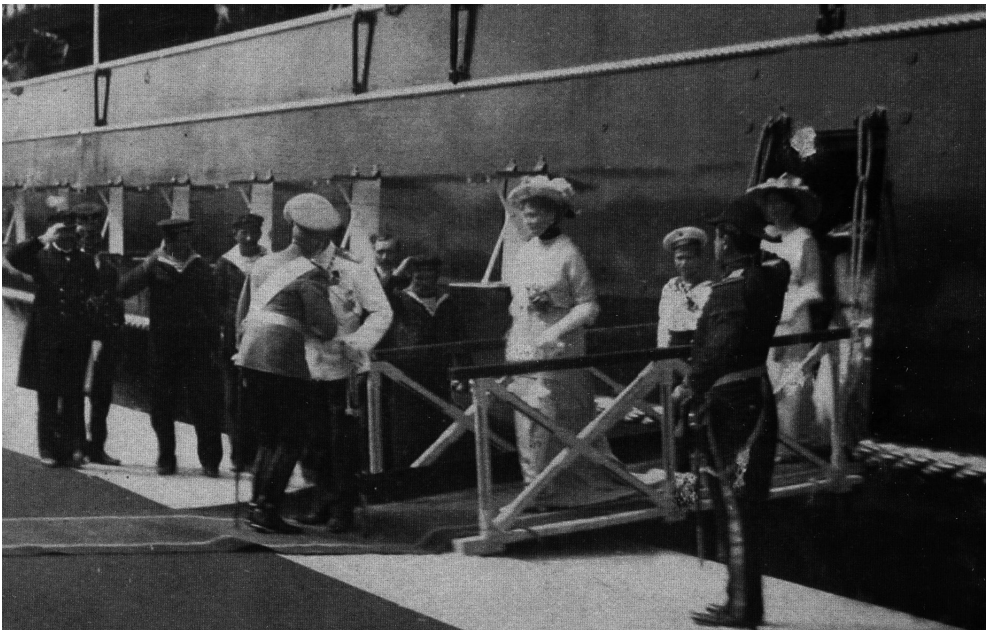


KING CAROL I and Tsar NICHOLAS II on 18 July 1898, at Krasnoe Selo, near Saint Petersburg. The two monarchs were photographed as they were reviewing the maneuvers of the Tsar's Guard. This is proof of the good relations built over time between Russia and Romania. SOURCE: Saint Petersburg Archive of the State Center for Photo-Phono-Cinematographic Documents. Published in *Consonanțe istorice româno-ruse: Centenarul vizitei Împăratului Nicolae al II-lea la Constanța, 1/14 iunie 1914*, bilingual text, Romanian and Russian, with a historical study by Prof. Ion Bulei (Bucharest: Next Page, 2014), 70.

policy.⁴ The king did not trust the tsar's promise that the Grand Duchess Olga would receive Bessarabia as her dowry. The tsar sought to improve the situation and tip the balance in favor of Romania's coming close to Russia. The tsar proposed, successfully, to pay a visit to the Romanian harbour of Constanța on 1 June 1914. He was going there joyfully, because thus he could meet his cousin, Princess Mary, whom he had briefly tried to court in his youth.

I. G. Duca wrote in his memoirs that, one day before the tsar's arrival, he took a stroll towards Tuzla in the company of Princess Mary. The princess depicted Nicholas II in warm colors, rejecting the malicious words that were being spread in connection to him. One single aspect, of a purely feminine nature, Princess Mary did not omit. Her cousin, Tsar Nicholas II, was not as beautiful to her as the rest of the imperial family, full of tall, handsome men, with seducing faces, able to sustain a sparkling, thrilling conversation. However, she underlined that Tsar Nicholas was a very pleasant person.⁵

The next day, Tsar Nicholas II arrived in Constanța. He was coming from the Crimean port of Yalta, aboard his sumptuous yacht, *Standard*, painted in black, a ship that impressed with its magnificence and elegance, escorted by six military ships (with a complement of 1,843). The tsar was accompanied by



Disembarking from the luxurious *Standard* yacht on 1 June 1914 in Constanța harbour, the Russian imperial family is welcomed by King CAROL I, the family and the official retinue.

