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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ACT OF 23 AUGUST, 1944 IN THE GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Anca OLTEAN*

Abstract. *Looking back at the important action from 23 August 1944 when Romania left the war on the side of Germany and ceased the fight with the Soviet Union, an action who contributed to the shortening considerably of the war and to the demise of Fascism and Holocaust in Europe, we have to acknowledge the important role played by King Mihai and democratic political forces from Romania like the leaders Iuliu Maniu, Gheorhe Brătianu (leaders of PNL and PNT) in the democratization of Romania and liberation from fascist experience. Unfortunately, the transformation of the state in communist state could not be prevented by these liberal and democratic forces, neither by monarchy in the context of lack of international support for the maintenance of capitalist, western-oriented state.*

Keywords: *23 August, Fascism, Communism, Holocaust, King Mihai, democratic Opposition*

Preliminaries

The factors who determined the success of the act that took place in August 23, 1944 were: the continuity of the activity of political parties at the level of their leadership, the precarity of the situation of Romania on Eastern front, fact that lead the political leaders of the time towards the finding of some solutions, and the action of King Mihai.

In what concerns the first factor, this was favoured by the fact that “Antonescu did not enterprise anything in order to limit at least the contacts and the discussions from the framework of the opposition” (Constantiniu, 1997: 395). On the contrary, it had been always a dialogue between Antonescu and the leaders of the Opposition: Iuliu Maniu, Dinu Brătianu and Constantin Titel Petrescu. These leaders criticised Antonescu in the moment when he decided to cross the Nister and to continue the fight on the territory of the Soviet Union. It had been also weaknesses coming from the part of Iuliu Maniu who declined allways the responsibility concerning the signing of the armistice. He did not want to assume the responsibility of the cease of some parts from the national territory (Bessarabia, the North of Bucovina and the land of Herța), agreeing all that this responsibility had to be granted to the Marshall. In spite of these endeavours, neither Antonescu is not disposed to sign the armistice (he was asserting that he is ready to give the power to the Opposition, if their leaders assumed the responsibility of such step), neither the Anglo-Americans did not seem receptive towards the fears of democratic parties concerning the future of Romania. Coming from here, the long waitings and pertractions of the leader of National Party of Peasants, Iuliu Maniu (Constantiniu, 1997: 395).

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In what it concerns the precariousness of external situation of Romania that led to the inevitability of the act of 23 August, I will mention a few moments concerning the position of Romania in the context of the outburst of the war.

The Marshall let himself be engaged in the conflict and he declared his loyalty towards Hitler that, starting the war against Soviet Union, did ask to Antonescu to do only what was in his own interest. In the vision of the Marshall, the war was not only one of liberation of the Romanian territories found under Soviet domination, but also against of an ideological enemy, the bolshevism.

An aspect that it can be reproached to Antonescu is that he kept King Mihai outside the politics, about the entrance in the war of Romania, King Mihai finding from BBC.

At July 2, 1941, Antonescu opened the offensive on Eastern front. It followed then the liberation of the Romanian territory at July 25, 1941 and liberation of the Chişinău at July 16, 1941. The passing over the Niester, after the liberation of Bessarabia and the North of Bucovina, was criticised by leaders of National Party of Peasants and Liberal Party. Antonescu motivated his decision. (Constantiniu, 1997: 403) It was initiated by a strategic calculus in order of not exposing the Romanian territory to Soviet attacks, but it had also a political motivation, having as purpose the fulfillment of German demands with the purpose of obtaining ultimately the annulment of the Diktate of Vienna. This was the motif of collaboration of Antonescu with Germany, he being on the side of Germans, unconditionally.

In August 30, 1941, he signed the Romanian- German agreement from Tighina that it foreseen the instauration of Romanian civil administration on the territory between Nistru and Bug named Transnistria.

The signs of bad luck came up since the Battle of Odessa (August 18–October 16, 1941) when the Romanian army lost 98 000 of people (death persons, injured, missing persons). (Constantiniu, 1997: 408) In the same time, the Germans lost the Battle of Moscow where they applied the Blitzkrieg. After the entrance of United States in the war (December 7, 1941), the balance of forces changed in favor of the allies. Romania and USA declared simultaneously the war. In 1942, the Romanian troops fought at South of Harkov and at Sevastopol. Another important defeat was at Stalingrad where the Romanian army lost 158 854 militaries (Constantinescu, 1997: 415), this fact causing a crises of trust between the High Commandments Romanian and German.

