

Romanian Military Attachés in London and their Diplomatic Value (1919-1939)

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ABSTRACT

The article emphasizes the fact that the military represented an important component of the connections between Romania and England in the interwar period. Military attachés played an important role in maintaining military connections between the two countries: Nicolae Arion, Matila Costiescu Ghika, Radu R. Rosetti, Ion Antonescu, Nicolae Rădescu, Constantin Sănătescu, Gheorghe Niculescu, Gheorghe Dumitrescu, Ermil Gheorghiu. In their diplomatic activity they supported the following: Romania being recognized in England in actual fact; providing good reports for English businessmen; developing Great Britain's economic interests in Romania; acquainting Romania with the organization and fighting technique of the British army; closer cooperation between the two armies (British and Romanian); building common military objectives (such as the Taşaul military port), and others.

1. Introduction

The military represented an important component of the connections between London and Bucharest in the interwar period, Romania being interested in developing its military potential with a view to defending its national borders. Examining the political and military circumstances in the area, the Romanian army's General Staff reached the following conclusion: "Reunited Romania is in a much more difficult situation than in the past, as all its frontiers are threatened by the surrounding states. This threat comes from either a desire for retaliation on the part of Hungary or Bulgaria, who cannot accept being dispossessed of certain territories they owned, or from the propaganda tendencies of the Bolshevik regime, eager to expand its influence as far west as possible". (1)

2. The role of military attachés within the diplomatic corps

In this situation, Romania endeavored on the one hand to enter from the beginning a system of defensive political and military alliances, and on the other hand to modernize the military technique owned by the Romanian army. (2) To that effect, following the Great Union of 1918 – recognized by the Great Powers through the Paris Treaties, – Romania started to put its defense policy into practice by immediately focusing on opening offices for the Romanian military attachés in the USA and England (1919), followed by Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Japan, France, Turkey, Belgium, Austria, Bulgaria, Serbia, Italy, reaching a number of 23 military attachés accredited abroad on the eve of the Second World War. All military attachés were employed by the *Direct Information Office I*, within the Romanian General Staff. (3) The responsibilities held by the offices of the military attachés in some posts were so great, that they needed accredited assistance. This is how the first assistant military attachés appeared, specialized in aeronautics or maritime navigation, in Paris (1925) and London (1935). (4) Regarding their importance within the diplomatic corps, "The military attaché comes after the Head of Mission and the person within the Legation who deputizes for the Minister when he is absent". (5) Later, in 1938, *The Guidelines for Military Attachés* established the role and the place of the military attaché who was part of "Romania's military mission, with the role of a technical and military counselor to the Head of Mission," representing "the Romanian army, Romanian authority and the Romanian army's interests in all circumstances in relation to local authorities, the diplomatic corps and Romanian citizens, irrespective of their status in the country of accreditation". (6) Military attachés contributed largely to maintaining permanent military ties between Romania and England. (7) Military relations between the two countries increased in the 1920-1939 period. Political and military

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personalities, such as Nicolae Titulescu, Ion Antonescu, V.V. Tilea, Gh. Dumitrescu and others, together with military attachés Nicolae Arion, Costiescu Matila Ghika, Douglas Căpităneanu, Radu R. Rosetti, Nicolae Rădescu, Constantin Sănătescu, Gheorghe Niculescu, Ermil Gheorghiu, Cezar Marinescu and Gheorghe Ilescu contributed to the development of these relations. (8)

3. Highly trained military officers attached to diplomatic missions in London

After the end of the First World War, Romania maintained Lieutenant-Colonel Nicolae Arion in the position of military attaché in London until 1st July 1919, when he was replaced by Colonel Radu R. Rosetti. (9) In his activity as a military attaché, Nicolae Arion “fulfilled his sensitive charges with faultless tact and great competence”, (10) being mainly interested, as chairman of the Commission for army supplies, in supplying equipment, food and training student-pilot officers. (11) In his activity, Nicolae Arion was assisted by Reserve Captain Matila Costiescu Ghika (12) who „is able, as a graduate of the Brest Naval School, to provide our military attaché with all the necessary clarifications and explanations in marine matters.” (13)