SOURCE: *Consonanțe istorice româno-ruse*, 101.

his close family: Tsarina Alexandra, Tsarevitch Alexei and their four daughters. There was also a retinue of 19 persons accompanying the tsar and his family on the occasion of that visit, which was meant to return those paid by the Romanian royal family on several occasions, including that very year.⁶

The visitors were welcomed on the pier by King Carol I, dressed in a Russian marshal's uniform and holding in his hand a Russian marshal's baton. Standing there was also the heir to the throne, Prince Ferdinand, also dressed in the Russian uniform of a colonel in the tsar's guard, along with the king's son, Prince Carol, wearing the uniform of an imperial aide. They all gave the honor salute to the tsar. Then, a great military parade was held. C. Bacalbaşa noted that the tsar was impressed by the performance of the local regiment from Dobruja, whose soldiers were wearing Turkish caps.⁷ The festive military welcome ceremony was completed by a Te Deum performed in the cathedral, an official lunch, a tea offered on the *Standard* yacht, supper on the shore, and a ball. Actu-



Image of the Grand Duchess OLGA NIKOLAEVNA, alongside her father, Tsar NICHOLAS II. OLGA NIKOLAEVNA holds in her arms Prince MIRCEA (3 January 1913–2 November 1916), the son of the future King FERDINAND I and of the future Queen MARY. Sadly, Prince MIRCEA died from typhoid fever. The gesture of the Grand Duchess OLGA NIKOLAEVNA proves her love for children. Her planned engagement to Prince CAROL, the future King CAROL II, could not come to fruition because of the opposition of King CAROL I and of Princess MARY. The photo is a fragment from the one picturing the Russian imperial family and the Romanian royal family during the visit of 1/14 June 1914 of Tsar NICHOLAS II to Constanța harbour.

SOURCE: *Consonanțe istorice româno-ruse*, 45.

ally, the schedule was overloaded and busy, yet it was observed according to the protocol and an agreement was intensely negotiated by the two parties.

The tsar proved to be extremely benevolent. He also accepted on the guest list the name of Constantin Stere, who was the rector of the University of Iași, an imperial subject in his youth at one point exiled to Siberia. The tsar also accepted to receive a delegation of the Russians who, although had not been deprived of citizenship, were not allowed to enter the Tsarist Empire. On his ship, the tsar had long discussions with Prime Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu and with the Foreign Affairs Minister Emanoil Porumbaru. The Russian monarch declared to the Romanian politicians that should a military action lead to an invasion of Serbia, he would not remain indifferent.⁸ The issues at stake were pan-Slavism and the defense of Slavic peoples. King Carol I adopted a wait-and-see position. As soon as he got off the boat, Brătianu ran to the telegraph station in town and telegraphed notes to Berlin and Vienna about the discussions that he



Tsarevitch ALEXEI NIKOLAEVICH (left), Princess ILEANA (middle), Prince NICHOLAS (right) during playtime onboard the *Standard* imperial yacht, 1 June 1914. The photo was taken on the occasion of the visit of Tsar NICHOLAS II to Constanța harbour. It is impressive that the two nephews of King CAROL I—ILEANA and NICHOLAS—removed the state of apathy from the suffering Tsarevitch ALEXEI. This success of the two Romanian princes elated Tsarina ALEXANDRA, too. She was happy that her son, ALEXEI, intimately called BABY, was playing and was happy.

SOURCE: *Consonanțe istorice româno-ruse*, 123.

had had together with Tsar Nicholas II.⁹ Undoubtedly, the tsar's Secret Service agents, led by General Alexander Ivanovich Spiridovich, followed Brătianu and found out whom he had telegraphed. Certainly, the Russian observers were not the only ones. Others, belonging to various secret services, were also in the area.

Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna was very affable in regard to the Romanian royal family. Those present were astonished, because they had grown accustomed to her sour, uncommunicative face. It could be that her kind behavior was owed to Carol I's nephews, the small children Princess Ileana and Prince Nicholas.¹⁰ The small, playful, exuberant and cheerful princess (five years-old at that time) went to the suffering nine year-old Tsarevitch Alexei, took him by the hand and started playing with him. She thus helped him out of his shyness and made him laugh. The three children played together on the yacht in unrestricted freedom—as can be seen in the photos taken during the event.

The visit ended in the evening, when under the full moon the tsar was given

the honor salute by the Romanian Royal Guard led by King Carol I, and the splendid *Standard* yacht sailed away like in a fairy tale. I can make all these remarks since, at the request of King Carol I, the whole visit was shot on camera. The images have fortunately been preserved to this day in the Saint Petersburg Central State Archive for Photo-Phono-Cinematographic Documents and in the Romanian National Film Archive. The film is important because it recorded the very last visit abroad of Tsar Nicholas II before the beginning of World War I.¹¹ The footage and the photos have also remained a testimony of the good relationships between the Romanian and Russian monarchs.

The consequences of the visit were outstanding.

First of all, the marriage between the Grand Duchess Olga and Prince Carol was postponed sine die. The main reason for this cancellation were the hesitations of Princess Mary of



Tsar NICHOLAS II and his wife, Tsarina ALEXANDRA, wearing traditional Russian costume.

SOURCE: *Consonanțe istorice româno-ruse*, 93.

Romania. As a member of the tsar's family, she knew that the women in the family were transmitting a disease that was affecting the men. A living proof to that was Tsarevitch Alexei. Princess Mary wanted to avoid that the descendants of Prince Carol should suffer from that disease.¹²

Secondly, Romania's exit from the Triple Alliance was not achieved. Russia demanded that Romania should remain neutral, in case it did not change its allies. This point of view was taken up and supported by Ion I. C. Brătianu.

At that time, at the beginning of World War I, a popular joke in Bucharest dealt with Romania's neutrality. It said that P. P. Carp asserted that the time had come for Romania to enter the war. Nicolae Filipescu, an Entente supporter and a Francophile, said that the time had not yet come for us to join the fight alongside the Entente. In conclusion, Mr. Brătianu believed that it was best... not to look at the time.



Prince FERDINAND, Tsar NICHOLAS II and King CAROL I, on the seashore, on 1 June 1914, during the visit of the Russian monarch to Constanța harbour.

SOURCE: *Consonanțe istorice româno-ruse*, 113.

Most likely, Romania's decision to remain neutral, adopted during the Crown Council held at Sinaia (21 July/3 August 1914) was partly determined by the arrival in Bucharest, immediately after the tsar's visit, of the Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Dmitryevich Sazonov. He enjoyed a long audience granted by King Carol I in Constanța, then he spent no less than four days in Romania, in Bucharest and in Sinaia, where he went on discussing with decision-makers in the Romanian government. While in Sinaia, Sazonov took a stroll to Predeal together with Brătianu. There, close to the locality, was the border between Romania and Austria-Hungary. Deliberately, and yet pretending to have erred, they both crossed the border. It was then that Sazonov pointed towards Transylvania in Brătianu's plain sight and told him that it could be the gift Romania would receive should it remain neutral. In any case, Russia and the Entente implicitly obtained what they had desired: Romania remained neutral and thus a high level visit weakened the Triple Alliance.