Besides the defeat from the Cotul Donului and Calmuca stepa, the Romanian army suffered the defeat from Kursk (July 5–August 23, 1943) that, corroborated with the leaving out of Mussolini in Italy at July 25, 1943, worsen the situation from Eastern Front. It was more probable that Romania to be occupied by the Russians. The Romanians did not know that at Teheran (November 28–December 1, 1943), Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill rejected the plan of the Anglo-American debarcation in the Balkans. At March 5–April 17, 1944, the Soviet troops entered on the territory of Romania. At April 2, 1944, the Red Army came in the Old Kingdom. The declaration of Molotov showed that the Soviets entered the territory of Romania not from the wish of taking over of a part of the country or to impose another social system, but from purely strategic reasons. This assertion proved ultimately untrue, being a politic-diplomatic lie.

In what it concerns the third factor, King Mihai I, he played a role that can not be contested. Although he was advised and counselled by the representatives of BND (peasant party members, liberals, social-democrats, communists), he was the main initiator of the act of 23 August. Later, the communists arrogated the role of main

coordinators of the events. The main character of those days was King Mihai that hurried the rhythm of events during the day of August 23, the initial action being fixed on August 26. At August 23, the king acted alone, the leaders of the main political parties were not to be found.

The evolution of events

The Act of 23 August was prepared since 1942. At Cairo, Barbu Știrbei tried to negotiate with the allies, but his action was stopped by Antonescu who received from Hitler the promise that Transilvania will become a part of Romania. Hitler, basing himself on the Marshall's loyalty, renounced to the plan Margareta II who foreseen the occupation of Romania by the Nazi forces. In the meantime, in October 1943, the Romanian vice-consul to Istanbul was taking the connection with a representative of S.O.E. (Special Operation Executive) and he was presenting the plan of a stately insurrection in order to eliminate the Marshall. This action failed though, partly because of the lack of British forces support. (Giurăscu, 1995: 1)

With the help of Maniu and Brătianu, the king was trying to organize and also, Maniu could send news and inform the Allies at Cairo and Ankara. (Ciobanu, 1997: 18) After this transmission of news, Maniu and Brătianu used to come to Palace to make a rapport of their action.

In order to be able to cooperate with the Allies, the King was compelled to receive, also, communist members, in the future actions that followed, although their number was very small. The actions of the King, were to a very small extent based on exterior action. Thus, on one hand, at BBC and the Voice of America, they were advised to get out from the war, and, on the other hand, the message of Romanians towards the Allies were not confirmed: "We were working intensively to reach a viable solution, but as the time was going by, we realized we had no help from anyone and that exactly the ones who lead us to get out of the war, they end all actions when we wanted to propose something more concrete". (Ciobanu, 1997: 20)

Finding out that Antonescu had to go on the Front, although the date for the proposed action was 26 August, the king had convoked the Marshall to the Palace, together with the Ministry of External Affairs, Mihai Antonescu. In August 22, Maniu, Brătianu, Titel Petrescu and Pătrășcanu were not to be found. King Mihai received the two Antonescu in the presence of Sănătescu and tried to convince the Marshall of the necessity of signing the armistice. For Antonescu, his word of honour given to Hitler worthed more than the situation in which was the country, thus he refused to give his consent. The Marshall did not feel the danger of his situation, he continued to see King Mihai as a child who had to be kept out of politics. He asserted that he can not go and to leave the country in the hand of a child. The solution that came up was that of the arrestment of Antonescu after which his collaborators were called to Palace and arrested. Maniu, Brătianu, Titel Petrescu, Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu were named ministers without portofolio in the new government.

The communists were unpleasantly surprised by the spontaneous action of the King who put them in the situation of not asserting the paternity of the Political Act from August 23. This aspect did not imperished the communist journals (Scântea) to declare, since the second day, that them, the communists, were the main initiators of the events.

In the same time, it started the bombing of the Germans towards the capital. The King took a refuge in Oltenița, at Dobrița. They were taken 50 000 of German prisoners. The Russians interrupted the offensive hoping that the Romanians be defeated by the

Germans. On the Eastern Front, the Romanian troops were treated as prisoners. Russians entered in the Capital in September 1, after the leaving of German troops in August 26.