Radu R. Rosetti played an important role in the development of military activities in London. (14) He fulfilled the position of military attaché in Great Britain between 1st July 1919 and 1st October 1920. Among the most important information sent by Radu R. Rosetti, we mention: the attitude of the English media regarding the Romanian army's intervention in Hungary. “Apart from a few exceptions, the media supports our action. Financial circles also. Official circles have reservations.” (9th August 1919 report) (15); the military situation in Russia, where “English and White Russian troops recorded several small successes on the Northern front” (24th August 1912 report) (16); the perception of Romania's involvement in the First World War. (17) Thus, in his report to the Romanian Academy, Rosetti requested to be sent “a complete collection of photographs taken during the war [...], as nothing can better demonstrate to the great public the part we played in the war, which is generally utterly unknown here.” (18); the necessity of establishing a press agency attached to the London Legation to supply better information to English businessmen, “that should provide English trade, industry and capital with accurate information on the national wealth, our need for raw and manufactured materials, as well as our constitutional and financial legislation” (19); his direct involvement in the campaign for the protection of Romanian interests and counteraction of the extremely energetic and offensive propaganda and diplomatic actions undertaken in London, as well as other places, by the Hungarian government with a view to revising peace conditions in the matter of frontiers (20); English Jews' statement that in Romania the Jewish matter was solved completely (21); the opportunity of organizing our navy with the support of the British Admiralty; the ways in which the Romanian state could obtain aviation materials and war munitions from England (22); the structure of the British army, navy and aviation. (23)

In the 1920s, a distinct role in enlarging Romanian-English rapports was played by Nicolae Titulescu, whose accreditation as a minister to the English capital was closely followed by British official circles, (24) and also Colonel Ion Antonescu, who was appointed military attaché in London through the Ministry of War Order no. 1392. (25) The appointment was made due to his “healthy mentality, tireless energy, resolute and undaunted decision, courage of opinion and taste for responsibility.” (26) As a military attaché in London, Ion Antonescu distinguished himself by the efforts he put into promoting Romanian-English relations. He “compiled a very interesting and elaborated paper on the political and military situation in England. He kept the General Staff up to date with all the information the English General Staff possesses about Russia, which proves that he has good rapports with the English Commandment.” (27) In London, Ion Antonescu had a fruitful collaboration with the great diplomat Nicolae Titulescu. Their correspondence reveals the friendly co-operation that benefited Romania. Titulescu assessed repeatedly that “I can only congratulate myself for cooperating with Colonel Antonescu,” while Antonescu stated in his turn, in a letter to the diplomat, that “mutual love and trust” lay at the foundation of their friendship. (28)

In his entire career as a military attaché in London, Ion Antonescu aimed at the following: making the Great Powers recognize Romania's military effort during World War I. Hence, he wrote a synthesis in French to be used by the renown journalist Wickham Steed, manager of the esteemed newspaper “The Times”, and the latter used this material in a series of conferences he held at the University of London (29); the increase of Romania's military potential with an eye to defending national borders. This explains the efforts made towards close co-operation with armament factories in Great Britain (30); negotiating a Romanian-British military co-operation in aeronautics, which was in full development in 1925; Soviet politics and its possible implications for Romania. Colonel Antonescu kept Bucharest up to date with all the information the English

General Staff possessed about Russia, "which proves that he has good rapports with the English Commandment," (31) and "the news he sent were always accurate and frequently proved other, more immediate sources inexact." (32) The accurate information provided by Antonescu dismissed the exaggerated news indicating an imminent Soviet attack on Romania and "due to his telegraphic information millions were saved from being spent uselessly" (33); the army, navy and aviation budgets in Great Britain, showing that "they could reveal details about the organic manpower and the expenses corresponding to each military unit, service or establishment" (34); the works of certain international conferences held on Great Britain's territory. Thus, between 16th July and 16th August 1924 London hosted an "inter-allied" conference with the participation of England, France, Belgium, Italy, the USA, Japan, Portugal, Greece, Romania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The *Dowes Plan* was devised on the same occasion, introducing important facilitations pertaining to war reparations (35); the international political situation and especially England's involvement in the Near East. In a *Secret Information Report* on 10th December 1925, Antonescu examines the dispute between England and Turkey concerning "the oil lands known as Mosul" (36) and points out that the Romanian state should take all necessary measures "because it is likely that an armed conflict between England and Turkey will not be solved in the disputed area, but in other areas much closer to us. Another element to be closely followed is Russia's maneuvers in Angora (sic!) and the preparations they are making to help the Turks in case of a conflict." (37)