I may conclude that the Russian-Romanian discussions that took place in Constanța were decisive as regards the neutrality status of Romania between 1914 and 1916. In this case, too, the liberal propaganda attributed to Ion I. C. Brătianu a role greater than the one the politician had actually played. In that moment, however, Brătianu had the wisdom to obey the threatening will of the tsar. □

Notes

1. I. G. Duca, *Amintiri politice*, vol. 1 (Munich: Jon Dumitru Verlag, 1981), 31.
2. Ibid.
3. Cf. Alexandru Marghiloman, *Note politice 1897–1924*, vol. 1, 1897–1915 (Bucharest: Ed. Institutului de Arte Grafice Eminescu, 1927), 230.
4. Ibid., 212–213.
5. Princess Mary told I. G. Duca: “Like everyone, you’ve heard about Niky [Tsar Nicholas II] that he is stupid, devoid of any physical attractiveness. It is true that compared to other members of the Romanov family, all tall men and strikingly handsome, the emperor is not an Adonis, but you will see tomorrow that he is not at all the legend that has been created around him. I don’t defend him in his capacity of a sovereign but I can assure you that he is not a stupid person and in any case he is full of simplicity and charm” (cf. Duca, 33–34).
6. Among those accompanying the tsar, there were: the minister of the Imperial Court, Count Vladimir Borisovich Frederiks, Admiral Konstantin Dmitryevich Nilov, Vladimir Nikolaevich Voeikov, the bailiff of the Imperial Palace, the head of the ministerial office of the Imperial Court, General Alexander Alexandrovich Mosolov, the head of the military campaign office, Prince Vladimir Nikolaevich Orlov, chief of the Chancellery of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Baron Moritz Fabianovich

Schilling, the commander of the infantry regiment of the High Imperial Majesty, Major General Vladimir Alexandrovich Komarov, the commander of the tsar's guard, Major General Alexander Nikolaevich Grabbe (Grabbe-Nikitin) and of course the Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Dmitryevich Sazonov. Cf. Oksana Morozan, "Vizitele familiei regale române în Rusia la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea, începutul secolului XX și vizita de răspuns a împăratului Nicolae al II-lea la Constanța în anul 1914," in *Consonanțe istorice româno-ruse: Centenarul vizitei Împăratului Nicolae al II-lea la Constanța, 1/14 iunie 1914*, bilingual text, Romanian and Russian, with a historical study by Prof. Ion Bulei (Bucharest: Next Page, 2014), 33/36.

7. Cf. Constantin Bacalbașa, *Bucureștii de altădată*, vol. 4, 1910–1914, 2nd edition (Bucharest: Universul, 1936), 172.
8. Cf. Duca, 32.
9. As I. G. Duca showed, the Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Dmitryevich Sazonov had arrived in Constanța a day before, by train, because he could not bear traveling at sea (*ibid.*).
10. Prince Nicholas (1903–1978), the younger son of the future monarchs of Romania Ferdinand I and Mary, was the godson of the Russian Tsar Nicholas II. The tsar had not attended the baptizing ceremony directly but had delegated Prince Dolgoruky to represent him.
11. I mention here that the first historical event filmed in the Romanovs' house was Nicholas II's coronation on 14/26 May 1896, in Moscow. That is also the very first record on camera of the future monarchs of Romania, Ferdinand and Mary, invited to attend the event. Cf. Maria, Regina României, *Însemnări zilnice*, vol. 3, transl. Sanda Ileana Racoviceanu, ed. Vasile Arimia (Bucharest: Albatros, 2004), 264; Manuela Cernat, "Cinematograful în istorie (I)," in *Studii și Cercetări de Istoria Artei: Teatru, Muzică, Cinematografie* (Bucharest), new ser., 5–6 (49–50) (2011–2012): 4–5.
12. Cf. Marghiloman, 223.

Abstract

A High Level Political Meeting Decisive for Romania's Neutrality

Close to the outbreak of World War I, the relationships between the Kingdom of Romania and the Tsarist Empire were not warm. Tsar Nicholas II decided to pay a visit to Romania, aimed at improving relationships with King Carol I. On 1 June 1914 the tsar arrived in Constanța harbour. It was the first official visit of a Russian head of state to Romania in the 20th century. The tsar had talks with King Carol I, with Prime Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu and with the Foreign Affairs Minister Emanoil Porumbaru. The tsar was seconded by the Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Dmitryevich Sazonov. The consequence of this official visit was that Romania preserved its neutrality status from 1914 to 1916.

Keywords

World War I, neutrality, Tsar Nicholas II, King Carol I of Romania