Another problem that aroused controversies was the surrender of Antonescu to the Soviets. He was left in the surveillance of Emil Bodnăraș who gave him to the Russians, without having the King's consent.

The Act of August 23, 1944 (event, signification, the role of King Mihai)

At August 22, Antonescu comes back to Bucharest and talks with Mihalache and Gh. Brătianu who ask him to conclude the armistice. With the support of the Opposition, Antonescu seemed to agree to sign the amistice. Gheorghe Brătianu promised to bring letters of guarantee from Maniu and Brătianu. Antonescu asked for an audience to Palace for 16.00 p.m. and in the discussions with the political leaders of the time the king decides, that if the marshal would be not agree with the signing of the armistice, to arrest him during the audience.

The discussion King Mihai-Antonescu developed in contradictorial terms. To the assertion of Ion Antonescu that he can not accept the conditions of the armistice, the king told him: "We can not bargain at this late hour and in the situation in which we are". Antonescu proposed to call back the Romanian troupes and to organize a resistance in the Carpathians, but the king opposed asserting that the whole country will transformed into ruins. The marshal is arrested. The monarch was criticized later, that he gave the marshal to the communists of Emil Bodnăraș to watch him.

At August 23, 8 o'clock p.m., in a royal decree, Constantin Sănătescu was named president of the Council of Ministers. The new government included a representative of each party from BND. The majority of the government, was formed by military technicians.

At 21.30 p.m., all the radio stations from the country announced that they will transmute an important communicate for the country. At 22, 12 o'clock p.m., it had began the transmission of the proclamation. The proclamation was containing the leading message of King Mihai I, addressed to Romanian Army to stop the war against Soviet Union and to turn back the guns against the Germans. *The fact that Romanian army was subjected to him, demonstrates that the king remained in the eyes of the army the head of the troops*, although Antonescu ignored this prerogative of him. The fact that in the night of 23/ 24 August it took place spontaneous manifestations in front of the Palace demonstrates the fact that *the king was enjoying popularity and trust* in the eyes of the people. On August 26, 1944, the Romanian army liberated Bucharest found under German occupation, and in October 25, the last Romanian city, Carei, was liberated from the German occupation. The act of August 23, was an action meant to support the United Nations and, especially, the Soviet Union, but, unfortunately, the Russians did not appreciated the gesture of the monarch. The Romanian army, after the proclamation of August 23, opposed no more resistance to the Soviets. These occupied the whole territory of Romania, taking over 130. 000 of prisoners.

The meaning of the Act of August 23 was highly important. After turning the weapons against the Nazi forces, Romania, the second country as surface in Eastern Europe, changed in a few days the line of the front with 500 of kilometers. This thing happened with the price of numerous victims, Romania lost 500 000 of soldiers on Eastern front and 168 000 on Western front. The act of August 23, had a special meaning also for the situation of Romania. In the opinion of Șerban Papacostea (Papacostea, Revista 22, 23-30 August 1995), the Act of August 23, had numerous significations such as: to avoid

the transformation of the country in a theatre of war, to avoid the direct occupation by the Soviet army and the immediate taking over of the power by the exponents of Soviet interest, the communists, the return of Ardeal to the Kingdom of Romania and the annulment of the Diktate of Vienna because of the participation of the Romanian army to the military operations together with the allies, the reduction of the war time period on all fronts, because of the huge vacuum provoked by the action of Romania in the defensive system of the Reich.

King Mihai played the key-role in these events. Although he was helped and advised by the representatives of BND (nationalist peasants, liberals, social-democrats and communists), he was the main initiator of the act. Ulteriorly, the communists arrogated themselves the right of main initiators and actors in the events of the act of August 23, but the reality was completely different. In 1944, Romanian Communist Party had a reduced number of members and it was accepted to negotiations only because it was hoped that the implication of the communists in action, will determine the acceptance by the Soviet Union of some easier conditions of armistice with Romania. There are also opinions that minimize the role had by King Mihai in this operation, using the same discourses that Ion Antonescu used when he isolated the king by the political realities and the roles he had under the pretext that he was nothing more than a child. Thus, in an interview granted to Gabriela Adameșanu, Ion Iliescu asserts that the Act from August 23 “was not his merit (of the king) in principal, as it was accredited. A young man of 22 years old...But I appreciated and I considered that it is right this justification, the fact that he contributed to the achievement of this turning back of the weapons against Germany and to the ralliation of Romanian military forces to the forces of United Nations-participation to Romania to war until the defeat of Germany”. (transl.) (Ion Iliescu Apud Adameșanu, Revista 22, 12-19 October 1994).