On 14th July 1926 Ion Antonescu's appointment as a military attaché in London was withdrawn and he was assigned within the General Staff, (38) Nicolae Rădescu being appointed in his place. (39) An address sent by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Nicolae Titulescu, minister plenipotentiary in London, stated that "Colonel Nicolae Rădescu [...] is replacing Colonel Ion Antonescu as military attaché in London and Bruxelles." (40) As a military attaché, he was interested in the organizational structure of the British army and the existing types of armament. "All the material remaining at the end of the war – reported Nicolae Rădescu – was inspected and deposited, so that in case of necessity it could help fulfill the first requirements. At the same time different organizations were instituted to study and test any newly invented material, to rule over the models that should be adopted and foresee all necessary measures so that production could start at any moment, execution being postponed until the moment a conflict is foreseen. (41)

After Nicolae Rădescu, the activity of the military attaché in London was resumed by Colonel Constantin Sănătescu who "employed a lot of benevolence in his job, seeking to procure as much information as possible regarding the English army. He submitted all the intelligence he was requested in time. His most important work concerns the employment of the English cavalry and the organization and employment of motorized formations." (42) In an ample report on 22nd August 1928, regarding military maneuvers performed by the British army, C. Sănătescu showed that "The English hold *the human element* in high esteem; the life of every individual is of main concern for the governing class. Starting from this idea, they are evaluating whether it is possible to replace the human element with machines." (43) During his appointment as military attaché, Constantin Sănătescu was also interested in the following: Great Britain's army, navy and aviation budget, emphasizing that "Whilst the army budget suffers a yearly reduction, the aviation budget increases every year. Thus, the budget for the current year (1928) reveals an increment of £7,000,000 compared to last year's. It is £16,042,000" (44); British military maneuvers, showing that "the officers' and troops' bearing is flawless. The troop's equipment is such that can rarely be seen [...]. Much restraint in receiving and transmitting orders, each man is preoccupied with doing his own part conscientiously and does not concern himself with what his superior will say" (45); attracting the interest of certain economic and financial circles in London in order to consolidate their position in Romania; keeping in mind Romania's geostrategic position, at the beginning of 1930 he supported the proposed construction of a naval base on the Black Sea with British support (46); in 1930 Colonel Constantin Sănătescu "continued to fulfill the role of military attaché in London, where he pursued a fruitful activity, just as he did last year, his main responsibilities in future being studying and informing the General Staff about matters of great interest for the Romanian army, regarding the experiments performed by the English army" – thus was shown in an address to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (47)

4. The involvement of military attachés in achieving economic and military cooperation between Romania and the United Kingdom