The Act of August 23 and its significations were acknowledged also in international plan. Thus, at July 6, 1945, the Presidium of Supreme Soviet of Soviet Union granted to King Mihai the Order Victoria, the highest military Soviet distinction. With the same appreciation the president of the United States, Harry Truman names Mihai I as Chief Commander of the Legion of Merit. In spite of these distinctions which openly acknowledged the role of the King in the solutionning of the Second World War, the situation evolved differently. The Romanian communists supported by the Soviet Union, the indifference of Great Britain and of the United States of America, who accepted that Romania to arrive in the Soviet sphere of influence, the lack of diplomacy of adjunct of Soviet minister, Andrei Vâșinsky who came in Romania in order to exert pressures of the king and of the democratic forces in the country, all these lead to the end of monarchy and of the political democratic regime of Romania.

Towards this situation king Mihai adopted a cooperant attitude towards the Soviet Union not knowing from the very beginning which were her real intentions, then he *tried to oppose* to the communization of the country through actions that culminated with the royal strike started in 20.02. 1945. The end of royal strike and the acceptance of Groza Government was the beginning of a policy of concessions and resignation in front of Moscow and of the communists supported by it. King Michael had understood that he can do nothing to change the situation. In time, only by his simple presence, the monarch become persona non grata and he is imposed the act of abdication. The attitude of Romanian communists was not from the start hostile to the monarch, they knew about the prestige of the monarch: “In Romania, it was created an unusual political phenomenon. Here, the communists trained by/in Soviet Union, unlike the communists in general who

hated the monarchy praise the merits of royalty. No one from the communist ministers miss the occasion to appear in public or official occasions together with King Mihai”. (Deletant, Revista 22, nr.9, March 1995)

The reflection of events from August 23, 1944 in the press of the time

At August 23, 1944, at 22 o'clock, King Mihai was announcing his *Proclamation to the country*. It represents the moment of the rupture of the relations with Germany. The Crown and the Throne were becoming the only factors of balance in a country ruined by the war: “The Romanian people understands to be itself master on his destiny. Anybody would stay against our decision freely taken and which do not undermine anybody’s rights, is an enemy of our people. I order to the army and I call the people to fight by all means and with any sacrifices against him. All the citizens to gather around the Throne and Government, for the salvation of the Mother country”. (Universul, nr.231: 25 august 1944) In the same time, it was transmitted also a declaration of the Government through which it was announced the formation of a BND government, the country receiving benefits of independence from the side of USSR, USA and Great Britain. With this occasion, it was formulated the option of Romanians to take back Transylvania: “The acknowledgement by the governments from Moscow, London, Washington of the injustices made to Romania by the Dictate of Vienna opens the possibility that the Romanian armies together with allied armies to liberate Northern Transylvania under the foreign occupation”. (Universul, nr.231: 25 august 1944)

The king named a new government together with General of Army Corpus Constantin Sănătescu as president of the Council of Ministers. The members of the Government became Iuliu Maniu, Constantin Brătianu, Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu and Constantin Titel Petrescu. Other portofolios were occupied by the general Mihail Racoviță (secretary minister to the department of National Defense, Grigore Niculescu Buzești (secretary minister at the department of Foreign Affairs), the general Aldea Aurel (secretary minister at the department of Internal Affairs). Other ministers were: general Nicolae Marinescu, Dimitrie Negel, general Ion Boițeanu, Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu (minister at the Justice Department).

In August 26, the legionnaire movement was destroyed. The Constitution from 1923 came into force.