In the same period, while Colonel C. Sănătescu activated as a military attaché, Captain-Commander Gheorghe Niculescu was appointed naval attaché "in order to keep our Navy up to date with all the technical progress achieved by the British and French navies." (48) He fulfilled the role of naval and military attaché with the Romanian Legation in London, Paris and Rome (15th February 1929 – 15th June 1935), respectively naval and military attaché in London (1st October 1930-1935). (49) The *Activity chart* of naval attaché Gheorghe Niculescu mentioned he had to "transmit a monthly Information Bulletin and, through new intercessions with the Admiralty and the British Government, continue negotiations for the naval base [Taşaul – A/N]" (50) During his appointment as a naval attaché, he was also preoccupied with: diplomatic and political relations between the Great Powers and Romania, emphasizing in this context that "relations among the European Great Powers and especially the Mediterranean ones affect directly not only our interests at the seaside, but also in the interior as, in order to reach its goals, Italy seems to cross Germany and Hungary to the Balkans on the one hand and, on the other, Eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea to Russia" (51); keeping the Navy General Inspectorate informed about all the Navy publications and regulations in the armies he came into direct contact with; elaborating studies regarding the reduction of naval armament (1929), the works of the Naval conference in London (1930) and the structuring of the Romanian Navy according to the progress of this branch at an international level; the budget of Great Britain's army, aviation and navy, showing that "the Government and Authorities' present concern is the problem of arming, equipping and strengthening the armed forces, the problem of anti-aircraft defense and the competition emerging between the Aviation and the Navy as a factor of main necessity for National Defense. (52) He also highlighted in an *Information Bulletin* in March-April 1934 that in Great Britain "great concern is manifested in public, in the media and the Parliament on the matter of Germany's military preparations, especially since the 1934 budget provisions for the Army, Navy and Aviation came to light." (53) Gheorghe Niculescu wrote that this is the reason why "Mr. Neville Chamberlain, Chancellor of the Exchequer, declared in Newcastle that if the Disarmament Conference did not make any progress, he would be forced to appeal to a national loan of over 100,000,000 (one hundred million pounds) in order to build a stronger Navy and Aviation than any on earth" (54); attracting the interest of economic and financial circles in order to London to consolidate their position in Romania. (55) The Romanian-English commercial treaty signed in August 1930 illustrated England's and Romania's wish to organize their economic relations on better foundations and apparently contributed to a more favorable mood in London, which lasted until the eve of the Second World War. As a matter of fact, an *Information Bulletin* on 26th September 1934 highlighted the following: "Political rapports between Romania and Great Britain remain excellent. The essential role that Romania – whose Minister of Foreign Affairs is the President of the Permanent Council of the Little Entente – plays in the European Concert makes these rapports all the more important" (56); the means through which the Romanian state could obtain from England military equipment for our army; "the organization and operation of the History Department within the English War Office." (57)

However, Gheorghe Niculescu was the one who played the most important role during the talks between Romania and England regarding the establishment of a naval base on the Black Sea. On this line, Gh. Niculescu showed that the English Admiralty offered to send a delegation to visit Constanța "in order to make a local assessment." (58)

The international events in 1930-1933 and especially Hitler coming to power in Germany represent a new stage in the history of the Anglo-German relations, an overall change in the *Foreign Office's* perspective in matters of external politics, and particularly Romanian issues, being noticeable. "As far as England's foreign politics is concerned – shows a *Revision Report for October 1933* – the British Cabinet is divided upon the issue of Germany, rapports with Hitler's government following this divide. The Foreign Office is unequivocally against Germany, while Mr. MacDonald is definitely pro Germany, although lately he's been slightly intrigued in his feelings for Chancellor Hitler." (59)

Another *Information Bulletin*, particularly rich in facts, is the one in March-April 1934 showing, among others, that in Great Britain "great concern is manifested in public, in the media and the Parliament on the matter of German military preparations, especially since the 1934 budget provisions for the Army, Navy and Aviation came to light." (60) In time, the British Government paid particular attention to the development of aviation in certain allied countries. Thus, referring to such a co-operation in the domain of aviation, Commander Gheorghe Niculescu explained that he met General W.B. Caddel, the Director of the Aviation Department within the Vickers Company and received "all assurance that they will be able to procure and

produce the most enhanced engines” and that the British “are ready to take over the entire situation from the IAR, as it is today, which means including the French group, should the Romanian Government want it, in order to avoid creating difficulties for us with this group.” (61)

In the same period – beginning with 1st April 1933 – Ermil Gheorghiu was appointed “aeronautical attaché in Paris and also accredited in England, Italy, Belgium.” (62) Although he had a difficult mission being accredited in four different countries, his studies and monthly bulletins were well made and represented “a very interesting mine of information” concerning the following: the restructuring of the aeronautics in England; the tactics of the French and Italian aeronautics; the connections between Romanian and English pilots. A *Qualifying paper* from 1934/1935 specified the fact that Ermil Gheorghiu sent home a series of very interesting studies on “The Organization of the Aeronautics in the three states [...] Air policy and its most important problems. Translations and regulations [...]. At the same time he continued his training by performing flights on the following planes: Morane 230, Potez 25, Erequet 29, Potez 64 and Mureant 113” and in conclusion it highlighted that Ermil Gheorghiu was a “very good General Staff officer and a very good pilot [...] who enjoyed great esteem in all circles due to his competence, reliability and freshness.” (63)