Through the Act of August 23, the power is detained by the monarch, after, during four years, this was subordinated to the Marshall: “Thrown away, from the columns of the newspapers by the photographic exhibitions of the dictator and of his family, surveyed in the most inoffensive movements, isolated in the narrow circle of the Court and being forbidden to take contact with the chiefs of the army and with the political men, deprived by all information, the King and Queen Mother had an existence of martyrs”. (Lugosianu, Universul, no. 246: 1944)

Although the communists arrogated later the role of the main initiators of the Act of 23 August, the mass-media of the time acknowledged in all newspapers, no matter of their political orientation, the role of King Mihai I in the development of the events. Thus in the liberal newspaper “Viitorul” it is asserted ca “M.S. King Mihai I, taking the leading of the state from unskilled hands and giving back to the people, besides the spread liberties, on the wire of its traditional politics, he cemented once more the ties that unite our glorious dynasty with the Romanian People”. (Zurescu, Viitorul, 29 august 1944:1) In “Greater Romania”, the paper of communist orientation, it is acknowledged in the same time the role of the King”. His Majesty the King never ceased for a moment to prepare the

action fulfilled at August 23, action in the view the presence of the Majesty in the midst of the nation was as simple, as indispensable act". (*România liberă*, nr.18, 2 Septembrie, 1944: 1)

The solidarity with the monarchy had not excluded, also, the solidarity with the Red Army. Thus, the press of the time publishes eulogistic articles at the address of Soviet Union and of Red Army: "The winning troupes of the Red Army entered yesterday in the capital. Young, vigorous, admirably equipped, framed in a total discipline they bring not only the quiet pride of some brilliant victories, but also the conscience of a mission of liberation against a detested enemy on all the world territory" (*Universul*, nr. 239, 31 august, 1944:1). In the same world of ideas he wrote, also, the journal "Free Romania" ("*România liberă*"): "The great Red Army, the strongest and most glorious army of the Great United Nations entered in August 30 in the democrat Bucharest...This day will enter in the history of our country. The workers and the citizens of the capital, in a continuous enthusiasm, received the allied army of Soviet Union with flowers and flags, with endless ovations (...)" (*România Liberă*, 31 August 1944: 1)

The press of the time debated, also, the problem of the closing of the armistice. It was signed from the allied part by General Rodeon Malonovski and from Romania by Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, general adjunct Dămăceanu, Barbu Știrbei and Ghiță Pop. The text of armistice was stipulating that at the date of August 23, 1944, Romania lost the military operations against USSR. Romania was carrying the war against Germany and Hungary with the purpose of restoring the independence and sovereignty of Romania. To this campaign, they were participating 12 divisions of infantry. The military operations against Germany and Hungary could be put under the general command of the Higher Allied Commandment (Sovietic). Romania had to ensure to the Soviet forces and to the other allies more easiness for their free movement on the territory of Romania. It had to support the expenses of the war and it had to re-establish the frontier with USSR so it was decided by the Convention Romanian–Soviet from June 28, 1940. Towards the Russians, they had to be delivered all the materials of war of Germany, including the vessels of war anchored in the Romanian ports. The government of Romania had to do regularly the payment asked to him by the Higher Allied Commandment (Soviet). In the same time, this is obliged to give back to USSR all the values taken during the war but also the payment of some compensations of 300 000 of dollars. In turn, "the allied governments think about the decisions of the Arbitrage from Vienna with regard to Transylvania as null and inexistence and they are agree that Transylvania (or its greatest part of it) to be given back to Romania under the condition of the confirmation through the Treaty of Peace". (*Romania Liberă*, 17 September 1944: 1) In "*Romania liberă*", Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu asserted the necessity of the respectation of the armistice. (*România Liberă*, nr.31, 15 September, 1944) This would not undermine the trust of the allies in Romania, especially of Soviet Union.

They appeared since then severe attacks on the address of the Fascists from the communist newspaper "*România Liberă*", Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu asserted the necessity of expectation of the armistice. This would have determined the trust of the Allies in Romania, especially of the Soviet Union.

It appeared since then grave attacks on the address of the fascists from the communist newspaper "Free Romania", fact that constituted later a weapon of the communists against all their political adversaries which they accuse with or without basis of fascism.

But, for the moment of the year of 1944, the King Mihai was attributed the role on initiator of the political Act from August 23 as a premise of the Convention of Armistice.

No one was supposing the turnure which the events will take soon, in the direction of the direct subordination of Romania to the Soviet Union and Romanian communists that had become simple instruments of the “brother from East”.

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