In the 1936-1939 period relations between London and Bucharest expanded as the international situation worsened. At the beginning of 1936 Nazi Germany intensified its preparations for the remilitarization of the Rhineland – which was accomplished on 7th March 1936. In this case, the English government – Laptew informed – was increasingly willing to play the role of mediator between Germany and France. Commenting on the policy of the English government during the Rhineland crisis, Mircea Grigorescu wrote in the “*Dimineața*” newspaper of 28th March 1936: “England’s historic role was to maintain a balance of the continental forces, in order to ensure its dominating peace. Today it is strange that London ignores Germany’s plans for European expansion and that it is precisely in the name of its old balance of power policy that Great Britain does not delineate an uncompromising attitude in order to impose, alongside France, a respect for peace.” It was only in 1938 that Great Britain reached certain military agreements with East European countries. Moreover, it was easier in this period to obtain an authorization from the English government for armament orders. Thus, the Romanian government, getting in touch with the War Office, managed to place an order for eight artillery batteries 75 mm (caliber) with the Vickers Company. (64) An important role in these talks was played by Gheorghe Șt. Dumitrescu, who acted as a military and naval attaché in England (1935-1941) (65), France and Italy. While he was a military attaché, Gh. Dumitrescu was preoccupied with the following: the army budget and plans for the equipment of the aviation and the navy in Great Britain, emphasizing that “The Air Ministry’s project envisaged the creation of 41 new squadrons until the end of 1938 [...] and replacing ships that reached their age limit as soon as possible” (66); the international context in the last years of the fourth decade of the 20th century, highlighting that a particular preoccupation with the Italian-Abyssinian conflict is visible in British governmental circles, because “the accomplishment of Italian aspirations in Eastern Africa is believed to pose numerous dangers for Britain in the future.” (67) In his analysis of the international situation, Gh. Dumitrescu highlights the political and diplomatic positions of countries which influenced Romania’s geopolitical state in one way or another. Therefore, making a reference to the French policy, he revealed that “lately France’s foreign policy has been characterized by a continuous effort to persuade Germany and Poland to contribute to the consolidation of peace.” (68) Ample political, diplomatic and military data – in a 1935 *Report* – refer to neighboring countries: Hungary, Bulgaria and the U.S.S.R. Referring to Hungary, Gh. Dumitrescu shows that its foreign policy “has lately been characterized by a continuous alternation between the Italian and the German spheres of interest” (69) and that “Friendly relations between Romania and the Soviets as well as the signing of the French-Russian and Czech-Russian pacts have generated great uneasiness in Hungary.” (70) The deterioration of the international situation in 1938-1939 compelled the Government in Bucharest and especially Armand Călinescu to approve Mihail Moruzov’s proposal that an officer of high rank should travel abroad in order to establish relations with the allied intelligence services and their commanders. An essential objective in this mission was one connected with the policy of Great Britain and France towards Germany’s expansion in South-Eastern Europe, mainly Romania, with the “reliability” of the commitments the two democracies made to Bucharest. We should also not neglect the fact that this mission was to be carried out at a moment when two events – Viorel Virgil Tilea’s endeavor on 17th March 1939 and the signing of the Romanian-German economic treaty on 23rd March 1939 – had made Romania the centerpiece of European democracies’ preoccupations. (71) Speaking about the Romanian-German negotiations, the military naval attaché in London, Gheorghe Șt. Dumitrescu showed in a *Report* on 5th April 1939 that they “succeeded in generating in England a hostile feeling towards the Reich’s leaders,” especially “following the military occupation of first Czechoslovakia and then Memel” and that “news of Romania’s determination to

defend its borders was welcomed with relief and discussed favorably.” (72) Moreover, the signing of the economic treaty was largely commented upon in London and “a first consequence of the situation triggered by the signing of this treaty was the decision taken by the English government to dispatch a commercial committee to Romania as soon as possible.” (73)

After the outbreak of the Second World War, Romania continued to hope for political and military co-operation with Great Britain. However, after 6th September 1940, when Romania’s relations with Germany clarified definitely and settled on a base of complete political co-operation, it became clear that relations with the European democratic Great Powers – England, France – would never return to what they once were.

Notes

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